



Video Games As a Queer Platform

Breaking Past Heteronormative Design.

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ABSTRACT

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Recent years have seen a widespread debate on Gender, Sexual and Romantic Minority (GSRM) rights that has permeated nearly every aspect of Western society. This discourse has inevitably entered the video game scene and brought with it wider representation in the form of diverse characters, yet very little attention has been put into analysing the mechanics that shape one's relationship with a game, and how heteronormativity affects them.

This thesis aims to expose the influences of heteronormativity in modern video game design and the wider gaming community, and how it shapes the design of mechanics that perpetuate the structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy.

In order to do so it examines how video games reflect the environment they are built in, both in the larger abstract scale of Western society, and the smaller local scale of homogeneous design and development teams. Additionally, it explores alternative approaches to game design that departs with heteronormative traditional design and introduce a new possibility of play and exploration of one's identity.

The conclusions were reached through this examination of the dynamics between design and societal structures, as well as the observation of games that make use of disruptive design methods and implementations of non-conforming mechanics. And through the adoption of this transgressive design thinking, it compiles a design suggestion for a Queer game that deals with self-acceptance.

Key words: games, game design, queer, LGBT, GSRM, diversity

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GLOSSARY

Abstract game	A game category defined by a lack of or little connection to a theme, and that focuses almost exclusively on game mechanics.
Cisgender	Identifying with the gender one has been assigned at birth.
FOSS	Free and Open Source Software.
Game Mechanic	Rule based systems that dictate the interactions of a player with a game, and the response it gives. Collectively they define gameplay.
Gameplay	The way in which players interact with a game.
GSRM	Gender, Sexual and Romantic Minorities. Global term for any identity that doesn't correspond to cisgender and heterosexual.
Headcanon	Interpretations of fiction accepted by a single individual but not necessarily supported by the official canon.
Heteronormativity	The assumption that heterosexuality is the norm or default sexual orientation.
Lore	Collection of history and knowledge available about a fictional universe.
NPC	Non-Playable Character.
Platformer	Genre of game that consists where the main gameplay loop revolves around jumping and climbing between platforms.
Queer	Casually, global term for any identity that doesn't correspond to cisgender and heterosexual. Discussed in detail in the introduction.
Swatting	Criminal harassment tactic consisting of falsely reporting an emergency with the goal of sending a police emergency response team to the target's domicile.
Triple-A	Informal classification for big video game productions, akin to the term <i>blockbuster</i> .

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a society-wide debate about Gender Sexual and Romantic Minority (GSRM) identities, rights and representation. As non-heterosexual relationships and non-conforming gender identities have become more commonly accepted in Western society a debate has started to take place on the need to reform the inherently cis-heteronormative and patriarchal institutions of society. This debate has entered the media industries mostly through the concept of representation and diversity, yet these concepts are often nebulous and undefined (Shaw 2014, 15, 97). In modern mainstream media in general, and video games specifically, the chosen approach to diversity and representation has been through the inclusion of GSRM characters, but little thought has been put into changing the power structures and hierarchies that rule the industry and inevitably affect the creation of media (Shaw 2014, 5). Additionally, the dominance of the profit motive in capitalistic modes of production, coupled with the usage of outdated audience profiles, lead to approaching diversity by avoiding anger among reactionary sectors of an established audience. In other words, the creation of these GSRM characters is done in such a way that doesn't bother the established heteronormative order. The result of this approach is the pacification of Queerness, the distillation of an inherently transgressive identity into something harmless and, most importantly, profitable.

This thesis approaches this situation with the goal of developing a gaming experience that rejects that heteronormative framework and explores Queerness to its full potential. In the second section it offers an overview of the current state of the game industry, the commercialisation of the indie scene and the reactionary tendencies of the gaming community. In the third section it digs deeper into deeply rooted concepts in game design and the existing power structures that promote masculine, sexist, and heteronormative hegemony in the industry. In the fourth and fifth sections it explores alternative approaches to game design that break with those established notions and their potential for enabling Queer experiences. First through researching alternative game design theories, and afterwards through case studies of non-normative games. Finally, in the sixth section

it exposes my own experimentation with game design based on the concepts taken from this thesis.

1.1 A note on the usage of 'Queer'

In this thesis, along with the acronym GSRM, I am using the term Queer to refer to non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities. Queer is a controversial word which still holds negative connotations to many, so it warrants a disclaimer and an explanation of why I picked it. Queer is probably the most commonly used blanket term for GSRM identities, however, it is also very politically charged; for the majority of the 20th century it was commonly used as a slur against GSRM people. Its origins as a generic descriptor for GSRM identities lie in the formation of the activist group *Queer Nation* in 1990 (The Allusionist 2018). The reclamation of what had been up to that point a slur takes a confrontational stance with the existing cis-hetero hegemony in both society as well and relevant institutions of power. In order to differentiate between a pure descriptor of identities that don't correspond to cisgender and heterosexual, and the rebellious attitude of struggle against heteronormative ideals and institutions, throughout this thesis I refer to the former as GSRM and the latter as Queer.

2 THE GAME INDUSTRY IN 2019

Up to the mid-2010s video games had been a mostly physically distributed medium (Figure 1). Games had to be burned into a storage device like a CD or a cartridge, shipped to retailers and finally, purchased by consumers. In order to deal with this expensive and complex logistical process developers relied on big budget publisher companies. With the arrival of the modern internet, digital distribution of media started to become commonplace. For games that meant that they could be sold through a digital storefront directly to the consumer; effectively eliminating the need for a publisher to handle distribution — although their importance still remains in marketing and funding — or, in other words, enabled a developer to be its own publisher. The widespread adoption of smart devices would then consolidate this idea of a unified digital distribution platform for software (even games) around the concept of the “App Store”.

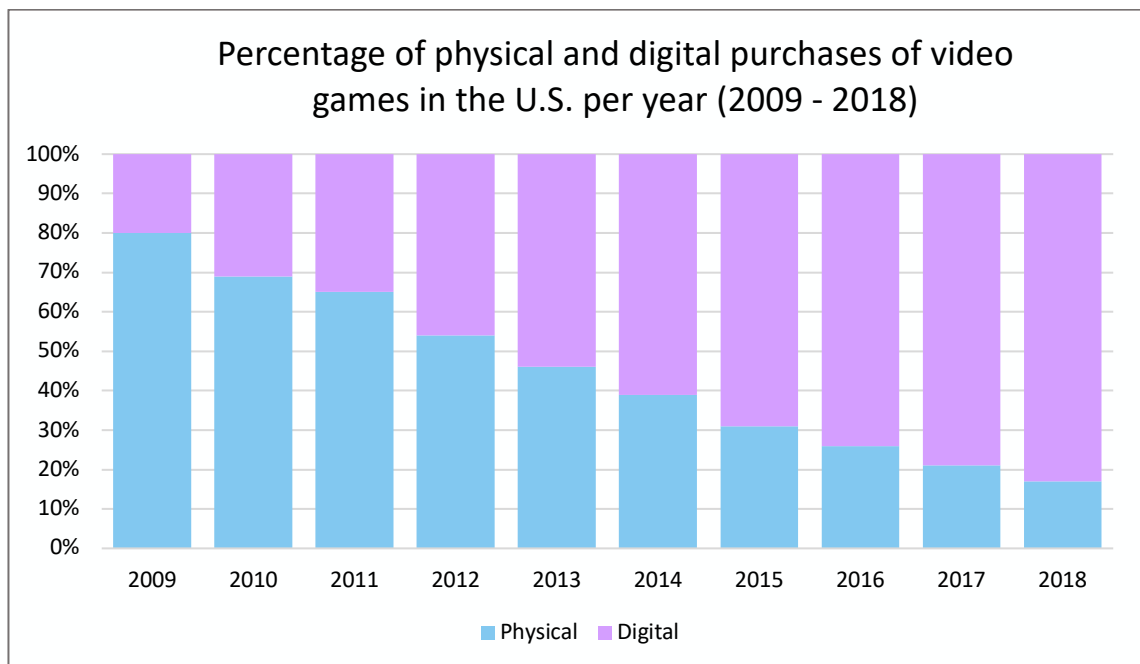


FIGURE 1. Percentage of physical and digital purchases of video games in the U.S. per year between 2009 and 2018 (Statista, 2019)

Around the same time another change in the game development industry was taking place. Software and development tools had up to that point been developed in-house or licensed from third parties at large costs (Nutt 2014). This, however, had started to change with the appearance of FOSS or otherwise affordable

alternatives, and culminated with the shift towards subscription models — which provided more stable income and a significantly lower upfront cost — in professional software (Wendt 2015).

