International Journal of Communication 13(2019), 1544–1569 1932–8036/20190005

Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985–2005

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This article provides quantitative analyses of trends in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) content in digital games released between 1985 and 2005, including 162 games and 283 instances of content. We contextualize these findings within the literature on LGBTQ media representation and emphasize the unique forms this content takes in games. We also demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the game text in isolation in coding sexual and gender identities. We explore the statistical association among variables, including the intersection of race and character role with LGBTQ identities, country of origin, and year of release. Moreover, we demonstrate trends in this representation over time. In addition, we discuss the limitations of quantitative analysis of game content, particularly for this sort of historical analysis. Still, we can point to

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Date submitted: 2018–05–28

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge the help of the following individuals/organizations in the preparation of this article: two anonymous reviewers; Lee Tae Cobb; Emma Leigh Waldron; Elizaveta Freisem; Nirvan West; Kenny Thach; Amanda Phillips, Bonnie Ruberg, Josef Nguyen, and Alexandrina Agloro; Refiguring Innovation in Games (York University); University of California Davis ModLab; Queerly Represent Me; The LGBTQ Game Archive.

interesting quantitative trends in LGBTQ representation, which offer important context for understanding what ideologies are being replicated in digital games.

Keywords: video games, digital games, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, LGBTQ, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, asexual, intersex, representation, race, character role, historical trends

As queer game studies scholars, we are often asked just how much queer representation there is in games. This is a loaded but important question. It suggests that quantity equals relevance. Yet being counted is also politically important. Digital games have been around for six decades, and although histories of the industry exist, there is a surprising lack of scholarly research on trends in representation in this medium. There is a general sense that game texts have not included much LGBTQ content (Shaw, 2009), but there has yet to be a systematic analysis of LGBTQ representation in digital games over time, like that done for other media (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001; Sender, 2004). The research presented here seeks to remedy this oversight by quantitatively analyzing trends in LGBTQ representation in digital games from 1985 to 2005. We argue this analysis is the necessary first step in making a more nuanced critique of LGBTQ representation in games; it also helps contextualize current trends in LGBTQ representation in digital games.

This analysis is offered with the caveat that the entire population of digital games during this period is not knowable, and queer sexualities and genders often defy quantification. There is also an English-language bias in data sources drawn on for this analysis (though our research team did benefit from having members who know Japanese, French, Korean, and Russian). The master list of games for our analysis was aggregated in August 2016 from two public databases of LGBTQ game content: Queerly Represent Me (Cole, 2016), and the LGBTQ Game Archive (Shaw, 2016). These databases use different processes for identifying games with LGBTQ content, but taken together provide the most complete available picture of known digital games with LGBTQ content.

Starting with our master list, we collected all the information we could on each instance of LGBTQ content in each game, from those databases as well as our own research, and then coded following a process described in our Method section. Content here refers to characters, narrative content, ludic elements, locations like gay bars, or other references to LGBTQ people/themes. The majority of our quantitative analyses are on characters specifically, but we also provide data on other types of representation to provide a fuller picture of how LGBTQ themes are used even when there are not specific LGBTQ characters involved.

In this article we provide descriptive and inferential statistics based on these data, showing that trends in LGBTQ representation in games do not necessarily follow the same trends for these two decades (1985–2005) as other media do. We also provide the first summary of trends specific to LGBTQ representation in this medium, including which countries and platforms are responsible for the most documented LGBTQ content. We also look at the racial diversity (or lack thereof) of LGBTQ characters, as well as these characters' roles in their respective games. Although white gay male characters are not the majority, it is clear that white characters and gay characters are decidedly the most represented.

Interestingly, country of origin and year of publication yielded many more significant relationships to chataracter race, character role, and explicitness of sexuality than race or sexuality alone did. Moreover, nonhumanness was also significantly related to role and explicitness of sexuality, as well as used to stand in for human racial and gender difference.

As discussed in our Results and Analysis section, these data demonstrate important trends in this particular historical moment (1985–2005), while also pointing to future analyses that might be done for other time periods. Our findings also challenge claims that representation in media follows a predictable progression from oppressive to inclusive (summarized in Shaw, 2009). Finally, throughout our analyses and again in our conclusion, we discuss the limitations of quantifying subjective and contextually sensitive identifiers like gender, sexuality, and race in a medium produced and consumed around the globe, with ever-evolving technical and representational possibilities, and for texts whose content has been inconsistently documented.

Background and Research Question/Hypotheses

Many scholars have suggested that the ideological impact of media representation is tied to the repetition of particular kinds of content reinforcing dominant discourses (Hall, 1997). Despite growing popular and game-industry interest in LGBTQ content (Gravning, 2014), a growing queer indie designer scene (Anthropy, 2012), the success of GaymerX (an LGBTQ gamer convention; Varquez, 2016), and what Ruberg and Shaw (2017) have termed a queer game studies paradigm shift, there is no historical overview of LGBTQ digital game content. Two books by game designers have charted histories of gender (Graner Ray, 2004) and sex (Brathwaite, 2013) in games, but these histories focus on cisgender women and largely heterosexuality. Games are not a regularly tracked form of representation by GLAAD,[2] and answering basic questions about how much LGBTQ content there is in games has been an ongoing problem for LGBTQ game studies.

Research on LGBTQ representation in games has primarily focused on games from 2000 onward (e.g., Consalvo, 2003; Pavlounis, 2016) and same-sex relationship options in games (e.g., Adams, 2015; Greer, 2013). More recently scholars have considered how nonnormative sexuality and gender are incorporated across game structures, visual content, and narratives (e.g., Chess, 2016; Ruberg, 2019).

Building on histories of LGBTQ representation in other media industries (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001; Sender, 2004), this project documents trends in known LGBTQ content in games over two decades. Although this is not a traditional content analysis for reasons we describe below, we argue that the ability to look at quantitative trends in LGBTQ representation in games offers an important complement to other qualitative analyses. Moreover, existing content analyses of games have many methodological limitations. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory's (2009) "virtual census," for example, focuses only on characters and content seen in the first 30 minutes of game play. They also look at race, gender, and age in isolation from one another and do not address intersectional representation. Wohn's (2011) analysis of gender and race in casual games only looks at the primary character in each game. Similarly, Dietrich's (2013) analysis

[2] Formerly an acronym for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the organization has chosen to just go by its acronym since 2013 as they became more inclusive of bisexual and transgender issues.

of race in massively multiplayer online role-playing games and off-line role-playing games only looks at character customization options. In contrast, as described below, this project considers all manner of LGBTQ representation, from one-off homophobic jokes to gay bars and neighborhoods to explicitly queer playable and nonplayable characters, in all types of digital games. In sum, it is able to offer a more holistic view of representation in this medium. In the interest of exploring the range of LGBTQ-related content in computer and digital games, our main research questions are:

RQ1: What types of LGBTQ representation, and in what amounts, exist in games released between 1985 and 2005?

