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**Designing Queer(er) Games:
A Game Design Analysis Through Queer
Game Studies Concepts and Practices**

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Abstract

This paper explores the current practises in representing LGBTQ+ lives in the video game industry, in order to gain more in-depth understanding of queer game studies. With the help of concepts pulled through *Queer Game Studies* (2017), a book edited by Ruberg and Shaw, and more particularly Chang's chapter on queergaming, queer game studies will be defined and a framework of Chang's repurposing of Galloway's countergaming values (2006) extracted. These values are as follows: queer(er) design, queer(er) play, and queer remediation. These are then used to analyse two video games in particular: *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Gone Home* (2013). These games' queerness is therefore analysed through the games' design and gameplay, but also through its fans.

The main findings of the paper are that representing LGBTQ+ people in video games is not only about adding queer characters and relationships, but also about how to view the medium as a whole, and differing from the normative ideologies in video games, because this is what the queer experience is about. In *Life is Strange*, its strengths lie in the characters of Max and Chloe, but also challenging play with the time-rewind mechanic, defining choices and the focus made on the exploration. However, the game uses common traps like queerbaiting and the Bury Your Gays trope, but this also creates queer remediation by its fans. In *Gone Home*, the game is structured around its queerness. It also differs from normative play by inviting the players to explore without specific objectives. In terms of remediation, *Gone Home* finds itself in the middle of acclaims and critics surrounding its specific gameplay, and queer representation.

Overall, it appears that queering a game from its design to its gameplay, in addition to adding queer characters and relationships, are key to improve LGBTQ+ representation. It is also a way to create new gaming experiences. To go further, representation should also be thought of as intersectional.

Keywords: Queer Game Studies, Queergaming, Queer Design, Queer Play, Queer Remediation, LGBTQ+, Video Games, Game Design, Life is Strange, Gone Home.

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List of Abbreviations

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and all of the other gender identities and sexual orientations on the spectrum.

In this paper, I am proposing to explore queer game design through the study of two video games, employing a framework based on Chang's queer repurposing (2017) of Galloway's countergaming values (2006) in *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017).

In the introduction, the history of video games will be revisited, and more specifically the history of representation in video games. This will then be followed by the clarification of queer game studies. Having clarified that, a methodology will be defined, along with the framework used throughout this paper. Subsequently, part four will be focused on the case studies of two chosen video games. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn from this research.

1. Introduction

Often wrongly called addictive and violent, could video games be more inclusive? Is representation still an issue in video games? Even though it is a massive industry, video games are sometimes still not considered as legitimate, nor are they taken seriously, but rather considered as a childish activity. Back at the beginning of the industry, video games have long struggled to make their place alongside established entertainment industries, and were, and still are sometimes, heavily critiqued, once popularised, especially on the false rhetoric that they were promoting violence to children and young adults (Cleary, 2019). In fact, countries with highest video game spending per capita are also mostly with the lowest ratio of gun-related murders per 100,000 inhabitants, such as South Korea, Japan and France, with the exception of the United States. Of course, this is also because these countries are developed, and because the United States have not implemented strong gun control laws, but it should be noted that there is no correlation with gun violence (Washington Post, 2012). More recently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in the United States, video game industry revenue notably went over sports and film industries combined in 2020 (IDC, 2020). This shows how this industry has now become a staple in entertainment. Incidentally, Oxford researchers have found that playing video games contributes to well-being, and therefore advised people to play during lockdown (Oxford University, 2020). Video games indeed act as a true sanctuary, as when in game, the player forgets about their worries and concentrates only on the game.

In the beginning of video game history, games were simpler in design because of technical restrictions, so questions of genre and sexuality hardly came across. After 3D modeling and more advanced games, this reflection started to arise, first more specifically on the female characters. In its first representations, in video games, like other industries such as the cinematic industry, women were often designed as passive, sexy, and powerless, whereas men were daring, often brutal, where the action is, and carrying the storyline. For example, one overused trope for female characters is the Damsel in Distress. This female character is characterised by her helplessness and the way she is often kidnapped, then saved throughout the game by the main character, usually male. As such, without this female character, there is no end goal to the game. However, this character has no real purpose but to be this end goal. The examples are numerous: Peach in the *Mario* games, or Zelda in the *Zelda* franchise, except in *Breath of The Wild* (2017), to name a few. At the end of the 1990s, mainstream video games with strong, main female characters finally came out, such as Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996). Lara Croft is ambivalent. She is both extremely sexualised, especially in the first games, with exaggerated features and inappropriate outfits for her adventures, but also an emancipating figure for women. She is independent, adventurous, and strong. It's an archetype that prepares for other strong female characters in the media at the beginning of the 2000s, such as *Bayonetta* (2009). Today however, there are modern day main female characters in a universe that finally seem more accepting of women characters, such as *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), or the more recent *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), which also include a lesbian main character in a relationship.

As women have started to be better represented in recent years, a push for diversity is now happening in all mediums. Mainstream video games, such as triple-A games – which are games made by big corporations, in which tens of millions of dollars are invested – are finally taking this new step and starting to represent different ethnicities, sexual orientations, and genders. In 2018 notably, the E3, a massive game convention where developers and publishers introduce upcoming games to the press and public, opened on the trailer of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), featuring a lesbian kiss of Ellie and her girlfriend Dina, confirming Ellie's sexual orientation, the main character in this new opus of *The Last of Us* (2013). By developing diversity, video games can also be a safe space in exploring one's own identity. Inhabiting a different gender than one's own through a game can have a strong effect in self-discovery, especially for transgender or non-binary people. Exploring different sexualities in-game can also have this effect for questioning people on their sexual orientation. As the mere existence of LGBTQ+

people is challenging the norms, introducing queer studies in games can only help to rethink their own norms in game design and mechanics. Queer game studies have only recently emerged, merging the game studies researches along with queer studies. This research paper will therefore be based on gaining a more in-depth understanding of queer studies applied to video games, in order to define how to better represent the LGBTQ+ community in video games. This paper will first define queer studies and video games studies in relation to queer game studies. The analytical framework will then be described, based on previous research in queer games studies and game design. It will be used as a guideline for an analysis of two video games, a mainstream one, *Life is Strange* (2015), and an independent one, *Gone Home* (2013), both containing queer representation.

2. Term Clarification: Queer game studies

To start off, let us decipher each part of the queer game studies component. Game studies are the study of games, their players and the cultures attached to them. Queer studies can be divided into two branches: LGBTQ+ studies and queer theory. LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and the plus sign for all of the other sexualities and gender identities that differ from the norm – the norm being a heterosexual cisgender individual. LGBTQ+ studies are then the study of these sexualities and gender identities. It's also closely linked to advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights. Queer theory, however, is more based on a literary and philosophy standpoint. It is notably linked to famous theorists such as Adrienne Rich (compulsory heterosexuality), Judith Butler (performativity in gender and sex) and many others, who defined critical techniques for analysing 'non-heteronormative sexual identity'. It is worth noting that 'LGBTQ Studies do not always share the same poststructuralist concerns regarding the value of identity politics' (Felluga 2015, p. 255).

