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CHAPTER THREE

GAY FOR PLAY:  
THEORIZING LGBTQ CHARACTERS  
IN GAME STUDIES

MARC A. OUELLETTE

Despite, and perhaps because of, popular press reactions to stereotypical depictions of beefy boys and busty babes in video games, the realm of gender, sex, and sexuality remains a lacuna in the emerging field of game studies. Of particular interest is the notion of performance and the ways this impacts both on gender and on game play. The combination might be expected to offer a very interesting way of approaching LGBTQ characters in digital games, especially given the recent inclusion of such characters in some popular and well-studied game franchises, including *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar 1997-present), *Jade Empire* (BioWare 2005-08) and *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts 2007-present). In addition, there is a well-documented history, complete with the authority of a Wikipedia page, of characters who are gay, who might be gay, who could be gay, and who are ambiguously gendered, which is more than gay enough for the people who leave messages on YouTube and on Xbox LIVE. However, this enumeration highlights the mass conflation of gender, sex, and sexuality—that is, the performance of a conventionalized set of behaviours, the chromosomal assignment of XX or XY, and the locus of erotic desire, respectively (Sedgwick 1997)—in contemporary popular culture. For Richard Dyer (1978, 2002, 2005) this situation means the continued depiction of LGBTQ characters according to the rubric of the dominant culture. As Dyer (1978, 2002, 2005) explains, these constructions rely on stereotypes that attribute queerness to a very reduced set of features as opposed to recognizing even the barest physical, emotional, and libidinal differences entailed in LGBTQ identities. Indeed, the approach taken by game makers and by game players confirms Dyer’s position insofar as game designers so far have left characters such as *Mass Effect*’s

Commander Shepard unchanged other than to say “now he has sex with men.” Similarly, players—including gay ones—have taken characters’ cross-dressing or androgyny as sufficient for membership.

More significant, then, is (the development of) the character of Patrick Galloway in *Clive Barker’s Undying* (Electronic Arts 2001), for he does not appear on any of these lists and yet may well be the first major video game character created with the specific desires of (a) gay man in mind. Indeed, when Galloway is added to the list, the available options map neatly onto the available theoretical positions: characters whose homoerotics offer queer possibilities for fans (as opposed to homophobic barbs from the adolescent minded), characters whose queer construction and appeal remain unnoticed among straight audiences, and characters whose construction might prompt particular queer identifications. Ultimately, these three modes are related, not only to each other but also to the mechanisms and the processes of (game) play by virtue of their manipulation through performance of the imposed (cultural) limits. The seemingly endless potentialities enabled by virtual worlds and by video games’ reputation for pushing technical *and* cultural boundaries should mean that gender, sex, and sexuality merely add to the repertoire of playable features in games. As a corollary, a careful consideration of gendered play opens a key intersection between the emerging field of game studies and other, established disciplines, one that places play as contingent to the analysis rather than games being colonized by institutionalized regimes.

Indeed, the fact that play is a necessary component of games—insofar as audience, industrial, and institutional expectations are concerned—allows for a seamless integration of gendered play into the production. This is important because it opens the possibility for more characters and also for more participants than otherwise might be possible by making gendered play an object, a rationale, and an outcome, in and of itself. Said another way, games involve play, fantasy, and the adoption of myriad roles. Any anticipatory glee derived from these developments is enhanced by the presence of Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s (1999) work in “F2M,” which offers the reminder that a signifier on its own neither is revolutionary nor is radical in and of itself. Significantly, when unpacked, this statement is not redundant, and in this way Halberstam’s work also problematizes the situation. Said another way, the divergence lies at the heart of Halberstam’s oft-cited but occasionally misunderstood statement, “There are no transsexuals” (1999, 126). Rather, the signified—here, simply, and not so simply, passing—still matters tremendously. In fact, what transpires might even be considered an anachronism in an era

marked by what can only be described as some very lonely signifiers. As Halberstam elaborates, “We all pass or we don’t” (1999, 127). As sign vehicles, these items go beyond the detached signifier and signified for the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994, 3), and perhaps even past the “short circuit sign,” in which the signifier *is* the signified for all intents and purposes (Monaco 2009, 184, 470). Instead, there are vast swaths of contemporary signs that only mean that they mean. In essence, the signs have no sign value.

