

This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Gender and sexuality subversion in digital games

Reference:

Biscop Kilian, Malliet Steven, Dhoest Alexander.- Gender and sexuality subversion in digital games

DiGeSt : journal of diversity and gender studies - ISSN 2593-0281 - 6:2(2019), p. 23-42

Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.11116/DIGEST.6.2.2>

To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1632270151162165141>

Authors:

Kilian Biscop

Media, Policy & Culture (MPC), Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp,
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerpen, kilian.biscop@gmail.com

Steven Malliet

Media, Policy & Culture (MPC), Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp,
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerpen, steven.malliet@uantwerpen.be

Alexander Dhoest

Media, Policy & Culture (MPC), Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp,
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerpen, alexander.dhoest@uantwerpen.be

Subversive Ludic Performance:

An Analysis of Gender and Sexuality Performance in Digital Games

Abstract:

We apply Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemonic subversion, key concepts in queer game studies, and Butler's construct of gender performativity to the field of critical game studies. Using qualitative videogame content analysis, we investigate how games such as *Life is Strange* or *The Sims* can enable players to act out a non-heteronormative gender role. Results show that gender and non-heteronormative enactment in games can essentially take two forms, depending on the genre and the possibilities for action presented in the mechanics. Directed games are characterised by a more or less fixed narrative or a strict path towards a desired ending, directing the player towards one specific type of (identity) performance. In semi-directed games, players are granted freedom in terms of performance, albeit to a limited degree as made possible within the constraints of game technology and aesthetics. In conclusion we posit that the interplay between game rules, narrative elements and player context marks the essence of counter-hegemonic enactment of gender roles and norms concerning sexuality in digital games.

Introduction

Despite several recent initiatives of the games industry to become more inclusive of women and LGBTQ individuals, a large majority of contemporary games target a male, heterosexual adolescent public and display a traditional perspective on gender roles (Fox & Tang, 2014; Stermer & Burkley, 2012). There are ample indications that game journalism, game research, game production and gamer culture continue to be male-dominated spaces where women are often subject to aggression, harassment and discrimination (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2015). Public debate regarding the role of women in the games industry frequently occurs in a polarised fashion, which is exemplified, among others, in several anti-feminist campaigns that recently took place on online forums such as Reddit, 4chan and Twitter, and even within the DiGRA¹ research community (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2015). The heated nature of these discussions is remarkable, given that women account for an increasing proportion of the gamer population. According to recent market research, female players constitute 45% of all gamers in the US (ESA, 2017) and 44% of all gamers in Europe (ISFE, 2017). On the production side, however, it is estimated that only 22% of employed game designers and artists are women, which demonstrates the need for new strategies to tackle the gender gap in game research and development (Kondrat, 2015; Chess & Shawn 2015). According to Shaw (2009), this production context, where the majority of game designers are male and heterosexual, can also partially explain the relative scarcity of non-heterosexual characters in games.

¹ DiGRA, or 'Digital Gaming Research Association,' is an international association for academics and professionals who research gaming and associated phenomena.

In the past decade a body of literature has emerged that investigates issues of gender and sexuality in games, exploring new ways to foster a more diverse culture in the gaming industry (Kondrat, 2015). While a majority of studies has addressed questions of stereotyping and gender representation (e.g. Downs & Smith, 2010), this paper aims to move beyond the topic of visual depiction of gender characteristics and representation of non-heterosexual characters. We present the results of a qualitative content analysis, targeting the possibilities for gender role enactment in a selection of recent games. To avoid an essentialist point of view on gendered in-game activity, we build on a number of key points of the feminist and critical perspectives on game studies, as exemplified in the work of Shaw (2009; 2014) and Cassar (2013). Additionally, in our analysis of non-heterosexual performances, we draw upon some key terms used in queer studies, found in the works of Hulan (2017). First, we discuss two key elements of our theoretical framework: the concepts of counter-hegemonic subversion and performativity of gender and sexuality. Second, we introduce the method of qualitative game content analysis, after which the results of such an analysis are described. Finally, in the discussion, we present a number of methodological challenges and focal points for game text analysis aiming to address issues of gender and sexuality.

Performativity of Gender and Sexuality in Digital Games

Although the feminist perspective on game studies harbors a wide range of theoretical foundations and research methods, a running thread can be found in the left-critical frameworks that are used, aiming to counterbalance the male perspective that is dominant within gaming culture (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Different conceptualizations of this male perspective have been

elaborated, some describing it as a mainstream ideology (e.g. Chess & Shaw, 2015) and others attributing counter-cultural characteristics to it (e.g. Massanari, 2015). A consensus seems to be that, especially within mainstream gaming, a masculine culture systematically minimises or oppresses female and non-heteronormative perspectives, for instance through hypersexualization of female game characters or harassment of women on online discussion boards (Consalvo, 2012). Additionally, non-heteronormative perspectives have long been systematically subjected to processes of othering and exoticising (Friesem & Shaw, 2016). While this does not always result from deliberate exclusion strategies by male producers (who, as individuals, often do not harbor discriminatory intent), it can be seen as a direct consequence of the appreciation and gatekeeping processes that occur within a male-oriented production context (Harvey & Fisher, 2015). The masculine norms that dominate gaming culture emphasise that men have traditionally been dominant in society and promote values such as force, competition, control over emotions, and self-reliance (Fox & Tang, 2014). These norms have resulted in an abundance of games that feature competition or aggression as main mechanics, and storylines revolving around heroic male protagonists, normalising 'sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players' (Consalvo, 2012).