Therefore, queer game studies are a branch of game studies centred on queer and LGBTQ+ studies. It is an analysis of video games through the standpoint of queer thinking, a way to understand games through queer theory. As per Ruberg and Shaw (2017, p. x):

Queer game studies stands as a call to action, an argument for the scholarly, creative, and political value of queerness as a strategy for disrupting dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played. (Ruberg, Shaw 2017, p. x)

3. Methodology (Literary review)

This chapter will serve as an analytical framework for this research paper. I have chosen to base my research on two main books. First, *Gender Inclusive Game Design* by Sheri Graner Ray, which will provide insight about designing female characters. Then *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. This one will help to analyse video games from a queer perspective.

To begin with, Ray criticises the earlier representation of women in games, as they are either viewed as sexual objects, or damsels in distress, a trope first defined in the introduction of this paper. She then goes on to provide design guidelines in order to extend the market. To summarise her work, she suggests game designers should think outside the norms to include indirect competition, nonconflict-based scenarios, non-gratuitous violence, and alternative reward systems. They should take the audience into account when choosing stimuli, add a backstory, think about humour and tone, more specifically making sure that the humour is funny to all players and not just men. Finally, they should add diverse representations in avatars to attract broader audiences (Ray, 2002). As these guidelines are about broadening the audiences of video games, they can also be taken into account when designing games for queer people, especially since some women are also a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Then, to touch on queer game studies, according to Clark, there are two ways of making a game queer: ‘diversifying the content of games and representation of marginalized identities in the industry’, or ‘investigate how to queer the structure of games’ (Clark 2017, p. 3). In order to make games queerer, the initial step is having representation that differs from the status quo, which are heterosexual cisgender characters. But another interesting point would be queer people designing their own games, which tends to create new and different gaming experiences. Refusing the norm is indeed what allow queer games to achieve new ways of playing (Clark 2017, p. 9). As such, creation of mainstream games with queer characters seem to clash with maintaining their disruptive voice, on which they were first based. In fact, as stated by Chang (2017, p. 17),

Queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits, and other goofiness and the desire for

queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure.

Chang offers 'an adaptation and repurposing of Galloway's countergaming values organized around intersections rather than binary oppositions' (Chang, 2017, p. 18). These values are as follows: queer(er) design, queer(er) play, and queer remediation.

First, according to Chang, queer(er) design involves not just having queer representation in a game, but properly integrate a character's queerness within the narrative and gameplay. That is because being queer is not just about the sexual orientation, but tends to redefine every little part of a queer person's life. It is more about the queer's experience, not just its existence. Though today, the mainstream video games which include queer characters are more about having a token character, rather than developing this character based on their queerness. But it should not just be for pretence. Including characters whose sexual identity can be either queer or heterosexual and does not interfere with the main plot is then basic inclusion rather than queer design and representation. In order to analyse the integration of queer characters in games, I will specifically look for if the character's queerness is depending on the player, i.e. can the sexual orientation be switched depending on the actions throughout the game. I will also search if the storyline is influenced by the character's queerness.

Second, still according to Chang, queer(er) play is the idea that games can and should re-think their conventions, such as competition, violence, exploitation, etc. Reasons for this is that queer existence is, by its very nature, defined by getting away from the norm. Implementing queer(er) play therefore is all about getting away from the standards in video games. Queerer play may as well be a game without purpose, only focused on exploration, such as Jenova Chen's games *Flower* (2009) and *Journey* (2012). In the following analysis, I will then look for the game's purpose, if it has one, and detail the game mechanics to see if they differ from the norm.

Finally, per Chang, queer remediation is the idea that players have been imagining queerness in games long before it were represented through participatory culture. Therefore, it is a way to make games queer. It's the act of appropriating and transforming one medium by another, as per Bolter and Grusin. An example of this is fandoms, a community of fans of the same artist, or book, or film, etc. LGBTQ+ fans in fandoms have long created their own queer representation through fanarts, or fanfictions. That is because their yearning for representation

has been ignored by mainstream media for a long time. They then had to resort to creating their own. It is in reaction to the inability of mediums to think beyond and outside of the box of their claimed target audience. Per Chang, ‘all in all, queergaming is a demand for full, dimensional, consequential, variegated, and playable queer experiences, lives, bodies, and worlds’ (Chang 2017, p. 22). In order to analyse this remediation, I will search if there is a fandom dedicated to this game. I will also look for players’ created content, such as art or fanfiction, around this game, and see if any is LGBTQ+. Finally, I will more specifically look for if this game is well-known in the LGBTQ+ community.

In the purpose of clarity, I created an analytical framework grid on which to base myself on in order to analyse two games in this research paper, per Chang’s queergaming values.

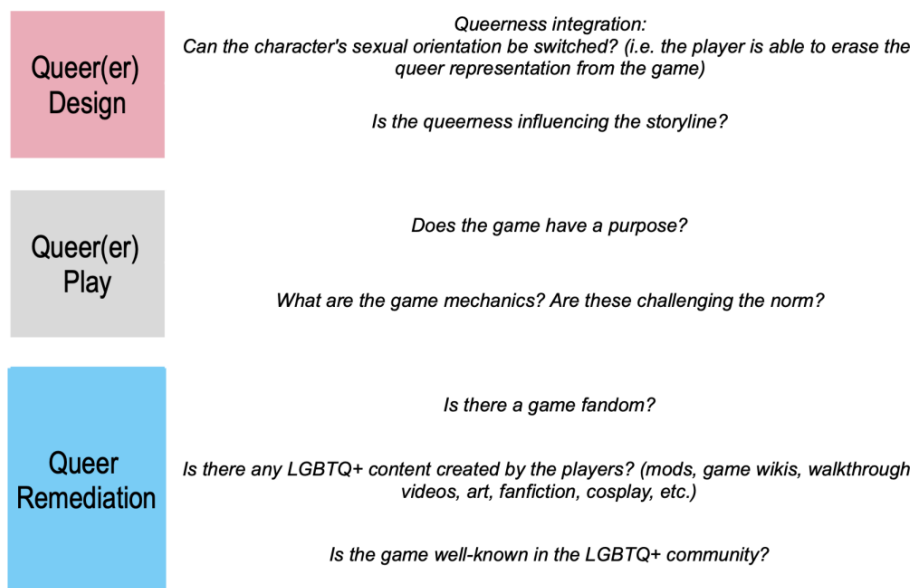


Figure 1: Chang’s queergaming values

4. Case studies

In this chapter, the following two games, *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Gone Home* (2013), will be analysed with the previously introduced framework by Edmond Y. Chang.

4.1. *LIFE IS STRANGE* (2015)

4.1.1 Plot

Life is Strange (2015) is an adventure game divided into five episodes, each individually released across 2015. It is an interactive narrative game around choices and their consequences. It was developed by French studio Dontnod and published by Square Enix. The main protagonist is Maxine Caulfield, or as she is usually called, Max. At the beginning of the game, Max comes back to her hometown, Arcadia Bay, a fictional town set in Oregon. During one of her classes, she experiences an intense vision of a storm destroying the town. Feeling shocked, she goes to the bathroom. However, there, she sees her childhood friend Chloe Price get assaulted and shot dead. With all of the sudden trauma, Max uncovers powers and finds herself being able to turn back in time to save Chloe. With her newfound powers, and the mysterious tornado vision which they believe might be the future to come, they set out to uncover the truth about a missing student, called Rachel Amber.