Yet, as Halberstam argues, we are all passing; some of us better than others. The missing object in this formulation, the answer to what we are passing, and what we are passing for, is scrutiny. In terms of the digital game, scrutiny has many varieties of the same species: level up, power-up, checkpoint, boss level, side mission, core mission, wave, puzzle, assignment, operation, and so forth. Anyone who has played any version of *Grand Theft Auto* for any length of time can attest that the game keeps track of a seemingly limitless series of statistics that speak volumes about the kinds of scrutiny in a game. Regardless of what players, critics, scholars, or game developers call it, any game is an exercise in relentless scrutiny. At the very least, the game engine cannot calculate an avatar’s position without a collection of routines scanning for inputs. The player similarly scrutinizes the game engine’s outputs. Passing is all. Nowhere is this process more visible than in board games and in card games. One only needs to watch the collection of eye and expression hiding paraphernalia that pass—completely without irony—for skill in competitive poker to recognize the multiple modes of passing. Moreover, contemporary poker is as much, if not more, a game of competitive homosocial passing as it is a game of cards. Move that game online, and the surveillance multiplies in seemingly infinite proportions. Thus, gender passing becomes one of many and several simultaneous means of passing involved in the play of any game. If this is the case, then I am more than prepared to make the logical and rhetorical leap—one Halberstam makes when arguing that ours is a post-transsexual era—that is necessary to argue that gender itself has become an anachronism, at least in terms of the definitions and the rigidity of those definitions. This is terrifically important given the supposedly envelope-pushing reputation and potential of the medium.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In fact, Ken McAllister and Judd Ruggill spend an entire chapter of their book, *Gaming Matters* (2011), arguing that games are inherently anachronistic, as well. Intriguingly, Marsha Kinder (1992) observes children’s identification with the “turtle” icon that served as a pointer and output device for the Logo programming language. However, in adhering to an Oedipal framework to critique game structures, Kinder’s work also adheres to the notion that gender remains an

Another important intersection between the study of gender performativity and the study of play occurs through a consideration of Espen Aarseth's early (2001) remarks in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* about the distinctions between game studies as a discipline and other, encroaching fields.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, there is a shared concern regarding anachronistic or misplaced approaches since play is a necessary condition in games, one which emphasizes on narrative features continue to ignore.<sup>3</sup> Here, I wish to revisit, if only briefly, the work done by Claudia Springer (1998) and by Sherry Turkle (1998) when they initially considered the aspects of adopting or of exploring alternate identities, including and especially genders, in virtual spaces. The complete or nearly complete lack of visual references in the games they studied had a tremendous impact in narrowing rather than opening the gender possibilities for players. As Turkle finds, when playing in such spaces passing for any length of time requires "speech, manner, [and] the interpretation of experience" with enough credibility to obviate questions about the gender being performed (1998, 397). What transpires, then, is that gender performance relies on a reduced and recognizable set of behaviours, traits, and qualities that signify the essential "whatness" of a given gender. The apparently limitless potential of genders and the resultant uncertainty has the effect of demanding a concrete, fixed and, more significantly, predictable, gender identity within virtual interactions instead of allowing for, let alone tolerating, the fluidity and multiplicity virtuality might otherwise entail.<sup>4</sup> As much as players become

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impermeable boundary for identification even as anthropomorphic ones do not. In this regard see Ouellette (2002, 2004) for approaches that begin to consider other possibilities for gender.

2. In fact, it is arguable that the encroachment is akin to an imperial annexation. The concern is not without foundation given the history of traditional departments, and hence their structures and approaches, subsuming new, progressive or innovative disciplines once it becomes clear that resisting their advance is futile and mercenary motives such as grant funding and backside seats present themselves.

3. Part of the reason for the divide between the narratology and the ludology camps lies in the overwhelming tendency of the former to be condemnatory based on games' perceived violence, sexism, etc. In contrast, ludologists see these as embedded within games' algorithms, rules, simulations, and strategies. These, the ludologists would argue, allow for greater potential than the narratologists can envision because textual analyses cannot account fully for players' participation.

4. Such is the importance that the internet site Urban Dictionary, a popular culture resource, lists the acronym for "Age/ Sex/ Location" (ASL) as the first thing new users are asked. Users are reminded that when asked "one must comply with the

comfortable, even habituated, with the performance, the essentialization remains. Thus, it is not surprising that LGBTQ characters fall into the categories listed at the beginning of this paper. The assessment for passing always already adopts the criteria of the dominant culture. In fact, the criteria become more stringent and are applied more rigorously.

### **If You're Game Enough: Postures of Play**

The evidence of the gendered variant of the colonization of video games comes from the creative and sometimes prescriptive involvement of players and not necessarily from the games themselves—though this helps. In this regard, I would like to posit that the colonization of gender in digital games presents an opportunity and a currently expanding scenario for theorizing and for considering LGBTQ characters in digital games through the threefold related processes one finds (a) in Slash Fiction; (b) in fitness or physique pictorials, films, and their consumption; and (c) in queer readings of and/or identifications with otherwise straight characters in film and in literature. In this last instance, some may feel that these readings constitute appropriative or even colonizing acts in their own right. However, this supposition overlooks the absence of a history of such accounts that is either systemic or institutionalized. As I will show, each of these has a particular attraction and a particular presence within digital games. That said, these readings are likely to cause as much debate and to draw as much resistance as approaches to game studies as they have within the fields from which they are drawn. Slash comprises a sub-genre of fan fiction that takes its name from the “/” between the initials of characters who become lovers in listings and exchanges of fan fiction. Since the most noteworthy examples have been those involving pairings of otherwise straight characters—for example, Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*—this variety has become synecdochal for the form. Given this archetype, one could see the characters from squad-based shooters, such as *Gears of War* (2006-present) or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007-present), becoming fodder for fan fiction. As I have discussed elsewhere, the “friend” routines in the *GTA IV* (2008) series represent a kind of homosocial dating that becomes necessary to complete the game (Ouellette 2011). This should be differentiated from interactions with the game’s “gay” characters, Bernie and Gay Tony, who fall into the category of being stereotypical sources of a laddish humour.

