# Putting the Gay in Games Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games

**Article** *in* Games and Culture · July 2009

DOI: 10.1177/1555412009339729

CITATIONS
30

READS
439

**1 author:**

Adrienne Shaw
Temple University

**30** PUBLICATIONS **202** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

**Games and Culture**
Volume 4 Number 3
July 2009 228-253

10.1177/1555412009339729
http://gac.sagepub.com

# Putting the Gay in Games

## Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games

Adrienne Shaw
*University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication*

This article addresses gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) representation in video games from a cultural production perspective. It addresses how members of the video game industry account for the relative lack of GLBT representation in this medium. Previous studies have shown that certain stakeholders actively invest in GLBT representation in media. Factors in the inclusion of GLBT content include (a) the presence of motivated producers in the industry, those that are personally, politically, or commercially interested in GLBT content; (b) how the audience for a text or medium is constructed; (c) what the public backlash from both the GLBT community and conservative groups will be, as well as industry-based reprisals in the form of censorship or ratings; (d) the structure of the industry and how it is funded; and (e) how homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender identities can be represented in the medium.

***Keywords:*** *video games; cultural production; gay, lesbian bisexual and transgender representation*

In 2006, the video game *Bully* (Rockstar) garnered media attention, not for its display of schoolyard violence but because it allowed players' male avatar Jimmy Hopkins to kiss both male and female characters (Lumpkin, 2007; Matei, 2006). This finding was both celebrated and decried by critics. Media coverage of this optional homosexuality or bisexuality noted that video games were becoming more inclusive. This is not the first instance of explicit nonheterosexual content in video games; recent examples include *the Sims* series of games (Electronic Arts, 2000–present), *Fable* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004), and the *Temple of Elemental Evil* (Atari, 2003) to name but a few (Barton, 2004; Consalvo, 2003b; Ochalla, 2006; Thompson, 2004). The widespread media attention for *Bully*, however, demonstrates an increased attention to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) content in video games as well as GLBT gamers and video game designers. Specifically, coverage of this game emphasized the rarity of GLBT representation in video games.[1] Curiously,

**Author's Note:** Please address correspondence to Adrienne Shaw, University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, 3620 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104; e-mail: ashaw@asc.upenn.edu.

however, in the broader space of popular culture, such content is not new. In television, film, advertising, news, and other media, the GLBT community is visible and has been for decades (Gross, 2001). Why then, when video games have been a popular medium since the 1970s, are questions about the representation of diverse sexualities and gendered identities only now being discussed? Although I cannot answer this question specifically herein, by drawing correlations between how GLBT representation came to be present in other media, I show how a cultural production approach can help make sense of the dearth of GLBT representation in video games.

Although there has been research on representation in video games, generally it has focused on gender and race (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Delp, 1997; Dietz, 1998; Glaubke & Children Now, 2002; Huntemann & Media Education Foundation, 2002; Leonard, 2006; Miller, 2006). Research on representation of the GLBT community is scarce (Consalvo, 2003a, 2003b, are rare exceptions). Similarly, research on the creation and reception of those representations is wanting (preliminary work includes Rockwood, 2006). In my interviews with GLBT gamers, popularly referred to as gaymers, respondents often replied that video games are a "new medium" and that representation would come "in time," a perspective repeated in press articles and interviews for this project. This article critiques this evolution narrative of GLBT representation.

Previous studies have shown that GLBT representations do not just happen in media, but rather certain stakeholders actively invest in their creation (Alwood, 1996; Becker, 2006; Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001; Montgomery, 1979; Sender, 2004). Following in this tradition, this article addresses the issue of GLBT representation in video games from a cultural production perspective. Specifically, this article addresses how members of the video game industry account for the relative lack of GLBT representation in this medium and what needs to take place for there to be more. Among the factors affecting the representation of the GLBT community are the attitudes of those in the video game development community, the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content, whether the structure of the industry allows it to face this backlash, and the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium. Although this analysis focuses primarily on the North American video game industry, the findings might be useful in future analyses on the international video game sphere and GLBT content.

## Methodology

For this project, a theoretical sampling method was used (Glaser & Strauss, 2006 [1967], p. 45). First, a list of GLBT characters/themes, and so on was compiled from articles and discussion forums (Barton, 2004; Brute, 2007; GayGamer.net, 2007;

Gaymer.org, 2007; Lopez, 2004; Ochalla, 2006; Shuman, 2005; Thompson, 2004; Wikipedia, 2006).[2] Then e-mails were sent to the developers of (a) games which, according to more than one article or discussion forum, contain implicitly or explicitly (based on the assessment of the poster/author) homosexual, bisexual, or transgender characters or (b) games noted for having optional or "Easter Egg"[3] homosexuality or bisexuality.[4] Individuals who had written press articles or blog posts on GLBT content, gamers, or game developers were also contacted.[5] Finally, requests for interviewees were posted on six message boards: International Game Developers Association (IGDA), Womengamers.com, GameDev.net, Gamersexperimentations.com, GayGamer.net (2007), and Gaymer.org (2007), all of which have game developer and journalist presences.[6]

Participants were given the option of answering questions via phone, instant messaging (IM), or e-mail to accommodate their schedules (the "crunch time" work schedule of the video game industry is discussed in Nichols, 2005). Eight respondents chose e-mail, three offered IM, and one offered phone (though one who I conversed with via e-mail later spoke with me on the phone as well). I was also able to ask additional questions of some who replied to the e-mailed questionnaire, allowing for a more dynamic, less survey-like, discourse. Interviewees include four journalists/bloggers/academics from online video game news sources, one mainstream video game journalist, five game developers/designers (three of whom worked on games with GLBT content), and two graphic designers, one from a video game marketing department and the other with training in video game design ($N = 12$). Eight identify as heterosexual and four as gay, bisexual, or queer. All but two are White (one Native American, the other Indian American). Only one respondent, from Paris, lived outside of the United States. While this may not be a generalizable sample *per se*, the consistency of responses and themes in these interviews and the other sources of data offer compelling insight into the relationship between representation of marginal identities and cultural production. The "strategic selection of cases" was useful in "*testing* theoretical ideas" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 43, italics in original), namely those ideas presented in previous studies of the production of GLBT media representation.

Interviews were supplemented with analysis of all the press coverage I could find from online and print news sources on GLBT video game content, gamers, and game developers ($N = 26$). IGDA's message boards on diversity in the industry, games, and audience, particularly those relating to GLBT topics were also analyzed (13 threads and a total of 222 posts). I was given permission, moreover, to use the raw survey data from IGDA's 2005 workforce diversity survey ($N = 6{,}436$; Jason Della Rocca, personal communication, July 20, 2007). These sources allowed me to see how industry, content, and audience diversity are discussed in the game development community. To analyze the survey data, I used SPSS and the interviews, articles, and discussion forums were analyzed using the qualitative coding software NVivo. The

themes which emerged from this analysis are discussed herein in light of previous research on the production of GLBT representation in other mediums.

