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Tentative Presentation Title: Queering Violence: How Queer Video Games Are Interrupting Toxicity In Gaming Culture

The idea that the gaming community is toxic, particularly to anyone who is not a cisgender straight white male, is not new. Women and queer people, in particular, have been subjected to violence on multiple levels in relation to gaming: women characters are often sexualized and violently brutalized in mainstream games, representation of LGBT+ characters are often shouted down, and the language of online games is often laced with homophobic and misogynistic slurs meant to demean and insult others. This pervasive attitude has resulted in cisgender, heterosexual, typically white men being seen as the default video game player. However, greater access to technology and information has allowed more diversity in the game development. This has led to queer gamers creating queer games, which has potential to bring new perspectives to games.

The presentation begins by describing the current intersectional cycle that connects violence and sexism in games, encourages toxic behavior in the communities, and discourages the success of material that challenges these ideas. In an abbreviated form, the violence and sex in the games is reinforced by reward systems that give validity to the player’s actions. Because of the immersive experience games provide, this validity is applied to engaging with others within the video game community. Finally, that the monetary success of these games promotes the perpetuation of similar games within the gaming industry. These elements work together to ensure that the cycle continues. To understand the perpetuation of this environment, one must understand flow theory and SIDE model theory. Flow theory explains gamers develop a complete focus on a gaming experience where everything else falls away in favor of becoming enjoyably engrossed in it. Games or other gamers who try to bring up facts such as sexism, homophobia, racism, ect. in games act as a form of flow prevention for gamers who would rather not (or simply would not) usually think of these things. These socially conscious games or players are therefore seen as a threat towards their enjoyment, which may account for some of the toxicity hurled their way. The social identity model of deindividuation effects, or SIDE model, illustrates how online interactions in large groups skew people’s perceptions of personal versus group identity. As gamers are affronted with the desire to be a part of this community—a community that society already sees as marginal—they may act alongside this prejudice behavior regardless of whether it represents their personal ideals.

From there, this presentation considers three queer games which highlight how queer games are interrupting this cycle by changing the depictions of violence within them. The perception of “queer” as not just identity but also as a means of perceiving and challenging established norm is central to the categorization of these games as “queer games”. The game *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* presents a battle system that relies on quick, snarky wit as opposed to violence. Trans game designer Anna Anthropy *Dys4ia*’s functions in a similarly disruptive fashion by emphasizing the violence of trans-exclusive radical feminists’ ideology. *Undertale*’s narrative punishment of players who seek out excessive violence encourages alternative views by operating on a game mechanic’s level.

My paper seeks to explain how queer games have the potential to interrupt the established cycle by challenging both the context behind current toxic behaviors in gaming communities and also by presenting alternatives to dominant portrayals of violence in mainstream games. Although they present an alternative to the dominant gaming culture, two of the three “queer”
games have amassed critical acclaim and wide-ranging audiences. This demonstrates the impact that a queer game can have on a community that has been stuck for decades in its own toxic cycle and reveals the need for a more nuanced discussion of violence in video games that will extend beyond mainstream fan communities and big-budget releases.

Bibliography:


*Gaming In Color*. Directed by Philip Jones, MidBoss, 2015.
