

Introduction

Video games have always been queer. Even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly, and all games can be interpreted through queer lenses. This is because queerness in video games means more than the representation of LGBTQ characters or same-sex romance. Queerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play. From the origins of the medium, to the present day, and reaching into the future, video-game worlds have offered players the opportunity to explore queer experience, queer embodiment, queer affect, and queer desire—even when the non-heteronormative and counterhegemonic implications of these games have been far from obvious. Through new critical perspectives, queerness can be discovered in video games, but it can also be brought to games through queer play and queer players, whose choices to engage with games on their own terms and for their own pleasures can profoundly transform the meaning of games and unleash their queer potential. In this way, playing queer, like queer interpretation and queer game design, can be seen as a transformative practice that reframes and remakes games from the inside out. Amidst a dominant games culture that has proven itself to be openly hostile to diversity, the politics of queer play echo outward across games communities, games history, the games industry, and into wide-reaching contemporary concerns around identity, marginalization, and agency in digital media.

Arguing for the importance of queerness in video games beyond representation—or, more accurately, arguing for redefining queer representation in games—is also a way to rewrite the LGBTQ history of video games. This history is commonly told as one of absence and linear progress. From the 1970s to the 2000s, LGBTQ characters are commonly said to have been all but non-existent in commercial games, with a slow but steady rise in LGBTQ representation from the early 2010s to the

present.¹ As a kind of “it gets better” narrative, in the language of columnist Dan Savage’s well-known video campaign, this history seems hopeful, yet it also raises notable concerns.² It is indeed valuable to celebrate the increasing visibility of gay, lesbian, transgender, genderqueer, and other non-straight, non-cisgender identities in video games. However, as theorists of queer history have warned, linear progress narratives run the risk of erasing the complexities and obstacles of LGBTQ subjects’ lived experiences.³ These experiences are often far messier, more winding, and ultimately richer than tales of straight movement from oppression to acceptance would suggest. The history of queerness and games as it is being told today often reinforces the problematic and indeed misinformed assumption that LGBTQ players, game-makers, themes, and meaning are relatively new to video games. To the contrary, queerness and queer people are now and have always been central to games.

As I argue throughout this book, placing video games in dialogue with queer theory reveals the deep-seated resonances between queerness and games: from their emphasis on world-building, to their de-naturalization of the normative body, to their invitation to rethink the mechanisms of desire. Throughout this analysis, queer theory serves as a guiding framework, pointing toward a future for the study of video games that foregrounds gender and sexual expression in its many forms. The medium of video games has immense queer potential. At the same time, the exploration of queerness in games must remain grounded in the lived realities of the LGBTQ players, game-makers, and scholars who call games their own. Queer people have always belonged in video games, no matter how often we have been made to feel like outsiders, because video games have always been queer.

Video Games and . . . Queerness?

These are the claims that guide this book, and though they may appear straightforward, they are in fact highly controversial. For those who are new to the study of video games, and even for many who know the medium well, talking about games in relation to LGBTQ issues may seem counterintuitive. To understand why, it is important to understand more about (one version of) games history, as well as the current cultural landscape of video games.



Figure I.1. Birdo in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, 1988). Screenshot by author.

For decades—from the production of the first arcade machines to the rise of the thriving, multibillion-dollar commercial games industry of today—video games have notoriously underrepresented or harmfully misrepresented LGBTQ people. The few well-known LGBTQ characters from before the turn of the twenty-first century, such as the transgender, egg-spitting dinosaur Birdo from *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, 1988), have primarily been oddities, caricatures, or villains (figure I.1). The issue of LGBTQ representation is an intersectional one, part of a larger “diversity problem” in games, the games industry, and player cultures that constitutes, as Mary Flanagan among others has stated, “a social justice issue.”⁴ In part, the poor representation of LGBTQ people in the history of games speaks to the profound impact of corporate concerns on video games as a medium. Fearful that diversifying their content will alienate their established player bases, large-scale, “AAA” development studios have long catered primarily to imagined white, straight, cisgender male audiences. This perpetuates what Janine Fron et al. have called “the hegemony of play”: a set of rarely questioned, continually reinforced

assumptions about what video games should be like, who should be represented in games, and what types of players count as “gamers.”⁵ In many ways, the cards seemed stacked against queerness in video games. Heteronormative content remains standard in most game genres, homophobic language is commonplace in online gaming, and LGBTQ players often report feeling uncomfortable in game-related spaces, both online and off.⁶ Recently, long-standing tensions between progressive and reactionary sectors of games culture have reached a boiling point, drawing national attention to the vitriolic online harassment campaign #GamerGate, which has targeted feminists and other so-called social justice warriors.⁷ From one perspective, this would appear to be a particularly discouraging and inopportune moment to argue for the place of queerness in video games.

However, despite all of the obstacles that stand in the way of “diversity” (a convenient shorthand for identity issues, but one that itself merits scrutiny), video games are now, and have been since their origins, important sites of queer expression and self-discovery.⁸ There have been LGBTQ video-game players as long as there have been video games. To claim otherwise would contribute to what T. L. Taylor, writing about the often-repeated misconception that women rarely play video games, has described as the “devastating cycle of invisibility.”⁹ Indeed, for some queer players, video games have long offered invaluable opportunities to explore gender, sexuality, and identity in ways that may not have been possible outside of games.¹⁰ The present moment itself represents an important and indeed exciting time of growth for the area of queerness and video games, with game-makers, scholars, and players bringing new queer perspectives to the medium—perspectives that challenge standard ways of imagining the relationship between LGBTQ issues and games.