## Production of Video Game Culture

Why is representation in games even a goal? As Sender notes, it is problematic to look for tolerance in the "consumer sphere" (2004, p. 242). It could be argued, as some interviewees did in my previous study, that it is more beneficial for the GLBT community to be left out of media than to be only referenced through stereotypes. If we use the structuralist model proposed by Althusser, however, we see that not being referred to in the public discourse is just as problematic as being referred to stereotypically. Not being "hailed," in his terms, is a form of "symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978b). In essence, lack of media representation is a way of saying: "Your concerns/thoughts/lifestyle and so on are/is not important." Framing this in terms of cultural studies, we can think of this issue in the way Couldry does: "[C]ultural studies thinks of culture in relation to issues of power; the power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent" (2000, p. 2). In this sense, the heterocentrism of most video games, as Consalvo (2003a) describes and as it is often spoken of in popular media and in interviews in this project, is an ideological problem that requires attention.[7]

It can be argued, of course, that it does not matter how or whether GLBT identities are represented in games, as the relationship between producer encoding and audience decoding is uncertain (Hall, 1997 [1990]). Nondominant groups can appropriate texts in a "struggle within signification" (Hebdige, 1997, p. 367). Doty explores this particularly in the realm of queer readings (Doty, 1993, p. 16). Evans and Gamman discuss the manner in which queer audiences can destabilize the gender and sexuality normalizing discourses of texts. "Some texts do seem to 'encourage' queer viewing ... because the sexualized images are so ambiguous. But even texts which have overt heterosexual narratives can come over time to be seen as queer" (Evans & Gamman, 2004, p. 218). In my previous research, "gaymers" were well versed in the subversion of texts. Female gamers have taken similar approaches to problematic representations of women, as T. L. Taylor discovered in her study of *Everquest*. "[W]omen in *EQ* often struggle with conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling they have to 'bracket' or ignore how they look .... In many ways, women play *despite* the game" (Taylor, 2003, p. 36). That the players can enjoy playing and "deal with" the aspects of play they do not like, however, does not mean that it does not matter how or whether marginal groups are represented. As Doty concludes in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*:

> By publicly articulating our queer positions in and about mass culture, we reveal that capitalist cultural production need not exclusively and inevitably express straightness. If mass culture remains by, for, and about straight culture, it will be so through our silences, or by our continued acquiescence to such cultural paradigms as connotation, *sub*cultures, *sub*cultural studies, *sub*texting, the closet, and other heterocentrist ploys positioning straightness as the norm. (Doty, 1993, p. 104)

That is to say, queer readings may allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation, but that does not preclude a demand for representation. Rather it signals that queerness is always-already a part of "straight" media and thus does not have to be seen as something at the margins. GLBT content does not have to exist *just* for those that identify with that acronym. Rather than approach this topic via audience reception, this study takes a cultural production perspective. Of interest is not whether video games can be "queered," but rather how members of the industry understand the place of and problems surrounding the representation of different sexual and gender identities within video games.

The cultural production perspective offers a useful way of providing insight into video game content. As King and Krzywinska describe, "[t]o be understood fully, games have to be situated within the cultures in which they are found, including the wider industrial/economic context" (2006, p. 217). Studying how texts are produced and how certain types of representation come to be has a long history in communication studies. DiMaggio and Hirsch (1976), for example, encourage us to look at how works of art are created, funded, distributed, and consumed. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter (2003) detail the benefits of using this approach in video game studies, as it allows us to see how meanings are produced and reproduced in the complex interrelationship between the game development industry, video games, and players.

In particular, this perspective is useful in analyzing how certain identities come to be represented in video games. The masculine prevalence in both the video game development community and audience, for instance, is the main reason given for the sexist portrayal of women in most video games, if they are represented at all (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Huntemann & Media Education Foundation, 2002). Video games are largely created for the stereotypical gamer market, teenage to young adult males (Kline et al., 2003, p. 195). Gansmo, Nordli, and Sorensen (2003), for example, studied a number of game development companies and found that masculine fantasies dominated design discussions. "What unfolds in the managed dialogue of commercialized digital design is a process in which commodity form and consumer subjectivity circle around each other in a mating dance of mutual provocation and enticement" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 196). Game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market. These games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time. As only economically successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what "gamers" play. This is

displayed in what Kline et al. (2003) describe as the "militarized masculinity" prevalent in many video games. Efforts to rethink this cycle are demonstrated in the main area in which sectors of the video game industry have attempted to address underrepresentation and problematic representation, the "girl games" movement.

It has been argued that because women make up over half the world's population, the video game industry greatly limits their market by only appealing to male gamers, specifically by creating games with problematic representations of women. Symbolically annihilating (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978b) girls and women from gaming culture potentially circumscribes their participation in technology careers, because games are often a gateway to computing careers (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Gorriz & Medina, 2000, p. 43). Thus, by limiting their audience by gender, it is argued, the video game industry is also limiting its own diversity and its ability to appeal to diverse audiences (Schuster, 2007).

Recognizing both the social and economic importance of targeting female gamers, some companies have attempted to court the "girl gamer" market. Market research, by companies such as Purple Moon, sought to establish essential qualities of the "girl games market" by looking at how boys and girls play outside of gaming (Gorriz & Medina, 2000, p. 47). Significantly, they did not look at what girls who were already gamers did or did not enjoy but rather were targeting the nongaming girl market. According to Gansmo et al. (2003), when female players are discussed by designers, generally a very traditional feminine stereotype is evoked, which translates into game designs built around social relations, romance, emotions, and role-playing (also described in Kerr, 2006, p. 97). Creating a subgenre of games that appeals to stereotypes of gendered play habits resulted in the "ghettoization" of girl games and few—though this may be changing—attempts to incorporate women into mainstream video gaming culture.

As the "girl games" example demonstrates, historically "better" representation of a given group in video games has relied on targeting that group as a consumer market. However, unlike representing women as more than big breasted vixens, GLBT representation is highly controversial.[8] The hindrances to this content are thus more numerous than those for the representation of gender and sexually normative women. Studies on the rise of GLBT visibility in film, television, press, and marketing are useful in understanding why it has not been present in video games and how it might come to be. The literature on the production of GLBT content indicates several factors that influence media representation. Factors that emerge in this literature as well in the research done for this project include (a) the presence of motivated producers in the industry, those that are personally, politically, or commercially interested in GLBT content; (b) how the audience for a text or medium is constructed; (c) what the public backlash from both the GLBT community and conservative groups will be, as well as industry-based reprisals in the form of censorship or ratings; (d) the structure of the industry and how it is funded; and (e) how homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender identities can be represented in the medium. Herein I discuss the

correlations between other media and the data I have obtained on the video game industry in these regards.

## Who Wants to Make Gaymes?

The presence of motivated producers is one requirement for GLBT content in media. Motivation can come from identifying as part of the GLBT community or feeling that diversity in content is important. However, individual motivation is tempered by dominant identities and discourses in the industry.

As seen in the "girl games" discussion, diversity of producers is discursively associated with diversity of content. This is logical, as historically the presence and acceptance of GLBT professionals in the media has affected how the community is addressed in a given medium. Benshoff and Griffin (2006) detail the role queer filmmakers have played in inserting vague and explicit representations of the GLBT community into movies. Alwood (1996) addresses how a shift from mostly closeted gay journalists to out gay journalists influenced a positive shift in the representation of gay issues in the news. Sender (2004) discusses how GLBT marketers played a large role in producing gay-directed marketing. Unlike homosexual journalists who were originally not supposed to cover "gay issues" as they might not be objective (Alwood, 1996, p. 175), GLBT marketers were sometimes favored for their "insider knowledge" (Sender, 2004, p. 76).

Statistically, the video game industry is fairly homogeneous. According to the data from IGDA's 2005 survey of workforce diversity[9] ($N = 6{,}436$), the vast majority (91.6%) of respondents identify as heterosexual, 5.1% as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 3.2% declined to answer. Males accounted for 89.1% of those surveyed and 1.5% of all respondents identify as transgendered.[10] In press articles and forums, this homogeneity is used to explain the lack of GLBT content in video games.

Generally, it is presumed that members of the GLBT community would be the people most concerned with and knowledgeable about GLBT content in video games. Indeed, when I submitted requests for interviewees to various message boards, early respondents often directed me toward GLBT game designers or gaymer discussion forums. Articles and discussion forum posts indicate that they would be able to strike a balance between stereotyping and properly reflecting "gay identity." According to academic and video game blogger Matthew Barton, "[i]f GLBT individuals are involved directly in development, they can work against the stereotypes and ensure they're represented in a positive way" (personal communication, June 29, 2007). Graphic designer Jean Luc Pierite also suggests that having members of the community on a development team "saves some time on market research, as the target niche is right there" (personal communication, July 18, 2007). This is similar to Sender's (2004) finding that many GLBT marketers felt they had an edge in creating advertising for the gay market. There is also a presumption that these individuals have an investment

in seeing homosexuals "properly" represented; "If the gay community doesn't speak out repeatedly things will not change and the LGBT community will continue to be excluded" (Gene Wendel,[11] personal communication, July 10, 2007).