These two changes meant that the cost of developing games, both economic and technical, rapidly lowered in a relatively short span, enabling a new, thriving and increasingly diverse indie gaming scene (Alexander 2013). This is evidenced with Steam — the world’s biggest digital video games store — abandoning their (strict) application and review system altogether with the release of Steam Greenlight in 2012, a system meant to streamline the application process and enable anyone to sell a game on their platform, and the subsequent rapid increase of games available in the platform (Figure 2). As the market kept growing bigger, this system would eventually also be phased out in June 2017 in favour of Steam Direct. An application implementation that relinquished Valve’s control of the timing of releases and provided a simpler form and refundable payment, finally leading to halted growth and the stabilization of releases at around 2000 per month (Figure 3). Together with the previously mentioned popularity of smartphones and tablets, this massively expanded the game industry, approached video games to entire new audiences and making development (and distribution) more accessible than ever before (Code 2016).

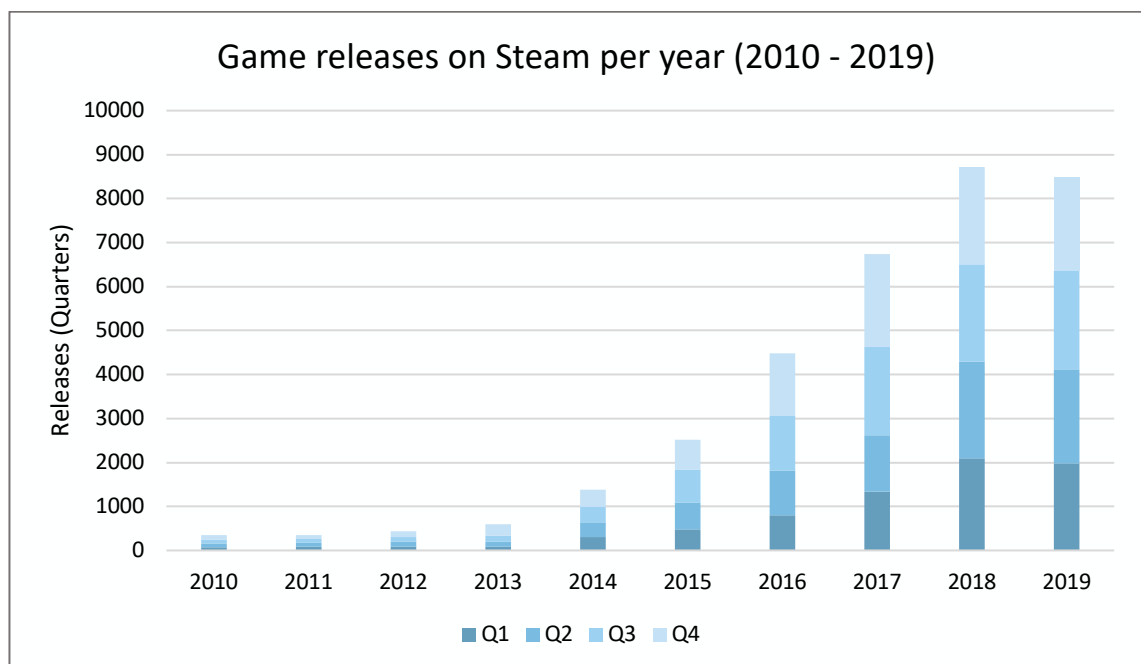


FIGURE 2. Game releases on Steam by year and quarter (Steam Spy, 2020)

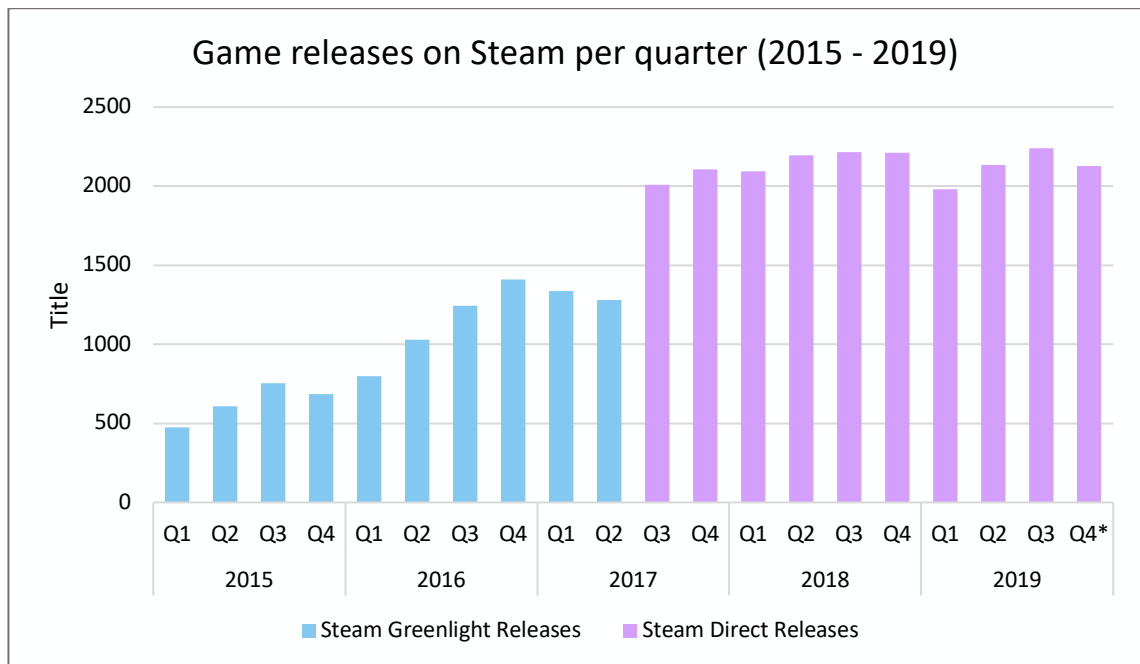


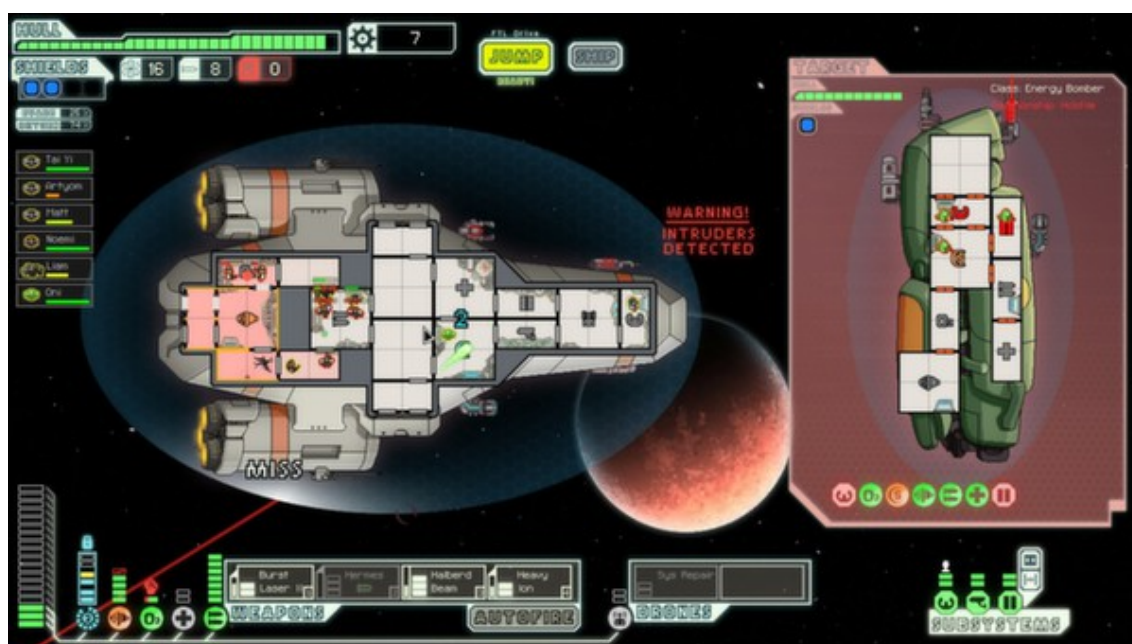
FIGURE 3. Game releases on Steam by quarter (Steam Spy, 2020). Colour differentiates between the periods in which the Steam Greenlight and Steam Direct programmes were into effect.

2.1 The stagnation of Game Design

Despite this widespread accessibility and the huge success of mobile gaming (need data), most people — even some who play games — remain uninterested in the wider video game scene. How can it be that despite the industry having grown so much in the past decade, the public opinion remains as it was in 2010? In her article *Video Games Are Boring*, Brie Code (2016) talks about her experiences as a game designer with people in her environment that aren't interested in video games. She explains how playing video games allowed her friends to see there's more to them than they had initially assumed, that video games allow for valuable and emotional interactions with characters. In spite of this, her friends haven't been able to find a game they are actually interested in or care about. This has to be, she argues, a design issue. In the article, Code argues the reason for this perceived lack of concern from game developers is a lack of diversity in the industry.