To date, the focus of many popular discussions about queerness and video games has been LGBTQ representation, and, in particular, the representation of a subset of highly visible LGBTQ characters from mainstream games. Historically, LGBTQ characters have rarely featured prominently in AAA games, but today examples are becoming more common.¹¹ For example, later games in the long-standing *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000–2017) allow for same-sex pairings. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) are much loved by fans for giving players the opportunity to pursue queer romances



Figure I.2. *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) comic panel in which character Tracer is kissed by her girlfriend.

with non-player characters (NPCs). *Overwatch* (2016) garnered considerable attention when its creators, Blizzard, confirmed that Tracer, arguably the game's most prominent character, was a lesbian (figure I.2).¹² In 2017, Riot Games followed suit by announcing that Varus, a character from their game *League of Legends*, was also gay.¹³ While these characters are often incorrectly described as some of the “first” LGBTQ characters in video games, current archival work, such as Adrienne Shaw’s LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Alayna Cole’s Queerly Represent Me project, is demonstrating that queer characters and other LGBTQ content have been making appearances in video games since the 1980s.¹⁴ With its 300+ entries, the LGBTQ Video Game Archive is a compelling case for flipping the script on the dominant narrative that says that LGBTQ subjects are only now finding a place in the medium. Even if they have largely been cast in supporting roles, these earlier, lesser-known LGBTQ characters still matter.¹⁵ By shining a light on the margins of video games, counter-histories of this sort turn attention to those who have been overlooked by well-intentioned yet limiting narratives about diversity in games.

Yet the shift toward queerness and video games that is happening today encompasses far more than the introduction of additional LGBTQ characters into mainstream games. In the cultural landscape of North



Figure I.3. *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012). Screenshot by the author.

America and beyond that surrounds contemporary video games, this shift is taking many forms. The increased availability of accessible game-making tools like Twine, as well as the rise of online game publishing platforms like Steam and itch.io, has ushered in a new wave of small-scale, “indie” games, predicted by Anna Anthropy’s *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, many of which are being made by queer creators and directly address LGBTQ issues.¹⁶ An example of these games is Anthropy’s own celebrated 2012 work *Dys4ia* (figure I.3). I term this wave of queer indie game-making the “queer games avant-garde,” and it is the subject of the last chapter of this book. Simultaneously, a number of annual events, such as the games convention GaymerX, are creating vibrant communities around queerness and games. Change is also coming to the academic study of games. Long dominated by formalist voices that advocated for separating social issues from discussions of play (though by no means have these been the only voices in this area), the scholarly field of game studies is increasingly turning toward cul-

tural concerns—LGBTQ issues prominent among them.¹⁷ In this way, game studies is finding its political voice. At the forefront of this shift is an ever-growing network of scholars who are exploring the intersection of queerness and video games through critical lenses. This nascent yet thriving academic area calls itself “queer game studies.”

This is, in short, a pivotal moment for video games and the way that meaning is made from games. Queerness is at the center of this shift. However, even as we look toward video games’ queer future, this moment also stands as an invitation to reconsider video games as we have already known them. Inspired by the queerness of the present, we can reimagine the medium on a broader scale, discovering the queer meanings even of those video games that may seem “straight” and looking to play itself as a site of queer potential.

What is “queerness”? Like many of the key terms that appear throughout this book, queerness is difficult to define—yet, in laying the groundwork for connections between video games and queer theory, it is crucial to establish a common vocabulary. “Queer” has meant different things at different times and to different people. This speaks to the word’s changing nature and multivalent meaning. Originally used as a pejorative, “queer” has since been largely reclaimed as a term of pride in popular as well as academic contexts.¹⁸ Today, “queer” is used in two distinct yet interrelated senses. At its most basic, queer serves as an umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality. By this definition, queer encompasses all of the identities described by the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and many more, including genderqueer, asexual, and intersex—though not everyone in these categories self-identifies as queer. The second meaning of queerness is more conceptual. Over the last 30 years, queer theorists like Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, Lee Edelman, and Kathryn Bond Stockton have argued for thinking about queerness as a way of being, doing, and desiring *differently* as much as a specific marker of identity.¹⁹ To be queer, by this definition, is to resist the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject. Queerness challenges dominant beliefs about pleasure and power. It names a longing to “live life otherwise.”²⁰ In this sense, queerness is simultaneously a term for the lived experiences of LGBTQ subjects and a term for a way of reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world.

Perhaps surprisingly, the definition of “video games” is just as complex and slippery as the definition of queerness. “Video game” too has multiple meanings, and these meanings have long been contested, within both game studies and the cultures that surround them. In this way, the term video game describes something seemingly concrete in the world (e.g., the game object itself), but it also describes an often-unspoken set of beliefs about what does and does not count as “real” when it comes to the study, design, and discussion of play.²¹ How we define a “game” matters because it sets the terms for what types of experiences, perspectives, and subjects are valued—or even visible—in the way we talk about this widely influential medium. Defining video games may seem like a semantic task, but in fact it is inextricable from larger questions about who does and does not get to “count” in games.

For the purposes of the present study, video games are defined as any designed, interactive experience that operates primarily through a digital interface and *understands itself* as a video game. By my definition, video games encompass a wide range of genres, production paradigms, platforms, and styles of gameplay. Arcade games are video games, as are home console games, computer games, portable games for systems like the Nintendo Game Boy, social games played on Facebook and other networking sites, and mobile games played on smart phones. In the mainstream news media, video games are often equated with first-person shooters, but in truth these games represent only a sliver of the work contained within the medium. Role-playing games, strategy games, puzzle games, adventure games, sports games, and racing games are among the many other popular video-game genres. Different games also emerge from different production paradigms. Typically, a division is made between large-scale AAA and indie games, developed with smaller teams and more modest budgets, but many game studios operate in a middle ground. Video games can also vary greatly in those who play them and the communities that form around them. Some video games garner substantial followings; others are produced, played, and disappear into relative obscurity. Games are not always developed for the people whom we imagine. As Shira Chess explains in her book *Ready Player Two*, a considerable number of contemporary games are being designed for and marketed to women and girls, though society at large continues to imagine gamers as men.²² This book attempts to speak

to as many of these video-game types as possible, while recognizing that this field is far vaster and more varied than any one book can account for. Though my own focus is on digital games, which I often shorten to simply “games,” non-digital games and analogue play are also important touchstones in discussions of queerness and video games.