Arguably, representation of GLBT characters is not only the province of GLBT designers. Some interviewees caution that heterosexual and traditionally gendered individuals should also be concerned with representation: "not only LGBT people should be concerned about what and how characters are portrayed" (Blair Cooper, personal communication, July 18, 2007). As Jay Koottarappallil, artist and president of a game design firm, notes, "A GLBT may not represent their community well, just as we've seen countless heterosexual developers massacre a hetero relationship in games. Awareness is the key. Good writing helps too" (personal communication, July 13, 2007). Echoing this point, all of the game designers that I interviewed who worked on games with GLBT content identified as heterosexual.

The IGDA survey data demonstrate that traditionally underrepresented groups are not the only ones concerned with diversity in the video game industry, game content, and gamers. The majority of respondents felt that "a diverse workforce has a direct impact (broad appeal, quality, etc.) on the games produced" (59.4%). Even more (62.8%) thought that "workforce diversity is important to the future success of the game industry." Finally, a vast majority (71.7%) agreed that "better/more research on consumer/gamer diversity would be valuable." Demographic factors, however, did influence how strongly respondents agree with those sentiments. Women, non-heterosexual, non-White people, all feel more strongly that diversity in the industry and content is important and that we should study consumer diversity more than men, heterosexuals, whites.[12]

Thus, minorities and underrepresented groups are somewhat more concerned with diversity in video game content. Their abilities to act on these concerns, however, are influenced by the atmosphere of the industry. Before GLBT designers can insert diverse sexuality and gender representations into games, they must feel comfortable being "out," as seen in other media industries (Alwood, 1996; Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Sender, 2004). In articles, interviews, and forums, members of the GLBT community discuss high variation in the level of acceptance across the industry (Dancer, 2007; Leupold, 2006; Ochalla, 2007).[13] Transgender people are reportedly welcomed in the industry (Next Generation Online, 1999; Ochalla, 2007). Stories vary from those who successfully prevent homophobic comments from being included in games (and are thanked for educating their coworkers) to those who are barraged with homophobic jokes in company e-mails (Next Generation Online, 1999; Ochalla, 2007). In one interview, Jeb Havens notes that while there are GLBT individuals in the video game industry "there's no presence or community. There's no 'gay' face to it" (Ochalla, 2007). Generally being gay is a "nonissue" (Ochalla, 2007). Not being hostile is not the same as being inclusive however. Referring to an industry conference, Jeb Havens states that "there was such a strong frat-boy heterosexuality among the industry people that it made me realize that even if there were gay people in the

industry, they probably wouldn't feel very comfortable talking about it'' (Ochalla, 2007). The openness with which industry professionals can express their sexual or gender identities affects how they are able to represent those identities in media texts (Alwood, 1996; Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Sender, 2004).

Beyond how individuals are treated, we must look at how diversity is discussed and thought about in terms of content. Largely when GLBT content is supported, it is discussed as a matter of fairness, a sentiment my interviewees shared. Jean Luc Pierite emphasizes this point:

> The GLBT experience must be fairly represented in all forms of media. Else, our community is stifled and held back from sharing in the larger progress of mass communication. We have bisexual books, lesbian magazines, transgender movies, gay television series, and more. The need and demand for a gay-centric video games is greater now than ever. (Personal communication, July 18, 2007)

Developers of *Fable* (Lionhead) stated that optional homosexual content was included as it occurred naturally in the game's coding and it seemed unfair to actively exclude it (Lumpkin, 2007; Ochalla, 2006). Similarly, Tom Decker, producer of *Temple of Elemental Evil*, states that ''I particularly felt strongly that since we had several heterosexual marriages available ... we should include at least one homosexual encounter ... on par with the other relationships available in the game'' (Barton, 2004). In *Fahrenheit*/*Indigo Prophecy* (Atari), there is an incidental but important character, Tommy, the gay neighbor of one of the protagonists. According to David Cage, the writer/director of the game, having a diversity of characters was central to the game (personal communication, August 28, 2007). Moreover, ''having a gay character was also some kind of political message for homosexual rights'' (David Cage, personal communication, August 28, 2007).

That is not to say all members of the industry feel GLBT representation is important, although those that do not are a statistical minority according to the survey data. Notably, the IGDA's White Paper on Workforce Diversity states that they received many negative reactions to their question about sexuality. ''Responses such as [...] 'who cares about sexual preference...' expressed quite common sentiments [...] others expressed that they would not take the survey as a direct result of this particular question'' (Gourdin, 2005, p. 15). Similarly some respondents on discussion forums fail to see a place for sexuality in video games. Not all were opposed to homosexuality, per se. Some were concerned that inclusion for the sake of inclusion would result in tokenism and poor video games.

Interestingly, the main argument against GLBT content is that ''real world'' issues have no place in virtual fantasies. Conversely, arguments supporting GLBT content emphasize that it reflects the reality of the world we live in. ''[T]he medium is pushed forward the more it is able to properly represent real world characteristics. The GLBT community is just another aspect of the real world to properly represent''

(Jay Koottarappallil, personal communication, July 13, 2007). Whether games are meant to be fantastical or realistic, that certain identities are represented and not others it is telling. "The moment any choices are made about what material to include, how to treat it and what kinds of activities are required of players in order to succeed, particular meanings—or the potential for such meanings—are created" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 172). Part of the reason certain realities are shown is that the constructed audience for video games follows the demographic norms of the industry itself: heterosexual, White males.

## Who Wants to Make Gaymers?

If video game designers are to include GLBT content, they must believe there is an audience for this content. The production of culture literature emphasizes that the imagined audiences for a text or audience responses to a text shape production decisions (D'Acci, 1994; Dornfeld, 1998; Henderson, 1999). Similarly, how GLBT content is included in media texts relies highly on how the audience for that text is constructed. As with gay marketing described by Sender (2004), Alwood (1996), Benshoff and Griffin (2006), and Gross (2001) discuss targeting a GLBT audience as one way of justifying GLBT content. One might also target "gay aware" heterosexual audiences, as seen in Becker's (2006) analysis of the upsurge of gay characters in prime time network television of the 1990s. This holds true for video games.

Kerr (2006) traces the inner workings of the digital games industry and describes how the video game market has been mainly defined by industry presumptions. One presumption about gamers that is often offered as a reason for not including GLBT content is that they are largely homophobic. As Jeb Havens notes in one interview, this characterization of gamer culture as homophobic "comes more from the *perception* of the players . . . . It's almost condescending in a way, that reinforcement of the idea that gamers are immature and prejudiced" (Dancer, 2007). While gamers, like game developers, span the spectrum of attitudes toward the GLBT community, hardcore gamers of the White adolescent male variety are constructed as homophobic. In particular, the use of the words "fag" or "gay" in online gaming spaces are often noted as proof of this (Chonin, 2006; Leupold, 2006; Sliwinski, 2006a, 2006b; Vargas, 2006). However, in discussion forums, individuals who use these terms note that they do not mean them "that way"; the terms are used more to offend generally than gay bash specifically. While gaymers report conflicting reactions to these remarks, some are bothered and some are not. Generally speaking, video game culture is highly heterocentric. "Gay" and "fag" are used pejoratively, even if that does not indicate a conscious bias against homosexuals against whom one is playing.

When they presume that gamers are not comfortable with homosexuality, video game developers assume that gamers are not homosexual, a construction supported by the video game press. As Jean Luc Pierite describes, "The gaming media plays a

role in whether or not gaymers are seen as gamers. Through their ads, reviews, language, humor, they don't give space to gaymers as part of the gaming market" (Jean Luc Pierite, personal communication, July 18, 2007). As if to emphasize his point, the August 2007 issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (2007b), which has had articles on gaymers, speaks disparagingly of the Japanese game *Ore no Shita de Agake* (Blue Alice), which features a male character whose task is to ruin the lives of and then seduce three different men (p. 18).[14]

Several interviewees, as well as discussions on message boards and replies to online articles, note that the "real" gamer audience is wider than that constructed by the video game industry and press. Only recently, however, has the presence of gaymers been recognized (Lopez, 2004; Lumpkin, 2007; Vargas, 2006). Successfully marketing to this group is offered as one step toward more GLBT video game content. As game designer Scott Campbell describes, "[o]nce one game capitalizes on that, you'd better believe that others will follow!" (personal communication, July 12, 2007). In Britain, Sony is taking steps in this direction. The gay magazine *Attitude* featured an ad for the game *Singstar* (Sony) using muscular and flamboyant firemen to sell the game to gay men (Sliwinski, 2006c). Notably, however, the ad appears in a gay magazine, not a gaming magazine. Like girl gamers before them, the homosexual market for games is being appealed to as gays, not as gamers.