Although feminist game scholars have been criticised for wanting to 'dismantle hegemonic masculinity' (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 217), Chess and Shaw point out that their perspective mainly aims at 'making room for other gaming cultures and increased diversity' (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 217), hereby creating a space for feminist scholarship to co-exist with traditional approaches to game research. In this sense, the concept of counter-hegemonic action, as

developed by Antonio Gramsci, can be of help understanding how subversion is defined within feminist game scholarship (e.g. Fisher, 2015). Cassar (2013), paraphrasing Gramsci, contextualizes the counter-hegemonic processes at work during game play as follows:

“Gramsci believes that it is never simply a question of domination versus subordination or resistance. In order to maintain its authority, a ruling body should be flexible enough to embrace the views and notions of its subordinates and be open to accept new and changing circumstances.” (Cassar, 2013, p. 340).

Elaborating on this thought, Cassar posits that player agency is an essential element in shaping the meaning of a game. Depending on the choices the player makes, the same game content can yield a variety of interpretations, messages and values. As such, Cassar points out, ‘[i]deology is mutable, depending as much on the text as it depends on the reading made out of that text’ (Cassar, 2013, p. 341). This means that counter-hegemonic game analysis should not only direct its attention towards game content (e.g. characters, visual presentation, narrative or puzzles) but also to how specific players interact with this content, and which possibilities for agency are facilitated in the game rules (Cassar, 2013).

Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity provides a good starting point to discuss how games can aid in subverting gender roles and expectations (Jenson & de Castell, 2008). A central line of thought in Butler’s theory is that gender, as an act and therefore a fluid and non-essentialist identifier, is continuously shaped through the embodied experiences of individuals and the symbolic representations to which they are exposed (Jenson & de Castell,

2008). Within Western society, Butler points out, gender role expectations are essentially heteronormative, defining a causal, harmonious relationship between sex, gender and desire within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 2006). In this normative framework, subjects perform their gender identity in order to produce what Butler refers to as 'intelligible genders.' These intelligible genders present coherence and are naturalised by the societal framework: outside these intelligible genders, nothing 'exists,' because the binary opposition between 'male' and 'female' is presumed to be 'natural.'

Butler's theory does not attribute a strong agency to the individual and her views have often been deemed as deterministic as she emphasises the normalization of gendered behavior through the routine enactment of binary norms (Nussbaum, 1999). While it does not fundamentally question the heterosexual matrix, Butler does acknowledge the possibility of individual subversion, for instance through performing in drag which, if done a certain way, could expose the constructed nature of gender (Butler, 2006). Similarly, the medium of the game can be ascribed a subversive potential, as it requires players to take up an active role and become a co-creator (Bogost, 2005). Akin to Butler's notion of performativity in gender and sexuality, players are invited to perform a certain way in digital games. These digital performances are, much like Butler's idea of performativity, subject to certain rules and contexts of play. Under the right circumstances, game play can be a valuable exercise in empowerment, as it makes visible dominant norms, and provides the tools to act out, within a safe environment, alternative identities (Frasca, 2001). During game play a process of socialization of norms takes place, whereby one is invited to 'take the role of the other' (Biesty, 1986). Hereby players do not only gain a better understanding of the roles they are supposed to take, but are also granted freedom in

enacting, and thus also rejecting them (Biesty, 1986). In order to live up to this subversive potential, games should provide players with a normative framework sufficiently reflecting the complexity of real life, in addition to facilitating freedom of choice and performative experimentation (Frasca, 2001). As such the current gaming culture can be considered as problematic, not only in terms of representation of characters that deviate from the (heterosexual) binary gender norm, but more importantly, in terms of enabling the player to perform alternative identities. In a majority of games, both male and female players have to perform a gender role that is defined by heteronormativity (Fox & Tang, 2014) and that belongs to what Butler describes as the intelligible heterosexual matrix. These games serve to normalise social dominance and sexism, rather than to subvert hegemonic masculinity norms (Fox & Tang, 2014).

Video Game Content Analysis

In this study we aim to connect Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemonic subversion with Butler's construct of gender performativity in the analysis of a selection of games that enable the player to act out non-normative characters in terms of gender and sexuality. Unlike most research on game content, our analysis does not primarily address the question of representation or stereotyping, but focuses on the rules that apply to game characters, and how these enable or facilitate different modes of performance.

