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# Queer Quests: Journeying Through Manifestations of Queerness in Video Games

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Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media and Cultural Studies

School of Media, Film and Music  
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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

## Abstract

This thesis focuses on the various manifestations of queerness in video games, and investigates how video games' queer potential connects and clashes with LGBTQ politics, as well as with gaming culture and hegemonic masculinity. Through the lens of queer theory, I adopt two main angles of approach. Firstly, I concentrate on video game characters and study them as vessels of queer politics. Focusing on two game characters, and their reception within gaming communities, I explore the limits and potentials of the queer politics in video games. As such, despite the prevalence of heteronormative values in video game narratives, I argue that some game characters embody unexpected vessels of queer hope.

Expanding upon this argument, this thesis moves away from queer characters and interrogates the inherent queerness of games themselves. In doing so, I delve into multiple choice dialogue systems and forms of 'aimless' game exploration, and argue that games can enfold the player in a queer, timeless bubble where alternative possibilities loom on the horizon. As such, I argue that the player escapes from normative time structures and freely articulates game time and space. In this way, these sequences occur in a queer temporality which runs counter to core game mechanics, such as achievements and rewards. Extending this queering of game, I finally argue that particular counternormative gaming practices, such as intentionally losing, celebrate the failure of heteromascularity both inside and outside gaming culture.

In this way, and throughout this thesis, I argue that video games operate as a multidimensional medium, providing various instances where queerness manifests itself. While I demonstrate that some of these instances can be found in other popular media such as cinema and literature, I argue that video game queerness also takes unique shapes that are exclusive to the medium. As such, I suggest that video games, as a polysemic medium, gleam with queer potentiality, and are pioneers in revealing new queer embodiments.

## Acknowledgements

It would be terribly unfair not to acknowledge that several people directly contributed to this academic journey and helped make it more bearable. I must first thank Niall Richardson, who inspired the initial focus of this thesis and accompanied me during the first part of my research. I am also truly thankful for Sharif, my primary supervisor, who believed in this project until the end – despite the numerous obstacles I encountered – and carried it with his wit, engagement and enthusiasm.

As a non-native English speaker, proofreading one or two paragraphs or finding the right word can sometimes take me a full day. Fortunately, two people in particular spent countless hours on my clumsy writing and helped me keep a little bit of self-confidence. I thank the spectacular Tom Houlton, who generously read this thesis in its entirety, provided encouraging feedback and prevented me from selling my liver. I also cannot stop thanking Matt Beetar, who, in addition to having started his PhD at the same time as me (and obviously finishing a year before me), being “MY BEST FRIEND!” and introducing me to several faces of queer culture, is THE proofreader everyone would dream of. You know that if you ever want EU citizenship, I am (and probably will remain for decades) single and happy to marry you.

2016 was a bad year. Tormented by insomnia, I saw my life drifting away to dangerous shores that, I thought, had been erased from my mind. For going through this I must thank Andrew for hanging out with me during half a year. You will probably never read this, nor be aware of how you actually helped me, but you definitely restored, somehow, my confidence and sense of self-worth. I cannot forget George, who gave me helpful advice and listened to my endless and self-centred monologues with a smile that would cheer up the grumpiest cat. I can also only thank Poppy for those wild London nights, which, for a couple of hours, washed my worries away. And for all those drinks I never paid for.

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# Introduction

Any gamer knows that some games will leave an everlasting mark in their mind. In my case, the last of them was *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2017) in which I played a Japanese high-schooler in bustling Tokyo, fighting to change society. Juggling between my student life, awkward dates, part-time jobs and demon hunting in parallel worlds, I was more than impressed by the game's mature take on Japanese societal problems such as corruption, sexual harassment or online bullying, and delighted by its detailed and informational references to the occult.

However, alongside these refreshingly progressive themes lay much more problematic and backwards representations of sexual and gender minorities. For instance, the only visible gay characters echoed the worst stereotypes: screaming and campy queens on the verge of being 'predatory effeminate pedophile rapists' (Gerardi, 2017, n.p.). Similarly, one of the main female characters was repeatedly oversexualised throughout the game, which even used "soft" sexual harassment as a plot device (Khosravi, 2017). While I managed to brush aside these unpleasant elements and focused on the undeniable qualities of the game, I could not help thinking that despite the increasing number of arguably progressive game franchises, the industry still had a long way to go before catering to a non-heteronormative audience.

This bitter feeling was confirmed when *Persona 5*'s game director explained his decision of not including a female protagonist: it would have constituted an additional amount of work which was not 'worth it'; an 'archaic' answer which regrettably echoes the general discourse of this evolving industry (Franck, 2017, n.p.). Fortunately, there is still an increasing number of independent games and game companies which push for the inclusion of more diverse narratives advocating for social change. For example, *The Tearoom* (Yang, 2017) and *Hurt Me Plenty* (Yang, 2016), both created by independent game developer Robert Yang, enable the player to respectively cruise a toilet while trying to escape the police and participate in a spanking session. Although more shy when it comes to diversity, blockbusters also show signs of improvements with games such as *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios, 2016) and the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-Present) which feature non-heterosexual characters and relationships.

Nonetheless, when reflecting on these advancements, I did not feel that hooking up with the chief engineer in *Mass Effect* conveyed much more radical politics than the fights of *Persona 5*'s characters. Despite its contradictions, *Persona 5* provided me with an “out-of-this-world” experience without taking me to a far-away galaxy. Exploring exotic solar systems in *Mass Effect* was, of course, a thrilling experience, and having the possibility to carry out a same-sex romance fully fulfilled my gay space fantasy, but the rest of this adventure did not differ much from other canons of the Space Opera genre: I had to explore uncharted planets, save civilians and fight an unknown extraterrestrial entity. In the case of *Persona 5*, nothing I was doing felt like something I could relate to in any way. The game's atmosphere, impressive soundtrack and jaw-dropping design brought an uncanny twist to the mundane activities in which I was invited to engage, whether it be passing exams or buying exotic sodas from vending machines. Despite its apparent ordinariness, my daily life as a high-schooler was truly extraordinary or, should I dare write, queer.

This thesis is an investigation of different manifestations of queerness in video games. Drawing on textual analysis of the games themselves, as well as the responses they have garnered, it explores the presence, absence and gamer's perception of queer content. Beginning with a focus on the sexual and political queerness of key characters in popular games, this thesis then moves on to interrogate how queerness can structure gaming itself and deliver experiences which are at odds with the values of mainstream gaming culture. As such, I suggest that queer game experiences create a temporality that is not ruled by game objectives or achievements, and escape from the hegemonic linear conception of time. Running counter to the principles of most AAA<sup>1</sup> games, these findings lead this research to focus on another queer instance of gaming: intentional failure. Through the analysis of Gay Ryona, a subcultural community which use fighting games to celebrate loss and humiliation, I demonstrate that even the most heteronormative material can be recuperated as a queer site.

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<sup>1</sup> An AAA game, pronounced “Triple-A” game, refers to a game generally developed by a large studio, funded by a significant budget (multiple millions of dollars) and produced for major platforms (PC, and, currently, Xbox One, PS4 and Nintendo Switch).

## Context and Contribution to Knowledge/ Scope of the Research

A substantial body of research on representation and identity in video games has tackled gender and race (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002, Delp; 1997; Dietz, 1998; Leonard, 2006; Miller & Summers, 2007, Sanford & Madill, 2006). Yet, queer game studies is still in its early stages. Led by scholars such as Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, this field questions our critical understanding of video games as a medium and suggests alternative paths to normative gaming. The recently published collection of essays *Queer Game Studies* (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017) lays out these paths, functioning as a compass for the queer scholar willing to venture into uncharted queer realms.

Overall, queer scholars advocate for an extensive understanding of queer content in video games, indicating that most LGBTQ game studies have focused on representation (i.e. the display of LGBTQ characters and relationships) and that it is now time to consider other types of queer instances, such as places and game actions. This thesis adopts both a traditional and innovative approach by undertaking a journey through recognized and uncharted manifestations of queer content.

As such, this research starts with the studying of queer representation as it is understood in its “traditional” sense. In addition to being a necessary step which builds towards a comprehensive understanding of video game queerness, this relatively conventional start also reflects my personal growth as a queer scholar. Yet, this first part should not be perceived as a simple reiteration of what has been done in queer representation as it situates itself at the intersection between two lines of thought. The first is that queer representation focuses more specifically on LGBTQ gamers and their online interactions (Pulos, 2013; Condis, 2015; Ratan et al., 2015), logically privileging and approaching online games as platforms which enable the display of social signifiers in the gaming community. The second is that several branches of queer theory such as anti-relationality (Edelman, 2004; Bersani, 1989) have not been extensively applied to video games.

Thus, I make an original intervention by focusing first and foremost on two characters taken from games that are played offline – Dorian Pavus from the relatively recent *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), and Kuja from *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000), a game now considered “old” – and provide the in-depth queer readings they deserve. Concentrating on online content selected from forum threads and videos, this thesis shows

that queer representation often remains misunderstood in the gaming community, reiterating its importance in queer game studies. Finally, by showing that *Final Fantasy IX* can be as political as *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, this work draws attention to the fact that queer scholars should not solely focus on contemporary games in their search of queer game content.

Moving beyond representation, this work maps out its own critical journey, as it tests, explores, adapts and combines game theories construed by scholars such as Ruberg (2017) with the queer scholarship of Halberstam (2005) and Muñoz (2009) among others. In this way, I build upon the current research on queer game studies and explore in greater detail the critical findings of such scholars through the study of relatively popular games – particularly the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* franchises – and others much less known to the gaming community such as *The Path*. I also offer an exploration of “Gay Ryona”, a subcultural genre of game videos which remains largely unknown to the public.

Studying these games through this queer lens, this thesis provides an innovative application of queer theory to video games. Exploring the anti-chrononormative potential of video games, I argue against the idea that video games work as simulations of capitalist societies (Stallabrass, 1993), and make the original claim that games also function as spaces where alternatives to our perceptions of time and space can be experienced. Similarly, I investigate the politics of queer failure in games and how it both deconstructs normative playing and promotes gameplay variants from which gamers derive queer pleasures. As such, this thesis navigates back and forth around queer game theories, beginning with arguably conventional, but detailed readings of game characters, before moving to the less explored territories of game flânerie and homoerotic fighting game videos.

## “Select your Character” – Motivation and Self-Reflection as a Ga(y)mer

In many academic circles, games are poorly regarded and game studies and development are often confused. Hoping to contribute to game studies’ fight for recognition as a legitimate subject, I began this research to demonstrate that video games were a polysemic medium and an inexhaustible source for academic study. I also started this PhD to debunk stereotypes and show that some franchises were at the forefront of progressive

representations of gender and sexuality. Most importantly, undertaking this work enabled me to attempt to bring an intellectual focus to what has primarily been a personal, emotional practice over the years.

Games were indubitably a strong source of creativity and inspiration during my childhood and teenagehood. However, the first Act of this “love story” was one of frustration as my parents were strongly hostile to the idea of a video game console entering the household. Often, I would go to my neighbour’s house and fight to free a sprawling metropolis from the authoritarian rule of a crime boss. When I was not playing, dozens of imaginary levels would blossom in my mind – I was (re)creating my own game fantasy, using toys, drawings, and creating new scenes and characters. However, the day my neighbour acquired *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998), I knew that my imagination would not suffice to satisfy me. The game was beyond beautiful at the time and the 3D graphics added an immersion I had never imagined. I wanted to fully experience its universe.

I had to wait until my going away party – I was then 10 – to receive my very first game console. I was moving countries in the middle of the school year and my school friends had achieved the unexpected, teaming up to offer me a N64 with *Ocarina of Time* as a farewell gift. The N64 had been out for at least three years, everyone had finished *Zelda* and the Playstation 2 was about to arrive, but I did not care – I had received the console as a symbol of the friendships I had made, and the game about which I had dreamt so much was waiting for me in our new house. My journey as a gamer had begun.

Of course, this journey encountered its fair share of obstacles. While I used to play regularly as a teenager, the beginning of my studies put an end to my regular gaming practice. I did not have a TV set during my first two years of undergraduate life and had begun to lose interest in games, convincing myself that I was now “too old” for them. Yet, I would start playing again during the holidays, reviving that childhood need to escape from the real world – a desire that, I quickly realized, would never entirely fade. After these two years without regular gaming, I finally decided to bring back an old TV set and a console from home and began to play again from time to time. Gaming was not as important, but it was a distraction from the stressful beginnings of my adulthood.

My gaming practice also had its ups and downs during the writing of my PhD, which led me to question my identity as a gamer. My first-year resolution was to buy a Playstation 3 (which had already been around for four years). Excited about this new (second-hand) purchase, I turned into a truly antisocial geek during my first term, spending entire weekends on games about which I had heard and read. Still, I spent increasingly less time playing games during the following year: I was unable to find the same sense of escape I had previously enjoyed. While I was going through challenging times during my research, I even came to doubt whether I was still a gamer, and whether not being a gamer would impact the writing of my work. For the first time, I felt that I might have definitely lost my interest in gaming.

Fortunately, I learned to accept the fact that my “gaming needs” did not have to be consistent over time. More importantly, I realized that I had become more demanding and that only a few games could provide that same pleasure that I had enjoyed as a child. As such, I went back to a light, but regular gaming routine towards the end of my second year (4-5 hours a week) which informed the writing of this research, but also restored my confidence.

Little did I know that my gaming routine would intensify again during the writing of my full draft. I was like a child again, and several days would pass when I would switch from working to killing demons during my short evenings, while engaging in a bare minimum of social interaction. Knowing that I had an adventure to look forward to at the very end of a long and lonely day of writing (and endless questioning) facilitated my heavy schedule. I had become the gamer that, I thought, I had always been.

Yet, in spite of these intensive gaming phases, I still do not strongly associate with mainstream gaming culture. My recurring inability (and sometimes refusal) to obtain the latest consoles in “due time” and my lack of enjoyment of online and multiplayer games often put me at odds with gaming societies, which often revolve around purchases of recent games, goodies, T-shirts, high-tech and gaming competition. While I consider gaming to be an important part of my daily life, it is part of a greater ensemble of eclectic interests such as mountain trekking, performing arts and creative writing, which are often considered at odds with gaming and still question my self-identification as a gamer. Gaming, for me, is an intimate experience, and while I am convinced that plenty of other

gamers feel the same way, I still struggle today to find fellow gamers that articulate a pleasure for gaming in the same way that I do.

It comes as no surprise that my (potentially narcissistic) self-perception as a marginal gamer has informed this research's topic. Yet, I do not consider this piece of work as an "extension of myself", particularly because I have always put some distance between this PhD and my daily life. Originally, doing a thesis was a reason for me to stay in an English-speaking country and improve my language skills. It was also a way to delay the inevitable – deciding what to do with my future – while taking a necessary step before considering an academic career. Thus researching queerness in games was not a project that had been well thought-out many years before it started.

Nonetheless, I quickly realized that such an intellectual journey inevitably influences and is in turn influenced by the author's personal life. In addition to being a gamer, I am also a gay man, a part of my identity which, unsurprisingly, initially informed the choice of this research's topic. Being a late bloomer, I had only started to grasp and act upon my desires just a few months before the start of my PhD. As such, both the exploration of my sexuality and this intellectual journey followed a parallel path. These last four and a half years of discovery, questioning, attachments and disappointments enabled me to have a more fluid and tolerant understanding of both my sexuality and research. As I was going through tough personal times, I learned to let go of my work's expectations and allow myself to investigate new trajectories. In sum, I do not see this thesis as a "piece of me", but rather as a glimpse of both the personal and academic journey I undertook over the past four years.

## “Game Changer”: Changing Critical Trajectories

Intrigued by the comments of one examiner during a presentation I had given on queer video game characters – they mentioned that the characters I had chosen looked like dandies – I started this thesis with a focus on video game dandyism, without knowing whether it would drive my entire research. Originally thinking of carrying focus groups after having produced two analysis chapters of game dandies, I rapidly realized that this would force me to drastically change my original research questions. Since queer theory is still deeply rooted in academia, focus groups and interviews would have forced me to spend



more time on the questioning of the basic paradigms of this research, such as the definition of queerness and queer game content, and clearly deviate from my first two chapters, instead of furthering my findings. In comparison, online forums appeared as a more productive alternative. Indeed, the effectiveness of the informational, but also genuine support that online forum provided had been reported (Hsiung, 2000). Online forums also enabled the screening of a larger number of gamers about a given topic, where I positioned myself as an observer and did not directly interact with any user.

Furthermore, my original focus on dandyism also evolved as my arguments became more about queer politics than dandy politics *per se*. Indeed, my analysis pointed towards other fragments of queer game politics which, I thought, deserved to be tackled. As a consequence, I decided to put aside dandyism and came to terms with the fact that I had been working, since the beginning, on manifestations of queerness in games and how, subsequently, games could be considered a medium with queer potential.

As such, the first part of this thesis, constituting Chapters 3 and 4, uses forum comments and game text as the primary material to deliver a queer reading of two game characters that I originally regarded as game dandies. In this, Chapter 3 mainly navigates between gaming culture and LGBTQ politics while Chapter 4 moves towards a queer understanding of game characters and narratives. The second part of this thesis adopts a more ‘global’ approach to queer gaming and interrogates game mechanics, principles and values. While these two parts adopt different methods, their findings echo one another and provide a variety of critical angles, enabling the grasping of queerness both “inside” and “outside” the screen.

# Thesis Walkthrough

## *Research Questions:*

Main Research Question: **How does queerness manifest itself in video games? To what extent does it operate as a disruptive force, and to what end?**

Sub-Question 1: How are queer characters identified by gamers?

Sub-Question 2: What political roles do these characters take on in video games?

Sub-Question 3: In what way can video games promote queer practice and, ultimately, become a site of queerness and queer reappropriation?

**Chapter 1**, ‘Queerness in Games: What, Where, and How?’ provides an overview of queer content in video games and the rise of queer game studies. Through instances of vitriolic homophobia and misogyny in the gaming community, I demonstrate the necessity of carrying out research focusing on LGBTQ content in games. Extending this contextualization, I offer a brief overview of queer game studies and expand upon its claim to move beyond the level of “representation” so as to challenge the core foundations of game studies.

First introducing the debate between narratology and ludology, **Chapter 2** – ‘Instruction Manual: Methodology’ – sets out the methods of this research. I first explain how I selected my characters for Chapter 3 and 4, and develop how I adopted an intersubjective position as a researcher. I also elaborate on the slightly different approach of Chapter 5 and 6 and their specific focus – queer time and failure. Finally, I discuss how I used YouTube and web forums as platforms for research material, and the difficulties and limitations that these online materials present.

I start investigating the queer politics of this research’s first queer character in **Chapter 3** ‘Moustaches, Blood Magic and Interspecies Sex: Navigating the Non-Heterosexuality of

Dorian Pavus'. Engaging with forum comments' politics, I first show that despite Dorian's arguably positive representation, a group of gamers find him stereotypical and argue that too much attention is given to his sexuality. Instead, they push for an assimilationist agenda by suggesting that we have now reached an era where sexuality does not matter. Building upon these comments, I explore the dangers of such politics in the gaming community, and demonstrate how it links back to past controversies and oppressive instances towards minorities in gaming. However, I also indicate that a large amount of players regard Dorian as a moving and relatable character, which informs my reading of Dorian's gay, but also queer politics. This chapter closes on Dorian's optional cross-species romance with a non-human character and demonstrates that it redefines this flamboyant mage as a queer character.

Similar to Chapter 3, **Chapter 4** 'Sissies, Sinthomosexuals and Cyborgs: Searching for the Coordinates of a Queer Future in *Final Fantasy IX*' starts with the analysis of gamers' readings of Kuja through Western gay stereotypes. I note that contrary to Dorian, Kuja's sexuality is never disclosed, and that these readings are problematic because they are based on a misunderstanding of Japanese gender representation in popular culture. Highlighting the complexity of analysing Kuja through a Western lens, I build upon the work of Lee Edelman and argue that Kuja is a quintessentially queer villain who delivers anti-futuristic politics and attacks symbols of heteronormativity. As such, I suggest that he illustrates Edelman's queer and deadly figure of the sinthomosexual. Nonetheless, I also point out the limitations of Edelman's theory, and suggest that it fails at grasping Kuja's multidimensionality. Instead, I investigate Kuja's politics through Haraway and Muñoz's works, and discuss that Kuja should be first and foremost understood as a queer and hopeful cyborg.

Moving away from queer characters, **Chapter 5** 'Charming Aliens, Searching for Wolves: Queer Time and Flânerie in Video Games' focuses on queer moments in games and introduces another facet of queer theory: queer time and flânerie. In a first analytic section, I argue that the *Mass Effect* games' dialogue system positions the player in a queer time which offers glimpses of a plurality of worlds. I also make an analogy between game exploration in the *Mass Effect* franchise and queer flânerie. As such, I demonstrate that some instances, such as the exploration of narrative hubs, put the player in a suspended time and space that is ultimately detached from the main narrative. I extend this claim in the last section in which I argue that *The Path*, an independent game

production, solely relies on flânerie as an anti-chrononormative gameplay mechanic. I conclude that through the deconstruction of the narrative's perception as linear, both gaming and game characters are queered.

Finally, I explore the queering of gaming through the concept of failure in **Chapter 6** 'Hurt Him Plenty: Pleasure and Queer Failure in Gay Ryona videos'. In this chapter, I discuss the queer politics of Gay Ryona by studying the role given to failure in these videos and demonstrate that Gay Ryona videos resist the hegemony of fun by boring, shocking, alarming and disappointing mainstream gamers. I also define failure in Gay Ryona as an anti-normative strategy that rejects disciplining values and liberates space for queer performance and desire. Focusing more specifically on the power dynamics between characters on screen, but also between the audience and the videos' admins, I connect Gay Ryona with BDSM culture and highlight that it promotes, despite appearances, the relentless failure of the masculine.

In the light of these six chapters, I explore old and new embodiments of video game queerness and the extent of their disruptive potential. Through this journey, I combine both my personal experience as a gamer and observer with novel understandings and perception of gaming, and ultimately pave the way towards new critical perspectives.

## Chapter 1. Queer Presence in Video Games – GamerGate, Queer Characters and Queer Game Studies.

“Believing” in video games is an anomaly. When I mention the topic of my research, I read amusement, surprise, and most of the time disbelief on my interlocutor’s face: “Queerness in games? There is probably not a lot of that in those my son is playing!”, “I did not know that some games were queer!”, “Oh, I think I remember having a gay couple in the Sims”. In the minds of many, video games are still for (heterosexual) boys: they are violent and they make you aggressive. They mostly depict strong warriors and weak damsels in distress. They are about being competitive, fighting, racing, surviving, and above all killing.

Indubitably, video games still have a long way to go before they can be considered something other than a straight ‘boy’s thing’ (Sanford & Madill, 2006). However, there seems to be a general obliviousness to the fact that queerness may have always been present in gaming. Indeed, some have argued that video games should always be perceived as a queer medium, as we can find it in the way we play, explore, interact, but also share our experiences and recall them (Macklin, 2017). Before returning to this argument later in this thesis, I first give a brief explanation of what led me to study queer content in video games, and proceed to a contextualization of queerness in video game history.

In this chapter, I develop the critical foundations upon which this thesis is built. I first offer an overview of recent controversies caused by the gendered understandings and misunderstandings of gamers towards the increasing inclusivity of gaming culture. I then identify key instances and LGBTQ characters in video game history and provide a summary of the evolution of queer game studies as an academic field. Following this overview, I underline the differences and similarities of this thesis with the current field. Finally, I provide an outline of queer theory and identify the key theoretical tools that I will use throughout this thesis.

## Homophobia and GamerGate

Although the video game industry has made some slow progress towards a more diverse representation of characters, recent online controversies regarding gender and sexual diversity in the gaming community demonstrate that video games and their audience still have a long way to go, even when it involves progressive companies such as BioWare. In her discussion of the Mass Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *Star Wars: the Old Republic (SWTOR)* (BioWare, 2011), Megan Condis (2015, 203) argues that several gamers still show resistance towards the inclusion of non-heterosexual characters and practices. Meanwhile, BioWare caused great controversy when they revealed plans to censor the use of words such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ on their forums in order to prevent derogatory and offensive uses of these terms (Sliwinski, 2009). While the word gay is often used to refer to anything ‘unmasculine, non-normative, or uncool’ (Thurlow, 2001, 26), BioWare’s plan was criticised for furthering the marginalization of the gay and lesbian community by censoring them (Condis, 2015, 202). The ban was finally lifted with an apology; yet, several gamers supported BioWare’s decision and argued that video games, as virtual spaces, should be located outside the “real world”, and that including LGBTQ content (in games or discussions of games) was breaking this barrier (203). Through her case study, Condis demonstrates how all things encompassing queerness in the gaming community are considered an ‘aberration or an outlying position creating by privileging straightness’ (Warner, 1993, xxi). BioWare ended up including a “gay planet” via an optional downloadable content (Hamilton, 2013), but the damage had been done and the planet was mostly perceived as another way of ostracizing the LGBTQ community. Fortunately, BioWare made amends for this faux pas by engraining a strong and inclusive politics in its offline franchises *Mass Effect* (2007-present) and *Dragon Age* (2009-present).

Along the same lines, the more recent Old School RunScape incident started when the developers of this free online video game decided to hold an in-game Pride event in June 2017. Many game fans considered this inclusive move to be a step too far and flooded the game’s forums with homophobic abuse and criticism (Duffy, 2017). Hundreds of people even assembled in-game to protest against the event, spreading homophobic messages such as: ‘We pay no gay’ or ‘We hate queers’ (Duffy, 2017). Some gamers dressed in equipment that were reminiscent of KKK members, Nazis or terrorists. In response, moderators did not hesitate to mute and sometimes even ban the responsible gamers.

Later, several of them were unbanned after having their “innocence” verified. The event finally took place without any major incidents, but showed that a majority of RunScape gamers voiced their concern about not having been consulted, and argued that such an event was out of place in this type of game, echoing SWTOR’s debate (Duffy, 2017).

Other controversies, such as competitive fighting gamer Aris Bakhtanians’s inflammatory comments about the intangibility of misogyny in gaming culture (Hamilton, 2012), are a proof of how vital it is for game scholars, gamers and journalists to support minorities within the gaming community. Called out for his views, but also for verbally harassing a female gamer while she was playing a competitive match, Bakhtanian later apologized (Hamilton, 2012), justifying his words by arguing that competitive game culture has always been mildly hostile towards newcomers.

Finally, the most recent and extensive illustration of how hostile the gaming community can be towards minorities and women is the GamerGate – the extensive controversy stemming from online harassment of female game designers and feminist games journalists mainly conducted through the hashtag #GamerGate. The phenomenon became heterogenous and complex as it ‘has cut across online platforms and types of fandom and remains diverse in both its stakeholders and targets’ (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, xx). Under the Gamergate banner regrouped self-called “justice warriors” who felt that “authentic” game culture was being attacked by outsiders who were advocating for more inclusive approaches. As Ruberg (2015a, 111) notes, the centrality of the discourse of Gamergate is the idea that games need to be fun and should not be ‘subject to socially engaged critique’. The claims revolved around fighting the censorship of “mainstream culture” in order to maintain gaming as a resisting subculture – without acknowledging the benefits that gaming gained from being already part of mainstream culture (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, xxvii).

Ironically, academics, journalists, but also independent game designers – people who are arguably at the very centre of gaming culture – who would take a feminist approach towards gaming became perceived as a conspiracy aiming at destroying games and their more faithful fans (Shaw, 2017, 155). Almost amused, Cross (2017) brilliantly reads the GamerGate as the inner-fight against the childhood trauma of many straight male gamers:

[a] “wished-for narrative” of a grand cultural mythos is a tale of triumph against censorious parents, violent nerd-hating bullies, and puritanical politicians who wanted to take away their beloved hobby— a tale in which a boys’ club prevailed and gamers could indulge the womanizing power fantasies of strength and valor that “real life” had denied them (Cross, 2017, 216).

During this online backlash, several designers and game journalists received death threats, had their accounts hacked or had to stop working in the field (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, xxi; Wingfield, 2014). The hostility of the gaming community against movements of inclusivity has mainly been perceived as a reaction to the increasing presence of non-heterosexuality and non-hypermasculinity in gaming culture. However, a closer look at video games shows that this presence had always been there, and that behind the overwhelming heteronormativity of video game visuals lie non-conforming characters who have appeared in the early ages of video game culture. As such, Gamergate stands as a reaction against both the evolution and the overall perception of gaming and the gaming community.

## Representation of Queer Characters in Mainstream Video Games

Identifying queerness in games is not an easy task, and as many game scholars before me have noted (Shaw, 2017; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Clark, 2017; Chang, 2017; Lauteria, 2012; Ruberg, 2015a), researching this complex concept often starts with studying representation: in other words, looking at characters’ appearance, sexuality and gender. In this context, queer tends to be used as an umbrella term for LGBT sexualities. As such, archives of queer representation often suggest a move from representation of queer characters to broader understanding of ways games might be queer (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In this way, I follow the same evolving understanding of queerness, by first conceptualizing it as an umbrella term in order to provide a historical contextualization of queer content in the games.

The first LGBT character in a video game appeared in 1986, ten years after the industry started ‘coming into focus’ (Flanagan, 2014, n.p.). *Moonmist* (Infocom, 1984) was an interactive fiction computer game in which a woman is seen to be angry at her girlfriend who is about to marry a man (Flanagan, 2014; Cobbett, 2011). The following years saw the



release of games featuring two openly queer characters who remain famous and are still playable in games today: Birdo from *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo R&D4, 1988) and Poison from *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1989) (Pictures 1 & 2).

In the original game manual, the former was referred as transgender (Flanagan, 2014), an identification that has since been removed, leaving Birdo's gender undetermined. Along the same lines, Poison was defined as transgender in the Japanese manual of the game. This was interpreted by journalistic and fan accounts as a way to bypass Nintendo of America's censorship policy, condemning violence against women<sup>2</sup> (Lauteria, 2016, 49). However, the cultural differences between Japan and the USA regarding transgender identities resulted in the removal of Poison in the American version of the game. The potential status of the character as a transwoman was finally confirmed in the West by Japanese game producer Yoshinori Ono in 2007 (McWhertor, 2007).



Picture 1: Birdo, by Nintendo, MarioWiki, Public Domain.

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, Nintendo Japan was hoping that Poison would not be considered a real woman in the United States. A strategy which would be regarded as transphobic in the Western world today.



Picture 2: Poison, by Capcom, MugaenWikia, Public Domain.

Other characters who could potentially be identified as LGBTQ stood out during the mid-90s and early 2000s<sup>3</sup> (Flanagan, 2014). However, most of them were ‘usually minor characters; mostly predatory or lecherous men included for comedic effect’ (Mulcahy, 2013). As such, and echoing other mainstream cultural output, LGBTQ game characters were reduced to comedic and erotic roles (Kies, 2015, 213).

Same-sex relationships gained visibility in *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios, 1998), *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004) and *The Sims 2* (Maxis, 2003). However, in each case, they had little to no influence on the game’s storyline. As of 2017, the *Dragon Age* (Bioware, 2009-present) and *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007-present) franchises arguably display the most diverse cast of LGBTQ characters and relationships. While the first two instalments of *DA* and *ME* were not considered inclusive enough as they presented limited same-sex options<sup>4</sup>, these games are at present considered to be some of the few that depict non-heterosexuality in a positive light (Kies, 2015, 214).

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<sup>3</sup> *Chrono Trigger* (Squaresoft, 1995) featured a non-conforming mage called Flea mistaken for an attractive woman, and *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* (Nautilus, 2004) a rather flamboyant wrestling master offering his body as a reward in case of defeat.

<sup>4</sup> The games mainly included bisexual characters, adapting to the main character’s sexuality.

Both franchises became more inclusive with the release of *ME 3* (2012), which provided multiple romantic options for every player, and for the first time, included among the supporting characters a gay man and a lesbian (Kane, 2015). *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) went further and featured the ‘full spectrum of L, G, B and T’, although, Krem, who is the most significant transgender character in any BioWare title, was not playable. *ME 3* and *DA:I* stood out as progressive games because they actively create LGBT characters in a game world instead of simply allowing same-sex pairing. They differed from most older games because they provided characters who ‘exist out in the open’, ‘regardless of the player’s choices and actions’ (Kane, 2015, n.p.). Indeed, ‘someone could easily spend hours in a game like *The Sims* (2000- Present) and never know the option for same-sex couples even existed’ (ibid.).

While these games are not without their limitations, particularly because some of the romances available in the earlier games are still produced for the heterosexual male gaze (Glassie, 2015, 162), they offer a refreshing alternative to the overwhelmingly hypermasculine narratives that continue to populate fantasy and science-fiction games today (Hollinger, 1999, 24). This is often made possible by an increasing diversification of developer teams, which is the case of *DA:I*. Indeed, *DA:I*’s narrative was created by gay game’s lead writer David Gaider, who surrounded himself with female co-workers (Theora, 2016, Hernandez, 2012). Gaider praised the influence his female colleagues had on the writing of the romances, particularly because a lot of video games (and even those that would be considered progressive) still depict situations that are not far from rape or rely on forms of implicit sexism or outright misogyny (Hernandez, 2012).

In this way, BioWare has positioned itself as a developer that is keen to promote diversity and represent gender and sexual minorities. Statements from David Gaider confirm the company’s position:

‘We make roleplaying games, which means that the character you play doesn’t *have* to be yourself, but I believe there’s an element where having a game acknowledge that you exist can be validating in a way most people never consider—no doubt because they have no need for validation, and thus no knowledge as to what the lack of it can do to someone.’

'It may not be much, but it's not nothing, and people tell us all the time it's not nothing. We receive heartfelt messages of how much our efforts mean all the time, and it galls me to consider how the assumption out there is that we should consider these individuals less important than those who say hateful things, that placating the hateful should be more of a priority for us or any developer' (Gaider, 2014a).

There is now a growing awareness that video games are not necessarily a heteronormative and oppressive medium. On the contrary, their potential of becoming a primary site where queerness can flourish is slowly growing. In addition, queer game scholars now encourage researchers to approach queer content more expansively than it has done already (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). They have been regrouping over the last ten years to contribute to the building of a new academic field: queer game studies, which more than ever stands as a resisting, hopeful and necessary practice.

## Queer Game Studies

Queer Game Studies started with research investigating why gaming culture was so overwhelmingly male and straight (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000, 8, 9), demonstrating that a lot of video games were leading to actions that were aggressive, pushing gamers to be competitive, in other words, encouraging gamers to carry out typical "masculine" actions. Several other authors (Thornham, 2008; Ratan et al., 2015) explored how female gamers navigate the tension between expectations related to their gender and their actual gaming abilities, concluding that social dynamics contribute to the gender gap in gaming and that video games still lack positive representation of women (Miller and Summer 2007). This body of research drew upon a perceptible phenomenon – that of gendered behaviours in game. However, while these works helped building the foundations of what later became queer game studies, they mostly provided a binary approach of play 'mapped onto female and male bodies' (Condis, 2015, 200). As such, queer game studies detached itself from strictly gendered research to move beyond these dualities.

Queer game studies is comprised of work around representation and the embodiment of identity, focusing on the definition of "gaymers" (Shaw, 2009), looking at the politics of non-binary characters (Lauteria, 2016) and sexual practices (Navarro-Remesal, 2015), and subversion of sexuality through non-human characters (Glassie, 2015). While the

remaining misogyny and homophobia in video games show that works focusing on representation are still necessary, there seems to be a common agreement that queer game studies as a field needs to move beyond representation (mainly, players, contents and game creators) (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, ix). The general argument establishes that queer theory should challenge the dichotomies that have structured game scholarships (ludology/narratology) and recognize queer potential within video games without explicitly identifying visible queer content. For instance, Ruberg (2015a) focuses on the queer potential of failing at games and how the lack of entertainment of this same practice of failing brings about alternative ways of approaching them as a medium.

Along the same lines, Galloway (2014) coined the term *countergaming* – which I define in greater detail later in this thesis – advocating for radical gameplay, but also, as Edmund Chang (2017, 16) and Ruberg (2017) argue, queer modes of play. Chang praises the inclusion of visible and playable queer characters in video games, but wonders how games and game design incorporate queerness in a purposeful way so that it affects narratives, but also game play mechanics, consequences and possibilities. In the same vein, Gabel (2017) and Harper (2017) respectively study how games succeed and fail at gendered gaming practices, and how characters who come out as gay retroactively rewrite past and future gaming experiences.

Other authors such as Bagnall (2017) seek to formulate a queer concept of technology by reflecting on how technology itself is prescribed in a heteronormative way. Taking the example of game controllers, Bagnall argues that joysticks (now present on most controllers) associate in-game agency with phalluses, and wonders how much game experiences would be altered if game controls communicate queer experiences (141). Without advocating for the end of controllers with joysticks, Bagnall searches for different options and questions the potential of ‘remodeling preexisting alternatives’ such as ‘more gender-neutral directional pad’ (ibid.) and how they might modify the nature of our agency as players.

Overall, queer game studies aim at deconstructing our understanding of gaming and exploring new ways of playing, but also conversing about gaming. Above all, queer game scholars rally against the harassment, but also the misunderstanding of many branches of the gaming community. With the advent of new video game companies and developers,

queer game studies has never been more relevant and necessary in order to understand the complex relationship between video games and society.

Queer game studies has now reached a turning point: scholars are entering uncharted territories, advocating for new approaches that might revolutionise the ways we understand games. This new direction is critically illustrated in what could be considered one of the first comprehensive guides to queer game theories, a book made of small chapters and essays that I have already quoted several times in previous paragraphs: *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

As I started this project, there was no book length study available about queerness in video games and it was only when I moved towards the end of my thesis that the book was published. While this book echoes a lot of ideas I have been working with since 2013, it differs in its actual content and structure as it is made of short exploratory chapters and essays which investigate queer gaming today and how it could evolve. In comparison, this PhD stands as an in-depth illustration of this turning point in queer game studies as it first focuses on the politics of queer and the queering of video game content before moving on to the reading of video game as a queer medium. This PhD also differs from the work in *Queer Game Studies* as it tackles and studies concepts and subcultures that have hitherto remained undocumented in academic critiques, including game flânerie and Gay Ryona. Thus, while there are obvious resonances between this thesis and some of the most recently published scholarly work, there are also key differences.

Perhaps the key resonance is that this PhD argues for a movement beyond representation in order to fully grasp video games' queer potential. This is not to dismiss discussions of the representational; indeed, the next two chapters focus explicitly on representations of LGBTQ characters. Instead, it is perhaps better to understand this thesis as a journey that uses representation as a *starting point* from which to venture into other queer realms. This broader perspective permits me to identify instances of queerness that exist beyond the purely representational. As such, I would argue that while this thesis is still grounded in “representation”, my understanding of “representation” becomes more expansive and inclusive as I gradually build this thesis's argument. As a result, this first focus becomes part of a much bigger whole constituted of interconnected manifestations of queerness. Having provided an overview of queer characters and game studies, I now take a small

step back and turn in the next section to the concepts upon which this field and, more generally, this thesis, are built – queerness and queer theory.

## Queerness and Queer Theory

Queer has historically been used in a number of different ways: as a word to signify something strange, as a negative characteristic associated with others – such as madness or worthlessness – and most famously as a word for homosexuality (Sullivan, 2003, v). While queer is a polysemic term characterised by indeterminacy and elasticity, we should not expect, as Anne Marie Jagose (1993) argues, the term to gain consistency over time, but embrace its lack of foundational logic and consistency.

Queer understood in its most recent senses has been adopted in the early 1990s (Jagose, 1993, 76), which saw the emergence of groups such as Queercore, a coalition of radical anarchist and punk queers, QUASH (Queers United Against Straight Acting Homosexuals) and Queer Nation. Academics such as Joseph Bristow and Angelica Wilson (1992), as well as Lisa Duggan (1992) rapidly distinguished these groups from traditional liberationist activism such as the Gay Liberation Front, as they were replacing assimilationist policies with rhetorics of difference.

Symbolising both the continuity and the split with gay and lesbian liberationist agendas, queer gained ground alongside the delegitimation of ‘liberal, liberationist, ethnic and even separatists notions of identity’ (Jagose, 1993, 76). The terms challenged the assumption that sexual preference and/or gender should prevail over other aspects of identity (Sullivan, 2003, 37), and its fluidity allowed it to go beyond the limitations of exclusionist approaches towards lesbian and gay as identity categories.

As an academic term, queer arose in a post-structuralist context provided by the works of Louis Althusser, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, who all contributed to the reconceptualization of identity as a ‘sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth’<sup>5</sup> (Jagose, 1996, 78). First coined by Teresa de Lauretis as a title for a conference held in February 1990 in Santa Cruz, and then in her article

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<sup>5</sup> As Halperin (2003) indicates, most of these works which are now considered the founders of queer theory existed ‘well before anyone had ever heard of it’ (341).

entitled 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities' (1991), the word queer was used to disrupt and provoke familiar patterns of thought and research. Following this, two texts, written by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, were retrospectively hailed as the seminal works of queer theory.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick studies how the 'world-mapping by which every given person' is 'considered necessarily assignable' to two sexual categories (homo/heterosexuality) (2) produced a 'chronic modern crisis' (11) by establishing a false sexual binary. Exploring the paradoxes that stem from this duality, Sedgwick argues that homosexuality is by default subordinated to heterosexuality, which creates an unbalanced interdependence between the two concepts. In addition, Sedgwick contends that the idea of 'heterosexual' as a category is dependent on the 'simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of homosexual' (10). As such, Sedgwick suggests that one way of avoiding the reinforcement of this unbalanced dynamic is to approach 'gender and sexuality' as 'two analytic axes that may be productively imagined as being distinct from one another' (30) which directly informs the deconstructive approach of theory today.

Judith Butler is arguably the theorist who 'has done most to unpack the risks and limits of identity' (Jagose, 2003, 83). In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) specifies how gender operates as a regulatory construct and artifice which privileges heterosexuality and how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates gay and lesbian identities. Unpacking her argument, Butler suggests that gender is performative, that it is a doing: a repetition of bodily gestures and acts that signify gender at every moment. Acknowledging the assimilation of gendered performances, Butler highlights that 'compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term' (1990, 22, 23) and puts the emphasis on the need to move beyond this artificial binary. A queer perspective, therefore, signifies a 'disidentification from the rigidity with which [normative] identity categories continue to be enforced and from beliefs that such categories are immovable' (Giffney, 2008, 2, 3).

Queer theory has evolved into a vast field constituted of various antinormative strategies (Watson, 2005, 68), which revolve around the 'disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality, from their representation in film, literature, and music to their placement in the social and physical sciences' (Kirsh, 2000, 33). Alongside this



deconstructive process, being queer also signifies the practice of creating and nurturing queer spaces in which queer identities can thrive outside of the normative discourses of Western society (Halberstam, 2005, 6).

Queer theory thus relies on the refusal of the binary structure of gender (Bornstein, 1994), and, more generally, the understanding of gender and sexuality as defining components of identity (Sedgwick 1990). In this, queer theory calls for a refusal and a resistance to heteronormativity, and encourages us to think of alternative 'logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space' (Halberstam, 2005, 6).

Thus, queerness is perceived as a threat to the continuity of hegemonic masculinity. Being 'perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm' (Spargo, 1999, 40), it runs counter to the 'realization of [heteronormative] futurity' (Edelman, 2004, 4). Its constant desire to 'undo, disrupt, and make trouble for norms' (Giffney 2008, 57) appears in many guises such as 'queer apocalypticism' (Giffney 2008, 55), 'queer terrorism' (Puar, 2007), or 'gender terrorism' (Bornstein, 1994, 71). Overall, queer identities are excluded from what is deemed acceptable and often need to become invisible in order to remain viable (Halberstam, 2005, 78). Queer theory thus becomes a useful tool to think of queer identities, but also to conceptualise the paradigms of race and gender 'outside of the parameters of identity' (Puar, 2007, 211). As such, queer identities should be understood through 'assemblages', experiences and connections that can be found 'beyond heteronormative reproduction' (211).

The elasticity of queer and its refusal to 'crystallise in any specific form' (Jagose, 1996, 99) has led several scholars to raise several concerns regarding its academic value. Among these anxieties, Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (1993) warn us against the dangers of denying the existence of real lesbians who have only recently collectively began to gather. As such, there is a risk that queer becomes an apolitical term which washes out previous fights for the recognition of gay and lesbian identities. Indeed, one damaging potential of queer is that it ignores the politics of gender and runs the risk of marginalising lesbians even more. Another recurring anxiety is that queer's pejorative sense will survive attempts at political reclamation (Sedgwick, 1993, 4), making its adoption counter-productive, as its use would only serve 'to fuel existing prejudice' (Watney, 1992, 18). Finally, one of the 'simplest objections to queer' comes from those who do not recognise

themselves in that term. As Berlant and Warner (1995) write, ‘queer is hot’ (343), but its new attractiveness is also its curse, as several gays and lesbians do not have a common understanding of queer politics and culture (Jones, 1992, 26).

Nonetheless, while queer theory struggles to move beyond its disruptive nature, I follow Muñoz (2009) who argues that queerness allows a certain flexibility which, when exploited, opens new horizons. Indeed, although queerness, as it can be ideally understood, is not there yet, it offers glimpses of a utopia where queer individuals can thrive (95). In this, queer moments, arts and performances ‘contain blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity’ (1) and are a doing for and towards the future.

In this thesis, I first and foremost use the word queer to refer to characters, games and gaming practices which debunk ‘stable sexes, genders and sexualities’ (Jagose, 1996, 3). More broadly, I understand queer as a practice which aim is ‘to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up’ (Sullivan, 2003, vi) heteronormative knowledges and institutions, but also the hierarchy and rules that govern games and gaming culture. As I previously mentioned, I sporadically refer to queer in its more colloquial meaning (in Chapter 3 in particular): an umbrella term for all sexualities that differ from heterosexuality. While I am aware that this use ‘veils over the differences’ of non-heterosexuality, but also potentially represents us as ‘one big happy (queer) family’ (Sullivan, 2003, 44), I use this understanding as a starting point to access instances of queerness, here understood in their deconstructive meaning.

Thus, this research is built upon a field – Queer Game Studies – that is rapidly changing, and which is itself built upon a multifaceted concept. As a result, complex and evolving theoretical foundations such as queer theory cannot be explored through one single set of methodological tools. In the following chapter, I provide a detailed explanation of my methodology and explain how I adapted my approaches in accordance to my critical focus.

## Chapter 2. Instruction Manual: Methodology

Having mapped out the critical terrain in which this thesis takes place, I now turn my attention to the methods that I used to perform this research. As I explained earlier, this analysis begins with a relatively traditional approach – a study of queer representation in games – before adopting a more multifaceted approach of queerness – that of queer time, queer failure and queer play. Each chapter uses different sorts of primary material – forum comments, personal gaming experiences, YouTube videos – which all demand an eclectic set of methodological approaches.

The queer multidimensionality of this thesis serves to challenge the dichotomies that have long structured how scholars and designers alike understand games ('production/reception, control/agency, success/failure' (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, ix)). While I do not claim that this thesis addresses all the dichotomies identified by Shaw and Ruberg here, all chapters aim at moving beyond them. As such, I first introduce in this chapter arguably one of the most prevalent dualities in game studies – namely the 'narratology versus ludology' debate and explain why a queer approach does not fit with any of those approaches. I then expand upon the ways I selected the characters and games on which I decided to focus. In a last section, I define the intersubjective nature of my analysis and provide a detailed overview of how I gathered my data and why I decided to approach video games through different mediums.

### Going Beyond Dualities (Narratology vs Ludology)

The term 'narratology' was first coined by Tzvetan Todorov in *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969). It refers to the study of the narrative techniques and structures present in all kinds of stories. Todorov regards narrative as a 'universe of representations' (9) that has general, logical, and structural properties to which we should apply linguistic methods. He calls for a generalising theory that could be used for any kind of narrative. Gérard Genette (1983) writes about the ambiguity surrounding the term 'narrative' (25) and defines 'three aspects of narrative reality' (1980, 27). A narrative can be the content of a discourse, that is to say an account of events and/or experiences (a story). It also refers to the medium of

the discourse itself, such as a book containing a story (a narrative). Finally, a narrative is a discourse about narrative (narrating) that evokes the art and the technique of narration, (the activity of narrating) (Genette 1983, 25-27; 1988, 11; Carr 2006, 33). Applied to games, narratology is understood as the study of what and how a story communicates events, characters and perspectives (Genette 1980, 186; Chatman, 1978, 19; Carr, 2006, 33) and how a narrative can be created through the exploration of space and ‘episodic play’ (Carr, 2006, 30).

Since narratologists do not self-identify as such (Harvey, 2006, 66), the clash between narratology and ludology has never truly occurred. Mostly, this dichotomy appears through the works of game scholars such as Juul (1998) or Frasca (2003) who raise the difficulty of translating the concept of narration ‘between media’ (Chatman 1978, Brooks 1992, Harvey 2009, 67). As such, Juul (1998) explains that games do not obey the same criteria as other types of media that employ story-telling. He highlights that the play element of the game does not translate between media, particularly when games, such as *Tetris* (Rowan Software, 1984) only feature non-anthropomorphic “subjects”.

Other scholars such as Newman (2002) argue that the pleasures of video game play are interactive: they are not principally ‘visual’, but ‘rather kinaesthetic’<sup>6</sup> (2), which make them impossible to study solely from the perspective of a narrative. Along the same lines, Kennedy (2002, n.p.) suggests that a narrativist approach cannot ‘account for how the processes of identification and desire may be enhanced or subverted through playing the game’. She notes that several gaming elements, such as the “body” of the player or the societal context in which the game is played, cannot be simply explained ‘within’, as they occur ‘outside’ (ibid.) the game.

Such ludologists advocate for a ‘focus on the understanding of structure and elements – particularly rules – as well as creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of the games’ (Frasca, 2003, 222). As a result, ludology primarily concentrates on gameplay, i.e. the ‘actualisation of a specific stratification of rules, strategies and interaction, as well as the realisation of a certain amalgamation of commands, plans and

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<sup>6</sup> Kinesthesia is understood here as the muscular effort necessary to accompany the motion of the body. Newman refers, therefore, to the interactive effort that is ‘required to keep the flow of the game in motion’ (Apperley 2006, 8).

paths' (136). Thus, ludologists do not intend to 'replace' the narrative approach, 'but to complement it' (Frasca, 1999, n.p.).