RQ2: Are there discernable trends in LGBTQ representation in games released between 1985 and 2005?

Scholars have argued for the importance of looking at the ludic (or play related) and narrative (story/dialogue related) elements of games (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). Analyzing the role characters play in a game is also important to the significance of a given representation (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; King & Krzywinska, 2006), as is made clear by the history of using racial difference and alien otherness in explaining conflicts in games (Brock, 2011; Higgin, 2009). Moreover, given trends from prior research on LGBTQ representation in other media (Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987; Sender, 2004), we would expect white gay male characters to be the majority of characters represented, most LGBTQ characters to either be placed in villainous or secondary roles in the game, and race to be related to LGBTQ representation. Thus, we test the following related hypotheses about LGBTQ game content:

H1: Race and LGBTQ identity are associated, influencing the frequency and proportion of representation.

H2a: The majority of LGBTQ characters in earlier games will be villains or enemies rather than protagonists, heroes, or allied supporting cast.

H2b: Race and humanness will be associated with LGBTQ character roles in these games.

In answering these questions and testing these hypotheses, we provide an overview of LGBTQ content in early digital games, identify further lines of inquiry regarding LGBTQ representation in games, and establish a baseline for understanding individual content in the broader landscape of LGBTQ content in games. Moreover, we shall see if these representational trends are unique to games or if they follow from trends seen in other media. Finally, we point to some of the immeasurable aspects of this representation as a rich site for further study while demonstrating a unique approach to coding content in this medium.

Method

Starting with the two public databases—Queerly Represent Me (Cole, 2016) and the LGBTQ Video Game Archive (Shaw, 2016)—we created a master list of games with LGBTQ content published from 1985 to 2005 (as of August 2016 in those databases). We then collected all the information we could on each instance of LGBTQ content (character, narrative, action, etc.) in each game from those existing databases and did additional research as necessary to supplement them. The focus of the coding process, thus, is

the archive of material about the games, including walkthroughs, game wikis, videos of content, published reviews, developer interviews, fan discussions on forums, and instances of content rather than the game as a stand-alone object. As identified by Hall (1997) in the circuit of culture, the meaning of cultural artifacts exists within a complex web, or assemblage, to use T. L. Taylor's (2009) framing.

For this analysis, we concentrated on games from 1985 to 2005 (N = 162). It is important to look at this early period of digital game content, as the existence of LGBTQ content in this time period questions convenient popular narratives that LGBTQ content is somehow new and only present now that the industry and medium have achieved a level of maturity and broad popularity. We set the starting point at 1985 because the earliest example of LGBTQ game content found in the databases was from that year. In addition, these years account for the approximately two decades worth of stable digital game market growth since the crash of the Atari-led North American gaming market in 1983. The release of the Japanese Nintendo Entertainment System in the U.S. in 1985 led to major shifts in the production, regulation, and dissemination of digital game content that deviated from prior industry standards (Herman, 2001). Of particular relevance to our study, digital game content, particularly sexual and LGBTQ representation, became codified—and consequently more visible to industry observers—under Nintendo of America's internal censorship policies (Brathwaite, 2013; Lauteria, 2015). Also, game releases were institutionally accounted for via Nintendo and later SEGA's licensing strategies (Harris, 2014). Regarding game content more generally, Japanese game designers drew more directly from tropes in anime and manga, rather than the military simulations that built up the previous American market (Crogan, 2015), leading to a greater prominence of narrative, characterization, and dialogue in games (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), allowing for LGBTQ content to appear with meaningful regularity.

We stop at 2005, as the release of the Nintendo Wii in 2006 marked a shift for the game industry, when "casual" players were identified as a viable and key target market (Juul, 2010). Also, by the late 1990s the game industry started to become divided into AAA games (the equivalent of Blockbuster films) and non-AAA games (DeMaria, 2002). By the mid-2000s, the expansion of the social and casual games industry, followed in turn by expanded options for independent game distribution in the 2010s, meant that a proliferation of types of games was accessible to a dispersed audience. By focusing on the decades before this occurred, and looking at games that span genres, platforms, and types of creation practices, we can gain important insight into available game content from this 21-year period. We also posit that the fact that these specific games are remembered, talked about, and sometimes even still played (and thus can be recorded in the two databases) demonstrates their importance and impact regardless of the size of the teams, budgets, and initial audiences involved. That said, nearly all of these games are from what we might call "mainstream" game publishers. The two exceptions from the 1980s were relatively niche, independent games, yet they garnered enough awareness to be made part of the known history of LGBTQ content alongside those produced by well-funded companies.

To analyze instances of LGBTQ content, we used a modified approach to a content analysis, better described as a content survey. As outlined in Krippendorff (2012), content analysis requires a random sample of units from a known population. As the actual full population of games with LGBTQ content is not knowable, this project focuses on a comprehensive list of games pulled from the two previously named large databases. This portion of the project was inspired by Bond's (2015) analysis of

sex and sexuality in gay- and lesbian-oriented media popular with lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. We focus on a known set of games and explore what representation in these games looks like. The limitations of our starting databases mean this might not cover all LGBTQ game representation, but they are, to date, the most complete lists available for this period of game history.

We wrote summaries of the research conducted on each game to develop the code book that allowed us to classify each example of LGBTQ content (i.e., character, a homophobic joke, etc.) individually. We recorded information on the game itself, including developer, country of origin, genre (role-playing, fighting, visual novel, etc.), and platform type (computer, console, handheld, or various). Then we coded each instance of LGBTQ content in the game separately into the following mutually exclusive categories: characters, queer games/narratives, mentions, locations, actions, relationships/romance/sex, artifacts, traits, Easter eggs, and mods. Although the majority of the content included is in the form of specific characters, these other categories allow us to show the breadth of ways LGBTQ content can be included in games. Mods, for instance, are player-made software patches that change aspects of the game and are often posted online so other players can use them. Although not part of the games themselves, this category allows us to compare the amount of player-produced and developer-produced instances of LGBTQ content and queer player resistance practices (Lauteria, 2012) that make up the assemblage of play (Taylor, 2009). Notably, however, only one mod was listed in these databases for this time period, indicating this as a major area for future research.