My definition of video games is inclusive by design, but it is also far from self-evident. Definitions of video games are as numerous and nuanced as the individuals who critique them. Game studies, the academic study of games and play, has a long tradition of defining and re-defining games. Much of the early- and mid-twentieth-century works from which game studies scholars drew initial inspiration were anthropological treatises on the characteristics of play and games.²³ The field was founded in the late 1990s by scholars like Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth, who are often described as representing the positions of “narratology” and “ludology” respectively; narratology and ludology have long been pitted as rivals in game studies precisely because they represent different modes of understanding games: the latter as play and the former as narrative.²⁴ In the intervening decades, many major works in game studies scholarship have continued to consider issues relating to the question of what defines a video game. One such thread of thinking, for instance, explores the permeable nature of games’ boundaries, challenging the divide between “game” and “not game” (T. L. Taylor) that is often described as the “magic circle” (Mia Consalvo) and instead repositioning games as “half real” (Jesper Juul), blurring the line between in-game fiction and embodied experience.²⁵ Such work demonstrates that “video game” is, by nature, neither a single nor a stable ontological category.

Even (or perhaps especially) outside of the academic context, debates about what does or does not count as a video game continue to rage. A regular complaint expressed online by what I characterize as “reactionary” gamers—those who bemoan the push to bring diversity to the medium—is that video games that do not closely resemble established genres should not be considered games at all.²⁶ Often, it is games made by or about women, queer people, people of color, and non-neurotypical people that are dismissed or outright condemned for being “not real games.” For this reason, though the question of how to define a game may sound rhetorical, it in fact serves as an active example of how social biases are shaping what work is or is not permitted to enter the conversation

around video games. This is why defining video games as digital media objects that “understand themselves” as games is a political statement. It asserts the right of games and game-makers to set the terms of their own identities.

Whatever definition we use for video games, it is crucial to recognize that these works are meaningful products of culture. As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum have compellingly argued, games communicate social values and serve as windows onto the beliefs of the communities and society from which they emerge, whether or not the game developers who create them intended them to do so.²⁷ Long misunderstood as mere entertainment for children or machines of violence, video games are in fact an impactful media form with an immense capacity to affect and also reflect on the world outside the game in ways that are simultaneously political and deeply personal. All video games, no matter how “fun,” send messages: about how to act and what to value, about when to conform and when to resist, about what is possible and who is allowed to explore those possibilities.

At the Intersection of Queerness and Video Games

The intersection of queerness and video games is a site of rich potential. This is reflected in the wealth and variety of work, both academic and creative, currently taking place at this intersection. As areas of research interest, gender and sexuality in video games are not new. Work on these issues can be traced back to foundational texts like Sherry Turkle’s 1995 *Life on the Screen* and Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins’s 1998 collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. In the decades since, discussions about gender identity in video games have focused largely on experiences and representations of cisgender women (though more recent writing, such as Yasmin B. Kafai et al.’s 2016 collection *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* and Carly Kocurek’s research on masculinity and arcades have productively broadened and complicated discussions of gender in games).²⁸ However, until recently, queerness and LGBTQ experiences were rarely the subjects of game studies research. In the 1990s and 2000s, texts that did address sexual orientation frequently did so through questions about straight male identification with sexualized, on-screen women—problematically perpetuating the presumption that

video-game players are predominantly heterosexual, cisgender men.²⁹ This is not to say that earlier game studies scholarship did not engage, in less direct ways, with notions of non-normative desire in video games. Canonical works like Aarseth's *Cybertext*, Alexander Galloway's *Gaming*, and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, among others, all include reflections on how play makes space for alternative pleasures.³⁰ The present work takes these ideas further by insisting on non-normative desires as core to video games and explicitly linking those desires to queerness.

This book emerges as part of the current rise of queer game studies. I began writing about LGBTQ perspectives in and on video games in 2005, more than a decade ago, during my first days as a games and technology journalist. In the intervening time, I have seen queerness in video games go from what was perceived as a highly niche interest to an area of widespread attention and major growth for both the study and the creation of games. In the academic context, this rising interest in queerness and video games is coming together to form what Shaw and I have termed elsewhere an interdisciplinary "paradigm."³¹ Because queer game studies is still nascent, scholars come to this work from a variety of backgrounds; some are humanists, some social scientists, some coders or critical makers. Across these many perspectives, queer game studies is built on the belief that queer studies and game studies, considered together, shed new light on one another and suggest valuable areas of inquiry. At the same time, "queer game studies" does not describe one, unified community of scholars, but rather a network of collaborators and affiliates from across North America, and indeed the globe. This paradigm has galvanized around the annual Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), a hybrid event that brings together representatives from academia, industry, and activism, of which I am honored to have served as lead organizer from 2013 to 2017. One of the things that makes QGCon, and queer game studies more generally, unique among established modes of scholarship is that it is founded on a commitment to building bridges between theoretical analysis and the LGBTQ people who make, play, and study games.

