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Emily Ward- Thesis Proposal

Proposed title: How important is the prevalence of LGBT representation in Video games?

Key words: Representation, Gender, Sexuality, Games, Character Creator, Avatar, LGBT, Video Games

Draft Introduction:

My previous paper explored the nuance of inherent racism and sexism in video games, with a specific focus on character creation menus. The subject becomes somewhat less quantifiable on the subject of the LGBTQ+ avatar, with an entire spectrum of genders and presentations to consider. An avatar could be intended by all accounts by the player to be transgender, non-binary, bisexual or any other orientation beside without requirements for physical markers, as might be required to represent race. As a result, when discussing this area, the player's ability to act as the avatar in gameplay, to engage socially with other players or other non-player characters, and to engage with a story that is respectful and representative of LGBTQ+ characters are all areas that could be considered to comprise the LGBTQ+ avatar. A game may allow players to romance other characters of the same gender, such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, or allow free customisation of gender presentation, pronouns, fashion choice and even ability to become pregnant, such as in *The Sims 4*. My aims in this area of research would be to consider if widening availability of LGBTQ+ representation has a positive impact on audiences, including real-world applications, and to consider whether existing representation is sufficient and inclusive.

Draft Chapter:

It could certainly be argued that many players use their avatar as an extension of their self. Kukshinov & Shaw, (2022), found that many players expressed that when given the opportunity to create an avatar, those lacking wider representation in other forms of media were more likely to create self-representing avatars. It certainly then seems likely that this would continue to apply to LGBTQ+ gamers when playing games.

Strauss, (2019) completed a study that comprised of a series of interviews with transgender and gender-diverse gamers, finding that "The ability to play as, and express, their affirmed gender" had a consistent positive impact on mental health, and in some circumstances was even able to lessen the effects of gender dysphoria in TGD youths; "Avatars offer a way of existing in an affirming body that might not otherwise be possible at that moment." This offers a greater understanding both to the importance of real-world applications of games, but also the importance of representative character creation options within games with avatar creation modes. Some participants even noted that they "could use this autonomy in online spaces to be their true self without commentary or threat from external society."

A similar finding was found by McKenna *et al.* (2022), with participants reporting that “TGD youth found avatar creation provided a safe place to explore their social environment as a more accurate, digital representation of themselves in a low-stakes manner that was free from many social repercussions... the ability to freely exist in a world as themselves allowed many participants to experience both internal and external validation of their affirmed gender.” (McKenna *et al.* 2022) it could be suggested that the ability to remain anonymous in an online setting would allow TGD players to integrate themselves into a virtual society without sustaining risk of being outed, put in a position of danger, or harassed for being openly transgender or gender-nonconforming.

Many games equally have chosen to celebrate queer pride explicitly within the games themselves, such as *Overwatch*, (2016), and *League of Legends*, (2009) through the use of unique profile decorations as well as character skins and accessories that allow players to change character appearances within the game. Such opportunities may be a positive for LGBT people unable to safely interact with other queer people outside of the virtual world; “Many LGBT players may have greater access to queer celebration, and virtual access to pride parades and online pride events may be the only available access these individuals may have. (McKenna, Chughtai, 2019) Despite this, McKenna and Chughtai note that virtual worlds may not be an entirely safe haven for LGBTQ+ players; “Virtual worlds are gendered political social environments that can provide safe places of engagement for marginalised groups but also used as a means of oppression.”

A survey released by the Anti-Defamation League found that 74% of online players have experienced online harassment, with “Thirty-eight percent of women and 35 percent of LGBTQ+ players [reporting] harassment on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation, respectively.” despite this, many players also report to having many positive experiences with other players through in-game chat functions.

Throughout, studies appear to assert that in general, the ability to self-represent and be represented through virtual spaces in video games has a major impact on social functioning for LGBT players. It could be asserted that video games may be able provide an avenue for safe exploration of gender, sexuality and community building.

Draft Literature Review:

McKenna *et al.* (2022) provides primary insight into the perspectives of transgender and gender-diverse players in games through direct questionnaires in this area. The results are incredibly valuable at directly presenting insight into how many LGBTQ+ players are affected by their avatars and playing games. This is inherently valuable, since the discussion of LGBT representation in this area is somewhat less quantifiable than discussions of representation in other facets of character creation such as in discussions of race or sexism in games. That being said, it is important to note that this survey size is fairly small, as well as comprising entirely young people who responded with parent consent. As a result, the findings may be skewed in a

positive light, since the respondents could be argued to come from already accepting backgrounds that allowed for gender exploration. However, this finding was similarly established by Strauss (2019), which both widens the pool of respondents and implies replicable findings in this area of research. Strauss clearly outlines the real-world applications of avatar creation as a means of gender exploration. This insight directly into how TGD youth interact with and utilise games as a means of gender expression stresses the importance of self-representation in media.

Shaw as an author provides incredibly wide research in the topic of queer representation as a whole. Kukshinov, E. and Shaw, A. (2022) provide the foundational and most necessary piece of research for this area, ultimately outlining player's desire to self-represent when creating avatars. This finding provides evidence for the neccessitation of available representation in games. Not only this, but Shaw collects an entire database of LGBTQ+ representation in games, outlining both successful instances of representation but also instances where games create the existence of a "gay button", a common game design format of all queer content being essentially hidden without specific player intention to unlock it, thereby providing no intrinsic LGBTQ+ representation.

General Chapter outlines:

- *Chapter 1: Many early games portrayed LGBT characters and tropes as humorous, evil or both. These characters have frequently been based on homophobic or transphobic stereotypes, and were frequently censored or removed entirely in the west, instead of respectfully altered. As a result, players were left with minimal to no representation, and the representation that did exist was arguably harmful. It is key to discuss how censorship of LGBT material leaves players alienated from wider elements of society.*
- *Chapter 2: Games in recent years have improved the representation of lgbt representation, but this usually appears in the scope of romantic/sexual options in more mature games. This can reduce the queer experience as purely sexual. The sexualisation and simplification of sexuality and gender as fetish is frequently a major complaint from homophobic criticism of queer lifestyles.*
- *Chapter 3: A lot of games do not explicitly state whether characters are queer or not (e.g the gay button concept) which leaves players without visible representation- especially for people who dont seek that content. This leaves the question of whether "opt-in" queer content is really representation, as those who do not actively seek it will not see or experience it in many cases.*
- *Chapter 4: "Playersexuality" vs developed characters- inherent bisexuality of all romancable technically provides representation for all players of all orientations, but a lack of character's established will can minimise the importance of queer identities.*

- *Chapter 5: Having the options to have queer relationships or represent the avatar in a gender-affirming way has been seen to have positive real world applications including mental health and social community building.*
- *Chapter 6: Gaming as a form of affirmation and social integration may allow for safe exploration for LGBTQ+ members who may not live with supporting family, or in locations safe for them to engage with queer communities.*

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