The limited construction of the gamer market is only part of why GLBT content is rarely seen in video games. Video game journalist and columnist Clive Thompson notes that,

> [T]here's no easy way to target a GLBT audience. If you spend 10 million on a game and try to sell it through Electronics Boutique, maybe that's not the best way to reach the GLBT gamer audience ... so you don't make your money back and the publisher hates you and won't do any more of your GLBT games. Plus, if it's an explicitly GLBT game, Wal Mart probably won't carry it, and that is the kiss of death for mass sales. So the question is not whether the audience is there, but whether there are any mechanisms for reaching the audience with enough efficiency to pay for the awesome cost of making a GLBT game. (Personal communication, August 2, 2007)

One must ask, moreover, whether gaymers want to be appealed to as gay gamers. In my interviews with gaymers and articles about them (Glover, 2007; Lumpkin, 2007), there is a stress on not being marketed to. The ghettoization of "girl gamers" might be one reason for this. Game designer Kevin Mack discusses how appealing to a specific niche market can impede game development.

> [I]f the audience is your starting point, you're really not creating anything sincere, you're pandering to them [....] They'll figure out quickly that you don't really have a point of view that you're trying to take from them without giving anything in return [....] No individual wants to be treated as a "demographic." (Personal communication, July 27, 2007)

Appealing to a market based on limited notions of identity essentializes what members in that group would want in video games. Not wanting "gay games" also recognizes, as discussed in Sender (2004, p. 120), that GLBT people do not only consume niche media, and thus there is reason to target them in mainstream venues. Furthermore, as noted in forums, articles, and interviews, even heterosexual, traditionally gendered gamers may want to play with sexuality and gender in video games.

In spite of counter examples, an assumption made in articles and discussions about GLBT content is that only gaymers seek this content. This stems from the assumption that players identify more strongly with their characters in video games than in other media (Gee, 2003).

> They simultaneously know they are 'only' an avatar, but because they're your physical proxy in the virtual world, you wind up having a lot of identify bleed into them. In online games, of course, part of the fun is crafting an elaborate new identity—either one that riffs off your existing identity or wholesale discards it to try something new. (Clive Thompson, personal communication, August 2, 2007)

A major argument for excluding GLBT characters is that the majority of gamers cannot identify with them. Empirically, however, we know very little about how and why players identify with some characters and not with others. Throughout the history of video games, cross-gender play has been prevalent (e.g., *Tomb Raider*). In the online realm, surveying players of *Everquest*, Yee (2001) found that 47.9% of male and 23.3% of female players have a least one game character that is of the opposite gender and did so for reasons including in-game strategy, role-play purposes, and gender exploration. More research on how identity operates in closed games, particularly identifying across socially constructed boundaries such as gender, sexuality and race, is imperative. As Becker's (2006) research found, producers can use gay content to appeal to heterosexual audiences. A somewhat problematic video game example is the game *Fear Effect 2*. This game's primary audience was straight men, although the main characters were lesbians. In fact, none of the games that contain GLBT content have been marketed to the gaymer community.

As heterosexual masculinity is the presumed normative identity in both the audiences and industry, it is unsurprising that video game content follows similar norms. In general, interviewees expressed a tension between the GLBT community pushing for nonheterosexual, nontraditionally gendered content, and non-GLBT gamers supporting and purchasing such games. All agreed, however, that content is shaped by what the video game industry expects its audience to want and feel comfortable with.

## Fear of Backlash

Although the IGDA survey, interviews, and articles indicate that the video game industry by and large is supportive of diversity, there seems to be little action to back

up these sentiments. The construction of the gamer audience as both heterosexual and potentially homophobic leads to fears of backlash for including GLBT content. Alwood (1996), Becker (2006), Sender (2004), and Benshoff and Griffin (2006), all discuss similar fears in the media industries they analyze. This backlash can come in the form of loss of sales, ratings, and censorship as well as pro-GLBT content activism.

The reasons given in forums, articles, and interviews for not having GLBT content in games mirror perfectly the reasons given for not appealing to the gay market described by Sender. First, "advertisers ... were concerned that their merchandise might be branded a 'gay product,' thereby alienating their heterosexual customers" (2004, p. 35). Jay Koottarappallil states, "[p]eople are afraid to get pigeon-holed as the 'gay game'" (personal communication, July 13, 2007). "Second, advertisers were worried that approaching gay consumers might provoke retribution from ... Moral Majority boycotts" (Sender, 2004, p. 35). According to game designer Kevin Mack, "[h]onestly, I think a big reason is that GLBT content can engender outright hostility .... Christian 'family' groups can get all over you" (personal communication, July 27, 2007). "Third ... advertisers expressed anxiety over explicitly sexual advertising in gay publications" (Sender, 2004, p. 35). Similarly, sexual content is a very contentious issue in video games, as David Cage describes. "Sexuality in general is a very sensitive issue [ ... ] even a man and a woman kissing or making love in a game is considered as a sin that would deeply alienate our kids if they discovered it" (David Cage, personal communication, August 28, 2007). Due to this, it is very difficult for video game creators like himself to put sexuality into games.

Video game developers must take into account the fiscal and regulatory ramifications of content choices. Fiscal risk is noted throughout discussion boards, blogs, articles, and interviews as a reason for not including GLBT content in video games. The risk posed by including gay content can affect both the company and individual executives, as Kevin Mack describes: "Remember that any executive at a large company has a large cadre of enemies who are actively trying to get them out of that job, so these people become very risk-averse and in the end, nobody gets fired for saying no" (personal communication, July 27, 2007). Much research on the video game industry suggests that it is highly risk-averse (Kerr, 2006, p. 93; King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 225; Williams & Clippinger, 2002, p. 49).

Recently increased attention, negative and positive, on GLBT content in games has caused developers to be cautious. Developers of *Lord of the Rings Online* decided to exclude marriage altogether rather than allow same-sex or interracial (elf/hobbit) marriages (Glover, 2007). *Army of Two* reportedly toned down the homoerotic undertones pointed out when the game was first announced (Electronic Gaming Monthly, 2007a, p. 31), though this could not be confirmed through industry sources. Often the fear of offense and risk has more to do with what audiences might do, however, than what they have actually done, following the "imaginary feedback loops" described in DiMaggio and Hirsch (1976, p. 80).

Institutionalization of these fears of backlash can affect game content. This includes forms of self-censorship like ratings systems (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006), industry norms against showing explicit sex (Sender, 2004, p. 35) or mentioning homosexuality (Alwood, 1996). In the case of film, studies have shown that sexual scenes weigh more heavily than violent scenes on the Motion Picture Association of American (MPAA) movie ratings (Leone, 2002). Moreover, homosexual content can garner more severe ratings than similar heterosexual scenes, as demonstrated in *this film is not yet rated* (Dick, 2006). The ratings given by the Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB) seem to operate similarly. According to Scott Campbell, the ESRB,

> [T]ruly is the equivalent to the MPAA for computer games. Although the ESRB has definite guidelines for their ratings, they are still subjective based on the situations which they occur. For example: A character professing their sexuality might be flagged as a ''Sexual Themes'' descriptor, which is an automatic Teen (or higher) rating. However, if the scene [with GLBT content] is particularly intense or descriptive (even without showing partial nudity), it could be flagged as ''Strong Sexual Content'' which is an automatic Mature rating. (Scott Campbell, personal communication, July 12, 2007)

In fact, when the gay kiss in *Bully* was discovered, critics like attorney and antiviolent video games legislation proponent Jack Thompson were outraged that this *Mature* content was included in a game given *only* Teen rating (Sliwinski, 2006c, italics added). This call for a higher rating is not innocuous as it can limit distribution of the game; ''WalMart, for example, won't carry 'M' rated games'' (Kevin Mack, personal communication, July 27, 2007).