Characters were coded in the following categories as appropriate: queer men/queer women (only in reference to sexuality); sexuality (denoting explicit and implicit representation); gender and sex (denoting explicit and implicit representation); character's primary role (background, enemy/villain, nonplayer characters, player characters, and teammates); human or nonhuman; and race (only coded for humans and only if clearly knowable from context clues, otherwise labeled as "indeterminate"). In the coding process we made efforts to synthesize conflicts over player and producer understandings of characters' genders, sexes, and sexualities. Whether a character was intentionally meant to be read as queer by the game creators can often be heavily debated (see, e.g., Phillips' 2017 discussion of the character Bayonetta). Beyond that, sexuality and gender/sex[3] themselves are hard to pin down when characters are rarely explicitly labeled as such in the games themselves. Two women represented as in a relationship, via cohabitation or implicit representations of intimacy, are not inherently lesbians. However, experience with gamic representation, statements from producers, as well as fan documentation of their own readings of the texts, can be brought together to point to what we might call the dominant reading of a character's sexuality or gender/sex.

Narratives were coded as representing a main, major, or minor part of the game's overarching story. Mentions, or dialogue that references LGBTQ people, was coded as negative, neutral, or positive. Locations (e.g., gay bars) were coded on the basis of whether they were implicit, explicit, or just rumored to exist according to fan sites (but no clear documentation could be found). Artifacts included in-game

[3] Gender and sex are often conflated in games, as sex is typically only expressed via gender presentation (Shaw, 2014). To not exclude intersex characters, however, we consider both gender and sex. These are coded separately from sexuality, however, so as not to conflate gender/sex identities with sexualities.

advertisements that referenced LGBTQ people, or items in the game, like pride flags. For actions, we had several types of in-game events that have been tied by fans to LGBTQ-ness such as cross-dressing (optional or required) and gender changing (optional or required). In addition, there are games where characters have special "combat moves" that are read by players as signifying their queerness, such as Rasputin's "secret garden" move (from *World of Heroes*; ADK, 1992), where he takes off his shirt and pulls only other male fighters into heart-covered bushes. Relationships/romance/sex encompass a form of representation that has received a great deal of academic attention. This category includes the non-mutually exclusive subtypes optional same-sex relationships; bisexual sex workers (used only when games, designers, or fan communities around games call these characters bisexual); and transgender or gender-nonconforming sex workers.

There are major limitations to the quantification of gender, sexuality, and race in coding digital game characters. Some of this we addressed by only coding race if the game or paratexts around the game explicitly indicated the character's race, and thus we left many as "indeterminate." For sexuality and gender, there is an inherent difficulty in determining sexual identity based on sexual actions (i.e., not all men who have sex with men identify as gay). Moreover, our coders were focused on what interpretations fans and producers have offered for the characters' sexualities and gender, in addition to representational codes used within the games. Coders used the qualitative research collected for each instance of game content to determine the most plausible interpretation of a character's sexuality or gender, also indicating if it was implicit or explicit in the text.

We had three coders, who were not involved in the analysis and did not directly work together. Each analyzed an equal proportion of instances of LGBTQ game content. We also created a random subsample of instances of content that pairs of coders were assigned to, to assess intercoder reliability. We ran Cohen's kappa tests for pairs of coders, calculating the mean kappas between each pair. In each case, near-perfect (typically, very close to 1.00) reliability was observed. The bulk of disagreements were actually around the issue of race, with one coder using indeterminate more often than the other two. Interestingly, that coder was white and from Australia, whereas the other two were U.S.-raised people of color, suggesting different experiences of racialized coding can affect this sort of quantitative analysis of representation.[4] This general intercoder reliability makes these findings compelling despite the sampling limitations, as well as the limitations of quantifying hard-to-label forms of representation.

The Trouble With Coding a Glocal Medium: The Case of Ustvestia

Race, gender, and sexuality present some noticeable problems in practice for this type of quantitative analysis. For one, characters cannot "self-identify," the typical measurement tool in census-like and survey research (e.g., for race, gender). Also, games are often tied to their cultural contexts, and with games traversing the globe from Japan to Canada to Germany, issues of translation and localization complicate representation further. Moreover, graphical representation and processing power across these two decades changed drastically, substantially altering how characters appear and are

[4] Here, nationality might have played a key role, as there are people in Australia who are Indigenous but appear phenotypically white, and thus skin color is not seen as inherently denoting a person is racially white.

represented on-screen (e.g., visually, audibly), requiring different techniques for each representational instance to gather relevant and appropriate data.

In one particular case, the minor character Ustvestia from *Phantasy Star II* (SEGA, 1989), we had to rely on English and Japanese fan sites to roughly determine sexuality and race. As this is a highly pixelated game with no voice acting, Ustvestia has a limited backstory or agentic self-representation. This makes it difficult to discern his sexual orientation, but also his racial background. Some English-language fans commented that he was sexist and viewed women as intellectually inferior and thus ultimately unworthy of his assistance. Other fans commented that this was a translation decision to mask his (physical and romantic) preference for men over women. Digging into the Japanese fan sites, no character named "Ustvestia" exists in *Phantasy Star II*'s Japanese release, and no fan website listed Ustvestia's original Japanese name. Instead, we discovered the name of another, more centrally important character in the same in-game town. Upon discovering this other character's Japanese name, we were able to discern the name of the town in Japanese, and then we were able to find Ustvestia's name in a Japanese-language fan walkthrough. In the Japanese version, the character is more explicitly physically attracted to the male characters of your party, and more repulsed by the female characters.

From here, we were required to make some subjective, but culturally informed, judgment calls for coding purposes. Ustvestia's Japanese name—Aventino—coupled with his career as a musician and mustached character portrait, led our researchers to discern he was generically "Italian," and thus racially white. This decision was partially based on other racially and ethnically distinct Japanese characters, like the famous Mario, who relied on his career and facial hair early on to establish his geographic (Brooklyn) and ethnic (Italian American) background. Although a potentially extreme case, Ustvestia/Aventino represents the labor-intensive process of collating information about LGBTQ game content. Limitations in data, linguistic and cultural barriers, and reliance on fan curatorial practices directly shaped and informed the overall structure and content of our original database. This is also why we asked our coders to assess the body of material about each instance of content, rather than relying on their own interpretations of game content. This method, although still limited, offers a fuller picture of LGBTQ content than was otherwise possible.

Results and Analysis

As shown in Table 1, games including LGBTQ content from 1985 to 2005 appeared on home computers, gaming consoles, and handheld devices. Predictably, LGBTQ content appeared more regularly on computers and consoles—or across both platforms—than on handheld devices, which tended to have more simplified content because of space constraints and hardware limitations. We also did not look at genre in relation to representation in this article, but can say that 34.6% of the instances of content was in role-playing games, whereas 31.8% was from adventure games. A range of other genres was present in the data set, however, including fighting games, first-person shooters, puzzle games, racing games, simulation games, and visual novels. The trends in representation by genre may be part of a future analysis.

Table 1. Instances of LGBTQ Content by Platform, 1985–2005.