However, the ludologist approach is not flawless. Montola (2012) argues that the ludological building blocks that are games, rules, goals, gameplays should not be 'taken for granted as stable' (302) since games are experienced by gamers according to their preferences, skills and backgrounds (307). Moreover, he outlines that discussions in game studies and journalism mostly revolve around 'idealized play experience[s]'. In other words, if one does not study a game that is repeatable, ephemeral, and simple (such as PAC-MAN), it is impossible to produce a 'complete [and uniform] view' (309) of one game through one or several gaming experiences, particularly in the case of long adventure games. Hence, a ludological approach must require looking at every genre of 'interactivity' (Apperley, 2006, 21).

Key ludologists (Aarseth, 2012; Juul, 2005) have acknowledged that focusing on the narrative of story-based video games could still produce critical and groundbreaking findings. Overall, it would be fair to write that the debate seems passé. Queer game theorists are thus calling for an understanding of queerness in video games that goes beyond that of games as 'rule based structures' (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017, x) or interactive narratives. Following their advice, this thesis adopts a hybrid approach constituted of an assemblage of chapters tackling queerness from a changing critical angle.

As such, although some chapters verge towards a stronger focus on narrativity or game play, these foci are never exclusive and bring about the debunking of normative understandings of games. Thus, each chapter simultaneously tackles game narratives and experiences, and their role as a reflector, but also creator of cultural standards. In this way, confining a study of queerness to a ludological or narratological approach would be nonsensical, as their exclusivity and confinement run counter to the definition of queerness itself (Clark, 2017, 9). Despite its multifaceted approach, this research needed a starting point – a game character and/or a game franchise which would contain enough material to illustrate the queer potential of gaming. The next section expands on what motivated the selection of the case studies of this thesis.

## Selecting Characters and Games

I came to this study as a gamer and all the games I am looking at are games that I have played either prior to or during this research. I first made a list of games that were or could include LGBTQ characters, but also games that stood out through their visuals, gameplay and overall experience. This selection was informed by my own evaluation and experience of these games, but also the quality of the data I had managed to gather from online sources comprised of forum threads (more details will be given in the next section) and online articles from specialised video game websites<sup>7</sup>. Fearing that using too many games would weaken the strength and coherence of this thesis and make it appear as a list of fragmented illustrations, I restricted the selection to one or two game franchises per chapter<sup>8</sup>. In this way, each game and character was approached as a platform for studying queerness, ultimately serving a broader argument which can be extended to other games and game characters.

My first choice of case study was *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000). While the franchise includes a significant number of elegant, dandy-like and potentially queer characters<sup>9</sup> for the Western eye, I set my heart on studying Kuja, *FF IX*'s flamboyant antagonist. Remembering him as one of the most androgynous-looking characters of my gaming experiences, Kuja immediately struck me as a relevant case study for this thesis. As a feared outcast, he embodies numerous traits of queer identities, traits that I did not identify as such when I first played the game, but which came back to my mind at the start of this research. In addition, I also found online materials about gamers' confused reactions to his appearance on forum threads, confirming my reading of Kuja as a potentially disruptive character.

As the chapter progressed, I found that Kuja was a strong illustration of the debates surrounding the anti-social turn in queer theory. While Kuja might not have been originally designed to be read as queer, this thesis defines him as such from a Western point of view, enabling me to demonstrate that characters who are not openly queer could still be considered through a queer lens. Following this, I then decided to turn my attention to characters who are openly non-heterosexual, hoping that they might lead to interesting

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<sup>7</sup> Namely: jeuxvideo.com, gamekult.com, kotaku.com, ign.com, gamespot.com.

<sup>8</sup> This does not apply to Chapter 5 as it tackles a game genre rather than specific games.

<sup>9</sup> To name a few: Balthier, Setzer or Seymour.

results. This led me to an obvious choice: Dorian Pavus from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014).

While I explain later in this thesis why I conflated the meanings of queer as an umbrella term for non-heterosexuality and queer as a deconstructive tool, a study of the potential and limitations of queerness in video games must include arguably one of the most popular and playable gay characters in video games today. Indeed, contrary to a lot of characters whose sexual orientations vary according to the gamer's choices, Dorian was one of the first major examples of a character who could only be gay in a AAA game and was granted a kissing scene with some nudity. In addition, Dorian is an extremely popular character online and the subject of many forum conversations, which led me to question the role of LGBTQ characters in the gaming community. As my analysis developed, I acknowledged that he was more of a "breakout gay game character" than a queer character (queer being understood as disruptive) *per se*. As such, I use him as an introductory figure to Kuja, who, I shall later argue, offers more queer potential. In this way, the analysis of both characters enables me to map out the critical trajectory going through gay, lesbian and queer politics.

As I indicated in the introduction, the fifth chapter developed as a move beyond queer representation towards the concept of queer time in games. Despite this change of focus, I wanted to echo the different cues about game time scattered in the previous chapters. As such, I selected the first three *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2012) games, another franchise from BioWare which shares common characteristics with *Dragon Age* (they are both story-driven games, promote the visibility of lesbian, gay and bisexual characters and offer multiple dialogue choices). However, *Mass Effect* trilogy's branching narrative gives more significance to the player's choices. In this way, its narrative can take a "relatively"<sup>10</sup> queer turn while following the plot's trajectory. As a result, I constantly felt a certain pressure when I had to make a decision in the *Mass Effect* games, as I was aware that it might impact my gaming experience.

In addition to its multiple-choice dialogues, the *Mass Effect* games follow a narrative structure that is recurrent in role-playing games: some game locations are considered narrative hubs where the main narrative will not move forward until the player leaves them/starts a mission/ completes an objective, a structure I expand upon in Chapter 5.

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<sup>10</sup> I will nuance this argument in the next chapters.

Overall, the *Mass Effect* games allow both moments and spaces where the narrative was temporarily paused, but also undetermined. Thus, *Mass Effect* was original and popular enough to provide qualitative game and online material, but also generic enough to apply my argument to other games of the same genre. Moreover, the lack of research around the articulation between space and gameplay (most articles about the *Mass Effect* franchise focus on representation) made me pick the franchise as the first case study for Chapter 5.

Being an AAA franchise, *Mass Effect* follows numerous mainstream conventions and heavily relies on a high number of spectacular action scenes, game sequences and the necessary completion of objectives. As a result, the queer instances I identified during this chapter are limited, mostly because they can be easily ignored by gamers who simply want to carry on with narratives. Therefore, I wished to go further into queer territories and extend this argument with another case study which would not be restricted by the AAA format, and chose to explore the independent game scene. Indeed, independent games are often allowed to be more experimental and can, therefore, detach themselves from mainstream gameplay conventions.

Such is the case of *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), which lets the player (almost) aimlessly wander in a vast forest. As a contemplative experience, *The Path* shares similarities with other significant names of the independent scene, such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), making the building of an argument applicable to a relatively wide range of independent game titles. Having played the game in the past, I remembered it as being a disorientating experience. I also remembered game journalists and developers wondering whether or not it should be defined as a game (Harvey & Samyn, 2010; Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009). Hence, even before studying it, *The Path* already appeared to me as a queer game which deconstructs our approach of gaming. As a relevant (independent) counterpart to *Mass Effect*, *The Path* emerged as another obvious choice for this research.

Chapter 6 stands out deliberately by not focusing on particular video games, but on YouTube videos displaying fighting games. As such, although all the games mentioned in this chapter belong to the fighting game genre, there is no specific focus on a game franchise. Overall, this thesis studies an eclectic selection of games, which all provide various manifestations of queerness. Sometimes their diversity implies changes in their angles of approach, an aspect of this analysis into which I delve in the next section.



## Game Analysis

### *Chapter 3 and 4: An Intersubjective Methodology*

While each chapter is structured around queer foci which are all ultimately linked together – queer non-humanity, queer futurity, queer time, and queer failure – I mentioned that Chapter 3 and 4 differed from Chapter 5 and 6 as they focus on particular characters rather than the games themselves. Such an enterprise is intricate for two reasons. First, the ‘medium-specific theory of video game characters is still in its infancy’ (Schröter & Thon, 2014, n.p.) and game theory is currently verging towards the study of game mechanics over themes and narratives. Secondly, ‘video games’ interactivity complicates matters significantly, because it leads to the representation of characters not being predetermined to the same extent as it is in other narrative media’ (ibid.). Thus, approaching a video game character the same way we would approach, for instance, a movie character, would be a mistake.

Indeed, contemporary games use diverse strategies to narrate their stories. As far as non-interactive narration goes, video games mostly resort to cut-scenes, a term used to refer to any ‘non-interactive’ element in a video game, which either contributes to the unfolding of the story or, more generally, fleshes out the storyworld in which the game is situated (Klevjer, 2002; Sorg & Eichhorn, 2005; Thon, 2007; Klevjer, 2014). These can take the shape of cinematographic sequences, which often display high graphic quality, but also ‘in-engine’ scenes which ‘allow for a greater degree of customization’<sup>11</sup> (Schröter & Thon, 2014, n.p.). Although cut-scenes remain a popular strategy for conveying narratives in contemporary games, predetermined events are increasingly represented within the actual game spaces, allowing the players to continue to interact with the game while the scripted event takes place.

Echoing Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) argument regarding the several levels of characters’ perception by gamers<sup>12</sup>, Schröter and Thon (2014, n.p.) distinguish between three representational modes in games: the mode of narration, representing ‘characters

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, in-engine cut-scenes are likely to represent changes in the characters’ clothes and weapons (granting that those are available).

<sup>12</sup> They apply the concept of ‘frames’ to the players’ self-perception in multiplayer video games: They postulate a three-fold framing of player consciousness “as a *character* in a simulated world, as a *player* in a game, and as a *person* in a larger social setting” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, 454)

as fictional beings to whom the players can ascribe a specific corporeality, mentality, and sociality'; the mode of simulation, focusing on how characters are connected to 'specific ludic abilities (such as 'running' or 'shooting') and characteristics (such as 'health' or 'accuracy') as well as to the game goals and the possibilities of interaction that the game provides'; and the mode of communication, allowing for 'forms of self-representation that let characters function as representations of the players in the social space of the game'.

Shröter and Thon add that a character can also be experienced in different ways. As such, they use the term 'narrative experience' to identify the process through which 'players construct mental character models that represent, for example, the bodily, mental, and social properties of a fictional entity and connect these with situation models related to diegetic events and existents', in short, when players identify as a fictional character. The 'ludic experience' echoes the mode of simulation, referring to the player's attention to the ties between the character and the game's mechanics. Finally, the 'social experience' refers to the perception of characters as avatars and 'representation of other players in a multiplayer setting' (ibid.). In order to undertake a comprehensive analysis of video game characters, Shröter and Thon encourage researchers to take into account the relationship between these three modes of representation and ways of experiencing characters, as well as their ontological status ('fictional entity, game piece, representation of the player' (ibid.)) and conclude that these categories overlap and are inherently unstable.

Along the same lines, Aarseth (2003, n.p.) argues that playing 'is essential, but it should be combined with other sources if at all possible'. Following these scholars, in almost all the following analysis chapters, I combine three distinct approaches in my discussion: a study of walkthrough videos available on interactive networks, an autoethnography of my personal gaming experience, and a gathering of Internet-based textual data (forums, articles, images, fan arts, videos). This mixed methodology allows me to take into 'account the modes of representation that video games employ to represent their characters but also [...] the ways in which these characters are experienced by video game players' (ibid.). In this way, characters are approached from an 'intersubjective' lens, bringing together how they are represented on screen, how they are perceived by gamers, but also how they can be constructed through forum conversations. As such, this thesis aims at tackling video game characters 'inside' and 'outside' the games (Kennedy, 2002).

However, this method does not tackle the aforementioned ludic experience of these characters for two reasons: Kuja is not a playable character and only appears through cut-scenes, while Dorian's gameplay does not differ drastically from the other characters of *DA:I*. Consequently, the forums I draw data from did not tackle gameplay as a topic of conversations, which explains the heavier focus on the games' narrative in these two chapters.

This narrative focus is also due to the fact that both *DA:I* and *FF IX* are story-driven games. *DA:I* is a Role-Playing Game (RPG) and *FF IX* a Japanese RPG (J-RPG). RPGs are video games in which the player controls the action of protagonists in a complex fictional world. RPGs have evolved from text-based console-window games into outstanding 3D game experiences. Most RPG games deal with increasing and strengthening the games' protagonists, a menu-driven combat system using skills particular to each character, and the exploration of the games' worlds populated by numerous non-playable characters (NPCs). Loosely defined, RPGs have been categorised into numerous sub-genre such as Action-RPG, tactical-RPG, and so on. J-RPGs tended to be more linear in nature, both plot and exploration wise, but it seems that more recent games such as *Nier Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017) and *FF XV* (Square Enix, 2016) have shifted the genre towards exploration while keeping an engaging storyline. Although these genres remain broad, these games are well suited for textual analyses as they refer to games in which narrative plays a significant role. In comparison, Chapter 5 and 6 study both characters and the game environments that surround them, requiring me to adopt a slightly different approach by giving more significance to the relationships between game space, narrative and time.

#### *Chapter 5 and 6: Questioning Gameplay, Space and Narrative.*

These chapters follow a similar methodology to Chapter 3 and 4 except from the inclusion of forum threads (I decided to remove them for Chapter 5 and 6 as the specificity and critical argument of these two chapters were too remote from what can be found in forum conversations). I combine my analysis with YouTube videos and comments, a method on which I will expand in the next section. Overall, these chapters adopt more of a personal than an intersubjective lens because of the lack of online conversations and research about their topics.

More specifically, Chapter 5 differs from the previous chapters as it looks at the structure of narrative, time and gameplay through Halberstam's (2005) concept of queer time and Bredbeck's (1995) theory of queer narrative. Its main objective is to map out queer time in video games from a relatively broad angle. Similar to Chapter 4, I apply a corpus of queer readings to two different franchises (*Mass Effect* and *The Path*). However, I do not strictly focus on characters and their roles within the game's narrative, but on how the narrative was structured in relation to game space and time. As such, through the use of videos and my own gaming sessions, I reflect upon both the 'narrative' and 'ludic' (Shröter & Thon, 2014, n.p.) experiences of the multiple dialogue choice system and the navigation of narrative hubs in *Mass Effect*, as well as the exploration of the forest in *The Path* and how it runs counter to the mainstream game rules.

Chapter 6 proceeds to a queer reading of Gay Ryona<sup>13</sup> through works which question the place of masculinity in sports (Pronger, 1990; Oppliger, 2004) and the queer potential of failure in society (Halberstam, 2011; Ruberg, 2015a, 2015b). I apply this analysis to a corpus of 50 Gay Ryona videos, an erotic genre of online video in which two fictional characters engage in a one-sided match, and study how these videos disturb the practice of gaming and cultural values of the gaming community. As such, Chapter 6 particularly diverges from the other chapters in the sense that it strongly relies on the watching of video games being played and does not involve any of my own gaming experiences. It also reiterates that each chapter relies on a specific combination of online materials which were considered the most suitable for each queer focus. Indeed, the nature of each online platform from which I extracted data informed this study in particular ways. In order to explain the selection process and benefits of each platform, I now turn my attention to how I proceeded to collect my data.

## Data Collection

### *Forum Comments*

I explained earlier that forum comments enabled me to adopt an intersubjective approach to the study of video game characters in Chapter 3 and 4. Indeed, forum threads can be an

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<sup>13</sup> Gay Ryona is a genre of video in which two fictional characters engage in a one-sided match. This genre will be defined in more detail later in this chapter.

efficient way of gathering the opinions and game experiences of hundreds of gamers who share their personal views on a given topic. However, the web is both immense and ephemeral (Mitra & Cohen 1999, Schneider & Foot 2004), making it impossible to gather a sample of websites that would encompass the whole gaming community. As a result of this research being centred upon a Western context, and my own position as a Westerner researching in an English-speaking institution, the data gathered was limited to that which was in the English language.

I chose popularity as the first criteria for selection in order to obtain diverse samples and began by exploring the most visited video game websites as measured by eBizmba.com<sup>14</sup>, an eBusiness website that specialises in ranking websites based on visitors and activity. Among these, I mostly<sup>15</sup> restricted myself to the six websites (*IGN*, *GameFAQs*, *GameSpot*, *Kotaku*, *Neoseeker*, *GiantBomb*) which provided me with the most satisfactory material.

These websites attract a very high number of gamers thanks to their rich and varied database and often specialise in a specific type of content. *Gamefaqs*, for instance, focuses mainly on detailed textual game's walkthroughs and FAQs<sup>16</sup> and hosts an active message board community. *IGN*, *GameSpot* and *GiantBomb* are arguably the most comprehensive – they provide news, previews, information and videos about gaming. More specifically, *IGN* does not only focus on video games, but also provides film and television content. *Kotaku* launched several country-specific sites for Australia, Japan, Brazil and the UK. Finally, *Neoseeker*, which contains FAQs, walkthroughs, cheats and tips about games, has become one of the most complete gaming/hardware forums. The second step of my selection process consisted in browsing websites that were specialised in the games I used as case studies in this research (*ffdream.com*, *ffworld.com*, *finalfantasyforums.net*, *maseffect.wikia.com*, *dragonage.wikia.com*, *bioware.com*). Often, these websites offered useful and detailed documents, forums and articles about their universe and characters.

Forum comments were selected through web navigation and key terms research. In total, I selected forums through the websites mentioned above, but also search engines such as

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, these websites were (from the most popular to the least popular): *IGN*, *GameFAQs*, *GameSpot*, *Kotaku*, *N4G*, *EscapistMagazine*, *PCGamer*, *NeoSeeker*, *GiantBomb*, *GameFront*, *Joystiq*, *GameTrailers*, *GamesRadar*, *CheatCC*, *SuperCheats*.

<sup>15</sup> I made a few exceptions with more comprehensive websites which do not solely focus on video games, such as *reddit*.

<sup>16</sup> A shorter word for Frequently Asked Questions.

Google, Bing and Yahoo! by inputting key words associating the name of the characters with anything that would be related to their sexual identity, gender, personality, strength, and general questions about their narrative. In addition to archiving forums in word documents, I ran text queries on the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, using the aforementioned types of keywords. In total, I included for this research no less than 20 forum threads from websites and YouTube videos, going through more than 2058 comments (96 of them were archived). By the end of this research, the BioWare forums available on the official website were closed down as their management was considered too time-consuming (Pierse, 2016), which ultimately gave an unexpected historical dimension to this data collection.

While this thesis follows the Harvard style of referencing, I made an exception for forum references in the interest of transparency and clarity. Hence, instead of indicating the name of the website which hosts the selected forum, I directly refer to the title of the thread. This enables me to clearly differentiate threads that would be on the same website (Harvard style would only differentiate by dates and letters), and also gives the reader more information about the nature of the forum conversations.

Although forum comments enabled me to capture how some gamers feel about a specific character, I often needed to put the comments back in context, and access specific game moments which sometimes could only be reached after hours of gameplay. This could be done through the screening of YouTube videos, which worked as a transitory experience between my own gaming experience and that of the forum users.

### *YouTube Videos and Comments*

I mentioned that all the games I selected are games that I have played either prior to or during this research. Of course, I played them first and foremost as a gamer, but invariably I also played them as a researcher. One of the key challenges of studying games, and role-playing games in particular, is their overall length. However, they are intertextual<sup>17</sup> and can be understood as both text and hypertext that operate across these different platforms. Consequently, there are ways in which one game researcher can engage with games without having to play an entire game several times, such as following walkthroughs-

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<sup>17</sup> One game's text creates interrelations between those of other games.

videos<sup>18</sup> on media platforms such as YouTube.

YouTube has become a remarkable database for video game walkthroughs, allowing viewers to watch a game being played. These videos usually assist gamers in overcoming the game's challenges, but can also serve entertainment purposes. Video game walkthroughs (and, in the case of this research, RPG walkthroughs) usually last between forty and sixty hours – the average time required to beat a RPG. These walkthroughs are divided into chapters, which enables viewers to access specific cut-scenes<sup>19</sup> and dialogues, without needing to replay or load a game repeatedly. This flexibility facilitated the study of characters such as Dorian and Kuja, as it is often required to play several hours before witnessing a cut-scene in which they are featured. It also allowed me to re-experience specific moments of gameplay, as a viewer this time, in *Mass Effect* and *The Path*.

As such, YouTube videos were watched throughout the primary research of each chapter. While I was working on the data collection of Chapter 3, I watched the walkthrough and cutscene video channels<sup>20</sup> of MrRetroKid91 (2014) and Danaduchy (2015). Similarly, I relied on the 'Final Fantasy IX Cutscenes' (Surturius, 2010) and 'Final Fantasy IX Walkthrough' (Mike Bettencourt, 2011) video channels during the writing of Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 was informed by the PC Gamer (2014) *Mass Effect* trilogy walkthrough channel and CinnamonToastKen (2013) videos of *The Path*.

Of course, watching a YouTube video of a game is different from playing the game. Still, I did not consider it a hindrance in my research as these videos did not replace, but rather complemented the time I spent playing. Comparing the different romances in *DA:I* and *Mass Effect* would have required me to play games in their entirety several times (totalising several hundred hours of gameplay). Nevertheless, the goals of this research and this combined method would not have benefitted from these additional hours of gameplay. In this way, YouTube added a multifaceted dimension to my own gaming experience.

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<sup>18</sup> A step-by-step video/ document that guides you through one entire game

<sup>19</sup> A cutscene or event scene (sometimes in-game cinematic or in-game movie) is a sequence in a video game that is not interactive, breaking up the gameplay.

<sup>20</sup> While I only included one video "chapter" for each channel in the bibliography, all links gives access to the video channel and, therefore, to the other chapters.

Gay Ryona is still an emerging genre which uses YouTube as its primary platform. As such, YouTube videos played an essential part in the writing of Chapter 6. Watching sessions were central, instead of being supplementary to my own gaming experience. Through specific key word searches<sup>21</sup>, the number of videos posted to each channel and the number of views garnered, I focused my research on two “Gyaku Ryona Male on Male” YouTube channels: *GyakuRyonaMale* and *GuysinTrouble*. Although this selection might seem rather restrictive, most videos from all channels followed the same “structure” – one character beats up another character in a given setting – which allowed me to rapidly reach saturation and apply my analysis to Gay Ryona as an erotic genre of video and gaming.

Although YouTube channels were primarily used for their visuals, their comment sections also complemented forum threads. These were particularly useful as I was working on Chapter 6, as the comments were directly related to the videos. Moreover, in addition to being relatively rare, forum threads about Gay Ryona were only used by people who were familiar with the genre. As such, the discussions with the most material were displayed on YouTube as both Gay Ryona aficionados and YouTube users who were still unfamiliar with this genre could discuss their views on the videos.

## Ethical Considerations

My research was deemed low-risk by the Arts and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the University of Sussex. As it originally aimed at carrying focus groups, parallel to the textual analysis, the main concern revolved around the timespan and recruitment of this process. However, this method was abandoned due to its lack of relevance to the emerging research questions underpinning the thesis. Further to my previous comments, the non-academic nature of focus groups could not ensure fruitful discussions and applications of queer theory to gaming. Queer game studies is still developing and the primary purpose of this research was to contribute to its strengthening and development, hopefully opening the doors to future research which may include more direct participation, such as focus groups.

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<sup>21</sup> Gyaku, Ryona, Gay, Men.



All the online data examined was part of the online public space as the selected websites were openly accessible and password-free. Consequently, I did not have to approach site owners, but simply acknowledge the host service in my bibliography. While I kept forum users anonymous, I used verbatim quotation for my textual analysis, which made quotes potentially traceable online. However, this did not constitute a concern since these posts were all part of the public space (Coleman, 1999, 206; Tsaliki, 2002, 97), hence the categorization of this research as ‘low-risk’.

Because of the eclectic nature of this thesis’s case studies, a varied set of methodological approaches as necessary. Overall, these diverse tools enabled me to tackle different aspects of gaming and gaming culture, and, above all, study various shapes of queerness that otherwise I would never have encountered. Having explained both the theoretical and methodological work which structure this thesis, I now turn my attention to the study of the first, and arguably most visible manifestation of queerness of this research: the representation and perception of the openly gay video game character, Dorian Pavus.

## Chapter 3. Moustaches, Blood Magic and Interspecies Sex: Navigating the Non-Heterosexuality of Dorian Pavus

Dorian: You caught the eye of a young woman in that last village, Blackwall.

Blackwall: I'm sure you're mistaken.

Dorian: You're right. She was undoubtedly looking at me (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, BioWare, 2014).

Striding across the forests, bogs and mountains of Thedas would have never been the same without Dorian. His jokes and wit, but also his great sense of fashion and convenient magic made him an indispensable companion. Of course, as a “gaymer”, I am indubitably biased: having a handsome gay dandy mage by my side is rare in a gamer’s life. Needless to say, I was more than thrilled to have face-to-face interactions and eventually share more intimate moments with the mage in my avatar’s room. I am far from being the first one to write about their love for Dorian Pavus and some would even say that I am late to the party. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the fact that Dorian is, according to developer David Gaider, the first ‘fully gay’ (Gaider, 2014b) video game character.

This claim was something that developer David Gaider later regretted making (Dumitrescu, 2014), not least because it indirectly dismissed bisexuality and types of fluid sexuality that had previously appeared in video games, a particular aspect that many fans complained about on social media (Grill, 2014), accusing Gaider of being disrespectful towards fluid sexualities. Other (presumably straight) video game commentators such as MundaneMatt (2014) criticised BioWare to market their characters as gay, but also started a debate about assimilation and representation that I will tackle in the next paragraph. As a result, Gaider felt impelled to clarify that he meant that Dorian was only attracted to men, but also indicated that his mention of Dorian being a “fully gay” was not an official press release and deplored that some fans misunderstood his words (Grill, 2014). This controversy revealed the fragility and heterogeneity of the gaming community, which led me to choose Dorian as the first case study for this thesis.

Most LGBTQ game characters who flout gender and sex roles ‘usually [are] minor characters; mostly predatory or lecherous men included for comedic effect’ (Mulcahy, 2013). Compared to straight characters, they are often reduced to demeaning roles (Kies, 2015, 213) that have little direct involvement or ability to interact within the confines of the game. Conversely, not only is Dorian romanceable<sup>22</sup>, he is also arguably the first playable gay character both within the BioWare games catalogue, and more broadly across AAA games. The quality of his dialogues and voice-acting have earned him the title of ‘breakout gay game character’ (Karmali, 2015).

However, having a gay character in an AAA video game does not mean that the industry should be considered progressive, or that it has begun to fully cater to a LGBTQ audience. Indeed, as Shaw (2009) argues, a significant segment of the LGBTQ gaming community does not wish to be particularly marketed to, mainly because a game about LGBTQ content is likely to appear ‘preachy’, or because of the stereotypes and prejudices attached to it. Shaw argues that ‘gaymers’ are ‘well versed in the subversion of texts’ (231), and that queer readings that ‘allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation do not preclude a demand for representation’ (232). This leads her to conclude that not being ‘referred to in the [gaming] public discourse is just as problematic as being referred to stereotypically’ (231). Shaw’s work points that LGBTQ stereotypes are often perceived as being negative and harmful to LGBTQ identities. As such, and while ostensibly representing a confident move forward in terms of LGBTQ representation, Dorian has not achieved unanimous support among gamers – LGBTQ or otherwise. That said, while he is imperfect, there seems to be a general agreement about the fact that Dorian is depicted ‘positively’ (Karmali, 2015).

In this chapter I explore the challenges and opportunities presented by a character such as Dorian. Through an analysis of forum comments about Dorian, I map out the unstable politics of gay male representation within the context of contemporary video game culture. I begin by analyzing criticisms of Dorian, and identify two lines of reasoning that these critics adopt. These two lines of criticism focus on and signify the fact that, despite BioWare’s progressive take on sexuality, Dorian is still considered stereotypical. Following an in-depth analysis of this criticism, I reflect upon the negative responses that Dorian has garnered, and consider the role that gay assimilationist politics plays in this

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<sup>22</sup> *DA:I* enables gamers to play several characters, but also to pursue a romantic relationship with them.

negativity. In a third section, I explore how Dorian speaks to LGBTQ politics of post-Stonewall identity construction through the analysis of forum comments that celebrate and praise Dorian as an aspirational character. Finally, I argue that while several aspects of Dorian define him as a *gay* character, he should not be excluded from *queer* readings. Through the study of transformative works, and in particular fan art that builds upon the relationship between Dorian and the Iron Bull, I argue that Dorian is positioned beyond the debate between stereotypes and a ‘true’ gay identity, and can ultimately be recuperated as a queer figure, in other words, a figure that debunks stable notions of sex, gender and sexuality.

### *Methodological Details*

This chapter’s data was gathered from forum threads and YouTube videos which were selected through a combination of key words<sup>23</sup> on Google, Bing and Yahoo! Privileging diverse and quality forum conversations, I paid particular attention to the flow of online debates and dismissed threads that quickly went off topic. In addition to the aforementioned criteria, I focused on comments which introduced new debates, were detailed and articulate. Overall, I selected nine forum threads and two YouTube videos which included at the time of this research 1567 comments. I also ran text queries on the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, using the same combination of key words. I then selected and archived 51 comments on word documents.

Coupled with forum comments, I included pieces of fan art in the corpus of primary material during the writing of the last section. On top of adopting an intersubjective and intermediated approach, these artworks served as illustrations of a greater corpus of transformative works (such as fan fiction), which specifically focus on a queer side of Dorian, his optional inter-species relationship. Since this aspect was not the primary focus of this chapter, fan artworks were a sufficient way to obtain a general understanding of how “Adoribull” – the portmanteau referring to Dorian’s inter-species relationship – was approached in the fan fiction community. Contrary to forum comments, most fan art conveyed a very similar vision of the relationship (tender, happy and kinky) which enabled me to restrict this research to a small sample of four artworks.

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<sup>23</sup> Dorian, Dragon Age, Stereotypes, gay, sexuality.

This research took place during June, July and August 2015. Having gathered these comments and fan artworks, I was then able to start my reading of Dorian as a queer character by applying to this primary material debates of post-Stonewall LGBTQ politics. As a result, my analysis consisted in analyzing gamer's conversations and artworks through the lens of gay iconography, assimilationist politics, post-Stonewall identity politics and queer interspecies theory.

### *Introducing Dorian Pavus*

*Dragon Age: Inquisition (DA:I)* is an action role-playing game developed by BioWare. It is the third major instalment of the video game franchise *Dragon Age*. The game is structured around main quests, which allow the plot to unfold, and side quests, which offer additional experiences and cut-scenes. Most of the quests require the player to kill enemies, loot equipment, talk to NPCs<sup>24</sup> and explore new areas in exchange for experience. The plot is set in a world called Thedas and follows the main character, called the Inquisitor, whose gender, race and class (warrior, mage, rogue) is chosen by the player. The Inquisitor sets out on a quest to close the 'Breach', a gigantic tear in the sky which allows demons to terrorise Thedas. The Inquisitor is viewed by some as the chosen one, due to a mark on the palm of their hand, which is capable of closing the Breach. The aim is to gather enough strong members of a fellowship called the Inquisition in order to stop Corypheus, a demon who opened the breach in an attempt to conquer Thedas. Each member of the Inquisition freely and willingly joins the fellowship and has their own backstory. Dorian Pavus is one such member (Picture 3).

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<sup>24</sup> NPC stands for non-playable characters.



Picture 3: DorianPavus by BioWare, Dragon Age Wiki, Public Domain.

Dorian comes from Tevinter, a northern region of Thedas. The Tevinter Imperium is a decaying but still powerful magocracy that is notoriously decadent. Powerful houses fight for dominance and vie for the perfection of their bloodlines through careful matchmaking strategies, following politics and practices that are reminiscent of eugenics. Being openly gay and refusing to perpetuate his bloodline with the female companion chosen for him, Dorian's backstory involves him running counter his father's plans and since 'every perceived flaw – every aberration – is deviant and shameful' in Tevinter (*Dragon Age: Inquisition* 2014), Dorian's father previously schemed to "change" him through the use of blood magic<sup>25</sup>. Before his father could act, however, Dorian left Tevinter and cut links with his father.

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<sup>25</sup> Blood magic is 'a school of magic that uses the power inherent in blood to fuel spellcasting and also to twist the blood in other for violent or corrupting purposes' (Dragon Age Wiki 2016). Blood magic is mostly regarded as a deviant and inherently evil practice as it often used to enter in contact with demons. Most countries forbid or tightly control it.

## The Mustachioed Mage: Dorian as a Gay Stereotype

We are NOT all flamboyant, sex crazed, walking LGBT[Q] stereotypes irl so why are we being represented this way? [...] Seriously Dorian & Sera are walking stereotypes and that just pisses me off to no end.

The problem I have with Dorian is that he is the stereotypical, flamboyant gay stereotype who even has a daddy issues personal quest. I do like him as a character, but the gay part feels forced down the throat ('As much as I love Dorian...', 2015, 1).

Not all gamers welcome the introduction of LGBTQ characters such as Dorian into video games. As the comments above indicate, many of Dorian's traits – flamboyance, flirtatiousness, being overtly sexual – are perceived by some as being negative stereotypes that harm LGBTQ people. Out of 162 comments debating whether Dorian was a stereotypical character, only 9 (approximately 5.6%) considered Dorian to be a negative stereotype and 21 (12.9%) expressed mixed views (see Table 1 in Appendix). While these comments are a minority, they deserve to be tackled as they illustrate the views and arguments that still fuel debates in game studies, and LGBTQ identity politics more widely.

It is true that Dorian may be a convincing illustration of what Dyer (1980) has previously termed 'gay iconography' (31) as the mage embodies several of the stereotypical traits that have previously been used to suggest homosexuality in Hollywood cinema. Dyer defines iconography as a 'certain set of visual and aural signs which immediately bespeak' a symbolic representation (in this case homosexuality) and which 'connote the qualities associated, stereotypically, with it' (ibid.). In this way, gay male iconography manifests itself through an 'over-concern with appearance' and an 'association with a 'good taste' that is just shading into decadence' (32).

This concern with appearance is pointed out by several other characters of *DA:I*, who often tease and criticize Dorian for his dapper style. For instance, the mage Solas comments on the futility of Dorian's 'flashy' moves (*DA:I*, 2014), clearly indicating that the latter willingly puts on a show as he displays his magical abilities. Meanwhile Vivienne, a high ranked enchantress who does not hold Tevinter mages in her heart, recognises that 'he

has a good sense of fashion' (*DA:I*, 2014). Indeed, most members of the Inquisition at some point comment on the Dorian's refined style of dress and well-groomed appearance. Such references also are often backhanded, suggesting that Dorian's style is not only decadent but somewhat dubious:

Iron Bull: (if in the party when the Inquisitor meets Dorian in Redcliffe) 'Watch yourself. The pretty ones are always the worst.'

Blackwall: 'They are men and women, atoning for what they've done by giving of themselves. They fight for people like *you*. People in silks and velvets. Who talk... and judge' (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, BioWare 2014).

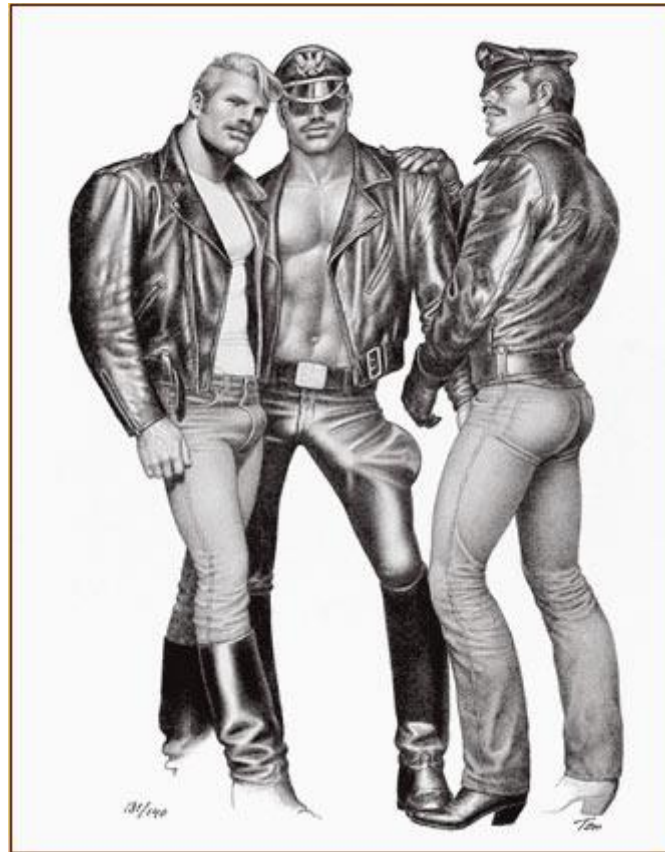
However, beyond his clothing and attention to detail, one particular aspect of Dorian's grooming caught the eye of several forum users: his impeccable moustache. Indeed, four of the ten forums selected for this research included at least one post about Dorian's facial hair. Several gamers compared Dorian's moustache to that of Freddy Mercury, implying that it should be read as a "gay characteristic":

[From] the moment I saw a video of him I just assumed he was gay, because he reminded me of how I picture Freddie Mercury ('How do you feel about Dorian Pavus' Homosexuality?', 2015).

I dunno why but every time I see Dorian all I can think of is putting the Freddy Mercury mustache on him and they'd look exactly alike ('Does Dorian look like Freddy Mercury to anybody else?', 2015).

The moustache is a perfect illustration of Dorian's reading as a stereotype as it is also reminiscent of those found in artworks by a Finnish artist who had a major influence in shaping today's gay iconography – Tom of Finland. Famous for his homoerotic drawings (Picture 4), it is said that he inspired the look of both Freddie Mercury and the Village People (McCormick, 2016). Albeit slightly more proportioned, Dorian's muscles and moustache are very similar to Finland's policemen, sailors and leather men. John Mercer (2003) argues that Finland, along with other illustrators such as Harry Bush, Rex and George Quaintance, had a major impact in the "formulation of a paradigm of erotic Prototypes of gay porn" and, more generally, gay iconography.





Picture 4: A Tom of Finland's drawing of three men in their leather gear, by Tom of Finland, EUNIC London, Public Domain.

For instance, 'the Leatherman had no explicit representational existence until Tom of Finland's illustrations of the 1950s and 1960s'. Today, this figure – and Finland's work – still plays a central role in the "repertoire" of homoerotic figures that populate media representation (287). Hence, by immediately associating Dorian's facial grooming with Mercury's moustaches, these comments understand the moustache as a gay trope of a particular kind.

Along the same lines, I gathered no less than fifteen comments which focus on two clichés regarding gay characters in popular culture – that of the gay man as a sexually unthreatening character and as being an "accessory" for straight individuals.:

Also, as a straight liberal man, I can honestly say I LOVE Dorian! The actor who plays him is superb and I really hope more video game developers take notice of him.)

I instantly loved him. He's my favorite [sic] mage and will always bring him with me now. ('How can someone NOT romance Dorian?', 2014, 2)

Dorian appears in these comments as nothing more than the “funny sidekick” – a figure, often depicted hanging out with straight women in TV series and movies such as *Sex In The City* (1998-2004), *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *The Object of My Affection* (1998). Their relationship with other women is based on “safe eroticism” (Dreisinger, 2000, 6), often reducing the gay man to the position of being the fag hag's ultimate accessory (Owens, 2015), mainly supporting female lead characters and allowing them to shine (Richardson, 2012).

This demotion of Dorian to the position of secondary, humorous character also triggers a polarisation of him as a gay character, echoing Hall's (1997) argument about the construction of a binary between “normal” and “marginals” – here applicable to straight and LGBTQ sexualities. In this way, the first comment performs this polarised representative structure: the writer mentions his own heterosexuality, thus positioning himself as opposite as Dorian, and defines the mage as “other”. Thus, despite being “positively” represented, Dorian cannot seem to escape the stereotypical categorisation by several gamers.

The debate surrounding the stereotypisation of Dorian was brought up in all the forums selected for this chapter. In several cases, forum users would identify most of Dorian's traits, but not automatically define them as “gay” traits:

Dorian's a great character. He's hilarious, charming, well dressed and kind of an asshole. He happens to like having sex with men and only men. In a game where the fan base has a billion questions (via twitter, tumblr, and forums) about who's romancable [sic] and by whom, I think Bioware was just keeping people informed ('How do you feel about Dorian Pavus' Homosexuality?', 2015).

Dorian always struck me as “arrogant aristocrat” stereotype more than anything ('As much as I love Dorian....', 2015, 7).

Dorian looks more sophisticated than “flamboyant”, and full of himself, which is not a “gay trait” in itself. It is in the manner you depict a gay effeminate [sic] that

will show respect or not; it can be realistic without being a buffoon (‘As much as I love Dorian....’, 2015, 8).

These three gamers nuance the previous comments by arguing that there seems to be a confusion between Dorian’s noble heritage, mannerisms, and his sexuality. From a broader perspective, these disagreements revolve around the understanding and knowledge of historical manifestations of homosexuality, and how they are currently perceived by gamers. It can be argued that the reason for these disagreements is that Dorian embodies the figure of the dandy, a figure that has been both associated and dissociated with homosexuality.

The obvious ‘Oscar Wilde reference aside’ (Chang, 2017, 19), Dorian is eloquent, pays particular attention to his dressing style, is regularly insolent towards his fellow companions, never misses an opportunity to make in-game witty “meta” comments about the game, openly talks about his sexuality, and enjoys making his fellow party members uncomfortable<sup>26</sup>. Thus, his theatricality, dressing style and accessories are reminiscent, as I will indicate in the next paragraphs, of the common understanding of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dandy. Evidence that Dorian is understood as a dandy can be seen in the name of a popular Tumblr blog dedicated to the character and entitled “tevinter-Dandy”.

Quoting Elia Glick’s words, it is ‘impossible not to think of the dandy as queer’ (2009, 7). Laughing at the face of gender normativity, the dandy is ungraspable. Often, authors disagree on his sexuality: some of them define him as ‘the premier model of gay subjectivity’ (Glick, 2001, 129), while others define him as a self-obsessed individual who does not express much interest in men or women (Carassus, 1971, 150). The same goes for the dandy agenda: Eli Adams (2005) perceives him as a ‘fundamentally [...] theatrical being’ (22), Carlyle (2014) writes that the dandy is nothing more than a ‘clothes-wearing man’ (n.p.) and Crisp (2006), a dandy himself, strived to be an educator of the masses (50).

Novelist and critic Barbey d’Aurévilly, who is arguably the first one to theorise dandyism (Kempf, 1977; Cerankowski, 2013), provides a broad understanding of the dandy:

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<sup>26</sup> His dialogues with Blackwall are particularly memorable (starting at 42min): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ke2DTTs81g0>

Dandyism is almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define. Those who see things only from a narrow point of view have imagined it to be especially the art of dress, a bold and felicitous dictatorship in the matter clothes and exterior elegance. That it most certainly is, but much more besides. Dandyism is a complete theory of life and its material is not its only side. It is a way of existing, made up entirely of shades' (Barbey D'Aurévilly, 1988, 31).

In essence, dandy fashion is groundbreaking. It is a tool used to promote new ways of appearing in society, disrupting the contextual codes of adornment. As such, and going back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Beau Brummell, the first dandy of all times (Carassus, 1971), became a disruptive fashion icon thanks to his perfectly tailored suits and luxurious accessories (2). He made dandy fashion emerge as a style distinguishable through his attention given to details (99, 315). While these details became more extravagant and flamboyant with later dandies such as D'Orsay and Oscar Wilde, Brummell launched dandy fashion with a single purpose – equating masculinity with beauty (6).

Through fashion, these dandies challenge the rigid gender norms of their time by reclaiming masculinity as a site of beauty. Indeed, Flugel (1930) argues that since the end of the XVIIIth century, men had progressively rejected elaborate, colourful and elegant fabric and were focusing on darker and more practical clothes (111). Flugel calls this event the Great Masculine Renunciation since men abandoned their 'claim to be considered beautiful' (ibid.). Consequently, male fashion had to depart from the adornments that it displayed in the past and reassess the superiority of masculinity over femininity. The advent of the two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also played a significant role in Western Europe in dressing men and making them appear as healthy and hygienic and preventing them from the 'degeneration of Western masculinity' (Bourke, 1993, 23).

Overall, dandy fashion always challenged 'the codes of good society' (Carassus, 1971, 124) through different shapes. Quentin Crisp (2006), for instance, went beyond the "puffery" of D'Orsay and Wilde and dressed as queerly and extravagantly as possible in order to be visible, and switched from 'effeminate' to 'the bizarre', aware that it would trigger 'outraged hatred' from strangers (50). The same would go for new wave and post-punk bands such as Culture Club or Adam and the Ants whose transgressive fashion choices were well-received by audiences who enjoyed their disruption of the sartorial codes (Geczy, Karaminas, 38).

Although Dorian does not revolutionise male fashion in *DA:I*, his dressing style and grooming leave few people indifferent, both in-game and in the gaming community. However, more than a “clothes-wearing man”, Dorian is first and foremost a fierce agitator. As the earlier comments suggest, he is cocky, arrogant, sarcastic and, above all things, camp, a quintessential trait to dandyism.

Answering heterosexual disapproval through a strategy of defensive offensiveness (camp thrives on paradoxes), camp incarnates the ‘homophobe's worst fears’ (Medhurst 1997, 276). It is more than an ‘amusing diversion’ (Medhurst 1997, 279) and relies on gender codes' inversions so as to undermine heterosexual normativity. As such, and contrary to what Sontag (1964) argues, camp can be political. Meyer (1994) goes further by arguing that ‘the un-queer does not have access to the discourses of Camp, only to derivative unconstructed through the act of appropriation’ (1).

Without always being a queer activist, the dandy is by essence a camp character, particularly because of Oscar Wilde – arguably the most famous of dandies – is considered to be one of the first ‘conscious ideologists’ (Sontag, 1964, 5) of camp. In Britain, camp is precisely derived from gay men's aspirations to inhabit the taste and behaviour codes of the aristocracy, a lineage stemming from the repercussions of the Oscar Wilde trials (April 3, 26 and May 22, 1895). According to Sinfield, the image of Wilde was formative in shaping a relationship between camp and class which reverberates even today, so that all gay male camp, deliberately or not, contains ‘a lurking recollection of the effeminate leisure-class dandy’ (Sinfield, 1994, 156). Although camp does not only apply to dandies, dandies are always camp.

Campness and effeminacy were not automatically associated with homosexuality (Richardson, 2009, 29), it is the publicity of Wilde’s trials that made camp and effeminacy signifiers of homosexuality, and often triggered a confusion between them that still pervades today. This confusion also put an end to the relative tolerance towards homoeroticism in English society<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, Wilde’s trials notoriously applied and made visible a severe legislation of homosexual acts in England passed in 1885 that prohibited gay sex behind closed doors (Cole, 2000, 16). As a consequence, dandies symbolised a

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<sup>27</sup> The second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasingly visible homosexual community that was not exclusive to the intelligentsia (Marsh, 2014a).

sexual threat towards the end of Victorian times, celebrating what could be read as homosexuality, or at least non-heterosexuality. Of course, not all historical figures of dandyism were gay, but most of them had unconventional sexual relationships, provoking suspicion<sup>28</sup> (Fasick, 2000, 24).

The haziness and disclosed nature of the dandy's sexuality led scholars such as Cerankowski (2013) to argue that dandy sexuality is queer because of its social unacceptability. More precisely, she argues that we can 'think of the dandy as not necessarily gay', but that we cannot think him 'as anything but queer' (231). As such, the dandy is surrounded with an aura of abnormalcy, whether it is about his scandalous relationships or counternormative desires, he always, in one way or another, goes beyond the realms of acceptability.

I have used "him" to refer to the dandy because most historical dandy figures were men, but I could also use "them". Indeed, there has been a few examples of "female dandies" in the past, such as the *Lionnes*<sup>29</sup> in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. In today's context, the characteristics of dandyism established in this section can apply to individuals regardless of their gender. However, I concentrated on male dandies in this chapter as several of the politics associated with "male" dandyism, such as camp and gender imbalance (female dandies would perform as man to gain power while male dandies would disturb gender norms and lose respectability) did not apply to female dandies.

As such, the fact that Dorian displays strong dandy traits – disruptive fashion, camp performance, non-normative sexuality – makes him stereotypical, or at least a perpetrator of old stereotypes associating non-normative gender performances with non-heterosexuality to the eyes of forum users. Indeed, without specifically labelling Dorian as a dandy, forum users paraphrase the traits of this figure by labelling Dorian as arrogant, flamboyant, and commenting on his extravagant moustache.

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Count D'Orsay, a French dandy who was a Count of France and an illegitimate son of one of Napoleon's 'most handsome general[s]' (Moers, 1960, 150), was supported financially during his whole life by Lord and Lady Blessington, a couple with which he nurtured an intimate and scandalous, yet largely undocumented relationship (Matoff, 2015, 322);

<sup>29</sup> The *Lionnes* would 'take fencing lessons, bet on horse race, and gamble' (Goldstein 2004), in other words, live in the public sphere and live like a man. Female dandies were more likely to live their lives thanks to their outfits. For instance, René Vivien or George Sand used to dress like men during the day.

As I indicated at the beginning of this section, not all forum users were happy with the representation of Dorian as a character who shows traits that are reminiscent of gay iconography. Indeed, while they remained a minority, negative and mixed comment about Dorian could be found in seven of the nine forums selected for this research, showing that Dorian is not universally popular. These comments often expressed their annoyance about Dorian's flamboyance or found him stereotypical and offensive:

With Dorian I'm almost surprised he doesn't come pre-packaged with a limp-wrist, a handbag, some lip-gloss and an ipod filled with Cher's greatest hits since they're clearly trying to go for "offensive stereotype" with him. I haven't heard him speak yet but I'm guessing based on his flamboyant and FAB-U-LOUS character design they're giving him a lisp? [...] If they didn't want to add a gay character why didn't they just leave it at that instead of producing this grotesque parody of what people thought a homosexual looked like back in the 1950s? ('So how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 2015)

The problem I have with Dorian is that he is the stereotypical, flamboyant gay stereotype who even has a daddy issues personal quest. I do like him as a character, but the gay part feels forced down the throat. Why can't we have more realistic gay characters like Arcade from Fallout New Vegas? He is gay, but doesn't have to remind us that during every single dialogue. And Arcade also had daddy issues, but they had nothing to do with his sexuality. Ugh ('As much as I love Dorian....', 2015, 7).

