

## Beyond the avatar: LGBTIQ+ Representations, narratives and communities in video games

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The popularity of video games and their widespread presence in contemporary culture make them a medium of enormous relevance for the exploration, representation, and experimentation of sex-gender identities. Their capacity for mass circulation, the diversity of platforms and formats, and the enduring presence of ludic practices in both physical and digital contexts position video games as a privileged space for observing how norms are negotiated, identities are performed, and communities are formed. Beyond their industrial and leisure dimensions, video games exert symbolic influence over collective imaginaries and processes of cultural socialisation, which helps explain the growing scholarly interest in understanding their role in the trajectories of identification, resistance, and activism of LGBTIQ+ communities (see, for example, Shaw, 2015; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Malkowski & Russworm, 2017; Harper, Adams, & Taylor, 2018; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018; Ruberg, 2019, 2020).

Historically, this medium has been shaped by the predominance of users and narratives associated with cisheterosexual masculinity, resulting in a cultural imaginary that has largely excluded sexual and gender diversity. However, recent academic research has shown that, beyond these limitations, video games have become spaces in which LGBTIQ+ people can explore and represent their identities, build communities of belonging, and participate in practices of cultural activism. Both the representation of queer characters and narratives and the lived experiences of players offer new ways of understanding the interaction between identity, ludic practice, and popular culture. This scholarship demonstrates that video games are not merely entertainment products, but cultural artefacts that mediate processes of visibility, resistance, and affective experimentation.

More than ever, it is essential to develop queer studies of video games, as there has never been a more stimulating and inspiring moment to explore the presence of queerness in gaming culture. The visibility of queer creators is increasing and gaining international recognition, and thousands of queer players actively participate in conventions and gaming communities. For this special issue, we adopt a broad understanding of queerness, not only as a critique of the cisheteronormative regime, but as a challenge to all forms of normativity (Warner, 1993). This perspective allows us to expand the scope of research to include queer mechanics and modes of play, reflections on monstrosity and illness (see, for example, McGuinness's contribution), and representations of non-normative sexualities, including practices such as kink or BDSM (see the article by Navarro-Remesal, Pérez Zapata, and Hino).

Although queer theory provides a valuable framework for questioning the systems that structure the medium and has significant potential to destabilise and rethink Game Studies—along with classic dichotomies such as narratology/ludology, control/agency, or success/failure (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017)—most research, including this special issue, continues to focus primarily on LGBTIQ+ representation and fan communities. Within the field of queer game studies, this dossier aligns primarily with what Shaw and Ruberg (2017) describe as research focused on LGBTIQ+ topics—ranging from LGBTIQ+ players and developers to games featuring LGBTIQ+ representation—and on analysing video games through queer theoretical frameworks. This orientation suggests that the first perspective, centred on representation, predominates in this issue, aligning with the trend identified by Maletska (2024) in her state-of-the-art review of Queer Game Studies.

This thematic dossier is framed within the research projects “*Persuasive Communication in Games-as-a-Service: Problematic Uses among Generation Z – PERVID GEN Z*” (PR17/24-31893), funded by the agreement

between the Community of Madrid and the Complutense University of Madrid, and “*Political Radicalisation in Digital Play Environments: Production, Mediation, and Dissemination of Extremist Ideologies – Rage Game*” (PID2024-158794OB-I00), funded by the Spanish State Research Agency (Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities). It aims to contribute to the academic study of video games from LGBTIQ+ studies and queer theory perspectives. We seek to bring together research that analyses both the representation of sex-gender diversity within videogame texts and the practices and experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities surrounding them. The contributions included in this volume explore how video games function as spaces of expression, belonging, experimentation, and cultural activism, offering diverse methodological and analytical approaches that illuminate the complexity of interactions between identity, popular culture, and ludic practice in contemporary contexts.

The volume opens with a series of articles focused on the construction of queer characters and the articulation of their identities within digital game worlds. In “*Of Dommies and Night Queens: Kink, BDSM, and Positive Representations of Alternative Sexualities in the Ryu Ga Gotoku (Yakuza/Like a Dragon) Video Game Series*,” Víctor Navarro-Remesal, Beatriz Pérez Zapata, and Yoshihiro Hino explore representations of kink and BDSM in *Yakuza 0* (2015) and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020). Through myth analysis, they identify recurring motifs that help explain how these practices are integrated into the saga’s imaginaries, highlighting professionalisation, agency, and the construction of a queer community around dominatrices and Night Queens.