Both the ratings standards and lack of GLBT content in video games are connected with the contentious relationship between games and sex. Part of this is because video games are often construed as a children's medium. ''Most parents don't want their children to be exposed to ANY material that would cause their children to even bring up the subject of sex (hetero or gay) or transsexuality'' (Jay Koottarappallil, personal communication, July 13, 2007). Even though ''cartoon'' violence is, at least tacitly, acceptable for young children, any mention of sex makes a game mature. ''Most companies shy away from having (or even mentioning) sexuality in their products. Violence is OK. Sexuality is still taboo'' (Scott Campbell, personal communication, July 12, 2007). While video game academics, journalists, and developers will fight against too much regulation of violent games (Entertainment Consumers Association, 2007; Jenkins, 2007; Jones, 2002), a similar fight for expression of sex in video games is rare, excepting the Sex in Games special interest group of the IGDA (Brathwaite, 2006). It is worth further research into why regulation of sex is considered more acceptable than regulation of violence.

Backlash can also take the form of pro-GLBT activism. Montgomery (1979), for example, looks at the role gay activists played in the representation of homosexuals

in television in the 1970s. She notes that while all of their demands were not always met, networks generally conceded to some of the activists' demands though they rarely admitted to succumbing to pressure (p. 139). Benshoff and Griffin (2006) describe gay activist protests of movies such as *Cruising* (1980) and *Windows* (1980). Alwood too describes the role media activists played in shaping coverage of gay issues in journalism (1996, p. 58). Activism for GLBT content can also come from within industries, as writers, marketers, directors, and so on insert GLBT representation into their media products (Sender, 2004, p. 90).

Rarely do GLBT rights group takes interest in video game content. Lambda Legal's intervention on behalf of Sara Andrews in her fight with Blizzard is one of the few examples.[15] As video gaming is not a readily recognized part of gay culture, a common sentiment in my interviews with gaymers, there seems to be no call from consumers for organized activism for in-game representation. This may also have to do with the sociohistorical context in which video games have developed. Unlike other media, video games developed largely after both the Stonewall Riots (1969) and the AIDS crisis, both of which galvanized gay visibility groups in the United States (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001). As Aaron describes in reference to New Queer Cinema, "it is AIDS that provided the key site for the development of queer practices and productions" (2004, p. 11). Same-sex marriage, it would seem, is the only corollary social issue for video games. This may explain why so much attention has been paid to video games, which include gay marriage options. Articles on *Temple of Elemental Evil* and *Lord of the Rings Online*, for example, reference the current legislative battles over same-sex marriage in the United States (Glover, 2007; Thompson, 2004). It is implied that in this political environment, games in which marriage is an option can make strong statements on either side of the political spectrum.

Although organizations like Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) do not have resources to address video games as a medium, it is empowering that individual acts can create change. When people stand up against derogatory gay content or suggest that homosexuality should be an option, anecdotally at least, others listen (Dancer, 2007; Glover, 2007). If fear of activism against GLBT content is enough to dissuade companies from including it, perhaps eventually fear of pro-GLBT content activism could hold similar sway.

Even with motivated individuals in an industry with a liberal atmosphere and a receptive audience, game development companies must assess the risks of including GLBT content. Pro-GLBT content activism could potentially double these risks, as seen in Montgomery's (1979) study of gay activists and television networks. While the networks, in response to the gay activists, tend to approach the issue of homosexual representation very carefully, "steering away from any kind of portrayal which could elicit criticism from the gay community at large. At the same time, the network was careful not to present a picture of gay life that would be in any way offensive to the heterosexual audience" (1979, p. 197). The risks game developers are willing to take in the face of backlash are affected by how those companies are structured and funded.

## Structural Impact on Gayme Content

How industries are organized and funded influences their response to activism and whether they can risk including controversial content. A product with a primarily conservative market cannot afford to offend its consumers by courting homosexuals (Sender, 2004). Conversely, during the 1990s, "network executives incorporated gay and lesbian material into their prime-time lineups in order to attract an audience of upscale, college-educated and socially liberal adults" (Becker, 2006, p. 81). Likewise, independent, low-budget films can afford to appeal to a small GLBT audience (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). According to my interviewees, smaller video game firms are able to risk appealing to narrower markets than big firms, particularly as they are not responsible to shareholders and spend less on marketing overall. The relationship between game developers and game publishers can also influence the level of "controversial" content (the sometimes antagonistic relationship between the two is discussed in Game Informer, 2007, pp. 18-22).

One way to get around the industrial gatekeepers and include GLBT content might be to foster an independent gaming industry. In other media, this has often taken the form of texts produced within and for the GLBT community, like the gay press (Alwood, 1996) or new queer cinema (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). "Indie has always been the way GLBT stuff got made for decades—centuries even" (Clive Thompson, personal communication, August 2, 2007). Although in the past it was difficult to release independent games on video game consoles, Kevin Mack notes that Internet networks on newer consoles are changing this: "All three manufacturers sell small independent games online [ . . . ] and they're desperate to keep those pipelines full—to make sure they have the most compelling content, so they're making it much easier to develop for these platforms now" (personal communication, July 27, 2007). Although there have not, to my knowledge, been any games released through these channels with GLBT content, the decrease in gatekeepers makes the potential for independent GLBT game development high however.

"[G]ame content that raises questions about dominant social-political assumptions is more likely to be found in niche products than those which seek to reach a mass market" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 228). Small game companies and independent games released online are much more capable of targeting niche audiences than large game companies. Even small independent companies, however, must work with the medium's ability to represent GLBT identities.

## Representing Gayme Content

Industry norms, driven by how the industry is organized, affect media content (Tuchman, 1978a). Although audience construction and industry discourses about

the risk involved in controversial content impede the active inclusion of overt GLBT content, the general lack of overt GLBT content in games may have more to do with practical aspects of video game design than active exclusion. Several interviewees mentioned that the industry needs to mature before we can get "good" GLBT representation. Such representation may exist "when the medium is truly considered an art form, and there are companies who want to deliver unique experiences to the audience, not just churn out the same visceral reactions" (Scott Campbell, personal communication, July 12, 2007). Rather than read this as part of an evolutionary narrative, at some level people are still trying to work out what makes games good, the design concerns of making a good game and seeing beyond the market as it has been constructed. "We're barely at the point where people can convey emotions through characters. It's easier for developers to rely on stereotypes and/or archetypes for now" (Leon Woods, personal communication, July 18, 2007). While trying to work out the details of the medium, concepts like representation are forgotten, not intentionally, but for people who do not identify as G, L, B, or T, it is not central to their thought process (assuming it would be even for GLBT developers). As Scott Campbell points out:

> I don't think [GLBT content] even comes to mind with the vast majority of game developers. Most development begins with an idea for a game mechanic (like first-person shooter, or rope-swinging platformer), then the art style, and lastly, the story. When you just need a character to hold a gun or chop up zombies, I don't think developers pay much attention to their sexual orientation. (Personal communication, July 12, 2007)

When sexuality is used in game content, games generally rely on heterosexual narratives (Consalvo, 2003a, p. 172). As Jay Koottarappalli acknowledges, "since games rarely focus on any sort of relationship complexity, most developers feel it's easier and more accessible to use a standard heterosexual relationship" (personal communication, July 13, 2007). Such statements reflect that heterosexuality remains the unmarked normative category and for all other identities to be represented their existence must be defended. Certainly sexual and gender identities are not always "marked" in games, normative or not, nor is identity more generally, but when it is the absence of GLBT or other, marginalized identities must be critically examined.