	Instances of Content	Proportion of Content
Computer	81	28.6%
Console	80	28.3%
Handheld	9	3.2%
Cross-platform	113	39.9%
Total	283	100%

Moreover, although our database draws heavily from English-language sources, potentially skewing the data toward games released in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the games included span the globe. Most of these games were from Japan, followed by the U.S. and the UK (Table 2). There was a small number of games from other countries, including several European countries, Australia, and South Korea, as well as multinational production teams ("Various"). The clear dominance of Japan, the U.S., and the UK, led us to combine these into a single "Other" category.

Table 2. Instances of LGBTQ Content by Region of Production, 1985–2005.

Region of Origin	Number of Games	Proportion of Games
Japan	79	48.8%
U.S.	53	32.7%
UK	15	9.3%
Other	15	9.3%
Total	162	100%

Note: Percentages in the proportion column are averaged.

These numbers do not necessarily reflect a culture of LGBTQ acceptance or inclusion in games in Japan and the U.S. or UK compared with other game-producing countries; rather, Japan and the U.S. were responsible for producing the majority of console-based games during the time, whereas the U.S. and the UK designed the majority of personal computer games. These numbers might reflect a general trend in overall games production rather than anything specific to LGBTQ content. Moreover, if we look at the amount of content by region, it follows closely with the proportion of games for 1985–2005 (see Table 3). Without being able to compare these totals with the number of games produced in each country during the same time period, however, we cannot speak to the relationship between these numbers and game production globally or locally.

Table 3. Instances of LGBTQ Content by Region of Production, 1985–2005.

Region of Origin	Instances of LGBTQ Content	Proportion of Content
Japan	125	44.2%
U.S.	99	35.0%
UK	30	10.6%
Other	29	10.2%
Total	283	100%

Types of LGBTQ Representation in Games

Before this study, there was no comprehensive account of LGBTQ content in digital games. Thus, our primary research questions were, What types of LGBTQ representation, and in what amounts, exist in games? Are there discernable trends? Focusing on just 1985 to 2005 (see Table 4), LGBTQ characters make up approximately three quarters (72.1%) of LGBTQ content, followed distantly by optional romantic or sexual relationship options (13.1%). We only coded characters as "instances" of content in their first appearance in the series, so if they appeared in multiple games during this 20-year period, they were not counted multiple times. The number of appearances for LGBTQ characters might be an area for future research.

Table 4. LGBT Content by Content Type, 1985–2005.

	Frequency of Content	Proportion of Content
Actions	12	4.2%
Artifacts	3	1.1%
Characters	204	72.1%
Easter eggs	2	0.7%
Locations	8	2.8%
Mentions	13	4.6%
Mods	1	0.4%
Narratives	3	1.1%
Relationship/romance/sex	37	13.1%
Total content entries	283	100%

Note: Percentages in the proportion column are averaged.

Numbers here refer solely to instances of LGBTQ content; in some cases, one game may have multiple cases of LGBTQ content. For instance, *Darkstalkers: The Night Warriors* (Capcom, 1994) was a fighting game that included two "rumored" LGBTQ characters—Morrigan and Demitri—as well as one queer action—the fighting move "Midnight Bliss," in which Demitri would turn his male opponents into women, or female characters into more comedic representations of themselves. As such, the frequency of content is

not a direct corollary for the number of games with LGBTQ content. Although there are 162 games named in the archive between 1985 and 2005, 62 games (38.04%) accounted for 177 of the content entries (63.67%). Five games—which included adult-themed games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) and *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993)—had more than five content entries each, in total accounting for 34 (12.23%) content entries. Importantly, though, this also demonstrates that individual instances of LGBTQ content are isolated, often showing only a single LGBTQ character in a fictional universe populated with heterosexual cisgender folks. This is a trend seen in media such as film and television as well (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001), pointing to a larger inequity where LGBTQ people are not shown as members of a larger community.

Beyond a general interest in the frequency of representation, we attempted to identify whether references to LGBTQ people tended to be more negative and homophobic. Given the early years of this archival subset, and the well-documented history of homophobia and transphobia in game communities (Pulos, 2013), we suspected that most of this content would be negative. As illustrated in Table 5, however, the real story is the relative invisibility of LGBTQ content outside of specific characters and relationship/romance options. Of the 283 instances of LGBTQ content, we have documentation of only 29 examples of specifically homophobic or transphobic content. This is in part an artifact of our primary sources, which do not consistently describe content in enough detail to discern tone. Moreover, most information about LGBTQ content in games is only recorded for games with notable LGBTQ content (e.g., a major character who is gay), and thus there might be many more games with homophobic or transphobic content, even with no specific LGBTQ characters to speak of.

Table 5. Frequency of Homophobic and Transphobic Content, 1985–2005.

Content Type	Number of Content Entries	Proportion of Entries
Homophobia	20	69%
Transphobia	9	31%
Total	29	100%

Combined with the relative lack of queer game narratives during this period (3), as well as other minor forms of representation, such as locations (8), mentions (13), and actions (12), this also points to another indirect form of representational oppression: invisibility. This form of "symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) is just as problematic as negative representation as it suggests that LGBTQ people have no spaces in these fictional worlds outside of specific isolated characters and games in which relationship options are part of the game mechanics and narratives.

Trends Over Time

The frequency of LGBTQ content in general has increased over time (see Figure 1). However, given the focus of the databases—only on LGBTQ-related content—we cannot articulate the proportional changes of LGBTQ game content versus the number of games overall. That is, during this two-decade period, there was an increasing amount of game content in general, suggesting that we should understand any trends in LGBTQ frequency as the result of general increases in games and game content broadly.

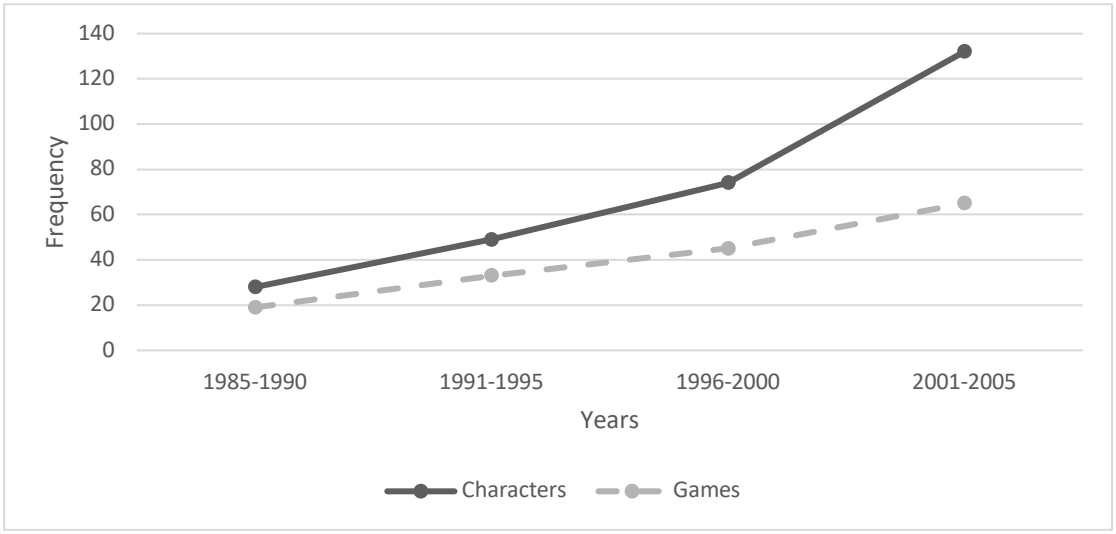

Figure 1. Line Graph of Game Releases and New LGBTQ Characters by Year.