The special issue continues with studies that bring queerness into dialogue with historical and political referents. In “*Alcibiades’ Political Bisexuality in Assassin’s Creed Odyssey (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018)*,” Rita R. Costa examines how *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* represents the bisexuality of Alcibiades, a central political figure in classical Athens. Combining sexuality studies and historical interpretation, the article shows how the game integrates this orientation not merely as a personal trait, but as a political tool. By softening or dismantling prejudices traditionally associated with bisexuality—such as suspicion and distrust—the game offers a complex representation that situates this identity within a historical framework shaped by power and desire.

Along similar lines, “*Far Cry 6 and Queer Visibility: Paolo de la Vega and Rosa Mel Paquete as Narrative Agents*,” by Raquel San Mamés Albar, explores two characters who expand representational possibilities within a large-scale commercial production. Paolo undergoes a process of identity affirmation linked to music and political resistance, while Rosa Mel Paquete transforms drag performance into a strategy of infiltration and subversion, demonstrating how sex-gender diversity can be embedded in narratives centred on conflict and revolution.

Building on these character-focused analyses, the discussion broadens to examine relationships between design, mechanics, and player positioning. In “*Standing With as Allyship: A Reflexive Approach to Queer Game Design*,” Wanxing Zhou challenges dominant models of “empathy games” and proposes an approach grounded in accompaniment as an ethical stance. A socio-semiotic analysis of *Dys4ia* (2012) reveals how fragmentation, proceduralised frustration, and the absence of narrative closure position the player as a partial witness, avoiding the substitution of queer embodiment with simplified emotions and advocating for a design approach that respects difference.

Subjective and affective gaming experiences take centre stage in “*It’s More Than a Little Farming Game: LGBTIQ+ Representations and Possibilities in Cozy Rural Life Simulators*,” by Francisco Miguel Ojeda-García. Analysing *Story of Seasons: Grand Bazaar* (2025) through a combination of formal analysis and autoethnography, the paper shows how farming simulators become privileged environments for the normalisation of diverse identities, thanks to their customisation options, relational structures, and narrative dynamics open to multiple affective and familial configurations.

The communal and participatory dimensions of gaming are explored in “*Queerbaiting and Fandom: Community Influence on LGBTIQ+ Representation in the Arcane Series of League of Legends*,” by F. Javier Rivero-Estévez and Mihaela Tatyana Doncheva. The study analyses how the relationship between Caitlyn and Vi was initially articulated by fans on platforms such as Reddit and later incorporated into the animated series *Arcane*. The research highlights fandom as a collective space of interpretation, demand, and symbolic production, where diversity is normalised and desired forms of representation are negotiated.

In the case of “*Becoming the Gay Pig – A Mapping of Queer Entanglements with Disease and Monstrosity in Bloodborne*,” by Gregory McGuinness, offers a deeply situated reflection on queer experiences related to *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015). From a positionality shaped by Irish queer identity and its historical relationship with the Catholic Church, the article analyses imaginaries of blood and disease through a feminist materialist lens. By placing these elements in dialogue with HIV/AIDS discourses from the 1980s and 1990s, the article traces a cartography in which monstrosity, risk, and the search for liberation intertwine, allowing for the conceptualisation of queer identities that negotiate the boundaries between humanity and transformation.

Finally, the volume closes with the overview article “*Video games, sexual orientation, and youth: an approach from the 2023 Youth Survey*” by José Juan García Vázquez and Laura Lobato Escudero. Drawing on the 2023 Youth Survey (EJ2023) from INJUVE, the authors reveal that 49.5% of young people play weekly, though intersectionality uncovers a persistent gender gap, with heterosexual males leading in usage. The study warns that the multiplayer environment remains hostile, with 44.3% reporting homophobic comments, which prompts LGBTIQ+ players to conceal their sexual orientation more frequently. The work concludes that video games are non-neutral instruments of socialisation which, despite reproducing exclusionary logics, can function as laboratories for more inclusive realities.

Taken together, the contributions offer a robust and diverse overview of how video games articulate and contest queer representations, experiences, and communities. The special issue demonstrates that these

practices extend beyond the presence of characters or storylines, permeating mechanics, historical genealogies, community appropriations, and emerging design models. The articles gathered here contribute to the consolidation of a growing field of study that is essential for understanding the role of video games in contemporary cultural transformations linked to sex-gender diversity.

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