Game developers are mostly young, white, male, and mostly gamers (Code 2016). As gamers they take the existing and established mechanics for granted,

assuming they align with the expectations, wants and interests of their audience, and preventing them (unintentionally) from even acknowledging the existence of other perspectives, perpetuating this way the same mechanisms and concepts of old. In turn, this creates a biased image of what video games are, stifles their actual potential and disinterests a vast amount of people who feel alienated in today's biased market. The success of interactive storytelling experiments made outside of conventional gaming, like Netflix's *Bandersnatch* (Ramachandran 2019), show that there is an audience for interactive storytelling different from what we understand as conventional video games, that we have yet to address.



PICTURE 1. Combat scene in FTL: Faster Than Light. (Subset Games 2012)

This stagnation becomes apparent when analysing the trends in the game industry of the past few years. Retro games are still very popular among gamers (Bowman & Wulf 2018), companies like Nintendo have been able to capitalize on this through the release of remastered versions of old titles, and even going as far as releasing modern versions of retro consoles like the SNES and the original PlayStation. Additionally, many popular and highly regarded modern games are ones that have brought new and modern takes on old concepts. We can see this in the resurgence of the Rogue-Like genre with titles like *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen 2011), *Spelunky* (Mossmouth 2013), and *FTL: Faster Than Light* (Subset Games 2012) (Picture 1); the success of From Software's *Dark*

Souls (2012, 2014, 2016) series, which bases its gameplay on unforgiving “old school” difficulty; and the revival of the old 8 and 16 bit platformer genre.

2.2 Hostility and reactionary culture

It would be unfair to say there are no new perspectives in video games, there are plenty of interesting ideas and experimental games available on the internet (and I will mention some of them later on). What I really mean when saying the industry doesn't acknowledge new perspectives is, like in any other complex system of relations, it has its own set of normative expectations and punishes those that don't fit within. At best, truly innovative and experimental titles get limited praise, one “huh, that's interesting” or two from press, and then everyone moves on; at worst, they are met with straight up hostile behaviour (Parkin 2014); but most of the time, they are simply ignored.

Throughout its lifetime, the game industry and general media have fostered a community that was hostile to outsiders (Tucker 2019). With the arrival of smartphones and the growth of the market — especially of so-called casual games — there have been numerous shifts in the target audiences of big productions in the game industry. Games are increasingly accessible, and the influx of players that entails has caused the outcry of numerous voices in the community.

It doesn't take much searching to find outrage within the gaming community, in late 2019 there was a petition to the White House asking to stop sales of the latest Pokémon title because it wasn't (allegedly) up to standards (Kaser 2019). While this may seem like a funny overreaction or joke, online gaming communities are notorious for their intensity with outrage culture. There have been actions ranging from organised harassment campaigns to death threats, and even actual deaths, through the practice of *swatting*, as a result of heated online arguments (Mc Laughlin 2018).

But the hostile attitude towards change isn't restricted to just widening audiences. The wake of discussions around social issues has made this hostility increasingly visible in the form of widespread reactionary positions (Tucker 2019). A significant

part of the gaming community condemns the introduction of diversity or progressive stances on social issues in any way, shape or form as a political agenda, and has sparked numerous harassment campaigns for things as mundane as portraying women in a game's cover art (Campbell 2018).

This environment further discourages the mainstream industry's already lukewarm approach to social issues from being expanded upon (Campbell 2018) and adds difficulty to the development of games that address these social issues and the advertisement of them without being targeted by hate campaigns.

3 HETERONORMATIVITY IN MODERN GAME DESIGN

Media represents one of the main ways with which people first come into contact with the existence of GSRM people (Grey 2009). As such GSRM inclusivity in media has been an often-debated issue on the process of achieving equal rights (Grey 2009). In the past few decades, starting in the 70s and extending throughout the later decades of the 20th century into the new millennium, there has been a shift in the Western public perception of GSRM people, bringing about a certain degree of normalisation and acceptance (Craig & McInroy 2015). Together with that social change has come a significant growth in GSRM representation and visibility in media (Dhoest and Simons, 2012). While this increased visibility is often celebrated, it has also raised concerns among the GSRM community that the predominance of negative roles and stereotypes still harm the public's understanding (Grey 2009, Craig et al. 2015).

As the debate on media representation continues, the internet revolution of the past 10 years has drastically changed the media landscape with the appearance and explosive popularity of new media — in the form of online social networking, and content production and consumption —, and the huge accessibility brought by the adoption of smartphones and other connected devices (Craig et al. 2015). Craig et al. (2015) note that the participative dynamic brought by new media opens the possibility of diversifying the representation of GSRM identities and deepening the conversation around them (2014).

Focusing on the video game industry, the inclusion and discussion of GSRM identities in games has existed since practically its inception (Friedberg 2015) but has grown rapidly since 2011 (Figure 4). Despite this growth, like much of traditional media, GSRM identities are often portrayed in a shallow and uninteresting manner and rely on negative stereotypes and roles (Craig et al. 2015). Furthermore, the reliance on character archetypes denotes a reductionist approach towards GSRM identities, enabling the invisibilisation of the diversity of identities within the GSRM community, particularly those at the intersection with other marginalised demographics (Craig et al. 2015), and often resulting in tokenistic attitudes and practices.

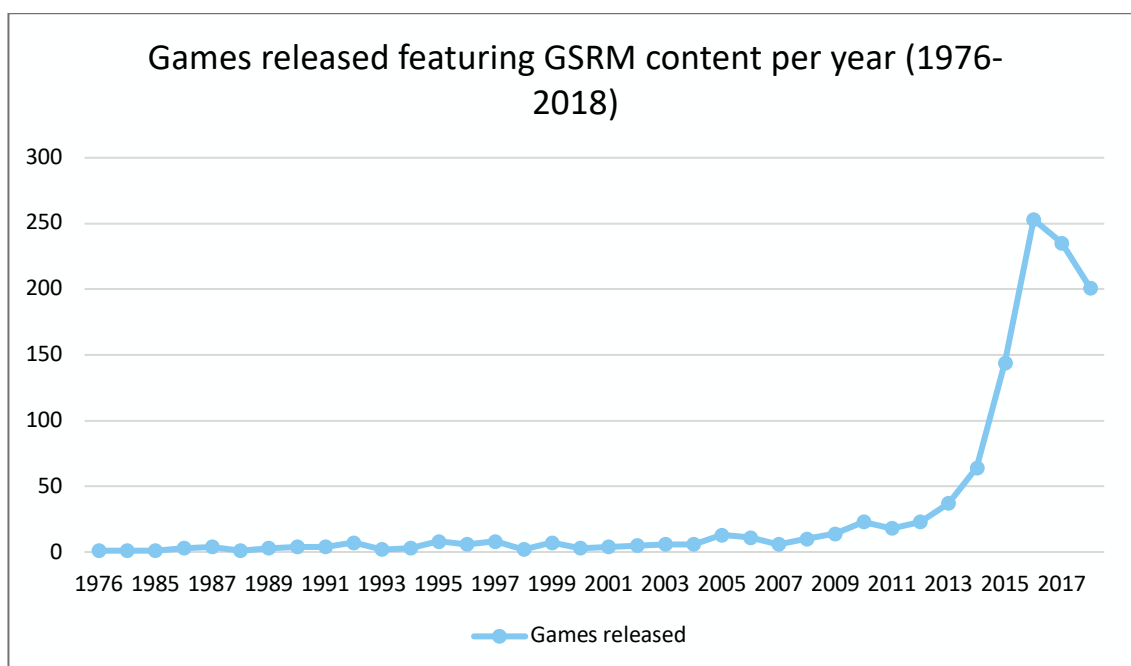


FIGURE 4. Number of video games (not part of a series of franchise) that feature any kind of GSRM content released per year between 1976 and 2018 (Queerly Represent Me, 2019). The Queerly Represent Me database is non-exhaustive and excludes games from series and franchises, therefore, while it clearly indicates a general trend, the exact values per year are not reliable enough to analyse for smaller periods.