The data illustrate, however, that the increase in LGBTQ representation was not uniform across all identities or types. Gay men in particular saw an upward trend in representational frequency beginning in the 1990s, whereas asexual, lesbian, and bisexual representation remained sparse (see Figure 2). Intriguingly, lesbian characters demonstrated a lower frequency by the mid-2000s than in previous years. However, further research into post-2005 trends are necessary to see if this is an anomaly. Moreover, this dip occurs as the representation of bisexuals rises and most bisexual characters in the databse were female. Thus, it is possible that the representations,or interpretations, of female characters' sexualities shifted in the 2000–2005 period.

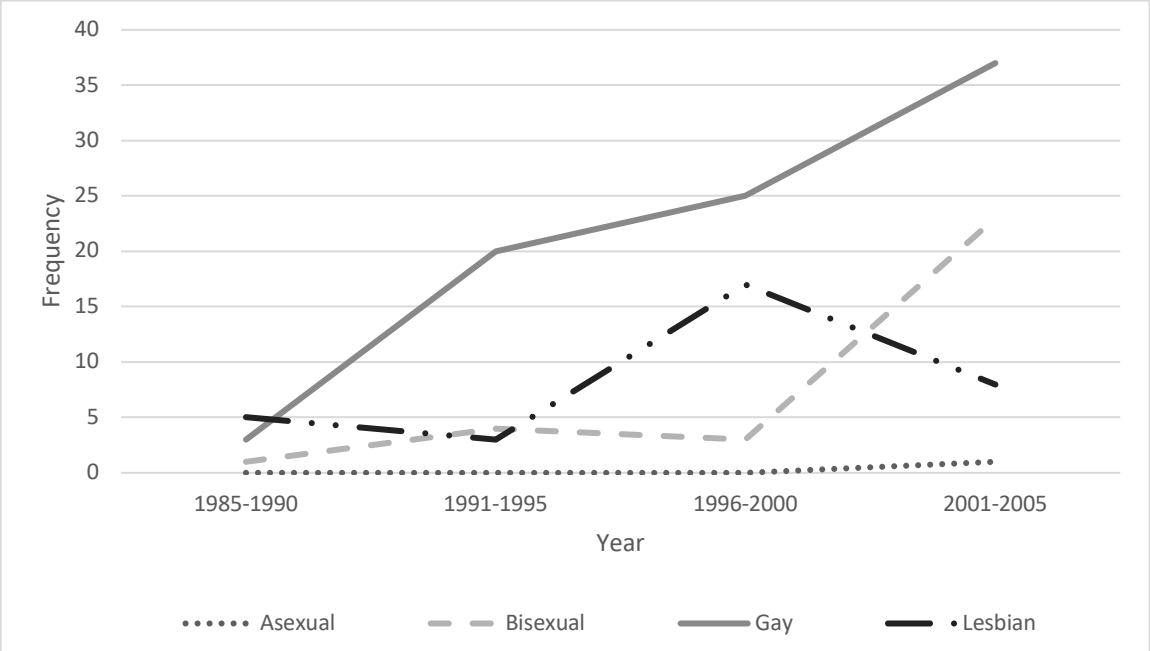

Figure 2. Line Graph of Sexuality and Year.

In terms of gender/sex categories, nonbinary and intersex characters remain relatively underrepresented, whereas gender nonconforming and transgender representation have generally increased over time. Gender and sex diversity, however, is radically less present than sexual diversity in games (see Figure 3). Overall, the representation of most LGBTQ identities saw no drastic change, remaining relatively low in frequency of representation despite the increased number of characters and game releases overall.

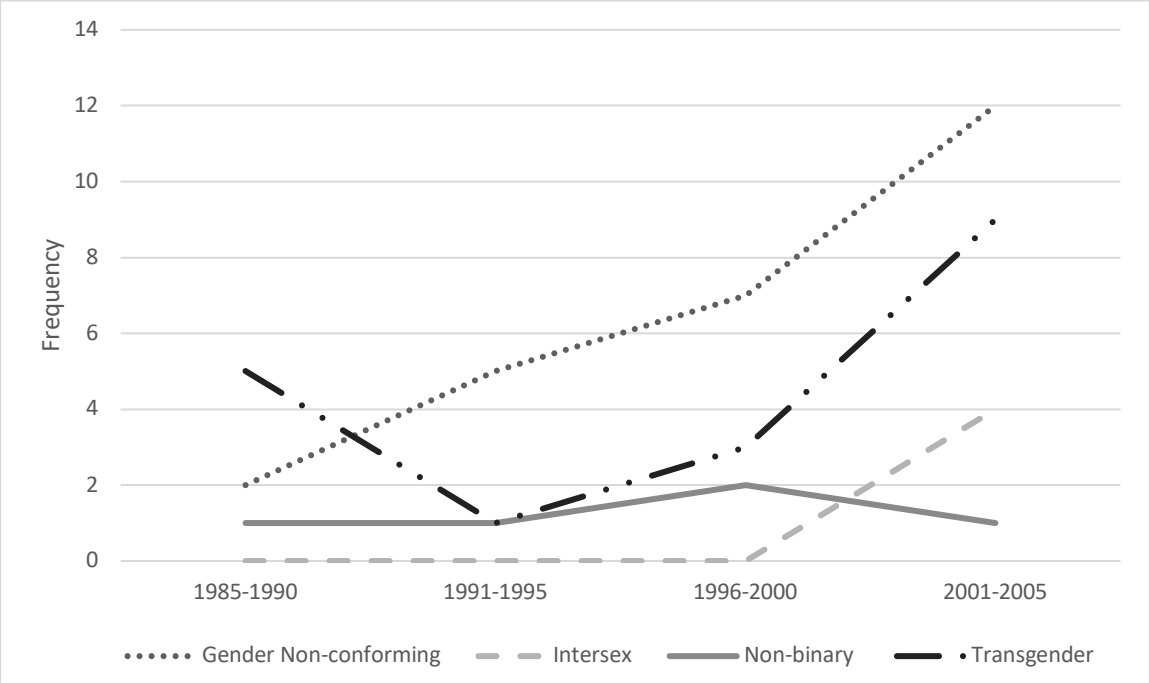

Figure 3. Line Graph of Gender/Sex and Year.