New scholarship in the paradigm of queer game studies is emerging regularly, so any overview of this area would be by nature incomplete. However, there are a number of key threads that can be traced across



Figure I.4. Still from *Bayonetta 2* (Platinum Games, 2014) trailer. Screenshot by author.

this work. One of these threads is an interest in the implicit queerness of characters who are not overtly coded as LGBTQ. Amanda Phillips's writing on hyperfemininity in *Bayonetta 2* exemplifies this scholarly approach (figure I.4).³² Another thread is the critique of existing LGBTQ representation in mainstream video games, which often promotes limited or re-normativizing perspectives on queerness. An example of this is Edmond Chang's writing on same-sex coupling options in the popular social media game *FrontierVille*.³³ Issues of player culture also appear in this work. Lisa Nakamura's essay on the challenges faced by queer women of color who game illustrates this type of queer game studies scholarship.³⁴ Also common in queer game studies is work that reflects on connections between queerness and game design—or the queer potential of alternative design approaches. Naomi Clark and merritt kopas's "Queering Human-Game Relations," for example, looks at game mechanics (the rules that govern interactivity) as potential sites of queer expression and resistance.³⁵ Evan Lauteria has written about how "modding" enacts queerness by reshaping the game's very code through non-normative player agencies.³⁶ As queer game studies becomes an area of broader interest, we are beginning to see a widening pool of play theorists dip their toes into queerness, as demonstrated by Miguel Sicart's article "Queering the Controller." New texts, such as the recent collection

Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games, continue to emerge.³⁷ Together, these works suggest just some of the many ways that video games can be reimagined through the frameworks of queerness.

Moving forward, there are many more issues at the intersection of queerness and video games for queer game studies to explore. Bisexuality, asexuality, kink, genderqueer identities, and polyamory and non-heteronormative relationship structures are all subjects that merit further consideration in relation to video games, as are broader theoretical discussions around subjects like affect and politics. Queer game studies must also continue to push toward an intersectional understanding of queerness by increasing its engagement with race, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, socioeconomics, religion, and nationality. Industry studies and the experience of LGBTQ people within the commercial structures of game-making represent another potentially fruitful avenue for queer game studies scholars. Similarly, fan studies offers an opportunity to turn toward video-game fandoms and the ways that fans are remaking games as queer.³⁸ The present moment is a promising one for the study of queerness and video games, but the real work of making sense of video games through queer perspectives is only just beginning.

At times, this moment of unprecedented potential for queer voices within the study and creation of video games can also feel like a moment of unprecedeted danger. With the increased visibility of diversity as a core issue in video games has also come a sharp rise in harmful negative responses from the reactionary sectors of games culture. Though misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination have long been part of video games' cultural makeup, in recent years a torrent of online harassment has been unleashed on those who make or speak publicly about diverse video games. I myself have been harassed many times, and I know all too well the risk involved in calling for social justice in video games. Yet #GamerGate has gotten at least one thing right. It is no coincidence that this backlash comes at the same time that queerness is becoming a more central concern in games and the dialogues that surround them. As Katherine Cross has written, proponents of #GamerGate are driven by a fear that video games are changing, that they will no longer belong only to white, straight, cisgender men and boys.³⁹ And that is true.

Beyond Representation

Among the many possible approaches to exploring the intersection of LGBTQ perspectives and video games, my purpose here is to demonstrate the value of understanding queerness in video games in ways that go beyond representation. As many have argued, video games communicate meaning not only through the people, situations, and stories they represent on-screen but also through their procedural and computational systems. Such systems, writes Ian Bogost, make arguments and communicate ideologies, thereby “invok[ing] political, social, and cultural values.”⁴⁰

When I say that we must look for the queerness in video games “beyond representation,” I do not mean to underestimate or devalue the importance of diverse representation in video games—for LGBTQ people, people of color, and many more. Organizations like #ineeddiversegames and Dames Making Games, who are pushing for increased racial and gender diversity in games and games production, are doing important work that directly furthers the cause of social justice. Dmitri Williams et al. have argued that the systemic underrepresentation of women and people of color (and, I would add, queer people) in video games has the real potential to negatively impact how society views these groups, as well as how players from these groups view themselves.⁴¹ As Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm write in their introduction to *Gaming Representation*, it is crucial not to overlook representation and issues of identity more broadly in an attempt to push game studies toward “hardcore” concerns, like questions of platforms and code.⁴² Yet, increasing diverse representation in video games is not the only path toward making space for those who are “different” in games—and representation itself, as it is traditionally imagined, has its own limitations. It is not enough to simply count the number of LGBTQ characters who appear on-screen. We must also think about how experiences of difference can be given voice (or once again be silenced) by video games’ seemingly non-representational elements, such as their interactive systems, their controls, and their underlying computational logics. Indeed, Malkowski and Russworm themselves explain that representation should not and cannot be separated from the designed and technical aspects of video games.⁴³

Once we move beyond the traditional limits of representation, the queer possibilities of video games become significantly more wide-reaching and, I contend, significantly more subversive. In its conceptual modes, as a name for being or desiring differently, queerness can also be a way of designing a game, interpreting it, or playing it. As the examples discussed throughout this book demonstrate, a game's queerness may lay in its mechanics, or in its imagery, or in its control schema, or in how it creates a platform for emergent and transgressive forms of play. As yet, the possibility for emergence and transgression through video-game play has been most directly explored in relation to virtual worlds, such as in Celia Pearce's writing on emergent cultures in *Uru* or Jenny Sundén's ethnographic study of sexual expression among *World of Warcraft* players.⁴⁴ Yet all video games can become platforms for playing at the boundaries of heteronormativity—or for disrupting and dismantling heteronormativity itself. The queerness in a video game may lie in the opportunity to resist structures of power, or partake in alternative forms of pleasure, or inhabit embodied and affective experiences of difference. Queerness can be found in how video games construct or disrupt notions of desire, temporality, success, meaning, life, and death. The idea that queerness could be embodied by a game mechanic, and in this sense could move “beyond representation,” was first described by tabletop role-playing game designers Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick in a 2013 talk at the Queerness and Games Conference.⁴⁵ Alder’s game *Monsterhearts* (2012) illustrates this move beyond representation by translating sexual attraction into a mechanic; players must roll a die to determine who “turns their character on.” This is just one example of how LGBTQ experiences can manifest through gameplay rather than traditional representational elements.