When GLBT content is discussed, developers and journalists, like gaymers in my previous research, were concerned about how to include it without relying on stereotypes. This is difficult, however, as it has been noted throughout analyses of GLBT media content that sexuality is rarely written on the body except through stereotypes (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001; Sender, 2004). "The history of gay visibility reveals the tensions between invisibility and limited visibility, between typification and stereotyping, and between needing to find telegraphic ways of representing gayness and doing so at the expense of gay people" (Sender, 2004, p. 13). Moreover, denouncing stereotypical representations outright is a bit heterosexist as it often

relies on ignoring the nongender normative members of the GLBT community (Jean Luc Pierite, personal communication, July 18, 2007). In writing *Fahrenheit* (*Indigo Prophecy*), David Cage discusses his struggles with trying to create a diverse cast without relying on typical video game stereotypes:

> Characterization is often the weak part of interactive writing. Characters are often very stereotyped (sexy girls, very evil villain, heroes with big muscles . . . ). One of my goals in Fahrenheit was to try to create characters who would have a background that the player could very easily and quickly relate to. To achieve this goal, I tried to use archetypes (which are different from caricatures, hopefully . . . ), types of characters that everyone has the feeling of having seen before. (Personal communication, August 28, 2007)

Thinking outside of stereotypes, however, is difficult. In her study of four focus groups attempting to create ideas for television shows featuring a White character, an American Indian character, and a female character, Bird (2003) found participants often relied on stereotypes for characters of racial identities different from their own. One of the White male groups, "even with their determination not to stereotype . . . essentially found themselves unable to draw on cultural knowledge that would help them imagine a fully-developed Indian character" (Bird, 2003, p. 99). Moreover, while White people may have learned not to characterize Native Americans negatively, they still rely on stereotyped assumptions about behavior, though they may be "positive" stereotypes (Bird, 2003, pp. 88-89).

The question might not be, however, whether gay video game characters represent stereotypes, but how labeling them as homosexual functions in the game. Dyer distinguishes between "types . . . which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes)" (1999, pp. 298-299). Stereotypes are used as disciplinary forces by clearly demarcating homosexuals from heterosexuals. Rather than talking about whether stereotypes are true or offensive, it is better to ask what purpose they are serving in the text. Is it to emphasize the oddness of a character, to provide comic relief, to add depth to a feeling of otherness, to make a statement for diversity and tolerance?

Avoiding stereotypes was a central concern for my interviewees in both my interviews with gaymers and the interviews conducted for this article. One potential solution offered by interviewees was that GLBT representations should only be included in a game "if it matters." As Leon Woods put it: "I feel like it depends on the context of the story/game [ . . . ] If you try to force something in just to add it, it runs the risk of diminishing what you are trying to communicate" (personal communication, July 18, 2007). Making the sexuality of a character too relevant could also make the game, as several interviewees and forum posters noted, "about being gay," which may limit the interested audience and make the game seem "preachy." Similarly, adding a gay character into a game "for the sake of diversity," ends up feeling

shallow and is read either as a cheap attempt to cater to diversity or as out and out offensive, particularly when designers signify gayness by relying on stereotypes like "the leather-daddy, lilting gay, or butch lesbian stereotypes" (Scott Campbell, personal communication, July 12, 2007).

In other games, where there are set characters moving through preset stories in which relationships are of little or incidental importance, it takes motivation to have a traditionally underrepresented group as the main character. One example making sexuality fit into a video game narrative is *Fear Effect 2*. Kevin Mack, who worked on the never released *Fear Effect 3*, describes the logic behind the lesbian relationship in *Fear Effect 2*.

> I know that one of the intentions for Hana's character was to give her somebody to care for. She'd been such a hard character in the first game, they wanted to introduce another side of her. It'd probably be disingenuous of me to suggest that there wasn't a prurient side to that choice as well, I don't know for sure how the story and the characters were developed, but the primary motivation at work was to give Hana somebody she could care about enough that she'd be vulnerable to this character being put in jeopardy. (Personal communication, July 27, 2007)

Although interviewees and forum members describe the lesbianism in this game as largely a marketing gimmick, it was also used because it fit the logic of the story for the game.

Representation should also fit within the logic of the game mechanics. "Good games [ . . . ] generally prompt meaningful choices by the player" (Kevin Mack, personal communication, July 27, 2007). In my previous research with both Arab gamers and gaymers, interviewees argued that gameplay is as important if not more so than in-game representation. Thus, it makes sense, that games centered on choices and intercharacter relationships are the place where homosexuality and bisexuality have been incorporated. In open narrative, "sandbox" and "simulation" games, seeing all possible options is at the center of the design process. Making games innovative relies on including nontraditional choices like being gay (Leon Woods, personal communication, July 18, 2007).

In the case of the games *Bully, Fable, the Sims*, and *Fallout 1* and *2*, a player could make their avatar have relationships with either gender (Ochalla, 2006). Lead designer on *Fallout 1*, Scott Campbell stated that "[f]or the game design, we were very adamant about allowing the player to do anything they wanted" (personal communication, July 12, 2007). Campbell's point indicates that tying sexuality to game mechanics is a way of including sexuality organically. Qualitative evaluations by the interviewees seemed to rate the implicit or stereotypical gay characters in video games as not ideal. However, the optional representations, ones that rely on players playing the game a certain way, were seen as positive or neutral. Generally speaking, however, optional homosexuality, bisexuality, and potentially

transgender identity are discussed as the path of least resistance to including GLBT content.

It is somewhat problematic, however, that homosexual, bisexual, or transgender identities must be justified to be included in games. Dominant discourses about sexuality often frame nonheterosexuality as nonnormative (more detailed discussion of how sexuality has been constructed is available in Foucault, 1990). Jay Koottarappalli discusses the difficulty of including homosexual relationships without making it "about that," however; "In games, a GLBT relationship would take more explaining and would oftentimes become a central theme to the game in the mind of the consumer, even if the designers didn't intend it to be so" (personal communication, July 13, 2007). Thus, unless otherwise noted, heterosexuality is the presumed norm.

Making a character's homosexuality relevant to a story rests on homosexuality being nonnormative. However, as one poster to an industry forum points out, "[s]ometimes a person can be gay or black or a woman for no reason whatsoever. The idea that a white straight male is the default hero is spread over many mediums, but it doesn't mean it's right." Praise for the game *Bully*, in fact, focused on its being added to the game without much fanfare (Lumpkin, 2007; Sliwinski, 2006c). Scott Campbell supported this type of representation: "Instead of other mediums preaching understanding and tolerance of the subject, I see 'Good Games' dealing with the subject matter-of-factly—showing that it is just another aspect of human existence" (Scott Campbell, personal communication, July 12, 2007). This type of portrayal, however, might lose a chance to stress the significance of including GLBT content in a medium in which it is rarely seen.

Paradoxically, making a game with GLBT content "about that" falls into hegemonic discourses, which classify nonheterosexuality, nongender normativity as deviant but including it incidentally lacks political vigor. Interviewees and forum respondents were split on whether video games should make political statements, while press articles operated under the assumption that games with GLBT content had made strong statements. In either case, the ability of developers to make such statements is tempered by the ability of the medium to represent GLBT identities as well as the relevance of sexual identities in the design of a game.

## Conclusion

This article is just a small part of the larger subject of GLBT representation of video games. It was not the task of this project to analyze GLBT representation in video games. Moreover, how audiences receive representations of a whole variety of identities is an important area of further study. Finally, this is not a full and representative survey of the entire gaming industry. The strong correlations between themes that emerged in this study and previous studies of GLBT representation in other media, however, are significant.

Analyses of interviews with video game designers and journalists, press articles, and message board discussions indicate that, as there are specific reasons that GLBT representation exists in other media, there are specific reasons for why it is not seen in video games. That is to say, it is not necessarily a matter of homophobic exclusion (though that exists too) but rather specific concerns of this industry make including GLBT content difficult and shape how the content that does get into games ultimately looks and plays (e.g., optional content). As DiMaggio and Hirsch describe, "[d]iscovering the blueprints for imaginary feedback systems, and the ways in which they are formed and change, might provide the key to unlock the issue of information control in liberal societies" (1976, p. 80). As this analysis has shown, the attitudes of members of the industry toward GLBT content, how the audience for video games is constructed, what market and institutionalized risks there are to presenting nonnormative sexualities and genders, the structure of the industry and the ways in which sexual and gender identities are incorporated into game design all factor into how the GLBT community is represented in video games.