Digging Into Sexuality and Gender/Sex

The vast majority of LGBTQ content in digital games from 1985 to 2005 is in the form of characters, though not uniformly distributed across all LGBTQ identities. Table 6 looks at sexuality (excluding heterosexuality), and Table 7 addresses gender and sex (excluding cisgender), as these are not mutually exclusive codes. Although no singular identity covers the majority of LGBTQ representation, there are three times as many nonheterosexuals as there are noncisgender characters. Gay men (implicitly or explicitly coded) also account for more than half (56.6%) of all character entries in the archive during these decades, whereas lesbian and bisexual characters only comprise 22% and 20.7%, respectively. Just focusing on lesbian versus gay characters, there is a strong relationship between character sexuality and explicitness ($\chi^2 = 3.25$, $df = 1$, $p = .07$, Fisher's exact test = .055). Specifically, gay male characters are represented more explicitly than implicitly, compared with the lesbian characters that are represented more implicitly than explicitly. Finally, gender nonconforming characters appear more often than transgender or nonbinary characters; however, there were no significant differences among the gender and sex categories in terms of explicitness.

Table 6. Character Sexuality, 1985–2005.

Character Sexuality	Explicitness	Number of Characters	Proportion
Asexual	Explicit	0	0.0%
	Implicit	1	0.7%
Bisexual	Explicit	12	8.0%
	Implicit	19	12.7%
Gay (man)	Explicit	44	29.3%
	Implicit	41	27.3%
Lesbian	Explicit	11	7.3%
	Implicit	22	14.7%
Total		150	100%

Table 7. Characters Gender/Sex, 1985–2005.

Character Gender/Sex	Explicitness	Number of Characters	Proportion
Gender nonconforming		26	49.1%
Intersex	Explicit	4	7.5%
	Implicit	0	0%
Nonbinary	Explicit	3	5.7%
	Implicit	2	3.8%
Transgender	Explicit	11	20.8%
	Implicit	7	13.2%
Total		53	100%

Note: Percentages in the proportion column are averaged.

Race

We hypothesized (H1) that representation and content would not be uniformly distributed across racial identities. This is because white, cisgender gay men have higher levels of representation in other media (Gross, 2001; Sender, 2004). Looking at historical trends, we see that there are fewer LGBTQ characters of color during this period (see Figure 4). Only Asian characters, primarily from Japanese games, saw a discernible increase in representation during the 20-year period, though the trend is not uniformly upward. Also, notably, the following figures and tables exclude nonhuman characters, which we did not code for race.

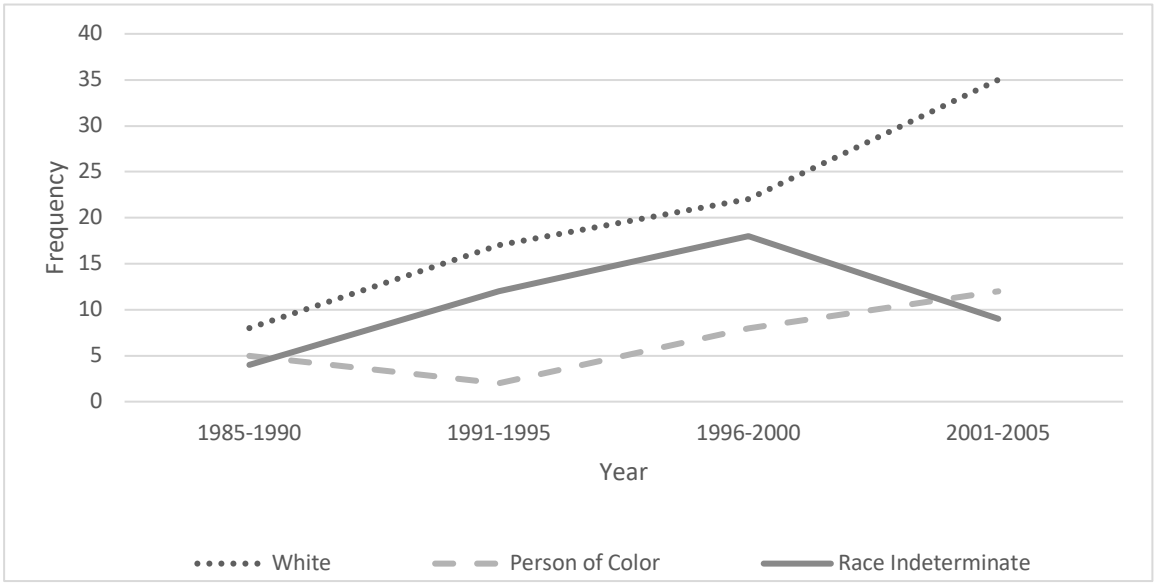

Figure 4. Line Graph of LGBTQ Characters, by Race and Year.

Because of the low number of characters, to properly test for association, we combined all non-white, non-"Indeterminate" cases into the generic "person of color" category (see Tables 8 and 9). White characters (53.8%) are clearly the majority, though, for this subset, notably not to the same extent as Williams et al.'s (2009) study, where white characters were 85.23% of the total number of characters. Although gay men were overrepresented in the data—85 of 204 characters, or 41.6%—only 38 (or 18.62% of the total) were white men, and 21 were racially ambiguous or indeterminate men. Nevertheless, white gay men accounted for twice as many characters as did gay men of color. The relationship for lesbian women was even more pronounced; there were 12 white lesbians, but only two discernable lesbians of color across the two decades. None of these differences were shown to be statistically significant, but that is offered with the caveat that the low number of people of color in games made significance testing difficult. For gender and sex, the numbers were lower still, as only eight of the 53 characters coded as not being cisgender were human, and thus coded for race. Of those, three gender-nonconforming characters were white, one was a person of color, and one was indeterminate. Also, two transgender characters were people of color and one was white.

Table 8. Sexuality by Race.

	Race			
Character sexuality	Person of Color	White	Indeterminate	Total
Asexual	0	0	1	1
Bisexual	8	10	3	21
Gay	11	38	21	70
Lesbian	5	15	5	25
Total	24	63	30	117

Although the statistical significance is weak (see Table 9), there appears to be an association between race and year of release (χ^2 = 11.21, *df* = 6, *p* = .08).[5] Although frequencies of LGBTQ characters have increased over the years, race-indeterminate characters declined between 2001 and 2005 compared with the two previous half decades. This may largely be due to the technical improvements in games that allow for greater visual detail and voice acting that can signify race in ways not possible in earlier games.