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wishes of the moderators or proceed to be ignored.” Moreover, there are dozens of related sub-definitions and usage examples that have been added.

Unfortunately, slash has become a hackneyed and bastardized genre, especially since the rise of the Internet, not to mention the dilemma of including the manga, anime, and *shōnenai* subspecies.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, its production, even in its “pure” form, relies on a tremendous amount of white, middle-class normalizing. The most notable instance of the normalizing concerns the portrayals of sexual acts, even in the rare occasions when they occur. The existing criticism involves psychoanalytic readings that are sure to be unpopular in game studies circles. Even so, Constance Penley, one of the first scholars to consider slash fiction seriously, explains that the form represents the “hit and run” tactics of those who are disempowered (1991, 139). The creative potential within the form, especially through the manipulation—that is, the play—of gender, offers a space in which the authors can turn the imaginative play into a means of using the tendencies and the methods of the dominant culture against itself. For Penley, what is at issue is “finding alternative and unexpected ways of thinking and speaking about [people’s] relation to the new technologies of science, the body and the mind” (1991, 139). This is more than just a restatement of the axiom that readers make texts, though that part of the formulation should not be overlooked or understated. It represents both a reminder of and a call for the liberatory power of play.

In the second case, the success and the power of physique pictorial magazines and movies relies on the ability to exist without the knowledge of straight audiences. This is the very contingency of Dick Hebdige’s oft-cited but frequently misunderstood formulation of “hiding in the light”: “[it] forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched” (1998, 35). At the same time, these texts still must possess undeniable homoerotics or opportunities for identifications. The multiple and simultaneous levels on which the text operates provide part of the attraction. In a manner akin to the pleasures of Hebdige’s punks, the text is more enjoyable for LGBTQ audiences because straight audiences miss the homoerotics and occasionally enjoy and partake in them without recognizing the full implications of them. As with slash the process

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5. These cannot and will not be considered here primarily because of the myriad challenges of rationally considering these sorts of highly sexualized Japanese animations as they are consumed, transformed, and appropriated by North American audiences. This is not to mention the predictable moral and the academic outrage and sensationalization of these genres largely because the depictions feature children in a sexualized manner. Thus, the genres are fraught with seemingly limitless theoretical and other positionings that overwhelm and obfuscate any and all other concerns the current chapter might have.

subverts the system by turning the tendencies of that system onto itself. Moreover, in the games cited above, hypermasculine violence displaces any of the homoeroticism, as it usually does. Gay Tony, in *The Ballad of Gay Tony* (2009) expansion pack, provides examples of these elements when he expresses his confusion regarding the “pent up suburban he-man angst [and] the fake tan and muscles” of rival mob boss, Rocco. While the potential is there for such an identification, the *Grand Theft Auto* seems more like a sarcastic joke and a dare rather than an opportunity. Even so, the overwhelming tendency of designers to stock games with hypermasculinized characters just as, if not more, frequently than with hyperfeminized ones will likely lead to limitless lusting.

At some level, though, this line of inquiry leads to suggestions of authorial intent and even biographical criticism, based on the assumptions of a “gay sensibility” running counter to the hegemonic, heteronormative one. As Richard Dyer (1978) argues, there is no particular guarantee that such a sensibility will produce anything different since it is bound by the same institutional and industrial structures as well as the generic conventions involved. In fact, Dyer (1978) argues that a gay man’s thorough understanding of these regimes more readily inform a strong heteronormative depiction. Thus, the third form, a queer reading based on behaviours and rituals that evoke a particular queer identification, might raise the most eyebrows because at the very least it means admitting once and for all that the author has truly died, or at least does not play video games. If readers do make texts, then a queer identification with an otherwise straight character, specifically one created expressly *as* part of the project of reproducing normative genders—should not be the problem it has become for an astonishing admixture of respondents, including feminist and queer scholars, not to mention their students. Indeed, vituperative responses will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Beyond the obvious threat to icons, the discomfort caused by all three of these approaches is as much cultural as theoretical because it invokes a key source of homophobia, namely straight men’s knowledge of their own lustfulness and the resultant fear of that lust being turned on them. In enumerating these sources, sociologist Tim Beneke (1997) explains that men’s knowledge of their lust for women plays a key part in homophobia because of the possibility of being the target of a similar lust. I think that this is an oversimplification in theoretical terms, but this is not Beneke’s goal. Rather, he offers a general explanation for the expression of



homophobia by the typical straight male.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere do the reactions Beneke outlines occur more obviously than in *Jade Empire*'s treatment of the lovers' kiss. Female characters are shown kissing while there is a careful fade to black for the men before the lips can touch. As Linda Williams explains it is practically a truism in Gender Studies that men are primarily attracted to "what the industry calls girl-girl numbers" because of the cultural prohibition on their enjoyment of same-sex relations, and the resultant need to displace such affections (1993, 252). For Lynne Segal, these kinds of scenes allow men to enjoy and to deny simultaneously the "more complex pleasures of bisexuality and the capacity for identification with the 'opposite' sex, as well as the enjoyment of passivity, the eroticization of penetration and pain" (1993, 70). Thus, the two kisses are at some level two versions of one act of consummation. In addition to denials and displacements, though, the third prospective reading runs the risk of being labelled an appropriative reading since it involves something (allegedly) not readily available from the text; this is, if one takes the reading as a narratological approach alone. At the same time, such a narratological approach would have to rely in a most deterministic fashion on the certainty of authorial intent. Such a reaction, which is so formulaic as to be utterly predictable, is seemingly anachronistic given its play in an era largely dominated by the cult of the individual.<sup>7</sup> As such, the responses to a reading based on *this* identification offer a poignant reminder that even fantasies are normalized and that not everyone is allowed to have them.