In order to identify queerness in video games beyond representation, I look not to games with explicit LGBTQ content but to those that are commonly assumed to be “straight”—i.e., “normal” or not queer. With a few notable exceptions, the games I address here contain no LGBTQ characters or romance options. Nonetheless, I believe they should be understood as deeply queer, especially when they are placed in the hands of queer players. If these video games seem initially unrelated to queerness, perhaps because there is good reason to doubt that their creators and/or primary audiences see them as queer, this is actually the point; these

are the games that most need reclaiming. There are many wonderful games available today, many of them emerging from the queer games avant-garde, that do directly engage with LGBTQ issues. Such games deserve extensive scholarly and popular attention. Yet (with the exceptions of the games discussed in chapters 4 and 8) these games are not my subject here. An octopus attempting to walk on land, a ball bounced back and forth at a frenzied pace between paddles, a race car crashed into a semi-truck in a spectacular blaze: As a queer player myself, *these* are the moments that I find myself most drawn to in games—not when I see characters who share my gender and sexuality identities, but when I see my own queer approach to the world echoed in what it feels like to play. In this way, this project builds on Adrienne Shaw's insight in her book *Gaming at the Edge* that, for many LGBTQ players, identifying with a video game is rarely as simple as relating to a queer character on-screen.⁴⁶

Finding the queerness in video games “beyond representation” requires methodologies—like close reading and critical analysis rooted in theory—that are well-established in other fields, such as media studies, yet remain surprisingly contentious in the study of games. Queer theory has its roots in the analysis of language and imagery, and many of the most formative works in the field (such as D. A. Miller’s practices of “too-close reading,” discussed in chapter 2) focus on how queer meaning can be read between the lines.⁴⁷ In the early 1990s, Alexander Doty was already arguing for the right of scholars to critique cinema and television that others deemed “straight” through a queer lens. Indeed, Doty’s laments about the skepticism and judgment he faced for interpreting film queerly sound much like the present-day frustrations of queer game studies scholars and feminist game commentators. “It often seems as if people think that since you have chosen to read something queerly,” Doty has written, considering this issue more than once, “you need to be pressured or patronized into feeling” that your efforts represent “pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn’t there.”⁴⁸ This quote could easily describe the backlash from contemporary games culture against “reading too much into” video games. The practice of drawing comparisons between film and video games has been, in other contexts, rightly criticized.⁴⁹ Games differ from film in key ways. In this case though, the history of film scholarship does serve as a useful benchmark. Twenty

years from now, with any luck, it will likely seem surprising to all of those who study video games that there once was a time when we had to fight for the legitimacy of interpreting games queerly.

Arguing for queerness beyond representation constitutes far more than an academic exercise. In the face of discrimination in games culture, it becomes a rallying cry for queer subjects to reclaim the medium. In identifying how video games, even those that appear most simplistic or heteronormative, can resonate powerfully with queer experiences, queerness emerges as a form of potential that lies within all games. In this way, discovering the queerness in video games calls for an expansion of the very definition of representation. It allows us to make new space for queer identities, desires, and ways of being within the medium across its past, present, and future. Queerness beyond representation also disrupts the neoliberal instrumentalization of LGBTQ content in video games. In the corporate context and the popular media, the call to increase diversity in games is often conflated with financial incentives for studios to bring in additional queer consumers.⁵⁰ Looking to queerness beyond representation is not about buying, or selling, or making things “better” in any traditional sense. It is about rethinking the stories we tell about the place of LGBTQ subjects in video games. It is about being bold and unapologetic in refusing to lay claim to anything less than the entire medium of games.

From this vision of queerness in video games beyond representation comes the notion of what I term “playing queer.” Writing about how mainstream game series that include LGBTQ representation, such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004–2016) and *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009–2014), offer limited options for exploring sexual difference, Stephen Greer has used the phrase “playing queer” in reference to what he sees as the ultimately limited possibilities for queer identification in video games.⁵¹ My use of the concept here is quite different; I see “playing queer” as a mode of nearly infinite possibility, brought to games largely through their players rather than systems structured by (mainstream) developers.

In the hands of those who bring queer perspectives to the medium, video games can be interpreted queerly, whether through their content or their structures, but they can also be played in queer ways. Queer play can take a variety of forms—from playing to lose, to playing to hurt, to

playing too fast or too slow. It can be simultaneously defiant, deviant, ecstatic, languid, silly, or absurd. Sometimes queer play is built into a video game by its designers, but in many other instances players bring this queerness with them when they choose to play in ways that a game did not intend. In such moments, queer play resists and repurposes games for alternative desires; it upends the normative logics that structure the game and transform it into a space for testing the boundaries of pleasure, identity, and agency. This is a form of what T. L. Taylor has called the “transformative work” enacted by video-game players, or what Anne-Marie Schleiner terms “ludic mutation.”⁵² It is also related to Alexander Galloway’s notion of countergaming, i.e., gaming that resists the established logics of video games.⁵³ Along with cheating, as Mia Consalvo has described it, queer play shares the belief that there is more than one “correct” way to play a game.⁵⁴ To put this even more boldly, queer play embraces the powerful act of playing the “wrong” way. Just as any video game can be interpreted queerly, any video game can be played queerly, and thereby reimagined. This is what it means to “play queer.”

At the same time, it is worth interrogating and even problematizing the notion of playing queer. To whom does queer play belong and who has the right to describe themselves as playing queerly? Can straight, cisgender LGBTQ allies also take part in queer play or do they risk appropriating the terms of queer experience? Playing queer signifies the act of queer play, but it also suggests playing queerness itself—whether that means playing *at* queerness or somehow playing with queerness as an object (the way one plays a game). To call this form of expression “playing queer” also invokes the image of a queer subject who plays. Like Johan Huizinga’s “homo ludens,” the playing man, the playing queer might be a name for a kind of universal queer subject who is characterized by the fact that they are, in some basic sense, at play. However, while it represents a site of expanding intersectional potential, inviting non-LGBTQ people to play at being queer should bring us pause. For example, as I discuss in chapter 6, a number of queer games today are being mislabeled as “empathy games,” encouraging straight, cisgender players to engage in a kind of queerness tourism—to echo Lisa Nakamura’s concept of “identity tourism”—by supposedly stepping into the shoes of their queer designers.⁵⁵ I also recognize that the vision of queer play that I am offering here

runs the risk of becoming diffuse and all-encompassing, as if all types of engagements with video games that are non-normative, in one way or another, now have grounds to call themselves queer.