As the plot goes on, many events appear throughout the town. Max and Chloe uncover the two men behind the missing women in the town, who were one of their professors called Mark Jefferson, along with a student called Nathan Prescott. Jefferson abducts Max, and Nathan kills Chloe. However, Max is able to escape, and rewinds time again to save Chloe. In the end, Max and Chloe both meet at the lighthouse, but Max is now facing the possibility that saving Chloe has brought on the storm to Arcadia Bay. She has to face the end choice: either save the town of Arcadia Bay and all of its inhabitants or save Chloe's life again by sacrificing the town. Depending on the choice, the ending is either skipping town with Chloe as it gets destroyed by the storm, or saving the town, leading to Jefferson and Prescott's arrests, but sadly having to bury Chloe.

In terms of mechanics, the game lets the player rewind as often as they would like, but they must make choices to move forward in the game, which will later on trigger specific events, good or bad. Several objects or information must be found in order to be able to get by several events as well.

Life is Strange has overall received a great reception thanks to its indie style and design, as well as strong plot. It has notably won many awards, such as the 2015 Game Award for Games for Change, the 2015 Develop Industry Excellence Awards for Use of Narrative, the 2015 Global Game Awards for Best Original Game and Best Adventure, and the impressive 2016 BAFTA Game Award for Story, along with great ratings on review websites. Many people were also excited to see representation in the form of female main protagonists and lesbian romance, in a release of such a praised game. However, this representation has been subject to critique, and this research paper will analyse how.

4.1.2 Analysis

4.1.2.1 QUEER(ER) DESIGN IN LIFE IS STRANGE

At its core, *Life is Strange* includes LGBTQ+ representation, and wanted expressly to include main female characters. While choosing the game's publisher, Dontnod studio had already written the two main female characters, and indeed decided to go with the only publisher that would not make them switch their main female characters into male characters, Square Enix (Gamespot, 2015). In doing so, they expressly decided to include women, and more specifically LGBTQ+ women in this game. Chang questions this idea of only introducing characters for the purpose of representation, and especially recommends not to only build a queer character or a queer plotline, but rather provide actual queer experiences through a game (Chang, 2017).

It is worth wondering if queer representation in *Life is Strange* is only in the purpose of having token characters and if the player has the choice to erase this queer dimension, if they wanted to avoid it. On this point, *Life is Strange* is not very clear in its representation. The game indeed never clearly states the characters' sexual orientation, but they have been guessed by players.

First, Chloe is represented through styling codes often shared in LGBTQ+ women, such as her blue hair, her tattoos, and her overall grunge aesthetic.



Figure 2: Chloe's concept art (Caplain, 2015)

It is also implied that she was involved with the missing girl Rachel, or at least felt attraction towards her. Chloe also gets very upset when finding out that Rachel was romantically involved with someone else named Frank. Their relationship is also made clearer in the prequel, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017), where Chloe has the option to tell Rachel that she wants to be more than friends. Rachel will reciprocate, but then say that she cannot go further on the matter, even though she wants to. In *Life is Strange*, Chloe also seems to show interest in Max. At some point, she even dares Max to kiss her. If the player chooses to, they will share a kiss, and Max's journal will mention that it was cute how Chloe looked embarrassed after they kissed. If the player chooses not to, Max's journal will read that she actually wanted to, but did not like the idea of being dared to, and that perhaps she was scared, but she likes that Chloe is so fearless. As she wanted to kiss Chloe in any case, Max can also be defined as a queer character. However, during the game, Max also has the option to be romantically involved with another male character named Warren. But even if the player decides to make Max go on a date with him, she later calls him 'a supercool geek brother' in her journal, and states that she hopes he does not make 'a lame move' on her (*Life is Strange*, 2015). At some point during the game, Max also has the option to kiss Warren.

At the end of the game, if Max decides to sacrifice Chloe, both of them will share a kiss. Chloe will say that she will always love Max, and Max promises to never forget her. In the end

sequence after Chloe's death, Max can be seen standing next to Warren during Chloe's funeral. Relationships and sexual orientations in *Life is Strange* are never clearly described, but it is evident that Chloe and Max share a special bond that does not only resemble friendship. Chloe was also very close to Rachel before her disappearance, and elements in the game point out to at least romantic attraction to her on Chloe's side. But as these complex relationships are never defined properly, they can be interpreted depending on the player. As such, I believe that for any LGBTQ+ player, Chloe and Max's queerness will never be questioned. However, it might not be obvious to all players.

To go even further, queerness in this game can also be represented as punitive, as the only way for Max and Chloe to share a kiss which is not coming from a dare, is only if Chloe is sacrificed for the greater good, as a perfect representation of today's Bury your Gays trope. This trope has long existed due to historical indecency laws where homosexuality was punishable by prison. In 1930 notably, Hollywood adopted the Hays Code, banning 'depictions of sexual perversion' (The Take, 2020). Because of it, most queer characters only existed through subtext, and usually depicted as villains, most often with a tragic ending. Depicting these queer characters being punished for their existence made it more appropriate in films, TV, and literature, because it could not be seen as 'promoting homosexuality' (Hulan, 2017). In *Life is Strange*, the only other queer character Rachel, was also missing throughout the game, and found to be assaulted and killed by the main protagonist. As such, queerness is indeed influencing the storyline, but not in the way intended by Chang's values.

4.1.2.2 QUEER(ER) PLAY IN LIFE IS STRANGE

However, can *Life is Strange* be interpreted as queer play? This game is an interactive narrative game. It is indeed a story-based game, in which the player must explore to gather information, and make choices in order for the game's plot to move forward. It has a purpose, because it seems to be following a dramatic structure, as per Gustav Freytag's pyramid of dramatic structure, used in storytelling (Freytag, 1863).

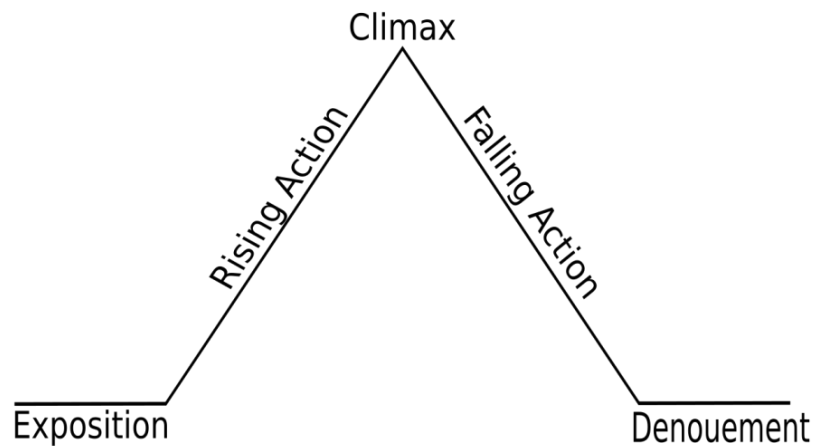


Figure 3: Freytag's pyramid (2006, Wikimedia Commons)

This pyramid divides a drama in five parts, each assigned to a function to take the story further. The first part is the exposition, which sets the scene and introduces the main characters. In *Life is Strange*, it is Max coming back to Arcadia Bay. The second part is the rising action, the inciting incident which forces the protagonist to take action. Here, it is Chloe getting shot in the bathroom, and Max awakening to her power of rewind time. Next is the climax, which is the highest point of the story, generally where the protagonist makes an action or has a realisation which will define the story's outcome. For Max, it is at the end of the third episode, Chaos Theory, when she is able to go back years in time through a photo. She finds herself on the day of the car crash that killed Chloe's father, William. She saves him, but by saving him and going back to the present, she discovers that Chloe is now severely handicapped. At the beginning of episode four, Chloe from this new timeline begs her to kill her with morphine, because she cannot do it herself. Deciding that she should undo her saving of William to save Chloe once more, she is able to get back to the original timeline. The climax is therefore her saving William, and her realisation that every action she takes can have strong consequences on the future, otherwise known as the butterfly effect in chaos theory – which is where episode three gets its name. The fourth phase in Freytag's pyramid is then the falling action, which are the events leading up to the ending. Here, it could be the last episode, in which Max gets captured by the main antagonist, Jefferson, and Chloe gets shot by Nathan Prescott. Finally, the denouement, is when the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist ends through resolution, either good or bad for the main character. In *Life is Strange*, it is the final and major

choice at the end of the game, when Max must decide whether to save Chloe, by leaving Arcadia Bay to destruction by the storm, or save the town, but leading Chloe to her death.