Dorian always struck me as "arrogant aristocrat" stereotype more than anything (ibid.).

Because I'm a heterosexual male. I find him annoying and arrogant, to be honest ('How can someone NOT romance Dorian?', 2014, 1).

The first and second comments directly refer to the first comment of this section about Dorian being a "walking stereotype", running counter BioWare's progressive claims. In addition, the second comment also introduces another dimension that I will tackle shortly in this section: the place given to his sexuality. The player argues that Dorian's characterisation revolves around clichés and his sexuality, and that should not be

necessary given that other gay characters have been depicted without making their sexuality too obvious. As a result, the player finds Dorian unrealistic, because of Bioware's "agenda".

The last two comments make a similar claim: Dorian's traits are irritating. Both comments also imply that these traits are related to his sexuality. Indeed, the fourth forum user mentions that he is straight, setting himself in opposition to Dorian, and implying that being straight is the reason why he finds Dorian annoying and that gay gamers might think otherwise. In comparison, the third user does not explicitly specify that Dorian being an arrogant aristocrat should be linked to his homosexuality, but clearly expresses his dislike for the character and the negative perception of the stereotypes he conveys.

As such, these four comments complain about Dorian's representation for different reasons. The first two comments echo the two forum posts which introduced this section, and see Dorian as an outdated and offensive cliché. They consider BioWare's attempt to convey progressive politics as a failure, and argue for a less flamboyant representation of LGBTQ characters. The last two comments illustrate the concerns of those previously mentioned: Dorian, as a gay character, is annoying to straight gamers. The latter are, therefore, unlikely to learn more about him and, by extension, LGBTQ identities.

As such, the last two comments illustrate the fears of the first two, who, worried about Bioware's representation of homosexuality, do not think that Dorian will help easing the assimilation of LGBT individuals. In this respect, these comments echo the debates revolving around the identity politics of the first decade after the Stonewall Riots (Gross, 2005, 518). Indeed, post-Stonewall identity politics focuses on challenging the 'overwhelming invisibility broken occasionally by representations of sexual minorities that were negative, limiting, and demeaning' (ibid.). Organised gay movements in the 1970s made efforts to improve the ways television network programmers handled LGBT representation (Montgomery, 1981; Moritz, 1985). There was an attempt for the LGBT community to historically construct its own identity and reinvent itself 'out of a paradigm of referents belonging to an oppressive heterosexual culture' (Mercer, 2003, 286). Ultimately, the main project of post-Stonewall politics was to 'rehandle gender assignment and gender hierarchy, and hence to repel the stigma of effeminacy', which involved 'claiming masculinity for gay men, declaring that gay femininity is all right, and various combinations of these' (Sinfield, 1997, 205)).



While it is unclear whether or not the gamers quoted in this section declare that gay femininity is ‘all right’ (and, therefore, move away from the final aim of post-Stonewall politics), they clearly do not see Dorian as a character who has the potential to challenge gender normative attitudes, and imply that BioWare have failed to produce a character that empowers LGBT people. In this way, these gamers illustrate that the rationale of post-Stonewall politics – here mainly understood as “positive” identity politics – still applies today.

Nevertheless, the fear that Dorian might not positively represent gay individuals also seems to illustrate these gamers’ uneasiness about visibility. As such, even the comments criticising Dorian for being offensive might not advocate for a more liberal agenda. This contradiction is reinforced by another group of comments which specifically deplore the significant role given to Dorian’s sexuality in his personal arc<sup>30</sup>:

It's a little tedious to constantly see gay characters always being reduced to their sexuality, as if their entire personality revolves around it. The “boohoo my parents no homo” cliché is omnipresent in nearly every piece of fiction, and I find it contrived and boring, and tbh a little bit patronising. Dorian's pariah status could've easily been achieved by his actual actions and personal beliefs, instead of a coincidence of birth, but nope! Gotta shoehorn in some awkward real-life allegory, like everybody else does with their gays.

I'm disappointed in BioWare for his personal arc. Most writers seem to have yet to realise that gay characters can have personal issues that are unrelated to their gayness. Shocking stuff (‘How can someone NOT romance Dorian?’, 2014, 4).

He's by far my favorite character in the game; I love the banter he has with Sera and Varric, and he has a voice I bloody wish I had. But I'm a little disappointed that his personal mission was solely based on him being gay (‘As much as I love Dorian....’, 2015, 1).

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<sup>30</sup> An arc is the part of a storyline that, in the case of *DA:I*, focuses on a specific character.

These gamers see Dorian's distinct narrative as another stereotype of gay narratives. As such, they might appreciate Dorian as a character, but not his backstory, which is further developed in his personal quest. In this, these comments express the wish for 'divergent modes of validation' (Sinfield, 1997, 206), by finding Dorian's gay narrative too distinctive from straight narratives, particularly because, according to them, it mainly focuses on his sexuality. As such, these arguments do not actually side with post-Stonewall identity politics, but run against them, as they support an "equal treatment" to characters of all sexualities. In that, they echo one of the main counter-arguments to post-Stonewall views according to which 'our gender attributes (whatever they are) don't make us very different from other people'. As such, 'homophobia [becomes] just a misunderstanding' (ibid.) and assimilation is key.

Some might even argue that the politics of assimilation is gaining ground. Indeed, scholars have noted a tendency among millennial gays to 'shun labels' (Savin-Williams, 2005), detaching themselves from 'historical understandings of what it means to be gay' (Westrate & McLean, 2010, 228). Consequently, a significant part of the millennial generation argue that we might be 'growing out of "gay"' (Sinfield, 1998, 1) and that we have reached a 'post-gay era' (Westrate & McLean, 2010, 237; Cohler & Hammack, 2007) represented by a diversification of gay narratives. While it is impossible to determine the age of these gamers because of the forums' anonymity policy, these gamers' complaints bear strong similarities with the views of the millennial generation. They deplore the lack of 'multiplicity' (Westrate & McLean, 2010, 237) in the portrayal of gay narratives in video games, presenting Dorian as 'tedious', 'contrived' and 'boring' because his sexuality plays a central part in his story-arc. Hence, in the context of an era where there is no need to define or distinguish oneself through sexuality, the flamboyant dandy appears as an outdated and harmful trope.

Thus, Dorian as a gay character is criticised by two different sets of identity politics. His personality traits and physical attributes can be associated with stereotypical gay iconography. Consequently, some gamers read him as another stereotypical and negative representation of LGBTQ identities in video games, while a second group of gamers judge that he delivers a gay narrative that has become unnecessary and obsolete in today's society. As such, most comments in this section expressed views that seem to genuinely support LGBTQ identities, despite their disagreement with BioWare's methods. However, I show in the next section that assimilationist politics also opens the door to more

repressive views on LGBTQ politics for the sake of “equality”, which remain vocal within the gaming community, and advocate for a need to navigate the fine line between the two.

## Shunning the Mage or the Dangers of Assimilationist Politics

Adopting an all-inclusive approach that shuns labels is not exactly new, and former generations, ‘whether activists or not, have resented and attacked the images of homosexuality in films (and the other arts and media) for as long as [LGBT identities] have managed to achieve any self-respect’ (Dyer, 1980, 27). While advocating for a multiplicity of gay representation is commendable, refusing to differentiate them from heterosexual canonical narratives remains problematic (Westrate & McClean, 2010, 237). Indeed, such an approach can only be successful when all types of narratives are viewed as equal and do not exclude one another. It is only in this ideal case when it would become obsolete to differentiate between canonical and alternative narratives.

As previously indicated, this differentiation often operates through the use of stereotypes that hold a controversial place in the minds of several gamers. This can be explained by the fact that ‘ruling groups’, what Dyer (1980) also called the ‘hegemony’ (30), create and nurture stereotypes in order to reinforce their position. As a result, stereotypes are rarely chosen by the group to which they refer. Ideally, gay politics aims at ‘transcending’ categories of historical gay identity (Dyer, 2013, 165) and fights for a more accepting future. However, this does not mean breaking free from ‘the cultural categories within which we think, feel, live and are’. Doing so would only ensure ‘that [everything] remains the same’ (ibid.).

The main issue with assimilationist arguments is that homophobia is still undeniably part of the mainstream that the millennial generation, but also same-sex marriage advocates and LGBTQ conservative wish to join (Sinfield, 1998, 126). The rise of the (far) right in several Western countries demonstrates that power dynamics are more than ever geared towards nationalist and heteronormative interests at the expense of minorities. Reports of the tragic mass shooting in Pulse, a gay club in Orlando in 2016, omitting in their headlines that the venue was catered for LGBTQ people illustrates this imbalance (Martin, 2016). In a tense interview on Sky News, journalist Owen Jones even decided to leave the TV set, shocked by the hosts’ reluctance to accept that this terrorist act was also

homophobic (Jones, 2016). This interview perfectly illustrates how the shunning of labels fails to acknowledge ‘the actual reality of the situation’ (Dyer, 2013, 165).

This imbalance is transposable to digital platforms and, more specifically, video games. In *Convergence culture*, Jenkins (2006) highlights the danger of assuming that all participants are equal on online media platforms. Focusing on the relationship between media convergence<sup>31</sup>, participatory culture and collective intelligence<sup>32</sup>, he argues that the boundaries between media consumers and producers are increasingly blurred. He demonstrates that audiences benefit from an increasing influence on media production (62-63). However, he highlights that not ‘all participants are created equal’ (3) since some users have some greater abilities than others.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, Condis (2015) tackles this imbalance through Jenkins’ work to analyse participatory culture in forums about an online game also developed by BioWare – *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011). Building upon a significant body of literature that demonstrates the ongoing prevalence of video games oriented towards a white straight male demographic (Bertozzi, 2008; Burrill, 2008; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000; Ray, 2003), she focuses on a significant controversy which started when BioWare decided to ban the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ from forums in order to protect the LGBTQ community.

In addition to further excluding LGBTQ gamers, BioWare’s decision triggered forum debates that revealed the lack of acceptance in video game culture and the dire need for LGBTQ visibility. In her work, Condis (2015, 203) focuses on a group of gamers that define themselves as ‘real gamers’ and who argue that there should be a ‘stark divide’ between virtual and real worlds. These gamers reprimanded others for not being loyal to gaming worlds by committing the faux pas of mixing the real and the virtual. Conversely, they present themselves as real citizens of an ideal internet world that articulates its detachment from ‘the real world’ (ibid.) by rejecting the use of labels. As such, they are invested in ‘techno-utopian rhetorics’ (204), also known as cyber-utopianism, here understood as the theory according to which bodies and identities that we were born with

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<sup>31</sup> He defines convergence as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’ (2)

<sup>32</sup> Collective intelligence is the ‘alternative source of media power’ (4) where users can accumulate knowledge through their day to day interactions and create a collective power.

are irrelevant online (Stone, 1991, 113). Cyber utopian thinking hopes to create a ‘new social order created online’ that would be free of the scourges of ‘racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism’ (Condis, 2015, 205). Conversely, in the case of the BioWare’s controversy, several gamers misused cyber-utopian ideas in order to overlook the ongoing differences and inequalities in the gaming community. In doing so, they also erased the visibility of LGBTQ minorities.

A similar rhetoric can be found in some of the forums about Dorian Pavus, in which gamers complain about the intrusion of “real life” politics into the world of Thedas:

i don't need real life in a game, i don't care for npc sexuality (he can be in love with a building, whatever, i'd still like the char). what i want is an interesting quest that will give me some insight into char's unique background (‘As much as I love Dorian....’, 2015, 14).

I didn't play the game, so I won't speak at great lengths, but I take issue with characters being advertised as “gay”. If a character's most prominent trait is their sexual orientation, that is the sign of poor writing, in my opinion (‘Dragon Age Inquisition players: How do you feel Bioware handled Dorian’s sexual orientation?’, 2014, 1).

Dismissing sexuality as a whole, these comments echo techno-utopian arguments as they advocate for ‘genderless, raceless, sexless and bodiless’ identities, ‘in favour of a universal sameness’, but also imply that this sameness ‘is ultimately read as the default: straightness’ (207). Consequently, they see sexuality, and particularly non-heterosexuality, as an obstacle to the quality of a game’s narrative. These comments demonstrate that even four years after the BioWare controversy, diversity raises exactly the same issues for several gamers who regard games as a safe space for straight people. Anything threatening this status quo is seen as a betrayal, and the materialisation of the fear that the gaming community is changing for the worse, leading ultimately to the exclusion of heterosexual gamers:

Dorian an[d] iron b[u]ll are easily the most charismatic characters in this game, and it made me tempted to romance them, simply on the basis that the straight male options are just so plain.

[...] I won't go into discussion about the amount of characters that are able to be romanced but I will say quality wise the gay characters are much more substantial than the straight characters. which is a shame because I feel like I don't have anyone that I really want to invest with in this game because I am not gay, and have nothing against people who are gay, but I don't want to role play that way. but I genuinely feel like I'm getting the short end of the stick because I'm not gay, and that i am being punished by having only two very bland options ('Why the straight male romance option suck?', 2014, 1).

Criticising the quality of the straight romances, these two gamers blame BioWare for willfully privileging LGBTQ gamers. Their complaints articulate a fear of losing heterosexual privilege, no matter how unjustified that fear is. For instance, these gamers fail to acknowledge that there are still twice as many possibilities to pursue straight romances (four options) in comparison to gay (two) or bisexual romance options (two). In addition, while the queer romance between Dorian and the Iron Bull (a pansexual character) tends to be among the most popular ('[Poll] Who are your favorite and least favorite companions in the Dragon Age series?', 2015; 'Why the straight male romance option suck?', 2014), the idea that straight romance options are less 'substantial' remains purely subjective, particularly because several other gamers do not share the same views and find several of the straight romances satisfying ('Why the straight male romance option suck?', 2014, 1, 2). There is something slightly ironic about the last complaint which inevitably implies that the gamer "has done their research" as both his claim about the quality of the gay romances and strict refusal to engage with them are paradoxical, and reveals his uneasiness *vis-à-vis* non-heterosexual content in video games.

While BioWare have tried to make amends for their past mistakes, these comments show that some gamers still refuse to follow the company's newer, more inclusive approach. The comments above also demonstrate that tolerating these types of attitude put at risk even the most moderate politics (such as assimilation). Indeed, the deceived gamer rejects both techno-utopian and assimilationist politics by relying on his straight identity and stereotypes, and indicating how strongly interrelated his "real-life" and "virtual" lives are.

Challenged by other forum users, the same gamer describes himself as a 'passionate gamer', taking 'things' that happen in the game 'personally' ('Why the straight male

romance option suck?', 2014, 2). In this way, this gamer undermines his earlier claims to holding a division between 'real world' and 'game world' life. He applies his heteronormative view of daily life to the game world in order to advocate for the maintenance of such a hierarchy. While his opinion appears to be at best ignorant and at worst, offensive, it led to much more homophobic attitudes later on in this forum:

The equality movement is great and all, but attention should be focused on the effect on the population dynamics. The US doesn't have a robust birth rate, and it's slightly concer[n]ing if those who choose the lgbt path don't have children. This is really my only concern with the movement; I just hope everyone, including lgbt, realize how important births are for a healthy and growing population ('Why the straight male romance option suck?', 2014, 6).

Seemingly worried about the effects of BioWare's depiction of same-sex romance on society, this gamer adopts what Edelman (2004) terms reproductive futurism<sup>33</sup> – the belief that the future can only be envisaged through biological reproduction. Centred around symbols and values such as children and the family, reproductive futurism generally excludes LGBTQ individuals, except if they simulate patterns of heterosexual families. The comment above bluntly presents LGBTQ culture as a threat to the growth of the American population, ultimately implying that it constitutes a "way of living" that should not be encouraged.

In sum, this forum discussion reveals how the deployment of two political frames – assimilationist politics and cyber-utopianism – creates a space for the enunciation of heteronormative understandings of reproductive futurism, a politics that not only excludes LGBTQ people, but which also positions queer folk as a danger to the very fabric of the nation. Consequently, while Dorian might appear as an embarrassing stereotype to the eyes of some, arguing that we are 'past accepting gays' ('How can someone NOT romance Dorian?', 2014, 6) ignores the inequalities regarding representation, as well as participation, in video game culture. Finally, these debates ultimately ask whether or not some of the gaymers are wrong to consider Dorian stereotypical, particularly if he is, as a character, realistic and 'substantial' enough to threaten straight gamers. In these conditions, stereotypes today might still have a part to play.

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<sup>33</sup> I will discuss at length in the next chapter.

## The Moving Mage: Dorian as a “breakout gay character”

Righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them. In addition, there is a real problem as to just what we would put in their place (Dyer, 1980, 27).

Dorian’s story is developed in his personal quest. When enough positive approval has been gained from Dorian<sup>34</sup>, the Inquisitor is given a letter from Dorian’s father, asking him and Dorian to meet a “retainer” in a tavern. The retainer turns out to be Dorian’s father and a heated conversation starts between him and his son. Regardless of the dialogue options, Dorian comes out to the Inquisitor and tells him about his father trying to “change” him through blood magic. If the player encourages Dorian to talk to his father, the latter apologises for his behaviour. If the player decides to cut the conversation short, the father has a distraught look, showing that he wants to make amends to his son. Once the Inquisitor and Dorian are back in Skyhold (the Inquisition’s Headquarters), the latter reflects upon what has happened and discusses it with the Inquisitor.

The idea that Dorian’s personal arc is stereotypical needs to be qualified. Indeed, stereotypes are dangerous because they make the audience, and more particularly the gay audience believe ‘[...] that the stereotypes are accurate and act accordingly in line with them’ (Dyer, 1980, 32). Stereotypes connote a wealth of meanings and are similar to ideology in that ‘they are both (apparently) true and (really) false at the same time’ (Perkins, 1979, 155). Stereotyping exposes individuals who are ‘different from the majority’ (Hall, 1997, 229) through binary forms of representation. As a result, LGBTQ stereotypes are harmful because they exclude LGBTQ people and make them ‘fall short of the ‘ideal’ of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human)’ (31). However, this does not prevent LGBTQ individuals from being regularly exposed to and confronted with these same “failing” stereotypes. Williams et al. (2009) demonstrate that LGBTQ employees are often expected by their coworkers to dress and behave in ways that relate to LGBTQ culture, no matter how tolerant their work space can be. Along the same lines, Mitchell and Ellis (2010) show that American college students tend to immediately

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<sup>34</sup> Positive and Negative Approvals are gained through dialogues.



attribute cross-gender characteristics to a person who is labeled gay. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Dorian, a character who was announced as gay before the release of the game, is read by several gamers through gay stereotypes.

Nevertheless, Dorian's story is not essentially stereotypical. While some aspects of his life, such as his sexuality, play an important part in some of his cut-scenes, most of the stereotypes attributed to him could, 'in the larger context' ('As much as I love Dorian...', 2015, 13), be ruled out. For instance, Dorian does not talk about the difficulty of coming out, but about the refusal to adhere to Tevinter's eugenics, which encourage reproduction between people from high lineages. Indubitably, his father's attitude is homophobic and echoes Edelman's reproductive futurism. However, it is not Dorian's desire for other men that upsets him, but his inability and (more importantly) his refusal to produce an heir. There is, therefore, a nuance here, between the idea that Dorian's father potentially tolerates his son's sexuality, but does not accept its consequences.

Similarly, Dorian's campness could be essentially read as part of his status as an aristocrat, and not as an echo to early historical representations of homosexuality. From this perspective, it could be argued that Dorian genuinely performs the 'tastes and manners that are characteristic of the aristocracy' (Sinfield, 1994, 156), considering that Thedas more or less replicates some societal norms of the renaissance and early-industrialised era. Of course, this perspective is slightly far-fetched as it is clear that Dorian as a character emulates several traits of gay iconography and that his campness also plays along these traits, but the relative depth of Dorian as a character made him first and foremost a popular and relatable to a majority of forum users. As a result, out of the 161 comments debating stereotypes, 95 comments (approximately 58.6%) disagreed with the idea of Dorian being stereotypical and 37 (22.8%) agreed to a certain extent, but did not think that it was harmful or unrealistic:

I can't believe how many people are either refusing to acknowledge or just failed to understand the rest of the story. No one is denying that his sexuality plays a role in the story. It's the driving force. But to make a statement that it's all about his sexuality or that he's defined by his sexuality is silly. It's missing the larger context.

And no it's not cliché, given that it's an ongoing global human rights issue.

Completely agree here. Dorian's story actually reminded me very much of the experience of a close friend and his family – they didn't so much care that he was gay, they cared that he was wouldn't pretend to be straight publicly ('As much as I love Dorian....', 2015, 13).

As this last comment indicates, Dorian's storyline immediately evokes the memory of the user's personal experience about navigating homosexuality in a family environment. Hence, his personal arc appears as realistic enough for a certain number of gamers, regardless of its stereotypical aspects. This further raises the question as to whether stereotypes and "realism" should be opposed, and how both operate in the reading of a given narrative. Indeed, a realistic story might be (slightly) stereotypical and vice-versa. This tension is further developed in two other forums about Dorian, illustrating again the idea that his story is relatable and, therefore, realistic:

Having friends who are gay, that cutscene hit really hard. One of my favorite characters was experiencing the same thing as one of my close friends. I couldn't help but feel some more bro-love for him ('So how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 2015, n.p.).

I've recently done Dorian's personal quest, and to be honest...I like [italics] the heavy-handed aspect of it, given that it's something that actually happens [italics] to gay people in real life. While I like how the average person in the Dragon Age world doesn't view non-heterosexuals negatively, it's still interesting to see the topic tackled in the game.

Honestly, I found the backstory to be an analogue to the real world. Homosexual people with families who don't accept them could probably relate. Yeah, it wasn't the best written, and it was a bit forced, but him coming out to you, and revealing he is homosexual, and the problems he's having with his family because of it, isn't bad in and of itself ('Dragon Age Inquisition players: How do you feel Bioware handled Dorian's sexual orientation?', 2014, 1, 3).

As these comments indicate, stereotypes do not automatically make a story less realistic. On the contrary, the second comment illustrates how they can function as a tool that

reinforces the politics of its narrative. Stereotypes are a double-edged sword. They are generally created by the hegemony to marginalise a specific group, who can in turn reappropriate and use them as tools to resist and ‘fashion the whole of society according to their own world-view, value-system, sensibility and ideology’ (Dyer, 1980, 30). Stereotypes have a strong transgressive potential: LGBTQ clichés run counter the ‘typically masculine’ and the heterosexual ‘sex-caste’ (31). Instead of shunning stereotypes, LGBTQ individuals, as this second comment suggests, should celebrate and navigate them, no matter how “heavy-handed” they might be.

In this way, Dorian can be read as a strong and relatable gay character. As one of the first video game gay characters to hold such a significant “positive” presence, he embodies the continuation of a fight that started with the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s, standing as ‘an appropriate response to invisibility and a history of negative images was the construction and circulation of positive ones’ (Arroyo, 1997, 70). Concentrating on gay narratives that focused on themes such as ‘Stonewall, AIDS, and the gay rights movement’, the ‘rise of gay culture’ (Harris, 1997, 236) of the 70s and 80s fought the silencing of gay life stories. Similarly, Dorian resists a gaming environment that can be hostile to any significant change. As these comments indicate, Dorian has the potential to have a positive impact on gamers as several elements of his narrative deliberately “hit home” (some could also read his father’s attempt through the use of blood magic as a reference to AIDS, implying that Dorian’s blood is not “satisfactory”, or fully “functional”).

Finally, a reading of Dorian as a flagship of positive representation would not be complete without mentioning his romance option. Although his gameplay does not diverge widely from the other mage characters – Vivienne and Solas – and forum discussions do not associate his abilities with his sexual identity<sup>35</sup>, several gamers mention how influential his (interactive) dialogues were in their choice of including Dorian in their party:

He's the most charismatic and likable character that I've seen in a video game in quite some time, not to mention his great mustache. Regardless of orientation, he's the best choice.

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<sup>35</sup> Although, once again, I could start expanding upon his necromancy ability and read it through Edelman’s death wish (2004), a concept that I will tackle in the next chapter.

I'm straight and I was romancing cassandra. I most definitely will romance Dorian on my second playthrough ('How can someone NOT romance Dorian?', 2014, 1, 6).

I couldn't help it

Cassandra hasn't been very approving of my choices as of late and Josephine isn't really my kinda lady. But I find myself getting along with Dorian more and more. He's so witty and charming and the perfect guy for a bromance,

Long story short, afterwards I told him he's a badass and we swapped some spit. I have no regrets TeamDorian ('So how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 2015).

These comments are only a sample of a greater number of comments. Indeed, in 'So, how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 30 comments out of 271 specifically indicated that presumably straight forum users chose Dorian as their first in-game romance or decided to start a new game to be able to romance him ('So how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 2015). 15 forum users wrote that they decided to romance another character while the rest of the comments were mainly answers to these posts, jokes and subconversations that were off-topic.

Hence, Dorian won a significant number of straight gamers over with his wit and charisma. His 'snark', 'humour' and flirtatious comments made him a 'heartwarming' and 'touching' character (So, how many straight males romanced Dorian?), making in-game flirting, dating, and ultimately sex in *DA:I* an emotional experience. In this way, *DA:I* distinguishes itself from a majority of mainstream games in which sex and romance often serve as a 'currency' (Hart, 2015, 147; Ware, 2015, 237).

Returning briefly to techno-utopian theory, it should be noted that interactivity adds an extra layer of porosity between a player's "real-life" and virtual identity. Indeed, it seems that players are likely to engage personally – as a "real-life" identity – with characters with which they interact. This creates a convoluted relationship between "real" and "virtual" beings, which often blurs the lines between the gamer's and their avatar's experience. This is further developed by journalist Kate Gray (2015):

And yes of course, the "me" that Dorian was entangled with was the "me" in the game – a semi-magical, dagger-wielding dwarf. But I still felt like he was talking

to me me – the me sitting cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom, eyes wide, reminiscing over all the heartbreak she’d experienced before, because it all felt just like this. Isn’t it odd how it’s taken so long to reach this stage in games – the stage at which human conversations and relationships feel real? (Gray, 2015).

Here, Gray illustrates how playability and interactivity differ from mere “representation” in the understanding and shaping of the gamer’s identity. In the same article, she confesses her disappointment about not being able to romance Dorian as a female character, thereby echoing some of the forum users’ previous comments. While not fully engaging with the blurring of her own identity with her game identity, she establishes a correlation that is similar to that of Gee’s (2008) tripartite identities theory in role-playing games.

According to Gee (2008, 53), three identities operate at the same time when playing a game: a ‘real-world identity’ (the identity of the player outside of play), a ‘virtual identity’ (the identity of the character they play) and a ‘projective identity’, the projection of the gamer’s ‘values and desires onto the virtual character’ (50) and the witnessing of this character being created, learning and improving according to the gamer’s choices. Gee’s projective identity is defined by both a conscious and unconscious involvement of the two previous identities:

The kind of person I want Bead Bead<sup>[36]</sup> to be, the kind of history I want her to have, the kind of person and history I am trying to build in and through her is what I mean by a projective identity. Since these aspirations are my desires for Bead Bead, the projective identity is both mine and hers, and it is a space in which I can transcend both her limitations and my own (51).

The plasticity between these three identities runs counter to the techno-utopian arguments previously mentioned according to which “virtual worlds” should be completely distinct from the “real world”. Indeed, this tripartite dynamic is ‘active’ (53) and ‘reflexive’, as the choices the player makes about their virtual character set parameters about how this character is developed, but also ‘what the player can now do’. As a result, the ‘virtual character rebounds back on the player and affects’ (54) their future action and perception of the game world.

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<sup>36</sup> Bead Bead is Gee’s avatar.

Thus, thanks to the quality of the crafting of his character and the possibility to pursue a same-sex romance with him, Dorian stands as the flagship of BioWare's politics of "positive representation". Using games as a medium that creates new worlds and 'invite[s] players to take on various identities within them' (Gee, 2007, 145), BioWare enables gamers to playfully explore gay romance and, hopefully, come to terms with some of the stereotypes related to gay identity (Karmali, 2015). As a result, *DA:I* serves as a platform which enables some gamers to challenge players' taken-for-granted views about' LGBTQ identities (145), or at least debates these views between them. I have been using LGBTQ in this chapter because Dorian is, in fact, not solely limited to his "gay" storyline. Indeed, if Dorian is not romanced by the main character, he might start a relationship with the Iron-Bull, a non-human pansexual warrior. This unusual relationship redefines Dorian's sexual identity, and allows for a new queer reading of this extravagant mage.

## The Mage and The Bull: Dorian's Secret Queer Love

As the previous forum posts indicate, it is difficult not to romance Dorian or the Iron Bull (Picture 5) given the quality and wit of their dialogue lines ('Why the straight male romance option suck?', 2014, 1). Indeed, two forums in particular ('How can someone NOT romance Dorian?', 2014; 'So how many straight males romanced Dorian?', 2015) included a large majority of gamers who express their liking of Dorian, and often confess romancing him, regardless of their sexuality, or even romancing on a second playthrough when they were not able to romance him before (i.e. when playing a female inquisitor). However, if the player refuses to intimately interact with both characters, there is a chance of a romance developing between the two. When teamed up, the mage and the bull start having in-game banter. Their innocent teasing quickly takes a more flirtatious turn, particularly when the Iron Bull reveals that Dorian pays him nocturnal visits:

Iron Bull: Quite the stink-eye you've got going, Dorian.

Dorian: You stand there, flexing your muscles, huffing like some beast of burden with no thought save conquest.

Iron Bull: That's right. These big muscled hands could tear those robes off while you struggled, helpless in my grip.

Iron Bull: I'd pin you down, and as you gripped my horns; I. *Would*. Conquer. You.

Dorian: Uh. What?

Iron Bull: Oh. Is that not where we're going?

Dorian: No. It was very much not.

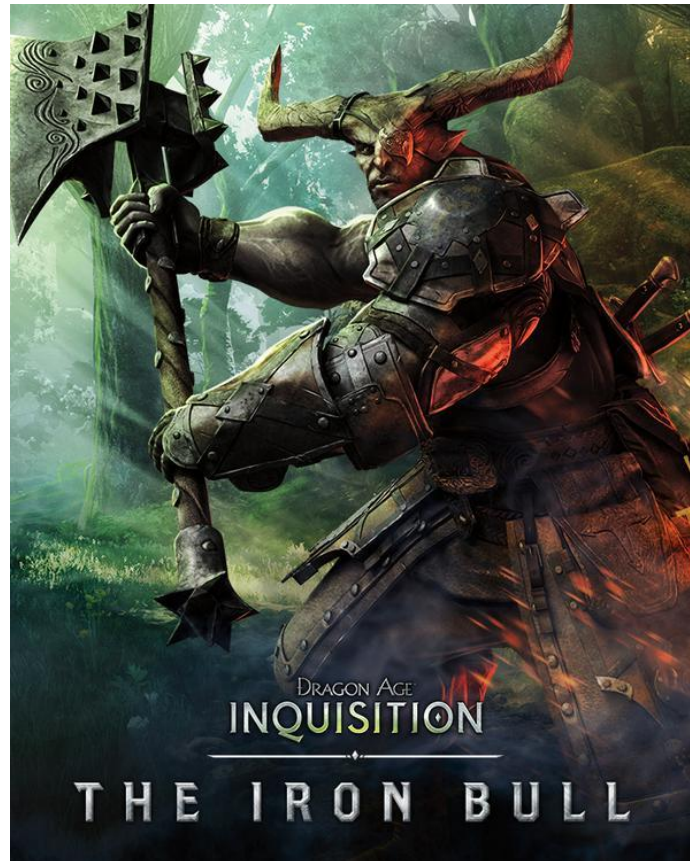
Iron Bull: So, Dorian, about last night...

Dorian: (Sighs) Discretion isn't your thing, is it?

Iron Bull: Three times! Also, your silky underthings, do you want them back, or did you leave those like a token? Or...wait, did you “forget” them so you'd have an excuse to come back? You sly dog!

Dorian: If you choose to leave your door unlocked like a savage, I may or may not come.

Iron Bull: Speak for yourself (*DA:I*, BioWare, 2014).



Picture 5: The Iron Bull, by BioWare, Dragon Age Wika, Public Domain.

This interspecies coupling came as a surprise to a significant amount of gamers. This can be witnessed in the comment section of two YouTube videos – one including Dorian’s flirtatious dialogues with the Iron Bull, and the other excluding them – where gamers express their emotions, ranging from utter disgust to pleasant surprise:

Omg I thought I was the only one who cringed horribly at the whole IB/Dorian romance. Thank you for not including it.

Same here dude. I'm just glad I didn't have to hear it since I romanced Dorian myself. Only heard this was a thing online. Just... no.

Pleased to see I'm not alone. Bull and Dorian are two of my favourite characters, and two of my favourite romances, but if they get together it just... rubs me up the wrong way (Annatar, 2014).

Wow, gonna to need some time to stomach this pairing XD I mean, not like it's bad or anything... just ... surprising XD



This is hilarious! How does this come about? There are so many combinations, it is enough to make your head spin.

A qunari and a Tev together. I love you Bioware.

Bioware is unpredictable (Danaduchy, 2015).

Taken aback by such an unusual romance, these gamers clearly illustrate how interspecies sex, even in a fantasy setting, falls outside the ‘imagery’ of ‘hegemonic representation’ (Erhart, 2003, 174; Huebert, 2015, 254). Indeed, Dorian’s relationship with the Iron Bull offers an unexpected alternative to the ‘binary constraints of gender and sexuality’ (Zekany, 2015, 5). As a qunari, the Iron Bull cannot be approached as a “gay human”. Consequently, he represents an unknown realm: that of the sexual ‘other’ (Tosenberger, 2008, 3.1<sup>37</sup>), which is ‘often coded [...] as lesbian, gay or otherwise queer’ (Benshoff, 1997, 6). Alien otherness can be also associated with Giffney’s queer reading of ‘affective relations between human and nonhuman animals’ which encourage us to think ‘about the animal as a symbol for representing non-normative love and the resistance to normative hegemonies’ (10).

This relationship also poses ‘productive challenges to prevailing structures of sexual, political, and ideological hegemony’ (Huebert, 2015, 257), which is “too much to handle” for some gamers. Coupling a mage and a qunari – who is twice the size of the former – pushes the boundaries of the understanding of sex. However, *DA:I* does not leave the gamers’ unanswered doubts about the possibility of these two characters having sex, and openly mentions the sexual challenges that such a relationship entails. In the case when the Inquisitor romances the qunari, the latter asks if he has what it takes to “ride the bull”, clearly implying that the size of his penis might become a problem for someone that is inexperienced. After their first night, the Iron Bull asks another member of the Inquisition to leave the Inquisitor alone, implying that they need some rest. Human-qunari sex is, therefore, presented as a physically and psychologically demanding practice, and as uncharted territory to the eyes of the player. This sex act requires the Inquisitor to figuratively and literally take all this queerness in, leading to the creation of what we

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<sup>37</sup> The *Journal of Transformative Work* uses paragraph instead of page numbers, following a x.x numeration system

could call an ‘excessive’ queer space (Jagose, 1996, 2), which ultimately stands as a milestone in the representation of queer sex in video games.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Dorian and the Iron Bull remains discrete, as it is reduced to a few dialogue lines and banter. During the final scenes of the game, the Iron Bull confesses to the Inquisitor that Dorian is a “good guy”, and the latter expresses the wish to stay for a while in Thedas to be with the Bull. Leaving much to the imagination of the players, it can be argued that this pairing provides an incentive for gamers to celebrate queer sexuality through the creation of fan-fiction.

Fan-fiction, or transformative fiction, is ‘a genre that [...] offers a form of commentary on the canon by introducing new perspectives and interpretations that subvert the original intention of the canon’ (Leow, 2011, 1.1). While there are several types of transformative fiction, I focus in this chapter on the slash fiction sub-category, ‘a slippery genre which has been defined [...] as buddy-story bromance, romance, or just plain porn’ (Flegel and Roth, 2010, 1.2). Indeed, the Dorian/ Iron Bull in-game relationship indubitably constitutes solid material for any slash-fiction writer as it starts as a “buddy-story bromance” of two characters that everything seems to oppose and then verges on erotic, as suggested in their dialogue lines.

As previously implied, slash-fiction involves “shipping” practices, a term used in fan-fiction to describe the pairing of previously created characters who are not together in the canon<sup>38</sup>. In this way, it could be argued that BioWare anticipated the shipping of Dorian and the Iron Bull, by consciously providing such an unusual relationship, and foreseeing that transformative work would follow. This was confirmed by lead writer David Gaider who indicated on his Tumblr that much of the Dorian/Iron Bull relationship was left for fans to speculate over:

I’m not going to go into detail on what I think about it — most of their relationship is left undetailed, after all, and the player is only catching the very edge of it...thus I think it’s a matter best left to headcanon<sup>39</sup> (Gaider, 2015).

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<sup>38</sup> Another word for ‘official’ used in fan fiction to differentiate from the official storyline in which a fan fiction is based on.

<sup>39</sup> The headcanon refers to a particular belief, elements or interpretations of a fictional universe by an individual, or several fans. By letting fans expand on the Adoribull romance, Gaider openly orients and encourages transformative work.

While I indicated previously that several YouTube users reacted negatively to the dialogue between the two characters, others clearly rose to BioWare's bait:

Ohhhh I ship this now

Saaame.I screamed several times.

It's too perfect ;3; <3

I ship these two so hard!!! Both are my Inquisitor's best friends, so to see them together, makes her heart happy (Danaduchy, 2015).

Having been given the incentive to fill the gaps in “Adoribull” romance – the shipping term given to these two characters –, shippers actively reacted to BioWare's anticipated shipping strategy. Indeed, there are no less than 505 fan-fiction stories which are associated to the keyword Adoribull on *Archiveofourown (AO3)*, one of the biggest archives for transformative work (Pellegrini, 2017). While the scope of this chapter does not allow me to explore Adoribull fan fiction in detail, browsing the list of synopses reveals that several of them follow a similar structure: Dorian and the Bull are two characters that everyone seems to oppose, yet they are unashamedly attracted to each other and decide to live their romance. This is the case of “Drapetomania”, the most read Adoribull fan fiction of *AO3*, in which the Iron Bull is first perceived as alien and hostile by Dorian, but then asks the latter for a date in the second chapter.

Fan made artworks (which are considered another type of transformative work) proved to be a relevant illustration, both literally and metaphorically, of how Adoribull was generally perceived in the fan fiction community. Searching for ‘Adoribull’ images in any search engine inevitably leads to an endless flow of artworks depicting tender and romantic moments between the Mage and the Bull. After several hours of research, I concluded that a majority of drawings focus on depicting Dorian and the Iron Bull in a romantic, rather than carnal, relationship.

Thus, Adoribull adopts a contradictory position as it is both assimilated and queer. In some ways, it follows heteronormative ideals such as monogamous love and feminine

domesticity to homosexual romance (Flegel & Roth, 2010, 1.4). Consequently, presenting the relationship as acceptable to the eyes of the mainstream “unqueers” the pairing by making it similar to homonormative and assimilationist models of romance and sexuality. Thus, the threat that this interspecies relationship represent is diminished, if not sugarcoated by normative ideals.

Nevertheless, Adoribull should not be dismissed for lapsing into sentimentality, precisely because it aims at bringing happiness and monstrosity together. While I develop later in this thesis the conflictual relationship between queerness and happiness, I follow, in this section, Tosenberger (2008) who argues that fan fiction has the potential to subvert and queer an original text by allowing misfits to be happy. She takes the example of *Wincest*, one of the most prolific shipping of the internet based on the television series *Supernatural* (2005-present) (Baker-Whitelaw, 2014), which pairs up the two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who are also the main protagonists of the tv show. According to Tosenberger (2008), this subverts the original text by making things ‘happy’ for both Sam and Dean and giving them the ‘measure of comfort’ (1.5) that is denied to them in the original series.

Overall, Adoribull aims at picturing the happiness of both characters. In this regard, it operates similarly to “Wincest”, even though in most Wincest stories, ‘the incest taboo is the obstacle that Sam and Dean have to negotiate before their relationship can reach its full potential’, however, ‘the payoff is not so much in the breaking of the taboo, but in the fulfilment—sexual and emotional—that comes afterward’ (1.9). In this way, the taboo of incest becomes secondary and is eventually overshadowed. Hence, Tosenberger argues that the most subversive aspect of Wincest is not the depiction of homoerotic incest, but ‘its insistence on giving Sam and Dean the happiness and fulfilment that the show eternally defers’ (5.1), and I add, on making incest socially acceptable in its fictional context.

Adoribull does not subvert the original text as much as Wincest, but pursues and strengthens the game’s progressive stance by picturing what was only suggested: the two characters having “fun”. Fan arts (which is another type of transformative work) further demonstrate this general move beyond heteronormativity by addressing the physical difference of the mage and the bull in a humourous way (Pictures 6 and 7), but still depict their cuddles and sexual intercourses as tender and romantic (Pictures 8 and 9). In doing so, Adoribull’s fan art exploits the pairing as a ‘queer zone of possibilities’ (Jagose, 1996,

33), widening ‘a space in which the effects of the connections between romantic happiness and heterosexism can be more radically questioned’ (Flegel & Roth, 2010, 5.2). Rejecting the vision of queer interspecies relationships as monstrous, they celebrate and reclaim them as an alternative (but also valid and desirable) romantic love story.



Picture 6: Adoribull 1, by Alphabeticful, Pinterest, Public Domain.



Picture 7: Adoribull 2, by Itachaaan, Tumblr blog, Public Domain.



Picture 8: Drunk, by TareNagashi, Tumblr blog, Public Domain.



Picture 9: Adoribull 3, by Ionicera-caprifolium, Tumblr blog, Public Domain.

These fan arts convey solid politics of resistance against heteronormativity. They first redefine the Iron Bull, a seemingly queer ‘abjected’ figure’ (Hollinger, 1996, 35), as a valid and arguably desirable romantic partner, thereby allowing both characters to successfully overcome their cultural and physical differences. In this way, Adoribull ‘resists the compulsory heterosexuality of culture at large’ (Tosenberger, 2008, 1.3) by sweeping heteronormative concerns away. Ultimately, these fan artworks reflect upon the queer potential of the heroic fantasy genre. In the depiction of this fantastical relationship, they use ‘the culturally distant settings of [...] fantasy [to] clearly present writers with both the opportunity [...] to explore gender variations’ within homosexual [and queer] acts and ‘separate these acts from culturally specific identities’ (Woledge, 2005, p. 52). As a result, Adoribull challenges ‘coercive regime[s] of compulsory heterosexuality’ (Hollinger, 1999, 23). It sheds a queer light on Dorian, who is a gay character with a “gay themed” narrative. Going beyond the questioning of gay and straight stereotypes, Adoribull approaches the “Uncategorisable”, offering an unexpected and positive alternative to a straight, bi or gay romance.

## Conclusion

‘[T]here is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about’ (Wilde, 1908, 9).

To write that Dorian Pavus lives up to his name would be an understatement. As the subject of several polemic discussions, I have demonstrated that Dorian made a mixed, but noticeable impression among the gaming community. Despite his strong popularity and *DA:I*'s progressive approach, gamers and gamers do not manage to agree on Dorian. For some, the mage is just another stereotypical character, following the norms of heteronormativity and damaging LGBTQ individuals. These gamers are followed by a second group who advocate for an assimilationist approach in the representation of LGBTQ minorities. According to them, Dorian’s personal arc focuses excessively on his sexuality. In this way, these gamers prefer to shun stereotypes, advocating for a society in which sexual identity ideally does not matter.

While this approach can be defended, I have shown that the prejudice towards LGBTQ minorities remains in the gaming communities. For instance, the progressive turn adopted

by certain franchises such as *DA:I* is received as a betrayal by certain gamers, who feel that their community is getting “contaminated” by “real-world” issues. I showed that several of these gamers who repeatedly hide their vexation, but also homophobia, under techno-utopian arguments. For these reasons, I concluded that holding strong assimilationist politics is likely to backfire and nurture opposite views.

For this reason, I have argued that Dorian should be considered as a “break out gay game character”, and showed that a great number of gamers welcome his story. I have also demonstrated that stereotypes are inevitable because they are part of a wider societal structure. Consequently, they should not be shunned but used as a tool of resistance to promote that which goes against the norms of the ruling group that create them. Thus, despite his relatively stereotypical story, Dorian stands as the flagship character of BioWare post-Stonewall politics. Narrating a relatable story, Dorian also allows gamers to engage in a gay romantic relationship, delivering an experience that potentially enables them to empathise further with the LGBTQ community. In this way, Dorian’s romance illustrates how games can enable players to inhabit ‘other perspectives in virtual environments’, which could aim at reducing ‘negative stereotypes’ and increasing ‘empathy’ (Johnson, 2015, n.p.). To follow Johnson, it could even be argued that games ‘trump other mediums’ (ibid.) in this matter, in particular the television and movie industry.

However, I have also shown that Dorian is not limited to his gay sexuality, and that the game also presents an interspecies relationship with the Iron Bull. I have argued that BioWare indirectly encouraged gamers and fans to build upon this queer relationship and promote alternatives to heteronormative romantic love. As I mentioned, there are, of course, limitations to my queer reading, such as the fact that transformative works aim at normalising and making this relationship acceptable might ultimately compromise its disruptive nature. While the act of normalising something disruptive might be enough to be considered queer, it also runs counter the essence of queerness, often defined as non-normative. A more comprehensive analysis of written transformative work should shed some light on this contradiction.

There is no such thing as an ideal LGBTQ character. Because of the remaining lack of diverse representation in games, a character is likely to be scrutinized by the minority for which they stand. While he might be imperfect, the gaming community clearly needs more



characters like Dorian Pavus. It is indeed time for several gamers to accept that video games can be more than just a “fun” experience. Ironically, while I might be biased as a gaymer, I found Dorian to be the most fun character to hang out with in *DA:I*. However, I still remember my surprise and disappointment when I first discovered in a forum conversation that my favourite mage could end up with the Iron Bull. I felt that I missed what seems like the most interesting side of Dorian and immediately went on YouTube to watch their entire dialogue. However, I then questioned the fact that Dorian’s queer side was almost “hidden”, both by him and BioWare. As video games’ “breaking gay game character”, I found this prudery almost ironic. In this light, Dorian may be more of an introductory, than a key figure to queer sexuality in video games. Still, he remains, I hope, one of the first of a long list of human and non-human (but these already exist) characters who unashamedly live their queer sexuality in broad daylight.

This analysis proved that the integration of a gay character in a larger story does not automatically bring about queer topics. Outside of his relationship with the Iron Bull, Dorian is a flirtatious and flamboyant mage whose goals do not differ from any other characters: defeating evil and reestablishing peace in Thedas. In many ways, Dorian seemed much less queer than a lot of more ambiguous characters I had encountered in my past gaming experiences. As such, Dorian’s clear categorization as a gay character is both a blessing and a curse. In this, queerness needs a more fluid and ambivalent environment to thrive, an argument that I extend in the next chapter through the analysis of an equally flamboyant, but more mysterious and multifaceted character – Kuja from *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000).

## Chapter 4. Sissies, Sinthomosexuals and Cyborgs: Searching for the Coordinates of a Queer Future in Final Fantasy IX.

Kuja... what you did was wrong... But you gave us all one thing... hope... we were all created for the wrong reason, but you alone defied your fate. We do not want to forget this. We want your memory to live on forever... to remind us that we were not created for the wrong reason... that our life has meaning (Squaresoft, 2000)

One of the reasons why I enjoyed playing the *Final Fantasy* games as a child was their multidimensional characters. The games would slowly build complex politics behind the seemingly evil motivations of these charismatic antagonists, and often lead the players to question the motivations of the protagonists themselves, ultimately depicting the final confrontation as a clash of ideals. Of course, the conventional heroes of the game always ended up being the most conventionally moral and ethical characters, but deep inside, I always wished I could play these games, at least once, as a villain. I wanted to embrace their radical struggle, but also their nonconformity, power, and solitude.

Kuja is one of those villains I admired and continue to admire. Being the main antagonist of the first Japanese Role-Playing Game (J-RPG) I played, he holds a special place in my heart. Often mistaken for a woman by my friends, he is among the most androgynous (and, therefore, often considered less “stylish” than other antagonists) villains of the franchise. It always seemed to me that Kuja was the odd one out and his redeeming qualities made me feel that his death was tragic and unfair. While I was completely unaware of most aspects of queer culture and history at the time, I now realise that Kuja might well have been my first queer encounter. As a young teenager, I remember being impressed and also hopeful at the sight of such a powerful, fearful, but also feminine character on screen. Kuja brought about a new dimension to game villains that I had not found in other characters of the series, cartoons, movies and other games of my early adolescence.

The previous chapter demonstrated that openly gay characters such as Dorian are not restricted to articulating “conventional” lesbian and gay politics, but can also pave the way for a more fluid and less binary understanding of the world. This chapter takes a radically different approach by focusing on a character whose identity is left open to interpretation.

Contrary to Dorian, Kuja is rarely associated with LGBTQ video game content. While there are obvious reasons for this – Kuja’s sexuality is not specified and reading him as gay because of his attire, as I will demonstrate very soon, is problematic – I argue that a character such as Kuja is likely to convey more diverse queer politics than an openly gay character such as Dorian. As such, while characters who are “out” are necessary today, we should not dismiss other expressions of dissidence; characters who are hiding in the shadows, waiting for us to stumble upon, recognize and perhaps also celebrate their queer potential.

*FFIX* is now considered an old game (18 years old at the time of writing) within the context of the video game industry. Old games are often forgotten, even in subjects such as game studies, where new games are all too often privileged and perceived to be the source of ground-breaking concepts as well as technological and social innovation. However, I am convinced that historical “artefacts” such as *FFIX* remain fonts of queer potential. In this way, I follow Muñoz’s (2009, 1) argument that ‘queerness can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future’. In many ways, this critical perspective has shaped my analysis of Kuja and approach to *FFIX* in this chapter.