However, when considering the potentials for LGBTQ character and for queer readings as and through ludic approaches, the scruples, caveats, and rejoinders—both to their general implementation and to their implementation for games, in particular—should dissolve. This should be the case even if they cannot occur without bringing existing premises from

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6. Even though it is the least likely source to be acknowledged fully, this source of homophobia should not be discounted. UCLA researcher Neil Malamuth's (1991) investigations on the likelihood men will commit rape are the most widely cited of their kind. Perhaps because the data is frequently cited to sensationalize it, a later study by Malamuth and Karole Dean confirms the original finding that "between 16% to 20% indicated some likelihood of raping. The percentages that indicated some likelihood of 'forcing sex' ranged from 36% to 44%" (1991, 234). Well-meaning scholars and writers occasionally combine the two numbers to suggest a majority of men are inclined to commit such acts. Even without such manipulations, the numbers are staggering.

7. A good read on the subject is Hal Niedzviecki's *Hello, I'm Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity* (Penguin 2004).

other critical domains to bear on the topic. In other words, ludic approaches themselves furnish the justification and the methodology for non-ludic approaches to the queering of games and of game studies. This simultaneity exists because the ludic approaches not only take into account the intervention of the player, these approaches develop because as Aarseth says, “the gameworld is its own reward” (2004, 51). Said another way, playing provides the rationale, the outcome, but also the means of reading and of engaging the text. Furthermore, Canadian video game scholar Bernard Perron (2003) enumerates three different modes of cognitive and affective responses to games: playing within the gameworld, playing with the gameworld, and making up new games to play within the gameworld. In the last regard, this is precisely what happens in fashioning a queer modality for an otherwise straight figure. As Perron and Mark Wolf (2009) explain elsewhere, the presence and the proliferation of new games created by players *within* existing games demonstrates concretely the player’s own frame of reference and ability to intervene whenever and wherever he or she pleases. I did not say “or is able to intervene” precisely because this is never in question.

At the very least, the player can always press pause or even turn off the game machine. Moreover, the advent of digital recording technologies opens the possibilities for manipulating Full Motion Videos (FMVs) and load screens into clips, “mashups,” and machinima.<sup>8</sup> Creating a new game based on, because of, or in spite of an existing game should be an always already potentiality. In fact, this is taken into account within a variety of established disciplines. For example, the process is called “repurposing” when the text is a film, “rearranging” when the text is sheet music, and “remounting” when the text is a (stage) play. Even “culture jamming,” a reductive version of *détournement*, has become an accepted and studied form when the text is an affect of consumerism. The significance is that manipulating an existing cultural construct, as is most evident in the case of *détournement*, includes the attractiveness and the option of the using such constructs as part of their own undoing. This is important because such techniques are among the hit-and-run tactics Penley (1991, 1992) outlines in her considerations of Slash Lit. Moreover, these kinds of interventions are the rule, as it were, in games, and this is what separates the medium from watching a film, reading a book, or even making fan fiction. Play makes each engagement different and occasions each engagement. Manipulating and changing the text is an in-built attraction

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8. Mashups combine pieces of other productions to make a new one, while machinima are films created by laying dialogue over animations produced by manipulating video games.

and is part of the enjoyment. If the gameworld allows something to occur, then such a move is neither an appropriative one nor is it an appropriation.

### **Playing with Death: Authorial Intent and Available Readings**

At the same time, I am more than aware that Alexander Doty's (2002) reading of the *Wizard of Oz* as a lesbian text, to cite the example to which I am most drawn when considering the potentiality of games as LGBTQ texts, has received tremendous resistance from a variety of locations. Many resist the reading since it runs counter to the superficial authorial intent or it seems imposed or appropriative of another's voice.<sup>9</sup> By Doty's own account, feminist scholars have given it such labels because it encroaches on the idea of a woman-centred text (2002, 140). These oppositions exist in the face of Doty's clear and careful analysis that heterosexuality is not really present in *The Wizard of Oz*, either. Instead, he finds a process that is evocative of a lesbian experience and would be recognized in that way by cognizant viewers. I anticipate the same sorts of responses to the readings I envision. However, I remain hopeful because as Doty points out, there is the potential for *any* text—and therefore any game—to become a text worthy of consideration for its LGBTQ considerations. In sum, though, the distinction is that the text was never intended for such a purpose, but the others were intended to be read in personalized ways. The personal clearly still is political. But, is this personalization not a key component of actually playing a game? That is to say, play as distinct from formulaically following an FAQ, strategy guide, or 100% completion walkthrough? Moreover this kind of play is analogous to the game play Perron and Wolf identify as being a defining mode of engagement. If this is the case, then games should be a *better* site for gender play since they need as much as they inspire the creativity of players. This is important because a discourse of power such as gender has an overwhelming tendency to be both prescriptive and proscriptive simultaneously. In other words, the act of defining what is accepted also has the cognitive and affective impact of defining implicitly what is not