Literature on previous GLBT media also makes us aware of potential pitfalls in representation. Studies on the history of GLBT representation in the media have shown that often less gender normative or socially privileged (including lower class and racial minorities) members of the community are often excluded from media visibility, or at least given limited and problematic representation. Potentially, targeting the gaymer market may rely on very narrow definitions of what it is to be a gay gamer, an identity found in my previous research to be adopted by a wide variety of people. Also, focusing too heavily on having GLBT game developers making GLBT content ignores that heterosexual designers can also be concerned with, and are capable of, representing the GLBT community. Moreover, games with non-heterosexual, non-traditionally gendered characters could appeal to those outside the GLBT community. Finally, relegating GLBT representation to the realm of independent game developers could result in a ghettoization of content similar to that seen in the "girl games" movement.

This discussion has focused primarily on the North American context. Video games, however, are an international industry. In fact, a great many of the games that contain homoerotic content come from Asian countries (Korea and Japan primarily). Part of this may have to do with the fact that video games are not seen as children's toys in these countries as all generations play them, allowing for more open inclusion of sexual content for mature markets. Often this content is altered when the games are exported to other markets, a topic worthy of study in and of itself. How GLBT content is created and received within and across non-Western cultures is an important area of further study. I suspect, however, that though the perceptions of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender individuals vary by country and culture, the fact that certain industrial logics work to promote the inclusion or exclusion of GLBT content would hold true across cultures.

# Notes

1. Whether there is quantitatively as much representation within video games as other mediums is an empirical question that this article cannot address. Discursively, however, GLBT representation in video games is being spoken of as something new, as something rare, within the data analyzed for this study. As institutional discourses shape practices (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), this article is less concerned with the "quantitative difference." That said, however, given that only 56 video games (see note two) reportedly have GLBT characters, and even that is a problematic number, and in light of the number of television shows listed in just the *Prime Time Closet* (Tropiano, 2002), I am willing to propose that there is less representation of the GLBT community in video games than in other mediums. To fully address this question, however, would require a text-focused study, which is not the task of this project.

2. Combining all sources, there are 56 video games that reportedly have GLBT characters, options, or references, including content that was removed prior to exportation from Asia. Although not the task of this article, a more thorough analysis of the content of these representations, particularly because many are ambiguous references to homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender identity, would be an important addition to the literature.

3. Easter Eggs are hidden messages, images, and content found within video games by those with the skill and motivation to look for them.

4. I could only obtain contact information for six video game development companies, particularly because many of the developers of the games that are on the list mentioned in Note 2 have sense folded. I received two refusals and four nonresponses.

5. In almost all cases, press articles are the only places to find out about GLBT content without either playing the game or word of mouth, making the video game press as pertinent to the production of GLBT content as game designers.

6. I e-mailed eight journalists and one mainstream gaming magazine who/which have written about GLBT content in video games and received five responses. I e-mailed, was put in touch with, or was contacted by nine video game designers, but only five were able to complete the interviews. In addition, two graphic designers replied to my message board posts and both completed the interview process.

7. I have outlined this in previous work as well: "The 'hero rescuing the damsel in distress' genre of games, for example, is usually only ever subverted by having the woman as rescuer. Past romances are sometimes mentioned in the background stories to give characters depth but (almost) never refer to same-sex relationships. Heterosexuality is often referenced by way of flirtations or sexual language and banter (Gee, 2003; Pickard, 2003). Often when homosexuality is included in games it is hidden and requires a players to actively seek or create the 'queer' content. In role-playing games, for example, this requires arriving at a particular point in the game with the appropriate character traits and in-game experiences to achieve the same-sex relationship (ex. *Fallout 1* and *2*). It is possible, thus, to play these games without ever seeing a reference to homosexuality. The circulation of dominant gender norms in these games also negates the more open relationship with gender categories present in the LGBT community" (Shaw 2007).

8. Arguably, it is philosophically problematic to distinguish between gender and sexuality in this regard. The reason for doing so is that representation of "women" has been addressed a great deal more that "GLBT" identities in the literature and offers a useful comparison for this analysis.

9. Unlike the IGDA's analysis of the data, I did not exclude any cases as doing so did not radically change demographic percentages but did allow for more varied comparisons, particularly international ones.

10. In addition, only 19.7% of all respondents identify as not White. Similar to video game market demographics (Entertainment Software Association, 2006), the mean age for respondents was 29.7. Most have a higher education, 57.5% have college degrees, and 20.5% have postgraduate degrees. The majority (53.8%) of respondents are from the United States, followed by Europe and Russia (14.8%), Canada (11.6%), and the United Kingdom (9.1%). The IGDA's report states that a North American bias in the topic of the survey and the language barrier may have precluded greater representation of other regions.

11. Alias.

12. Survey responses from those who identify as transgender were not different from those who do not, though the number of transgender individuals made these results statistically insignificant.

13. Comments on IGDA's survey on industry diversity demonstrate this array of attitudes.

14. The disparaging remarks were made about the homosexuality specifically and not necessarily directed toward the game's overall quality.

15. This controversy arose when Andrews, a member of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, advertised the creation of an in-game GLBT friendly guild in a public chat area of the game. Blizzard, the company that owns the game, sent the player a warning that she had violated the games' sexual harassment policy. They argued that by being gay friend, the guild would inevitably open itself up for harassment from anti-gay players and thus create a negative situation in the game. The public outcry, as well as support from Lambda Legal, forced the company to overturn its suspension of the player's account.

## Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Dr. Katherine Sender, Amanda Childs, two annonymous reviewers, as well as members of the "Culture Club" at ASC for their help in revising this paper. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the International Communications Association annual conference in Montreal in May 2008.

## References

Aaron, M. (2004). *New queer cinema: A critical reader.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Alwood, E. (1996). *Straight news: Gays, lesbians, and the news media.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Barton, M. D. (2004, March 17). Gay characters in video games. *Armchair Arcade*. Retrieved April 1, 2006, from http://www.armchairarcade.com/aamain/content.php?article.27

Beasley, B., & Collins Standley, T. (2002). Shirts vs skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games. *Mass Communication and Society*, *5*, 279-293.

Becker, R. (2006). *Gay TV and straight America.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Benshoff, H. M., & Griffin, S. (2006). *Queer images: A history of gay and lesbian film in America.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bird, S. E. (2003). *The audience and everyday life: Living in a media world.* New York: Routledge.

Brathwaite, B. (2006). *Sex in video games.* Rockland, MA: Charles River Media, Inc.

Brute, F. (2007, March 23). Top 20 gayest video game characters. Retrieved June 2007 from http://gaygamer.net/top-20-gayest-video-game-characters/

Cassell, J., & Jenkins, H. (2000). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and computer games.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Chonin, N. (2006, Sunday, February 5). MMORPG! WOW! TOS! GLBT! Sexual harrassment! *PK-16 San Franscisco Chronicle*.

Consalvo, M. (2003a). Hot dates and fairy-tale romances: Studying sexuality in video games. In M. J. P. Wolf, & B. Perron (Eds.), *The video game theory reader* (pp. 171-194). New York: Routledge.

Consalvo, M. (2003b). *It's a queer world after all: Studying the sims and sexuality.* New York: GLAAD Center for the Study of Media & Society.

Couldry, N. (2000). *Inside culture: Re-imagining the method of cultural studies.* London: Sage.

D'Acci, J. (1994). *Defining women: Television and the case of Cagney & Lacey.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Dancer, T. (2007, March 9). Gay by design: Interview with game designer Jeb Havens. *GayGamer.net*. Retrieved July 2007 from http://gaygamer.net/2007/03/gay_by_design_interview_with_g.html

Delp, C. A. (1997). *Boy Toys: the Construction of Gendered and Racialized identities in Video Games*. Thesis (M.A.) East Carolina University.

Dick, K. (Writer), Alison Palmer Bourke, Nick Fraser and Evan Shapiro (Executive Producers). (2006) This film is not yet rated [DVD]. Independent Film Channel (IFC).

Dietz, T. L. (1998). An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior. *Sex Roles*, *38*, 425-442.

DiMaggio, P., & Hirsch, P. M. (1976). Production organizations in the arts. In R. A. Peterson (Ed.), *The production of culture.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Dornfeld, B. (1998). *Producing public television, producing public culture.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press.