An initial review of forum comments during my early research for this chapter revealed that the most common discussion topic concerning Kuja was with regards to his gender and sexuality. Many forum discussions questioned whether Kuja should be read as gay or transgender, or whether there in fact should be any attempt to identify him at all. These comments have fueled past debates regarding Kuja, but to my mind, they all result in equally dissatisfying, 2-dimensional readings of him. I argue that this villain deserves better, and that queer theory provides the tools necessary to explore his multidimensionality. As a result, this chapter represents an attempt to use queer theory to explain to my younger self why Kuja was so appealing as a villain. Indeed, in this chapter I argue that Kuja is a figure who illustrates the different branches of queer theory, ranging from the anti-relational theories of queer annihilation (Edelman, 2004) to the more socially-engaged, but not less radical politics of queer hope (Muñoz, 2009).

The first section of this chapter analyses forum comments, and maps two problematic, but typical readings of Kuja, which frame most conversations about Kuja’s gender and sexual identity. The first is the identification of Kuja as gay because of his attire and manners. While this reading is valid from the angle of heteronormative masculinity, I argue that it

disregards the more complex gender dynamics that operate inside and outside *FF IX* as a fantasy video game. I also study the main answer to this first reading which is predicated on a refusal to consider Kuja as gay, instead choosing to read his alleged femininity within the context of the (assumed) cultural norms of Japan, where feminine male characters are supposedly more popular. Working with English language forums which are mostly populated by Western gamers, I suggest that this second reading of Kuja relies on Orientalist assumptions about Japanese masculinity, restricting it to stereotypes and ultimately subordinating to Western masculinity.

In the second section of this chapter, and countering the arguments set out in the forum discussions, I outline my first queer reading of Kuja via Edelman's (2004) *No Future* thesis and suggest that he is in fact a manifestation of Edelman's sinthomosexual; a queer figure who relies on a destructive drive and attacks heteronormativity, primarily by taking aim at its core symbol – the Child – and the reproductive futurism that is contained within this cultural figure. I demonstrate that approaching Kuja through Edelman's theory enables us to understand both the character's motives and actions, and to explore the intimate links between villainy and queerness.

Finally, I argue that Kuja's queerness is not solely about antagonism, resistance and destruction. On the contrary, I hold the polemic argument that Kuja's politics, despite their deadly consequences, also engender a sense of queer hope. As a non-human character designed to obey a strict agenda, Kuja defies his fate and proves to other characters that they too can take control of their lives, regardless of their nature. I demonstrate that Kuja stands as a metaphor for queer existence and that several key moments of his narrative, such as his transformation and death, provide glimpses of a queer future.

### *Methodological Details*

This chapter started in a similar way to Chapter 3 as I first gathered primary material from forum threads with a set of keywords<sup>40</sup> that evolved as I progressed in my research. I generally focused on posts and statements which would spark a debate about Kuja's identity, and search if the key words employed were also used in other forum threads. Overall, I selected twelve forum threads totalling 490 comments and archived 45

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<sup>40</sup> Kuja, dandy, gay, anti-hero, angel of death, Roy Batty, camp.

comments on word documents. As the figures indicate, the original sample of comments was significantly smaller than the sample of Chapter 3. In addition, the overall quality and articulation of the arguments were noticeably weaker. This was to be expected for two reasons: first, *FF IX* is a much older game than *DA:I*, there are, therefore, less forum threads dedicated to it; secondly, Kuja is not an openly gay character and has much less “screen time” than Dorian, as he is a non-playable villain, there is, therefore, arguably less material to “talk about”.

As such, this primary research revealed that the potentially queer data I was hoping for was not there, which made me articulate my own queer reading of Kuja. Hence, I first focus on two polemical readings of Kuja from forum comments and argue, through the navigation of theoretical works around masculinity, why they are unsatisfying. I then proceed to an in-depth analysis of Kuja and demonstrate how he first appears as a queer anti-relational figure (Edelman, 2004), but that he first and foremost conveys politics of hope (Muñoz, 2009).

### *Introducing FF IX*

*FF IX* is a story-led J-RPG which alternates between exploration and battles. During the exploring phase, the player navigates a character in the game world, searches for objects and talks to NPC (non-playable characters). Most of the game occurs in towns and dungeons which are represented by fixed frames (Picture 10) in which 3D characters evolve. Only the world map, which is a downsized representation of the game world, is three dimensional (Picture 11). Whenever the player encounters an enemy, the game switches to the 'battle screen' in which everything is represented in 3D (Picture 12). During the battle phase, the player cannot move the characters freely and is only able to select a character's action when their action gauge is full. Characters gain experience from battles and learn new abilities. *FF IX* also displays FMVs (Full Motion Videos) which occur at specific points during the game. These are non-interactive and feature the game in much greater detail than the normal play mode. *FF IX* did not include voices at the time of release and the game text appears through dialogue boxes.



Picture 10: Lindblum, by The White Dragon (n.d.), lparchive.org, Public Domain



Picture 11: Zidane on the world map, by Mike Bettencourt, YouTube, Public Domain.



Picture 12: Zidane during a battle in Lindblum, by Square Enix, Final Fantasy wiki, Public Domain.

The *FF* series is often considered to be the series that popularised the genre of J-RPG in the West (Webster, 2010) with the release of its seventh instalment in 1997. It now comprises fifteen core episodes, some of which have sequels, and several spin-offs. Whilst most *FF* games are still a commercial success (Palumbo, 2016) a lot of gamers agree that the golden age of the series has passed (Schreier, 2012). New games are often blamed for trying to appeal to the masses by adopting interventionist or action-oriented gameplays. While nobody claims that the *FF* series cannot regain its former glory in the future, the PSX<sup>41</sup> era (*FF VII*, *VIII*, *IX*) is generally considered to be the pinnacle of the series' popularity ('What do you think was the peak of the Final Fantasy franchise', 2012). *FF IX* came out at the end of the PSX generation and only one year before *FF X*. Since the Playstation 2 was already in stores, it encountered less commercial success than the two previous episodes despite the fact that it received the best reviews of the series (Technobliterator, 2016). Released as an homage to the earlier instalments, *FF IX* still holds a particular place in gaming communities as it is both self-reflective of the evolution of the series and marks the transition between two generations of consoles.

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<sup>41</sup> PSX is an abbreviation of the home video game console Playstation. *FF* games came out on PSX between 1997 and 2000.

One of the main reasons why we should not exclude a “Western reading” of a series such as *FF* is that it embraces, as a globally successful franchise, the cultural practice of *mukokuseki*, literally meaning ‘something or someone lacking any nationality’ (Iwabuchi, 2002, 28, 29). Ironically, *Mukokuseki* ‘encapsulates a type of ‘unembedded’ culture that is undeniably linked to a virtual imagery of Japan’ (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011) and its globally successful products. *Mukokuseki* aesthetics can be identified in the *FF* series through the “non-country specific appeal” of its most recurrent composer, Nobuo Uematsu (Kohler, 2016, 131) or the art direction of most instalments. *FF IX* is no exception as it displays a universe which is largely inspired by Western Medieval and Renaissance times.

### *Introducing Kuja*

The peaceful world of *FF IX* is disturbed when Queen Brahne decides to expand her kingdom. With the help of Kuja (figures 13 & 14), introduced as a mysterious man who provides her with Black Mages (man-sized magician dolls mass-produced as weapons of war), Brahne easily conquers and destroys neighbouring cities and nations. However, Kuja rapidly puts an end to the queen’s expansionism by killing her, and undertakes a journey to take control of the eidolons, powerful creatures that only summoners<sup>42</sup> can call. During the first three game discs, Kuja’s intentions remain unclear until the end of the third disc, when the player learns that people from a dying planet called Terra have sought to fuse their planet with Gaia (a young planet where *FF IX*’s story is set). In order to do so, they created a being called Garland who in turn created the genomes, a new artificial “race” designed to act as vessels for the Terrans’ souls. It is revealed that Kuja was one of the first genomes created and was sent to Gaia to trigger chaos so as to enable the fusion between the two planets. However, Kuja rebels against his creator and seeks to control both Terra and Gaia. He manages to reach ‘trance’ (Picture 15) – a state that transforms playable characters into a more powerful form – through the absorption of the souls of war victims. He then kills Garland, his creator, but learns that he himself will die soon and that he was always meant to be replaced by Zidane, the main protagonist, who turns out to be a better “version” of him. Kuja cannot bear the thought of dying alone and builds a castle made of memories in order to access and destroy the crystal, source of all life. He is eventually stopped by the protagonists and dies by the side of Zidane, his “brother”.

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<sup>42</sup> Summoners are a race of horned human-like people who can summon immensely powerful creatures.





Picture 13: Kuja, by Square Enix,  
Final Fantasy wiki, Public Domain *FF IX*.



Picture 14: Artwork of Kuja  
from *Dissidia* (Square Enix,  
2008) by Square Enix, Final  
Fantasy wiki, Public domain.



Picture 15: Trance Kuja from *Dissidia* (Square Enix, 2008), by Square Enix, Pinterest,  
Public Domain.

## A Villain in a Thong

Kuja is a villain to be remembered. His midriff, skirt, thong and make-up, together with his flowery language and overdramatic performance make him stand out among the already eccentric cast of *FF IX*, especially when read through the canon of Western games. However, I was (and still am) even more impressed by the fact that no in-game characters ever question Kuja's powers and abilities nor belittle the threat he represents because of his singular appearance, which would not have gone unnoticed in any Western games. As a result, I remember immediately accepting Kuja as a mysterious and stylish villain (despite the fact that I had never seen men in thong before).

Going through forum comments made me realise that no gamers could explain the strange emotional attraction I felt for Kuja. Of course, a great majority simply agreed that Kuja was a flamboyant villain: a 'narcissistic dandy' ('Kuja's not transgendered', 2013 ,1), a tragic 'thespian' ('What if Kuja got laid? \*SPOILERS\*', 2009, 1) or even a misunderstood antagonist ('Kuja – Bad guy or Anti Hero?', 2010, 1), but could not explain the dormant queer manifestation I could glimpse as a kid, and fully perceive today.

These comments coincided with much more polemical views of Kuja which often sparked online debates in the forum threads. While they were the driving force of online conversations, they remained a minority. Indeed, out of 490 posts, 7 of them specifically read Kuja as gay, 9 produced readings that could be considered, as I will demonstrate later, Orientalists, 12 were uncertain about Kuja's sex, gender and sexuality, and 13 saw him as a cross-dresser or even 'transvestite' ('Was Kuja gay?', 2008, 1). Altogether, these comments represent roughly 8.4% of the posts reviewed for this chapter (see Table 2 in Appendix). Although there were mostly problematic, they were also those that provide a non-heteronormative reading of Kuja. Most of the others did not engage with, or even avoided this debate. As such, I decided, before carrying my own analysis, to first focus on these readings (the gay and orientalist readings) as they sparked conversations that illustrate the difficulty of identifying a potentially gender disruptive character in a Japanese fantasy world.

Kuja is gay. I could have sworn that he was a woman the first time I saw him. He wears this robe thingie that exposes his legs ... He also has this long feminine hair ('Kuja is the most kick ass homosexual', 2004).

Well Kuja is deffinitely (sic) a male with (my opinion) an exaggerated gay-dressing style...I mean an uncovered-belly shirt may be ok... but a THONG ?! C'mon... ('Kuja: Boy or Girl', 2006, 6).

These two comments mirror those that complained about Dorian being a stereotypical character in the previous chapter. Only this time, the gamers read Kuja as gay through the lens of stereotypes and Western masculinities. At first sight, it does not take much to conclude that the villain does not embody the standards of hegemonic masculinity – the model pressurising men to conform to certain types of masculinity, mainly defined by aggressiveness, power over women, and heteronormativity (Connell 1995, Kahn 2009, Peralta 2007). On the contrary, his seemingly soft and delicate appearance position him at the opposite end of the spectrum, a position which is often taken to signify homosexuality. Indeed, to 'many people, homosexuality is a *negation* of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate' (Connell, 1992, 736), which results in the construction of hegemonic masculinity as inherently homophobic (Connell, 1992, 736; Herek, 1986; Lehne, 1989). These gamers follow a similar reasoning as they associate Kuja's clothes and allure with his sexual identity, which leads them to conflate non-masculinity with homosexuality as a way to define Kuja as a counter-hegemonic character.

Ironically, they fail to notice that Kuja also embodies several defining traits of hegemonic masculinity. As the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, Kuja is a cold-blooded self-centred villain who is not able to empathise with others. He does not hesitate in killing hundreds of people to achieve his plans and, as such, he embodies what MacInnes (1998, 47) calls the 'vices' of hegemonic masculinity, such as 'abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible' or 'to communicate'.

Instead, it could be argued that they identify him as a "sissy villain", a recurring figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood cinema and animation. During this period, gay male characters were typically confined to the roles of villain or victim, both of whom frequently had tragic outcomes, such as suicide, violent deaths, or eternal isolation (Capsuto, 2000; Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987). Among already many stereotypes, 'effeminacy' (Giunchigliani, 2011, 36) was (and arguably still is) considered the main indicator for homosexuality, thereby giving the name of "sissy villain" to stereotypically gay male figures.

Owing to censorship laws and concern over public decency, homosexuality was not openly displayed in the media until the Stonewall riots<sup>43</sup> (Russo, 1987). Consequently, homosexuality was often implied through the confusion between gender and sexuality, and signified through gendered characteristics, such as effeminacy, rather than sexual behaviour. Going all the way back to Peter Lorre in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941), Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (Preminger, 1944) or Bruno from *Strangers on a Train* (Hitchcock, 1951), ‘there’s a storied tradition of using queenliness (or gender confusion) as a way to explain a villain’s nefarious ways’ (Bernstein, 2010, n.p.). Along the same lines, the sissy villain is also used to emphasise the straightness of the hero.

The sissy villain is even more prevalent in animated movies – particularly those produced by Disney between the 1990s and early 2000s (Roth, 1996; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Very often, antagonists such as Jafar, Frolo or Scar have ‘finer bone structures, with narrow jaw lines, prominent cheekbones’, but also ‘tall and willowy frames with slender limbs and waists’ (Giunchigliani, 2011, 57). Often dressed in refined outfits, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) describe them as ‘dandy’ villains (99) who never do their own ‘dirty work’ (101) themselves, thereby showing their effeminacy by being ‘grouped with [stereotypical] representations of women as passive and inactive’ (102). As such, stereotypes are not only conveyed in movies which target an adult audience, but are also formed among the younger audience.

Without a doubt, Kuja shares strong similarities with the sissy villains of Hollywood and Disney: he delegates most of his work to his black mages, he is significantly more slender and elegant than his peers and he dies a tragic and spectacular death. Thus, it is hardly surprising that some gamers draw hasty conclusions regarding his sexuality, based on the recurring tropes that have pervaded Western popular culture. As I mentioned earlier, this conflation was not made by the majority of gamers on the selected forums and for the most part, these gamers responded to the ‘gay reading’ of Kuja with jokes or indifference (‘Kuja’s not transgendered’, 2013, 1, 2; ‘is Kuja gay?’, 2013, 1; ‘Kuja: Boy or Girl’, 2003, 3), but also criticised non-heterosexual readings of Kuja for not taking into account that it is a Japanese cultural product which, therefore, implies the display of different cultural norms and standards when it comes to gender and sexuality.

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<sup>43</sup> *The Boys in the Band* (Friedkin, 1970) is often considered to be the first major American movie to revolve around gay characters (Shaw, 2012, 65).

This led a minority of gamers (9 of them in total) to reject a Western reading of Kuja and attempt to adopt a “Japanese” point of view. However, these gamers failed to grasp the nuances of Japanese masculinity and formulated a rather excessive argument according to which feminine men are the “norm” in Japanese anime, but also more generally Japanese popular culture:

This doesn't really have anything to do with Kuja, as yeah effeminate men is just kind of a thing in Japanese games/anime (‘Kuja’s not transgendered’, 2013, 1).

Kuja's a dude. Just a really effeminate one that you see in every work of anime and Japanese production (‘Kuja’s not transgendered’, 2013, 1).

Hes (sic) a guy. He just looks feminine, feminine men are popular in Japan. That's why some animes and mangas have feminine men characters (‘Kuja: Boy or Girl’, 2005, 4).

Yeah I agree with you here, a lot of Japanese male fictional characters like in anime are really feminine. They'd get a shock when they meet the traditional British Bald Builder (‘Kuja...female?’, 2007, 1).

As I will argue in a few paragraphs, these statements are not entirely wrong. However, they make the mistake of approaching Japanese masculinity, and in general, pop culture, as a single entity, ignoring that it has undertaken significant changes over the last century.

As a non-Western country, Japan was originally part of a bigger societal dynamic that was originally influenced by the *wen-wu* (literally meaning literary-martial), a dyad which has structured Chinese, but also other East-Asian masculinities (Louie, 2003). The *wen-wu* ‘is an ideal that all men are supposed to work towards’ as it ‘captures both the mental and physical composition of the ideal man’ (3). Constructed both biologically and culturally, *wen* has been generally privileged above *wu* in ideal Chinese masculinity. While the *wen-wu* worked as an oppressive model, it enabled homosexuality and homoeroticism to be ‘common and accepted among the elite over the broad stretch of Chinese history’ (6).

Although it rapidly distanced itself from its neighbour, Japanese culture also boasted numerous accounts of homosexual relationships in its ancient writings<sup>44</sup>, but also in more modern works on Japanese history, mentioning romantic love between samurais<sup>45</sup> (Lunsing, 2001, 25). Gender and sexual fluidity is widespread in traditional Japanese theatre (McLeod, 2013, 317), and nonnormative sex and identities still abound in Japanese popular and entertainment culture (317). In the mindset of many Japanese people, 'beauty does not equal femininity' (319). As a result, Japanese pop culture often displays a different hierarchy of gender norms, which can lead to misunderstandings when encountered by non-Japanese audiences.

It should of course be noted that the apparent gender fluidity that is allowed in Japan is confined to popular culture (McLelland, 2003, 61). Since the Meiji restoration period, Japan has been 'very quick to adopt Western ways' of defining masculinity in everyday life (Louie, 2003, 11). The soldier and the 'salaryman' replaced the samurai, hybrid masculinity was implemented at the end of the 19th century, triggering a 'caucasianisation', and thus 'hybridisation' of masculine icons in order to present Japan as a 'white' power, 'and not weak and backward' like other Asian countries (ibid.).

Yet, in recent decades, non-hegemonic masculinities in Japan have undergone a new rise. Alternative models such as the *sôshokukei danshi*, or herbivore masculinities, promoting 'slim heterosexual men who are professionally unambitious, consumerists, and passive or uninterested in heterosexual relationships' (Charlebois, 2013, 89) are gaining visibility (see also Chen, 2012; Fukasawa, 2009). Nowadays, it is often argued that 'contemporary modes of masculinity in Japan, perhaps more radically than elsewhere in the postindustrial world, have diversified and shifted away from the most straightforward examples of modern hegemonic masculinity' (Früsthuck & Walthall, 2011, 11). In this light, it would, therefore, be reductive to state that feminine men are popular in Japan as a femininity and effeminacy are not necessarily perceived as positive traits.

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<sup>44</sup> One of 'Japan's oldest writings, the *Nihongi*, which is thought to have been completed around AD 720, contains an episode of what has been interpreted to concern the love relationship of two priests (ibid., referring to Karl Florenz's translation)' (Lusing, 2001, 25). Although others argue that it could be interpreted differently, it echoes numerous stories of old monks using novices for sexual relief (25).

<sup>45</sup> *Danshoku Okagami* (The great mirror of male love), written in the seventeenth century (Ihara 1976, 1990) is considered one of the founding text of same-sex samurai love.

Additionally, this type of reasoning encapsulates Japanese gender norms as it both isolates and foregrounds its assumed differences with Western culture. As a result, Japanese culture is defined as “Other”, but also inferior, given that femininity and effeminacy are not considered desirably traits for hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, it could be argued that these users adopt an orientalist approach as a strategy which enables them to simplify a culture that they might not fully grasp.

Orientalism, originally referring to ‘the work of the orientalist and a character, style or quality associated with the Eastern nations’ (Macfie, 2000, 2), has become in a ‘little more than twenty years’ after WWII a ‘corporate institution, designed for dealing with the orient, a partial view of Islam, an instrument of Western imperialism, a style of thought, based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between orient and occident, and even an ideology, justifying and accounting for the subjugation of blacks, Palestinian Arabs’ (ibid.). This transformation was mainly enabled through the works of a series of scholars who launched assaults on early orientalist works: Orientalism was criticised as an ‘instrument of imperialism, designed to secure the colonisation and enslavement of parts of the so-called Third World’ (Macfie, 2000, 3; Abdel-Malek, 2000), as a ‘mode of understanding and interpreting Islam and Arab nationalism’ (Macfie, 2000, 3; Tibawi 2000), as a ‘saturating hegemonic system’ (Macfie, 2000, 3; Said, 2000) and ‘a justification for a syndrome of beliefs, attitudes and theories, affecting the geography, economics and sociology of the orient’ (Macfie, 2000, 3).

Out of these four principal assaults on Orientalism, it is generally understood that Said’s (1995) theory and critique became the most prevalent (Macfie, 2000, 4). According to him, the Orient is Europe’s ‘cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other’ (Said, 1995, 1). Since Antiquity, it has been conceptualised as ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’ (1). The Orient became ‘almost a [Western] invention’, which enabled Orientalism to become an ‘intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture’ (19). Thus, Orientalism can be ‘discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...], as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (3).

Thus the nine comments aforementioned, which argue that feminine men are popular in anime, but also popular culture (and even in Japan in general as the third comment

suggests) do nothing less than isolate Japanese pop culture as a special place in the mind of Western gamers where effeminate men are celebrated, if not the norm. Although they arguably mean well, these gamers disregard both the complex (and still changing) formation of Japanese masculinities and gender construction more generally in East-Asia. Implying that Japanese men are predominantly feminine, or that being feminine is a positive trait in Japan, they dismiss the idea that these men might not appear as feminine to the eyes of a Japanese audience, but also that there are other types of ruling masculinity in Japan which follow the standards of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, femininity and effeminacy, even though they might take different forms, are still subordinated to hegemonic figures such as the salaryman.

These gamers' superior attitude towards Japanese masculinity can also be seen in these four forum comments, where gamers position themselves as "educators" who reject a gay reading by claiming an intellectual "authority" over Japanese culture, thereby echoing Said's argument. However, by mixing their Western reading of Japanese culture norms (feminine men are popular), they implicitly rank Japanese masculinity, and more generally, culture, as inferior and potentially decadent. In doing so, they echo Macfie's (2000) conclusion about Orientalism's core mechanics, which is the reliance on a stereotypical understanding of both familiar and foreign cultures, putting the former in a superior position:

Europe (the West, the 'self') is seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative and masculine, while the orient (the East, the 'other) (sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the 'self') is seen as being irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine and sexually corrupt (4).

These findings also illustrate Glasspool's (2016, 116) research, according to which Western gamers often rely on a 'particular imagining of androgynous masculinity as distinctively Japanese'. While Glasspool indicates that some view this as 'a positive quality', 'being a pleasing alternative to Western norms of masculinity' (ibid.), several 'reproduce the negative view of androgynous, Japanese' male characters' (117). Extending this claim, Glasspool notes that some gamers and fans ultimately 'align homosexuality and Japaneseness', thus combining homophobia with Orientalism and rejecting paradoxically 'the very Japaneseness' (ibid.) they enjoy consuming.



In sum, gamers who attempt to produce a “non-straight” reading of Kuja adopt two opposite, but equally problematic approaches to define and understand this antagonist. In both cases, I demonstrated that these readings were restrictive: although Kuja seems to fit perfectly the role of the “sissy villain” – as he embodies both an Orientalist vision of Japanese masculinity and the characteristics of stereotypical male homosexuality in the West – such a reading is limited as it does not take into account Kuja’s role and personality in *FF IX*. While these gamers produce unsatisfactory readings of Japanese gender codes, strictly approaching *FF IX* as a Japanese game would also be inadequate, as it is part, as I mentioned in the introduction, of a globally successful franchise which has been relying on various aesthetics including *mukokuseki*.

Furthermore, I felt equally dissatisfied with the remaining majority of forum comments – answering to the two previous approaches with indifference or humour. For instance, gamers would joke about Kuja transcending gender norms, or argue that he purposively wears an extravagant outfit to ‘confuse sexually insecure fanboys’ (‘Kuja: Boy or Girl’, 2006, 3, 4, 5). Others would simply read him as narcissistic and self-obsessed (‘is Kuja gay?’, 2013). As such, these gamers would often offer glimpses of explanation of why Kuja might appear as “different”, but never fully engage in the conversation. Of course, this volatility was to be expected in a forum thread and showed me that both gay or “straight” readings of Kuja – that is to say, approaching Kuja as a regular Japanese villain – were unsatisfactory to my quest for queerness.

Replaying *FF IX* while reading the comments, I encountered many cut-scenes which convinced me that Kuja was more than a destructive and heartless villain. Determined to build a queer understanding of Kuja through a Western lens which does not rely on weak paradigms (such as his potential effeminacy), I decided to put his appearance aside and focus on his role and motivations in *FF IX* in order to understand what drove him to wishing the destruction of an entire planet. Focusing on the drive that lies behind such a powerful and threatening, but also touching character, I rapidly noticed that Kuja presented several queer antisocial traits identified in the work of Lee Edelman (2004). This led me to apply Edelman’s work to my reading of Kuja and argue, through this lens, that Kuja’s queerness was intimately linked to the targeting of heteronormativity and its future.

## A Death-Driven Angel

*Kuja* - H-ha haha... What an interesting lie. You're telling me that my life will end soon? Ha ha ha... Nice try, Garland, but I won't fall for your silly tricks... Garland? Garland!? Answer me!

*Garland* - You were created to destroy. You are a mortal...

*Kuja* - A mortal!? ...I'm finished? I don't believe you! Why should I believe such a silly story! You're telling me that I'll die soon, now that I'm more powerful than anyone? I'm gonna... die!? Lose my soul...? Ha... hahahahahaha! What comedy! Zidane, isn't it hilarious!? I'll die just like the black mages I so despise! I single-handedly brought chaos into Gaia, but in the end, I'm nothing but a worthless doll!

*Zidane* - Kuja... Kuja?

*Kuja* - ...I won't let it happen. I won't... I won't let this world exist without me!  
(Squaresoft, 2000).

According to Edelman (2004), queerness is irremediably doomed as it is by default located 'in opposition' to the ruling belief of society: the nurturing of the fantasy of an 'always indefinite future' (17). Embodying the 'antisocial turn' (Halberstam, 2011, 109) in queer theory, Edelman situates himself in the context of Bersani's (1989) work according to which gay sex relies on an 'anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian' philosophy (Caserio et al. 2006, 823). As such, Bersani (1989) predates Edelman by arguing that homosexuals should adopt an 'outlaw existence' (76) to resist the dominant social order.

Edelman (2004) proposes 'no platform or position from which queer sexuality or any queer subject might finally and truly become itself' (17, 18). Contrariwise, he positions queerness against the rhetorics and privileges of heteronormativity, which are symbolised by the figure of the Child. Edelman argues that the Child (which is not to be confused with 'the lived experiences of any [...] children' (11)) 'shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought' (2) as it represents the ultimate symbol of social viability (9). It secures 'reproductive futurism' (2), the 'absolute privilege of heteronormativity' (11),

generating the perpetuation of sameness, assuring repetition and preventing change in the service of oppressive representation and desire. Challenging such a ‘political discourse’ is unthinkable, as it runs counter to the idea of a collective future, an idea that ‘we are never permitted to acknowledge or address’ (ibid.).

In this context, queer is inhabited, or, as Giffney (2008) would argue about Edelman’s work, ‘haunted’ (58), by a ‘death drive’: the ‘mechanistic compulsion’ (Edelman, 2004, 22) which aims at refusing any privileges and forms of social reproduction (9, 22). Building upon the work of Lacan, Edelman (2004) defines the death drive as the force which allows queers to survive as themselves (17), in other words, to disturb and queer normative social norms and organizations until their inevitable deaths. This solid negation of futurism enables queerness to embody a parallel concept (if not synonymous as Edelman sometimes uses both terms interchangeably) that Edelman calls *jouissance*, an “enjoyment” and ‘movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law’ (25).

Anti-futuristic queerness is often expressed through a vessel that Edelman calls the ‘sinthomosexual’. As the ‘site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a [queer] *jouissance*’ (38), sinthomosexuality is the characteristic given to the specific queer being enacting the death drive. The sinthomosexual is a “gravedigger of society”, one who care[s] nothing [for] the future’ (87), they are the incarnation of anti-futuristic queerness. This negation can be perceived in the strange spelling of the word: a portmanteau composed of *sinthome* and homosexuality.

The *sinthome*, a term first used by Lacan (35) retains the old French spelling of ‘symptom’, which, therefore, calls attention to the spelling of the word instead of the word as a signifier of meaning. In this way, similar to Lacan, Edelman uses *sinthome* as a ‘site at which meaning comes undone’ (ibid.). He argues that homosexuality is doomed to be considered negatively despite the well-intentioned efforts of many groups to normalize queer sexualities. According to him, homosexuality cannot escape the original “culture of death” with which it is still associated (74) since, in the imagination of heteronormativity, it is inevitably attached to a ‘definitional importance of sex’ as pleasure – hence, not reproduction – which ultimately leads to the aforementioned fatal *jouissance*. Thus homosexual culture expresses a ‘fantasy that locates homosexuality in the place of the

sinthome' as it negates core processes of reproduction and, can, therefore, be constructed 'as what [Edelman] call[s] *sinthomosexuality*' (39).

Edelman clarifies that all sexualities can be sinthomosexuality, but this condition only falls to subjects who nurture a 'fantasy turned inside out', subjects who refuse the promise of futurity (35). As such Edelman takes diverse examples of sinthomosexuals – Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1911), Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1997), Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843), or Leonard from *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1959). In all these instances, these characters threaten figures of reproductivity – children or heterosexual couples – and pursue sterile lifestyles as secluded singles and/or asexuals. Of course, some of these characters are offered a redeeming moment when they can abandon their disruptive agenda, and so stop being sinthomosexuals. Scrooge, for instance, becomes a kinder and generous gentleman after having been visited by the three ghosts. Overall, sinthomosexuality operates as a befitting tool to understand how queerness is ostracized and villainized. It gives depth to the Manichean nature of most mainstream narratives and allows a more nuanced approach of antagonistic characters.

In *FF IX*, Kuja poses a threat to all manifestations of reproductive futurism. As Garland's 'Angel of Death' (Squaresoft, 2000), he is sent to Gaia to wreak havoc and destruction in order to facilitate the fusion between Gaia and Terra – the dying planet on which he was created. However, Garland's plans are brutally stopped when Kuja rebels and kills him after learning that he himself is mortal. Terrified by the idea that the world might outlive him, he destroys Terra and heads to the Crystal, source of all life, with the same intention.

Needless to say, Kuja destabilizes the power structure of Gaia's main continent. By lending his force and technology to Queen Brahne, he enables her to invade most neighbouring regions and annihilate any resistance, thereby disrupting the political equilibrium of each city-state. Using weapons unknown to humans – the black mages – and reviving ancient powers through summoning, Kuja constitutes an unprecedented threat. Self-obsessed and cynical, he embraces sinthomosexuality's unthinkable drive: the enjoyment of annihilating 'every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form' (Edelman, 2004, 4). Even his allegiance to Queen Brahne is temporary, dispatching her when she becomes too cumbersome. In short, Kuja is an alien being whose sole mission is to wreak chaos, and he succeeds in doing so.

However, Kuja's actions are not wholly destructive, as they initially serve the regeneration of Terra, his home world – the souls collected from the dead were supposed to be transferred to the genomes and ultimately enable the revival and perpetuation of Terran civilisation. In essence, Terra stands as the ultimate symbol of reproductive futurism. Indeed, except from being divided in two distinct genres, genomes are almost all identical (Picture 16). Created as vessels for the collected souls of Gaia, they embody the perpetuation of physical, but also spiritual sameness. Being the only different genome in both appearance and personality, Kuja stands out from his peers and, contrary to the other genomes, his initial role is to destroy, not to reproduce. As such, Kuja does not represent the future, but only a transition.



Picture 16: Genomes by Square Enix, Final Fantasy wiki, Public Domain.

Kuja's betrayal constitutes a key moment in his embrace of anti-futuristic jouissance. Learning that he is mortal and realising that he will not be part of Terra's future, he absorbs most of the already collected souls to help him reach the state of trance, and destroys both his creator and home world. In doing so, Kuja performs sinthomosexuality from both a Gaian and a Terran point of view as he remains a threatening outcast in both cases. He chooses to "survive as himself": a queer pariah with a looming death, who, pushed by an unstoppable death drive, stands in front of all manifestations of a reproductive future.

In addition to causing death and preventing the perpetuation of sameness, Kuja repeatedly targets the figure of the Child. For instance, he destroys Terra's facilities,

which ultimately enables him to prevent the creation of new genomes, the children of Terra. But it is his relationship with Zidane which best symbolises Edelman's sinthomosexual/child duality. As previously mentioned, the player learns towards the end of the game that Zidane is Kuja's brother. Contrary to Kuja, Zidane was able to experience childhood and can, therefore, reach the state of trance naturally<sup>46</sup>. While it is not clear whether the latter is immortal, he does not have a limit placed on his life as Kuja has. Zidane has a soul, unlike most genomes, and developed a strong personality thanks to his life on Gaia. In comparison, Kuja is 'deemed' a 'failure' by Garland (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2017a) and cannot compare to his younger brother, who is destined to become the leader of Terra. Jealous, the player learns that Garland left Zidane as a kid on Gaia, hoping that he would not interfere.

Hence, Zidane is the "Child" of *FF IX*. Although he refuses the mission he was given, he still manages to save most of the genome survivors from Kuja's attack. In opposition to Kuja, he decides to fight for both Terra – which he fails to save – and Gaia. Zidane's attachment to Gaia, his adopted world, is another reason to read him as the ultimate protector of life and futurism. Echoing Greek mythology and ancient Western traditions, Gaia is often understood as the 'birth-mother', 'giver of life and creator of all' (Eisler, 1990, 23). More recent political movements such as ecofeminism draw analogies between 'women's role in biological production and the Earth Mother as a warrant that privileges women's relationship to nature' (Stearney, 1994, 152). As a result, 'the Gaia' functions 'as a source for much ecofeminist spirituality, theory and activism' (ibid.).

There is also a more sexist side to Zidane that makes him the flagship of heteronormative futurity. This is his attitude towards Garnet, *FF IX*'s main female character and Zidane's love interest. It is made clear that Zidane is not a child during the game, but a teenager<sup>47</sup>. He repeatedly makes flirtatious comments and rarely takes any hint that his flirtations are unwanted. In one particular cut-scene, he even 'cop[s] a feel and pass[es] it off as an accident' (Ashe, 2015, n.p.). In this way, Zidane's attitude is comparable to 'the sexual lifestyle of any straight male', but also verges on sexual harassment. However, the vaudevillian and fantastical context of the game predisposes the audience to accept it as a 'charmingly roguish' trait (n.p.).

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<sup>46</sup> It is understood that empathy and strong human emotions enable people to reach trance in *FF IX* (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2017d).

<sup>47</sup> It is also said in the game's instructions that he is sixteen.

Surprisingly, the game's narrative shows some awareness of Zidane's oppressive behaviour: during an interaction with Eiko, a younger female character who shows a strong interest in him and whose persistent overtures exasperate Zidane, he suddenly wonders if he is not putting Garnet through the same ordeal. Eventually, it is only when he starts to 'put her well-being before' (ibid.) his desires that she returns his interest. Thus, in addition to being the saviour of Gaia, Zidane learns how to navigate his performance of hegemonic masculinity towards women in order to be more attractive. Acting as the "Child", each of his actions leads to social and biological reproduction. He symbolises the epitome of heteronormativity, which Kuja, as sinthomosexual, attempts to eradicate.

Reading Kuja through Edelman's work enables me to shed light on his queer potential. As an anti-relational queer figure, Kuja's destructive drive is intimately related to him being an outcast who does not fit the models of reproductive futurity displayed in *FF IX*. As a result, his actions run counter to any manifestation of heteronormative futurity, such as Terra or the figure of the Child embodied by Zidane. However, while I have demonstrated how Kuja fits with Edelman's concept of the sinthomosexual, there are aspects of his character and narrative that re-evaluate the limitations of this reading and, by extension, the limits of Edelman's theory.

For instance, despite his disruptive nature, the sinthomosexual ultimately contributes to the restoration and reinforcement of heteronormativity. According to Coffman (2013), this figure is 'little more than a placeholder whose deviance enables the normative order's structural functioning' (60). Although Kuja is certainly more than a placeholder (he is, after all, one of the main motivators of the *FF IX* narrative), it can be argued that his death enacts the (re)absorption of queerness by normative futurity. Indeed, when he is finally defeated, he ends up lying on the ground, in the middle of the giant roots of the Lifa Tree<sup>48</sup>. After speaking his last words, roots suddenly start growing in his direction and "take" Kuja underground, a phenomenon which can be read as a normalisation process from both Gaian and Terran's points of view.

Returning to ecofeminism and the assimilation of Gaia with "Mother Earth", Kuja's return

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<sup>48</sup> This giant tree plays a complex role in the game's narrative. It is used as a tool that blocks Gaian's souls from returning to Gaia's core and filters them in order to only let Terran souls penetrate the planet's core so that Terran civilization might one day be revived.

to Gaia's core constitutes a strong redeeming moment, when, on his death bed, he apologises to Zidane and makes amends for what he has done. He is then allowed to leave in peace and be one with Gaia, who accepts him with open arms despite his origins and thus puts an end to his ostracisation. The same can be argued about the Lifa Tree. As the central instrument of Garland's planned regeneration of Terra, the Lifa Tree constitutes another key symbol of a Terran future. Kuja's return to the tree is nothing more than the manifestation of what every Terran soul goes through. Kuja is, therefore, forgiven, "normalised" and cleansed of his unthinkable desires. He is not a sinthomosexual villain anymore.

In addition, opposing Kuja to the figure of the Birth Mother 'always run[s] the risk of equating women with heteronormativity, by defining them as the site of the unqueer' (Halberstam, 2011, 108), while gay figures promise absolutely nothing, but still lead to something potentially better. Although Halberstam recognises the disruptive potential of Edelman's work, they mostly find it 'apolitical' (ibid.), particularly because it solely focuses on a short list of favoured 'canonical writers' and figures that primarily cater to gay men. They also add that queer theory must be willing to 'turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange', but also canonical figures in order to really 'make a mess', but also 'bash back' and 'speak up and out' (110), only then can queer negativity be political. The second issue with using Edelman's work in a reading of *FF IX* is that Kuja's politics are confined to queer antifuturity. Thus, antirelational queer theory is a useful and critical tool that sheds light on how queerness manifests itself in a AAA Japanese video game from the early 2000s. However, it failed at grasping the nuances that surround Kuja as a character.

As a player, it was clear to me that Kuja was not entirely ostracised, but that his struggles were shared by other characters such as Zidane. Repeatedly Zidane and other genomes admit that, should have they been in his position, they might have acted as Kuja did. Furthermore, Kuja's actions do not necessarily stand in the way of futurity. Taken from a different perspective, his transformation, for instance, is the result of his obsession to defy his fate and surpass his limits as an artificial, but imperfect being. Overall, I felt that Kuja's narrative was first and foremost about the character's inner conflicts. As such, a less confrontational approach was necessary. Going through *FF IX*'s dialogue lines, I finally stumbled upon a "speech" from Mikoto, one of the genome survivors of Terra's destruction, in which she thanks Kuja, despite his evil deeds, for giving them (the genomes) "hope".



Although this statement could seem oddly surprising, if not ironic – Kuja destroys Terra, the genomes’ “homeland” – it also illustrates a radical understanding of Kuja: that of a hopeful being who does not necessarily embody an anti-relational vision of the world, but who, first and foremost, offers glimpses of an alternative future where individuals free themselves from social constraints. Mikoto’s words reinforced my determination to tackle Kuja through a different angle. Going through counter-arguments to Edelman’s work, I directed my attention to José Muñoz’s work (2009), which conveniently echoes Mikoto’s words by developing a hopeful understanding of queerness.

## A Hopeful Cyborg

Futurity can be a problem. Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future [...] But that is not the case of different cultures of sexual dissidence. Rather than invest in a deferred future, the queer citizen-subject labors to live in a present that is calibrated, through the protocols of state power [...] But must the future and the present exist in this rigid binary? Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction? (Muñoz, 2009, 49)

In his compelling study of the everyday life confrontation between queerness and heteronormativity, Muñoz suggests an alternative vision of queerness and futurity to that of Edelman and, more generally, antirelational queer theory. He argues that while the antirelational approach provides a critical understanding of queerness as isolated, it also displays a ‘romance of singularity and negativity’ (10), thereby dismissing the idea of queer collectivity. Muñoz criticizes antirelational approaches for ‘deferring various dreams and difference’ (11), inevitably dooming queerness. According to him, queerness should be first and foremost about ‘futurity and hope’. Although it is likely to disappoint and fail, it must be viewed, if anything, ‘as being visible only in the horizon’ (ibid.). As such, the future does not have to be the province of the child if we understand queerness as a concept that is not currently being oppressed, but as something that is yet-to-be.

Indeed, Muñoz adopts the equally polemical argument that ‘queerness is not there yet’ (1). He advises us to be wary of those who refer to queerness in the present, particularly when it manifests itself under the guise of ‘pragmatic debates that dominate contemporary gay

and lesbian politics' which often result in the aping of heterosexual society (22). Although these should not be entirely dismissed, as they provide temporary and concrete relief, queerness should be approached as an 'ideality' (1). Thus we should strive for queerness, although we may never be queer, as it enables us to resist what Muñoz calls the 'here and now', in other words, the 'prison house' (ibid.) of the heteronormative present.

According to Muñoz, queerness is an ideal that reminds us that something is missing. It can be distilled 'from the past and used to imagine a future' through the 'realm of the aesthetic'. Queerness is also 'performative' as it is not simply a 'being' but a 'doing for and towards the future'. These offer glimpses of queer worlds and pleasures and contain 'blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity' (ibid.).

Muñoz uses Bloch's (1996) dual understanding of utopia and hope to explore queer potentiality<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, the latter makes a distinction between abstract utopias, which are understood by Muñoz (2009) as a 'banal optimism' that is completely detached from historical consciousness, and concrete utopias, defined as the 'historically situated struggles', the 'daydreamlike [...] hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solidarity oddball who is the one who dreams for many' (3). Bloch (1996) argues that concrete utopias are the realm of 'educated hope', an affective structure which dwells 'in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy' (146). Adapting Bloch's approach to queer theory and situating his work a little after the Stonewall revolution, Muñoz undertakes an investigation of utopian feelings throughout the works of that period. From Frank O'Hara's queer poems to Kevin Aviance's extravagant dancing, Muñoz takes his reader on a journey into queer literary, performance and visual arts, dedicating each chapter to one or two specific artists, and identifying the properties and traits which can help us to see the "not-yet-conscious" queer utopia.

Following Muñoz's response to antirelational queer theory, I argue that Kuja's queer potentiality promises more than death and destruction. As I indicated earlier, several traits and actions of Kuja cannot be satisfactorily explained by Edelman's theory. Indeed, behind his transformation lies a strong wish to be more complete, but most importantly to accept his hybridity, his monstrosity and, I argue, his queerness. Also, while his death can be read as a return to heteronormativity, it does not explain Zidane's impulse to go and

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<sup>49</sup> Understood by Muñoz as the possibility of something happening in the future.

see him before his last breath. Not only does Zidane put his life at risk, he also shows that he cares about his brother. Finally, Mikoto, one of the genome survivors of Terra's destruction, thanks Kuja for giving them "hope" by defying his fate despite his evil acts. These narrative details show Kuja and the characters' perception of him in a slightly different light. A light imbued with queer potentiality which might contain the coordinates of a hopeful horizon.

### *Do Genomes dream of Electric Sheep?*

Before investigating how Kuja's narrative can be approached through Muñoz's work, I first focus on how he, as a genome, inevitably embodies in essence queer futurity. In order to make this argument, I combine Muñoz's theory with Haraway's (1987) concept of the cyborg and ultimately claim it as a queer "hopeful" figure. This move was inspired by two comments, taken from separate forum threads, which compare Kuja to *Blade Runner's* (Scott, 1982) "villain", Roy Batty, the main antagonist of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982). Batty is one of the most advanced replicant (an advanced cyborg) models, has superhuman strength and genius intellect. He comes to Earth hoping to find a way to extend his lifespan, but finally accepts his fate, realising that people survive through each others' memories. Through their comparisons, both gamers express strong sympathy for both characters' development:

[...] and to tee it all off he becomes incredibly easy to sympathize with by the storyline's finale despite everything that he did to Zidane and the main cast of IX (it's like Roy from Blade Runner all over again) ('Kuja is seriously the best villain in Final Fantasy history', 2010).

[...] he becomes somewhat realistic, tragic and sympathetic in the climax of the story. When comparing him to other antagonists of the series, i[sic] generally applaud the development of his character, distinct echoes of Roy Batty from Blade Runner can't help but go over your mind at least once during the final Memoria scenes ('is Kuja gay?', 2013).

Describing the antagonists' tragic fates and rebellions against the social order, these players acknowledge the characters' struggle for recognition in a normative world. This comparison leads me to argue that Kuja is in essence a queer figure because he is not

human. Indeed, just like Batty who is a cyborg, Kuja is a complex being made of flesh but also born artificially. In this way, he embodies a complex and fragmented being who threatens the biological, but also sociological understandings of humanity.

In *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1987) Haraway defines the cyborg as a ‘cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’ (1). According to her, the cyborg is a creature which defies binary norms and our understanding of the Western self:

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense; a ‘final’ irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the ‘West’'s escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space (3).

Haraway introduces her concept as an answer to social and radical feminism. While she praises the works of feminists such as McKinnon or Kristeva, she criticises them for being too ‘totalizing’ and ‘essentialist’ (14). Instead, Haraway argues for an approach that moves away from a restrictive focus on the reconstruction of class, sex and gender (13) and towards the regrouping of women under ‘one theory of consciousness that counts as ‘women’s’ experience’ (14).

As a postmodern theorist, Haraway advocates for a more fragmented, but also blurred understanding of the self under the banner of the cyborg. She argues that our perception of human identity is now formulated in terms of parameters, or ‘cyborg semiologies’, such as ‘blood groups’ or ‘intelligence scores’ and that the world is organized through data (17). According to her, post-WWII feminism relies on outdated and cemented dualisms and dichotomies – *i.e.* mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private – which do not apply to today’s ‘techno-digested’ world (18).

Haraway uses her ‘cyborg myth’ (29) to approach the construction of women of color, but also heterogeneous social groups in society. She writes about what she calls “real-life cyborgs”, taking the example of a Southeast-Asian woman working in Western electronic

firms, or the LAG (Livermore Action Group), an anti-nuclear group composed of ‘witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists’ (8). She also focuses on monstrous selves in feminist science fiction, quoting the works of writers such as Octavia Butler and Vonda McIntyre.

While she concludes that we all are potential cyborgs – with the concept offering ‘a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves’ (37), she also suggests that her figure is mainly utopian. In this way, I understand Haraway’s figure as queer, as it is, in Muñoz’s words, “not-yet-there”. Haraway pre-empts Muñoz and Bloch when she argues that cyborgs materialize ‘grounds for hope in the emerging bases for new kind of unity across race, gender, and class’ (27) and contends that it is a self that feminism ‘must code’ (28). Thus, I understand the cyborg as a figure that delivers tools to decipher the hopeful politics the past and the present, and which, first and foremost, nurtures our ‘imagination’ (ibid.).

I understand the cyborg as utopian because it points towards a new type of postmodern identity which moves beyond otherness and oppositionality. As a hybrid of ungraspable identities in the present time, the cyborg can only fully be materialized in the future. In this way, I follow Haraway’s future-oriented thinking, however, I also acknowledge the risks of severing ties with past events that inevitably structured our understanding of the world. These limitations to postmodern identity formation are further developed by Carlson (2001):

[...] we cannot walk away from the historic struggles over power that still define class, race, gender, and sexual identity in the postmodern world. We are participants, wittingly or unwittingly, in historic struggles against oppression and invisibility, and to suggest that these ‘old’ modern era struggles are no longer relevant, that we are now free, if we want to be, to creatively engage in our own self-production outside of identity, outside of the dialectic between self and Other, is to engage in a fantasy we should not mistake for reality (306).

Haraway avoids these risks by focusing on feminist science fiction as her main site of postmodern feminism, a genre which provides a platform that is partly detached from the defining boundaries that are still deeply anchored within Western society. Of course, *FF*

*IX* cannot be considered feminist science fiction, but I demonstrate that the cyborg figure applies to its universe and, in particular, Kuja.

Like *Blade Runner's* Batty, Kuja was artificially created, but is first believed to be a human, despite his distinctive physique. Moreover, the game initially misleads the player by presenting Kuja as human as he is both referred in his first game dialogues as the 'mystery man' and the 'mysterious nobleman' before being properly introduced. Before Terra's destruction, Kuja's identity is revealed, which explains his superior abilities. As a genome, he is neither a human nor a robot, and represents the potent fusion between organic and mechanic, transgressing the categories of sentient beings and living his aristocratic life as an undercover cyborg.

Nevertheless, Kuja does not dream of a life of wealth and capital accumulation. It could be argued instead that behind his seemingly megalomaniac and nihilistic wishes of reigning over, and then destroying the world, lie a yearning to create a 'monstrous world' (Haraway, 1987, 37) which escapes from the biological and societal logic of his current environment. The black mages, for instance, can be read as an illustration of this yearning. Kuja creates and supplies Queen Brahne with black mages, who are unwanted and despised by humans because they symbolize danger and, above all, alienness. Black mages constitute the signifiers of a new type of war which relies on cyborg beings fabricated from mist, the residual element of souls that should return to the planet, but which is instead blocked by the Lifa Tree.

Black mages obviously differ from the other war recruits – mostly humans – of *FF IX* as they do not have motivations for fighting. Indeed, they do not go to war to expand or defend their nation nor try to protect their families, and do not have faith in their leader Kuja or believe in his ideals, but are under his control. At first sight, black mages are artificially created murderous beings. However, it is quickly revealed that a lot of them "awake", gaining consciousness and a will of their own. As a result, most of the "awaken" mages flee from the battlegrounds and regroup in a hidden village where they start living together.