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9. In teaching Doty's reading since 2004, I have had dozens of students tell me that he has "no right" to offer such a reading. Even when challenged about their "possession" of certain songs, poems, films, or novels that have a sentimental or other idiosyncratic reading attached to them, students still contend that Doty's reading is wrong. The tendency is to validate the mainstream. It might be argued that this group is more representative than even oppositional scholars since students belong to a larger demographic, one that is more likely to play games.

accepted. Players might, but games can make no such claims. Otherwise, it would be impossible to create games within games or routines within games. Here, I cannot help but think of the humanitarian potential of the *Grand Theft Auto* games and their host of paramedic and firefighter missions. Machinima could not exist without at least a partial enactment, if not explicit understanding, of this cognitive and affective response to (the play and the reception of) video games.

As mentioned above, there is a substantial catalogue of LGBTQ and allegedly LGBTQ video game characters. It is the latter instances that prove most interesting. Despite the generally positive reception of *The Longest Journey* (1999) and other games, the following and their sequels bear out my contention that more subversive tactics currently are required, especially considering the preponderance of unchecked homophobia on Xbox LIVE, on YouTube, and elsewhere on the Internet. While the aim of subversive tactics need not be cultural or political change, the necessity still remains for them. Characters and identifications that do not exist *sub rosa* most definitely will be subject to appropriation and/or abuse from mainstream and/or homophobic audiences, respectively. Even legitimate sources give me pause. For example, in an *Oricon* poll from 2008, cross-dressing Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII* (1997, 2009) was named the second most popular video game character in part because he was simultaneously second in the men's category and third in the women's category. Despite the popularity of the character, which derives from the fun of the game and from the game's established fan-base, the androgyny is not entirely unproblematic for audiences. For example, *GamesRadar* (2010) cites the scene in which Cloud Strife disguises as a woman in its category for "Gaming's most piss poor disguises," in large part due to Strife's extremely feminine appearance. Passing the level requires gendered passing. The two modes of scrutiny intersect at the heart of the puzzle to be solved. Moreover, this is an obvious case of the game as its own reward since playing with gender begets playing with the game and ultimately winning the game.

In turn, this serves as a reminder of the power of normative constructions and of stereotypes especially given the proviso that uneasiness regarding gender instability tends to rest in the eyes of the beholder (Dyer 1978, 2005). Such passing also calls into question the ability of the beholder similarly to pass scrutiny. The performance (like any performance) stands as a reminder that any gender is performative and hence is unstable, something Turkle (1998) finds in her examination of gender play in digital games. Not only does cross dressing enact gender treachery, but it also induces an oscillation in the player's identification

with the avatar. Here lies the principle subversion of slash and of passing. This is important because it calls into question the basis for any identification or reading of the character. Simply put, it makes the viewer/player confront the possibility, “I may be passing and others may be watching me do it.” However, gender treachery is not the same as a queer identity. More telling than the mainstream reaction, which predictably equates cross-dressing and androgyny with an undefined queer sexuality, is the GayGamer (2006) confirmation of and adherence to the dominant regime. This acquiescence reveals the power of such unproblematically and uncritically held views while simultaneously revealing the reduction of the necessary criteria for making such determinations in a virtual space.

Thus, Cloud Strife is actually more noteworthy because the character occasions one of noted writer Richard Cobbett’s (2007) “50 Weirdest Moments in PC Games.” Also on that list is Jacques Servin’s alteration of *SimCopter* (1996) to include what Cobbett calls the “first hot coffee mod” to occur in video games. The mod, for *SimCopter*, is triggered by certain events, such as a Friday 13th, and it replaces the usual celebration for passing a boss level with one that involves male figures running around in Sim Speedos and kissing each other. A “mod” is a modification of an existing game or console to change its characteristics or capabilities, or to eliminate anti-piracy features. The “hot coffee mod” refers to some explicit sexual content that Rockstar Games included in its initial shipment of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). Rockstar officials clearly changed their minds about the routine, since the code was locked, meaning the sequence—which occurs when a female character invites the avatar for coffee in her home—cannot be accessed without a mod. The mod achieved significant notoriety thanks to high-profile media attention. Thus, Cobbett’s equation of same-sex kissing with a routine featuring depictions of rear-entry heterosexual copulation further reveals the reduced set of criteria for establishing queerness in a video game character. As much as the *Sims* games are lauded for breaking new ground, Servin was still fired for his “Easter Egg,” or hidden secret.<sup>10</sup> Since then Servin has become one of the best known culture jammers in the world by playing Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men. Thus, it may be concluded that his move belongs more to this genre than either games or gender studies. It is a stunt produced for the sake of producing a stunt.