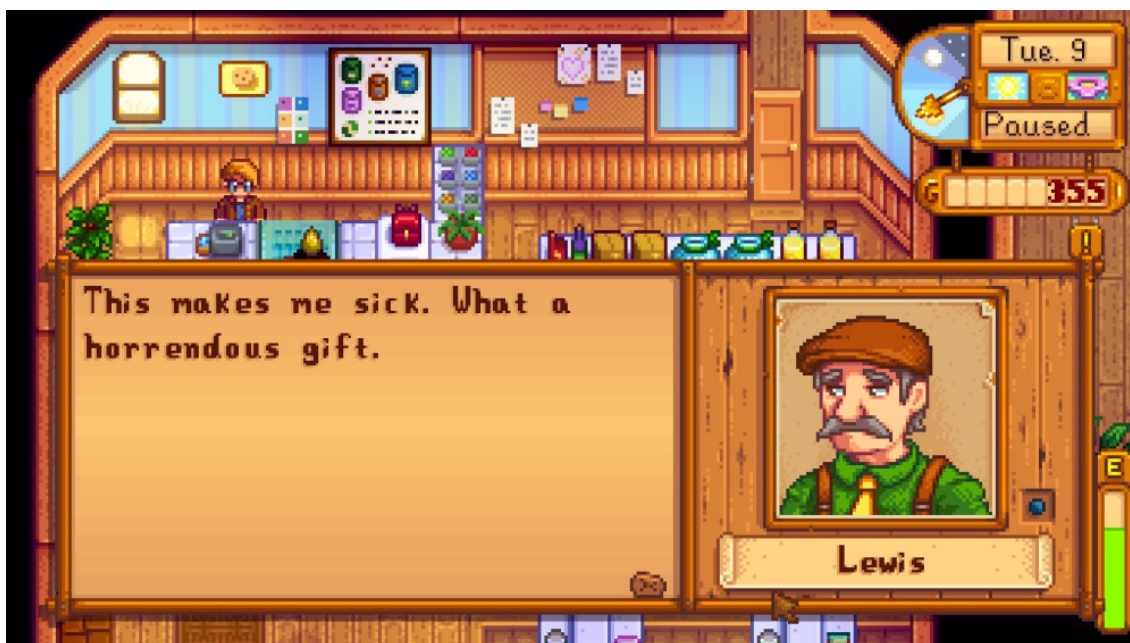
In this vein Ubisoft has received criticism for the treatment of gay and lesbian relationships in their video game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Picture 2), in which they allow players to pursue same-sex romantic encounters between the playable character and NPCs, only to then force a heterosexual relationship on them in order to justify some old overarching lore of the series with little connection to its most recent (as of 2020) iterations introduced in its first release in 2007 (Messner 2019).

This resignation to a surface-level representation of queerness in the industry is particularly frustrating; some of the biggest strengths of video games as a media platform lie in player interaction, bringing about the ability to create complex relationships between game, developer and player (Shaw 2014 100, Friedberg 2015), yet these games don't bring anything new to the table in the realms beyond characterisation, and repeat the same design formulas and archetypes of their established genres (Pelurson 2017).



PICTURE 2. Assassin's Creed Odyssey has been criticised for its bait and switch behaviour with same-sex relationships. (Fishbone76 n.d.)

Krobová, Moravec & Švelch (2015) bring up the social dynamics impacting GSRM representation beyond the addition of character identities. They emphasize the context in which games are developed. Even with player agency, these characters are still subject to heteronormative standards and designed for a primarily cisgender and heterosexual audience. Some of these dynamics are inherited from the overarching narrative tropes these games follow, like the commonly used tale of heroism with a heteroromantic motivation behind it. Even if the gender roles are swapped, or replaced with same-sex characters, the plot device still reflects and enforces heterosexist gender hierarchies. In this case, it simply re-frames queer identities onto a heterosexist framework, rather than doing away with it. One such trope is the reduction of relationship mechanics — both platonic and romantic — into a task of repeatedly offering gifts to the other party in the relationship, with little to no other interactions that offer more depth (Picture 3). Such approaches to modelling relationships frame them behind materialistic interests and reflect an unequal hierarchical relationship.



PICTURE 3. Stardew Valley. Stardew Valley's relationship system relies almost exclusively on gifting, a reflection of heterosexist social hierarchies. (profession-almoron.com 2016)

3.1 Identification as a focus of game design

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, media is one of the main avenues with which people can come into contact with the existence of GSRM identities, including people who will later identify as GSRM. This makes it a potentially important resource for those struggling with their identity (Grey 2009). Craig et al. (2015) reported the helpfulness of GSRM portrayals in media, even if flawed, as a tool for people to better understand themselves and come to terms with their identity.

But defining identification in games is a troublesome undertaking. As hard as it is to define identification in other media, video games add more issues to the mix. In regard to video games, identification is often associated with interaction (Shaw 2014, 55-68, 97-100), but that begs the question of what identification is featured in abstract games like *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984). Shaw (2014, 110) identifies this issue, and proposes a more nuanced approach. While interactivity makes a

closer connection between players and their avatars, Shaw argues it doesn't necessarily equate with identification and makes a distinction between identification and agency.

Similar approaches have been taken by other scholars in separating identity and interaction. The concept of immersion is brought up in this regard, which extends beyond the relationship between the player and the avatar and links them with the entire game instead (Shaw 2014, 101).

Krobová et al. (2015) describe the identification between game avatars and players' own GSRM identities by building on the concept of affordances: the ways in which a game lets you express your identity. Beyond games offering the possibility of engaging in same-sex relationships with other characters, they note that games also enable players to *perform* or *project* their identity unto the characters. But in spite of this debate on player identification and how GSRM identities fit into it, GSRM players don't necessarily look for this type of fulfilment from games (Shaw 2014, 97-104; Korová et al. 2015, Craig et al. 2015).

3.2 Behind the scenes: heteronormativity in development teams

Beyond the inclusion of GSRM identities in games, the environments in which they are developed have also been put into question. The game industry is dominated by young, white, cisgender, heterosexual men (Code 2016). There have been calls for increasing the diversity of development teams and audiences with the goal of also diversifying identities represented in games as well (Shaw 2014, 5; Code 2016; Korová et al. 2015).

Shaw (2014) criticises some of these initiatives as opportunistic and misguided. Merely focusing on the inclusion of underrepresented demographics in development teams assumes diversification happens just by merely including members of said groups — ignoring the diversity within those identities again — and ignores structural heterosexist issues in social environments. It may be needed, then, a new, participative space of development and experimentation.

As new media has consolidated itself as a newly established platform it has drawn the interest of countless communities, opening up more opportunities than ever before to collaborate in creation, distribution, consumption and discussion of media. This type of creative community collaboration was named participatory culture by Henry Jenkins in the early 90s, referring to the fandom communities of the time; but this kind of collaborative creation traces its roots back to folk culture (Jenkins, Ito, boyd 2016 7–8 13–16). Participatory culture, as defined in *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture* (Jenkins 2009) consists of:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)(Jenkins 2009 xi).

In the video game scene, the influence of new media has had wide ramifications. YouTube kickstarted the appearance of “Let’s Play” as a new platform of video game consumption, which later on branched off into livestreaming as well. The proliferation of community made video game modifications (mods) became an experimental hotbed of design that served as the origin of many blockbuster genres in the 2010s including MOBA, battle royale, and survival games.

One of such changes has been the appearance of an accessible and active, albeit not well known, independent games scene. Subsequently indie games have been commercialised following the success of the scene with big players like *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), following a trend of capitalizing participatory communities by corporate entities (Jenkins, Ito & boyd 2016, 21). This has culminated in the concept of indie darlings: independent games picked up and praised by mainstream media, turned into commercial success, that would then become trendsetters, inspiring other developers and spawning series of imitators (Bycer 2019).

In spite of the commercialization of the indie video game scene — which continues to be home to many valuable contributions — there still exist more underground or experimental game development communities that retain the DIY spirit of disruptive punk culture; in platforms like itch.io, Castle, or PICO-8; in events

like LudumDare and Train Jam; which remain as strongholds of participatory, collaborative, and often experimental game development.

4 BREAKING THE NORM

In the pursuit of finding alternative methods of design, scholars have theorised new design approaches that hinge on the rejection of conventional, normative design. Some of these methods are based on the analysis of non-normative elements in existing games, while others are born from seeking inspiration outside of the gaming industry and community and bringing in people who are foreign to it.

4.1 No fun

One of these approaches takes as a starting point questioning something as fundamental to modern game design as the concept of fun is. Fun is one of the most important and influential guiding principles of game design (Ruberg 2016). Not only is it embedded in gamer culture, but in the concept of play itself. What else would a video game strive to be if not fun? Fun is upheld by game developers and players alike, often times used as an excuse for hostility against “politics in video games” (Ruberg 2016). For a community that’s been obsessively insistent on the notion that video games are art, the focus on fun almost seems counter-productive (Alexander 2013).

Even games notorious for addressing unpleasant issues — like *Spec Ops: The Line*’s (YAGER, 2011) handling of war crimes, or *Frostpunk*’s (11bit, 2019) representation of inhuman policy under extreme emergencies (Picture 4) — frequently take a fun-first approach in their design. That is not to say there aren’t games that fully embrace unpleasantness and negativity, but that fun as a driving design philosophy is deeply ingrained in modern game design.