Of course, Kuja did not plan that the black mages would have a conscience, but he, himself, does not know fully about his cyborg nature until the very end of the game. As such, the black mages can be read as an extension of his essence as a cyborg: even before realizing that he is, himself, a cyborg, Kuja gives birth to a 'utopian dream of the hope' for a cyborg

world which relies on 'regeneration' instead of 'rebirth' (37). Kuja proves that new manifestations of life can occur outside of the paradigms of biological reproduction, but also revolutionise the cycle of souls on Gaia.

At the end of the game, both genomes and black mages live in the hidden village, learning how to 'come to terms with their existence and come to accept death as part of life, and that life's inevitable end doesn't make it meaningless' (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2017b). Although somewhat dramatic, this last statement illustrates how Kuja created a viable alternative to futurity: a future where wandering souls which cannot return to the planet core are regenerated into genderless beings which, in turn, defy all previous understandings of sentient life. Hence, Kuja's main medium of destruction eventually leads to the creation of a 'monstrous world without gender' (Haraway, 1987, 37), where former weapons of war become pacifist thinkers.

While Kuja enables the manifestation of what Haraway would call cyborg politics, he also goes through a process of accepting his cyborg nature. As a player, learning that Kuja is a genome is a surprise because he does not look like his peers and does not have a tail. This is briefly explained by Garland who mentions that Kuja hides his tail because he 'denies his own identity' (Squaresoft, 2000). In this way, the moment when Kuja reaches trance is a major turning point in his narrative. Initially ashamed of his nature as a genome, he eventually reveals his true self, and embraces his non-humanity, proudly displaying his tail and red feather-hair. Kuja then becomes an elegant creature situated at the crossroad between an ape and a firebird. There is no doubt about it: he is a chimera, a 'potent fusion' (Haraway, 1987, 7), a queer cyborg.

### *Queer Becomings, New Desires.*

Kuja's narrative symbolises a personal journey of self-acceptance, a journey which consists in moving from queer shame to queer pride. As such it strongly echoes Munt's (2004) work on queer shame, in which she rhetorically questions whether a homosexual subject can be formed outside of shame (95). Through the close reading of works such as *The Well of Loneliness*, *Queer As Folk* or *Six Feet Under*, Munt explores the dynamics of shame, what it restrains and what it releases. She understands shame as a necessary evil for queer individuals which openly becomes a 'badge' (112) of pride, once humiliated. The trauma of past shame and the will to avoid future shame function as a strong drive for

‘disattachment’ (22), which makes us turn away from human connection and possibly leads us to abjection, even to death. Furthermore, the one who is shamed has the capacity to circulate, impose and transmit shame to others (3). However, Munt argues that it is during these moments of shame and, more importantly, detachment, where the shamed individuals gain agency, which in turn enables them to create something new within them, potentially triggering self-transformation. Thus, shame is a space within which the self can reorient and create attachments of a new nature, thereby encouraging queer solidarity and pride.

While at first despising his nature as a genome, Kuja manages to turn his shame into a form of inner strength. Unable to empathise with humans and other anthropomorphic characters, he turns away from social connections and remains aloof from his environment. However, his self-centredness enables him to find an “unnatural” way – collecting the souls that were supposed to be transferred to the genomes – to become stronger, and ultimately reach the state of trance. In this light, Kuja’s transformation echoes Munt’s process of coming to terms with queer shame as his nature comes to light after times of concealment. Initially an imperfect genome – his creator put a limit on his life, but also prevented him from entering in his final form – he manages to fully reach the potential of his non-human nature. By the end of the game, Kuja’s shame has turned into the pride of having achieved the unachievable. In essence, Kuja’s transformation is both literal and identitarian.

In addition to fully becoming a cyborg, Kuja reaches trance to defy the fate he was given by Garland. As an independent cyborg, he refuses to be ‘encapsulated by [his] skin’ (Haraway, 1987, 33) and goes beyond the physical and psychological ties that prevented him from becoming fully autonomous. Similar to the Black mages who freed themselves from him, Kuja, as a weapon of war originally created to stay loyal and obedient to his homeland, betrays his origins and frees himself from the historicity that prevented him from conveying posthuman politics. As such, Kuja enters into what Haraway considers a typical, but necessary cyborg rebellion:

The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential (3).



As he kills his patriarchal figure (Garland) and rebels against his military plans, Kuja embraces, for a short moment, an unrestrained horizon. Unfortunately, the death of Garland coincides with Kuja learning of his coming death and going on a rampage. Yet, Kuja's killing spree does not prevent him from being perceived as a figure of hope by other protagonists. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mikoto, a genome survivor from Terra's destruction, gives a short monologue in which she presents Kuja's actions as inspiring:

Kuja... what you did was wrong... But you gave us all one thing... hope... we were all created for the wrong reason, but you alone defied your fate. We do not want to forget this. We want your memory to live on forever... to remind us that we were not created for the wrong reason... that our life has meaning (Squaresoft, 2000).

As this speech suggests, Kuja brought hope into the hearts of *FF IX*'s characters. Disrupting the cycles of souls and regeneration, Kuja gives birth to a more fluid world, where bodies are not created for a single purpose nor doomed to obey the strict rules of futurity. As such, cyborg bodies become desecralised and polysemous (Haraway, 1987, 37), as their new purpose is unknown. Despite his destructive agenda, Kuja inspires genomes to be proud of their bodies, their nature and essence. His transformation and rebellion demonstrate that genomes are able to take control of their lives and emancipate from Terran plans of regeneration. Without being fully aware of it, Kuja laid out schematas of an alternative cyborg future. A future where society is harmoniously comprised of human and non-human beings.

Finally, and as an answer to my earlier reading of Edelman, I argue that Kuja's demise provides a climactic instance of hope and desire for a queer future. As I mentioned earlier, Kuja falls from the Crystal world after his final battle and ends up on a stretch of moss within the roots of the Lifa tree. At this stage, Kuja has fully embraced his cyborg nature and thwarted the destiny of both Gaia and Terra. He has performed a chaotic dance until the very end, and is now lying down underground. Having left his trance state, he returns to his "neither human nor 'fully' genome" nature. He has, but also is, in the words of Muñoz (2009, 72) 'lost'. As a queer cyborg, he is 'illegible' and lost to 'the straight minds' mapping of space' (ibid.). Nonetheless, I suggest through a parallel with one of Muñoz's case study, that it is this illegibility that makes him desirable to heteronormativity.

Muñoz focuses on the queer performance of Kevin Aviance, a black drag queen who danced in a club that is part of the ‘circuit-party system’ (75), mainly composed of white, urban and reasonably wealthy gay men. According to Muñoz, Aviance’s performance is antinormative: it blurs gender and relies on the ‘cohabitation of traditional female and male traits’ (76). He is a wigless, untucked, black drag queen whose voguing dance moves clash with the more mechanical and less inspired choreography of his audience. However, his ‘gender freakishness’ (74) speaks to this same audience:

Aviance then throws himself into the audience and is held aloft by it. He is lost in a sea of white hands; this being lost can be understood as a particularly queer mode of performing the self. That is how the performance ends. This amazing counterfetish is absorbed by the desiring masses. He has opened in them a desire or a mode of desiring that is uneasy and utterly important if he is to surpass the new gender symmetry of the gay world (75).

Similar to Aviance, Kuja is lost in the roots of the Lifa tree, the same tree that perpetuates Terra’s reproductive futurism. As a simian firebird, his cyborg politics opened new modes of desiring within genomes and black mages, but also other humanoid characters. It could be argued that this heterogeneous “audience” regroups under the banner of the Lifa Tree, which once stood as a symbol of normativity for both Gaia and Terra – representing constraint for Gaia as a soul filter, and control for Terra as a soul provider. At the end of the game, the Tree ‘collapses upon itself, and presumably dies’ (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2017c), dragging Kuja with him. Its last move towards Kuja could be read as its desire to finally move towards a queerer horizon and a utopian world of cyborgs, where Gaian and Terran souls do not have to be separate and filtered, and where sociological and biological identity markers merge harmoniously, once and for all. This new desire coincides with the potential realization that the Lifa Tree is itself a cyborg as it is the product of the fusion between organic and Terran (extraterrestrial) material. As such, the roots of the Lifa Tree can be read as a manifestation of Kuja awakening cyborg dreams and desires in the hearts of *FFIX* characters, because we all ‘are cyborgs’ (Haraway, 1987, 2) in one way or another, even though we are unaware of it.

Yet, the most evident manifestation of hope occurs before the collapsing of the Lifa Tree, when Zidane goes back to the roots and finds Kuja waiting for his death. The player learns

during that scene that Kuja saved the main characters from the explosion resulting from the final battle. Kuja also apologises for what he has done and says that he realised what it means to live. Zidane plans to take him back to the surface, but Kuja dies before this can happen and the roots of the tree suddenly start moving. While Zidane's brotherly love might be unexpected, he explains to his friends that as a genome himself, should he have he been in Kuja's place, he might have acted the same.

This scene is reminiscent of Muñoz's reading of *The Toilet* (1966), a play written by LeRoi Jones, in which two gay characters in high school navigate the troubles of an oppressive and homophobic environment. The play starts with a group of students taking a boy called Karolis apart in the toilet. His face is bloody and indicates that he has been severely beaten. Then enters the presumed 'leader' of the group, Ray, who complains about the state of Karolis, implying that he wanted to fight him fairly. It is revealed by the others that Karolis sent a letter to Ray, telling him that he was beautiful and that he wanted to give him a blowjob (Muñoz, 2009, 89). Ray refuses to fight, but Karolis stands up and starts provoking him, implying that the two have been in a relationship and that it might be time to come to terms with it. A fight ensues and Karolis has the upper hand, but the group intervenes and beats Karolis up, who collapses on the floor. Everyone leaves except from Ray, who 'runs and kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms' (90). Muñoz reads this 'gesture of cradling the head of one's lover, a lover one has betrayed' not as an 'act of redemption that mitigates violence', but as 'a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination' (91). In short, Ray's cradling is an act of hope in a space where queerness is systematically shattered.

The brotherhood between Kuja and Zidane occurs obviously in a different context, where Kuja does not appear, at first sight, as a victim. Yet, this chapter has demonstrated that Kuja, as the main dissident character, did not have much choice but stirring chaos in a hostile and normative environment. In this very last scene of Zidane and Kuja (Picture 17), the former suggests forgetting about the past and moving forward together. Zidane does not cradle Kuja's head, but he sits by his brother's side, having just fought him moments before. Aware of Kuja's hardships, he finally understands his brother's point of view, and refuses to antagonize him. This brotherly reunion quintessentially expresses the awakening of Zidane's hope for a queer future. Just before dying, Kuja hands over his cyborg politics to his brother, hopefully allowing him be a less oppositional successor. Operating alongside Kuja's transformation and Mikoto's hopeful speech, this intimate

scene illustrates the strength of queer hope, trumping the hatred that had formed between the two brothers.



Picture 17: Kuja's death scene, by Square Enix, coldrungaming.blogspot, Public Domain.

## Conclusion

Kuja is a disturbing villain to say the least. He threatens the entire world of *FF IX* and is responsible for hundreds of deaths, yet he still saves his enemies and instills hope among the cyborg masses before breathing his last breath. I began my analysis of Kuja by examining how fans of *FF IX* discussed this character. This analysis revealed the ways in which the norms of Western masculinity shaped, or at least influenced, many gamers' attitudes towards Kuja's gender and sexual identity. As I demonstrated, forum debates were characterised by stereotypical gay iconography, Orientalist readings of East-Asian masculinities, or a lack of engagement towards the understanding of Kuja as more than a villain, and as such said more about the gamer's understandings of gender, than about this fascinating and ambivalent character.

Unsatisfied by most readings and unable to find sufficient material to build a queer understanding of Kuja, I then suggested my own queer reading of him through Edelman's antirelational concepts of sinthomosexuality and the death drive. I showed that Kuja

positions himself in opposition to the main models of reproductive futurity represented in *FF IX*: the regeneration project of Terra and the survival of Gaia. Most importantly, I argued that Kuja nurtures the antifuturistic jouissance of targeting the symbols of normative future, such as the genomes and, more particularly, Zidane, “the Child”. Finally, I concluded that the queer villain meets a queer fate by being finally absorbed by normative continuity, symbolized by the Lifa Tree.

However, I contended that defining Kuja as a sinthomosexual was not comprehensive enough as it overlooked several key moments in his narrative such as his more ambiguous role towards the end of the game. Conversely, I argued that Kuja was more than a destructive figure, combining Haraway and Muñoz’s work, and explored how Kuja could be approached as a cyborg who conveys politics of queer hope. Focusing mainly on his transformation and death scene, I argued that *FF IX* delivers the schematas for a queer future. Fighting for agency and control of his existence, Kuja advocates for a postgender world, freed from the constraints of the past and markers of identity, and opens new queer desires in the hearts of the heteronormative mass.

Playing *FF IX* as a teenager, never would have I imagined dissecting this experience more than ten years later. At the time, playing video games was certainly not highly regarded by my parents and friends, which often forced me to put gaming experiences in perspective and lower their emotional impact in comparison to other media. Still, finishing games such as *FF IX* undeniably brought tears to the “not-yet-queer” thirteen-year-old that I was. Needless to say, my parents were slightly taken aback.

Nowadays, I am convinced that these emotional experiences should not be forgotten. Instead, I believe that we should follow Muñoz’s advice and dig in our past for the dormant queerness that is out there, still waiting to be discovered. Kuja and, subsequently, my gaming experience, are such an example. As such, queer game characters should not be dismissed yet, as they function as a compass pointing to queer coordinates, informing future experiences and providing the oppressed with a ray of hope.

This chapter has shown that queer material already abounds in games. Although it is not always formulated, it is our duty as queer game scholars to bring it to life. Through our memories, we are able to revisit, rewrite and give new meanings to our past gaming experiences. In this, queer game subjects and objects serve as a springboard for us to

question our own relationship with gaming and its core elements, such as our enjoyment of gameplay, but also the time and space of game action. Indeed, in my study of Dorian and Kuja, I stumbled across other manifestations of queerness which were not directly related to their queer identities. For instance, navigating the branching narrative of *DA:I* while flirting with Dorian in the Inquisitor's room or exploring aimlessly Memoria – a castle built by Kuja where gravity and time are distorted – provided experiences which redefined my understanding of game time and space. As such, the games did not only represent queerness on screen, but enabled me to temporarily embody queer temporality and spatiality.

Thus, in the following chapter, I depart from my focus on representation and investigate how games can immerse the gamer in a time which does not correspond to coercive and regulatory structures. I build this reasoning against both the ideas of gaming as a waste of time, or as a simulation for real-life. Instead, I demonstrate that not only do video games display queer content, but that some of them can be approached as a queer medium.

## Chapter 5. Charming Aliens, Searching for Wolves: Queer Time and *Flânerie* in Video Games.

Unlike the aimless flaneur, the computer player (like the shopper, the snapper and the hack) loiters with intent (Stallabrass, 1993, 100).

Video games occupy a peculiar place in the relationship between time and productivity. Representing an industry that now plays an influential role in Western consumerist society (Diplomats, 2016), they are considered by scholars such as Stallabrass (1993), as simulations of neo-liberalism that reproduce sets of capitalist social practices, norms, values and patterns. Stallabrass' argument runs counter to the widespread attitude according to which games are mind-numbing and unproductive (Duggan, 2015).

Indeed, until very recently, the more general view was that 'play was seen as the antithesis of work' (Butler et al., 2011), an opinion that has its roots in the industrial revolution, which put a 'firmer accent' on the 'preaching of industry' and 'critique of idleness' (Thompson, 1967, 87). Industrial capital had strictly organized new labour habits through the division and supervision of labour, the use of 'bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings' (90). Extending Thompson's claim, neoliberalism has now established the idea that all time must be consumed and marketed (93).

Strongly influenced by the legacy of the Protestant Reformation (Weber, 1930), work has often been construed as 'virtuous, not only because of its social and material benefits, but also because it marked out the individual as one who was predestined to be saved by God' (Kavanagh, 2011, 340), while play was associated with activities that aimed at enhancing enjoyment, and was thus regarded as sinful (Brailsford, 1975; Scitovsky, 1978). This strict dichotomy has been qualified and questioned over time, notably because of the restrictive conceptualisation of work as good and play as bad. Such qualifications have elicited a general call for a more porous understanding of both categories (Huizinga, 1955; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

In spite of this, today's public still regard play with at least a modicum of disdain. For instance, a survey from the Pew Research center showed that public attitudes towards

video games were complex and uncertain (Duggan, 2015) and that it was still common to regard the practice of gaming as a ‘colossal waste of time’ (Purchase, 2008), even among people who play games regularly (Duggan, 2015). In addition, articles that are critical of video games still abound in the public sphere, blaming video games for young men’s educational and life failures<sup>50</sup> (Parkin, 2016; Etchells, 2015).

However, Stallabrass (1993) takes a diametrically different approach and claims that computer games present a ‘precise, reversed reflection of the preoccupations and even the techniques of capitalist power’ (103). Using Adorno, Stallabrass writes that free time is chained to the modern industrialised society, which strictly divides time up according to the categories of “productive” and “unproductive”. However, working habits have become so engrained in our daily life that we internalize modes of behavior that are ‘appropriate to work’ and ‘smuggle’ them ‘into leisure’ (Adorno, 1991, 190). In addition, Stallabrass (1993) notes that the distinction between simulation and story-based games become increasingly blurry (85). Consequently, he sees games as a ‘capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture’ which offer ‘virtual consumption of empty forms in an ideal market’ (104).

In today’s context, several of Stallabrass’s arguments need to be qualified. Firstly, the categorical boundaries between different forms of video game are no longer as rigid as before: we are witnessing a blurring of genres as well as shifts in the popularity of certain genres with every new console generation (Young, 2010). The same goes for the strict rules of conduct in games (Stallabrass, 1993, 87). In contemporary games culture, a great deal of emphasis is put on the player’s agency, particularly with sandbox games<sup>51</sup>. Instead of “training” gamers in how to master gameplay’s rules, these games give access to most, if not all, of their content and let gamers roam around their universes freely. Consequently, playthroughs of famous titles such as *Minecraft*<sup>52</sup> (Mojang, 4J Studios, 2011) can differ so much that we might wonder whether gamers in fact played the same game. Viewed from

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<sup>50</sup> A similar argument is often made about game shows and, more generally, watching television. As such, “screen time” is considered a waste of our leisure time (Livingstone, 2009; Scannell, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Sandbox games are characterized by the freedom they give to players. In most sandbox games, players are encouraged to exploit gameplay elements to their will. They can offer mini-games or objectives, but gamers are free to fully ignore them. Instead of featuring segmented areas or numbered levels, a sandbox game usually occurs in a “world” to which the gamer has full access from start to finish.

<sup>52</sup> *Minecraft* is a game about placing blocks and going on adventures. Gamers are invited to explore randomly generated worlds and build buildings of all size. The game provides two modes: a creative Mode with unlimited resources and a Survival Mode in which gamers need to craft weapons and armor to fend off dangerous mobs.



this angle, these titles give a large amount of options for gamers to freely express their creativity.

While I agree that this increasing agency can be read as another metaphor for neoliberalism, as games' political content remains ultimately 'prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism' (Stallabrass, 1993, 104), I maintain that video games today go beyond mere simulation. Stallabrass approaches games as a second-class medium, compartmentalising and comparing them to Hollywood cinema. However, the focus of his study – the simulation aspect of games – allows him to overlook the diversity of pleasures that can be taken from gaming. Moreover, it could be said that he involuntarily hints in his work at one aspect of gaming that strongly resists the idea of regimented time: the fact that 'many games take the form of a staged, touristic exploration' (99). For example, the aforementioned sandbox games generally allow players to freely explore environments without putting them under the pressure of a ticking clock. As such, most of these "touristic" explorations do not follow any sort of strict schedule. While we can agree to an extent with Stallabrass's view of games as simulation of an ideal capitalist society, we should not overlook the potential for games to produce specific temporalities that are protected from heteronormative and capitalist pressures, and which in fact resist such normativity.

This chapter aims at going beyond the aforementioned duality between productivity and idleness in order to explore how the practice of gaming can be positioned in relation to time and heteronormativity. I demonstrate that game time can be understood as "queered time" through the focus on two video games - a globally successful AAA franchise (*Mass Effect*), and a small independent production (*The Path*). In the first section, I introduce my critical framework and elaborate on how the concept of queer time situates itself in drastic opposition to the maximization of productivity and reproductivity. In the second section, I study how the production of multiple narrative possibilities in the *Mass Effect* games positions the gamer in a suspended time of choice, shattering the rigid concept of linear temporalities and constantly immersing characters in a plurality of future outcomes. I also contend that several elements of the narrative evoke unconventional conceptions of time, such as circular temporalities and game *flânerie*. In the third section, I argue that *The Path's* game mechanism solely focuses on *flânerie*, and conveys a more radical and queer vision of gaming than its mainstream counterpart, through a constant

reappropriation of space and a shattering of the characters' innocence, ultimately leading to a process of queer rebirth.

## Queer Narrative and Industrialised Time

### *Queer Narrative, Queer Lifestyles.*

Defined as 'the growth and flowing of plot into story across the narrative layerings of events, actantial functions, and discursive registers' (De Lauretis, 1987, 108), a narrative is central to story-based RPG game. However, the qualities necessary to identify a narrative as queer remain uncertain. Questions such as the presence and significance of queer characters, or necessary references to queer lifestyles rapidly arise.

Abbot (1984) coins the term 'New Narrative', or new queer narrative, to refer to works of a group of queer writers that includes Boone, Glück, Acker, Cooper, Amnasan and Bellamy. Sharing similar backgrounds, coming as they do from North American urban centres, these authors all incorporate 'violence and pornographic sex, elements of shock which are repeated structurally in a reliance on pastiches, cut and paste techniques, and non-linear narratives' into their work (Bredbeck, 1995, 478). Familiar with postmodern theorists such as Derrida, Bataille and Virilio, their writings blur 'the boundaries that typify heterosexuality as it is normatively constructed in Western culture' (ibid.).

Bredbeck stresses that new queer narrative should not be perceived as a successor to gay identity politics, as it has developed concurrently. Indeed, he argues that both adopt a different attitude towards institutional power and social change (479). He refers to gay narrative as an 'activist critique' and argues that it mimics Marxist social theory as it first exposes 'the dominant modes of production which result in the hegemony of a particular social formation' and then seeks to 'intervene in these modes and/or offer alternatives to them' (ibid.). Thus, gay narratives lay intellectual foundations for radical social change, but still operate within a recognisable institutional system. These narratives can be identified in most mainstream LGBTQ movies such as *La Belle Saison* (2015), which focuses on the tension between urban and rural lesbian lives and explores the intersectional successes and failures of a lesbian couple in 1970s rural France. The movie provides a gay narrative which seeks to improve and diversify society's gender roles and

expectations by challenging, but ultimately conforming to heteronormativity in order to be accepted. *La Belle Saison* is not about revolutionizing the social system, but addressing its flaws and finding solutions for lesbians and gays to survive in environments, such as the countryside, where they still lack visibility (Myrdahl, 2016).

Conversely, queer narrative offers a “pure” critique of this unitary cohesion as they analyse and question the grounds of a system’s possibility: ‘the critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are’ (Johnson, 1981, xv). Thus, while gay narratives seek to change a system, queer narrative aims at ‘expos[ing] a system in its entirety *as a system*’ (Bredbeck, 1995, 480). It shatters ‘linearity, proceeds by flashes, enigmas, and yields to a florid crying-out theme of suffering/horror – in short, to a future’ (Abbott, 1984, 42).

Gregg Araki’s movies, often considered part of the ‘new queer cinema’ (Rich, 1992) similarly adopt an approach that is critically queer. For instance, *Kaboom* (2010) displays most of the new narrative’s characteristics: its extravagant plotline is punctuated by tacky fades, episodes of inconsequential dialogue, and atypical narrative techniques relying on ‘random chronology and bricolage’ (Bredbeck, 1995, 487). The distinction between reality and dream is often blurred and there is no clear indication of how much time passes until the end. Scenes come one after another with an increasing lack of meaning until the explosion of planet Earth. *Kaboom* is representative of queer narrativity as it ‘shatters linearity’ through ‘flashes’ and ‘enigmas’ (Abbott, 1984, 42), only to end in a dramatic yet nonsensical finale. The movie eschews its original plot for the sake of absurdity and humour, but remains an aesthetic and self-reflexive experiment about mainstream cinema and heteronormative expectations. Its unapologetic approach, embrace of chaos and brutal ending clash with mainstream Hollywood narratives. As a relevant illustration of new queer narrative, *Kaboom* does not aim at engaging in a process of intervention towards a given system as it adopts a resisting position.

Queer narrative runs counter to the received idea of time as natural, exposing the latter as a coercive mechanism of control. Indeed, Riach et al. (2014) write that we often blindly follow ‘temporal orders inscribed in organizational life which produce assumed and expected heteronormative trajectories’ (1678). Citing Bourdieu (1977), Freeman (2005) argues that these strategies of power rely on playing on the time of the action and extend

'beyond local conflicts to [the] management of entire populations' (57). She calls these strategies 'chronopolitics' (ibid.) from which she develops the concept of 'chrononormativity' (2010, 3). Chrononormativity is 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (ibid.). Echoing Thompson's argument about the development of productive time during the industrial revolution, chrononormativity frames daily habits and routines in order to maximize productivity and reproductivity, but also defines the "right" time for particular life stages such as studying, marrying, life parenting or investing (Cosenza, 2014, 156). Chrononormativity also 'produces a "natural" sense of belonging' (ibid.) by setting these life stages as "normal", and makes time bind our bodies to the arbitrary schedule of capitalism and heteronormativity (Freeman, 2005, 60). Building upon Freeman's argument, Monaghan (2016, 156) adds that this seemingly 'natural flow of progression' often makes us forget how it 'naturali[s]es power inequalities, control discipline, and other factors that contribute to progress of productivity'.

As an extension of queer narrative, queer lifestyles have always struggled with being successfully integrated into a chrononormative system. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, queer individuals were excluded from the nuclear family which guaranteed a self-regulatory regime of exploitation of gender roles (The 1917 Collective, 1995). The Stonewall revolution gave birth to politics that were 'utopian in that they located the spaces of sexual practice as sites of freedom' (Sears, 2005, 96) and paved the way towards what we now call queer theory. The Gay Liberation Front demanded that LGBT people break free from everyday oppression by 'getting the state out of our bedrooms and our sexual lives' (ibid.). Hence, the GLF advocated for an understanding of sex as an instance that was shielded from chrononormativity.

More importantly, lesbian and gay movements often followed anti-capitalist views as most of them argued that sexual freedom was only possible through a broader transformation of society such as the oppressive gender hierarchy and other institutionalized inequalities (Seidman, 1993, 113-116). Several branching movements stemming from the Stonewall riots such as ActUp!<sup>53</sup> or Queer Nation<sup>54</sup> have strived to keep this anti-capitalist stand and

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<sup>53</sup> On September 14, 1989, seven ACT UP members infiltrated the [New York Stock Exchange](#) and chained themselves to the VIP balcony to protest the high price of the only approved AIDS drug, [AZT](#).

<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Queer Nation is non-hierarchical and decentralized and often organized demonstrations in places that are considered symbols of neo-liberalism, such as Macy's in New York or Newport Mall in Jersey City.

still attempt to follow ‘transformative commitments’ (Sears, 2005, 109). This large body of transgressive work based on the rejection of labels and a new intersectional reading of gender and sexual identity in relation to structural power relations came later to be known as queer theory (De Lauretis, 1991).

Much of the criticism stemming from queer theory, and targeting LGBTQ politics, is that the latter relies on acceptance from neoliberal models of society. Historical examples such as the struggle against AIDS and the gains won by LGBTQ individuals in the past enabled the ‘development of an upwardly mobile layer of openly homosexual professionals [...] who desperately crave bourgeois respectability’ (The 1917 Collective, 1996, 377). It seems that LGBTQ politics have been following a similar pattern over the last decades: activists have attempted to consistently mobilise sites of ‘resistance and disruption’ such as marriage, which are in turn ‘continually domesticated by bourgeois universalism’ (Crosby et al., 2012, 141). As a result, this process of appropriation inevitably “tame” and silence certain segments of the queer population who do not have the cultural nor the capital means to assimilate.

Yet, several academics argue that queerness cannot be conceptualised outside of capitalism, because identity politics are tightly linked to our economy. John D’Emilio (1983) contends that it has been ‘the historical development of capitalism [...] that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity’ (102). According to D’Emilio, homosexual desire could express itself thanks to the ‘material conditions’ created by capitalism (109). Indeed, the economic functions that cemented the nuclear family were taken away, as well as the mutual dependence of its members.

Duberman (1999) argues that we have a tendency to avoid focusing on class and that Western identity politics need to be thought within the frame of class-driven societies (428). He adds that radical politics often ask for legitimate proofs that LGBTQ people have always existed the same way that ‘official’ other minorities do (394), and rely on a neoliberal type of recognition that is the arbitrary offering of status and rights. In a similar vein, Bruce Bawer (1993) advocates for a more moderate stance on queer identities in reaction to radical LGBTQ and anti-gay activism. He adopts a conservative, assimilationist approach, heavily criticizing radical queer politics for deviating into far-

left authoritarianism (29). Bawer hopes that one day, gay men will be no longer caught between ‘the image of gay life promulgated’ by gay subcultures (19) and Bible-based anti-gay attitudes. In this way, Bawer supports more of an assimilationist approach, leading to the constitution of a moderate homosexual mainstream.

The main issue with Bawer’s position is that it nurtures the implicit shaming of queers who resist the mainstream. As Hollibaugh (2001) indicates, ‘queerness can’t be poor’ (n.p.). This is highly problematic as things have not gotten better for everyone. As Sears (2005) indicates, ‘queer people of color, street youth, people with limited incomes, women, people living with disabilities and transgendered people have gained less or in some cases even lost ground’ (93). Consequently, while a significant branch of queer theory aims at resisting and rethinking power relations and cultural values, a significant part of the queer population seems to prize ‘the image of wealth’ as if it were the only thing that queer people can ‘do right’ in order to assert their citizenship (Hollibaugh, 2001, n.p.). In this context, queer theory appears to fail at realistically challenging hegemonic capitalist structures.

Drawing upon this limitation, Kirsh (2000) asserts that the strongest paradox of queer theory is its mirroring of capitalist production (18). According to him, a large number of queer theorists focus on the celebration of difference and fluid identification as a radical act. However, Kirsh also shows that ‘these assertions are supportive of the same ideal of the individual as self that capitalism has created’ (43). It is impossible to fight a whole system of hierarchical oppression alone, and queer theory provides, according to Kirsh, ‘an opposition that does not oppose’ as it includes an incredibly varied spectrum of ideologies and acting on a collective level is ‘deemed impossible’ (99). As such, queer theory hardly enables us to think beyond the individual nor deliver the means to fight as a community. Puar (2007) stresses that this focus on transgression still relies on a ‘normative notion of deviance, always defined in relation to normativity, often universalizing’ (23). Hence we might not have a ‘readily available language’ (Crosby et al., 2012, 137) for separating queerness from regulatory capitalist regimes.

Accepting this limitation may be the best approach to queer theory. In conversation with Crosby et. al, Gayle Salamon encourages us to rely on certain ideologies, such as romantic love, that can be considered complicit with contemporary capitalism because they make the latter ‘(sometimes) survivable’ (Crosby et. al, 2012, 132). Yet, Sears (2005) argues that

the fact that certain spaces of queer existence have been assimilated should not ‘mute our anti-capitalism’ (105). Conversely, the complex tension between queerness and capitalism should still inspire us to follow ‘the best of the liberationist politics that emerged after Stonewall: the militancy, the breadth of vision and the transformative commitments’ while following ‘a serious and nuanced examination of the power relations that shape our experiences of gender and sexuality’ (109). In this, although queerness cannot be entirely excluded from, nor included by, heteronormative capitalism, it still temporarily embodies an alternative vision of the world.

Several queer scholars have dedicated their work to the identification of queer temporalities and how they position themselves in contemporary Western society. Monaghan (2016) argues that queer temporality’s dominant paradigm started with anti-social queer theory: the shift away from projects of reclamation within queer theory ‘towards a negative, anti-social and anti-relational theory of sexuality’ (14). As explained in the previous chapters, queer academics such as Bersani and Edelman position queerness in a time and place that are excluded from heteronormative society. The same goes with Muñoz (2009) who asserts that queerness is not ‘yet there’ (1).

*In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam (2005) specifically focuses on the relationship between queerness, temporality and space. Their argument is originally inspired from David Harvey (1990), who notes that most individuals perceive time as natural because they benefit in some ways or another from capitalism, and are ‘therefore able to ignore, repress, or erase the demands made on them and others by an unjust system’ (7). Consequently, alternative times and logics that lie inside and outside the logic of capital accumulation receive different emotional responses: ‘people feel guilty about leisure, frustrated by waiting, satisfied by punctuality, and so on’ (ibid.). According to Harvey, space undergoes a process of naturalisation that is two-fold: it is first naturalised in relation to ‘use values (we presume that our use of space is the only and inevitable use of space – private property, for example)’ and ‘by subordinating it to time’ (8).

Halberstam (2005) criticises Harvey for not clearly describing how time and space become naturalised, but also for missing obvious opportunities to discuss this process of naturalisation in relation to gender and sexuality. Halberstam argues that queerness can be imagined as ‘an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices’ (1). They aim at showing how transgender bodies and

subcultural lives can be situated in a time as outside of the parameters of heterosexual lifestyles and, by extension, time. As such, queerness can be detached from sexual identity and considered a disruption of heteronormative ways of living.

The first part of Halberstam's book focuses on the tragic murder of Brandon Teena in 1993, who, after passing as a man and dating local girls in Nebraska, was raped and killed by two local men. Halberstam explores Brandon's case and studies transgender representations in several movies, including *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 1999), which is based on the aforementioned murder. The rest of the book explores shorter illustrations of queer subcultures, ranging from music albums to contemporary art. Halberstam focuses on Brandon's figure as it represents 'both anachronism (an earlier model of gay identity as gender inversion) and dislocatedness (a person who chooses the rural over the urban as his theatre for staging his gender)'. Brandon is, therefore, 'literally and figuratively out of time and out of place' (16). In *Boys Don't Cry*, the transgender character symbolizes a new kind of temporality: he represents to the eyes of Lana – his girlfriend – an alternative future, by embodying a man with no past.

Halberstam demonstrates that Pierce, *Boys Don't Cry's* director, insists on conveying a female gaze in several scenes, straying away from the normative male gaze and allowing the development of an alternative vision of 'time, space and embodiment' (86). Taking this line of thought further, Halberstam also suggests that some scenes of the movie encourage spectators to adopt a 'transgender look' (87) by revealing the tensions between the male and the female gaze and providing a relief from heteronormative masculinity. For example, the two scenes in Lana's room display the latter preserving Brandon's body as male and refusing to assign him a gender according to his sex. In the first scene, occurring at the middle of the movie, Lana recollects her first sexual experience with Brandon while preserving his biological identity, illustrating a 'willingness to see what is not there' (ibid.). This is repeated later in the second scene of Lana's room, where Brandon is temporarily sheltered from his future murderers, John and Tom, and who force Brandon to reveal his biological identity. Lana takes him to her room, promising the two men that she would verify, but instead tell him to look "how beautiful" it is outside. The sentence is followed by a dreamlike shot, focusing on the outside and then looking up at the sky, picturing fast-paced passing clouds. Before returning to the abrupt reality of the following events, the scenes in Lana's room display different shooting techniques, where time is either slowed-down or accelerated, making Lana's room an otherworldly space, where real time is



suspended and sheltered from heteronormative norms and violence, embodied by Tom and John in the living room, who later rape and kill Brandon.

Through these multiple critiques of time, normativity and assimilationist politics, queer subcultures produce ‘alternative temporalities’ that allow queer individuals to believe that their ‘future can be imagined according to logics that lie outside’ (2) heteronormative markers of life experience. Because they strongly rely on an unknown future, queer life narratives are ‘non-linear’ in their temporality as they do not follow celebrated heterosexual milestones (Monaghan, 2016, 14). In this context, cultural products that deliver queer narratives must construct ‘alternate narrative forms that challenge the linearity’ of traditional narratives (22). Consequently, films, novels or games that present cyclic, non-linear or timeless stories offer modes of representation that can be read through queer theory as they depict non-sequential modes of temporality.

### *The Postmodern Queer Flâneur*

One particular historical figure – that of the flâneur – engages in performances that allow them to embrace queer time. First introduced to 20<sup>th</sup> century critical thinking by Walter Benjamin (1999) the flâneur is defined as a figure who belongs to the modern metropolis, in particular to 19th century Paris. Ivanchikova (2007) describes the flâneur as a ‘chronicler of his and his own epoch’s misery and a witness to his times, as a rigorous observer, an amateur geographer and historian’ (20). Because of its loose definition, the flâneur remains ‘an ambiguous and much contested concept’ (Rasmussen & Kenway, 2004, 51) and is sometimes confused with a privileged bourgeois male who dominates the social spaces of the modern city (Wolff, 1990).

However, the flâneur has been recuperated in various contexts. Queer scholars such as Sally Munt (1995) use this figure as a vessel for lesbian narratives while seeking to ‘contribute to the unfixing of the supremacy of the heterosexual male gaze in urban spatial theory’ (117). The flâneur is also used by Kenway and Bullen (2001) to refer to cyber individuals who perform *cyberflânerie* in the ‘interwoven webs of the internet and the corporate world (168). Taking a more global perspective, Edensor (1998) argues that *flânerie* is a practice that is now rarely experienced in Western cities because of their ‘channeling of the gaze, overarching surveillance [and] disciplining of movement’ (218). Conversely, he suggests that ‘the experience of the Indian street is in any ways akin to

that of the early modern European metropolitan street'. Its 'unpredictable juxtapositions', 'fleeting occurrences', 'disparate rhythms and multifarious sights, smells and noises [...] permit the *flâneur* to savour and contemplate the sensual urban experience' (ibid.). Finally, because of their cultivation of pleasures that are related to 'one's non-instrumental, non-pragmatic experience of space' and ultimately, their 'refusal to take a respectable socio-economic, sexual, or gender role' (Ivanchikova, 2007, 24), the *flâneur* is often recuperated by queer theory (Rasmussen & Kenway, 2004; Ivanchikova, 2007; Chisholm, 1999).

In this chapter, I focus on Ivanchikova's (2007) definition of 'postmodern queer *flâneurs*', which explores 'diverse forms of reading, and more often than not, misreading the city, diverse forms of relating to space, time and their own desire' (21). According to Ivanchikova, the postmodern *flâneur* can resort to three different practices of 'articulating queer spatiality': '*appropriation* (reprogramming space originally programmed as heteronormative), *queering* (creating queer possibilities through 'marking' heteronormative territory) and *actualization* of space (activating queer possibilities dormant in space)' (28).

In his thesis, Carlaw (2008) echoes such practices by focusing on 20th century New York *flâneurs*, through the work of gay poets such as O'Hara and Ginsberg. He argues that gay *flâneurs* in New York were put in a position of marginality and, therefore, left vulnerable. In order to survive and as a 'form of urban self-defence', they rewrote 'the heterosexual centre' and converted 'straight space into gay space' (163). As such, threats posed by the workmen and groups of Puerto Ricans roaming the streets were transformed in their poems into subjects of gay adoration.

Ivanchikova argues that we can 'approach the question of time similarly to the way we approach [...] space' (41) when it comes to practices of *flânerie*. Situated as the opposite of chrononormativity, these practices include the 'art of slowing down the flow of time; the art of idleness, a refusal to engage in goal-oriented activities, and last but not least, the practice of de-scheduling, which can be also understood as one's continuous withdrawal from the heteronormatively defined reproduction of prescribed social routine' (42). For instance, Benjamin (1968) mentions the habit among some 19th century *flâneurs* of walking turtles on leashes among the streets of Paris (36, 37). If we consider the urban mass as a symbol of human alienation, the industrial society, and the transformation of

human bodies into chrononormative ‘machines of production’ (Ivanchikova, 2007, 43; Engels, 1845), the flâneur creates a ‘dramatic discordance’ (Ivanchikova, 2007, 43) between their own and the crowd’s pace, but also their rhythm of life. In essence, the flâneur emphasises the constructed aspect of time as opposed to the received idea of a ‘naturalized notion of time understood as something [...] [that] occurs without our direct involvement’ (42). With their ‘reptilian-like slowness’ (46), they explicitly resist and criticize the busyness and business-driven contemporary society. This same act of refusal that opens up a ‘hiatus, a temporal havoc’ which allows ‘one to develop an alternative vision of life’ (47).

Thus, the flâneur operates as a disruptive figure who escapes regimented understandings of time and space in everyday life. They are an ‘obstacle’ and a ‘threat’ to ‘a fast paced capitalist society’ (Carlaw, 2008, 323). They make ‘a firm statement of outsidership’ and a ‘refusal to conform’ (ibid.) to the urban pace. The same goes for the queer flâneur, who articulates queer spatiality, clogging the city’s arteries through the transformation of urban symbols such as the workmen or passers-by into queer figures. Highly subversive and nonchalant, flâneurs symbolise a passive but efficient resistance by simply slowing down their pace and keeping an unrestrained mind.

All of this leads me to question whether video games can produce temporalities that can be read as queer according to Halberstam’s logic and, ultimately, whether they might open gameplay out to a queer performance of flânerie. The last two decades have produced several scholarly discussions of temporality in video games, mainly structured around temporal frames: a set of events, along with the temporality induced by the relationships between those events. One of the most influential scholar is Jesper Juul (2004), who distinguishes between ‘play time (the time the player takes to play) and event time (the time taken in the game world)’ (n.p.). The relationship between these two varies between games and game genres since ‘action games tend to proceed in real time, but strategy and simulation games often feature sped-up time or even the possibility of manually speeding or slowing the game’ (ibid.). Referring to action-oriented games such as *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007) in which pressing a button during play time almost immediately affects the game world, Juul represents this relationship between play time and event time as being 1:1; a ratio that is still applicable to most in-game action sequences. Still, Juul also indicates that other games such as ‘strategy or simulation’ games adopt a different ratio: in *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997), each purchase, investment and in-game life

decision happens in the game much faster than how it should during play time. Also, play time can sometimes be created in game time, such as *the Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo EAD, 2000) in which one hour in the game equates forty-five seconds.

I am particularly interested in the incoherences and distortions of the relationship between these temporalities, often perceived in instances such as cut-scenes, which generally depict event time in the game world. Mostly, these cut-scenes briefly disconnect event time and game time:

Cut-scenes are not a parallel time or an extra level, but a different way of creating the event time. They do not by themselves modify the game state - this is why they can usually be skipped, and why the user can't do anything during a cut-scene. While action sequences have play time mapped to event time, cut-scenes disconnect play time from event time (Juul, 2004, n.p.).

Thus, the relationship between play time and game time is temporarily distorted, resuming at the end of the cut-scene. Juul also notes the presence of other temporal anomalies that are recurrent in games, such as loading time, transitions between levels or pausing a game when the game sounds can still be heard. In the last example, the continuation between game time and elements that are associated to it is broken.

Zagal and Mateas (2010) expand upon Juul's work and introduce further nuance developing four main temporal frames within game worlds<sup>55</sup>. They draw similar conclusions to Juul by arguing that these temporal frames often coexist<sup>56</sup>. Temporal frames can also be sequential, as different time frames can succeed one another, such as in *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000), which includes a time for a turn-based combat system, and a time for exploration<sup>57</sup>. Zagal and Mateas (2010) draw up a longer list of temporal anomalies and manipulation such as 'temporal warping' (referring to the inconsistencies between two temporal frames: when shooting or driving take more or less

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<sup>55</sup> 'Real-world time (events taking place in the physical world), gameworld time (events within the represented gameworld, including events associated with gameplay actions), coordination time' (844) ('events that establish periods of play, limit availability of the game world, and/ or delay the effects of in-game actions' (850)) and 'fictive time' (applying sociocultural labels to events) (844).

<sup>56</sup> Games such as *Animal Crossing* (2001) include a game world in which the time happens exactly as it does in the real world.

<sup>57</sup> Both these temporal frames are structured differently (the combat system requires the player to wait a certain amount of time to perform an action, which is immediate during phases of exploration).

the same amount of time in the real-world, but when the day-night cycle only last for a few minutes) or ‘temporal bubbles’ (when time still flows in a game space, but is put on pause in another game space) (854). This last example is particularly interesting as it allows the player to take as much time as possible as even the “main” game time is put on hold. In this way, it can be argued that these temporal bubbles allow the player to take as much time as they wish.

In short, scholarly discussions argue that game time inevitably implies the coexistence of multi-layered temporalities and temporal anomalies that result from them. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the *Mass Effect* franchise, which is divided into multiple temporal frames defining the action of the player. More precisely, some instances allow the player to fight, while others are strictly limited to exploration and social interaction. There are also specific temporalities which involve chatting and making decisions that will impact the overall narrative. With such a variety of temporal layers, there is more to *Mass Effect* than meets the eye. Beyond its spectacular action and space-opera narrative lie moments of in-betweenness, incoherent moments which, temporarily, pause the narrative, game time and ultimately produce queer temporalities.

### *Mass Effect*. Unveiling “Possible Worlds” in Queer Space

In 2003, Bioware released *Knight of the Old Republic (KOTOR)* (2003), a role-playing game set 4000 years before the events that take place in the first *Star Wars* film, *A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977), and which was the first piece of official *Star Wars* property to include queer characters<sup>58</sup>. This progressive inclusion foreshadowed the 2009 release of the even more progressive *Mass Effect* game. BioWare wanted to start its own science-fiction franchise in order to gain more creative freedom (Didyouknowgaming, 2014), and created a world inspired by several significant sci-fi universes such as those of *Starship Troopers* (Verhoeven, 1997), *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and *Star Trek* (1966- Present). While its gameplay is more action-oriented than *KOTOR*, it is still considered by many to be its spiritual successor (Didyouknowgaming, 2014).

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<sup>58</sup> *KOTOR* featured a lesbian jedi, Juhani, who confesses her love to the player if he plays a female character. In *KOTOR II* (2003), a non-playable character (NPC) called Luxa flirts with the main player regardless of their gender.

*Mass Effect* benefitted from spin-off comic books and other derived products and is a franchise which enjoys great popularity in the gaming world (IGN, 2016). Originally conceived as a trilogy, the franchise now knows four instalments and several DLCs<sup>59</sup>. This chapter, however, focuses solely on the original trilogy (*ME* (BioWare, 2007), *ME 2* (BioWare, 2009), *ME 3* (BioWare, 2012)) as the fourth game begins a new narrative. What distinguishes *ME* from the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises is the stronger visibility of its non-heterosexual content. Indeed, similar to *Dragon Age*, *ME* openly represents gay and bisexual characters as well as same-sex and cross-species romances. Although the range and faithfulness of these relationships are arguably less varied than in *DA*<sup>60</sup>, it can still be considered one of the most progressive sci-fi game universes.

Interaction is an essential trait of games, but its significance varies from one genre to another. For instance, puzzle-games such as *Tetris* (Rowan Software, 1984) are almost entirely deprived of narrative components<sup>61</sup>, which led several scholars to argue that game platforms provide us with sensory pleasures and appeal to our sense of spectacle, acting similarly to film's theory "cinema of attractions" (Ermi & Märyä, 2005; Gunning, 1990, MacTavish, 2002). However, story and narrative are essential elements of the RPG genre, such as the *ME* games, in which the strength of the main narrative is that the player's choices have an influence on the development of both the main character's personality and the overall story.

The equal importance given to the narrative and to the player's agency represents a 'significant design challenge' (Bizzocchi, Tanenbaum, 2012, 394), as it encounters one of the greatest gameplay contradictions: the 'active exercise of choice' (interactivity) and the 'classic surrender to the pleasure of the story' (narrative) (394). However, given the popularity of the franchise (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2008, 2010, 2012), most players find pleasure in the 'bounded agency by exploring situations in games which encourage and reward players for "playing along" with the narrative' (394).

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<sup>59</sup> Shorter for Downloadable Content, which stands as an expansion pack (usually containing additional content) for a video game.

<sup>60</sup> There are no trans character in *ME* and several seemingly powerful female characters fall into the "damsel-in-distress" trope.

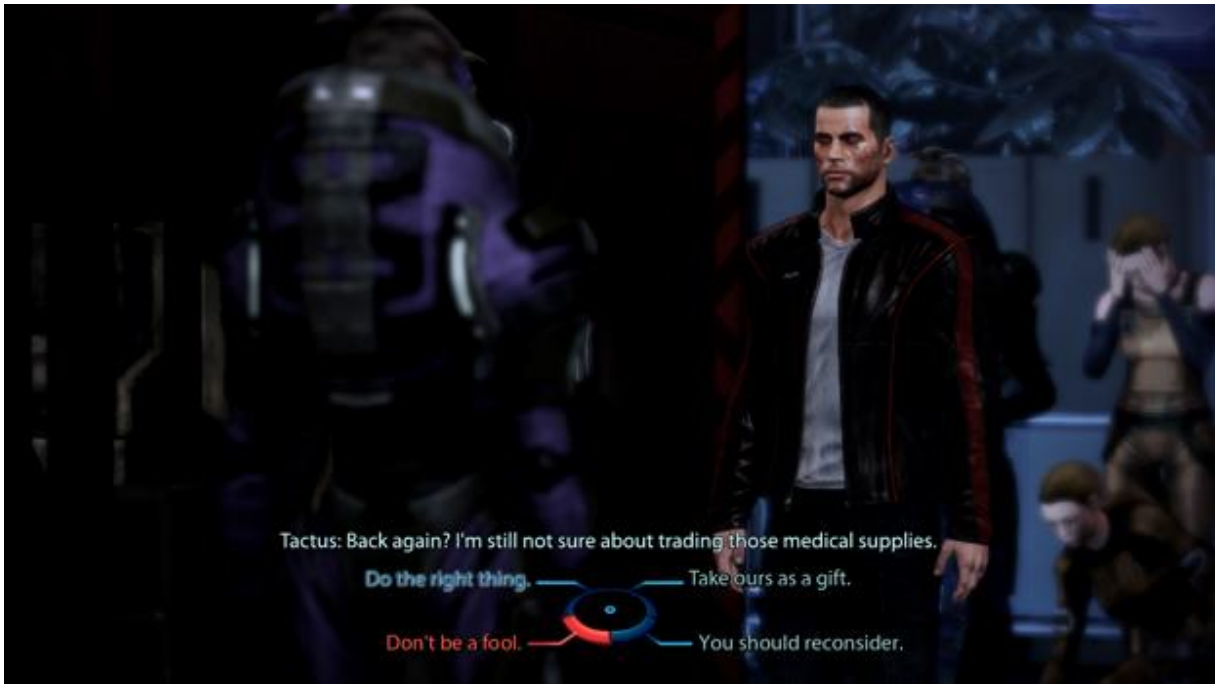
<sup>61</sup> This statement is only applicable to De Lauretis' definition of narrative.