In response to this, let me articulate a distinction—and also let me reassert the importance of the direct, material connection between queer readings of video games and LGBTQ lives. Playing queer is a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players—but which belongs, first and foremost, to those who live the joys and the pains of their queer lives each day in the world beyond games as well as within them. Queer theory, as a framework, can inspire many sorts of re-readings of video games: not just queer readings, but also others that challenge the standard notions of what games mean, who belongs in them, and how they make players feel. All players are entitled to explore and experience alternative desires through video games, and all scholars are entitled to approach games and the communities that surround them with an eye toward their transgressive implications. Yet, in using the word “queer” itself, straight, cisgender subjects must remain aware that their experiences are never one and the same with those of LGBTQ people (who themselves each bring their own individual perspectives to this work) and that their use of queerness as a lens must come with an acknowledgment of and respect for real, queer lives.

Even bearing these complications in mind, there is immense potential in playing queerly. This potential lies equally in the value of play as the value of queerness. Play, for instance, differentiates the study of queerness in video games from the study of queerness in other media forms. Beyond the representation of LGBTQ subjects on the screen is the interactive experience of queerness. Interactive experience matters because it is individual as well as cultural, and because it is felt in the body. Ultimately, it is in the body that queerness meets video games. Both discovering the queerness in games and bringing the queerness to games are experiments in bringing the queer body—its desires, its loss, its expression of self—to press up against a game, to see where the two attract and where they repel, to form an intimate, erotic, and often subversive connection between the experiences of queerness, the beauties and dangers of LGBTQ lives, and the medium of video games.

Methodologies, Themes, and Chapters

This book approaches the relationship between video games and queerness from an interdisciplinary perspective, bridging digital media studies, cultural studies, and social activism. Yet, in another sense, the methodologies of the project are relatively straightforward. Each of the chapters is structured around creating a dialogue between video games and queerness by juxtaposing a close reading of a game or games with a specific text or set of ideas from queer theory. By allowing these works to speak to one another, a rich network of insights reveals itself, shining new light on video games as well as on conceptualizations of queerness. In order to demonstrate the wide-reaching relevance of queerness to video games, I have selected games from across a variety of moments in the history of video games, game genres, and paradigms of game production. The queer theory texts I am working with are likewise diverse. Because it is important to me to establish that queer theory has shared an ethos with video games from its earliest days to the present, I have brought in both foundational and contemporary works of queer theory. Often, in describing points of commonality between queer theory and video games, I use the word “resonance.” What does it mean for video games, conceptualizations of queerness, and the experiences of queer subjects to resonate with one another? These resonances are points of relationality, moments when the structures and messages of video games echo and are echoed by the structures of queer thinking. To resonate does not simply mean to replicate; resonances still allow for difference and even contradiction. At the places where video games and queerness meet one another, they reverberate, calling to one another and calling to us to make new meaning by reading them in tandem.

Queerness is at the heart of the methodologies of this book, as well as its subject matter. My own training is as a literary scholar, as well as a scholar of new media, but I also worked for many years as a professional video games and technology journalist. Today, in addition, a notable amount of my time is spent as an LGBTQ community organizer. This has given me a perspective that is hybrid by nature: part theoretical, part cultural, with a wide-reaching knowledge of video games and the games industry but also a passion for diving into details. Many of the analyses included in this book are structured around close reading,

which theorist Elizabeth Freeman describes as a distinctly queer process of slowly unfolding.⁵⁶ These methodologies are political as well as queer. As I discuss in chapter 2, close reading—or, to use D. A. Miller’s words, too-close reading—stands in direct opposition to the insistence from reactionary sectors of games culture that video games should not be over-read, and that they should remain “just for fun.” Instead of allowing the meanings of video games to remain distant, I delve deeply, embracing the queer intimacy that forms between scholar and game.

Though queerness, sexuality, and gender are my explicit focuses here, a number of related themes emerge across this work that suggest additional underlying connections between the games and texts that I critique. Intimacy and forms of closeness—whether between characters in a video game, game players, or a player and a game—is one of these themes. Movement is another: movements through game space and time, movements of the body, movements across a game board as vectors of desire, movements backward and movements forward as we rethink the history and the future of LGBTQ issues in video games. Affect and embodiment also appear frequently. In addition, there are also a number of ontological questions that underlie these chapters, questions that game studies scholars and players may have heard before, but which are approached from important new angles. What types of interactive experiences count as “real” games? What is the place of winning and losing in a video game, and how can we challenge traditional notions of success? Understanding video games through queer perspectives also generates tensions and points of friction—such as between the way that a game is received by mainstream games culture versus the way that it is interpreted analytically, or the way that a game is designed by its creators versus the way that it is played. My approach to each of these issues is structured around challenging dominant logics and seeking alternative ways of being, doing, and understanding in and through video games.