Doty, A. (1993). *Making things perfectly queer: Interpreting mass culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dyer, R. (1999). Stereotyping. In L. Gross, & J. D. Woods (Eds.), *The Columbia reader on lesbians & gay men in media, society & politics.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Electronic Gaming Monthly. (2007a, August). Army of two: Ea's masked men follow a simple motto—Be aggressive. *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, pp. 30-31.

Electronic Gaming Monthly. (2007b, August). Ore no Shita de Agake: It's raining men . . . in Japan. *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, p. 18.

Entertainment Consumers Association. (2007). Videogames and violence. Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.theeca.com/games_violence.htm

Entertainment Software Association. (2006). Essential facts about the computer and video game industry. Retrieved May 2007 from http://www.theesa.com/archives/files/Essential%20Facts%202006.pdf

Evans, C., & Gamman, L. (2004). Reviewing queer viewing. In H. Benshoff, & S. Griffin (Eds.), *Queer cinema, the film reader* (pp. 209-224). New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality.* New York: Vintage Books.

Game Informer. (2007). The ties that divide. *Game Informer, 172*, 18-22.

Gansmo, H. J., Nordli, H., & Sorensen, K. H. (2003). The gender game. A study of Noregian computer game designers. In C. MacKeogh, & P. Preston (Eds.), *Strategies of inclusion: Gender and the information society. Experiences from private and voluntary sector initiatives* (pp. 159-139). Trondheim: NTNU.

GayGamer.net. (2007). Retrieved May 30, 2007, from http://www.gaygamer.net/forum/

Gaymer.org. (2007). Retrieved May 30, 2007, from http://www.gaymer.org/forums.html

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, *26*, 172-199.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (2006 [1967]). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick: Aldune Transaction.

Glaubke, C. R., & Children Now. (2002). *Fair play?: Violence, gender and race in video games*. Oakland, CA: Children Now.

Glover, K. (2007, April 28). Why can't gay dwarves get married in Middle-earth. *Salon.com*. Retrieved June 2007 from http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/04/28/gay_dwarves/print.html

Gorriz, C. M., & Medina, C. (2000). Engaging girls with computers through software games. *Communications of the ACM*, *43*, 42-49.

Gourdin, A. (2005, October). Game developer demographics report. Retrieved June 2007 from http://www.igda.org/diversity/report.php

Gross, L. P. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hall, S. (1997 [1990]). Encoding, decoding. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader*. London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Hebdige, D. (1997). From culture to hegemony. In S. During (Ed.), *The cultural studies reader.* New York: Routeledge.

Henderson, L. (1999). Storyline and the multicultural middlebrow: Reading women's culture on National Public Radio. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *16*, 329-346.

Huntemann, N., & Media Education Foundation. (2002). *Game over: Gender, race & violence in video games*. Northhampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Jenkins, H. (2007). Eight myths about video games debunked. Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html

Jones, G. (2002). *Killing monsters: Why children need fantasy, super heroes, and make-believe violence.* New York: Basic Books.

Kerr, A. (2006). *The business and culture of digital games: Gamework/gameplay.* London: Sage.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2006). *Tomb raiders & space invaders: Videogame forms & contexts.* New York: I. B. Tauris.

Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & De Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture and marketing.* Montréal London: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Leonard, D. J. (2006). Not a hater, just keepin' it real: The importance of race- and gender-based game studies. *Games and Culture*, *1*, 83-88.

Leone, R. (2002). Contemplating ratings: An examination of what the MPAA considers 'too far for r' and why. *Journal of Communication*, *52*, 938-954.

Leupold, T. (2006, April 7). Is there room for 'gaymers' in the gaming industry? Oakland Tribune. Retrieved July 2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20060407/ai_n16142589/

Lopez, V. (2004). Ms. Pac-Man's gay kids: The growing number of out video gamers has led to more gay game characters [Electronic version]. *The Advocate*. Retrieved May 2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1589/is_2004_Nov_23/ai_n8700526

Lumpkin, B. (2007, April 13). Gay gamers push for more player choice, like same-sex smooching in 'Bully'. *MTV.com*. Retrieved July 2007 from http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1557022/20070412/index.jhtml

Matei, R. (2006, October 23). Boy-on-boy action in Rockstar's Bully. Softpedia.com. Retrieved August 2007 from http://news.softpedia.com/news/Boy-On-Boy-Action-In-Rockstar-039-s-Bully-38467.shtml.

Miller, P. (2006). You got your race in my video game [Electronic version]. *Escapist, 56*. Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.escapistmagazine.com/issue/56

Montgomery, K. C. (1979). *Gay activists and the networks: A case study of special interest pressure in television.* Los Angeles: University of California.

Next Generation Online. (1999, June 21). Game designers just wanna be girls. Retrieved July 2007 from http://www.codinghorror.com/blog/files/Next-Generation-Online-Game-Designers-Just-Wanna-Be-Girls.htm

Nicols, R. J. (2005). The Games People Play: A political economic analysis of video games and their production. Thesis (M.A.). University of Oregon.

Ochalla, B. (2006, December 8). Boy on boy action: Is gay content on the rise? *Gamasutra*. Retrieved May 2007 from http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20061208/ochalla_01.shtml

Ochalla, B. (2007, March 30). 'Out' in the industry. Retrieved June 2007 from http://gamasutra.com/features/20070330/ochalla_pfv.htm

Phillips, N., Lawrence, T. B., & Hardy, C. (2004). Discourse and institutions. *Academy of Management Review*, *29*, 635-652.

Pickard, J. (2003, April 16). Genderplay: Successes and failures in character designs for videogames. Retrieved 2005 from <http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2003/04/16/genderplay_successes_and_failures_in_character_designs_for_videogames.html>

Rockwood, J. (2006). Gaymer survey results. Retrieved August 2007 from http://jasonrockwood.com/results.html

Schuster, S. (2007, April 26). Women growing in video games as consumers, designers. Retrieved June 2007 from http://www.wtoctv.com/global/story.asp?s=6432031&ClientType=Printable

Sender, K. (2004). *Business, not politics: The making of the gay market.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Shaw, A. (2007, September 15-18). *In-Gayme Representation?* Paper presented at the The 7th International Digital Arts and Culture Conference: The Future of Digital Media Culture, Perth, Australia.

Shuman, S. (2005). Net ten: Ten ambiguously gay game characters. Retrieved June 2007 from http://www.games.net/article/netten/1/100321/ten-ambiguously-gay-game-characters/

Sliwinski, A. (2006a, January 25). Blizzard of GLBT gaming policy questions. In Newsweekly. Retrieved July 2007 from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20060407/ai_n16142589/

Sliwinski, A. (2006b, February 1). Blizzard Stomed on 'GLBT' policy. In Newsweekly. Retrieved July 2007 from http://www.innewsweekly.com/innews/?class_code=Ga&article_code=1205

Sliwinski, A. (2006c, October 28). Warm tea: The Bully boy-on-boy kiss goes mainstream. *Joystiq*. Retrieved August 2007 from http://www.joystiq.com/2006/10/28/warm-tea-the-bully-boy-on-boy-kiss-goes-mainstream/

Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple pleasures: Women and online gaming. *Convergence*, *9*, 21-46.

Thompson, C. (2004, April 7). The game of wife. *Slate*. Retrieved April 1, 2006, from http://www.slate.com/id/2098406/

Tropiano, S. (2002). *The prime time closet: A history of gays and lesbians on TV.* New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.

Tuchman, G. (1978a). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality.* New York: The Free Press.

Tuchman, G. (1978b). The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media* (pp. 3-38). New York: Oxford University Press.

Vargas, J. A. (2006, Saturday, March 11). For gay gamers, a virtual reality check CO1. *The Washington Post*.

Walters, S. D. (2001). *All the rage: The story of gay visibility in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wikipedia. (2006). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters in video games. (2007, May 31). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved, May 2007, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBT_characters_in_video_games&oldid=293548909

Williams, R. B., & Clippinger, C. A. (2002). Aggression, competition and computer games: Computer and human opponents. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *18*, 495-506.

Yee, N. (2001). The Norranthian scrolls: A study of EverQuest. Retrieved August 2005 from http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/report.html

**Adrienne Shaw** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. She studies lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender media representation, video games and gaming culture, and the construction of identity and communities in relation to media consumption.

---