In the first *ME* trilogy, humanity is the youngest of many space-faring civilisations who all meet at the Citadel, an ancient deep space station which serves as the political, structural and financial capital of the galactic community. The games follow commander Shepard, who rapidly becomes the first human “Spectre”, a galactic elite military operative. The player discovers at the end of the first instalment that an ‘ancient race of sentient starships’ known as “Reapers” (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2012, 397) hide in dark space while galactic civilisations flourish, appearing every 50.000 years to harvest them, before disappearing again to let a new “cycle” begin. It also reveals that the Citadel was originally created by the Reapers, allowing them to travel from deep space. On top of this, they are an extremely advanced non-organic race whose motives transcend human understanding. In the three games, commander Shepard’s mission is to thwart the Reapers’ plans, to gather the races together to prepare for their arrival, and to lead the final battle.

Each instalment offers a number of choices which can have a great range of consequences, ranging from punching a space reporter to destroying planet Earth. As long as the games are played on the same platform (PC, PS3, etc.), game saves can be transferred from one instalment to another so that player’s choices throughout the entire trilogy are taken into account. The player can also witness the consequences of some of their choices should only one instalment be played. One of the most prominent features of the interactive narrative in *ME* lies in its alignment system<sup>62</sup>, giving life to Shepard’s personality through the use of a dialogue wheel (see Picture 18) during in-game dialogues.

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<sup>62</sup> In some role-playing games, alignment is a categorisation of the moral and ethical perspective of the player characters, non-player characters, monsters, and societies in the game.



Picture 18: The Dialogue Wheel, by BioWare, Talk Amongst Yourselves, Public Domain.

In order to reinforce the quality and realism of the dialogue, the player is asked to choose between a “type” of answer, what Bizzochi and Tanenbaum call ‘attitudinal vectors’, which is followed by a more elaborate line delivered by Shepard (Pictures 19 & 20).



Picture 19: Choosing a Dialogue Option, by jj0ck33, YouTube, Public Domain.





Picture 20: Female Shepard delivering the line chosen by the player, by jj0ck33, YouTube, Public Domain.

The dialogue wheel means that ‘the player interacts with Shepard and other characters on the level of attitude’ (397) and leaves them the choice to act “Paragon” (in blue) or “Renegade” (in red), two paths that are reminiscent of (although less dualistic than) those of the light and dark side of the force in *Star Wars*. Opting for “Paragon” encourages players to be heroic and compassionate while “Renegade” points are gained from pragmatic and often ruthless actions. Additionally, the player can also choose “neutral” answers which ultimately lead to more moderate attitudes and ideals.

When it comes to the main story, these choices lead the player ‘down [similar] narrative paths, but they inflect the experience of Shepard in profound ways’ as the character’s alignment enables new dialogue options<sup>63</sup>. More significant is ‘the way in which each version of the character evoke[s] very different personal narratives’ (397) for who the character is and what they fight for. In addition, *ME* requires the player to choose between six different character classes that grant a wide array of abilities, ranging from hacking skills to telekinetic powers, which will heavily influence the way of dealing with enemies.

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<sup>63</sup> In *ME 2* and *3* the player can sometimes interrupt a conversation in favour of Paragon or Renegade attitudes.

Although each playthrough is likely to follow different trajectories which rapidly start shaping up after a few hours of play, ‘all worlds are open to the player and amount to competing possibilities’ (Zakowski, 2014, 72) at the beginning of the series. Among these numerous possibilities, the player only actualises one of them, while the others remain ‘non-activated’ (72). These different time lines are also known as ‘possible worlds’ (PW) (Zakowski, 2014, 72; Ryan, 2006, 2009):

[R]eality – now conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists – is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds. [...] This universe is structured like a solar system at the center lies a world commonly known as “the actual world,” and this center is surrounded by worlds that are possible but not actual. (Ryan, 2006, 644, 645).

Although PW theory was originally created for literature, Zakowski (2014) demonstrates that it is suitable for games that include interactive narrative. Indeed, games do not only ‘contemplate’ (73) PWs, but establish that no storyline prevails over another as ‘all choices are equally valid’ (Chatman, 1978, 56). As such, PWs can be used to illustrate the ‘nonlinearity’ of the *ME* narrative (Zakowski, 2014, 59). While the perfect “Paragon” storyline puts the emphasis on the protection of refugee families and aims at the survival of the greatest number of people, other storylines entail the sacrifice of entire planets including Earth.

For instance, Bizzochi and Tanenbaum (2012) indicate that they ‘pushed [*ME 2*]’s narrative logic to its absolute limits’ (402) by refusing any optional investment for survival offered in the game<sup>64</sup>. This timeline is one of the most disruptive as the main character, Shepard, dies prematurely and the save game file cannot be imported at the beginning of *ME 3*. In this playthrough’s world, there is no *ME 3*, the survival of humanity is not guaranteed and the only “reward” for playing the game this way is ‘an experience of the game as drama and as tragedy’ (402). Thus, playing *ME* guarantees an experience that is tailored to the player’s choices while making the plurality of narratives visible through the dialogue wheel. Even though they do not give the same freedom of choice, this

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<sup>64</sup> During *ME 2* the player is regularly asked to upgrade his ship, the Normandy and to do side-quests to gain his squadmates’ loyalty.

approach to interactive narration is characteristic of a successful branch of Western RPGs and action games<sup>65</sup>, which embrace possible worlds and, therefore, non-linearity.

As the core mechanic, but also metaphor of these possible worlds, the dialogue wheel is a practical, but also curious process which immerses the player in a suspended time. Except for some optional interventions that require immediate reaction, it does not rush the player into making a decision. Consequently, the conversation is “paused” until the player’s choice is made. However, environmental sounds can still be heard and visual cues (such as eyes blinking or body movement) indicate that the event time is still passing. Thus, similar to what Juul writes about pausing in a game, it could be argued that the dialogue wheel is, using Zagal and Mateas’s term (2010), a ‘temporal anomaly’ (854) where game time stops, but some of the game’s features still run in order to provide comfort and continuity to the gaming experience.

Nonetheless, the case of the dialogue wheel is slightly subtler as the game is not supposed to be paused. Indeed, this mechanic only represents the different options shaping in Shepard’s mind, which has the effect of fragmenting each conversation, and relies on the assumption that each conversation goes smoothly. There is, therefore, a certain lack of realism about the fact that Shepard can take their time to answer, particularly when conversations occur in the middle of a battlefield. As a result, dialogue time freezes the sequence of events, which makes it more similar to what Zagal & Mateas call a ‘temporal bubble’ (854): when the time outside of the dialogue space is actually paused while the game still keeps the illusion that event time is still going.

In this way, the dialogue wheel echoes Halberstam’s example of Lana’s room in *Boys Don’t Cry*. Dialogue time occurs in a queer time because it immediately shelters Shepard (and, subsequently, the player) from external events and gives the player respite and agency. While several conversations, such as those with the crew’s doctor will not have dramatic consequences, a significant number of them enable Shepard to unlock side quests, start and nurture relationships, or even decide whether a character lives or dies. Queer time opens up new, hitherto unseen horizons. It should be noted that dialogue time is not queer *per se* since the player can follow very normative choices, but the moment of choice is still located in a dislocated temporality, a sheltered moment which, until the player makes their final decision, provides a space of deferral and relief from future events.

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<sup>65</sup> *Fable*, *Dishonored*, *Deus Ex* to name but a few.

The analogy between the dialogue wheel and Lana's room is all the more relevant when the player chooses a romance option which could be considered non-normative, and, therefore, be read as a metaphor for queer romances. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, cross-species relationships are, in essence, queer. For example, the player has the option to romance, as female Shepard, Garrus Vakarian, a turian<sup>66</sup>, in the second and third instalments. Garrus himself talks about how unusual this sort of interspecies relationship is<sup>67</sup>, particularly because of the physical differences and potential incompatibilities between the two races. This complexity is reinforced by the suggestions that their relationship is not primarily based on sexual encounters, as Garrus mentions that they have not had sex yet in *ME 3*. Logically, this turian-human relationship does not seem to involve exactly the same steps of any token human pairing.

All these dialogues and cut-scenes can only occur through the use of the dialogue wheel, which symbolises the time and space of choice. As such, dialogue time is two-fold as it embodies both the plurality of possible worlds waiting for Shepard, but also the time before the choice, where all options are laid out, but not activated. Hence, dialogue time can trigger both the start (starting a queer relationship with Garrus) or the end (breaking up with Garrus) of a manifestation of queerness. More importantly, dialogue time shelters and isolates queerness, for a moment, contemplating its creation, nurturing or annihilation, regardless of external events.

The “goodbye scene” with Garrus illustrates this shielding of queerness. If the player decides to romance Garrus, both characters share a last moment together before the final battle. Garrus then talks about his confidence about beating the reapers, and then retiring with Shepard somewhere warm and tropical and ‘maybe even find out what turian-human baby looks like’. While Shepard cheerfully answers that adoption is probably their best bet – reasserting their physical incompatibility – the subject of the conversation quickly goes back to the reapers. Still, both characters choose to believe that they will meet in a bar once the battle is over, and refuse to consider a future when one survives without the other.

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<sup>66</sup> The Turians are avian-dinosaur-like creatures who appear as a militaristic species in *Mass Effect*. They are the first alien race to make contact with humanity.

<sup>67</sup> Some cross-species relationships are common in *Mass Effect*. However, there are no representation of a Human-Turian couple, clearly indicating the rarity of such pairing.

Regardless of the player's choice, Shepard is not able to keep his physical form at the end of the game, making the pursuing of any relationship impossible. Looking at this scene retrospectively, it seems evident that the chance of survival against the enemy is slim. Nonetheless, Garrus allows himself to dream and to reject the looming threat of the Reapers, which will eventually put an end to their queer romance. In that respect, Garrus' dialogue time operates in a similar manner than Lana's room, where Lana refuses to privilege the literal over the figurative ('Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation' (Halberstam, 2005, 87)), and preserves Brandon from the potential trauma of being exposed as a biological woman. It also echoes Lana's desire to escape to Memphis with her lover, away from the sadness, depression and violence of Falls City.

Of course, dialogue time does not only apply to cross-species relationships, but the turian-human romance strongly echoes that of Brandon and Lana. Overall, the dialogue wheel positions the player in an alternative temporality and operates as a temporary 'sanctuary' (87) where the horror of the intergalactic war can be forgotten. Dialogue time becomes a dimension where all kinds of relationships can flourish or die, ranging from the most traditional to the queerest. It embraces an endless branching of narratives 'framed by the big night sky' (87) of the galaxy and let players dream about horizons of endless possibilities, such as unlikely warm and sunny retirement plans or unconceivable extraterrestrial babies. Real time is suspended and 'logic and organizations' of reproductivity are put aside (6). Dialogue time allows the "unimaginable" to be fantasised. Dislocating and denaturalising what is bound to happen, not only does it grasp the present moment, but also queers it.

In addition to depicting queer dialogue time, the *ME* series relies on the notion of 'fuzzy temporality' (Zakowski, 2014, 73). Also called 'temporal indeterminacy' (Herman, 2002, 212), fuzzy temporality involves a 'temporal sequencing that is strategically inexact, making it difficult or even impossible to assign narrated events a fixed or even fixable position along a timeline' (212). As such, the narrative is 'under- or even undetermined' and 'delinearised' (Zakowski, 2014, 73). This is typical of RPGs that only rely on the player's action to trigger another even in the storyline such as *ME*, which delivers with its branding narrative a fluid sequencing of events that is 'overwhelmingly subject to personal preference' (Backe, 2012).

*ME 1* and *2* are structured around core missions that trigger the main game events of the overall narrative. In between them, the player is free to explore the galaxy and accomplish dozens of side-quests that are sometimes as developed as those in the story and provide the player with elements that enrich the playing experience such as character background or fictional history. Yet, these sequences of exploration do not have a significant influence on the development of the main story. As there is no internal clock in *ME*, exploration time does not affect story time.

Once again, the game might still give the illusion of time passing by, resorting to techniques such as the continuity of sounds or a day/night cycle, but the time that the player spends exploring and wandering within cities often has no influence on the main sequence of events. As such, these moments of exploration can be comparable to the practice of *flânerie*, as the player is allowed to escape from the pressure of the main narrative.

Although phases of exploration are typical of RPG and other adventure-driven games, rules can vary<sup>68</sup>. The *ME* games prevent players from using their weapons in spaces in which they can roam around. Instead, they are encouraged to talk to other characters, admire the sights and find collectibles. Some of these phases can occur in small spaces during a given mission, but most of them are located in “cities” (mainly gigantic space shuttles in the *ME* series). These places work as “narrative hubs” where side quests can be unlocked and merchandise purchased. In order to maintain the illusion of an inhabited, lively, and coherent game world, game developers often put a lot of work into creating a narrative hub in which players are encouraged to freely peek into every nook and cranny, regardless of the urgency of the hero’s situation.

These urban hubs can be approached as a futuristic projection of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century vision of the city as a site of queer gathering. Indeed, most works of 1970s queer geographers argued that the high density of the metropolis offered a variety of experiences which supported the claims ‘that urban and sexual freedom go hand in hand’ (Visser, 2016, 81; Hanhardt, 2013; Harry, 1974; Levine, 1979; Weightman, 1981; Weinberg and Williams, 1975). This perception of the city as a liberal space was mainly explained by the formation of gay urban neighbourhoods in cities such New York, London, Paris, Sydney

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<sup>68</sup> In *Skyrim* (2011), for instance, all kinds of interactions, including fighting or killing a NPC (Non-Playable Character), are still available.

and San Francisco. Carrying urban values such as freedom, emancipation and diversity (Lees, 2004), the city was often contrasted with a vision of rurality that was ‘deemed sexually conservative and even backwards’ (Blidon, 2016, 234).

However, most scholars now recognise that this approach has several issues, such as the conceptualization of queer spaces as gay, excluding lesbians, bisexuals and queers (Podmore, 2016). It also opposes urban spaces to rural spaces, a duality which is increasingly less relevant today, notably because, as Myrdahl argues (2016), the main issue is that less visibility is given to rural spaces, and that, what is understood as urban or rural consequently varies. Studies of LGBTQ life documented that rurality could range from a population centre of under 35,000 like Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan (Wickenhauser, 2012, 35) to a large suburban municipality of 468,000 like Surrey, BC (Myrdahl, 2016). Overall, while early investigations of urban gay villages often hold a particular bias regarding class, race and gender (Giwa & Greensmith, 2012) they nevertheless reflected a growing phenomenon: ‘the development of commercially concentrated gay areas in major US and UK cities, representing mainly gay male identities and lifestyles, and making them increasingly visible’ (Visser, 2016, 81; Casey, 2004, 447; Levine, 1979).

The *Mass Effect* universe redeploys this split by representing most intergalactic species in urban spaces. In contrast, settlements and colonies that are deemed “rural” are invaded or destroyed. Consequently, anything that is not a space shuttle or a dense metropolis is likely to be a hostile space. *ME* depicts a universe in which citizens live their daily lives in shuttles and migrant fleets, while soldiers and scientists conduct their operations in wild areas. As such, urban spaces in *ME* are sanctuaries where citizens assemble, regardless of their identity markers. This becomes more visible in *ME 3*, in which the Citadel becomes the main haven where migrants come to seek refuge from the Reapers’ attacks.

While the Normandy (Shepard’s ship) remains the main area where the commander converses and potentially courts their paramour, there are several instances where Shepard is asked to meet one of their teammates in one of the games’ narrative hubs. These encounters often offer key moments in the relationship (regardless of its nature) between the commander and their teammate. In the light of these social interactions, the “city” is represented as a vital space for human relationships to develop, a refuge where characters can “relax” and interact in-between their dangerous missions.

As such, cities offer a space where the meaning of each interaction between Shepard and their physical and social environments varies from one playthrough to another. Going dancing in Afterlife – one of the main dance clubs in *ME 2* – will be experienced differently depending on the player’s choices: a straight male Shepard watching a female pole dancer will not articulate the same narrative as a queer commander, who might just want to take the dancer’s place in order to put an end to the absence of male performers. Encouraging the practice of flânerie, the *ME* games allow the player to freely articulate spatiality. Thus, in the case of a queer-themed playthrough<sup>69</sup>, the player undertakes a queer ‘appropriation’ and ‘actualization’ of a given space (28), which manifests through the wish of dancing on a pole, or seducing an attractive bartender. As such, these urban hubs provide the player with the means to embody a potentially queer commander and engage in queer ‘stylized performances’ (Krobová et al, 2015, n.p.), ‘deliberately perform[ing] as a queer character by marking the character with stereotypical signs’ (n.p.) of their sexuality.

In a larger perspective, *ME* delivers, in Bredbeck’s (1995) terms, a “gay narrative” (479) with queer content. Its branching system and dialogue wheel are progressive mechanics which allow the development of alternatives to heteronormativity and give the player the reins of power of the narrative system. As previously mentioned, players are able to shape and play a queer Shepard through their relationships and the possibility to undertake stylized performances of their avatar, earn the respect of most other sentient species and save the galaxy. As such, the *ME* games offer progressive ‘channels’ and different ‘modes of participation’ with which the player interact (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2012, 394). In this way, *ME* advocates openly for the possibility of developing alternative narrative in mainstream video games and ultimately seek to improve the gaming sphere.

From this angle, the *ME* games provides a “gay narrative” because they diversify a narrative system without revolutionising it. Overall, strolling the streets and corridors of Omega and the Citadel will not get the player very far. Indeed, queer elements are only temporary and ultimately reinscribed in a more traditional plot (mankind needs to unite with other species to save the galaxy from mechanical beings). Dialogue time is only temporary and embedded in a much bigger structure that is hardly mutable. Moreover, queer romances are secondary to the main story and follow a similar pattern as they are offered “slots” within the main narrative. For instance, most of the intimate scenes that

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<sup>69</sup> Which would require the player to make the commander engage in non-heterosexual relationships.



take place in the commander's room can only occur before the final mission of each instalment. Thus, although the games provide moments and opportunities for a queering of time (à la Halberstam), their overall game structure maintains a deeply chrononormative stance. Regardless of orientation, gender or species, romance time is embedded in a normative structure which defines when and where promiscuity occurs.

Chrononormativity is also central to the instalments' gameplay which, like most RPGS, encourages the player to accumulate experience and resources. The games demand the players to comply with rules and objectives – going to a certain location, achieving a specific action – in order to unlock new events. Playing *ME* is all about winning confrontations and saving humanity, and queerness is only offered temporary moments to shine, before being put aside for the sake of the main narrative.

Finally, it must be noted that the main characters put an end to arguably the queerest symbol of the games' narrative: the Reapers. To repeat, the Reapers of *ME* appear from dark space to harvest civilisations, allowing a new cycle of civilisation to begin, only to reappear 50.000 years later. 'Historical time', that is to say time at a 'macro level', here moves in a circular motion (Zakowski, 2014, 62). Hence, the backbone of the *ME* storyline is driven by a tension between a human conception of time that is 'based on an inescapable flow from past into future' and an 'unnatural counterpart' to this conception that fits into a 'larger pattern' (62). As such, the Reaper imposes a circular notion of time, rejecting the human conception of 'linear' time (62). In this context, Reapers can be read as operating in a queer time and space as they are designed to be 'utterly unknowable': as Zakowski writes, '[n]ot only is the conception of time which they implement and protect distinct from ours; in terms of space, they reside in extragalactic dark space, which is not accessible for other species' (62). Reapers alienate the conception of time as it is familiar to us.

As such, the *ME* series tells the story of a conflict between two opposite temporalities, and demands that the player defends the known, familiar and reassuring model of linear time. No matter how mysterious dark space is, intergalactic species do not seem to express interest in it. It is a place that escapes current understandings of time and space and anything that comes from it – the Reapers – must be destroyed. It could be argued that *ME* is about fighting what might come from "Lana's room" – dark space. Refusing to listen to the intergalactic council and repeatedly putting his career at risk, Shepard is willing to do anything to protect humanity no matter the cost, which strangely echoes John's (one of

Brandon's rapist and murderer) obsession and concern Lana, who is in danger for being in a relationship with the unknown, symbolised by the transgender figure of Brandon. As a result, *ME* is a story of survival which potentially contains some queer elements, but it is also about fighting the "unconceivable" without trying to understand it, about reasserting a vision of time as linear, of maintaining a seemingly working status quo, and hope for the best.

To conclude this critical reflection, queer time in *ME* can be identified in two main instances. The first one is the dialogue wheel, which introduces a time of endless possibilities until the player makes a choice. I showed that time in the dialogue wheel operates in a similar manner to the time documented by Halberstam in *Boys don't Cry*, where a myriad of possible narratives awaits the player, shielded from heteronormative oppression. The other feature which operates alongside the dialogue wheel is the possibility to explore, interact or simply wander within the narrative hubs of the games. Common in RPGs, these urban places shelter the player from the overall narrative, allowing to develop the Commander's personality in a chosen fashion and reappropriate the game space through the eyes of the player. Enabling the player to behave as a flâneur, strolling aimlessly, these sequences potentially run counter to the ruling chrononormativity of most AAA games.

While the several endings of *ME* could be considered fairly traditional<sup>70</sup>, they were still judged unsatisfactory by a great number of players. For the first time in the industry, fans even petitioned to get a new ending through downloadable content (Keyes, 2011). As a result, BioWare felt obliged to provide a patch with more information about what had happened to secondary characters. I showed that the *ME* series, as a representative of AAA games, enjoys less flexibility when it comes to its content as they strongly rely on their audience's expectation, anything that strays too much from normativity will be met with hostility. On the other hand, the independent gaming scene enjoys much more freedom regarding game narratives and the themes they tackle. *The Path*, the second case study of this chapter, shows how a game can fully embrace a circular narrative and rely solely on game flânerie as a game mechanic.

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<sup>70</sup> They all lead to the stopping of the Reapers through control, destruction or assimilation depending on the player's choices.

## *Flânerie* in the Dark Woods: Shattering Innocence and Queering Time

I am walking in the woods. I can hear chains clicking and children singing a hypnotic and ominous chant. I pick up a flower. I have no idea where I am. Running makes me lose my bearings as the screen goes blurry and I cannot find the girl in white – the only friendly face out there – to get me back on the path. After more than half an hour of walking slowly, interacting with unlikely objects, the colours and the music change. I exult, I think I found my wolf: I am finally going to die. I am playing *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009).

### *'Wolf Encountered: no!' – Queering the Game*

*The Path* is a peculiar game to say the least. Described by developer Tale of Tales as a 'short horror game inspired by older versions of Little Red Riding Hood, set in modern day' (Harvey & Samyn, 2009), it is designed as an exploratory game with no monster to defeat nor puzzle to solve, and leaves complete freedom to the players to venture in a dark forest, 'with accessibility in mind' (Harvey & Samyn, 2009). *The Path* is a quintessential example of the artistic independent game scene. Developed by two game designers and one modeler, it received more than half of its budget from non-commercial art grants. The game was praised by the press but received mixed reactions from the gamers, mostly because of their disagreement about whether *The Path* should be considered a game (Harvey & Samyn, 2010; Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009).

*The Path* focuses on six sisters of different ages whose names all evoke the colour red (Robin, Rose, Ginger, Ruby, Carmen, Scarlet) (Picture 21). All available at the beginning of the game, each sister must take on a journey into the woods in order to reach "Grandmother's house". The game is organized in three distinctive "acts": the flat where the player chooses their character (Picture 22); the forest, the main part of the game, where the player is asked to explore, find objects and maybe encounter the "wolf" (Picture 23); and Grandmother's house. Once in the forest, the game tells the player to stay on the path. Nonetheless, following this rule quickly results in a disappointing ending with a scoreboard indicating the player that no objects nor wolf have been found (Picture 24), thereby revealing the main goal of the game: to stray from the path and meet the wolf. Staying on the path represents no challenge at all and can be achieved within seconds, however, leaving the path means getting lost in the forest, as the trail subsequently

disappears and the map starts repeating itself whenever the character reaches the edges of the woods, making it “infinite”.



Picture 21: The Six Red Riding Hoods, by Unknown, rebelsmarket, Public Domain. (*The Path*): artworks of the six Red Riding Hood.



Picture 22: The Flat, by Tale of Tales, tale of tales, Public Domain. (*The Path*)



Picture 23: Robin on the path, by Tales of Tales, actualgameplayer, Public Domain. (*The Path*)

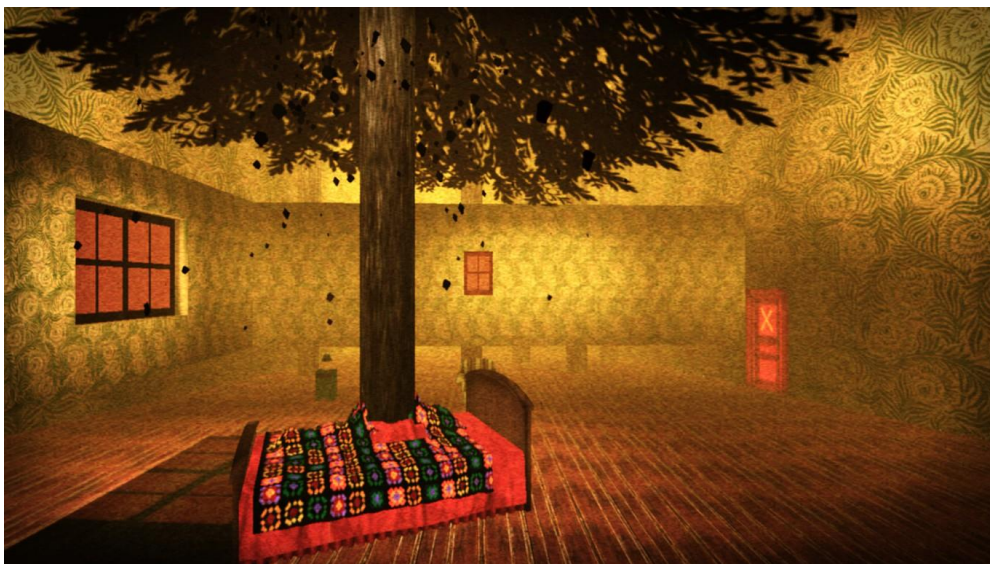


Picture 24: Scoreboard, by Tale of Tales, mwng, Public Domain. : (*The Path*)

Each sister's wolf is different and corresponds to their unique storyline. Robin, who is the closest character to the Perrauldian figure, meets a Werewolf in a cemetery with whom she wants to play. Rose, 'a precocious eleven-year-old' (Ensslin, 2013, 79) who enjoys the beauty of nature, encounters a "cloud man". The adventurous Ginger is a tomboy who meets another girl who murders her. Ruby, a taciturn goth teenager who is visibly limping because of an injury or disability, encounters a young man in a playground who seduces,

and who rapes and kills her. A lumberjack beheads<sup>71</sup> the charming and slightly narcissistic Carmen while Scarlet, the eldest, mysteriously dies by starting to play a piano in a ruined theatre in the presence of a tall and slender man with white hair.

Finding the wolf triggers a small cutscene, followed by a fade-out. After the encounter, the girl appears lying on the ground in front of grandmother's house, in the rain. Colours have faded and the girls' heads are down, making them look similar to walking corpses. The walk to Grandmother's house is extremely slow, and the play shifts to a first-person perspective once inside the house. The player is then given very little control and the pressing of any button makes them advance through the house. As such, the game becomes similar to a 'ghost train' (Ryan & Costello, 2012, 114), revealing surrealistic rooms representing the psyche of the girl chosen by the player (Picture 25). This part of the game ends with a series of images evoking the girl's death (Picture 26), followed by a scoreboard.



Picture 25: Grandmother's house, by Tale of tales, Luderacy, Public Domain.

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<sup>71</sup> Most of these killings are not explicit. But flashes of images at the end of the Grandmother's house "ride" strongly suggests the nature of their deaths.



Picture 26: Ginger's death, by Tale of Tales, photobucket, Public Domain.

*The Path* introduces several elements that hint at a darker and potentially queer version of the tale on which it is based: the ambiguous desire to find the wolf, the unclear death of some of the characters and the exploration of different stages of femininity. It bears similarities with other feminist and queer adaptations of the tale such as the three wolf tales of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) ('The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves' and 'Wolf-Alice'). In Carter's first tale, Red Hiding Hood finds out that her grandmother is actually a werewolf after cutting her paw at her house. The latter is then stoned to death as a witch and the child stays in the house and prospers. In the second story, regardless of the fear and danger that he represents, the child goes to the werewolf who devoured her grandmother and sleeps soundly between his tender paws. In the third tale, a feral child saves a werewolf by licking his blood and wounds. In Carter's retelling of the fairy tale, female desire, sexuality and independence break free from the heterosexual male gaze.

*The Path* also operates similarly to David Kaplan's film adaptation of the *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997). Based on "The Story of Grandmother", 'an early French oral version collected by Achille Millien in the Nièvre region of France in the late nineteenth century' (Orme, 2015, 88), Kaplan's film is arguably one of the queerest adaptations of the tale so far. Orme (2015) argues that the movie 'troubles expectations raised by the title by offering a girl (Christina Ricci) who has sexual agency and seeks out her wolf (Timour Bourtasenkov) rather than being his victim' (89). Similar to Carter's tales, 'there is nothing ambiguous

about the emphasis of the film: it focuses on female desire and a female gaze that rejoice in a young woman's artful and playful way in which she seduces an androgynous wolf (Zipes, 2011, 151). *The Path* and these adaptations contain material that hint at a queer reading of the tale. It is 'all about straying from the path, particularly one built on binary oppositions between masculine and feminine, active and passive, heterosexual and homosexual' (Orme, 2015, 57).

*The Path* attracted a reasonable amount of attention among game scholars, mostly focusing on how the game could be seen as a deconstructive and self-reflexive experience about gaming. Indeed, it breaks an assumed hidden contract between the game and the player which stipulates what and how goals can be set and reward the player for overcoming the game's obstacles. This contract has often been used as an essential component of the definition of games (Huizinga, 1955; Juul, 2005; Suits, 1978):

1. There is a goal that the player must achieve.
2. There are boundaries within which the player must remain.
3. The game will present obstacles to prevent the player from achieving the goal.
4. Overcoming obstacles is difficult but rewarding.
5. Final victory is won by defeating all obstacles and achieving the goal. (Ryan & Costello, 2012, 116).

At first, *The Path* 'seems to embrace the contract' (Ryan & Costello, 2012, 116) as it presents a simple goal and rule: going to grandma's house and staying on the path. However, it quickly establishes a new contract – once the player has failed to find the wolf after having followed the path –, an 'exploratory contract' characterized by 'secrets hidden around the virtual space' which 'yields a part of a greater story' (118).

Ensslin (2013) argues that *The Path* is a *détournement* type of game that focuses on self-reflexivity as it combines processes of aesthetic (77) with appropriation and subversion', using what Dragona (2010) refers to as 'play as a practice to transcend rigid forms and to break constraints' (27). According to Ensslin, the game disrupts the experience of mainstream games by breaking rules that are usually constitutive of gameplay. It resorts to three main 'ludonarratological techniques that underline the game's subversive and self-reflexive remit more generally: metaludicity, allusive fallacy, and illusory agency' (Ensslin, 2013, 77).



Metaludicity refers to aspects of a game whose purpose it is to make players reflect critically upon game mechanics and gameplay [...] Allusive fallacy combined the idea of “alluding” with that of purposeful deception. Players who are subjected to allusive fallacy are deliberately misled in a game – for instance, by deceptive semiotic clues. Illusory agency, finally, contains another deceptive aspect: the idea of illusion, or playful mockery by means of false appearances (Ensslin, 2013, 84, 85).

These readings point towards the similar conclusion that *The Path* distinguishes itself from mainstream games. However, they overlook the overwhelming dissidence of *The Path* and, subsequently, a cultural understanding of the game as a queer narrative. Indeed, proudly exposing a ‘metaludic if not antiludic’ agenda (81), its core elements provide both a queering of a tale and a queering of gaming.

Stating that exploring the forest is a contemplative experience would be an understatement. The eerie music<sup>72</sup>, the repeating map, the colours that vary between green, blue, grey and violet all contribute to the hypnotic nature of this experience. However, the most striking aspect of this exploration is the speed of the character’s pace. This slow pace is forced upon the player, as running (which would still be considered slow in comparison with most games) blurs the character’s vision, preventing the player from clearly seeing their surroundings and interacting with/collecting objects. In this way, the player needs to regularly revert to walking in order to orientate themselves or collect items. The same goes for the character’s thoughts and interactions which are represented by text that slowly appears on the screen. As such, *The Path* undeniably ‘defies quick action’ and, therefore, situates itself ‘in opposition to commercial blockbusters and the blind frenzy surrounding run-of-the-mill shooters and other popular genres’ (Ensslin, 2013, 81).

Additionally, players are not pressured to meet the wolf within a given time period. While a small paw appears on the screen on the second walkthrough in order to indicate the location of the wolf, following it immediately would consist in a very tame experience and prevent the player from “connecting” with the girl played. However, the game does not properly reward the player for spending time collecting objects either. For instance,

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<sup>72</sup> You can listen to the music here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW8VIhJdJ0o>

picking up all the 144 flowers – a very time-consuming process – has no influence on the ending and is only acknowledged on the final scoreboard. Hence, although *The Path* encourages the player to explore as a way to learn more about the played character, it both parodies and criticises game systems that are based upon achievements and rewards. Through their slow and aimless wander, the player needs to find their own satisfaction in playing the game.

Embodying the role of the flâneur, the player is thus invited to make their own sense of the interactive elements through the eyes of the six Riding Hoods. The game is structured so that space is reappropriated and given new meanings. Indeed, the setting of the forest is located in a time detached from the “busyness” of the city and the only link between the two places is where the game starts: the end of a tarmac road entering the forest. In this way, flânerie in *The Path* does not occur in a typical urban setting, but a “natural” setting littered with human-made elements that are reminiscent of urban spaces (a TV set, a playground, a wheelchair, and so on). Punctuating the walkthrough, these elements seem out of place, left by themselves in the forest.

Repeating Freeman’s (2005) words, the flânerie through the woods inevitably uproots these elements from their “natural” sense of belonging’ (156). The TV set is not there to screen news nor keep children busy by showing cartoons. Instead, white noise is mysteriously displayed on the screen and the set is partially broken, with no plugs in sight. The same goes for the other objects and places, symbolizing leisure, chores, escapism, (the drying clothes, the playground, the syringe, the theatre), all of which are tied to the schedule of a capitalist society (156). Left alone in the forest, their place and role become nonsensical. The player, therefore, needs to reassemble signified and signifiers, creating new associations between these objects, to give them new meanings. Echoing Ivanchikova, these elements are ultimately actualised and appropriated by the flâneur-gamer.

Not only does flânerie in *The Path* come into play within the game, it also applies “outside” of it by challenging the definition of gaming itself. Referring to my previous argument, *The Path* breaks the ludic contract, but also rejects the position of gaming within the heteronormative dogma of leisure and productivity. Defying quick action, *The Path* situates itself ‘in opposition to commercial blockbusters and the blind frenzy surrounding run-of-the-mill shooters and other popular genres’ (Ensslin, 2013, 81). In other words, the game resists the chrononormative nature adopted by most AAA games at the risk of not

being considered a game itself (Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009). In this way, it thwarts the players' expectations by failing to provide challenge or fun, as understood in the hegemonic sense<sup>73</sup>. While *The Path* provides a self-reflexive and challenging experience about gaming and the reappropriation of objects and spaces within a non-chrononormative environment, it also triggers a queering of the concept of linear time, thereby liberating its characters from the alienation of heteronormativity.

### *Red Riding Flânerie – Queering the Girls*

To appropriate Abbott's (1984) discussion of other queer narratives, *The Path* 'shatters linearity, proceeds by flashes, enigmas, and yields to a florid crying-out theme of /suffering/horror'. Contrary to *ME* which ultimately yields to the commonly received conception of time as 'linear' (Zakowski, 2014, 62), *The Path* adopts a circular structure and operates as a never-ending, deconstructed loop. The player is free to start the storyline of the six girls in any order. Once all the "paths" have been explored, the game lets the player manipulate "the girl in white" – an additional character who can bring the characters back to the path or lead them to points of interest in the forest – to lead her to Grandmother's house. After a short scene, the game takes the player back to the flat and shows each girl coming back to their original position. The player is then able to start each storyline again.

*The Path's* cyclical temporality targets the 'stable structures in society and in consciousness' as it can be read as an instance of 'violations of realistic temporality' (Hume, 2005, 121) which forces the player to reevaluate their conception of time, thereby echoing Halberstam's concept of queer time. *The Path* is not about a journey from which each character will learn something. Yet not only does it provide a timeless stroll that leads to the girls' death, but also to their mysterious rebirth. Through this the girls remain the same. They have not grown. They have been queered.

This queering process illustrates Stockton's work (2007) about the "backward birth" of queer children. Following on from the works of Segdwick (1990), Kincaid (1996) and Edelman (2004), Stockton (2007, 304) questions 'the vertical forward-motion metaphor of

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<sup>73</sup> Ruberg (2015a) writes a fundamental piece about the potential of "no-fun" games which would apply perfectly to *The Path*. However, the scope of this article does not allow me to explore it in detail.

“growing up” by exploring the many kinds of sideways growth appearing in the twentieth century’. She investigates the consequences of the synthesis of the child (the ultimate figure of futurism) and queer identity (when this same child shatters heteronormative expectations, thereby undergoing a “straight death”).

She argues that we commonly tend to view children as innocent, which results in a brutal and pressuring ‘ideal’ (2009, 12). According to her, one does not grow up ‘from innocence to the adult position of protecting it’ (12) as innocence works its own violence on individuals, particularly when it is combined with heteronormative oppression. Paradoxically, the child is temporarily queered as he is not allowed to be sexual. As a result, Stockton supports the provocative argument that ‘any and every child [is] queer’ (3), until their heterosexuality is “unveiled”, which ultimately puts an end to this acceptable concept of queer innocence. As such, children are implicitly construed by our culture to be ‘not-yet-straight’ (7). However, when an individual comes out as non-heterosexual, the protoqueer child is given what Stockton calls a ‘backward birth’ (6): a birthing mechanism occurring ‘through an act of retrospection and after a death’, the death of one’s ‘straight destination’ (2007, 303). As such, the queer innocence which should have been terminated survives and transforms into something that is no longer sacralised.

Stockton (2007) focuses on historical cases of murderous children, demonstrating how they challenge the comforting power of new life conventionally associated with children and instead creates an archive of childhood bloodbaths. Stockton demonstrates that, legally, ‘there cannot be a motive to kill until there is a killing – or an attempt, or a conspiracy, to kill’ (303). As a result, the motive to murder, just like the queerness of a child, is ‘born backward from the point of (attempted) death’ (303). Echoing Stockton’s argument, *The Path* relies on the shattering of heteronormative innocence through the death wish of the six girls. Despite their apparent innocence, it can be argued that they are, in fact, attracted to their wolf, even if it costs them their lives<sup>74</sup>. The encounters with the wolf embody a coming-out moment, when the player realizes the girl does not wish to escape, but “experience” her “wolf”. As such, each scene is an instance of non-normative desire such as playing with a monster, inter-generational sex (Erhart, 2003; Farrier, 2015) and, more generally, self-sacrifice.

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<sup>74</sup> While Robin decides to play with a werewolf in a cemetery featuring a freshly dug open grave, Rose goes on a small boat to investigate a small human-shaped cloud in the center of a lake, and Carmen shares a drink with a hostile-looking lumberjack.

Indeed, the six girls of *The Path* showcase queer characteristics: the most visible of them being their strong death wish. In each “storyline”, they willfully encounter their wolf: Robin decides to play with a werewolf in a cemetery featuring a freshly dug open grave, Rose goes on a small boat to investigate a small human-shaped cloud in the center of a lake, Carmen shares a drink with a hostile-looking lumberjack, and so on. While this echoes Edelman’s concepts of the child as symbol of reproductive futurity and the death drive as a queer force resisting that same futurity, Stockton’s work seems more appropriate to apply to the six girls of *The Path*, who can be read as queer children.

Indeed, while the six Riding Hoods do not have clear murderous motives, their encounter inevitably leads to their death, making them potentially suicidal. Instead of embracing futurity, they all appear to accept their fates without giving up any indication of remorse, fear or anxiety. Instead, they deliver lines during the exploration of the forest which illustrates anti-relational theory and concepts of non-linear narratives. For instance, Ruby, the “teenage-goth” of the group, jokes about death and defines it as an inconsequential stage, thereby echoing Stockton’s succession of birth, death and backward birth:

Engines. And friends. Turn them off. Turn them on. Life. Death. Are they so different?

I must be getting old. It’s about time! (*The Path*, 2009)

Behind their cynicism, Ruby’s lines foreshadow the narrative structure of each girl and underlines the cyclical nature of the game. This also applies to Rose, who seems obsessed with the same cyclical (and somewhat holistic) vision of life and death. While she enjoys nature and delivers more cheerful lines during her flânerie, the maturity she shows is disturbingly uncanny for a 11-year-old:

The cycle of life and death knows no beginning and no end.

Everything is one. My molecules float in all direction. The trees, the cloud we are all one (*The Path*, 2009).

Exploring the woods with Rose makes her sympathetic, but also presents her as ‘different, odd’, ‘out of sync’ (Stockton, 2007, 303), or, in other words, a queer child. The same is true for Robin, the youngest and presumably the most innocent of them all, who makes chillingly prophetic comments about digging dirt in someone’s grave – presumably her own. The innocence of Ginger – a tomboy looking for adventures – and Scarlet – a young woman who cares for her sister and is passionate about the arts – undergo similar, but less obvious queering processes. Yet, both of their wolves – a newfound (female) friend and piano teacher – represent their yearnings, both of which eventually lead to their ends, suggesting a desire to die. Finally, Carmen is in her late teens and manifests a high sexual drive; a drive that leads her to a sexual encounter with a shady-looking stranger, and ultimately to her death. Once again, however, some of her game lines unveil her awareness of her upcoming fall:

The man who would save is our destroyer, but the tenderness of giving in can defeat any power (*The Path*, 2009).

Thus, through the lens of Stockton’s work, the first girl chosen is likely to be read as “innocent” until the player goes through their first wolf encounter and Grandmother’s house. As such, the death of each Riding Hood can be equated to their heteronormative death, putting an end to their assumed “future straightness”. The girls are redefined as queer during the exploration of the house, allowing a process of “backward birth” to occur. Thus, after having witnessed a girl’s death, the gamer is more likely to be aware of the game’s cues about the girls’ non-normative desire. In the following playthroughs, the girls become part of the “horror” of the game<sup>75</sup> which consists in witnessing a child, the symbol of reproduction and secured future, wanting to die, and ultimately achieving her goal. Each of their in-game comments foreshadows their backward birth, almost turning into fragments of a “forward birth”, slowly breaking apart the oppressive and innocent straightness associated with the six girls and preparing the gamer for their queer fate.

Because of their fragmented and enigmatic nature, the comments obtained through the exploration of the forest remain mysterious and secretive and give little explanation as to why the girls are drawn to their wolves. As a result, time, along with rationality, remains

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<sup>75</sup> At least from the straight viewer. Following Edelman and Stockton’s views, there is something frightening about witnessing a child, the symbol of reproduction and secured future, wanting to die.

suspended. Echoing Stockton's reading of *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), the children's suicidal and murderous motives lack explanation. The viewers witness the intent of (self) killing, but can never determine its motive. They are 'made to watch, less of the purpose of "understanding" than inhabiting' (Stockton, 2007, 321) the feelings developed by the six Red Riding Hoods. Indeed, the termination of the girls' innocence by queer desires cannot be fully comprehended. Escaping rationality, these children go beyond the heteronormative understanding of what it means to grow up. It is only when taken altogether that these feelings can be temporarily grasped and experienced. And all that is left to do is to take a slow and aimless stroll.

Not only does the positioning of the gamer as a flâneur challenge the ludic contract, breaking as it does the linearity of the game's narrative structure, it also blurs and queers the identity of the game's characters. Contrary to what the game's title might suggest, *The Path* is everything but linear as the forest becomes a place of circularity where life and death blend. By straying from *The Path*, the "game flâneur" goes through a double process of 'appropriation' (Ivanchikova, 2007, 21): not only is the forest read through the eyes of each girl, it in turn hints at the queerness of the played character. As a consequence of the queering dynamic, the player activates, through each interaction, 'queer possibilities dormant in space' (21) and the queer dimension of each playable character. Articulating 'queer spatiality' (21) and identity, flânerie slowly breaks apart the oppressive and innocent straightness of the six girls.

Returning to Bredbeck's work, it can be argued that *The Path* produces a queer narrative. Indeed, the game constructs a narrative that is constituted of the queer birth/ rebirth of six girls, shattering the oppressive straightness of innocence. It also occurs in a temporality that is slowed down, running counter to industrialised time, in circular and destabilizing ways that challenge the commonly received understanding of time as linear. By the end the game, having played all characters and explored the environment, the player is left with a series of unanswered questions (Who is the girl in white? What does the "epilogue" ending mean? Do the girls really die?). In other words, *The Path* boasts a queer narrative since it exposes and resists through its flâneur gameplay and story the rigid rules that are still obeyed by most mainstream games.

*The Path* is not an isolated case of game flânerie and is part of a larger group of independent games, such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) or *Flower*

(thatgamecompany, 2009), which all stray from the fast-paced, violent and sensational nature of mainstream gaming:

*Journey* is an interactive parable, an anonymous online adventure to experience a person's life passage and their intersections with other's. You wake alone and surrounded by miles of burning, sprawling desert, and soon discover the looming mountaintop which is your goal. [...] The goal is to get to the mountaintop, but the experience is discovering who you are, what this place is, and what is your purpose. Travel and explore this ancient, mysterious world alone, or with a stranger you meet along the way (thatgamecompany, 2012).

Playing as the wind, the player guides and grows a swarm of petals by interacting with other flowers and the surrounding environment. *Flower's* gameplay offers different experiences, pacing and rhythm to all players. Along the way, the environment will pose challenges to the player's progress. Both pastoral and at times chaotic, *Flower* is a visual, audio and interactive escape (IGN, 2009).

While these games are slightly more goal-driven than *The Path*, they both place an emphasis on self-reflexive and unrestrained exploration, conveying an alternative game experience. These are also imbued with green political messages putting an emphasis on 'a reconnection with nature' (Parham, 2015, 227) and can be read as 'environmental texts' (Buell, 1995) by taking games into 'neglected spaces' (Parham, 2015, 223) such as the bush, the grass, or the desert. Morton (2007) argues that instead of othering nature, *Flowers* and *Journey* make us 'jump down into the mud' (205), echoing Doyle's argument (2015) about the necessity of connecting climate to culture and using popular culture and media as 'a way of inspiring and helping achieve social and political change' (1).

While *The Path* and other indie games strongly resist the rules that govern mainstream gaming, their resistance is of course threatened by financial sustainability. Indeed, most independent video games are now very much included in a capitalist system through online selling platform such as Steam, and rely on sales. However, game developers' expectations and commitments are a far cry from that of mainstream games. For instance, developer Tale of Tales declare they 'were never certain how much money we would make with *The Path*' (Samyn, Harvey, 2010). The fact that this same developer recently decided



to stop making games because of the commercial failure of their last game, *Sunset* (Tale of Tales, 2015) highlights how difficult such a commitment can be (Hall, 2015).

Still, these independent games are precursors. Similar to flâneurs who would navigate and reappropriate the very core of industrial capitalism (the city), and turn it into a space of idle and unrestrained wandering, independent video games reappropriate the normative pressure of the gaming industry and prove that a gaming experience can follow a different trajectory. Implicitly, they address the instability of queerness within a capitalist world illustrated in the previous chapter. These games can be read as ‘spectacular acts’, just like Aviance’s performance. Condemned to be forgotten by the mass with time, they constitute a mode of queer expression and activism. Games which are “fully queer” may not be viable, but these attempts only pave the way for a future queerness that is “not yet there”.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relationship between game time and queer time through two main case studies. I began by demonstrating how the *ME* franchise relied on a multi-layered and interactive narrative which creates a fuzzy temporality, that is to say a structure of events that is changeable and solely dependable upon the player’s action. Symbolized by the dialogue wheel, I showed how dialogue time occurred in a temporal ‘bubble’, an anomaly where the player is repeatedly confronted by the branching of the narrative, but also sheltered from the pre-apocalyptic chaos of the game series. Consequently, in combination with the queer content provided by the game, the dialogue wheel can be read as a moment of possibility, a moment suspended in a queer time when queer desire can be left unrestrained. In addition to its branching narrative, I argued that the *ME* games illustrate how adventure games leave some space for game flânerie through the inclusion of gameplay segment which leaves the player free to explore without any time pressure. However, I also highlighted the limitations of these game sequences such as their temporary and secondary nature to the main plot and game.

The same cannot be argued for independent games such as *The Path*, which mainly focuses on exploration sequences and stray from the structuring elements of most mainstream games such as rapidity of action, violence and sensational visuals. In addition to its

circular narrative and its queering of the original tale, *The Path* fully embraces postmodern flânerie by encouraging the player to make sense of both the physical environment of the forest and the Red Riding Hoods' psyches. Uprooted from their original sources, the essence of the objects and places encountered are left open to the interpretation of the player, while the six Red Riding Hoods go through a process of queer rebirth, where their assumed innocence as children is replaced by an inexplicable death wish.