Ruberg (2016) proposes the rejection of fun as an avenue for exploration of Queer experiences in video games. It is important to note, however, the distinction between fun and pleasure. By exclusively embracing fun, game design shuts

the possibility of fully exploring negative experiences. After all, it would be outrageous to suggest other media like film or literature ought to be first and foremost fun.



PICTURE 4. Frostpunk puts the player in charge of decision under extreme circumstances. (11bit 2019)

Additionally, fun-first design raises the issue that fun is, at the end of the day, a deeply personal experience, shaped by cultural and socioeconomic environments. The concept of fun itself can be as normative as gender expression; much like heteronormativity and patriarchy impose their gender roles onto people, the set of social expectations on what is correct and acceptable extends to fun as well. Punk subcultures base themselves on the rejection of normative fun. *Against Me!*'s (2007) song *Trash Unreal* tells a story of weekends spent in trashy dance floors and drugs and captures the spirit of punk's shamelessness in its non-conforming behaviour. The song's unapologetic final verse "she wouldn't change anything for the world", reaffirms its confrontational attitude towards normative life and fun. Going even beyond ideological proclaims, fun has even been theorised as a fully insurrectional tool. The Post-Anarchist manifesto *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Bey 1991) delves into the concept of fun and play as a potential vector for confrontation against control structures.

4.1.1 Failure

When discussing the ideas of no fun, one can't avoid mentioning failure. Failure is as fundamental a concept in video game design as fun is. Not only is repeatedly experienced when playing video games, but it is also actively sought for by players (Juul 2013, 34—36). The prevalence of failure in video game design appears to be contradictory with the aforementioned focus on fun design (Ruberg 2016, Juul 2013 pages), in fact, it has been the focus of many studies in this field. Most of the understandings of failure in game design look at it from the perspective of failure as an unpleasant experience used, in one way or another, to accentuate the other, more pleasant aspects of video games.

Failure has also been the target of study from the perspective of queer studies. Jack Halberstam writes about failure as a defining part of social hierarchies: the concepts of success and failure are necessarily defined by what values are held within a society. Queer existence, then, is intrinsically linked with the rejection of heteronormative success. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of the same social dynamics of Western culture are reflected in Western game design, in this way challenging the design of a game and embracing failure can be defined as queer playing. Juul (2013) acknowledges the appeal of this self-defeating way of playing, exemplifying it in *Skate 2* (Electronic Arts 2009), but brushes it away as a response to continued failure and a redefinition of success. Underestimating, perhaps, the liberating act of rejecting the game's constraint in delving into creative, alternative, queer experiences of play.

4.1.2 Tragedy

In games, the goals of the player and the goals of the protagonists are more often than not aligned (Juul 2013, 91). This alignment causes a mirroring of the emotions of the player and the protagonist regarding successes and failures. Juul (2013) argues that changing that alignment — gameplay success leads to the protagonist's failure — and illustrates this point with the creation of a game with the goal of committing suicide, analysing the players' responses. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't very well received. But extrapolating the results of a contextless game

to the entire medium ignores the player's role in the game; who is affected much like another character by the context in which they play.

Davey Wreden (2016) recalls a moment during a playtesting of *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013). In a certain section the player has to throw themselves off a platform while the narrator begs them not to. In the original design this section had a reversal of the roles: the narrator was forcing them to jump off, and most players reported a negative experience. However, reversing the roles and having the narrator beg the player not to jump removed the discomfort in the scene. In that scenario the outcome is the same, jumping into the void, but the player's agency in acting against the wishes of the narrator flips the perception of it. On a similar vein, games like *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope 2013) (Picture 5) have experimented with putting players in tough decisions. The game features a great deal of decisions between the wellbeing of strangers and that of the protagonist themselves. The brutal and cold atmosphere of the game eases the creation of an empathic bond with those strangers and helping them in one's (or one's family) own detriment.



PICTURE 5. *Papers Please*. One of the early decisions to make involves helping a sex worker flee, at risk of receiving a penalty in your work. (Lucas Pope 2013)

4.1.3 Mundanity

Beyond exploring negative experiences and transgressive rebellion, no fun can be present in simple and mundane elements (Ruberg 2016). From games like *Viscera Cleanup Detail* (RuneStorm 2015) and *Euro Truck Simulator* (SCS Software 2012) (Picture 6) simulate the uninteresting and repetitive tasks of cleaning and driving, to 5-minute life simulator *Passage*. These games don't have an exciting premise, instead they can offer pleasure in their recreation of low stakes, "low energy" tasks, offering a "zen-like" experience. Their design based on mundanity contrasts with the hectic, content packed games that represent the most typical and commercial understandings of fun in video games.



PICTURE 6. Euro Truck Simulator 2 recreates a mundane experience of driving trucks across a continent, with no types of special events in it. (SCS Software 2012)

4.2 Tend and befriend

The other main approaches I've analysed is, tend and befriend: an approach to game design that embraces positive experiences, but bases itself on the rejection of the traditional game design concepts of adrenaline, shock and even success. It builds upon a more humane approach to conflict and opens up the door to

creating engagement through caring and connecting (Code 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). It is based on research on stress responses that proposes an alternative reaction to fight-or-flight: tend-and-befriend, which consists of reacting by comforting others, (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung & Updegraff 2000; Taylor, Dickerson & Klein 2002) and its application to game design has been extensively explored by Brie Code in a context of tiredness with the video game industry, with its sexism, and with the attention and shock culture of capitalism (Code 2017a). This approach opens the door to engaging with games through care and curiosity, rather than through typical reward systems. These concept of personal involvement in a framework of a universe that's engaging on its own and not for the systems of rewards built within it, forms the basis of *A Short Hike* (adamgryu 2019).

A Short Hike (adamgryu 2019) does away with the normative understanding of progression and success and makes of exploration its primary method of engagement. A purely objective-focused playthrough will prove very little effort and offer a rather limited time of entertainment. The only real gameplay goal of the game is making it to the top of the island's mountain; and doing so requires collecting enough golden feathers, an item that allows the player to climb for a longer amount of time. However, the real strength of the game is its rich environment, full of well-developed characters, interesting scenery and littered with tiny little stories to discover (Picture 7). The expressive and relatable characters that inhabit this world keep the player engaged and interested in immersing themselves in the life of this island. The game offers no gameplay rewards for most of its quests or storylines and relies entirely on the players' interest in them.



PICTURE 7. One of the environments of A Short Hike. (adamgryu 2019)

In the context of Queerness tend-and-befriend rejects the masculine, sexist, heteronormative hegemony in game design and builds its interactions on the exploration and development of positive and loving acts of care. Tend-and-befriend is present in us finding comfort in others after experiencing a stressful situation (Taylor et al. 2002); this complicity of shared trust that is so fundamental to Queerness itself. Tend-and-befriend allows for the creation of safe spaces in which to explore one's identity, away from the heteronormative structures of conventional game design. Much like no-fun and embracing failure, it shares the stance of dismissing traditional game design principles by refusing to participate in them, but instead of taking a confrontational approach by promoting that which normative game design rejects (no-fun, failure), it simply distances itself through the creation of a radically new framework of design.

5 CASE STUDY: ANALYZING EXISTING GAMES

Having examined several theoretical approaches to nonconforming video game design, I want to take a moment to analyse games that, in my opinion, succeed in making use of gameplay mechanics and/or storytelling techniques to drive a point home. In this section I dig into a series of games that evoke certain feelings — positive and negative — that usually find themselves outside of the normative expectations of video game design.

5.1 Case studies

5.1.1 Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy

The premise of this *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Bennett Foddy 2017) (Picture 8) is as simple, as it is absurd and surrealistic. You play as a man in a cauldron, and, using a sledgehammer as your only tool to propel yourself, you are tasked with climbing a mountain of badly put together game assets.



PICTURE 8. The base of the mountain in *Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy*. (Bennett Foddy 2017)

The complete lack of checkpoints or any saving system on an already difficult control scheme makes the climb an extremely harsh journey, but what sets the game apart from other high difficulty abstract games is how failing impacts the perception of progression, making this a deeply frustrating experience.

Repeated failure isn't a new idea to games. Many recent commercial successes like *Super Hexagon* (Terry Cavanagh 2012) (Picture 9), hinge on such an approach to game design. Even arguing that it is one thing to repeatedly fail at a task and trying over and over again, but it is a different thing entirely to do so and have to restart it from scratch; one can find this type of high-stakes risk design in games as old as *Rogue* (Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman & Ken Arnold 1980), and the myriad of games it inspired. What makes *Getting Over It* unique is its attitude towards failure. *Getting Over It* never properly makes the player restart. Failing in the game always entails a setback. One bad movement leads to falling, as one desperately tries to hold on to anything, they witness the avatar fall back three quarters of the way back down. And then, after reaching the end of the fall, Bennett Foddy — the creator of the game himself — interjects to reassure you that it is okay, take your time and try again.