Table 9. Frequency of Race by Half Decade.

	Half Decade				
Race	1985–1990	1991–1995	1996–2000	2001–2005	Total
White	8	17	22	35	82
Person of color	5	2	8	12	27
Race indeterminate	4	12	18	9	43
Total	17	31	48	56	152/283

χ^2 = 11.21, *df* = 6, *p* = .08.

Additional analysis also demonstrates a significant association of race and country of origin (see Table 10). In Japanese games, white characters (45.5%) appear almost as often as race-indeterminate characters (40.3%). In the U.S., in contrast, the majority of characters are white (66%), followed by race-indeterminate characters (18%). White characters are the majority in the other categories as well, but characters of color are the second most represented in the UK and other countries (33.3%).

Table 10. Frequency of Race by Country.

	Countries of Origin				
Race	Japan	U.S.	UK	Others	Total
White	35	33	7	7	82
Person of color	11	8	4	4	27
Race indeterminate	31	9	1	1	43
Total	77	50	12	12	152/283

χ^2 = 14.13, *df* = 6, *p* = .03.

[5] The low frequencies of some of these categories make association tests difficult and violate some of the underlying assumptions of chi-squared. However, these are neither experimental data nor data that are being used for a parametric estimate tests, as the data are exhaustive of all known content from this historical period. The low *p* value indicates the possibility that these findings are not the result of a Type I error. The inferential statistics reported here indicate that the low numbers seen for these specific categories are likely not due to chance, and for that reason are important to report as a logical exploration of our data.

Role

Previous scholarship, as outlined above, demonstrates that it is important to take into account character role in the action of the game, as they are inherently interactive texts. Given the historical trends of representing LGBTQ people as villains or monsters (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Russo, 1987) we also hypothesized that LGBTQ characters would primarily fill the role of "enemy" in games. Here, "enemy" was defined as characters who impeded the player's progress in some way or were positioned as an antagonist. This did not always include enemies to be fought, but rather characters who were positioned against the player. Nonplayer characters (NPCs) were largely neutral and not the main protagonist, and are distinguished here from "background" characters who are largely not interacted with, but appear as part of the game environment. Included in the NPC category are members of ensemble casts if they were not "teammates" and sometimes controllable by the player (there were no "teammate" characters in the dataset). Playable characters we defined as playable when they first appeared, regardless of whether they were playable later in the series. As illustrated in Table 11, however, the majority of LGBTQ characters were nonantagonistic NPCs, followed by playable characters (PCs). Only 17.3% of characters were enemies or villains.

Table 11. Frequency of Character Roles, 1985–2005.

Character Role	Number of Character Entries	Proportion of Entries
Background	5	2.5%
Enemy	35	17.3%
NPC	103	51.0%
PC	59	29.2%
Total	202	100%

Historically, the frequency of queer villain characters remained fairly consistent, whereas by the 1990s both nonplayable LGBTQ characters and playable LGBTQ characters appeared more frequently than LGBTQ enemies (see Figure 5). Although NPCs and PCs both illustrated a steady upward trend in representation, by the 2000s the frequency LGBTQ enemies began to slope downward.

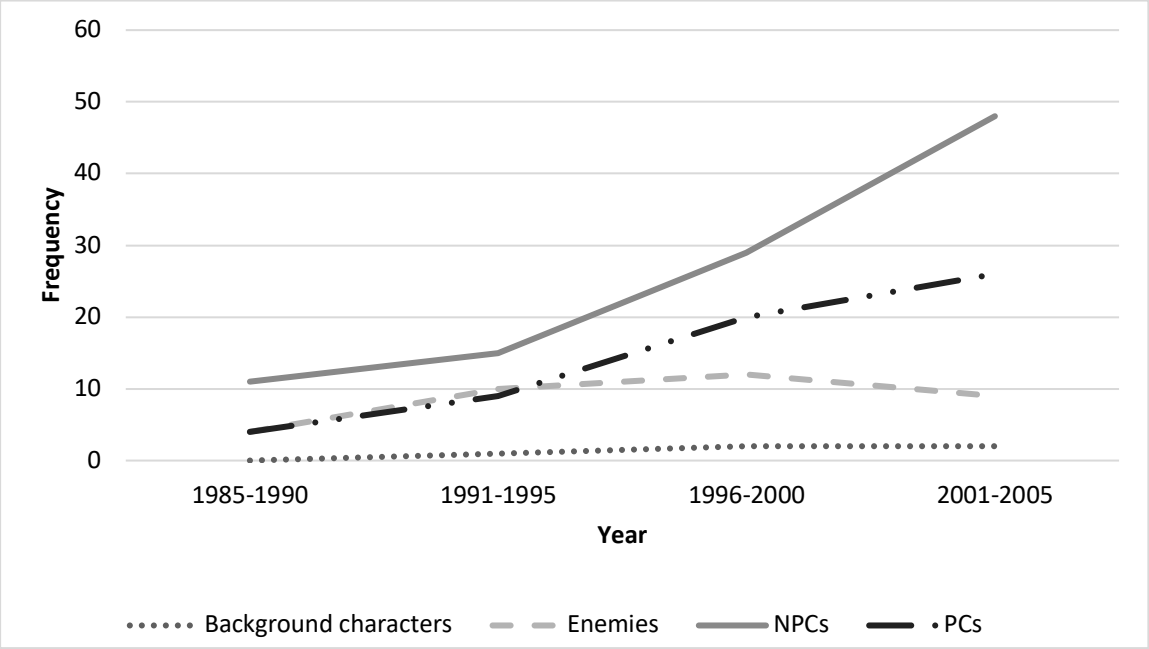

Figure 5. Line Graph of LGBTQ Characters, by Identity and Year.

We also looked at character role by country of origin for the games, to see if there were any differences in patterns of representation from different global contexts. The analysis (see Table 12) supports a significant association between character role and countries (χ^2 = 59.56, *df* = 9, *p* = .001). The most frequent character roles were NPCs (51%), but the most frequent roles in Japanese games were PCs (47.1%).

Table 12. Role by Country of Origin.

	Countries of Origin				
Character Role	Japan	U.S.	UK	Others	Total
Background characters	0	5	0	0	5
Enemies	24	8	1	2	35
NPCs	30	42	16	15	103
PCs	48	9	1	1	59
Total	102	64	18	18	202

χ^2 = 59.56, *df* = 9, *p* = .001.

Building on this interesting finding, we also looked at the explicitness of character sexuality by character role. Our analysis shows a significant association between character role and the explicitness of their sexuality (see Table 13). For PCs and enemies, sexuality was slightly more implicit than explicit. Among NPCs, character sexuality was equally implicit and explicit.