At several points in my life as a gamer, I have been transported on journeys which have required the investment of emotions and time. I have often felt the need to be as efficient as possible in order to complete objectives while juggling with my student and social life. Conversely, I have also felt the need to isolate myself for a weekend and play as much as possible so that I could put an end to the mild addiction I would experience.

However, my best gaming experiences were not the ones which pushed me to improve my gaming skills or unlock the hardest trophies, but those which required me to pause, and admire mesmerizing game environments. Appreciating the aesthetics, the sound, the music, but also the quality of a game's storytelling, I would spend more time than necessary paying attention to such details, waiting for the character to scold me for doing nothing. It is evident that most media have the potential today to provide escapism, and sometimes locate the absorbed audience in what could be read as a queer time. Although my aim is not to debate whether video games provide a more intense feeling of escapism than, for instance, literature, cinema or television, I believe that games are particularly strong when it comes to thwarting linear temporalities.

In many ways, *The Path* fails at providing entertainment as a game as it forces the player to repeatedly die slowly. It informs the player's agency to navigate gaming rules. Still, failure in *The Path* inevitably becomes an objective to achieve and, therefore, a way to succeed. To a certain extent, the game still coerces the player to abide to at least one rule. As such, it can be said that *The Path* provides a greater freedom than most AAA games for the player to "let go" of their expectations and let themselves be carried away by the game's exploration. Yet, *The Path* also illustrates that it is the practice of gaming, more than the game itself, which is imbued with queerness. In the next chapter, I extend this suggestion through the exploration of "real" failure (*i.e.* when not encouraged by the game) as a gaming disruption. I investigate how failure as a queer gaming practice leads to

radical politics of desires and identities which run counter hegemonic values of the gaming community, but also, more generally, heteronormativity.

## Chapter 6. Flawless in Defeat: Failure and Queer Pleasure in Gay Ryona videos.

Wandering down the endless corridors of YouTube, I am browsing videos of game modding<sup>76</sup> that include gay characters. Desperately searching for something more than a clumsy love scene between two male characters that were originally never supposed to meet, I stumble across a curiously titled fighting game video. This features a fight in which one character mercilessly beats his opponent for seven minutes. Admittedly, the half-naked characters are pretty attractive, but there is no clear sexual content nor game modifications which present the scene as erotic. I then read the video description and, looking at the sheer number of comments and followers, note that these videos seem to be growing in popularity. I have just discovered a new type of internet kink. I have discovered Gay Ryona.

This chapter considers the implications of Gay Ryona videos within a broader framework for studying queer potential and practices of gaming. It aims at showing how using heterosexist texts such as fighting games in a “deviant” way unveils their latent queer qualities. Before proceeding to this analysis, I first introduce Gay Ryona and then move onto the history of hypermasculinity in fighting sports in order to examine how it continues to operate as a shield against homoerotic appropriation. I then argue that fighting sports, as a homosocial practice, have regularly been appropriated by queer culture through social networks, erotic and porn sites and magazines. I continue by exploring how Gay Ryona can be read as a type of ‘counterplay’ as it runs counter to the ruling principles of fighting games and, by extension, heteropatriarchal ideals of masculine power and competition. In this way, I believe that this new cultural form can be associated with a broader canon of LGBTQ studies. Having undertaken this contextual work, the chapter performs a critical reading of Gay Ryona, focusing on its celebration of failure, a concept that I read as queer, through the work of Halberstam (2011). Through this reading, I argue that Gay Ryona reclaims failure as a pleasurable experience, which enables the player/ viewer to disturb the normative paradigms of what should and should

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<sup>76</sup> Modding refers to the modification of digital games. Most of the times, modders would interact with a game’s database in order to add features that were previously non-existent or unavailable in the games.

not be enjoyed. Leading on from this, I demonstrate how the BDSM dimension of Gay Ryona can be translated into another type of failure: the failure of the masculine. Studying BDSM dynamics, I show that both victim and torturer run counter the values of hegemonic masculinity.

### *Introducing Gay Ryona*

Ryona (リヨナ), is a Japanese term for a sexual complex where a female character is, usually sexually, attacked or tortured by either a man or another female character(s). The term "*ryona*" comes from "*ryonani*" (リヨナニー), a portmanteau of "*ryōki*" (猟奇, "Seeking the bizarre") and "*onanī*" (オナニー, masturbation) (ryonani.com, [no date]).

Introducing someone to Ryona as a genre is always a delicate procedure, as it revolves around a victim – often a humanoid female – who is ‘physically assaulted’ or ‘psychologically abused by an offender’ (ryonani.com, [no date]). It is a voyeuristic fantasy genre that primarily focuses on ‘fictional characters [mainly] from video games, [but also from] anime, comics, TV and movies that include battering, abusing or otherwise killing women’ (ryonani.com [no date]). Since it has a broad definition, it incorporates, and is often associated with, other practices such as BDSM, humiliation and even rape fantasies. However, Ryona fans distance themselves from both real-life BDSM and rape porn by limiting their focus on fictional and often unrealistic representations of such instances (undertow.club, 2014).

Due to linguistic limitations and the necessity to keep a manageable analytical scope, this study explores Gay Ryona in the English speaking-world. Being a ‘not-widely-subscribed-to fandom’ genre (Tim, 2013, n.p.), it is difficult to trace the origins of Ryona in the West. The genre seems to have expanded through YouTube over the last few years and most of the main Ryona channels (‘Ryona Channel’, ‘Ryona Honey’, ‘Ryona Station’) are less than a year old. The most visible Western Ryona community outside of YouTube gathers on undertow.club, in which videos are shared and terms and categories are discussed and defined.

However, this website does not indicate a clear and traceable history of Ryona, particularly because forum users often describe their first encounters with Ryona through other videos

or games that were not openly associated with this erotic genre (undertow.club, 2011). I gathered from these forums that RyonaniTV, which uploaded its first video in 2008, was most likely one of the first YouTube Ryona channels, but identifying the first video or videos to be uploaded to the Web has been impossible. Similarly, it is difficult to pinpoint the first appearance of the Gay Ryona community online. Going through forums, it appears that ryonani.com, created in 2009, together with GVZ and Super Deepthroat were the main platforms that first gathered together the Ryona community. These were closed in 2015 and replaced by undertow.club (Undertow @clanssd, 2015), a new website that merged the three previous sites (a move that was arguably made in order to unite the community) and kept the threads that were still active (Undertow.club, 2015).

Several sub-categories stemmed from the original fetish: guro (グロ), coming from gore, which corresponds to Ryona in that is taken to the point of lasting physical harm resulting in bleeding or death; Vore (捕), tied to Vore or Voraphilia, when assailants/creatures swallow victims whole; and Gyaku Ryona, where ‘Gyaku’ - meaning “reverse” – identifies the change in gender of the victim, from female to male. However, the gender of the assailant is left unspecified, which has led several members of the Gay Ryona community to indicate the gender of the assailant (undertow.club, 2012). Indeed, several members of the community (undertow.club, 2012) advocated for the necessity to add a suffix<sup>77</sup> for each thread focusing on a specific sub-genre (undertow.club, 2012). While forums agreed on the inclusion of “F/M” and “M/M” suffixes, YouTube channels choose their own adjectives (“male on male (gay)”, “reverse ryona”, etc.) indicating that no general terminology regarding these subgenres has been established.

This chapter focuses on Gyaku Ryona videos that display two male characters, and which are sometimes entitled “Gyaku Ryona Male” or “M/M Gyaku Ryona”. In order to avoid confusion or redundancy, I refer to this type of video as Gay Ryona. There is no clear data regarding the audience of Gay Ryona, however, both GyakuRyonaMale and GuysinTrouble present themselves as “gay” oriented channels, thereby openly catering to a gay male audience or an audience that enjoys gay content (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Guys in Trouble, 2016a, 2016b).

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<sup>77</sup> One of the suggested suffixes was “Gay”.

Gay Ryona videos draw from most of the biggest franchises of the fighting genre such as *Tekken*, *Dead or Alive*, *Street Fighter*, *UFC Undisputed* and *WWE 2K*. While it seems that the most popular videos utilise recent games, a lot of old games are also used and sometimes modded. While all kinds of moves are displayed in Gay Ryona videos, it seems that “holds”<sup>78</sup> are given a privileged place in these narratives (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012a, 2017, Guys in Trouble, 2016a). When possible, characters are represented in minimal clothing (half-naked, swimming trunks), giving a more “obvious” erotic dimension to the videos.

Finally, Gay Ryona is relatively easy to “perform” and produce as it only requires the computer or the player to remain passive and not react to the aggressor, running counter to the ruling principles of fighting games. Indeed, the latter typically demands good reflexes and often requires the player to enter ‘combo’ mode (which can only be performed through a correct combination of buttons in a short amount of time) in order to cause maximum damage, grab and throw an opponent or block their attack in time. As such, and except for its recording and transfer to YouTube, a Gay Ryona video can be created by disabling the computer’s AI – a very simple modification which can be done via the settings menu of most fighting games – leaving the opponent at the mercy of the player or, conversely, waiting for the player’s character to be defeated.

The Gay Ryona video is a polysemic text which is open to multiple readings. At first sight, it appears to be a sadistic and hypermasculine reenactment of the punishment of “weak” masculinity, thereby reestablishing heteropatriarchal ideals of masculinity. However, I argue that Gay Ryona is also open to a reading that is markedly queer in its approach to gender. This argument relies on the recognition of three key points. The first one is the appreciation of the genre by an audience who seems to find erotic pleasure in watching these videos. The second lies in the intertextuality of fighting games, and how they resonate with other queer texts, such as Tom of Finland’s drawings, which have appropriated sites of hypermasculinity for queer desire. Last but not least, Gay Ryona celebrates loss and failure, an intrinsically queer value, as I will demonstrate in the next sections. For these reasons, I claim Gay Ryona as a queer text which deviates from the

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<sup>78</sup> In contact sports such as Ju-Jitsu, Mixed Martial Arts, but also performances such as Pro-Wrestling, holds include a wide number of moves and pins that aim immobilising their opponents or lead them to submission.

principles of fighting games and, more generally, gaming, and reappropriate fighting sports as a site of queer eroticism and failure.

### *Methodological Details*

This chapter proceeds to a queer reading of Gay Ryona as a genre through works that question the place of masculinity in sports (Pronger, 1990; Oppliger, 2004) and the queer potential of failure in society (Halberstam, 2011; Ruberg, 2015a, 2015b). I apply this reading to a corpus of 50 Gay Ryona videos<sup>79</sup> available via two “Gyaku Ryona Male on Male” YouTube channels: *GyakuRyonaMale* and *GuysinTrouble*. These channels were selected according to the number of video posted and the number of views at the time and the videos were watched and analysed between December 2016 and January 2017.

While this research is mainly qualitative, I reached saturation fairly quickly as most videos follow a similar structure, which then enabled me to assemble the core characteristics of the genre and proceed to a textual analysis. Although some videos display games that did not belong to the fighting genre, they were not considered for this article as they remained a minority and sometimes introduced different gameplay dynamics. For the sake of coherence, I focused only on videos that appropriated fighting games<sup>80</sup>. For similar reasons, I also discarded modded Gay Ryona videos that included semen or nudity, as the emphasis in these texts switches from the expression of failure to one of ‘grotesque’ and comical eroticism. Thus, in my analysis, I focus solely on Gay Ryona videos that use fighting games as a medium, and which do not display any sort of sexually graphic content, in order to ensure consistency and stay within the scope of this study.

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<sup>79</sup> You can find three examples from these channels in the Bibliography. However, at the time of editing this thesis, *GuysinTrouble* was no longer online.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Games involving characters who fight usually hand-to-hand, in one-to-one combat situations without the use of firearms or projectiles. In most of these games, the fighters are represented as humans or anthropomorphic characters. The term should not be used for games which involve shooting or vehicles (see *Combat and Shoot ‘Em Up*), or for games which include fighting like *Ice Hockey*, but which have other objectives’ (Wolf, 2001, 124,125).



## Hypermasculinity in Fighting Sports

Hypermasculinity generally refers to an overemphasis upon masculine-gendered physical traits and/or behavioral patterns, particularly dismissal of hostility towards feminine displays (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Parrott & Zeichner, 2008; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Along the same lines and specifically applied to sports, orthodox masculinity is the dominating position given to masculinity in what Pronger (1990, 2) calls the ‘myth of gender [...] the sociocultural form that divides power between men and women’. Rooted in the dominant culture of heteropatriarchy, orthodox masculinity enacts and incarnates the difference between men and women, and asserts the superiority of the former over the latter (66). Emphasising ‘the conventional masculine values of power, muscular strength [and] competition’ (177) through aggressive behaviors, spectacular effects and *mise-en-scène*, televised fighting sports such as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and Pro Wrestling are often considered traditional sites of orthodox masculinity (ibid.). As such, orthodox masculinity can be approached as the manifestation, or even a synonym of hegemonic masculinity within the world of sports. Because both these terms are essentially the same, I use them interchangeably in this chapter.

MMA and Pro Wrestling both use imagery and narratives that are conveyed through settings allowing excessive and dangerous violence such as the ring or the cage (Brent & Kraska, 2013; Downey, 2007). MMA fights seem “real” because of their apparent lack of rules (van Bottenburg & Heibron, 2006) and resonate with ‘idealized visions of gritty, working-class (American) masculinity’ (Channon & Matthews, 2015, 938). Pro Wrestling includes ‘dangerous, cruel, and humiliating stunts’ that are ‘inextricably linked to the “manliness”’ (Soulliere, 2006, 64) of the wrestlers, who in being so masculine, are ‘entitled to destroy anything in their path, whether it is an innocent bystander or private property’ (73). Because it is ‘largely discounted as a legitimate sport’ (1), Pro Wrestling situates the audience in a hypermasculine fantasy space where only the strongest prevail.

Traits of hypermasculinity are also visually displayed and acknowledged through the fighters’ bodies. For instance, physical strength is represented both inside and outside the ring, and it has become common practice for MMA fighters and wrestlers to post pictures and videos of themselves working out at the gym (Lin, 2015; Dimon Dimson, 2016). Both disciplines also celebrate the imagery of strength through the display of hypermuscularity, showcasing fighters who look more like ‘the brute that just stepped off the loading dock’

(Pronger, 1990, 107) than the lean and muscled Greco-Roman wrestler of a former time. Displayed on screens, these bodies dominate others through techniques that reinforce their hypermasculinity, including the use of holds, which allow ‘the indefinite immobilization of one’s adversary’ (Rahilly, 2004, 223, 224), the visualization of their ‘powerlessness’, and the freezing of ‘bod[ies] into a range of poses effecting an unusual degree of bodily display’ (224) until one of the competitors taps out.

Fighting sports are inherently homosocial. Defined as the ‘social bonds between persons of the same sex’ (Hammarén & Johannsson, 2014, 1), homosociality is often ‘found in studies on male friendship, male bonding, and fraternity orders’ (1). Most importantly, it is applied to demonstrate how men manage to defend the heteronormative hierarchy of gender norms through acts of friendships and intimacy between them (Bird 1996; Flood, 2008; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Messner, 2001). At the same time, these bonds are always in danger from the spectre of homosexuality, and anxiety regarding this potential slippage – between male homosociality and homoeroticism – often characterises homosocial relationships. As such, homosociality is characterised as much by homosexual panic, as it is by homosocial desire and intimacy (Hammarén & Johannsson, 2014).

Much of the current literature on sport and masculinity agrees that the potential for homoeroticism reaches its climax in contact sports (Pronger, 1990, 183). For instance, Woods (1987: 94) argues that wrestling is often considered ‘the [only] heterosexually acceptable form of homosexual foreplay’, in which athletes ‘are actually [seen as] erotic accomplices’ (ibid.). Pronger (1990, 181) adds that there is something queer in the fact that competitors must ‘cooperate extensively with each other if the competitive struggle is going to take place at all’. As with most homosocial practices, competitive fighting implies, as Baron (2006) suggests, a homosocial enactment ‘in which men seek to have their manhood validated by other men’ (151). Hence, the homosociality of fighting sports is a ‘covert world of homoeroticism’ in which women remain ‘tangential to the real world of men’ (178) who can only find satisfaction in one another.

The porosity between homosociality and homoeroticism has led queer culture to claim sites and identities of homosocial activity as opportunities for homoerotic investment. Iconic figures of homosocial masculine culture such as the skinhead, the punk<sup>81</sup>, the working

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<sup>81</sup> These two groups were not only comprised of men, however, both subcultures did have strong homosocial bonds (Healy, 1996; Lewis, 1988; Borgeson & Valeri, 2015, Baron, 2006)

class labourer and construction workers have become appropriated as erotic signifiers within gay subcultures (Healy, 1996; Lewis, 1988; Borgeson & Valeri, 2015, Baron, 2006). Along similar lines, a vast number of instances of hypermasculinity in fighting sports have been reappropriated for queer desire and erotica. One of the most prevalent is the ‘squash match’, a one-sided Pro Wrestling match in which ‘one performer dominates the other and quickly defeats him with virtually no resistance’ (prowrestling.wikia.com, [no date]). While these matches are often very short, it is common practice for the winner – the heel – to spend some time torturing the loser – the jobber – and performing increasingly humiliating moves. Most of the time, a squash match either sheds a positive light on the heel, or reinforces his position as a villain, by presenting him as invincible. Heels in squash matches are often established wrestlers and use these instances as opportunities to create and perform signature moves.

The emergence of squash matches in Pro Wrestling in the 1990s coincided with the explosion of internet pornography (Joe, 2011, n.p.) and new wrestling videos were produced to cater to viewers with a taste for erotic wrestling. This new wave of cyber eroticism led to the creation of Yahoo groups and social networks (meetfighter.com, globalfight.com and bearhugger.net) that enable members to discuss, share content and also meet to organise bouts themselves<sup>82</sup>.

At the more commercial end of the cyber erotic spectrum, porn channels such as *Naked Kombat* offer viewers long and sweaty bouts in which wrestlers score points by performing holds, humiliating their opponent by groping and touching their genitals and bum. At the end of the match, the fighter who earns the most points “owns” the loser and does whatever he wishes with him. Most of the time, and conforming with dominant narratives of gay male pornography (in which ‘tops’ are considered more masculine and ‘manly’ than ‘bottoms’) this involves penetrating the ‘loser’ anally. While *Naked Kombat* does not include squash matches *per se*, it displays several one-sided fights, making the audience wonder whether wrestlers really fight for domination or accept a given role from the beginning.

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<sup>82</sup> All feature squash matches as a subcategory, enabling users to solely engage in this type of “confrontation”.

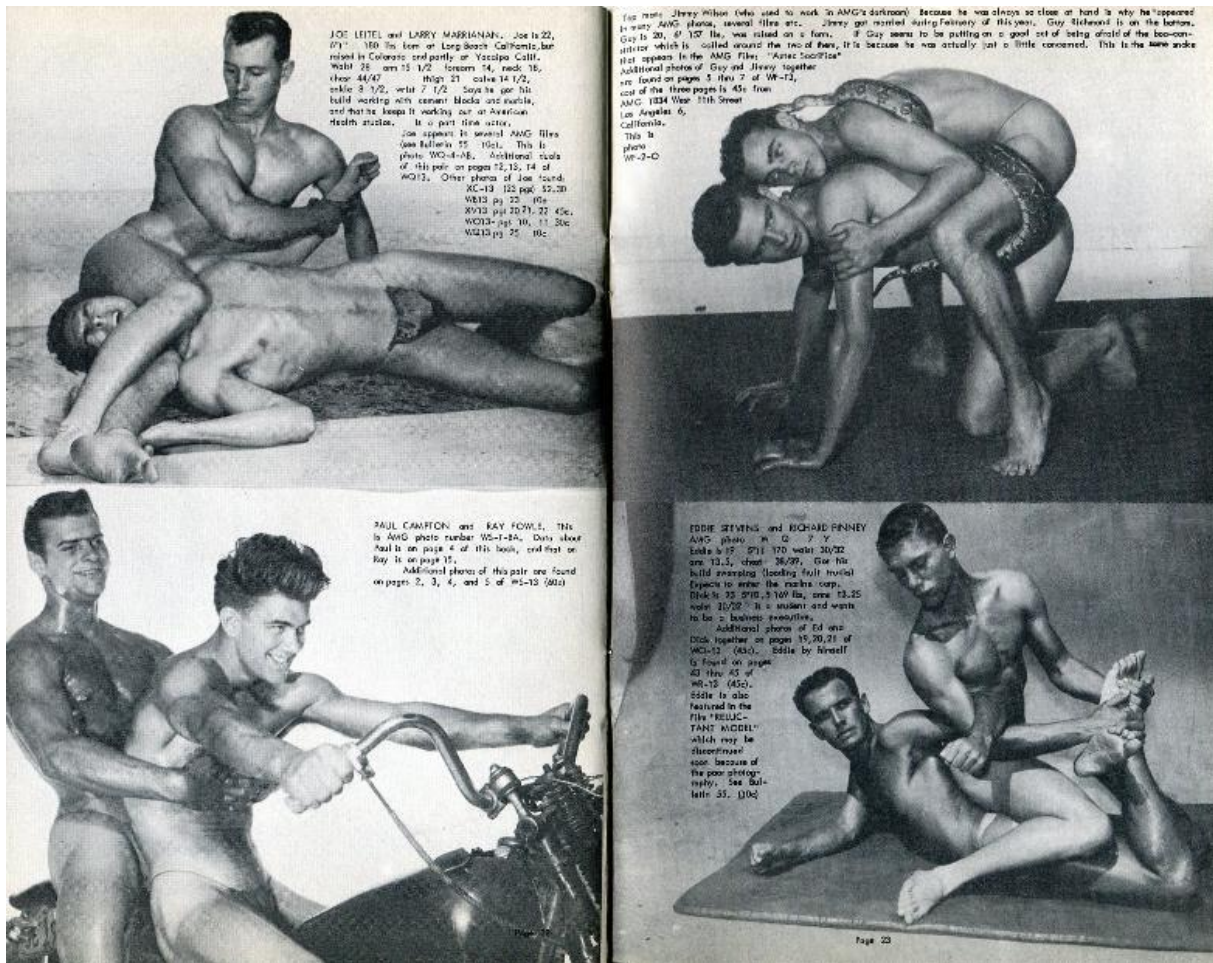
*Naked Kombat* openly associates the rhetoric of the squash match with sex and reenacts a hierarchy of gender norms that can be traced back to Greco-Roman Antiquity. Indeed, directly associating the outcome of the fight with sex echoes the rigidly and engendered ‘social hierarchy in which the penetrating phallus<sup>83</sup> functioned as the primary signifier of cultural privilege and power’ in Greco-Roman Antiquity (Vorster, 2006, 436). Back then, each sexual contact was said to signify and reinforce the male hierarchy in the mode of domination and submission, ‘requiring activeness for the penetrating phallus, passivity for the penetrated’ (447). Antiques representing men fighting and wrestling can, for example, be read as metaphors for, and illustrations of, such a hierarchy.

These same antiques have often served as a strong source of inspiration for gay fantasies. For instance, most of the available pornography in the 40s and 50s focused on men in ‘statuesque poses’ (Joe, 2011). Those pictures were available in physique magazines (also called beefcake magazines), one of the most popular being “Physique Pictorial”, the title in which Tom of Finland first began publishing his drawings (tomofinlandfoundation.org, 2017). While these digests quickly displayed more and more explicit pictures, one of their remaining themes was erotic wrestling (Picture 27). The clash of two male bodies, exposed from different angles, was enough to recreate elements of a homoerotic narrative and, ultimately, serves as a foreplay of and/or metaphor for sexual encounters<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Here phallus and penis should be distinguished. While the same referent is at stake, the phallus, according to Halperin (1990) ‘betokens not a specific item of the male anatomy simpliciter but that same item taken under the description of a cultural signifier’ (164).

<sup>84</sup> Censorship, Macarthyism and a post-war anxiety in the US regarding masculinity and gender roles meant that discussions (not to mention illustrations) of homosexual desire were in danger of being censored – and their producers prosecuted (Grossman, 2016). Thus, the slippage between homosociality and homoeroticism – between sport and sex –worked both ways, allowing gay men to eroticise that which was ostensibly straight, while allowing the producers to maintain a veneer of heteromascularity in the eyes of the censors.



Picture 27: Wrestling, by Physique Pictorial (April 1960).

Because of the potential for a 'mistaken' queer reading, fighting sports commonly resort to homophobia and misogyny as strategies with which to police the boundaries of homosociality. Characters who cannot make it to the top of the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity are, therefore, inevitably oppressed. Such is the fate of female wrestlers, who have been unable to escape the patriarchal imposition of a hypersexual gaze. The popularity of female wrestling skyrocketed in the 1970s, but women who wrestled throughout the 1980s and 90s were increasingly 'transformed into sexual entities'. As Oppliger (2004: 125-126) writes, the 'thick, rugged female wrestler in the one-piece, conservatively-cut bathing suits morphed into the thinner, more provocatively dressed performer of today' and while female wrestlers have always been trained athletes, today most of them are extremely thin and often undergo cosmetic surgery (mainly breast implants). When they are facing male opponents, they are often forced to "play dirty" (128, 129), thereby reinforcing their weaker position and inability to compete on a level playing field. Meanwhile, female wrestlers who are 'too masculine' are often criticized for being so.

They become the objects of mockery from other pro-wrestlers and the audience (128) and their sexuality is invariably questioned.

In Pro-Wrestling, homosexuality receives a similar treatment and Oppliger asserts that wrestlers often demonstrate their 'disapproval' of homosexuality by insulting and beating up gay characters (115). At the same time, homosexuality is actively deployed within Pro-Wrestling, with queer characters being 'purposely created' in order to 'combat the insinuation of homoeroticism' (114, 115). The latter are granted limited acceptance if they have a 'redeeming masculine side' and this ensures that homosexual storylines are not too 'uncomfortable' (115) for the audience. Men who are cast as "gay" wrestlers are large and 'not stereotypically effeminate characters' (ibid.). For instance, the Headbangers tag team combine skirts over boxer shorts with dark tank tops and makeup, 'revealing both feminine and masculine characteristics in a gothic framework' (ibid.). However, their motto, 'real men wear skirts' (ibid.), together with their large build, undeniably dissipate any doubts regarding their masculinity. The same goes for Goldust, who is arguably the "most out" wrestling character in wrestling, and who often gets rid of his wig to expose a crew cut, the ultimate symbol of virility (ibid.).

Thus, the stigma attached to stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality is rejected, and gay wrestlers look like hypermasculine straight fighters going to a fancy dress party. Ironically, these wrestlers still need to be threatening in some way so that they can entertain the idea that they are gay. They need to be 'strong enough to pose the threat of overpowering another male' in order to 'strike fear in homophobic characters and fans' and ultimately transfer this fear into 'physiological excitement for the average wrestling fan' (ibid.). Ultimately, gay wrestlers are rarely identified as "really" gay in the eyes of the homophobic audience. In this way, Gay Ryona operates alongside gay erotica and pornography which make fighting games a central setting of homoeroticism. However, Gay Ryona's disruptive nature resides in its disruption of the nature of fighting games themselves.

## Gay Ryona as Counterplay

Gay Ryona goes against the fundamentals of fighting games, representing as it does the exact opposite of what players are invited to do in these games. In this way, Gay Ryona can be identified as a form of ‘counterplay’, defined by Curlew (2010, 195) as the ‘range of user practices that with intention or by accident interfere with the ways corporate media producers and policy makers work to prevent or contain new abilities of user modification in digital environments’. Counterplay is closely associated with the practice of countergaming, which Galloway (2014) defines as a form of resistance that works *through* digital systems rather than against them. Countergaming is Galloway’s ‘lament for the new informatic masters’ (n.p.), which advocates the development or locating of alternative ‘algorithms’ in gaming, mostly through practices of modding. It resists the ‘powerful normative or normalizing processes’ embodied by video games, which are ultimately ‘embedded with ideological forces [as they are] products themselves of capitalist enterprise’ (ibid.). Changing their algorithms and structure, modding can, therefore, become a political practice and a reappropriation of ‘physical capitalistic space’ (Lauteria, 2012, n.p.).

Of course, not all modding is political. Indeed, much of it is practiced and shared for comical purposes (i.e. mods displaying characters naked, with absurd haircuts, changing their voices, and so on) and remains part of ‘the dominant culture [mostly heteronormative] surrounding a game’ (ibid.). In order for modding to be politically queer, it needs to offer meaningful alternatives to commercialized and restrictive manifestations of LGBT content. Thus, modding a straight couple into a gay couple might not be enough as it does not ‘lend itself to playful resistance’ (n.p.), particularly because it often seeks to be comedic, but only exposes the expected straightness of the characters in the original games, which may in turn discourage queer gamers from engaging with the product (n.p.). As such, political modding must imply ‘radical gameplay, not just radical graphics’ (Galloway, 2006, 125).

Modding and, by extension, countergaming, speaks to the cannon of LGBTQ media studies, the focus of which has often resided in the development of alternative readings of mainstream texts. Countergaming echoes most of the methods of early queer analysis, which Ng (2013; 270) suggests consists of ‘mining the subtext and reading against the grain in order to extract queer representations and narratives from mainstream texts’ (see

also Doty, 1993; Florence, 1993; Bruce & Cammaer, 2015 for discussion). These readings of mainstream popular culture present queerness as a concept that is ‘less an essential, waiting-to-be discovered property than the result of acts of production and reception’ (Doty, 1993, xi). As a consequence, such readings challenge the assumed denial of queerness in mass culture<sup>85</sup> and invert the hierarchy of interpretation, thereby dismissing the presumed ubiquity of straightness.

Counter gaming fits within LGBTQ media studies because it enables a queer reading of a source – games – and gives it an alternative meaning. It revolves around two central features: ‘negation’ and ‘deprivation’ (Galloway, 2014, n.p.). Negation occurs when ‘the game is stripped of all possibilities of game play, left to lapse back to other media altogether (video, animation)’. Deprivation refers to the cases when ‘the gamer is censored and scolded, allowed to continue to play, but only in an enlightened or “self-aware” mode’ (n.p.). *Gay Ryona* revolves around these same two features. First, the genre negates the received idea of gameplay in fighting games, asking the player to remain passive, or to participate in holds and attacks without offering any resistance. Secondly, *Gay Ryona* deprives the player from acting as they wish as it formats fighting game bouts into a very specific narrative: one fighter beating his opponent to a pulp, without any possibility to change the course of events.

In addition to this, I argue that *Gay Ryona* is a form of queer counterplay as it illustrates a queer appropriation of homosocial and hypermasculine symbols. Reclaiming male-male confrontation and the overpowering of one man by another as a site of homoerotic appeal, it fetishizes the confrontation, discarding all accounts of homosexual panic. Thus, while *Gay Ryona* does not automatically involve modding, it allows gamers ‘to navigate these limited algorithms, reflective of the limits of gamespace’s logics of sexuality, to permit resistant play’ (Lauteria, 2012, n.p.). *Gay Ryona* can also be understood as a form of queer counterplay because it is failure, rather than success, that is sought out and celebrated in these texts. This recognition and rehabilitation of failure runs counter to heteropatriarchal understandings of a game’s “logical” or “proper” trajectory. Building upon this extended overview of masculinity in fighting sports and *Gay Ryona* as a form of counterplay, I am now able to understand how *Gay Ryona* works as a new deviant form of gameplay. In the

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<sup>85</sup> Here, Doty takes the example of representations of men and women getting married do not undeniably depict straightness, unless one is willing to argue that no lesbian or gay has even been married and had sex with someone of the other gender for any reason.



next section I discuss how resistant play occurs in *Gay Ryona*, and how its celebration of failure defines it as a queer practice.

## ‘I am losing badly, and I love it’<sup>86</sup>: *Gay Ryona* as a Queer Practice of Failure.

At first glance, failure might not appear as a queer concept since it is a core element of most games’ mechanics. Juul (2009) explains that ‘players like to fail, but not too much’ (2013, 5) and games need to maintain a necessary balance between success and failure in order to keep the players absorbed and entertained. Juul highlights the paradox of failure here: players want to win as it provides gratification, but failing makes players reconsider their strategy and ‘winning without failing leads to dissatisfaction’ (2009, n.p.). Thus, every player loves a bit of failure. According to Juul, this contradiction stems from the tension between two separate, but also potentially superimposed perspectives on games: ‘a *goal-oriented* perspective wherein players want to win, and an *aesthetic perspective* wherein players prefer games with the right amount of challenge and variation’ (ibid.).

In his study, Juul concludes that the most important issue is not the nature of the punishment, but the consequences of the failure. Taking the example of casual games, he explains their success by ‘a sparing use of *setback punishment*’, meaning that players rarely have to replay an entire game sequence in case of failure. Hence, ‘players still feel responsible for failing, but they are less likely to feel stuck in the game’ (n.p.) and failure is less perceived as an emotionally negative event. Thus, Juul considers failure a necessary counterpart to winning as it needs to create a fragile balance with success in order to secure the entertainment of the player. Yet, he does not read failure as a goal in itself, but only as a consequence.

Standing in dialogue with Juul, Halberstam (2011) takes a different approach and argues that failure can be approached as a “positive” concept regardless of its ties to success. Indeed, they read failure as a queer art, a ‘style’ and a ‘way of life’ (2) that rejects normative and neoliberal values requiring us to be healthy, wealthy, happy and entertained. As

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<sup>86</sup> (Ruberg, 2015a, 108).

previously mentioned in Chapter 4, Halberstam relates their work to the antisocial turn in queer theory ‘as exemplified by the work of Bersani [and] Edelman’ (109), but criticizes its limited focus and considers Muñoz’s work one of the most convincing accounts of queer failure. This is because the latter’s concept of a queer utopia promotes the rejection of pragmatism and the refusal of social norms. Overall, Halberstam calls for more political negativity that involves failure, and which promises ‘to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate’ (110). Read from this perspective, failure becomes an escape from heterosexist discipline and protects us from an orderly, predictable and scripted life.

Halberstam argues that ‘success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation’ (2). On the one hand, they show that ruling groups encourage ‘advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope’ (89). On the other hand, they indicate that these objectives are much more difficult to achieve for queer individuals whose ‘modes of common sense’ are often already perceived as counterhegemonic, leading to the ‘association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique’ (89). Still, Halberstam argues that in several circumstances ‘failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ (2, 3). As such, failure is something queers do well and even embrace, as it promises so much more than grim scenarios of (almost) unreachable monetary success. Taking examples ranging from cinema to photography, Halberstam explores cases when fictional and real-life characters fail consciously, freeing themselves from a common sense that oppresses them.

Ruberg (2015a) applies Halberstam’s concept of queer failure to gaming and alternative understandings of enjoyment and play. She focuses on the concept of fun in video games and reads it as a defining principle of video game as a medium within the community that has ‘long been a guiding principle for game designers’ (110). Using the example of GamerGate – the extensive controversy stemming from online harassment of female game designers and feminist games journalists mainly conducted through the hashtag #GamerGate – Ruberg notes that central to its discourse is the idea that games need to be fun and should not be ‘subject to socially engaged critique’ (111). More generally, while fun

is subjective, it is ‘cultural, structural, gendered’ (ibid.). According to Ruberg, video games, reflecting society more broadly, tell us to have fun during leisure time. This ‘hegemony of play’ and ‘fun’ is dictated by a ‘system of “conventional wisdom” about who plays video games and what players expect from a successful game’ (2015b, 71). Consequently, fun silences minorities and promotes isolationist and ‘territorial behaviors from within privileged spaces of the community’ (2015a, 115).

Controversies such as Gamergate show that much progress can be made regarding tolerance and diversity in the gaming community. Exploring the concept of “no-fun” can, therefore, open a conversation about diversity in gaming and offer a greater understanding of video games as a whole. Ruberg defines no-fun as a queer mode of play which rejects the values of the hegemony of fun and cultivates no-fun experiences that represent a ‘rebellion against not just dominant expectations for video-game play, but also a rejection of the stated structure of a game itself’ (117). Following this, Ruberg identifies no-fun games through a specific set of game characteristics: games that are likely to cultivate failure are often disappointing, annoying, boring, alarming, sad and can hurt (by design) (118-121).

Queering the ruling principle of fighting games, Gay Ryona celebrates losing and being beaten to a pulp, and sometimes even to death. Focusing on the concept of queer failure, I explore the queer politics of Gay Ryona by studying the role given to failure in these videos, and by demonstrating that Gay Ryona videos resist the hegemony of fun (Ruberg, 2015a) by boring, shocking, alarming and disappointing mainstream gamers. Finally, I read failure in Gay Ryona as an anti-normative strategy that rejects disciplining values and liberates a space for queer performance and desire.

### *The Failure to Entertain*

Gay Ryona is a curious sort of entertainment: watching one character being mercilessly defeated is likely to make the non-initiated viewer question the purpose of such an activity. More than just loss or defeat, Gay Ryona is above all about *cultivating* failure, which, in line with Juul’s reading of games, equates it to defining it as a step that only enables one to better succeed (Curtis, 2016; Post, 2016; Walter, 2013). I equate no-fun as a type of failure, namely the failure to entertain, which is arguably the most essential quality for a game (Juul, 2009). As Juul puts it, ‘winning makes you happy, losing [too much] makes

you unhappy' (2009, n.p.). Hence, by focusing on losing, Gay Ryona is not "fun" to the hegemonic eye and should not be enjoyed. Through Ruberg's lens, the Gay Ryona video can easily satisfy the characteristics of no-fun games as it runs counter to the values of the digital fighting games community in every single way.

In this, Gay Ryona is produced for a gay male audience. Indeed, most of the visual cues surrounding the display of the video (such as the title, video description or comments) clearly indicate that the videos cater towards gay viewers, or viewers who appreciate gay content. Conversely, the fighting game community is a site where heterosexual masculinity prevails. The abusive treatment of women (Orland, 2012; Khan, 2015) and of dissident players are often understood within the community as 'essential' to the 'identity' of a fighting game player (Harper, 2013, 133), which explains why 'out queer-identified players keep things low key' (132). As such, fighting games culture generally remains 'hostile to queer identities' (Harper, 2013, 132; Cavalier, 2011). Therefore, in offering a text where homosexuality is not only an essential component, but is celebrated, Gay Ryona openly defies the heteronormative standards that most games are held to in contemporary culture.

It comes as no surprise that Gay Ryona's homoeroticism and celebration of failure is more likely to upset and alarm than entertain the regular gamer. Browsing forum conversations about this subcultural trend, it is not rare to read gamers' comments describing their first encounter with Gay Ryona as an unpleasant surprise:

You've just been introduced to the female death/pain fetish videos known as "Ryona", "Gyaku-Ryona" is the male version of it. Resident Evil is usually an extremely popular subject matter, or whatever the fighting game flavor of the month is. As stated, for your own sanity, stay far far away ('So is there, like, some weird fetish involving watching Rebecca Chambers killed?', 2013).

While some gamers in this forum advocate a more diverse representation of sexual preferences, quoting furies and foot fetishes, and the acceptability of using video games as an erotic medium, others argue that Ryona is made for 'sick' people ('So is there, like, some weird fetish involving watching Rebecca Chambers killed?', 2013), thereby clearly going beyond the margins of acceptability. Their comments are also echoed in another forum post started by a player who describes Ryona as the 'cancer' of fighting games

(‘Ryona: Fetishism Cancer of fighting game’, 2012, 1). He goes on to say that he finds the erotic genre ‘retarded’ and considers it a ‘teen-violation’ that is mainly geared towards masturbation (1). Other players agree with the latter, describing Ryona as ‘messed up’ (1), feeling sorry for people who enjoy it (1), ‘disturbing’ (2), ‘twisted’ (3) and a genre that is made for ‘weirdos’ (2) and that should be ‘shove[d] [...] into some easily abandoned and forgotten corner of the internet’ (3).

Furthermore, an opinion poll entitled ‘Ryona is a shit?’ introduces the thread and indicates that 17 people out of 30 (56.7%) agree on this statement. The other half disagrees with the use of the term ‘cancer’, mainly showing indifference or amusement (1, 2, 3), often finding such texts ‘bizarre’ and ‘strange’ (1), but arguing that people should be free to enjoy what they like. Thus, although Gay Ryona is not fully rejected by all gamers in this forum, it is at best considered an oddity. Reading these comments, it is evident that gamers do not “get” Gay Ryona, and Ryona in general, because of the strong aesthetics of failure on which it relies – the constant representation of failure:

I dont understand what subset of people find interesting in repeatedly inflicting damage to a [...] character repeatedly over and over again (‘Ryona: Fetishism Cancer of fighting game’, 2012, 1).

In this way, they express their indifference, annoyance, and sometimes anger towards a genre that strikes a dissonant chord in gaming culture.

Even though the videos on which I focus all display Knock-outs<sup>87</sup> as the only conclusion, I cannot help but notice that they are intimately related to (and sometimes conflated with) the popular subcultural genre of YouTube “video game deaths”. These videos constitute a trend that skyrocketed with the various and gruesome depictions of character deaths in the games *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom Production Studio 4, 2005) and *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008) (Curtis, 2015, 104). Contrary to Gay Ryona, they are not originally made for erotic purposes, but for comical or, as Curtis argues, aesthetic purposes. Indeed, Curtis coins the term “deathstetics” to describe and ‘explore the aesthetic moment and effect of videogame death’ (97).

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<sup>87</sup> Gay Ryona videos using *Mortal Kombat* are an exception: knock outs are replaced by death in the franchise.

Curtis follows Pater's (1986, xxx) definition of aesthetics in which its function is 'to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture [...] produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced'. Referring to video game deaths, Curtis coins the term "deathstetics" to describe and 'explore the aesthetic moment and effect of videogame death' (97). Drawing upon Juul's (2009) correlation between the pleasure to win and the necessary inclusion of potential failure mentioned earlier in this chapter, Curtis argues that death is a necessary part of the pleasure experience of playing games and is now an aesthetic object which has become fully part of the gaming experience.

He writes that death in video games took a sharp turn when gaming reached the household. Indeed, early game death in arcade games mostly equated with the end of the gaming experience (very often arcade games were not saving progress) and/or the necessity to insert more money in order to be able to keep playing. However, the ability to save in games ensured 'that death was no longer the end and that games became much more sophisticated narrative experiences' (103). As a result, death shifted from 'the denial of visual stimuli', in other words, the impossibility to carry on playing, to a spectacle in itself (114). While it symbolizes failure, death does not automatically terminate the ludic experience. In this way, death videos go beyond the boring or alarming aspects of deathstetics, and enable us to explore a particular moment of gameplay which is too often overlooked. Representing a gaming experience from an alternative angle, they give it a new meaning, essence and value.

Along the same lines, Knock Outs in Gay Ryona videos can be read as a form of symbolic death, and particularly because some franchises, such as *Mortal Kombat* mentioned above, do not make a difference. Embodying the climax of failure, Knock Outs also share the 'voyeuristic' (Curtis, 2015, 106) approach of deathstetics. They are the consecration of one character being beaten to a pulp, of losing or winning without resistance, and of completely dominating or being dominated by one's opponent. Celebrating a 'kinky disturbance' (Ruberg, 2015a, 115), Gay Ryona challenges the norm and promotes "alarming" gameplay styles to the eyes of the mainstream gamer. These videos provide instances of failure where fans obtain pleasure through the welcoming and/or triggering of loss. In doing so, they celebrate values that are considered undesirable to the eyes of gaming culture's hegemony as paradigms of failure and success are destabilized (ibid.).

Yet, there is more to Gay Ryona's failure than the "disturbing" eroticism around which it revolves. Indeed, a second main reason why Gay Ryona fails to entertain and resist normative gaming culture is that it never demonstrates the players' skill nor provide them with a sense of victory. Conversely, or perhaps, perversely, it symbolises a failure to prove one's gaming abilities.

Indeed, Gay Ryona also rejects key aspects of play within competitive gaming, identified by Harper (2013) as play practice, normative play and social play. Play practice refers to 'how games are actually played' (6) which, in fighting games, mostly revolves around competitiveness, 'be it in a game against the computer or against another person' (14). In official tournaments, players demonstrate a high degree of technical skill through the use of special moves, attacks and defensive acts that are difficult to perform, and by the execution of these moves in difficult circumstances. Such display is likely to receive 'accolades and cheering from the crowd' (41). Normative play refers to 'how players feel games should be played', and to 'social contexts', 'norms', 'cultural' and 'contextual factors that guide thinking about how the ideal experience ought to be' (6). Finally, social play is about 'how players play together', how it incorporates 'aspects of both play practice and normative play' and how 'they engage in the culture of gameplay together' (6).

As it is devoid of any competitive dimension, Gay Ryona radically destabilises the notion of play practice. Fighters often use the same combination of holds over and over until the opponent's life bar is depleted. Given that they know the moves (which are often relatively simple), anyone can "perform" Gay Ryona. Consequently, Gay Ryona also runs counter normative play, as it provides an experience that is at the opposite of "ideal" for the fighting game community. Along the same lines, these videos promote a form of social play that is dissident and holds a controversial position within gaming culture.

Although Gay Ryona stands as the opposite of a competitive gaming culture, both strongly rely on a community of viewers. Indeed, only a handful of top players manage to qualify for international tournaments and get sponsorship, and most of the community is formed by viewers who watch fights on YouTube and other broadcasting media. Documenting EVO<sup>88</sup> tournaments – one of the most famous fighting game tournaments in the Western world – Harper indicates that 'the "watching" part of the experience seems to run

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<sup>88</sup> Acronym for Evolution Championship Series.

concurrent to the “playing” part’ on the first two days, but that watching becomes the main experience on the third day, when decisive fights occur (40).

Nevertheless, the similarity stops here. Contrary to Gay Ryona, game tournament videos are entertaining because they are structured around variables which are valued within the game community. Indeed, the most enjoyable fights feature what Harper calls ‘drama’ (42): ‘the more technical the play, the more fantastic the footwork, and the more close the shave, the greater the crowd’s sense of drama and enjoyment’ (42). Fighting game communities privilege tension, but also balanced fights, over overwhelming victories, as these will lack drama: ‘the match tends to be shorter than normal’ and ‘there is no tension [nor] instability in the outcome’ (42). It comes therefore as no surprise that the Gay Ryona videos are “boring” to the mainstream gamer as they clearly lack drama and tension, as its repetitive and scripted nature make it similar, if not worse, than the least interesting fights of a competitive tournament.

Thus Gay Ryona alarms gamers both for its representational and gaming content. It is not fun. Ironically, Gay Ryona and fighting game culture *do* meet in certain instances when the latter is not considered fun either. For example, the franchise Super Smash Bros. in which items and arenas can introduce a high randomness factor, is generally despised as a competitive platform by hardcore gamers. As a result, some self-identified “serious” gamers started to shun most features and gameplay elements of the Smash franchise for the sake of promoting their idea of fair and technical play, and started only using one of the most technical characters – Fox – without any items, in in one specific arena – Final Destination – known for being devoid of any “game events”, thereby preserving the flow of the fight. The popularisation of this practice and the debates it triggered among the community led to the creation of a meme called “no items Fox Only Final Destination”. This catchphrase aimed at parodying the strict behaviour of these competitive players, emphasizing the absurdity of removing most of the defining traits of the Smash franchise.

This meme also positioned hard core Smash players as killjoys and people who forgot how to enjoy games. It operated alongside the “Stop Having Fun” Guys’ entry created by the website *TV trope* (n.d.) which refers to the same type of hardcore gamers who take their gaming too seriously and prevent others from enjoying it the way they want. Yet, while these passionate gamers intend to impose a way of playing which is not shared by the



majority, it only attempts to promote to the extreme the values of competitive game culture by fighting for a fairer game environment in which the most skilled player can truly shine.

Hence, Gay Ryona fails to entertain because it screens numerous manifestations of the undesirable: men who relentlessly dominate other men, inevitable failures and meaningless victories, and the absence of drama and technical skills. Through its embrace of disruptive values, it runs counter the principles of normative gaming pleasures. Yet, in addition to failing heteronormative players and queering gaming experiences (by boring, alarming or annoying them), Gay Ryona also disappoints the viewers who might expect visible depictions of same-sex activity.

### *The Failure to Arouse*

Despite their occasional display of half-naked bodies, Gay Ryona videos lack explicit and graphic images, and therefore challenge the expectations about erotic and sexual content in games and, arguably, queer culture. Indeed, because of its relative absence in mainstream media, anything displaying gay content is likely to contain some degrees of explicit eroticism (Gross, 2007, 272; Stoltenberg, 1991, 248).

Hidden in plain sight, the sexual “content” of Gay Ryona illustrates Krzywinska’s (2015) argument about the “misappearance of sex” in video games according to which sex acts are often relegated to cutscenes which strongly lack realism, often leading to disappointment. Consequently, Krzywinska argues that we should not only consider “traditional” representations and narratives of sex, but also investigate how game mechanics can be read as sex. She addresses the erotic dimension of play through philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s term of ‘libidinal economy’ (1974). Defining it as ‘the psychic and emotional energy produced by drives’ (2015, 113), Krzywinska focuses on the ‘relationship between the player and the game’ and how ‘game designers deploy a large variety of devices to please, tease, and excite the player’ (113). Starting from this concept, Krzywinska studies the ways in which games can be libidinal. She points out that actions in games only become meaningful and ‘potent’ through the gamers’ ‘imagination’ (113).

Taking the example of the erotic potential of Altair's physique in *Assassin's Creed*<sup>89</sup> (Ubisoft Montréal, 2007), Krzywinska argues that Altair's assassination scenes can be read as erotic instances. Extremely agile, jumping from one roof to another, but also 'steadily weighted', he is 'exotic and distanced' as he is only 'briefly ours to hold' (ibid.). Relying on the scenes' aesthetics, Krzywinska suggests that there is something sensual and sexual in the penetration of Altair's blade and the meticulous closing of his victim's eyes.

Less metaphorical than Krzywinska's example, Gay Ryona operates as another illustration of how game mechanics can be read as sex. (Hyper)muscular characters fuel the player's imagination, following a powerful and erotic choreography, using their bodies coming into contact to serve a sadomasochistic fetish. Similar to Altair, the controlled character (or the opponent) is literally and figuratively ours (or the computer's) to hold. Without representing sexual content, Gay Ryona moves away from "acceptable" game sex, defined by Krzywinska as the sex that is 'wrapped in the silks of romance' and 'activity motivator' (117). Its niche audience demonstrates that games can be considered as a platform of kink and alternative representations of eroticism. Gay Ryona reminds us that symbols and metaphors still have their place alongside "realism", showing that one can get aroused by making Altair's blade penetrate his victim's throat in *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montréal, 2007) or watching Jin Kazama being beaten up by King in *Tekken 6* (Namco, 2007).