PICTURE 9. *Super Hexagon*. This game consists of rotating the arrow around the centre in order to avoid obstacles coming at high speed (Terry Cavanagh 2012)

The brilliance of *Getting Over It* isn't just in its visceral representation of failure and frustration, but in the purpose behind it. Really, at its core, more than a game about failing it is a game of endurance, it doesn't want the player to fail. It uses the intense frustration of that moment and encourages them to turn it into resolve. For some, I assume, this will only create more anger but maybe that's just as intended. The goal of the game is still there and is still reachable, the game puts the player in a deeply frustrating environment where the only outcome is to accept it or to give up. And regardless of one's agreement with its message or its methods, it is a remarkable achievement to manage to say so much with such a simple (and absurd) concept.

5.1.2 Firewatch and SpecOps: The Line

Firewatch (Campo Santo 2016)(Picture 10) is a solitary narrative game about the daily life of Henry, a fire lookout in the Shoshone National Forest in the US. Gameplay wise it is rather simple — a member of the genre informally named “walking simulators” — only offering the player movement and timely use of interactions with the environment, as well as frequent conversations with the protagonist's supervisor Delilah. These conversations take place through a portable radio, allowing for them to happen at any moment, and make use of a rather innovative dialog system that adds the depth of silence into a mechanic that has traditionally been little more than a choose your own adventure game.

This innovative system of narrative is weaved into the gameplay by allowing it to take place at the same time as exploration or while performing routinely tasks. Despite not featuring any direct interactions with other people, the game avoids a sense of loneliness through the companionship of Henry with his supervisor. It is perhaps due to this otherwise ever-present loneliness — and the excellent writing and dialog systems of the game — that the player develops a complex relationship with her. This is further enhanced with the pacing of the game, providing breathing moments in between tense sections and letting the player get lost in the beauty of the natural environment around them, and making of the conversations with Delilah introspective moments of sincerity and bonding.



PICTURE 10. Firewatch uses detailed environments to immerse the player in its narrative. (Campo Santo 2016)

The real magic of the game, however, happens as the narrative starts to unfold. A few off-key events, that on their own might not raise any eyebrows, start to appear a bit concerning. Through the use (or abuse) of the trusting relationship built with Delilah, the game starts to create a sense of danger in the player. This tension heightens as the game progresses, almost mimicking the feelings in horror media, in a spectacular use of narrative to drive the player to paranoia. Reaching the final conclusion, the relationship with Delilah breaks down, after feeling abused and toyed with. The relationship between Henry and Delilah can itself be quite representative of the relationship between the player and the game. Initially seeking the comfort of tasks and beautiful scenery, only to end up feeling used and left out.

Firewatch itself might not hold any message beyond its creative and evocative use of narrative and gameplay, but it is perhaps the best example of using the trusting relationship between the player and the game to manipulate them into certain situations and outcomes. A similar approach is found in *Spec Ops: The Line* (YAGER 2012) (Picture 11), a game about a US military rescue mission in a Dubai destroyed by a sandstorm. This game offers a critique of the “generic modern military shooter” that was extremely popular at the time — with two of its

biggest hits, *Battlefield 3* (DICE 2011) and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward 2011), being released a year earlier — by presenting itself as one. In the same vein as its counterparts, it gives the player a rather uninteresting story of American heroism. Through this generic narrative the game downplays the actions of the player; mass killings were already very normalized — *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009) featured a controversial terrorism scene in which it instructed the player to commit indiscriminate murder against civilian population — and encourages the player to follow through. Eventually, the game confronts the player about their actions, shaming them for their complicity in committing war crimes and turning the premise around into a very real and guilt-ridden outlook on atrocities of war.



PICTURE 11. A cutscene snapshot in *Spec Ops: The Line* (YAGER 2012)

5.1.3 Save the Date

Save the Date (Paper Dino 2013) is a minimalistic game with gameplay in the vein of graphic novels: a simple multiple-choice dialogue system over static backgrounds (Picture 12). The object of the game, initially, is to successfully go on a date with a girl which, as the player will quickly realise, will always end up dead. The silly and ridiculous nature of the events, taking away any dramatism in the situation, and the short gameplay runs make it easy for the player to engage with

and commit to reaching the end, wherever it may be. The game's narrative, then, takes a completely different turn as it brings up questions about the nature of stories and storytelling, reflecting on the situation it has put the player in of resolving this unsolvable issue, and hints at how to reach a happy ending: by not reaching any ending at all. At the very end the game will bring up this idea, what if you stop a story before it has ended? What if you don't like the ending? Are you allowed to change it? And that's as far as it will allow the player to go, from that point no new options will be unlocked, and the game will remain the same loop.

And with that loop, making the player face the same outcome and dialogue, the game sends a clear message and challenges the player to simply quit and come up with their own ending. Its design shines in its usage of its (unassuming) main mechanic to express its intention, without having to spell it out, and in how powerful and effective it is at doing so.



PICTURE 12. Save the Date (Paper Dino 2013)

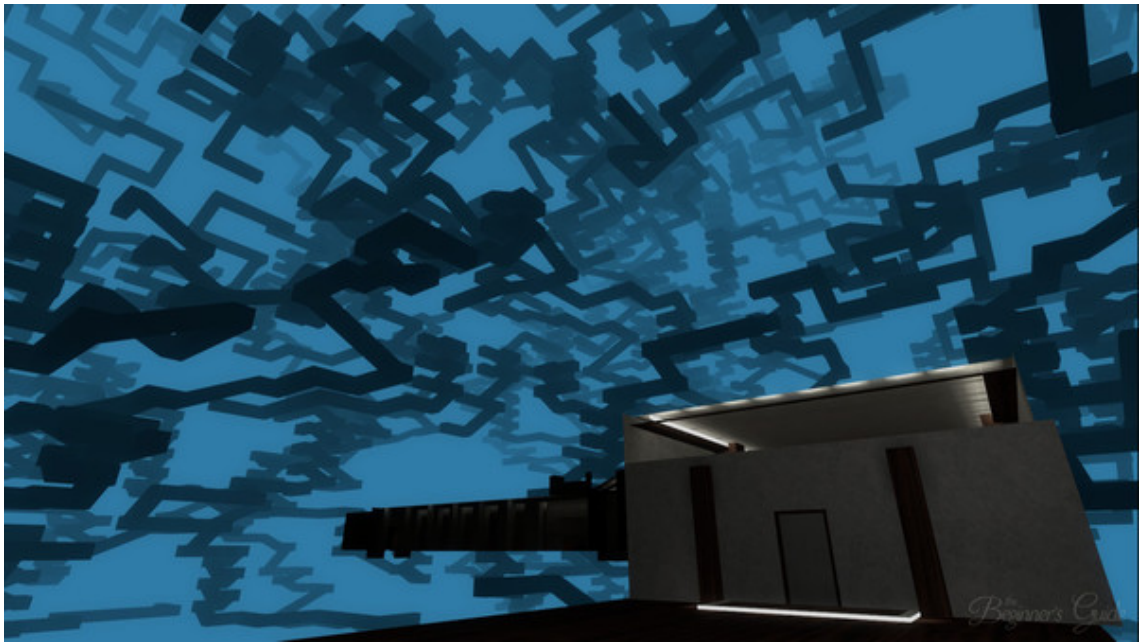
5.1.4 The Beginner's Guide

The Beginner's Guide (Everything Unlimited 2015) (Picture 13) is not really a game like any other in this list, nor does it aim to be one, and even admits so in the description of its own Steam page.

The Beginner's Guide is a narrative video game from Davey Wreden, the creator of *The Stanley Parable*. It lasts about an hour and a half and has no traditional mechanics, no goals or objectives. Instead, it tells the story of a person struggling to deal with something they do not understand. (Wreden 2015)

While most of the games above reject conventional commercial game design, none of them boldly proclaim to have no goals or mechanics. In a sense, *The Beginner's Guide* could be described as just interactive narrative but that would, in my opinion, be a huge understatement.