In the past twenty years a wide range of published studies have used quantitative content analysis to describe how female characters are represented in mainstream games (Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2010; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Ivory, 2006; Jansz & Martis, 2006; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel & Fritz, 2016; Smith, Lachlan & Tamborini, 2003). These analyses show

that mainstream games are primarily designed with a heterosexual male player in mind, that hyper-sexualization of female characters is a major problem, and that the male gaze is the implied dominant mode of appreciation.

Although quantitative content analysis has aided in exposing the prevalence of hyper-sexualization and subordination of female game characters, the use of strict coding schemes and the predominant focus on representation has been criticised from a feminist angle. Shaw (2014) suggests that these studies should be complemented with qualitative investigations that address processes of character identification and overall game appreciation. First, as Shaw points out, in almost all quantitative studies a dichotomous coding scheme is used whereby characters are either classified as 'male' or 'female', reinforcing binary gender categories. Second, as diversity is mostly measured in terms of the proportional representation of female versus male characters, most research ignores that women can also identify with male characters and enjoy the sexualisation of female characters. Additionally, quantitative data fail to account for the often complex interplay between non-binary gender and sexuality overlooking the experiences and representations of a wide variety of individuals and thus risking to contribute to processes of 'erasure' (Erikson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009).

Finally, according to Shaw, it is important to consider that 'the female player' does not constitute a homogenous category. Especially when issues of ideology and subversion are concerned, research should pay particular attention to those players and types of games operating at the margins of gaming culture, which potentially provide the most valuable examples of countercultural action.

The guidelines provided by Shaw (2014) are largely in line with the general methodologies for game discourse analysis proposed by Consalvo and Dutton (2006), Malliet (2007) and Schmierbach (2009). When analyzing the ‘text’ of a game, especially using qualitative methods, there are two main challenges, both related to the interactive nature of digital games. First, traditional methods of discourse analysis are only partly applicable to game analysis, as they relate to pre-produced thematic, visual and narrative content (Bogost, 2005) whereas the plot of a game is generated in real time. Thus, a game should be considered a ‘textual machine’ (Aarseth, 1999) facilitating the creation of a potentially infinite number of worlds and narratives (Ryan, 2004). Every time a game is played, a different sequence of events unfolds, even if played by the same player (Malliet, 2007). Consequently, when the content of a game is described, one should reference the programmed code and the possibilities included in the game rules, rather than the audiovisual output appearing on the screen. This is difficult to achieve because the game code cannot be directly accessed and requires considerable technical skill to comprehend. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) therefore suggest that the researcher, through playing, attempts to gain knowledge of several components of the underlying game system: objects, player interface, interactions and virtual environments.

A second, related, challenge deals with the interpretive role of the researcher who has to play a game to analyze it, and cannot avoid influencing the meanings that are investigated (Schmierbach, 2009). Game text analysis can thus by definition not be considered as neutral or unbiased. Several strategies have been proposed to tackle this difficulty. Some researchers propose the use of multiple coders (Schmierbach, 2009) or additional document analysis (of reviews, fan discussions or interviews with the creators) to obtain an idea of different potential

readings (Malliet, 2007). Others prefer a more practical approach whereby the researcher has to make references to (stable) simulation-level components, such as objects, algorithms and procedures, in addition to (variable and session-dependent) elements such as narrative or prevalence of certain events (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006).

In the current study, both challenges were met by following a number of these guidelines. First, in order to make sure we attributed sufficient importance to the programmed content, we used the character as the main unit of investigation, with a primary focus on performative characteristics: game characters' possibilities for interaction, their relation to the game world and the programmed parameters applying to them (such as strength, dexterity or stamina). Narrative and visual elements were additionally accounted for, in order to make claims about gender representation and to contextualise our analysis of gender performativity. Second, in order to avoid interpretative researcher bias, a number of investigative strategies were applied. While we have first-hand experience with all games encountered, we additionally consulted academic and journalistic literature relating to these games. When appropriate, multiple 'playthroughs' (i.e. playing or finishing games multiple times in different ways) were performed in order to ensure a deeper understanding of their rules and narratives. Although the analyses were carried out by only one researcher (the first author), the games were simultaneously played by the second author, and frequent moments of reflection took place, whereby intermediary results were discussed regarding their theoretical relevance.