As such, *Life is Strange*'s main purpose is to find out what happened to the missing girl Rachel, as well as figuring out Max's storm vision that she had right before her powers awoke. At the same time, as so much of this game is focused on exploration and collecting memorabilia in order for Max to write everything down in her journal, another purpose can emerge. This goal could be to make good memories with Chloe along the way. The game indeed starts early on with the scene of Chloe getting shot in the bathroom and Max awakening to her time-rewind powers because of that, in order to save her. Throughout the game, Max also keeps saving her from death, notably with the alternative timeline where Chloe, now disabled, wants to commit suicide. At the end, Max's choice is also once again about Chloe's life or death.

Life is Strange's plot therefore seems based on Freytag's pyramid, which is of common use in dramatic storytelling. However, one essential part of making queerer design, as defined by Chang in this research paper's framework, is the idea that queergaming is 'not grounded in normative ideologies' (Chang, 2017, p.19). As such, it is worth noting if *Life is Strange*'s game mechanics are challenging the video game norms. Such examples of these norms can be: 'competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states'. They can also be 'bigger guns, grislier gore, and 'pwning' (owning, topping, defeating, humiliating) other players' (Chang, 2017, p.19). In *Life is Strange*, the main game mechanic is rewinding time, and the game is based around this. Incidentally, it is this mechanic on which the game was first based on, as Dontnod wanted to implement it into a game. The time rewind can not only be used during actions, but also in dialogue. This way, the player can rewind and test all of the chat options if they want to, until they are satisfied with the answer. This manipulation of time in *Life is Strange* also seems to go along with Freytag's pyramid and the stereotypical progression of drama previously introduced that the game uses throughout its narrative. The past appears with the exposition and rising action, when the present along with its complications are truly the climax of the game. The future then appears as the denouement. This time mechanic can then correlate with the queer existence, because the time is not set in stone, and it is this mechanic that allows for queer representation to appear: without this mechanic, there is no game, so no queer gaming, because Chloe would have died at the beginning. This time mechanic also brings up another mechanic in making choices and having to deal with the consequences. As previously stated, the player can rewind as much as they

want. However, choices made and objects collected in the beginning can influence the game further down the line. By then, the player will not be able to change back their answer and will have to handle the outcome. Along with this choice mechanic, Dontnod studio also decided to record these choices and their consequences, in order to publish the results at the end of each episode. Players are then able to see the percentages of players' answers in important choices, as well as the different outcomes from their own. Other mechanics in *Life is Strange* include exploration, interaction and fetch quests. This exploration mechanic is especially important, as it can be the only way to activate certain options in later choices.

Overall, because it is a story-based game focused on information and object collection, but with added mechanics that complexify the gameplay, it can also be seen as an evolution of point and click games, in which the player is free to explore. As it does not engage in normative game mechanics such as violence, defeat and leveling up, but rather invites to exploration and telling a story, *Life is Strange* does seem to take on queer values into its gameplay.

4.1.2.3 QUEER REMEDIATION IN LIFE IS STRANGE

Finally, *Life is Strange* has received many awards and good critics, therefore ensuring a certain popularity in the media. In 2016, *Life is Strange* was in Steam's top 100 best-selling game of the year (Steam, 2016). By May 2017, Dontnod studio also announced that they had already sold 3 million copies of the game, and that they were currently working on a new *Life is Strange* game with the same team that designed and developed the first game. With this many players, it is evident that a strong fandom had developed around the game. In their announcement video of *Life is Strange 2*, Dontnod team also stated that fans kept asking for a sequel (Dontnod, 2017). Fans were also sending them letters and gifts to the office. This shows their dedication to this game, and how much it means to them. This year, Dontnod has also announced a remastered collection of *Life is Strange* and *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, coming out in September 2021, which shows the long-lasting interest this game has.

As previously stated, queer remediation is the act of appropriating and transforming one medium by another, in this case, making this medium queerer than it is. Per fandom glossary, it is the act of transforming canon, canon being the source it is based on, and its explicitly stated concepts, universe, relationships, etc (Romano, 2016).

As an immediate answer, *Life is Strange* does appear to have a fandom, because of its massive audience. There are many posts online discussing the game, on social media websites such as Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, etc. More specifically, there are a lot of posts questioning the queer representation and even debating the queerbaiting in *Life is Strange*. It is evident that this is a much talked about subject that sparks debate in the *Life is Strange* community. On Tumblr for example, a social media in the form of blogs, back in 2015, one user named shark-pup, accused the game of queerbaiting, specifically on the fact that Max and Warren's relationship is made explicit without issue by the development team. According to this user, Dontnod even talks about Warren's crush on Max during the game, and refers to it as the friendzone, a situation in which one person in a platonic relationship has unrequited feelings towards another. However, when mentioning the relationship between Max and Chloe, developers neither confirm nor deny, but always say that it is up for interpretation. Another user, yuriandtea, answered as such:

I'd like to add that it's common in homophobic rhetoric to consider being gay (or whatever) a 'choice'. So the fact that this game never gives us any actual confirmation about Max's (and Chloe's) sexual orientation, and even implicitly suggests that it's possible to CHOOSE to think what it may be is... kinda disturbing really, because it's directly tied to how homophobia operates in real life. (yuriandtea, 2015)

Another interesting point of view available on a Tumblr post is by user capriciousnerd, where they state that *Life is Strange* should not be interpreted as queerbaiting, because, to them, Chloe, Max, and Rachel, all appear to be bisexual women because of their interactions both with men and women. Therefore, calling it queerbaiting erases their bisexuality and their queerness (capriciousnerd, 2015). This goes to show the intense discussion that this game has brought to queer players. Even in the press, there are a multitude of articles on the subject. In Gayming, an online publication dedicated to queer representation in video games, Shepard wrote an opinion article titled 'Life is Strange has yet to portray a healthy queer relationship'. In it, he argues that 'in order to remain on good terms' with Chloe, her 'wants and desires' must 'come before anyone else's', and that much of Max and Chloe's relationship is built on guilt and manipulation (Shepard, 2017). Another interesting article on Polygon by Chan comes back on the Bury Your Gays trope used in *Life is Strange*. In it, they state that Chloe's death felt pointless and uncalled for to many queer players. Per them: 'It is yet another stark reminder of how queerness will almost always result in violent death or suicide in pop culture', especially

since ‘many in the community do pass away in their early years, and LGBTQ teenagers and young adults face a higher risk of suicide than their peers’. They finish the article by demanding queer characters and relationships without needing to witness their death (Chan, 2017).