Table 13. Role by Sexuality's Explicitness.

	Character Sexuality's Explicitness		
Character Role	Implicit	Explicit	Total
Background characters	0	4	4
Enemies	14	10	24
NPCs	39	39	78
PCs	27	12	39
Total	80	65	145

$\chi^2 = 8.98$, $df = 3$, $p = .03$.

Race and Role

We also looked at whether there was a significant relationship between race and character role for LGBTQ characters, but found no statistical evidence for this (see Table 14). This stems from the relative lack of LGBTQ characters of color and background characters.

Table 14. Simplified Frequency of Racial Categories by Character Role.

	Background	Enemy	NPC	PC
Person of color	0	3	16	8
Race indeterminate	2	9	14	18
White	3	13	43	23

$\chi^2 = 7.09$, $df = 6$, $p = .31$.

Acknowledging that nonhuman-ness is often deployed representationally to emulate racial difference (Brock, 2011; Higgin, 2009), we also looked at whether nonhuman characters would be more likely to be enemies. We found a statistically significant relationship between human/nonhuman categories and character role (see Table 15). Most (77.2%) characters were human, and for both types of characters, most were NPCs (human = 50%, nonhuman = 67%). Human characters were more often playable, whereas nonhumans were more often enemies.

Table 15. Frequency Table for Human/Non-Human Categories by Character Role.

	Background	Enemy	NPC	PC	Total
Human	5	24	74	46	149
Nonhuman	0	10	29	5	44
Total	5	34	103	51	193

$\chi^2 = 8.89$, $df = 3$, $p = .03$.

We also looked at whether there was a relationship between the explicitness of the characters' sexualities and humanness. The analysis supports a significant association between humanness and explicitness (see Table 16). Although human characters' sexuality was equally implicit and explicit (50%), nonhuman characters' sexuality was more implicit (75%) than explicit (25%).

Table 16. Frequency of Human/Nonhuman Categories by Sexuality Explicitness.

	Character Sexuality's Explicitness		
Humanness	Implicit	Explicit	Total
Human	57	57	114
Nonhuman	21	7	28
Total	78	64	142

$\chi^2 = 3.25$, $df = 1$, $p = .02$, Fisher's exact test = 0.02.

Moreover, as identified before, most of the gender-nonconforming, transgender, intersex, and nonbinary characters were not human. Thus, nonhumanness, non-whiteness, and noncisgenderness seem to be conflated in the way these characters are represented.

Conclusions

In 2019, for the first time in the organization's 34-year history, GLAAD will offer a media award for the digital games with "outstanding LGBTQ-inclusive content" (Good, 2018). Although this is an important milestone for the game industry and the activist organization, news of this has implied that a critical mass of LGBTQ content has begun to be included in games such that it is worth awarding "the best." Yet, as this analysis demonstrates, such content has a long history, of which even a mainstream LGBTQ media activist organization is not fully aware. If, moving forward, activists and scholars are to recognize outstanding forms of representation, we must first know what the existing norms of representation have been. As the first quantitative mapping of early LGBTQ game content, this analysis provides important insight into how LGBTQ content was used for one 21-year span. This content appeared across the global game industry and on multiple platforms. It encompassed primarily specific characters, but also visual, ludic, and narrative forms of representation. Moreover, our analyses show that increases of representation were not consistent for all groups, and that some groups were scarcely represented during this period.

Representation of LGBTQ characters in these 163 games published between 1985 and 2005 appeared to be largely neutral and inconsequential, at least in terms of what has been documented. The LGBTQ characters also primarily did not appear together in the games, with some rare exceptions, marking them as exceptions in an otherwise heterosexual and cisgender world. When they did appear together, they were generally in romantic pairs (implicitly or explicitly). This is similar to trends across LGBTQ media (Gross, 2001), where texts produced for a non-LGBTQ audience fail to show LGBTQ people as members of broader queer communities.

Surprisingly, given trends in other media, our statistical analyses demonstrate that there was not a statistically significant relationship between race and LGBTQ identities or character role. However, race did have a statistically significant relationship with the country of origin for the game. This is largely because our non-

Japanese coders found characters' races to be more indeterminate in Japanese games (something future research should account for). Moreover, around the late 1990s we see a downturn in the number of racially indeterminate characters while we see an increase in both white characters and characters of color. This suggests that changing graphical capabilities have allowed for more precise identification of phenotypic racial representation.

Humanness (vs. nonhumanness) of characters was significantly associated with character role and the explicitness of the characters' sexuality. Specifically, human characters were more likely to be player characters, whereas nonhuman characters were more likely to be enemies. Nonhuman characters were often represented with more implicit sexualities, suggesting that, like race, sexual difference is being offloaded into nonhumanness in the medium. Country of origin was also significantly associated with character role, as Japanese LGBTQ characters were playable more often than were characters in games from other countries.

These findings demonstrate important trends in this particular historical moment, while also pointing to future analyses that might be done for other time periods. They also support the claim that LGBTQ content has been a part of digital games for a long time. Yet the limitations of quantifying LGBTQ identities must continually be stressed. Although we know that sex acts do not define sexual identities, with whom a character has sex is meant to stand in for their sexuality in games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Similarly, signifiers of LGBTQ identities are drawn from popular stereotypes (Dyer, 1977/1999), which are not used differently in global game production contexts. We have used our knowledge of global game cultures and queer media studies to be sensitive to these concerns as we coded each entry, so we can offer statistical insights into the form LGBTQ representation took in games produced between 1985 and 2005. In doing so, we have also demonstrated that game content analysis need not rely on the playing of games alone. Indeed, for content like coded sexualities and genders, piecing together information across data sources is vital.

Our unique methodological choice, however, points to another difficulty in quantifying content from this time period. Most of the games, for example, had LGBTQ characters or same-sex relationship options. It is very likely that game fansites do not regularly document one-off homophobic jokes or LGBTQ-related artifacts. These limitations in turn are compounded by the language limitations of the researchers (though we addressed that as we could). This is an issue in English-language game studies broadly, as many national game histories are only now being rediscovered and reclaimed (Garda & Krawczyk, 2018; Mukherjee, 2018; Penix-Tadsen, 2016; Sotamaa & Suominen, 2018). Still, as we gain access to richer and more multinational information on the history of LGBTQ digital game representation, these methods and analyses can be used to inform future research. The trends analyzed here hint at important sites for further inquiry beyond 2005, as well as histories of representation in other data sets of LGBTQ game content created in different geographical contexts. But, most importantly, they offer clear evidence that LGBTQ content has been present in digital games since at least the 1980s, and many of these limitations suggest that, if anything, there is more out there to be discovered.

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