This book is broken into two sections: “Discovering Queerness in Video Games” and “Bringing Queerness to Video Games.” These sections, broadly grouped, represent the two key approaches to exploring the relationship between queer issues and video games that I am proposing here. The first section focuses on using queer theory to identify the queerness that already exists within video games, yet often remains just below the surface. As throughout the book, the games analyzed in this

first section are likely not those that come immediately to mind when one imagines a “queer video game.” Yet together they demonstrate that queer desires, bodies, affects, and acts of hegemonic resistance can be found already operating in a wide range of games, even those that seem unengaged with or perhaps antithetical to the concerns of queerness. Methodologically, the examples of queer game analysis given in this section demonstrate the work of doing game studies queerly. This is the work of interpretation, of approaching the medium from new angles; it is the work of allowing the multifaceted nature of queerness to disrupt, enrich, and complicate the standard set of lenses through which scholars and players make sense of video games. These chapters are also founded on an even larger claim: that all video games can be seen as queer, because all video games—like all forms of cultural production—can be interpreted through experiences of non-heteronormative identity and desire.

“Discovering Queerness in Video Games” begins with a juxtaposition that places games directly into dialogue with queer theory. Chapter 1, “Between Paddles: *Pong*, *Between Men*, and Queer Intimacy in Video Games,” offers a comparative reading of the video game *Pong* (Atari, 1972) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1985 book *Between Men*. These two works are foundational in the fields of video games and queer theory respectively. They have more in common than their canonical status, however. Both *Pong* and *Between Men* can be understood as reflections on queer intimacy. In a text that many consider the very origin point for queer theory, Sedgwick describes how male homoerotic desire in Western literature has often been triangulated through female characters. Similarly, the ball in *Pong* is hit back and forth in an ongoing dance between identical paddles, which can be seen as a metaphor for a mediated, sexually charged connection between like subjects. Yet reading *Pong* and *Between Men* side by side accomplishes more than a reframing of the classic video game through queerness. It also illustrates that resonances between queerness and games can be found not just in the present moment, with the increased push for diverse content in games, but across the medium’s history, all the way back to the very origins of video games and queer theory.

Chapter 2, “Getting Too Close: *Portal*, ‘Anal Rope,’ and the Perils of Queer Interpretation,” illustrates how the cultural logics that surround

video games, as well as games themselves, can be re-read through queer theory. Much as chapter 1 established ties between games and queer studies scholarship on literature, this chapter looks to a text that has been formative for queer studies in film: D. A. Miller's essay on the homoerotic implications of camera work and editing in *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948). By performing a parallel analysis of the homoerotic elements in the popular video game *Portal* (Valve, 2007), this chapter addresses and reclaims the notion of getting "too close"—a complaint often directed at those who seek to unpack the social dimensions of video games. It establishes the relevance of video games to scholarship on film and media and argues for the right of all players to look closely in order to see themselves in games.

Chapter 3, "'Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus': Queer Embodiment and Passing in *Octodad*," looks for the queerness in video games through a consideration of their control schema. In the cult hit *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), players assume the role of an octopus trying to pass as a normal, suburban dad. Accomplishing this feat is harder than it sounds, however. Each of Octodad's tentacles are controlled individually, resulting in endless displays of flailing contortion. Intentionally designed to foreground the awkward absurdity of the non-normative body, the game does more than represent difference; it allows players to inhabit difference. Read through a queer lens, *Octodad* reveals itself to be a game about "passing." The image of the fish out of water becomes a multivalent metaphor for the real-world experiences of queer subjects, people of color, and those with disabilities. In this sense, *Octodad* also demonstrates how intersectionality underlies the study of queerness in video games.

Chapter 4, "Kissing for Absolutely No Reason: *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, *Consentacle*, and Queer Game Design," closes the first section of the book by addressing how a game's very interactive systems can resist heteronormativity. In the small-scale, independent game *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Loren Schmidt and Jimmy Andrews, 2015), players lick and prod one another with impossibly long, floppy tongues. The game has no goal and continues indefinitely, upending the assumption that video games—like sex—must by nature have a win state or a point of completion. Here, "discovering" the queerness in games means attending to the ways in which design can act as social critique. In the face of

“gamification,” a prominent tool in the neoliberal instrumentalization of play, Schmidt and Andrews’s design stands as a compelling illustration of what I call “de-gamification,” the stripping away of the ludic structures than enact oppression in everyday life. This chapter also looks to a second game, Naomi Clark’s tabletop role-playing game *Consentacle* (2014), to explore the idea of “re-gamification,” through which designers can make visible the unspoken rules that shape cultural expectations for gender and sexuality. Together these games demonstrate how discovering the queerness in games calls for a careful consideration of a game’s design and its interactive systems, as well as its representational content.

There are many other ways, and many other places, to discover the queerness in video games than those addressed here. Thousands of video games await queer interpretation. My hope is that the chapters in this first section lay a groundwork for future scholarship. They illustrate the concept of queerness “beyond representation,” and evidence the legitimacy and rich potential of reimagining video games through queer perspectives. Queerness opens the doors to new ways of seeing. With this work, video games step through that door and move toward multiplicity of meaning.

Whereas the first section of this book focuses on looking beneath the surface to find queerness as it already exists in games—a scholarly mode of intervention—the second section, “Bringing Queerness to Video Games,” explores practices through which players and LGBTQ game designers are actively making games queer. In these examples, those who play games, and a new artistic generation of those who create them, are resisting the often toxic heteronormativity of mainstream video games and games culture. They are picking up existing games and playing them “the wrong way,” rejecting and thereby queering the stated goals of the game. Alternatively, they are intentionally taking non-normative pleasure in gameplay or questioning the politics of affect in relation to games, disrupting widespread beliefs about how video games are supposed to make players feel. Bringing queerness to games is at once political and personal. The designers in the loosely termed “queer games avant-garde,” with which this section closes, are introducing queerness to the broader field of game development by drawing on their own experiences as LGBTQ subjects to tell stories that have rarely appeared in commercially released video games.