However, because of this discussion around the queer representation in *Life is Strange*, it obviously inspired the fandom to represent Chloe and Max’s relationship, and even Chloe and Rachel’s under a different light.

First, it should be noted that even in works that features no queer representation, it is common in fandoms to engage in queer remediation by creating fan art and fanfictions with characters that would be otherwise depicted as heterosexual in the original work. Fanfictions are actually especially interesting, because it is an area where heterosexuality is generally in minority. A simple explanation for this would be that as characters are more regularly paired up in heterosexuality in works, therefore the need for writing primary heterosexual relationships in fanfiction would be rarer, even though it exists as well. Common examples of queer fanfictions can feature book characters, such as Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy of the *Harry Potter* series (J.K. Rowling, 1997-2007), who are often paired up as a couple in fan works. On Archive of Our Own (often referred to as AO3), one of the main websites where authors can publish their fanfictions and readers can read, like, and comment, this pairing is the most recurrent in the *Harry Potter* universe, with 50 409 fanfictions available, for example. On AO3 then, *Life is Strange* has over 6,100 works, with the most recurring relationship being Chloe and Max with 2,992 fanfictions. In second comes Chloe and Rachel, with 1,082 works. Overall, the top 10 works in *Life is Strange* relationships are all queer. Pairings are often referred to by a name decided by the community. In Chloe and Max’s case, it is the combination of their last name: Price and Caulfield, which becomes Pricefield. To research fan work, users can then type this either into a browser search engine, or directly onto social media where fan works might be published, such as Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr or more art focused websites such as Deviant Art. Research with this pairing name shows tremendous amounts of fan art on Chloe and Max, imagining their lives together as a couple, kissing, or even going to a Pride parade, a yearly march for LGBTQ+ rights.



Figure 4: Fan art representing Max and Chloe at Pride. Max is wearing makeup representing the bisexual flag on her cheek, whereas Chloe is wearing a t-shirt stating “I like girls” (Baka-neearts, 2019).

Moreover, it is interesting to note that in the prequel *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017), developed by another studio Deck Nine, focusing on Chloe’s life before Rachel’s disappearance, there is a clear option to date Rachel. However, it doesn’t stop the player from knowing that Rachel will die later on, and Chloe might as well.

Overall, *Life is Strange* sits on a blurry line between deciding to represent queer characters, but not wanting to make it too obvious. It is worth questioning whether it is because Dontnod studio might be afraid to take too much of a stand, in fear of losing potential customers, or if it is related to its all-male team, whom may have had a hard time properly representing queer female characters as they are not part of this minority. One can also wonder what the storyline might resemble if this game had been co-written by queer women alongside the original team. But the more queer representation will be democratised, the more players will be used to it, and the less it will be a subject for debate, especially since those who may decide to boycott are ultimately a vocal minority. However, it should be noted that *Life is Strange*’s ending choice could potentially affect queer people, especially as LGBTQ+ suicide attempts remain higher than in heterosexual people worldwide (Figueiredo and Abreu, 2020), and showing mostly

queer experiences ending badly can only reinforce the stereotype that queer lives cannot be happy nor end well.

5.1 *GONE HOME* (2013)

5.1.1 Plot

Gone Home is an exploration video game played as first-person, first released in 2013 on computer, followed by console and iOS releases in 2016 and 2018. It was developed by The Fullbright Company, and published by The Fullbright Company, Majesco Entertainment for Playstation and Xbox, and Annapurna Interactive for Switch and iOS.

The main protagonist is Katie Greenbriar, a 21-year old in the game, which is set in 1995. She returns home from abroad to an empty house, her family composed of her father, mother, and 17-year old sister seemingly absent. In order to understand their disappearance, she must piece together the recent events that might have happened during her absence. In order to do this, the player must look for information by searching the entire house, collecting information through objects and reading notes scattered throughout the house. Sometimes, a voiceover of her little sister's journal, that she decided to write as if she were talking to Katie, takes over to give context to a particular object and event that might have happened around it. The player must therefore uncover the narration non-linearly, through their exploration of the house.

First, right after the protagonist's arrival, a note from Samantha, 'Sam', Katie's little sister, can be found stuck on the door. In it, she pleads with Katie not to investigate where she is by searching the house, because she does not want anyone to know. Right before the word anyone, 'Mom and Dad' are crossed out, which supposedly means that she rather wanted to say that she did not want their parents finding out where she is.

To summarise the game's storyline, Sam had recently changed high school and had trouble fitting in until she met another girl, named Yolanda, whom she calls 'Lonnie' in her journal. Lonnie is a cadet in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps in the United States Army. They ended up in a romantic relationship together. However, Sam's parents ended up finding out about it. In Sam's April 22nd 1995 journal entry concerning this moment, she writes:

I had an... interesting talk with mom and dad tonight. One YOU'RE never going to need to have. I mean... you've known, right? Like... I'VE known. I've known since like, She-Ra. Mom and dad didn't, I guess. But they saw the zine, and the stuff on the locker, and they were like, "is there something we should know about you and Lonnie?" And so here's the thing. I was prepared for them to be mad, or disappointed, or start crying or something. But they were just in DENIAL. "You're too young to know what you want," "you and Lonnie are just GOOD FRIENDS," "you just haven't met the right BOY..." "It's a PHASE." That's what I didn't see coming. That they wouldn't even respect me enough... to BELIEVE me. Well. Joke's on them. Because they are in for one VERY long phase. (The Fullbright Company, 2013)

Because of Lonnie's enrolment in the United States Army, she was set to ship out to training after graduation, which left Sam devastated after her departure. However, after a few days, Lonnie called her to tell her that she got off the bus in Salem, because she could not go through with it, as she was missing Sam too much. She wanted her to come find her, and for them to go away together, to which Sam answered positively. Sam's final journal entry is a letter to Katie, in which she explains why she left, and that she hopes to see her again someday.

In addition to the main storyline concerning Sam, some clues imply that the mother could be romantically involved with a colleague. Furthermore, the father appears to have been sexually abused in his childhood by his uncle, who was the former owner of the house the family is living in.

Overall, *Gone Home* was widely acclaimed at its launch. It received high ratings and positive reviews from review websites and journalists, as well as won awards such as 2013 BAFTA Best Debut Game, Polygon Game of the Year 2013, and 2014 Game Developers Choice Awards Best Debut. The game's LGBTQ+ representation was also praised. However, because of its design and form, an exploration game only focused on collecting information through searching a house without much challenge, some critics have wondered if it were a game at all. The following sections will analyse the game's design, play, and remediation through a queer point of view, as per Chang's values previously defined in this research paper's framework.