Analysis

We have selected our cases based on theoretical relevance, analysing games that have received critical acclaim or instigated debate on gender issues. This in line with Shaw's assertion (2014) that game analysis should address players and games operating at the margin of game culture, and Kondrat's suggestion (2015) to provide examples encouraging diversity in the gaming industry. With respect to performativity of gender roles and sexuality, a first, explorative analysis unveiled that this can take two forms, depending on the genre and the possibilities for action presented in the mechanics. In a second, inductive phase we distinguished between two types of games: directed games and semi-directed games, mirroring Juul's distinction between games of progress and games of emergence (Juul, 2005). Directed games are characterised by a more or less fixed narrative or a strict path towards a desired ending, directing the player towards one specific type of (gender or sexuality) performance. In semi-directed games, players are granted freedom in terms of performance, within the constraints of game technology and aesthetics. Within this latter category we recognised a stronger potential for subversion because player choice is an essential element of the gender roles one has to take, and as such, multiple performances of gender identity are facilitated. The categories of directed and semi-directed games should be seen as grades on a continuum, not as binary opposites. A directed game can to a certain degree also facilitate player freedom, and in semi-directed games choice is often limited due to technological constraints. Navarro-Remesal points out that what he calls 'directed freedom' is fundamental to the ludological aspect of digital games, as rule-based limitations help shape the possibilities for play. (Navarro Remesal, 2018)

Performance of Gender and Sexuality in Directed Games

In directed games, the player is usually encouraged to take an ideal path, by means of rules of reward or progression through a storyline or quest. Directed games offer varying degrees of performative freedom, such as the option to choose between multiple characters, weapons-of-choice or variable environmental paths. These do, however, not include essentially different ways to perform a gender role. In a majority of directed games, the omission of certain options can even be considered an example of exclusion or erasure, as is for instance the case in military shooting games such as Battlefield 2, where female playable characters are absent. Directed games have, on the one hand, been criticised for implementing masculine norms and overtly sexist or eroticised behavior (Stermer & Burkley, 2012). In contrast, in a number of directed games players are guided through a narrative that encourages them to empathise with characters deviating from the masculine, heterosexual norm. Some recent titles demonstrate that this can be a powerful tool to provoke thought and propose new approaches on gender role taking.

Additionally, player-driven subversion in directed games is not impossible either. In some cases, players have been able to transgress the boundaries and rules of the games themselves to play subversively. Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) refer to this process as ‘queering play,’ considering it a specific, subversive kind of going beyond in-game boundaries, questioning heteronormativity, the binary gender system, and expectations of monogamy. Because this particular type of subversion is usually performed through mods, cheats or other strategies generally perceived as ‘outside’ the text of the game, we perceive *queering play* as beyond the scope of our article.

Instead, we will focus on how game design shapes possibilities for queer enactment within the established rules.

Our analysis is two-fold. We will first, inspired by Hutchinson (2007), propose a deconstruction of the traditional view on sexualised game content, by means of a comparative analysis between two games in the fighting game genre (*Soul Calibur II* and the *Tekken* series). Moving into queer theory, we will subsequently discuss a number of games that have made an explicit effort to include multi-layered characters in their storylines, with a predominant focus on LGBTQ characters (*Gone Home*, *The Last of Us*, *Life is Strange*).

Case 1. Soul Calibur II and the Tekken series

Both the *Soul Calibur* and *Tekken* series belong to the fighting game genre. The dominant activity players perform within this genre is fighting in one-on-one matches. Fighting games such as *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur* are among the highest selling games on mainstream consoles, each new release accounting for sales of more than three million copies (Khan, 2017). Players choose between a roster of characters varying in fighting styles, visual flair, genders, and parameters such as strength, flexibility or endurance, to engage a fighter in one-against-one combat. Getting to know the performative qualities of a character is at the heart of these games and combat is the primary mechanic. Modern installments also let players customise existing characters' appearance or make new ones based on presets and a library of in-game assets.

The *Soul Calibur* franchise is known for its erotic qualities. Part of the appeal of many characters resides in their sexualised representation and, more importantly, their special combat powers which are often related to sexuality. Following Hutchinson (2007) we argue that these

types of sexualisation are not inherently problematic, until they become the dominant mode of representation, or become hyper-sexualisation. For instance, the character of Ivy, who is portrayed as a BDSM dominatrix, is strongly sexualised: her breasts are ample, her clothes revealing, and she wields a whip-like weapon. Her moveset reinforces her visual appearance: Ivy can stomp on fallen characters with her heels, laughing maniacally. In isolation, this character is unproblematic as dominatrices do exist, but in a hegemonic digital game landscape in which female characters are hyper-sexualised, Ivy becomes a stereotype. Hutchinson (2007) links this domineering character to the enduring notion that, when it comes to physical strength, women, in general, are weaker than men, in combination with the fact that she seemingly operates outside the intelligible (heterosexual) matrix:

‘Ivy’s physical divergence is warranted by her sadistic personality, thigh boots, and whip-like weapon, pointing to a sexual deviance that places her outside accepted norms of heterosexual characteristics. The fact that female height and strength need such justifications in the game points to the endurance of social and cultural expectations regarding the female form’ (Hutchinson, 2007, p. 288).