The game does not try to evoke any message or feeling in particular, instead it is a project made in which the creator comes to terms with his shortcomings and his mistakes. *The Beginner's Guide* is not a story as much as it is a confession and an apology. It begins with Davey, the developer of the game and narrator, providing some context to the player about him, his friend Coda, and the relationship between them. He hints at their falling out and expresses concern and confusion at Coda abandoning game development. During the whole game Davey will maintain and reaffirm his position of being worried for Coda. The game then takes the player through a series of experimental games made by Coda between 2008 and 2011, while Davey narrates changes in their relationship over time, as well as his thoughts on the games. With this setup the game then establishes a dialogue between Coda, through his games, and Davey, through his narration, in which their friendship evolves as each one of them behaves in certain ways and exposes certain worries. Eventually their relationship degrades, and the alarmed and self-centred responses from Davey expose his toxic attitude as a result of his own insecurities and need for external validation. Through his own exposition as a harmful person, Davey comes to terms with his flaws and mistakes.



PICTURE 13. One of the experimental games in *The Beginner's Guide*, in this screenshot the walls of the room are turned invisible, revealing the complex exterior. (Everything Unlimited 2015)

5.2 Conclusions

As a first observation, these games appear to be fairly heterogeneous. While there are some clearly overlapping concepts, there also are some very distant ones. Most notably, *Getting Over It* is completely abstract and doesn't feature any traditional narrative storyline, instead it relies on its mechanics to convey ideas to the player. On the other hand, *The Beginner's Guide* is an entirely narrative approach, one which perfectly integrates the interactions unique to games as a method for storytelling.

These serve as two distinct approaches to game design with which the other games can be analysed: the first one is a more abstract approach, where the message of a game is conveyed through the usage of its mechanics to create situations that lead the player to a conclusion, idea, or feeling, and where the narrative can enhance or provide context for those interactions. The other one is a narrative-driven approach, where it is the underlying storyline or narrative that conveys a message and its game mechanics take an active part in storytelling.

Most of the other games borrow heavily from both approaches, but in order to define them more clearly, I will look at two games that share a very similar design: *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *Firewatch*. As mentioned in the earlier section, these two games base themselves on creating a certain emotion in the player, one generates a feeling of apathy and distancing while the other creates a feeling of alarm. Despite this, *Firewatch* bases its narrative on the creation of this feeling through the combination of gameplay (dialogue), and environment, making extensive use of it in order to build a sense of danger; while on the other hand, *Spec Ops: The Line* purposefully relies on the recreation of generic mechanics to provide a sense of comfort and familiarity, distance the player from the horrible actions they are doing, and later shames the player for their participation in those actions through largely through video. Additionally, *Spec Ops* offers a more abstract criticism in general, as the game can't be fully understood when taken away from its context within the industry.

Finally, *Save The Date* can be understood as, once again, leaning heavily on narrative to push its message forward. It does, however, use the repetitiveness and quirky puzzle-y nature of its main gameplay loop to build the appropriate atmosphere for its conclusion. Telling the player to quit the game and come up with their own ending works because the player has spent a great deal of attempts looking for that ending, while the game kept getting more ridiculous as if making fun of their efforts.

In this way I identify two distinct and complementary approaches to the issue at hand. Narrative can be a powerful tool to engage with the player and create a relationship between them and the game (positive or not). When used effectively, narrative will make use of the unique interactions of the video game format to emphasize and drive its message. Similarly, pure game mechanics can also be a successful language for the game to communicate with its players and create situations which manipulate the player in a more physical and tangible way to convey its message.

6 PROJECT: DESIGNING A QUEER GAME

With the results from the thesis' research I set out to develop a rough proof-of-concept prototype for a game that deals with the issues of self-discovery and self-acceptance. The game concept builds on the analyses and classifications made in the previous section.

6.1 Background

The reason for making this game, and this thesis in general, is a result of my own struggles with identity; as such, it draws heavily from my own experiences. The game tries to reflect the issues I was facing after finishing high school, feeling uninterested in my options for Bachelor's degrees, distanced from friends, and seeking constant escapism. It aims to reflect a process of questioning my sexuality and gender identity, coming to terms with it, and finally leaving denial behind, which I had carried for years at that point.

Besides experiences it's also influenced by my own interests, not only in setting but also in its gameplay design. The concept of the main gameplay loop stems from a reimagination of the Real Time Tactics (RTT) games of the early 2000s, spearheaded by Pyro Studios' *Commandos* (1998, 1999, 2001, 2003) series and reimplemented as a cheesy western in *Desperados: Wanted Dead or Alive* (Spellbound 2001) (Picture 14). Real Time Tactics games are a subset of strategy games derived from the militaristic branch of Real Time Strategy (RTS) genre. RTT games, as the name suggests, lower the focus of the game from the more traditional strategic designs — managing resources, building infrastructure and defences, researching, etc. in order to overcome an opponent on equal footing — to the specific movements and actions of specific units with unique abilities. In short, they take the most basic interactions from RTS games and offer a different, more methodical and puzzle-like challenge.



PICTURE 14. Part of a level in *Desperados: Wanted Dead or Alive*. The interface reflects the difference in scope from RTS games by focusing on individual characters (bottom-left) and their abilities (top-left) (Spellbound 2001)

The reason behind this concept is rooted in my relationship with these games when growing up. Initially, together with *Age of Empires 2* (Ensemble 1999), this genre is what brought me to realize my love for strategical games; an interest that also led me to discover board games and my enjoyment of certain problem-solving tasks. Despite its decline in the mid and late 00s RTT remained one of my favourite genres in games, and its short-lived existence is one of the main factors behind finding interest in game development and design. In a sense, then, it is not that I was rationally arguing this was a suitable approach for the type of message I want to convey, but that my approach to game design had to necessarily base itself on this.

A one-to-one representation of the original genre-defining games wouldn't work with the goal I was approaching this with; and would also be a fairly uninteresting exercise in design altogether. One of my fascinations with the possibilities of creating a new take on this genre was the possibility of basing it on a nonviolent

setting. Although it may seem a futile exercise at first — after all, it is a genre defined by its military or otherwise combatant themes — I figured the stealth-based puzzle behind its infiltration settings could translate fairly well in representing the stage of adolescence and its low-stake rebellious attitude against its everyday figures of authority. This leads me, then, to the creation of a new setting for a title inspired by classic RTT games consisting of the mundane experiences and adventures of a bored group of teenagers, lending itself as well to the exploration of sexuality and GSRM identity.

6.2 Game concept and influences

As mentioned in my explanation of the project's background, the general initial idea was to strip the common warfare setting of real-time tactics (games along the lines of the *Commandos* series and move their mechanics to the mundane setting of the troubles of a teenager during summer vacation. This genre has recently received modernized new release in the form of *Shadow Tactics: Blades of The Shogun* (Mimimi 2016) (Picture 15), which already provides a newer starting point for bringing the genre up to modern standards, however, much like its predecessors, it's still largely based around militaristic settings.



PICTURE 15. A level in *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* (Mimimi 2016)

When it comes to integrating the queer narrative and topics discussed in the game with the core gameplay loop the stealth mechanics of RTT games serve as an allegory for hiding one's GSRM identity from a heteronormative — although not necessarily homophobic — society. Additionally, it is a genre deeply tied with experiencing failure — a potential avenue for tying in with queer identity as a rejection of heteronormative success, and also an opening to discussing feelings of shame as a result of doubting one's identity.

In addition to the RTT-inspired main gameplay sections, I wanted to add slower, dialogue driven sections of padding in between, borrowing in this way both from some recent experimental titles like *Hotline Miami* and *Katana Zero* — which include psychedelic narrative scenes in between levels — as well as narrative and exploration focused games. These sections will be for the most part fairly uneventful and consist of the player interacting with a heteronormative society. These will be set in closed spaces and stand as a contrast, in tone, setting and gameplay, to the other more open sections, highlighting the frustration and reclusion deriving from one's own insecurities.

The premise of the game's narrative revolves around a teenager spending his summer vacation in a holiday residence in small coastal town. Once again, this setting is taken from my own experiences and culture, as this is a very common occurrence in Catalan and Spanish society and comes as a result of the rural exodus that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. The events take place after having dropped out of college and consequently being forced to take a summer job at the local bar ran by an old family friend. The plot of the game goes through the mundane troubles of a teenager — together with a group of friends — avoiding adult responsibilities while struggling with figuring out his own identity. Escapism and its consequences feature a prominent role as a driving motivation for the actions of the main character and pushes the narrative forward.

While researching this thesis I've mostly come across opinions and experiences of recognizing GSRM identity in oneself and actively exploring and discovering it, looking for references, etc. Surprisingly, I didn't find accounts that could resonate with my own negative experience with self-discovery, involving a rejection of one's own identity and consequent escapism from the reality of it. As a result, I

didn't have a lot of literature or examples to compare my project to, but at the same time it offered me more liberty to approach it with.