5.1.2 Analysis

5.1.2.1 QUEER(ER) DESIGN IN GONE HOME

While developing *Gone Home*, The Fullbright Company was only a four-person team, all living under the same roof. They lived off their savings before launching the game. Having such a small team influenced the game's development: they had to be realistic in terms of what they could achieve with each of their skills. Moreover, all of them having experience in exploratory storytelling, they knew it was what they would be best at. In an article focused on the making of *Gone Home*, its author Ellison states:

Gone Home's ending echoes The Fullbright Company's decision to move to Portland, take a chance on their savings lasting and, for a year and a half, work on a game that they wanted to be different, to be inspirational, and to be solely about people and their relationships to each other. (Ellison, 2014)

The way this game was developed, and because this game is so personal to its team, shows that *Gone Home* was not created with profit in mind, but rather a desire to create, just like a piece of art. Fullbright was also consistent in their support of the LGBTQ+ community. They notably pulled out from the PAX Prime exposition in 2013, where they were supposed to show in the Indie Megabooth, because of their insensitive, misogynistic, racist and transphobic takes and stances. More specifically, their statement includes the following:

We are a four-person team. Two of us are women and one of us is gay. *Gone Home* deals in part with LGBT issues. This stuff is important to us, on a lot of different levels. And Penny Arcade is not an entity that we feel welcomed by or comfortable operating alongside. (The Fullbright Company, 2013)

As such, the LGBTQ+ theme in *Gone Home* is clearly not only in the purpose of getting good press, as some critics said, such as during the Gamergate controversy – an online harassment campaign starting around 2014 opposing cultural diversification, and feminist and LGBTQ+ representation (Wikipedia).

In terms of Chang's value of queer(er) design, Chang clearly defines it as creating not only a queer character, but rather a queer experience. In *Gone Home*, Sam's queerness cannot be erased nor dissociated from the plot: it is indeed what creates the game. If Sam were not into women, and dating one, the game could not exist, because it is her queerness that essentially forces her out of the house. Furthermore, queer references are sprinkled across the game, such as the Riot Grrrl cassettes, the zines, Sam's celebrity photos in her locker, and the hair dye in the bathroom (Kennedy, 2020). Therefore, Sam's queerness is influencing the storyline, and is what creates an experience for the player.

Gone Home is also especially interesting, in that the game revolves around Sam's queerness: however, she is not physically present. The player can read her words, and hear her voice telling them her story, but she is absent, and only finishing the game can resolve that mystery.

As per quite a few queer game players, *Gone Home* is refreshing, first because of its LGBTQ+ representation, but also because this representation does not end badly, nor sadly or tragically, but rather beautifully. As per Smith in a PopDust article, 'I feel like this game gives you a refuge from a world that thinks you're disposable' (Smith, 2017).

5.1.2.2 QUEER(ER) PLAY IN GONE HOME

But can *Gone Home* be interpreted as queer(er) play, per Chang's values? First, the game has an overall goal, which is to uncover what happened to the family, for the house to be empty on Katie's arrival. However, the game does not set specific objectives within the gameplay, as some games usually do, and let the player explore on its own and find the answer they might be looking for. By exploring the house as Katie, the player gets rewarded by out loud lectures of Sam's journal, getting more answers on what is going on. Furthermore, in order to progress in the game, they must look for certain information or objects to unlock access to more discovery. For example, at the beginning of the game, the player can visit the father's office in which there are locked drawers. The code can be found later on, in a file in the library. If the player does not look everywhere, they might miss important information. However, not all players will go in the same direction during the game, which makes for a non-linear progression. The player also has access to a menu referencing all items found, a map of the house with the discovered rooms, and Sam's journal's entries, which can be listened to again.

Because *Gone Home* is so focused on exploring and collecting, it also feels like an accessible game, even to those who are not usually familiar with playing video games. Thanks to its non-standard gameplay, *Gone Home* has been used as an example on how video games can be considered as art. Because its gameplay does not feature any mechanics usually found in many games such as action, competition, fighting, nor a possibility of winning or losing, *Gone Home* appears to be challenging the norms of video games. As such, *Gone Home* seems to fit perfectly in Chang's definition of queer(er) play.

However, because of its main focus on exploration, *Gone Home* raised the question for some to whether it should be considered a game. It was also called derogatorily a walking simulator. In an article in *Lightgun Galaxy* by Mandi Odoerfer, she also first thought that 'it can barely be called a game at all'. However, because *Gone Home* appears so right in their interpretation of mundane objects scattered around the house and telling this family's story, she ended up thinking that 'the method of storytelling felt completely unique to video games, and I couldn't imagine a story like *Gone Home*'s working in any other medium' (Odoerfer, 2013). According to an interview of Gaynor, one of *Gone Home*'s creator by Alexander,

Gone Home is not challenge-based, but is deeply interactive: "The experience cannot exist without you driving it all the way. Everything that happens is intentional on the part of the player, and with most of the story, you have to connect the dots yourself," he says. "On that level, that was ... why this has to be a video game, an interactive thing. It's not something you can just read a novelization of and get the same experience. *Gone Home* couldn't be what it is in any other form."
(Alexander interviewing Gaynor, 2013)

Gone Home, by essence, appears as a form of queer play. Because of its object collecting mechanic, many have also argued that it could be seen as a queer archive. As the only way to find out Sam's queerness is by uncovering objects that will set out new entries of her journal. Therefore, per Renee Ann Drouin, 'only by archiving, using queer methodologies, is queerness irrefutable' (Drouin, 2019).

But aside from the primary mechanic of exploration and collection, the game also plays on some horror mechanics, without ever including actual horror or scary components. *Gone Home*'s gameplay is especially interesting because the player does not know what happened,

and can actually feel scared to discover it, because they are not sure what they will find. There is a thunderstorm outside, the main protagonist finds themselves in a big mansion, the house is dark, the lights sometimes flicker... Everything is set to resemble the beginning of a horror video game. Per Nicolle Lamerichs's essay on *Gone Home*'s horror, this game raises the following feelings in its players:

The purposeful *tension* and the unease that the house embodies, including the references to haunted mansion tropes. The *constraints and silence* of experiencing a queer lived experience second-hand. The *awkwardness* of snooping around and invading the privacy of everyone in your home. (Lamerichs, 2020)

Another interesting argument by Brigid Kennedy is that *Gone Home*'s queerness is not only about its LGBTQ+ representation, but also about queer 'in its older sense—to mark strangeness'. According to them, '*Gone Home* works to queer the domestic by making the domestic strange', because *Gone Home* wants the player to be uncomfortable. As such, objects like Sam's bottle of red hair dye functions both as 'a reference to queer subculture', and 'a play on horror tropes in the dye splashed on the bathtub resembling blood spatter' because these horror mechanics 'have created an expectation of impending danger'. They finish by arguing that '*Gone Home* refuses utopic queerness, instead welcoming something uncomfortable and strange, but not hopeless' (Kennedy, 2020).

Furthermore, this horror mechanic in *Gone Home* also works because of the setting of the game. In this game, the main protagonist arrives at the house, and does not know what happens, and neither does the player. It appears as a time mechanic, an idea of being caught between the past and the present, by rummaging through the house's objects, especially since *Gone Home* is set in the 1990s, which is 20 years prior to 2013, the year it came out. One of the reasons for this past setting is because developers needed to find a way for information and secrets to be contained in the house and its objects, rather than in a person's smartphone like it would be today (Grayson, 2012). Because of this idea of the past, it allows for exploration and slow pacing because the player can be scared of what they might find in the house, almost like an idea of psychological time. Psychological time is non-linear, and depends on events occurring within a time period, just like the story in *Gone Home* (Zakay, 2016). The game's slow pacing also resembles older video games, such as the *Zork* series (Infocom, 1977-1979), where the player had to use their imagination to connect with the game. In *Gone Home*, there is a 3D

environment, but it is also a game of imagining what happened in the house, and what could happen going forward.

These arguments prove to show *Gone Home* can be interpreted as queer play, per its narrative and mechanics, but also in some way in its horror theme.