As such, the type of Gay Ryona studied in this chapter cannot be considered part of "mainstream" (or even any sort of) gay erotica, or even pornography, as it explores 'ambiguous' (Hernandez & Tester, 2004, 2) ways of representing an erotic act and is devoid of any of its canonical traits, such as 'cum shot[s]' (Day, 2009, 3) or the 'penetration of feminized orifices by masculinized penises, fingers, tongues, and other objects' (1). Similar to independent queer porn, Gay Ryona severely lacks a climax. Instead, Gay Ryona might be better understood as a queering of pornography and erotica since it 'fail[s] expectation[s]' as its eroticism is 'situated in the spaces where sex scenes twist, alter, and remove elements essential to the formulas of the mainstream' (3). Thus, Gay Ryona positions itself in dialogue with conventions and codes of queer pornography, while

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<sup>89</sup> A game in which one must play an assassin called Altair who is repeatedly asked to kill specific people in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade.

sticking to the erotic genre, and supports a queer (as opposed to gay) understanding of sexuality.

In this way, by focusing on how Gay Ryona fails at providing entertainment, we are able to study its queer potential. As they suggest a drastically different understanding of “fun” in games, these videos antagonise both heteronormative and homonormative points of view in order to consider queer pleasure and desire beyond conventional paradigms. Accordingly, this compilation of different types of failure becomes a source of eroticism and pleasure in itself. Rejecting the idea of normative fun at all cost, Gay Ryona’s queer aim can be considered part of a wider resisting process against “positive values”. Embracing deliberate loss (or dull win) and constructing erotic aesthetics around the beating of a character, Gay Ryona focuses on emotional and physical states that should not be considered desirable. In this, it can be argued that Gay Ryona’s queer essence lies in this cultivation and exploration of negativity.

### *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*

I have already shown that antirelational queer scholars have dedicated their work to the relationship between queerness and negativity. However, some scholars followed a similar line of thought without automatically dooming their queer figures and destruction. This is, for instance, the case of Sally Munt and her work on queer shame mentioned in Chapter 4. Similar to Munt, Ahmed (2010) focuses on unhappiness, another “negative” feeling that she sees as bound to notions of queerness. She argues that happiness operates as a technique of disguise that conceals inequalities and reinforces the oppression of marginalized individuals. Happiness becomes a necessary and perpetual goal for everyone to be in line with the hetero-norm, and anyone threatening this goal is likely to become the source and cause of “bad feeling”. Thus, feminists, migrants and queers need to get over sexism, racism and homophobia. Because they are breaking the illusion of happiness, they become ‘affect aliens’ (158) to neoliberalism. However, just like Halberstam and her concept of queer failure, Ahmed argues that it is only through this rejection of happiness that we can explore and experience ‘how structures get under our skin’ (216) and how we can then better resist them. In this manner, unhappiness becomes a tool of political will and freedom.

Both Munt and Ahmed demonstrate how undesirable feelings are by default associated with queer individuals and become sites of regeneration and self-transformation. They articulate potential queer strategies that enable the survival and strengthening of queerness, strategies which work hand in hand with Halberstam's work on the performance of queer. In addition to having worked on queer time, Halberstam (2011) proceeds to a detailed study of masochistic passivity as a strategy for queer individuals to resist the disciplinary function of "positive" values such as happiness, strength and success. They take the example of stories that tell of the destruction of mother-daughter bonds through passivity, reading them as acts of unbecoming.

Halberstam first focuses on Kincaid's *Autobiography of my Mother* (1996) in which the character uses masochistic passivity to resist the values of the colonizer. They argue that Kincaid's main character, who is mixed-race, refuses the 'category of womanhood altogether' (2011, 131) imposed by the colonial order. Halberstam also builds upon Kincaid's disinterest in happy endings<sup>90</sup> and explores how the rejection of positivity brings about the embodiment of queer identity. Halberstam uses *The Piano Teacher* (Jelinek, 1983) as a second illustration, a novel narrates the diverse failures of a middle-aged woman, in order to show that masochistic passivity is not solely reserved for the colonized and obviously oppressed. Depicting shame and unhappiness, Halberstam uses both examples to illustrate that the stillness and refusal of love offer 'quiet masochistic gestures that invite us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it a new as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct' (145).

Gay Ryona cultivates, not to say celebrates, queer shame and unhappiness. It can be understood to be a reenactment of shame as each fight represents a shameful loss, the shameful beating of a defenseless rag doll, or the shameful lack of drama and skills displayed in the videos. More importantly, Gay Ryona videos are available online, accessible to everyone and, therefore, vulnerable to the judgement and condemning of the gaming community, but also mere passers-by. While Gay Ryona aficionados have to put up with shame when they become visible – through online activities such as posting videos or commenting – they also turn this uncomfortable exposition, as Munt suggests, into a means to connect. As such, the fact that YouTube enables the creation of channels with

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<sup>90</sup> Talking about her book and its ending, Kincaid (1997) indicates that she, as a writer, has a business to make 'everyone a little less happy' (1), and claims that her interest is the pursuit of 'truth' which 'often seems to be not happiness but its opposite' (1).

subscribers who can in turn ask for requests (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012c), allows members of the Gay Ryona community to share and “transmit” shame to one another as they regroup in plain sight. In short, it could be argued that Gay Ryona videos openly cultivate and spread shame among viewers.

Instead of trying to move beyond the pain and reject the ‘bad feelings’ (Ahmed, 2010, 215) that are in the way of the path to normative happiness, Gay Ryona offers an experience that particularly focuses on them, thereby demonstrating that neither happiness nor unhappiness should be considered ‘endpoint[s]’ (217). Gay Ryona allows us to rethink happiness and allows us to approach ‘those forms of happiness that are directed in the wrong way’ (220). Gay Ryona connoisseurs deviate from orthodox understandings of desires and eroticism when they say that a character’s body is ‘so shiny and hot and [...] looks good knocked out’ (Guys in Trouble, 2016b). Their freedom to be unhappy – to the eyes of heteronormativity – enables them to be “happy” in ‘inappropriate ways’ (222).

However, unlike Ahmed’s critique of happiness, I do not argue that Gay Ryona actively promotes these inappropriate forms of happiness as this would maintain the idea that happiness is what everyone should aim for (217). Instead, I suggest that this sub-genre allows the exploration of how happiness, and more importantly, pleasure, can be approached ‘outside the domain of ethics’ (217) through, for instance, unhappiness and shame. The Gay Ryona community does not pursue an alternative path of happiness, but finds pleasure in exploring feelings and strategies that run counter the idea of the heteronormative ‘good life’ (217), such as the likeness and worship of pain, or the celebration of sadistic erotic wrestling. As an ‘affect alien’ (218), the Gay Ryona community is a creative force as it embraces ‘possibilities that we have been asked to give up’, but creates ‘life worlds around these wants’ (218).

Although Gay Ryona members seem to be active in their promotion and sharing of videos, there is an obvious lack of discussion between its members and the gaming community. As such, Gay Ryona embodies a silent resistance, which echoes Halberstam’s masochistic passivity. Instead of engaging directly on forums that attack this genre, the Gay Ryona community uploads videos on a weekly basis from its main channels, satisfying the desires of their fans. As such, the Gay Ryona community remains passive and discrete in response to the condemnation their beloved texts receive, but continues growing regardless, ignoring the pressure of heteronormativity by posting new videos weekly.

This form of passive resistance is particularly visible during the relatively rare instances when YouTube users criticize Gay Ryona videos, such as in the comments of the ‘Compilation of Gyaku Ryona pictures - Male on male (gay oriented)’ video:

YouTube user 1: Gay assssss shit

YouTube user 1: fag alert

YouTube user 2: Better content than you’re [sic] (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012b)

YouTube User A: Fag alert

YouTube User B: :o (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012b)

It needs to be acknowledged that the answer written by YouTube user 2 to YouTube user 1 came six months after his comment. In addition to these brief conversations, two other comments criticizing the same video were left without answers. Looking at these comments, it seems evident that the Gay Ryona community does not wish to engage with its haters. The (very) late and arguably tame answer to YouTube user 1 shows the disinterest of the Gay Ryona aficionados *vis à vis* potentially threatening YouTube users. The same can be witnessed in the second conversation, where YouTube User B, who is the “admin” of the channel (hence in charge of posting and often creating the videos), replies with an ironic smiley, feigning the surprise about the video’s “gay content”.

Thus, haters seem to be silenced by their passive opponents, who refuse to engage with “straight bullies”. In this way, Gay Ryona fans do not fight or protect themselves from the potential shame cast upon them, but silently accept it instead of fueling an unnecessary debate. As such, they adopt a strategy of “passive aggressiveness”, which is reminiscent of camp performances mentioned earlier in this thesis, but also queer figures in today’s popular culture. Indeed, queer celebrities such as Willam Belli<sup>91</sup> often resort to passive aggressiveness to keep composure in all circumstances, and following Wildean mottos. The latter became famous for blatantly ignoring his fellow contestants’ cutting remarks, calmly responding that their voice was ‘very pointed’ and claiming that ‘indifference is worse than hate’ (RuPaul Drag’s Race Season 4, 2012). Similar to Willam, the Gay Ryona community

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<sup>91</sup> Willam is considered one of the most popular drag queens in the English-speaking world thanks to his appearance on the reality TV show *RuPaul Drag’s Race*, but also in various TV shows and internet videos.

seems to have managed to “bore” its attackers, or even, maybe, mute them by refusing to fuel their hate.

Overall, the Gay Ryona amateurs are not very vocal inside and outside the community. The ‘Compilation of Gyaku Ryona pictures - Male on male (gay oriented)’ mentioned above is the most popular video of the GyakuRyonaMale channel with a total of 49 631 views at the time of writing, is only followed by 25 comments. Aside from the rare criticisms, these comments often praise the visuals, thank the admin and share their enjoyment of watching Gay Ryona videos:

Thx more pls

Lovely lovely vid, verrrrrrrrry hot!

Fantastic. got me nuttin’

Good headscissors, reverse pile drivers, and illegal tactics. Good work!

(GyakuRyonaMale, 2012b).

Clearly defining these videos as erotic, these comments coexist with the much less numerous insults aforementioned, but also a few comments from YouTubers or members of the (straight) Ryona community who often express their curiosity about this sub-genre.

In sum, Gay Ryona enables fighting games to reveal, and for gamers to explore, counter-normativity. Gay Ryona illustrates Ruberg’s conclusion that even (or, maybe, particularly) the most heterosexist games have the potential to become a site of queer subversion, when we relish playing ‘in our own way, the wrong way’ (Ruberg, 2015a, 122). Not only does Gay Ryona run counter the values of the gaming community, it also dismisses the oppressive use of concepts such as happiness in heteronormative contexts. I also showed that the Gay Ryona community rarely frontally responded to its haters, but continued praising and regularly posting videos. Curiously, this relative lack of voice supporting, but also defending Gay Ryona against its oppressors echoes the masochistic and passive attitude of the videos’ victim, but also the pleasure players get from it. Moving beyond the gaming community and the promotion of failure in games, I explore in the next section how Gay Ryona specifically cultivates the failure of the masculine through BDSM voyeurism.

‘The power is exchanged, but so is the responsibility that goes with it’<sup>92</sup>:  
Intentionally Failing the Masculine.

Admittedly, I must concede that Gay Ryona still reproduces some patterns of mainstream pornography, such as the association of male pleasure with ‘victimizing, hurting, exploiting’ (Dworkin, 1981, 69) or the promotion of ‘sexual power-mongering’ and ‘dominating’ behaviour (Stoltenberg, 1991, 249). Indeed, since most Gay Ryona videos depict “masculine” looking characters dominating more “feminine” characters, the genre inevitably reenacts, at first sight, gender inequality between men, and possibly perpetuates prejudice and discrimination through the hierarchization of body image and gender dynamics. However, I already demonstrated that this reenactment of hypermasculinity is counterbalanced by promoting queer game pleasures through the rejection of the concepts of “fun” and the embrace of masochistic passivity. In this section, I add that Gay Ryona produces a critique of the masculine through the lens of BDSM and, therefore, plays with and ultimately queers the same prejudice and discrimination it initially replicates.

I approach BDSM as a broad concept which encompasses ‘all sexual identities and practices involving pain play, bondage, dominance and submission, and erotic power exchange’ (Langdrige & Barker, 2013, 11). Writing about BDSM can be slightly confusing as it includes a variety of labels, subtypes and conventions which do not hold the exact same meaning for BDSM practitioners (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2013, 43). For instance, a masochist is generally understood as someone who seeks physical sensations and pain while a submissive is ‘primarily interested in psychological domination’ and a slave provides service and/or experiences psychological domination ‘without limits’. Still, these categories are contested and often overlap, meaning that the same person could ‘adopt any of these terms, without any change in behavior’ (ibid.). What practitioners tend to agree on are the main features of BDSM, namely ‘the appearance of dominance and submission, role-playing, mutual definition, consensuality and a sexual context for the individual’ (44).

A vast amount of work has shown that practices that could be understood as BDSM have occurred for centuries (Sisson, 2013, 18; Brandt, 1963; Ellis, 1905; Keuls, 1985; Taylor, 1996). However, it was in 1886 when the words ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ were coined by

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<sup>92</sup> (Sophia, 2013, 180).



Krafft-Ebing (1953) and in 1905 when ‘sodomasochism’ was used by Freud in *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1938). No ‘clear distinction between sexual orientation and S/M practice appears in the literature’ (Sisson, 2013, 18) until the 1940s, when a distinct gay male leather community developed in the USA (Rubin, 1994, 1997). While BDSM communities developed distinctly according to sexuality, the rising visibility of gay BDSM enabled those of heterosexual and lesbian BDSM communities, which mainly met through underground networks up until the 1970s (Sisson, 2013, 18). As such, this decade saw the formation of more stable communities (21-26).

BDSM, and in particular lesbian and queer BDSM, was also granted visibility by liberal feminists, particularly during the ‘Sex Wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s, ‘pitting radical feminists against liberal (sex-positive, anti-censorship) feminists’ (Walters, 2012, 63). On the one hand, radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon and Sheila Jeffreys approached BDSM as a practice that emulates ‘patriarchal, masculine forms of domination through the eroticization of power’ and reinscribes ‘the notion of women as passive victims’ (Musser, 2015, 125). On the other hand, liberal feminists such as Gayle Rubin, Pat Califa and Carole Vance advocated for a feminist view of sexual freedom, stating that discussions should focus on both the eradication of danger [...] and the positive aspect of sexual pleasure’ (Walters, 2012, 69; Vance, 1984). Liberal feminists do not seek to dismantle patriarchy like their radical counterparts, but to change it from within. As such, their position enables them to ‘engage in and discuss non-normative sexual practices without feeling a sense of conflict with their political ideals’ (Walters, 2012, 70). Through the formation of collectives, such as SAMOIS, liberal feminists contributed to the popularization of BDSM in alternative and queer circles in the 1980s.

In the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream BDSM benefitted from greater cultural visibility and media presence (26-28). Indeed, BDSMers became able to share their own experiences through forums and social gatherings and organized events through social networks and websites. In addition, the internet allowed people wanting to know more about BDSM to go beyond the ‘watered down [...] and deeply de-sexualised’ (Langdrige & Barker, 2013, 5) BDSM aesthetics present in mainstream media. Moreover, this “softened” presence of BDSM in the ‘outside world’ (5) also enabled to increase public awareness.

In spite of its growing visibility, BDSM still holds a controversial place in society. For instance, sodomasochism is still classified as a psychiatric disorder ‘within both the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM – IV) and the International Classification of Disease (ICD – 10), despite the lack of evidence that BDSMers are any more psychologically unhealthy than others’ (Langdridge & Barker, 2013, 4; Gosselin & Wilson, 1980; Moser & Levitt, 1987). Additionally, sadomasochistic sex is considered in the UK ‘alongside rape and child sexual abuse as individual sexual pathology in need of explanation, treatment and cure’ (Langdridge & Barker, 2013, 4).

As a result, visibly embracing BDSM often means embracing a practice that is still a marker of the boundaries of sexual citizenship (Langdridge & Barker, 2013, 4; Langdridge, 2006). Instances such as the case of Operation Spanner in 1990 which resulted in the conviction of ‘16 gay men [...] for engaging in consensual sadomasochistic sex’ and the ‘recent attempts at prosecutions under the UK’s extreme pornography legislation (Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008) for representations of fisting’ (10) indicate that the practice and theory of SM are still a contentious site that is often blamed for going beyond the boundaries of acceptable sex. This was confirmed in 2014, when the UK parliament finally passed an amendment to the 2003 Communications Act, banning a series of acts in British pornography which mainly focus on female and BDSM pleasure such as female ejaculation, but also facesitting, strangulation or physical restraint (Hooton, 2015). This research follows an increasing body of academic research that takes a non-pathologising and non-discriminating approach towards BDSM (Barker & Gill, 2012; Langdridge & Barker, 2013; Newmahr, 2011; Powls & Davies, 2012), studies the complexity of its structure, and explores how it strays from mainstream heterosexual sex.

Despite its sometimes strict and distinct subdivision, most academics and practitioners agree that gender ‘is not the most important factor organizing [BD]SM sexuality’ (Yost, 2013, 157). Indeed, it is the role identity that mostly determines sexual fantasy content and the production of pleasure. A significant part of BDSM communities ignores ‘traditional gender expectations of the broader culture’ (155) and chooses dominant and submissive roles freely (Califia, 2001). Studies show that BDSMers perceive their practice as ‘dissident’ as it is ‘deliberately, consciously antithetical to a sexual hegemonic, namely patriarchal heterosexuality’ (Taylor & Ussher, 2001, 302).

In addition to genderless roles, BDSM relies on a core concept that lies at the heart of its resisting nature called the power exchange:

One partner, the submissive or bottom, must give up some or all of their power and control over what happens to them to the dominant or top. This might be for the duration of an individual scene (maybe hours or just minutes), in the context of the sexual side of an ongoing relationship, possibly more generally and at the extreme even extending to the control of the submissive's daily life by the dominant partner (Sophia, 2013, 278).

It is generally understood that 'power is self-serving or that people in power will use that power to their own advantage' (Yost, 2013, 156). Such a reasoning implies that 'not having power is understood as unfulfilling'. Yost indicates that straight switches – practitioners who alternate between the roles of dominant and submissive – follow the same 'stereotypical' pattern: the person expressing dominance felt sexual pleasure himself/herself, whereas the person who submits provided sexual pleasure to their partner'. However, the situation differs for BDSM submissives and dominants, as well as non-heterosexual practitioners. Indeed, the power-pleasure dynamic follows a counter-stereotypical pattern: 'the person in power tended to use that power to give pleasure to his/her partner, and the person who submits felt sexual pleasure himself/herself' (ibid.). Thus, for most SM practitioners (at the exclusion of straight switches), giving stimulation and sensations to the submissive partner is prior and the concern of the dominant's own sexual pleasure comes second (Easton & Liszt, 1995).

Therefore, determining who holds a superior position and who is really in charge is a tricky answer. As Sophia (2013, 281) puts it, BDSM sex is a balancing act: in some ways, the dominant is the 'ships's pilot', 'turning the wheel to sail the ship into a harbor', giving orders, fulfilling desires 'within consensually agreed limits' while the submissive is more likely to 'set the course and choose the harbor', embracing the dominant role of the captain. As such, BDSM operates as a game, the focus of which is the failure of traditional Western gender expectations: the masochist gives up power willingly and entirely in order to achieve pleasure and the sadist can only work within the boundaries given by the former, thereby performing only an illusion of power.

Carrying with it a sense of voyeurism that is inevitably invested within a libidinal economy, Gay Ryona cannot be considered fully part of BDSM practices as only one or two people actually perform, while a large number of others watch. As Nadeau (1995, 224) argues, the voyeur position allows more fluidity than the relatively rigid binary roles of

BDSM practice. Therefore, the Gay Ryona audience is free to navigate roles and positions: as a voyeur, they can embody the torturer, the victim, both or neither. The voyeur can visualize themselves inside and outside the observed act. As such, it is difficult to assert whether Gay Ryona members specifically identify with a character, or see themselves purely as an audience member. Indeed, while they clearly indicate, as previously mentioned, that they approach Gay Ryona video as an erotic text, they seldom indicate that they identify with a specific role.

Still, there are obvious clues that the community is composed of people who directly associate themselves with the victim, the torturer, both or neither. For instance, the profile of GyakuRyonaMale channel leaves no doubt: the admin declares in his profile description that he loves ‘to be the victim of grabs/throws/hug in fighting’ (YouTube, 2017) and welcomes people to add him on the PSN<sup>93</sup> if they want to “play with him” online. However, he also requires people who add him to be serious about playing online, as he finds himself restrained by the maximum allowed number of friends. This maximum being 2000, his comment leaves little room for doubt that the Gay Ryona community is alive and well, and that players enjoy embodying victims and/or torturer. In all cases, I demonstrate in the next paragraphs that no matter the role, the masculine is deemed to be queered.

In a context where fighting games function as strong hegemonic texts where only the fittest survives, the victim inevitably symbolizes queer failure. Indeed, game visuals and sounds undoubtedly give the winning character a position of power and desirability, while the beaten opponent is belittled and humiliated. This is illustrated in the Gay Ryona video entitled ‘Street Fighter V - Zangief dominates Ryu (alt) - Gyaku Ryona Male on male (gay oriented)’ (GyakuRyonaMale, 2016) in which Zangief gets specific close-ups and delivers additional lines while performing a special attack. As in most fighting games, Zangief finishes the round by striking a victory pose, furthering the opponent’s humiliation.

Conversely, Ryu’s performance is reduced to expressing pain through growls and shouts. While his tormentor is the main focus of the camera, facing the viewers, benefitting from zooms-in which show his best angles, Ryu’s body is abused, turned upside-down and his face is not always visible. Thus, the victim is positioned in an undesirable position, since the only spectacle offered is that of a suffering loser, submitting to a more powerful and,

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<sup>93</sup> Shorter for the Playstation Network, a digital media entertainment service provided by Sony and enabling user to buy and play videos and games, but also play online with other players.

therefore, masculine opponent. In addition, the power-exchange does not apply “in-game” which makes Gay Ryona, like BDSM, a cruel genre which offers to the uninitiated viewer the spectacle of a suffering loser submitting to a more powerful and, therefore, masculine opponent.

As mentioned above, some viewers identify with the victim, meaning that they are willing to fantasise about being, or at least playing the role of the victim. While this power-exchange lies “outside” the visuals of the game, the victim becomes the eternally failing figure of the audience’s obsessive cultivation of loss, and, subsequently, unmanliness. Indeed, sports, and more particularly fighting sports culture often equate losing a fight with figurative emasculation, as weakness ‘is at the core of traditional feminine stereotypes’ (Oppliger, 2004, 101). According to Dundes (1980), most ‘means of testing masculinity cross-culturally’ rely upon answering ‘the question of who penetrates whom’ (209). Interestingly, this process is more or less visibly reenacted in sports, intimately linking masculinity with winning. For instance, it is common practice in Pro Wrestling (and even MMA) to see the loser subjected to taunting and humiliating moves that simulate fellatio or penetration (101). As such, the latter is figuratively penetrated anally, which often fuels a common blurred vision of gender and sexuality within sports ideology, according to which unsuccessful male athletes are considered unmasculine and, therefore, associated with homosexuality (Oppliger, 2004, 62; Lehre, 1976). Therefore, wanting to lose is considered unfulfilling. As such, the victim in Gay Ryona is an anomaly, it constitutes the symbol of endless loss, but also the audience’s willing divergence from hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, Gay Ryona symbolizes nothing so much as the total failure of ruling masculinity: embodying a submissive, emasculated and potentially gay man. Consequently, the victim fails at proving his strength and cannot be tolerated. He is ‘a traitor to a politics of virility and as someone who had betrayed patriarchal fraternity’ (Halberstam, 2011, 160) as he passively waits for his opponent to beat him up. However, it is this same passivity that opens onto ‘a different kind of politics’ that reject the ‘moral systems we inhabit’ (163). As such, players who embody or identify with the victim resort to the same masochistic passivity displayed by the characters from Kincaid and Jelinek’s novels. The victim ‘not only offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself, but also enable player/ viewers to ‘op[t] out of [heteronormative] systems’ (113) such as competitive

gaming. Hence, the victim functions as a queer vessel which materializes the audience's queer desire of failure in a context that is considered erotically stimulating for his viewers.

This is the reason why I mostly dismiss a reading of Gay Ryona as a reinforcement of heteropatriarchy. Indeed, both the position of voyeur and torturer seem at first sight to sadistically perpetuate the oppression of non-masculine identities (the victim), thereby brutally asserting gender binary and heteronormative values. However, I argue that Gay Ryona should be approached the same way liberal feminists approach BDSM: it is a site originally located within the realm of heteromascularity which grants power and agency to gamers who express anti-normative desires. Admittedly, Gay Ryona appears as an ambivalent text, nonetheless, its erotic cues (title, description, comments, characters), the audience's various pleasures and identifications with victims and torturers, and, above all, its promotion of failure, present it as a queer text.

The role of the torturer in Gay Ryona videos should be equally undesirable, as his strength is inevitably undermined by his victim's passivity. In other words, the victor is not the 'winner' because his opponent was (consciously) unworthy. Considering that there is no 'real' victory in Gay Ryona, as winners and losers are established at the beginning, the torturer only appears as an oppressor of a "willingly" defenseless character, a feat that is more likely to attract shame – here echoing Munt – than pride and a recognition of superiority. In addition, the torturer is also complicit in perpetuating a sadomasochistic act which appeals to the Gay Ryona audience. As a result, the torturer is not a true oppressor, but an integral part of a performance which runs counter to hegemonic masculinity.

The game adjustments necessary to make a Gay Ryona video also calls into question the actual dominance of the torturer. During the making of a video, the torturer can only act as such if the player allows him to do so: as the victim, the player needs to remain motionless in order for the computer to beat him up, conversely, as the torturer, the player needs to disable the computer's difficulty. These adjustments point towards the 'staging' of a Gay Ryona fighting scene, whereby winning (and losing) is a delusion that is elaborately constructed. The torturer also needs to perform holds and moves that are considered the most attractive for the viewers (more details will be given later in this section), hence needing to be constantly attentive to the fight, making sure that the other character is beaten up in the most erotic fashion.

The expectations regarding the torturer are similar to Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán's (2015) reading of Kratos's performance in *God of War's* sex scenes. The authors read these instances as scenes of forced domination, and demonstrate that the submissive character is the one who is in control. They take the example of a scene in which Aphrodite 'lies in her bed surrendered and defenseless', and asks Kratos to pleasure her (126). While BDSM mechanics are only suggested, they suggest that the encounter clearly takes the shape of a 'game of submission' featuring 'an unbalanced sexual relationship in which the player [aka Kratos] is asked – forced – to act in a dominant fashion' (ibid.). Indeed, the player should not be tricked by Kratos's aggressive performance, as only Aphrodite is in control. Indeed, her moaning will stop and she will reject Kratos if the player fails to press the correct buttons repeatedly. Resultantly, the player embodying the "master" 'has to follow her orders to be dominated and pleased' (ibid.) and to continue the playing of the mini-game. Along the same lines, any power held by the torturer in Gay Ryona videos has been granted to him. He performs for the viewers (regardless of how they position themselves) and is "trapped" in a role of "forced domination" where only certain moves (mainly grabs and holds) are better regarded than others. Sustaining the illusion of a one-sided fight, the torturer is an accomplice, if not a slave, of an anti-normative "confrontation".

Further to my previous comments, Gay Ryona videos move beyond the duality between top and bottom positions and allow the viewer to adopt a more ubiquitous role as a voyeur. Similar to what Nadeau (1995) argues about the depiction of lesbian BDSM in *The Berlin Affair* (Cavani, 1985), Gay Ryona addresses '[BD]SM sexuality as a site of control' where 'it is not a question of being on the top', but an exploration of how 'sexuality might really defy the gendered predicament that power in sex is necessarily defined by 'visible' positionalities/positions' (225). Thus, viewers regroup around these videos and sometimes participate in their creation.

Indeed, aside from the odd YouTube user stumbling across Gay Ryona for the first time, the interactions between viewers and admins illustrate that the community is perfectly aware of the videos' erotic dimensions. In this way, Gay Ryona shares similarities with amateur porn and erotica, often characterized by the possibility to interact with directors

and actors of a film, which ultimately contributes to the solidification of a community<sup>94</sup> (Lloyd, 2016, 115). As such, regardless of the character with whom they identify, or whether they identify with a character at all, viewers place requests and position themselves as clients who implicitly introduce another balance of power which lies “outside” the videos. For instance, after having watched Brian from *Tekken 6* relentlessly punching his unconscious opponent, several viewers had rather specific ideas of new videos in mind:

Please make video "King grabs shirtless paul" in tekken 6.

Can you do it only to King in underwear??

can you do one of these with lars, kazuya, jin, hwoarang, and heihachi. all shirtless please :) (GyakuRyonaMale, 2012c).

Admins of the YouTube channels are free to ignore these demands, but they are nevertheless made aware of their fans’ desires. Consequently, they sometimes answer positively to the demands, fueling a cycle of new video uploads triggering new demands. In this way, viewers and admins explore “together” the varieties and intricacies of an arguably scripted genre. They collectively partake in the celebration of the failure of the masculine and satiate their queer desire.

Overall, Gay Ryona includes figures – a victim and a torturer – who both embody failure of hegemonic masculinity. On the one hand, the victim is the epitomic symbol of weak masculinity, on the other hand, the torturer has to adopt a position of “forced dominance”, serving the needs of the audience. This audience – the viewers – in turn adopt a more ubiquitous role, that of cyber voyeurs, and participate in the making of a Gay Ryona’s queer videos, by making requests and expressing their enjoyment in watching these relentless depictions of the masculine.

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<sup>94</sup> Gay Ryona bears even more resemblance with the erotic wrestling communities previously mentioned in this chapter, which can be found on website such as *meetfighters.com*, and communicate through posts, forums, pictures, but above all videos.



## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how Gay Ryona operates as a queer practice which celebrates a variety of failures. In the first section, I explored how Gay Ryona is characterized by values which are at odds with those of the gaming community. Far away from the competitive and skill-based nature of fighting games, Gay Ryona videos lack “drama” and promote upsetting visuals and aesthetics, beating characters to a pulp. Expanding upon Ruberg’s concept, Gay Ryona videos fail at being fun. Instead, they are boring, repetitive, unsettling and alarming because of their visuals and their erotic dimension, but also potentially disappointing for queer individuals who might expect more explicit content. Indeed, not only does Gay Ryona queer gaming, it also queers sexuality in games and, more generally, digital media, opting for a much more metaphorical approach of eroticism devoid of penetration and phallic obsession.

Through the works of Munt, Ahmed and Halberstam, I demonstrated that Gay Ryona is a site of “negative feelings” where ‘affect aliens’ (Ahmed, 2010, 158) could regroup and grow a community, regardless of the shame cast upon them. Rejected, pathologized and ostracized by the gaming community, Gay Ryona aficionados continue to embody the victim or/and the torturer, celebrating the undesirable, uploading videos regularly and avoiding confrontation. However, I demonstrated that it is thanks to this presumed unhappiness and shameful seclusion in a world of unacceptable eroticism that they are able to nurture a queer practice that opens new possibilities for the use of video games as a medium, but also alternative representations of eroticism and carnal desire online.

In the second section of this chapter, I explored how the BDSM dimension of Gay Ryona contributed to another type of failure: the failure of the masculine. The figure of the victim represents weakness and is a failure to the eyes of hegemonic masculinity. Figuratively emasculated and feminised, he embodies the most undesirable position in the heteropatriarchal hierarchy. However, the same applies to the torturer who, read through the power dynamics of the power of BDSM, is only complicit in this resisting strategy by complying with the hidden contract defined by the Gay Ryona genre. Resultantly, his power is meaningless and his actions are determined by his victim’s will. Overall, I showed that Gay Ryona relies first and foremost on its community, its involvement, but also requests and nurturing of this spectacle of failure.

Gay Ryona reclaims the heterosexist practices of both the gaming community and fighting sports as sites of strong homoeroticism. Using their erotic potential, Gay Ryona embraces the taboo of mainstream sports by depriving masculinity from its dominating position and redefining it as the ultimate object of desire. In this way, I concluded that Gay Ryona upsets the hierarchy of conventions of enjoyment, fun, but also sexual pleasure, and opens the door to alternative ways of desiring.

Nonetheless, Gay Ryona encounters some limitations. The first one being that it is this queer reading of Gay Ryona can only be applied to videos that include two male opponents. Admittedly, including a female dominatrix as torturer can also be read in a queer way, but the politics behind it come from a different reasoning – “FemDom” as it is better known among practitioners, relies on a complete reversal of the heteronormative gender hierarchy and the worship of the female subject. Although I am convinced that FemDom can be read through a queer lens, a different critical angle would be necessary as it does not challenge gender dynamics in the same manner as Gay Ryona.

Along the same line, displaying two female characters is likely to serve the trope of the “lesbian fantasy”, mainly geared towards a straight audience. Similar to Femdom, I do not argue that two female characters fighting cannot be disruptive or read as queer, but the recurring and sexist hypersexualisation of women in fighting games hinder such a reading. However, I am confident that resembling deviant use of games belonging to another genre can advocate for queer desire while representing strong female and/or non-binary characters. In this way, Gay Ryona should be used as a platform to further the possibility of queer practices in gaming.

Another consideration that would bring this chapter’s argument to a broader level is the “practice” of Gay Ryona in online competition. Referring to my previous arguments, the creator of one of the biggest Gay Ryona YouTube channels openly invites people to add him on the Playstation Network in order to “play” Gay Ryona online. He also suggests that matches can be recorded and available for everyone, or only displayed for both players. In this instance, Gay Ryona becomes the means for two players to consume this fetish at the same time in a different location, almost becoming a surrogate for a sexual intercourse. The online and live practices of Gay Ryona also introduces the possibility of practicing this fetish unilaterally – in other words, losing on purpose against an online opponent – which clearly upsets significant elements of the competitive gaming community such as

rankings. Further studies on whether Gay Ryona is practiced online would exponentially strengthen the visibility and disruption of this queer subgenre.

This chapter argued that Gay Ryona can be read as a quintessentially queer practice. It is a call to ‘queer worldmaking, a call to build alternate spaces both personal and culture, a call to think about [sado]masochistic play as a site of potential rather than pathology’ (Ruberg, 2015, 122). Ultimately, Gay Ryona illustrates how being queer can be ‘about being different and desiring differently’ (114, 115). Gay Ryona reminded me of the times where I would curse and throw my controller away out of anger, unable to beat the game. It reminded me that these moments of unhappiness should be welcome and incorporated into the pleasure that is experiencing a game. It also reminded me of these times when I would feel guilty for not being “productive” in-game, exploring random buildings or making my own silly quests. Surprisingly, burying myself in Gay Ryona made me feel less self-critical as a gamer, but also as a person. In the light of this original and potentially disturbing genre, doing things in a “different ways” had never felt so good.

# Conclusion

## Summary and Contribution of this Thesis

This thesis has argued that although video games and the gaming community remain largely normative, they constitute a platform for queerness to thrive. Journeying through various games, characters and ways of playing, I have explored the complex intricacies of queer politics in games and navigated the contradictory claims within both queer and game studies. As such, I have suggested that queer “representation”, as an inexhaustible source of material, should not be dismissed as it still remains a rarity within a medium ruled by heteronormativity. Nonetheless, this study led me to shift this research beyond representation and tackle games from angles that critically challenge the essence of video games as a medium, such as time and failure. In this, I have demonstrated that video games hide multiple manifestations of queer strategies and politics, which could make them the queerest medium of them all.

Firstly, I explained in detail the journey of my research. After having initially begun with a focus on the figure of the dandy in contemporary gaming, I rapidly discussed how the instability of the figure, but also the fact that it is only part of a broader selection of queer characters, made me decide to explore in more detail the disruption of queer video game instances. I then provided a brief contextualization of queer theory and queer game studies in order to locate this thesis within the broader field of scholarship. In Chapter 2, I went on to detail my methodological approach and explained how each chapter differed from one another. I first established the list of games on which I focused and justified how they illustrated each chapter’s argument. I also delved on my choice of using online threads to inform Chapter 3 and support Chapter 4 as well as the inclusion of YouTube videos for all chapters, and finally detailed the process of archiving and studying these online materials.

Chapter 3 and 4 tackled the first two research questions of this thesis: the political roles of video game queer characters and how these characters are identified by gamers. In Chapter 3, I argued that visible LGBTQ characters are still vital in video games today. I explored the dis/satisfaction of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ gamers towards depictions of characters like Dorian, who, in spite of the arguable quality of his character development,

was considered stereotypical and offensive by some, and “outdated” by others. I demonstrated that these gamers advocated for silent assimilationist politics which failed to address the remaining oppression of minorities within gaming culture. Conversely, I showed that another group of gamers praised BioWare for including a character who felt “relatable”, proving that visible LGBT game characters were necessary, but also beneficial for non-heterosexual gamers. Finally, I suggested that through the cross-species pairing of Dorian and the Iron Bull, Dorian revealed an unexpected queer side to him, making him more than one of the first playable gay characters. His relationship with Iron Bull, called Adoribull, became a platform for gamers and fans to engage in more depth with this pairing and, more generally, queer relationships.

Extending these findings, in Chapter 4 I turned to an even more flamboyant and mysterious character, Kuja, who I identified as queer, not solely because of his appearance, but because of his role and his politics in *FF IX*. I first noticed that most forum users did not engage with a queer reading of Kuja. Instead, I showed that some of them misread Kuja’s gender and sexuality because of his appearance, while others approached Kuja from an orientalist perspective by restricting him to the stereotypes of Japanese popular culture. As a result, I undertook my own personal queer reading of Kuja in order to reconcile both the gamer and the queer scholar inside of me. I first argued that Kuja embodied Edelman’s figure of the sinthomosexual: a destructive and misunderstood villain whose unique goal was to stop heteronormative futurity. Studying Kuja’s actions and relationship with his brother Zidane, I suggested that he was a great illustration of queer anti-social theory. I then nuanced my findings and highlighted that Edelman’s theory failed to offer a method for acknowledging the multidimensionality of Kuja’s narrative, such as his death and his complex relationship with the protagonist. I provided instead a new polemical take on this antagonist, and argued that he should instead be understood as a figure of queer hope. Indeed, against all odds, Kuja defies his fate and succeeds in reaching trance. As a hybrid - a cyborg - he is the signifier of queer futurity, echoing Muñoz’s work on queer utopia. Through a reading of cut-scenes and narrative, I identified how Kuja awakens queer desire among the inhabitants of *FF IX* and enables them to temporarily think outside the paradigms of heteronormativity.

Having tackled in great detail my first two research questions, I explored how these findings gave me materials to tackle my third aim: finding how video games promote queer practice and become a site of queerness and reappropriation. While maintaining the focus

on temporality that I introduced towards the end of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 moved away from the study of characters and identified the assemblages of queer temporalities in *Mass Effect* and *The Path*. I began by offering a new reading of the time of the dialogue wheel device in *Mass Effect*, using theories of multiple possibilities and associating them with suspended temporalities. I argued that the game repeatedly provides instances when linear time becomes cracked, displaying a confrontation between two conceptions of time (linear vs circular). While it finally re-establishes the heteronormative order, *Mass Effect* illustrates the queer peculiarities of game time, a concept that I further developed in *The Path*. In this horrific retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood, the player becomes a *flâneur* who queerly articulates time, space and game elements. I showed that *The Path* provides an experience which queers both gaming and the game's characters as achievements become non-existent and the characters' identity are rewritten as the player explores the forest. As such, I concluded that *The Path* is an anti-chrononormative game bathed in queer time.

In respect to mainstream gaming culture, *The Path* is not an entertaining game as it fails to satisfy, in many ways, gamers' expectations. Furthermore, I indicated the game tricks the player into failing by initially misdirecting them – that going to Grandmother's house without finding the wolf. Because of my focus on queer time and space, I could not fully concentrate on the concept of failure in games, and how it be understood as a queer value. Thus, I dedicated my last chapter on queer game failure through the study of Gay Ryona videos, a subcultural phenomenon that remains undocumented in academia and unknown to the general public. I examined how video games could be used as a site of resistance where the heteronormative practices of gaming can be queered. As such, I noted that Gay Ryona embodied a failure that is two-fold. First, I argued that this genre of counterplay celebrates the failure of competitive gaming, and, by extension, hegemonic masculinity. Similar to erotic wrestling and art, it recuperates competitive fighting and makes it a core site of queer desire. I noted that Gay Ryona relies on its repetitive aspect to deter straight gamers, but also runs counter to the principles of fighting games. Secondly, I suggested that the similarities between Gay Ryona and BDSM voyeurism nurtured a failure of the masculine. Torturers, victims, voyeurs, YouTube admins and users, all contribute to an intentional eroticisation of the imagery of pain, but also willing submission and scripted victories. I concluded that Gay Ryona represented a pioneering form of counter gaming which does not involve significant game modding and proved us that even games with the

simplest objective – defeating an opponent – could be queered and be in turn a site of queer promotion.

Taken together, these chapters work to reveal that LGBTQ video game content does not automatically corroborate the presence of queer politics, and that looking for queerness in video games is both a past- and future- oriented journey. This thesis serves to remind game scholars to pay further critical attention to the rise of both the independent gaming scene and subcultural gaming groups on social platforms, as these both represent the forefront of new and often polemic gaming practices. My rather eclectic approach to video game queerness also shows that my chapters' foci all connect in one way or another. Both Dorian and Kuja represent a form of (queered) failure – the former fails his father and family, and the latter is a defective angel of death. *The Path* fails the gamer for relaying on a slow-paced narrative and disrupt the dynamic between victory and failure by forcing the player to die. This last aspect was further explored in *Gay Ryona*, which upsets values of competitive gaming by promoting failure as a kink through the use of video games. Hence, I suggested in these chapters that queerness is permeable, but also ubiquitous. Whenever it manifests itself, it disrupts the foundation of its environment. As such, queer scholars should adopt fluid methodological approaches to identify the ever-changing shapes of queerness.

From a broader perspective, this thesis tackled current debates in queer game studies from unique angles. It first reiterates the importance of having, but also studying, LGBTQ characters in video games. Running counter to the idea that “representation” is an aspect of queer game studies that has “been covered”, it demonstrates, through the example of Dorian and Kuja, that we still have much to learn from video game characters, and that some games of the past hold the coordinates of queer futurity. In this way, this thesis proves that queer scholars should not solely focus on contemporary game instalments and provides, therefore, an original reading of two game characters that often have been included as illustrations in previous articles and chapters, but were never given full attention.

Yet, this thesis still positions itself alongside queer game studies' wish to approach queerness as a whole. Through the study of queer time and space, this work demonstrated how games displayed unique temporalities and how gaming's presumed chrononormativity is disrupted. This research provided an innovative application of

segments of queer theory, by showing that queer time and space manifests in video games through unique shapes, which are unique to this medium. In addition to the exploration of uncharted queer territories, this thesis also built in great details upon previous works such as Halberstam and Ruberg's concept of queer failure and no-fun by applying them to video games.

Further to this exploration of queer theory, this thesis' last contribution is that it showcases videos and video games "genre" (Gay Ryona) which have not been tackled through a theoretical queer lens. Thus, this PhD strengthens and amplifies the current body of work in queer studies through the testing and concrete application of queer theories, but also makes an original contribution by paving new paths and areas of gaming culture which have remained unnoticed. Initially standing at the intersection of several branches of queer game studies, this thesis undertakes a unique academic journey and provides a mosaic of queer manifestations which, despite all being distinct from one another, form a gleaming ensemble of hopeful futurity.

## Limitations

This work partly relies on online material taken from forum threads and YouTube videos. As I previously mentioned, these sources are volatile and vulnerable to deletion. Consequently, one of the main YouTube channels (GuysinTrouble) on which I worked on, as well as a forum thread on the BioWare website (which I, fortunately, managed to access via the internet wayback machine) were permanently closed during the writing of Chapter 5. Although this gave an archival nature to this research, it also indicates that the gaming landscape today is not what it was when I started this study. In this light, this PhD needs to be approached as an illustrative snapshot of the gaming community, which still applies today in terms of inner debates and politics, but will not provide the exact same platforms on which to find them.

Additionally, this research centred upon a Western context and written from my point of view as a French gamer working with data articulated in English. This means that no data written in other languages such as French, Spanish, or Japanese has been used for this research. Thinking particularly about Chapter 4, one could produce a comparative



analysis of a Western reading with a Japanese reading of Kuja, and also investigate whether he would be considered as a potential queer icon for queer Japanese gamers.

Finally, each chapter opens the path to more in-depth quantitative research relying on focus groups and direct interactions with online users. As such, I have suggested that Chapter 6 could be completed with a research discussing the online experience of Gay Ryona YouTube Channels. Similarly, selecting a sample of gamers would be useful in order to test and challenge my argument, as well as exploring in more detail the ways Gay Ryona fans consume and “play” this sub-genre.

## Final Thoughts

As I mentioned in the introduction, this thesis did not ignite a series of life-changing realisations in me, but illustrated the evolution of my perception of queer gaming. It put in perspective some anxieties and questioning that I had regarding my definition of gaming and also informed my understanding of the gaming community. Yet, spending many hours on this research inevitably extended this thesis’s sphere of influence to my daily life and gave me new tools to comprehend my various states of mind.

One week before writing the end of this conclusion, I went to see the show of a world-famous drag queen. This was a last-minute decision – I was not a die-hard fan and I was ill, but this was too good an opportunity to miss and I decided to give it a go. Half-way through the show, I already knew I had made the right decision – I was asked to come on stage. I had to stay on a chair while the famous performer kissed me, slapped me, licked me, and sang a cabaret version of “Girls just want to have fun”. I was slightly dazed, and once the show was over, I was able to thank them, and was warmly thanked in return. Needless to say, I was enchanted.

Yet, another familiar feeling had also appeared – a mix of dissatisfaction and missed opportunities, as if all this time spent during this last four years had been wasted. Of course, I had always considered such self-doubt as nothing but a daily occurrence for a PhD student, but also wondered why such negativity would rise during these moments of fleeting joy, where our routines are suddenly pleasantly disturbed. As I progressed

towards the end of this thesis, I learned to navigate this double-edge sword by filtering the goods from the bads, and recognising that these queer instances are effervescent. I convinced myself that queer hope should not be restricted to these fleeting moments that vanish before we can barely grasp them, and that we could ground hope in stability, without making it lose its shine.

In my personal case, I managed to grasp queer hope by embracing a place where time is “truly” suspended. Having moved a lot in my childhood, I cannot precisely say that I belong to a particular place. Instead, I often explain that I am from the village where I have been going every summer since I was born, in the south-east of France, where my father grew up. Curled up in the southern alps, the barn that my grandfather refurbished does not really feel like home. It feels better. It is indeed a place where daily life does not occur. When I arrive, in less than a few hours, it becomes evident – everything and nothing has changed. The lavender may be cut, but the decrepit houses remain the same. The noise of the water fountain is still there, the cemetery can be seen from a distance and wild animals can be spotted on the roads.

Often I feel silly to realise that I have to go back there to finally embrace plenitude. Every year, I see myself aging a little more, and strengthen my emotional link with this place. Despite some minor changes, the sun is (almost) always out, the river waits for me to have a swim and the smell of thyme is in the air. At night, I play (video) games by the fire of the chimney or go stargazing without light pollution. In short, time is suspended. I am shielded from anxiety by the mountains on both sides of the valley. The effervescence of sharing the stage with a god-like Drag Queen is fully enjoyed and understood, and I am proud of what I have achieved. This village is my Lana’s room.

In the light of these arguably over-dramatic personal reflections, the discussions I developed in my PhD might appear as a bit trivial. Yet, I believe that their outcomes can be useful. I am indeed well-aware that not everyone can escape to a small village to retreat. By focusing on video games, this thesis showed that this medium provides stimuli of queer effervescence and that we can find temporary relief, even in the most solitary activity. I believe video games produce fragments of fantasy which should be part of a broader assemblage of queer memories that enable us to tackle our daily life through a more positive lens. Through the articulation of diverse game material and experiences, I hope to have encouraged queer scholars to look into games with an open mind, to adopt an

attitude that is, maybe, similar to that of an academic flâneur, because queerness might just be around the corner.

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## Forum Comments

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Appendix: Categorisation of Forum Comments.

Table 1: Diverse readings of Dorian.

	Dorian is not seen as a stereotypical character and his storyline is not defined by his sexuality.	Dorian might be stereotypical and/ or his sexuality might be given too much attention, but he is still represented in a positive light.	Mixed views.	Dorian is a stereotypical character and/or his storyline focuses too much on his sexuality. As a result, he is represented in a negative light.
'As much as I love Dorian...'	39	10	11	4
'How do you feel about Dorian Pavus' Homosexuality?'	18	11	5	1
'How can someone NOT romance Dorian?'	3	1	2	3
'Why the straight male romance option suck?'	5	1	1	1



'Does Dorian look like Freddy Mercury to anybody else?'	2	4		
'How do you feel about Dorian Pavus' Homosexuality?'	20	9	2	
'So how many straight males romanced Dorian?'	8	1		
Total	95	37	21	9

Table 2: Unsatisfactory readings of Kuja.

	Gay Reading of Kuja	Orientalist Reading	Confused understanding of Kuja (uncertainty about his gender and sexuality)	Reading Kuja as a crossdresser.
'Kuja: Boy or Girl'	3	1	6	9
'Kuja's not transgendered'		3	3	1
'is Kuja gay?'			2	

'Kuja is seriously the best villain in Final Fantasy history'	1		1	
'Was Kuja gay?'	1	1	1	
'What if Kuja got laid? *SPOILERS*'	1		1	1
'Kuja... Female?'	1	4	3	1
'Why do people think Kuja gay?'		1		1
TOTAL (41)	7	9	12	13