The biggest influences in the storyline and general setting for the game come from the Slice of Life genre of media. Using a very broad definition, it bases its storytelling on the depiction of mundane scenes of everyday life, although not necessarily set in a realistic world. Originally, I became aware of this genre through Japanese animation films like *Wolf Children* (Mamoru Hosoda 2012), or those by *Studio Ghibli*; but there has been western media in this category that has had a significant impact on me, particularly the film *Estiu 1993* (Carla Simón 2017) and the videogame *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016).

6.3 Game design

6.3.1 Setting

Although the setting of the game isn't a recreation of a real location, it does draw heavy inspiration from my home region of Catalonia and specifically the towns along the coast north of Barcelona, where I spent most of my childhood summers. This influences aspects like the visual look of the town, such as in the architecture, but also heavily determines the environment around it and the layout of the levels themselves.

The geography of the setting is heavily based on the hilly coastal areas of Maresme, Baix Empordà, and Garraf, comprised of primarily rough and rocky terrain. The hilly environment means towns are built on fairly steep inclines, lending itself to make extensive use of vertical space in level design. The latter two regions also feature a great deal of cliffs and valleys upon which their towns lie (Pictures 16 & 17), this provides a fairly defined boundary between the fictional town and its surroundings, as well as some of the different environments in its vicinity.



PICTURES 16 & 17. Left: Llafranc, in Baix Empordà. (DagafeSQV 2009) Right: Garraf. (Toni Pérez Padilla 2013)

This environment has also influenced the development of the area in ways that are very visually striking. One such example is the railroad line (Picture 18), built along the shore and separating population centres from the sea, becoming a very prominent feature of all coastal towns in that area. Besides the visual aspect of it, these features enable a variety of scenarios to be played out in the game's levels.



PICTURE 18. Coastal railroad as it passes through Sant Pol de Mar. The line separates towns it passes through from their beaches and the sea (Jorge Franganillo 2016).

6.3.2 Structure

The game begins as the protagonist arrives at the town in question, after a brief introduction it will enter the main gameplay loop.

The game doesn't have any performance trackers like scoring systems, instead the only goal for the player is to advance the narrative. A normal section of the game begins with the protagonist at the bar where the conversations with townsfolk or background TV can provide context to move the narrative forward.

Following that come the more open and explorative sections. In this case the game is still centred around the protagonist, but this time accompanied by a group of friends, which will also become playable characters in specific sections. These sections revolve around escapism from the responsibilities of the real world by engaging with the group and taking part in activities for entertainment, often revolving around finding excitement in petty crimes around a small and otherwise not very interesting town.

The game progresses through the summer and ends as everyone must return home at the end of the vacation period.

6.3.3 Game mechanics

As mentioned, the game is split into two parts: a main gameplay section, consisting of exploration driven by RTT inspired mechanics, and dialogue driven sections padding them out.

The slower scenes in between the bigger, more open levels will in their majority be set in the closed spaces of the bar where the protagonist works at and his own home. This scenery difference helps highlight the contrast between the tone of both sequences and hopefully accentuate the pressure it aims to transmit. Frequented mostly by older men, the bar encapsulates the interactions with a heteronormative society in which the protagonist does not fit but is nonetheless not directly hostile to him. The regularity of the setting as a day job and the narrative

focus also serve as a vehicle for driving the narrative of the world forward, as it is a place to come in contact with a wide range of people.

Though I insist on the dialogue mechanic of this sections, they will not be limited to just that, their goal is not just to interact with people verbally, but to be part of a whole environment. Additionally, in order to represent the monotony and frustration of the job and by extension, heteronormative society the sections will require the completion of certain tasks at the bar. In this way, the game takes an approach where it lets go of fun, in order to evoke that feeling from the conflict of one's own identity.

The other half of the gameplay and the main focus of the game consists of the open levels set in and around the town, where the protagonist and his friends spend their free time. As I've mentioned earlier the core mechanics of these sections are inspired by real-time tactics games, but the design of these also clashes with the concept in some ways. Most jarringly, the overwhelming presence of failure as a core and fundamental element in their gameplay loop — more akin to the difficulty of figuring out the solution to a puzzle than to a dexterity-based obstacle — makes the event an extremely ubiquitous occurrence. Moreover, a failure in such games results in a game over screen in the overwhelming majority of cases, which, in my opinion, would break the flow of the narrative experience.

In order to tackle this problem, I opted for adopting two changes to the basic formula. The first one is, simply put, the inclusion of difficulty settings. As opposed to most combat-oriented games, RTT features a fairly minimally relevant notion of health points, on both playable and non-playable characters. As a result, difficulty settings often lie in imposing more or less harsh restrictions in one's abilities, equipment as well as modifying enemy reaction time. With the more laid-back and non-military design of my game, I felt these changes (while still valuable) didn't tackle the issue I had with accessibility and interruptions. I feel the most important concept to follow my line of thinking here is accessibility. I want this game to be approachable by people who don't want to be frustrated with resolving a tactical puzzle in order to be invested in the characters. Facing that issue, I decided to allow the possibility of removing the challenging elements from the game. The way this is implemented is by providing a specific difficulty setting for

each section of the game, in a way that blends seamlessly with in-game dialogue. (Picture 19)



PICTURE 19. Mock design of difficulty selection within the dialogue system.

The other change is one I borrowed from *Untitled Goose Game* (House House 2019) (Picture 20). That game also features a gameplay loop of navigating a level undetected, in this case while performing several mischievous actions, but, as opposed to a harsh game over screen, in this case the player's avatar (the goose) simply gets pushed back off the area they were in, as NPCs return to their business as normal. This essentially resets their progress without a harsh break that represents a game over screen. On the other hand, this approach necessitates the existence of checkpoints, a feature largely missing from RTT games which favour the approach of manually quick-saving and reloading in order to make the puzzle more challenging and engaging.



Picture 20. Untitled Goose Game provides a softer approach to stealth, putting the players in the shoes of a mischievous goose and tasked to cause chaos in the town.

Through the combination of explorative narrative mechanisms and a more challenging, and adventurous core gameplay loop, the game aims to portray the relationship between the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of doubting one's own identity, and the attitude of running away from it until it is no longer possible.

6.4 Extent of the prototype

The initial target for the project was to develop a more or less fleshed out short demo as a proof of concept, however, as elements of the demo started becoming better defined and a schedule was outlined it became apparent that the development of a polished demo would be a much too laborious process. In spite of that, I retained the goal of making a prototype showcasing the main mechanics and elements of the game and saving time on the visual side of the game, as it is out of the scope of the thesis' topic. For this reason, the resulting project is functional but features simple, placeholder assets.

The final developed prototype consists of 3 levels in total. All of them feature barebones placeholder graphics, as the limited time was better spent in the design and development of the game mechanics.

The first level takes the setting of a train carriage as the protagonist goes to the town in the very beginning of the game. The gameplay in this short level is limited to dialogue through text messages over phone. It showcases some of the dialogue mechanics and serves as an introduction to the game and the setting.



PICTURE 21. Preview of the bar level, showcasing interior and exterior.

The second level (Picture 21) introduces the first of the two main sequences in the game. This scene is set in the bar and consists of a short conversation and a task. Due to the simplicity of the mechanics involved in this section, its main purpose is to illustrate the environment represented by this half of the main gameplay.

Finally, the third level consists of a small explorable section, showcasing the basic navigation and interaction mechanics of the open levels. The level includes two small environments involving basic exploration as well as showcasing some basic stealth mechanics.

7 CONCLUSION

The discussion of GSRM visibility and diversity in Western media has already accomplished improvements in representation of non-normative identities. However, these representations are still often considered within heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks. In order to achieve visibility of underrepresented demographics, these restrictive mindsets need to be cast aside.

Modern game design is built upon years of homogeneous target demographics by developers and homogeneous development teams and as a result it is highly skewed towards a young, white, cisgender, heterosexual, male demographic. The inclusion of diverse characters is not enough to acknowledge the diversity of the community and society as a whole, instead, the bases upon which game design is built need to be shed and embrace the immense, diverse potential of play.

The recent lowering of the barrier of access in game development, both economically and technically, has contributed significantly to the creation of a new scene of independently developed games that are free to experiment without the constraints of capitalist profit-seeking. This scene has already produced a number of interesting and ground-breaking titles with regards to their design and the relationship with the player, but the road ahead is still long.

Additionally, several scholars have proposed approaches that break away from traditional game design, either by embracing what is normally considered incorrect in a confrontational rebellious attitude, or by abandoning old knowledge and seeking new foundations to build upon.

While traditional normative game design sits atop a massively profitable industry and won't go down any time soon, the fringes of the video game market opened up by the growth of indie games have provided many exciting approaches to game design and a thriving new and experimental development community. Despite the many difficulties ahead, with the further refinement of new design approaches and interactive technologies, the future for subversive, Queer, transgressive games are set for a bright future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Game design prototype gameplay video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0sTvIKQO3Q>