Hutchinson’s analysis suggests that performing as an exotic, sexually deviant character equals reinforcing the stereotype (and thus hegemonic gender-and-sexuality concepts), and that fighting against her equals subversion. This might indeed be a potential of the *Soul Calibur* franchise, but it is complicated by various factors. Firstly, virtually all characters in *Soul Calibur* and its sequels, including *Soul Calibur 6*, are a stereotype of some kind, be it national, gendered, sexual,

or ethnic. Consequently, one always fights and thus performs as a stereotype, even if it is against another, therefore always affirming the intelligible (white heterosexual) matrix.

Secondly, there are a plethora of reasons why players might opt to perform as Ivy: one might enjoy the sheer sexual spectacle, another (male) player might really be after gender subversion and exclusively fight as Ivy against male characters, while yet another player may simply be very good at playing as this character. Moreover, the fact that female characters in many fighting games are of equal strength as male characters is not a subversive gender statement on its own, but is a prerequisite to design a well-balanced game in which no character feels either under- or overpowered.

Some players find empowerment in performing as Ivy, like for instance Maddy Myers, managing editor at Kotaku, who reported on such an experience (2018). Female players can enjoy performing the hypersexual character as a sex-positive (female) dominant character, who is able to hold her own against powerful men. The fact that Myers reports on non-heterosexual women enjoying the sexual spectacle of Ivy offers a reminder that, while games are still often marketed to a male audience, there is no such thing as a strictly 'male gaze' to be pandered to. Focusing solely on the issue of hypersexualisation of female characters as pandering to a male heterosexual audience disregards non-heterosexual points of view.

Interestingly, the same article reports on Ivy's earlier pirate costume designs in terms of 'butch,' i.e. less (normative) feminine, pointing at the erasure of Ivy's potentially *queer coding*, leaving the interpretation and performance of Ivy as a queer character entirely up to the player, i.e. the player-driven process of *queering* (cf. Sihvonen & Stenros 2018).

This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that there is no gender and sexuality subversion at play in *Soul Calibur II*, but that it is primarily a potential. Furthermore, the fact that this subversive potential is left to the players may have negative impacts. For instance, Richards (2016) suggests that ‘hypersexualized female representation as well as a lack of diverse characters across gender and race can have negative effects on players’ perceptions and selfperceptions [sic] of women and racial/ethnic minorities’ (Richards, 2016, p. 75). Additionally, leaving subversive performances up to the players does not correspond with high rates of gendered subversion or *queering*, according to one study brought up in Richards’ article, which found that the vast majority of self-customised player characters are white and male.

An example of how non-binary gender performance in digital games can be subversive resides in the *Tekken* series. The character in question is Leo, first appearing in the sixth *Tekken* instalment (2009), and since then a part of the main roster of characters players can choose from. As the narrative mainly revolves around three specific generations of fighting men, Leo is not a story-essential character. Listed as ‘male’ in 2009, but ‘female’ since *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* (2011), the character appears to be genderqueer (i.e. not conforming to binary societal gender roles in terms of appearance and behaviour, e.g. Otis, 2015.) Their customisation options in terms of clothing are feminine, but certain moves that work against male characters only affect Leo, while moves that only work on women do not. Though Leo may look genderqueer, their moveset possesses the kind of grace typically associated with female characters in the series, strongly resembling that of Ling Xiaoyu, a cis-gendered female character. The character of Leo is never problematised, which is an interesting break with a trend Navarro-Remesal sees in Japanese games, which supposedly ‘do not have a good record on LGBT representation. Trans

women and effeminate male characters are ambiguous tropes in Japanese games, sometimes used for comic relief.’ (Navarro-Remesal 185)

Case 2. Dragon Age: Inquisition and Gone Home

Researching directed games also provides insight into prevailing attitudes towards non-heterosexuality, not just gender norms. Depiction and enactment of LGBTQ characters in games has recently become a topic of discussion as a result of their inclusion in high-selling and critically acclaimed popular narrative games such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) and *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013). *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, a fantasy role playing game, features a couple of romanceable gay or bisexual characters, Dorian, Iron Bull and Josephine, in addition to a genderqueer (assigned female at birth) character called Cassandra, and one transgender character Cremisius ‘Krem’ Aclassi. *Gone Home*, an exploration game, revolves around a narrative wherein the player character finds out that her sister has ran away from home because her parents did not support her lesbian relationship.

On a representational level, the inclusion of such characters is indicative of a positive evolution, normalizing rather than vilifying the non-binary and the non-heterosexual. On the level of performance, however, we notice that both games make use of well-documented stereotyping techniques. In *Gone Home*, the main character’s sister, Samantha, explicitly takes on the role of a martyr, choosing to run away from her family home to be with the woman she loves. While the game sheds light on real issues in this way, *Gone Home* joins a larger trend in games and other cultural products whereby non-heterosexuality is by default problematised or even inherently linked to tragedy (a trope often referred to as ‘bury your gays,’ see Hulan 2017.)