5.1.2.3 QUEER REMEDIATION IN GONE HOME

Finally, as mentioned previously, *Gone Home* has won awards as Best Debut, as well as Game of The Year 2013, and received many praising critics. Despite being Fullbright's first game, *Gone Home* went on selling over 700,000 copies by 2017 (Donnelly, 2017). Because of the press and the number of players, *Gone Home* also developed a large fanbase, but also attracted the critics because of its specific gameplay.

By the looks of it online, it appears that people either passionately love this game or hate it. This brought many discussions and debates on why others should play it, or not, notably on Reddit, a social media website based on discussion and debates on a specific topic. One of the common arguments of people disliking the game is that they think it should not be considered as a game, because it is a piece of interactive narrative, and a walking simulator. Per Suellentrop in a New York Times article,

Its designer and writer, Steve Gaynor, was bothered enough by negative user reviews online that he gave a talk at this year's Game Developers Conference titled "Why Is *Gone Home* a Game?" (Suellentrop, 2014)

However, others argued that *Gone Home* could only exist on a game medium, because it is all about exploration. According to Odoerfer, 'the method of storytelling felt completely unique to video games, and I couldn't imagine a story like *Gone Home*'s working in any other medium' (Odoerfer, 2013). Another argument against includes the price, believed to be too expensive – \$20 when it first came out – for only a couple of hours of gameplay. Some felt also deceived, because *Gone Home*'s promotion, and even the beginning of the game, resembled a horror game. They bought it thinking it would feature horror components and were ultimately disappointed because it turned out to be just a family story. Finally, it is well-known that the gaming community somewhat includes a specific kind of toxic masculinity, which notably caused the Gamergate scandal: male players calling out the progressive agenda of including

women and LGBTQ+ representation in video games because of the recent feminist influence around 2014, going as far as harassing and doxxing some women in the industry (Wikipedia) (Mortensen, 2016). This came from deep rooted misogyny, but also probably from a fear that games with hegemonic masculinity, featuring strong, violent characters, might disappear. In a 2015 article, Korfhage writes:

But with acclaim often comes contempt. On Reddit and Twitter, gamers declared *Gone Home*'s triumph a plot of “social justice warriors”—people bent on enforcing political correctness. The only way a game like this could get such positive reviews, some charged, was cronyism or political conspiracy. [...] Subreddit posts proliferated, with titles like “More Corruption at Polygon: *Gone Home* Nepotism Worse Than We Thought,” and threads on popular site Gamespot dissected the “gay agenda” of reviewers on various game sites. Obsessives posted diagrams of purported complicity between *Gone Home*'s makers and reviewers that looked like something from the walls of an FBI nerve center. (Korfhage, 2015)



Figure 5: A meme mocking *Gone Home*'s 10/10 Polygon review (Willamette Week, 2015)

As such, it is clear that *Gone Home* struck a nerve for some players, but making it very obvious why people would also defend it even more passionately, on social media but also in press articles. For example, in an article on Medium, Chmielarz, a video game creative director,

defends his point of view on why he likes *Gone Home*, despite the critics (Chmielarz, 2015). On Reddit, in a favourable post to *Gone Home*, some were also discussing the fact that they were afraid for Sam's life at some point, when she was desperate after Lonnie left for the army. So much so that they ran in the house into the attic to ensure she did not kill herself, therefore truly identifying to the main protagonist Katie on how afraid she would be for her sister's life (Reddit, 2014). This raises the idea of games having an affective resonance on players. According to Tomkins, affective resonance, or empathy, is how a person can resonate and experience the same emotions in response to somebody else feeling those emotions (Tomkins, 1962). Games could therefore have a strong affective resonance, perhaps stronger than some mediums, because playing could enhance this sensation of reality. It would then make sense that becoming a fan would stem from this empathetic response and bring this desire to create into and improve a loved universe.

Finally, another interesting point raised amongst the good critics in terms of gameplay was a Tumblr user being irritated that the press kept praising the game because it was a story that felt universally similar and almost personal. In their critique, they liked the queer women representation, but pointed out that the story was not catered to everybody, but rather to a white, upper middle-class person, because that was the family represented in *Gone Home* (kukkurovaca, 2013).

In terms of queer remediation, it is interesting to note that it is usually used by queer people in response to a lack of queer media, or if the media queerbaits, or in order to correct queer media using overused tropes like *Life is Strange* with the Bury your Gays trope. In the case of *Gone Home*, the queer representation is not hidden: Sam and Lonnie's relationship is described as romantic. Their relationship also ends well, because Sam flees the house to reunite with her. In that case, one could expect a lack of queer content created by the fandom, because it already exists in the canon, the name for the original media's content in fandom glossary. In some ways, this is true for *Gone Home*. There are game wikis, walkthrough videos, speed runs videos, and a multitude of content made by the fandom around the game. However, in terms of queer content, there are less works than other media using queerbaiting methods. As such, in terms of fanfictions, there are currently 19 works on Archive of Our Own, 13 on FanFiction.net, and 1 on Wattpad, using the actual game story, but rewriting it in a novel format (Obsidian_Productions, 2017). This could be explained once again by the lack of need to

remediate the game’s story to make it queerer: the game is already queer enough to its queer players.

However, there is a multitude of LGBTQ+ fan art on *Gone Home* online, representing Sam and Lonnie. There are many notably on Tumblr, some amassing a few hundred notes – meaning likes and reblogs (kikimanrique, 2014). There are also fan-made creations, such as this earring representing the *Gone Home* logo, posted only four months ago, even though the game came out in 2013.



Figure 6: *Gone Home* logo earring (sachiraki, 2021)

Gone Home fans were also really involved in the game, to the point of helping the developers. In a conference named ‘Crowdsourcing the Localization of *Gone Home*’ by Fullbright’s co-founder Johnnemann Nordhagen at the 2014 Game Developers Conference, Nordhagen explained that some fans helped translate the game in their native language, which reduced costs for the studio (Nordhagen, 2014).

Overall, *Gone Home* is well-known in the LGBTQ+ community, because it is including a lesbian romance with a good ending. It was also praised by reviewers at its launch, because of its specific gameplay along with its queer representation, such as a Pop Dust article stating ‘*Gone Home* is a timeless exploration into family and queer youth, and every queer gamer should play it’ (Smith, 2017). It can also be found in top queer games to play, such as on Tumblr (diversegaminglists, 2015), or the Gay Times’ ‘10 of the best LGBTQ video games to play while self-isolating’, which also includes *Life is Strange* (Megarry, 2020).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Case studies reflection

While writing this paper, I thought I had a clear idea on how LGBTQ+ lives could be represented under the video game medium. As it turns out, I really did not know much in terms of research. But studying queer game studies has really broaden up my knowledge in not only video game studies but also queer studies.

First, *Life is Strange* has been tremendously studied, because of its wide reach, its storytelling, and its representation. But looking at *Life is Strange* through Chang’s values has really brought a specific reading of the game different from its other aspects, allowing for a better understanding of its narrative and what it may entail, because *Life is Strange* was never clear about its representation.

In *Gone Home*’s case, because its queer representation is at the centre of the story, it cannot be dissociated. The narrative cannot be studied without having to mention Sam’s queerness, because it is what causes the story in the first place.