Chapter 5, “Playing to Lose: *Burnout* and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games,” begins this section by arguing for failure as a mode of queer resistance. As mentioned in chapter 4 in my discussion of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, the assumption that video games are meant to be winnable, and that players play them because they want to win, is still nearly pervasive across game design and game studies. This chapter rejects that assumption, drawing attention to the non-normative pleasures of play, and arguing that players play queerly when they embrace, to use Jack Halberstam’s term, “the art of failure.” To do this, the chapter looks at the racing game *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion Games, 2005), which turns notions of success on their head by instructing players to crash their cars and accrue points for self-destruction.

Chapter 6, “No Fun: Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt,” moves from queer failure to queer feeling. It draws from writing on affect from theorists like Sara Ahmed to argue that players can and do experience a range of difficult emotions in video games. This destabilizes the widely held and fundamentally heteronormative belief that video games are first and foremost “fun.” Empathy is also a central concern of this chapter. Increasingly, both queer games and games designed for virtual reality devices, which seem poised to become more widely integrated into basic consumer technologies, are being lauded for allowing players to feel what others feel—such as experiences of LGBTQ marginalization. Yet queer affect problematizes empathy, exposing the worrisome implications that underlie the belief that a brief gameplay experience could (or even should) effectively communicate to a straight, cisgender player what it feels like to be queer.

Chapter 7, “Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking: Queer Movements through Space and Time,” looks at the temporal and spatial dimensions of queer play. It draws from writing by queer theorists Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Love on “chrononormativity” to identify how players can disrupt established norms of temporality and spatiality in video games. Whether by “speedrunning” (racing through video games by memorizing levels or exploiting glitches) or by insistently lingering during gameplay, players have the opportunity to purposefully reject the chrononormativity of video games as a medium. Recently, the discourse around movement and speed in video games has

explicitly shifted to issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. The so-called walking simulator, a genre that includes games that often represent or are created by women and queer people, is at the center of heated debates within games culture about what does or does not count as a video game. This chapter looks at both the meta-gaming practice of speedrunning and the gameplay of walking simulators, which themselves have ties to the historically queer figure of the *flâneur*, as queer modes of play. Though speedrunning and walking simulators may seem diametrically opposed, they both offer alternative visions of what it means to move through time and space in video games.

The conclusion, “Video Games’ Queer Future: The Queer Games Avant-Garde,” finishes the book with a profile of some of the independent LGBTQ game-makers who are bringing queerness to the medium of video games through their work. While a number of themes resonate across their games, each of these designers approaches the relationship between queerness and video games from their own unique perspective, demonstrating the nearly infinite opportunities for self-expression that the medium affords and offering a vision of the future of video games that is undeniably queer.

Together the chapters in this second section suggest a vision of some of the many ways in which queerness can be brought to video games. In addition to queer interpretation and queer design, modes of identifying queerness in games, these chapters propose queer agency, queer affect, queer experience, and queer play as forces through which video games can be made queer. Much as the first section of this book argued that any video game could be understood through the lens of queerness, this second section argues that any game can be queer if it is played queerly.

Why Play Queer?

The value of identifying the queerness in video games “beyond representation” extends far beyond games themselves. Queer studies, for instance, has much to gain from being placed in dialogue with games. To date, the work of queer game studies has been presented primarily in game-related spaces, such as conferences and publications focused on digital media. Yet, as the juxtapositions I offer here demonstrate, video games bring new perspectives that productively complicate and

enrich queer theory. In much the same way that queer studies scholars like Kara Keeling, Jacob Gaboury, and micha cárdenas have identified resonances between queer and transgender experiences and technology more broadly, placing queerness in dialogue with video games offers the opportunity to reconsider the desires that structure digital protocols and algorithmic systems.⁵⁷ Dominant social norms of gender and sexuality shape every aspect of the video game as technology—from the rumble of a vibrating controller to the sexist remarks left behind by developers in a game's very code.⁵⁸ Among the many ways to define video games is as systems, rule sets that describe and regulate the operations of the worlds they create. For this reason, thinking through video games represents a valuable critical tool for rendering visible and reinventing systems of power, privilege, and interpersonal connection.

To talk about queerness and video games is also to talk about technology and diversity on a wider social scale. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, online digital tools have emerged as primary platforms for the popular discourse that surrounds problems like racial discrimination in America. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter is one particularly impactful and moving example of this. Simultaneously, as big data is coming increasingly to serve as the benchmark of knowledge in the digital world, feminist technology scholars are raising much-needed questions about whom data accounts for and whom it renders invisible.⁵⁹ In short, inclusion and identity are quickly becoming the most prominent and pressing points in widespread discussions about digital entertainment, digital communication, and digital subjecthood today. Video games, played by hundreds of millions in the United States and billions worldwide, are a critical part of this nexus of technology and culture.⁶⁰ Bringing queerness to video games represents an important step toward raising visibility around LGBTQ experiences, as well as the experiences of many other marginalized and underrepresented people, in the context of contemporary technology.

This book has been written with immense gratitude to my fellow queer game scholars, players, and makers, who fight this fight with their words, their hearts, and their bodies every day. With that in mind, I offer this text to all those who are passionate—or simply curious—about the place of LGBTQ issues in video games, as well as sexuality and gender in digital media more broadly. When possible, I have written this text with

a wide range of readers in mind, including scholars, developers, fans, and students. While its close reading methodologies and use of critical theory may make it academic in tone, the book's larger messages have real, immediate implications for the LGBTQ subjects who play games, who develop them, and who care about them. Queer game studies is playful work: interdisciplinary, inter-industry, and creative by nature. Though it is far from comprehensive, my intention is that this work will serve as a springboard for ongoing thinking around queerness and video games from the fields of games studies, queer studies, media studies, cultural studies, and beyond. Only through a diversity of perspectives can the complexity of the intersection between LGBTQ lives and games be uncovered. The way we think about video games must continue to change as games themselves are changing. This is a pivotal moment for the medium, a moment when both games' queer future and its past are coming into focus, when video games are being reclaimed as never before in the name of loving, living, being, and playing otherwise.