In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the exclusively gay character Dorian, who can be romanced only by players who have designed a male character, is also linked to tragedy, revealing that his father had tried to ‘correct’ his homosexuality with magic. In both cases the characters are experienced as vulnerable *because* of their sexualities, through the interplay between their representation, the narrative and their performative possibilities.

In the case of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, specifically, we notice a problematic trend prevalent in many games involving romanceable characters. On a surface level, romances can offer the player an increasing sense of agency and vicarious romantic satisfaction. However, the way romance is enacted is often problematic. Players are tasked with gradually winning over a romanceable character who is initially apathetic or even aggressive towards a relationship, by choosing the right options in dialogue gameplay and performing specific tasks for them. As such, these romanceable characters are rendered trophy-like and vulnerable to be pursued by the player.

Aside from the apparent vulnerabilities of romanceable characters, the mechanics of optional non-heteronormative romance in game design reveals a reductive attitude towards bisexuality. Because characters like *Dragon Age’s* Iron Bull can be pursued by both male and female player characters, they are often designed as bisexual. As Sihvonen and Stenros note, however, looking at bisexuality (and by extension, pansexuality) as little more than contextual or opportunistic reciprocity of attraction is reductive (Sihvonen & Stenros 2018, ebook 19). While characters such as Iron Bull are often explicitly referred to as pansexual, player characters in games that offer more than heterosexual optional romances are not, while these player characters are bi- or pansexually *coded*. The fact that players are performing as bi- or pansexual characters, without any context given to this sexuality, renders it invisible and little more than an

aforementioned ‘opportunistic’ aspect of design. This type of invisible bi/pansexuality performance compounds to the cultural issue of ‘bisexuality erasure’ (Erikson-Schroth & Mitchell 2009).

We argue that titles such as *Gone Home* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, despite displaying good intentions when it comes to inclusion, ultimately contribute to a reinforcement of the heteronormative structure.

Case 3. The Last of Us: Left Behind and Life is Strange

In opposition to *Gone Home*, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) can be considered an example of dealing with LGBTQ characters ‘matter-of-factly- showing that [sexuality] is just another aspect of human existence’ (Campbell, qtd. in Shaw 2009, p. 247). Players encounter a character named Bill, who has an unwelcoming personality but helps out the main characters nonetheless. Through dialogue and background elements the player finds out that Bill is homosexual, or at least has a desire or love for men. Rather than highlighting this as an issue or trying to create a homosexual, hyper-masculine hero, Bill is a well-rounded character. His sexuality does not define him, but becomes a narrative element that merely contextualises his potential for action.

In a standalone addition to the game, *Last of Us: Left Behind*, the character of Ellie, who appears as a side character in the main game where her sexuality is never explicitly made an issue of, appears to be homosexual. The game addition addresses her sexuality explicitly, but also matter-of-factly: Ellie is homosexual, but not conflicted about it in any way. Players are directed to explore her surroundings with her romantic interest, Riley, and are invited to vicariously care for their relationship, in the same way that the main game revolves around a caring relationship.

In this manner, players are directed to perform as a homosexual character that shows none of the traditionally-ascribed fragility of non-heterosexual people. Herein lies the performative, subversive potential strength of the *Last of Us: Left Behind* (and, retroactively, the main game as well). How players decide to interpret this potential depends on a whole variety of factors, including how they decide to empathise with the character, and how they decide to configure their player identity.

To a more extensive degree, *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) takes the player along on an evolution of its protagonist's sexuality. *Life is Strange* continually plays with the players' expectations, offering the illusion of choice while actually directing players through the story. One of the main themes is the evolution of protagonist's sexuality. Maxine (who prefers to be called 'Max') Caulfield often behaves as a tomboy, takes an interest in things traditionally coded as masculine and generally dresses in an untypically masculine nor feminine way. At the start of the narrative, Max's sexuality is confusing to new players. In early journal chapters, Max writes that she 'does not seem to be finding a groove with boys,' then dreams about dating 'a cute foreign exchange artiste' (note the female equivalent of artist), and then jokes about wanting to marry her male Professor, Jefferson. Throughout the narrative, Max is blatantly pursued by a male co-student called Warren, and more subtly by her best friend, Chloe, effectively subverting the traditional romantic engagement of digital games. Whereas at the onset, Max seems to be bisexual, the story progressively directs players towards bonding more with Chloe than with Warren. Not only is it impossible for players to end up romantically engaged with Warren, he is also, arguably deliberately, less developed and interesting than Chloe.