However, that ignores the potential for multiple and simultaneous

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10. It is with tongue firmly planted in cheek that I add that in this case game play may truly be its own reward.

readings of that stunt. Nevertheless, it is the third LGBTQ reference in Cobbett's list that is the most salient for the current paper. He explains,

When DreamWorks approached Clive Barker with the original design for what would become Clive Barker's *Undying*, their main character was a tough, hard-headed baldie called Count Magnus Wolfram. "You've got a gay man in charge here," warned an unimpressed Barker. "Bring me someone fabulously sexy. Bring me somebody I want to sleep with." Ten days later, Magnus was gone, *Undying* starred handsome Irish rogue Patrick Galloway, and the games industry had its only major male character to date designed specifically to be sexually attractive to other chaps. (2007)

In short, Patrick Galloway embodies many of the same factors that inspired Bob Miser (among others) to create the physique pictorial magazines and movies of the 1950s. These productions presented images of "beefcake" men, the sort also immortalized in peplum movies, to audiences both straight and gay alike. The key distinction is that Galloway so far is not to be found on lists of LGBTQ characters or even those who might be or could be gay. He is only gay for play, as the movie characters in a popular pornographic genre are known as gay for pay.

As much as these characters may appeal to LGBTQ audiences they have been created by proxy for these audiences by otherwise straight designers and producers. In fact, this moves the debate into territory purportedly colonized and recolonized during the Sandy Stone vs. Janice Raymond (1998) debate regarding transgendered persons. Their dispute centres on the extent of hegemonic masculine privilege involved in creating a woman from (a) man's body and from (a) man's view of how that woman should look (primarily) and act. The cultural assumptions behind the construction reveal the status of women in the dominant culture and result in a reductive, even stereotypical, product. The concern arises because the result is (a) man's version of what (an essential) woman should be. A similar argument can be made about the creation of Patrick Galloway whether or not Barker approves of the final rendering: straight men are making their version of what a(n essential) gay man will desire. In this regard, Gender Studies scholar Diana Fuss offers an important proviso for evaluating the status of any essentialization based on "who is utilizing, how it is deployed, and where its effects are concentrated" (1989, 20). This is not to deny the creativity of designers or developers but to make them aware that the conditions and the effects of that creativity remain fair game for critics, scholars, and players. If developers are free to create, consumers cannot be expected to give up the freedom to interpret.

## Good, Giving and Game: Beyond the Status Quo

In Sherry Turkle's words, rigidity regarding gender, sex, and sexuality "reminds us of the extent to which we use gender to shape our relationships" (1996, 396). What Turkle finds is that gender begins to matter more and to have more restrictions attached to it in a space purportedly designed for play. Similarly, Claudia Springer finds that while sexual identity can be altered, the roles assigned to men and to women are usually conventional, even those given to allegedly LGBTQ characters (1998, 485, 495). Cultural conventions continue to exert an influence and an authority on producers and consumers alike. Indeed, Richard Dyer (1978, 2002, 2005) argues that stereotypes are more rigid and more powerful than social types. Surprisingly, the scope of *Gaygamer.net* seems to follow the prescriptions and the proscriptions of normalizing tendencies in its reportage of purportedly LGBTQ issues in video games. Their most recent "April Fools" page, for example, in which they offer a Slash plot for *Gears of War 3* (2011), reflects the circumscription of play by dominant discourses of gender. Clearly the authors recognize the homoerotic potential between Dom and Marcus, but presenting it within the space of a prank, especially a hoax, reduces the political purchase of the move. In fact, it would be for more subversive to *not* do the spoof, but to list the ample evidence for portraying Dom and Marcus in this fashion. Beyond dismissal, though, lies a particular moment when such a move loses its meaning. For example, the homoerotic elements of the volleyball scene in *Top Gun* (1986) has become so well-known that *Time*—which is hardly a bastion of avant-garde liberal thinking—cites the "subtext" among its top ten list of the movie's enduring qualities (Webley 2011). At the moment a text reaches this kind of status as a sign vehicle it stops being available and, as has happened with *Top Gun*, it becomes a running joke on message boards and on YouTube. This is significant because the debate about the positionality of LGBTQ characters and players becomes circumlocutory. Rather than dealing with the specificity of LGBTQ concerns, perspectives, and issues, the discourse carefully avoids them.

Ultimately, any corrective move will start with game designers. This is not to place all of the responsibility squarely on their shoulders or to reinscribe authorial intent as a meaningful mode of analysis. In fact, the issue is not one of responsibility at all. Play, with its constituent parts, remains the central element that separates video games from other media. Players will do as they will with video games, but they still rely somewhat parasitically on the source material offered by developers (Penley 1991, 139, 155). Indeed, there seem to be profound restrictions—whether

implicitly or explicitly applied—on the extent of fantasy and of play within games. While they may do idiosyncratic things with games, the form is such that even gay gamers react in predictable and culturally determined ways. For example, *GayGamer.net* (2006) was launched with a list of the “20 gayest characters” as one of its means of establishing the legitimacy of the site and its aims. Upon reading this list and subsequent suggestions for revision posted by its readers, I have always been struck by the stereotypically camp characteristics of every entry and by the common refrain that all of the developers are in Japan—not to mention the banality of the list itself and the fact that such banality comes from this source. This kind of *pro forma* discourse has a companion in the tendency of players and of developers to avoid the topics of sexuality altogether. Slash fiction runs into the same prohibition/proscription once the pants come off, as it were. The reality of the sex act becomes a border that cannot be crossed, no matter how many winks or tongues-in-cheek the gleefully camp character may provide viewers and gamers.