Through these analyses, a few conclusions can be drawn. First, it appears that games based on storytelling, and/or exploration, with an indie feel, could foster LGBTQ+ representation easier than other types of games. For Chang, ‘queergaming engages different grammars of play, radical play, not grounded in normative ideologies’ (Chang, 2017, p.19). As such, it would be harder to implement LGBTQ+ representation, in terms of design but also play, in games

favouring play based on ‘competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states’ because being queer is being at the opposite of these ideologies (Chang, 2017, p.19). Then, comparing *Life is Strange* to *Gone Home*, it appears that choosing to queerbait to ensure not losing certain customers opposed to LGBTQ+ representation, can bring more queer remediation, as queer people will try to resolve this representation, but this remediation in *Life is Strange* was also be associated with many critiques on where the game could have done better.

It is also interesting to note that *Life is Strange*’s studio has much more of a corporation positioning. For their first game *Remember Me* (2013), Dontnod’s development budget had reached 20 million euros, a budget close to triple-A games. However, it only became profitable after a few years through digital sales, and the company had to file for a form of receivership in France (Richaud, 2017). Because of this, *Life is Strange*’s budget had to be much smaller. At the 2015 Paris Games Week, a video game event in France, Dontnod CEO Oskar Guilbert said that *Life is Strange* cost under 6 million to develop (McDermott, 2015). In an interview given to French newspaper Les Échos, he states that this game needed a strong identity, along with a committed artistic stance (Richaud, 2017). *Life is Strange*’s creative director Jean-Maxime Moris also said that ‘the decision to do something smaller was induced by the conditions and the environments’ (Bailey, 2015). Regarding *Gone Home*, its co-founder Johnnemann Nordhagen at the 2014 Game Developers Conference, presented a conference named ‘Crowdsourcing the Localization of *Gone Home*’. In it, he writes that *Gone Home*’s budget ‘was basically zero’, as they lived off their savings in a shared house, and personally funded every purchase and outsource task. They also used their fans’ dedication, as some offered to translate the game in their mother language, which reduced costs once the game was given international recognition (Nordhagen, 2014). As such, it appears that smaller budgets can tend to create games that are more story focused, because it costs less to develop if the studio chooses to simplify its design and gameplay. By their nature, these narrative games can then increase the chances of queer representation, because it is generally about treating a character’s life and their surroundings. Smaller budget can also appear inherently queer, because at its core, queerness is not about turning in a profit, but can rather include the potential of failure.

Through these analyses, these two video games have also proven to have an effect on their fans, especially through the act of queer remediation. As talked about in *Gone Home*’s analysis, games appear to have a strong affective resonance, notably through the act of playing. The

inclination in creating for some could arise from this affective resonance, and the emotional attachment to the characters and their universe. Creating games including more representation than the usual white, heterosexual male, means that more people would be able to identify to a plethora of video games, which could in return draw interest in the medium.

It is also interesting to note that a strive for representation of female characters has long been a strong request. This representation today is still not perfect, but it is more commonly accepted that there is a need for female characters, and most releases have started to implement at least a choice between two characters, male and female. This representation has also evolved, from the Damsel in Distress trope, and very sexualised female characters, which today now raises a lot of questions, to characters such as Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), and its sequel *Horizon Forbidden West* (2021) coming out this year, a strong, non-sexualised, main female character in a post-apocalyptic Earth. If representation of women in video games was able to get this far in only a few decades, there is hope that LGBTQ+ representation will keep getting better in years to come.

From these analyses, it is clear that these video games do not appear perfect through a queer lens. But could any game, even designed and developed by a queer person, appear to be hitting all the marks for everybody? The queer games studies are not a strive for perfection, but rather a need to represent the LGBTQ+ community somewhat correctly, and challenge dominant ideologies in the video game industry. It is hard to pinpoint and acknowledge one specific idea which could bring massive change in the medium, but also in the industry. It goes without saying that representing LGBTQ+ lives through video games stories, but also through gameplay can only reduce homophobia in society and expand the notion of game. Queer game studies appear as still a small area in research, but it is also under a growing interest. As the industry slowly starts to open up to LGBTQ+ researchers, but also designers and developers, the representation can only be positively affected. In the last few years, we have seen games such as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) with lesbian characters, *Tell Me Why* (2020) featuring a playable transgender character, but also older games had already started implementing queer representation such as the *Mass Effect* (2007-2021), *Dragon Age* (2009-2014), and *The Sims* (2000-2021) series, all featuring LGBTQ+ relationships. There has also always been various LGBTQ+ in indie games. There is clear evidence, and hope from the LGBTQ+ gaming community, that the representation will only increase, in quantity and in quality. Overall, it appears that queering a game from its design to its gameplay, in addition to adding queer

characters and relationships, are key to improve LGBTQ+ representation. It is also a way to create new gaming experiences.

5.2 Open reflection

Throughout this essay, many questions were raised from a player point of view, but also from a developer's perspective. This research paper has shown through specific case studies how video games could be queer, in a multitude of ways: design, play, and remediation. This research made me ponder upon video games' future, and more precisely how could the industry create queerer video games, through representation, but also through gameplay.

As a way to draw conclusions on this work, one might wonder why this representation would be needed. According to a 2019 survey on hate and harassment in online video games by the Anti-Defamation League of the United States, 35% of LGBTQ+ players reported harassment based on their sexual orientation. On the basis of gender, it was 38% of women. Overall, it was 53% of 'online multiplayer gamers who experience harassment believe they were targeted because of their race/ethnicity, religion, ability, gender or sexual orientation' (ADL, 2019). By pushing for better representation, it would reduce harmful stereotypes on often targeted genders and communities. According to Ortiz in an article on Hype Bae, who is a professional gamer who happens to be a transwoman, the fact that there were only cis characters on TV made her feel left out growing up. Ripley, another transwoman and professional player, believes that the transformation of the industry must go through hiring more LGBTQ+ professionals, because their stories should be told by themselves. In her words: 'if game developers want to tell LGBTQ+ stories, then it is absolutely vital that they hire LGBTQ+ writers who will be able to translate those very real queer experiences into a nuanced story', a feeling shared by many in the LGBTQ+ gaming community (Hype Bae, 2020).

A feeling also shared by many, including Ortiz and Ripley, is that the representation has already come a long way. As stated previously, the representation of women has tremendously evolved positively over the recent years. As it is now increasingly possible to speak openly about minorities' rights, and online activism has skyrocketed, the focus is now on not only representing, but also thinking in terms of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describing how different aspects of a person's identities, more specifically their race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other characteristics, all overlap

and can combine, creating different modes of discrimination, but also privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). This paper is focused on LGBTQ+ representation, and its two case analyses are more specifically about queer women, who happen to be white, but it is important to understand that other dynamics might be at play in representing minorities. For example, as part of the LGBTQ+ representation, gay and lesbian relationship are more often represented in video games than the transgender experience, even though some games are now taking interest, such as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) or *Tell Me Why* (2020). Furthermore, representing different gender identities and sexual orientation does not excuse from representing people of colour, who are also in tremendous need of representation. These identities can overlap, and it is therefore important to take them into account and represent them. In Bonnie Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* (2020), part five is focused exclusively on intersectional perspectives in and on queer games. Its chapter thirteen notably addresses the issue of 'making games about queer women of color by queer women of color' (B***** and Yang, 2020, pp. 153-161). This subject would also be relevant to analyse through the scope of ethnicity.

It is also worth noting that the indie video game community has long represented LGBTQ+ and other minorities in their video games, because it is also where a lot of LGBTQ+ people in the industry are working, and it will, without a doubt, continue to flourish. It is now up to the most prominent part of the industry to advocate for change.

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