Life is Strange directs players to perform as a female homosexual character whose love interest herself is bisexual and could be interpreted as genderqueer. This directed performance culminates in a choice to kiss Chloe or not. It is interesting to note that, according to a message posted on the Twitter account of publisher Square Enix, 77 percent of *Life is Strange* players chose to kiss her, effectively engaging in non-heteroromantic behaviour. It can be argued that straight male players engaging in this behaviour are simply acting out an erotic fantasy, and thus that the implied straight male gaze is being reinforced within this scene. However, the scene is staged in such a way that intimacy, rather than erotic tension, makes the core of the plot. The player reward is mainly included in the narrative outcome, i.e. the addition of depth around both characters, providing an example of how romanticism can be elaborated without hyper-sexualisation. Moreover, the possibility that this scene might correspond to a straight male erotic fantasy is satirised later on in the game, in an optional dialogue with an overly excited man in front of a painting of two women kissing.

As we have elaborated above, in directed games, subversion of gender and sexuality is primarily a potential to be explored by the players, if the game designers even leave room for it. However, in this type of games, game designers are also able to code their characters, as well as the in-game mechanics, to directly steer players into performances that subvert traditional ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. This subversive potential is definitely present in some current games, but not always in unproblematic ways, as our exploration of non-heterosexuality and hypersexualisation shows.

Performance of Gender and Sexuality in Semi-directed Games

In semi-directed games, players are given more options to play according to their preferred style, sensibilities and narrative desires, and thus are granted a stronger sense of agency compared to directed games. This can apply to several performative aspects of game characters, including their gender and sexuality, as players can choose to engage in behaviours traditionally coded as masculine or feminine, regardless of their character's sex. Sometimes, player freedom extends beyond the traditional choice between male and female characters, offering a gradual model rather than a simple binary. Players can also often engage in non-heteronormative behaviour. Thus, the potential for non-binary and non-heteronormative play is often stronger compared to that of directed games.

However, whereas the subversive potential of directed digital games is partly dependent on the players' interpretation of the developer's message, that of semi-directed digital games depends on whether players choose to play subversively at all. This dependency on player choice has one major consequence. Namely, gender and sexuality subversion affects only those players already interested in playing subversively, thus reaching a smaller audience. For those unwilling or uninterested to play as anything other than the established norm, non-binary and non-heterosexual identities are effectively erased. While perhaps not willingly, this process of shifting the responsibility of subversion to players is an adherence to the 'market logic' of digital games: many developers include gender and sexuality options to attract as wide an audience as possible.

Shaw contrasts this market logic with a socio-political need for diversity, stating that diversity has the collective force to enforce or expose social violence such as racism, heterosexism,

misogyny and more (Shaw 2014). However, one could posit a counter-argument to this opposition between market logic and socio-political ethics (for an elaborate discussion see Harvey & Fisher, 2015). While subversion through performance can reach its potential by making all players of a certain game perform non-hegemonic identity configurations, the fact that players are systematically offered the choice to play as someone other than the heterosexual male is by default a step in a more diverse direction. The fact that there are games in which, for instance, players can engage in homosexual romantic relationships is empowering in the sense that it presents homosexuality as normal and unproblematic.

Case 1. The Dark Souls and The Sims series

The *Dark Souls* series provides an interesting example of sexual and gendered performance, because it both affirms heteronormativity and subverts the gender binary. For instance, in *Dark Souls II* (FromSoftware, 2014) there is a Gender Coffin which players can use to effortlessly switch gender, effectively rendering gender expressions more fluid, albeit mostly appearance-wise. *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware, 2016) does not have this coffin but it has the ‘Reversal Ring,’ with a similar effect. Yet most semi-directed games that allow players to choose their character’s sex, like the *Dark Souls* franchise, only offer binary options from the start. This misses the opportunity to subvert gender roles by naturalising the opposition between strictly ‘male’ and strictly ‘female,’ against which other expressions stand out as deviant.

However, not all games rely on the gender binary. Since the second instalment of the *Saints Row* franchise (Volition, 2008), developer Volition offered players a ‘gender slider’, allowing players

to design their character's appearance on a spectrum instead of a binary, which potentially results in genderqueer characters.

One of the clearest examples of diversity is the *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2012) franchise. Since it centres around freedom and social interactions between characters, it provides an interesting environment to study gender and sexuality performance (Consalvo, 2003). The makers of *The Sims* treat both gender and sexuality as performances, rather than fixed identifiers or categories. The player character's gender and sexuality are not solely the result of pre-gameplay fixed choices, but also the way the player makes their character behave and grow in-game. In this way, in-game sexuality performance mimics the way Butler defined sexuality in real life as a performativity, determined by context and rules. The game normalises non-heteronormative sexuality, subverting the traditional notion that heterosexuality is the norm against which all other kinds of sexual behaviour are juxtaposed as deviant. Playing as a non-heterosexual character does not result in narrative tragedy, game-overs or other punitive measures, nor in the erasure of potential bisexuality, because players can choose to pursue a new partner of another gender than their previous partners. In terms of gendered performance, the *Sims* has also worked on increasing player freedom. Since June 2016, a new and free update to *The Sims 4* expanded upon gender customisation. In their official communication, developer Maxis emphasised that players could, from then on, create Sims without any gender boundaries with regard to physique, walk style, tone of voice, etc. This attitude goes in line with the notion that gender is not a fixed attribute, but a performance. It might seem a superficial aesthetic addition, but the fact that players can act whichever way they want, regardless of the gender binary, increases the subversive potential of the Sims franchise. Players can design and perform their characters as

genderqueer or transgender, if they so please, and although many who are uninterested in gender subversion will probably not do so, the range of freedom normalises non-traditional gender configurations to a great extent.