Writing nearly twenty years ago, Constance Penley finds a similar distance being maintained by Slash writers. She concludes that it arises as much from a desire to maintain the heterosexuality of the characters as from a discomfort with the act itself (1992, 487). The difference between *Jade Empire*'s treatment of the female lovers, who kiss, and the treatment of the male lovers, for whom there is a fade-to-black that interrupts the kiss, stands as emblematic of the contradictory state of games. Penley never mentions the heterosexuality of the author as needing protection, too, but this is clearly the case. Even while recognizing that 2010 stands as a significant year for the creep of sexuality into games, IGN's Michael Thomsen (2010) acknowledges that all too often any hint of sexuality becomes a source for humour. This is the case for *Bully* (2006), every *GTA* iteration, but also in the various avatar options available in the immensely popular song and dance games! Not surprisingly, Thomsen concludes, “Video game designers are, by all accounts, genuine prudes on the issue of sex. Few if any are willing to risk failure or audience discomfort by taking the issue on openly” (2010, 3). The expedient, then, remains the favoured choice. It is easier to circle or to ignore the issue—in essence maintaining the *status quo* in an industry that prides itself on relentless advance, especially in its various ways of presenting “reality”—than to deal with it.

In this regard, the arguments from developers and from critics reflect a general intransigence regarding sexuality. The contradictions among the arguments are revealing in their reliance upon reductive and dichotomous thinking. For example, in the influential game e-zine *Kotaku*, Drew Cohen (2011) writes about the potential harm to the “canon” of *Mass Effect* that



might be caused by a “full-scale gay romance” involving the male Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*. Switching to new consoles and game engines have had far more profound impact than this. The canon Cohen wishes to protect also includes a female Commander Shepard. Not only is that player choice always already producing a different “canon,” the unspoken part is that “full-scale” gay romance is fine for that character, not to mention the diction makes it seem like an assault on an unassailable beachhead. Although Cohen takes a devil’s advocate approach to the development, his own final point, like the game’s constructions, falls into the reductive, imposed simplicity of the formulaic coming out narrative and a fixed binary of gay-straight object choice so that everything fits a heteronormative paradigm. Here, I am reminded of Halberstam’s admonition that desire “has a terrifying precision” (1999, 127). The potential for the individualization of desire means that generalizations become more difficult to apply. In turn myths and stereotypes become more difficult to maintain. In fact, Halberstam’s statement opens up possibilities instead of foreclosing them because desire—and the fantasy and the play that go with it—should be so precise as to cause the “occasional misreading” (1999, 127). This is important because games frequently limit choice rather than make choices possible.

The fact that games limit choices remains lost on defenders of the *status quo*. Moreover, these limits extend to players and to critics. In response to *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Darren, the founder of the popular blog, *The Common Sense Gamer* (2011), wrestles with the terrifying precision of desire when he writes, “sexuality is a very personal and hot topic that gets everyone’s panties in a knot, but do we really need to represent every single human condition within our games just to make a social point?”<sup>11</sup> However, the piece still ends with the perfunctory conclusion that multiple and simultaneous depictions of identity will result in players “really hating our gaming sessions.” Admittedly, Darren dismisses the “games are art” defense favoured by those who argue that creative freedom gives the developers total leave because it really mean total absolution. For example, when wading into the same topic thread for the heavily subscribed *Game Critics* site, Mike Doolittle writes (2011), “Games are, of course, artistic reflections of our cultural ideologies, and it’s worthwhile to consider how our culture is reflected for better or worse in the arts.” Doolittle’s final sentence demands that players and critics respect the creative freedom of developers. Yet this is offered unproblematically after acknowledging that games flatly represent cultural ideologies; that is,

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11. Darren gives no last name in his biography.

societal norms that are held and are reproduced uncritically.

The argument about creative freedom is as disingenuous as it is contradictory for any mass cultural product or commercial endeavour. Tami Baribeau, a developer and editor of *Border House Blog* (2010), one of the most important e-zines for LGBTQ audiences, offers an important reminder:

What real world issues do game designers have to be aware of right now? They have to be aware of localization so their game can be played in other countries. They have to be aware of ESRB ratings, and what is allowed so that a game targeted to tweens and teens doesn't contain any inappropriate content. They have to be aware of laws in other countries that might prevent the game from shipping.<sup>12</sup>

Baribeau cites the multiple culturally sensitive versions of *Fallout 3* (2008) as being more rather than less typical of the circuit of game production. Again, social responsibility only exists as an expedient because developers fear for their bottom lines. Moreover, developers' behaviour and comments reveal the heart of the inherent biases in the culture that is reflected in games. Gordon Van Dyke, producer of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* (2010), explains that the decision to exclude female characters stems from the limits of the game engine and "a balancing act for implementing new things—how many vehicles [. . .] how many buildings with destruction" (quoted in Totilo 2010). This is the same argument developers for the *Tomb Raider* series (1996-present) were making in 1999! In his review of the fourth iteration for *Computer Games*, Steve Bauman explains that Lara Croft's endowment occurs because the game engine used in the *Tomb Raider* games is "best at conveying square-like settings, like Egyptian pyramids [as found in the first and fourth games]" (1999, 60). This argument may have had some credibility at the time, but consoles have moved ahead two generations in the intervening decade!