Case 2. World of Warcraft

Due to the social dimension, players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMORPGs) are confronted with other people's designed characters, and must also keep in mind that their own character is always under the scrutiny of thousands of other players. Consequently, the social dimension limits players' freedom and creates a hegemonic dimension of its own. Several known incidents have been reported wherein LGBTQ- (friendly-) guilds had been either shut down or subjected to strong criticism based on their sexual orientation and ideological profile (e.g. Pulos, 2013; Sundén, 2009). The collective social stance taken by these guilds can be considered as an act whereby the players themselves perform, in group, subversively against the hegemonic structure of the game. Sundén (2009) refers to this type of deliberate subversive performance as transgressive play, which 'is usually taken to mean play against the 'ideal' or 'implied' player of the game, of playing the game and bending the rules in ways not anticipated by design' (Sundén, 2009, p.2).

Despite the aforementioned incidents, one must consider that the game software made these groups and guilds possible. This means that World of Warcraft has an intrinsic subversive potential, even though this has been overridden by communities and developers in the past. Semi-directed games have the strongest subversive potential to show a great variety of players that heterosexuality and binary genders need not be the norm. However, by offering players the freedom to perform different constructions of gender and sexuality, semi-directed games depend

mostly on player-driven subversion. Because players can override this potential for subversion to play wholly within a currently normalised framework, they can choose not to be put in contact with queer identities. Thus, in semi-directed digital games, the danger of queer erasure is higher compared to directed games focusing directly on non-heterosexual and non-binary gendered characters.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using qualitative videogame content analysis, we investigated the potential of gender and sexuality subversion included in the rules of a selection of contemporary games. We observed that the process of subversion essentially takes two different forms, depending on the type of game or the main mechanics included in the game code. Within directed games, subversive performativity relates to the player being motivated to empathise with, and act out, characters of various genders, sexes and sexual orientations. Within semi-directed games, gender role performativity is mostly included in terms of optional features that players may or may not choose to consider as relevant to the gaming experience. As such, the investigation of player (community) context becomes an integral part of the analysis of game content and its subversive potential.

The presented analyses point at a number of ‘good practices’, demonstrating that the gaming industry is becoming more sensitive towards issues of gender, sexuality and diversity. There are, however, a number of reasons why this should be considered a gradual and ongoing process. First, although almost all games analysed here were very successful in terms of worldwide sales, the selection of cases was based on purposive sampling, targeting titles that received acclaim for

the way they deal with gender and sexuality. It was not a straightforward assignment to find many cases for analysis because both research literature and game journalism continuously highlight the same games as good examples, which indicates that we are dealing with a minority. Our results do not, therefore, contradict the findings of quantitative research which reveals that in a large majority of digital games, representation of gender and sexuality remains a problematic issue, as indicated for instance in our analyses of hypersexualisation in the *Soul Calibur* franchise and the persistence of the ‘bury your gays’ trope. We should additionally note that, outside of the market of high-selling games and within the smaller segment of art games and independent games, examples of LGBTQ-inclusive games can be more easily found.

Second, although the analyses show that digital games can open up possibilities to subvert gender norms, we should highlight that, currently, this is largely a potential that needs to be further explored and deepened. In the context of directed games, most of the presented cases can be considered examples of good intent to become more aware of issues of gender and sexuality, but also point at a range of difficulties inherent to the game medium. Because games use programmed rules to convey meaning, the option to implement gender in terms of binary choice becomes very appealing: decisions based on a ‘true-false’ dichotomy are relatively easy to code and communicate to the player. The cases of *Life is Strange* and *Gone Home* demonstrate that it can therefore be useful to intertwine performative mechanics with narrative contextualization and rewards. Nonetheless, even in these narration-oriented games we observed that it is not always easy to avoid stereotyping techniques such as victimization, subordination, or sexualization. In the context of semi-directed games, we additionally pointed out that players always have the option to reject the counter-hegemonic gaze that is offered and to conform to the

heteronormative ideology in acting out a character. This shows that, essentially, working towards a more diverse inclusive gaming culture becomes a shared responsibility of the producers and the player communities.

One crucial aspect to developing this field of game studies further is the inclusion of an intersectional approach, whereby gender and sexuality performativity are explored in their relation to other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, et cetera. However, due to spatial constraints, we could not carry out such an elaborate exploration, even though we see intersectional research as the future direction to take.

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