When not falling on this dated argument, developers also reveal that their internal discourse is not that different from the homophobic and misogynistic barbs found on YouTube and message boards. The infamous "Hot Coffee Mod" from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is only the best known example. Denis Farr, a *Border House* columnist, uncovered a telling bit of code in *Dead Island* (2006, 2011). The character Purna, an

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12. The "border" in *Border House Blog* refers to *Longest Journey*, which was among the most important early efforts to include LGBTQ characters in an adventure game.

avenging former police officer gets the tag “FeministWh\*rePurna” in the actual code for the game (quoted in Farr 2011, n.p.). It is worth noting that while users turn to largely unmoderated venues for their biases, and the developers lapse into blaming their units, the industry blankets discourse, discussion, and even mention of sexuality. Nothing stands out more than the banning of more than one million users, roughly 5% of the total, from Xbox LIVE because of some detail in their online profiles, including and especially anything to do with sexuality. The foreclosure is such that *GameSpy* lists a man being banned for including his hometown, Fort Gay, WV, in his profile (quoted in Sharkey 2011, n.p.). Though not as notorious, the utilitarian insistence on the merits of choosing homosexual options for *Mass Effect 2* or *GTA IV* are no less significant. These moves signal a desire to occlude playful possibilities on the part of players and of producers. Moreover, there is no reason for any of this to change.

### **Nobody Left Out: Conclusions**

Scholars, too, play a key role in the occlusion of sexuality from topics of discussion. To be frank, scholars have spent the bulk of their efforts attempting to settle the ludology vs. narratology debate, distinguishing games from other media, and attempting to posit which methods and approaches can be adopted, adapted, or appropriated from other disciplines. Ruggill and McAllister, in perhaps the first scholarly study that openly discusses the frustrations and contradictions of (nearly) everything about video games, go so far as to say that scholars show a “duplicitous connection to the computer game medium [. . .]. It is hard to think of an example of computer game scholarship that is free from ulterior motives and multiple desires” (2011, 79). Almost in anticipation of this paper, Ruggill and McAllister hit upon every contradictory aspect of the video game nexus that stunts the development of LGBTQ characters and limits the potential identifications. At the time of writing, the set comprises either a collection of stereotypes or the three underexplored and underexamined earlier elucidated methods of finding queer identifications among the source material. While the process might seem an imposition or making something out of nothing at all, the reality is that whether or not game developers ever make the same leap into inclusivity that film and TV made over a decade ago, these will always be available. Moreover, recognizing the combinations of Slash, or the camp of beefcake, or of the ritualizations of the queer coming-of-age circuit encompasses more and more central aspects of play than the critics, scholars, and developers seem willing to allow or to admit.

The issue of freedom in games stands as one of the key elements identified by early thinkers in the field and that remains at the core of any version of game studies. Such positions proceed from cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's (1958) tenet that "the first main characteristic of play [is that] it is free, is in fact freedom" (8). Although it may appear counterintuitive, grasping this axiom requires understanding that the game world occasions rather than limits play. In the words of sociologist Roger Caillois (1950), instead of being constrained a game "consists of the need to find or continue at once a response which is free within the limits set by the rules" (8). If this were the case everyone involved should encourage the LGBTQ pleasures of video games because they embody and reflect such a fundamental and distinguishing element of the medium. Citing the examples of skydiving and surgery games, Ruggill and McAllister explain the admixture of play elements this way:

Abetted by computers, game designs are attempts at making players think and act abnormally. This is fundamental to every medium in a way, and part of what can make any one of them compelling. [. . .] What better subject for computer games, for inconsequential play (though of course play can be quite consequential), than those activities that, were they real, would surely ruin one's real life. (2011, 73)

LGBTQ enjoyment is hardly as alarmingly real as the multiple surgery options in *Trauma Center: Under the Knife* (2006), nor is it as dangerous or as illegal as the street racing, drug dealing, gun and prostitute running, assassinations, bank robberies, or even day-to-day life in any *GTA*. Yet, each successive iteration of games claims a more realistic, more immersive environment. At the time of writing, the advertisements for the next release in the *Battlefield* (2002-present) and *Call of Duty* (2003-present) series trumpet this very point in the hope of securing a massive share of the 2011 holiday rush. This year is no different than any other that has preceded. In contrast, characters remain flat, and even futuristic and alien ones are saddled with contemporary earthbound modalities. Thus, players should be ready to hear and to experience, and critics and scholars should be ready to play when LGBTQ characters finally appear as more than jokes and filler in popular games.