Queer Gamer Assemblages and the Affective Elements of Digital Games

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Abstract

Centering on a discussion of gaming as an embodied experience, this essay explores the affective and embodied relationship between LGBT/queer gamers and video games. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven queer gamers, I argue in that we should understand gamers as socio-technological assemblages, in order to illustrate how gamer identity, subjectivity, and sociality are enacted through the relationship between the body of a gamer and the game technologies. I further expand upon this by tending to how queer gamers talk about their embodied experiences and affective connections to various games through 'worlding' and storytelling elements. These stories illustrate how games create affective possibilities for connection and belonging for queer gamers. I conclude by arguing that an attention to gaming as an embodied experience expands our conceptualizations of play and helps us understand the worldmaking practices that queer gamers often employ.

Keywords

Introduction

> At one point she disappears, and then you realize she has died and you can't get her back like you were able to with some other characters. I got all teary-eyed because I realized I could never get her back. I actually can't see this character anymore except for a portrait of her that we have in our guild house. That was kind of depressing.
>
> —Tina[1]

As Tina, one of my interviewees, describes above, sometimes you are moved so deeply by a character in a game that you cry when the character dies. Even as you hold the controller or feel your hands on the keyboard and remember that this is all a work of fiction, you get yourself worked up. In this regard, digital gaming can be seen an embodied experience, both in that a player's body controls the game and that the game can elicit deep affective and emotional responses from the player. We as gamers also immerse ourselves in digital landscapes; we transport ourselves to other worlds, ones we don't necessarily belong to but within which we still learn to find a sense of belonging. We "play between worlds" (Taylor, 2006) even as our bodies remain in the physical world. We are affectively moved (Isbister, 2016) in game worlds so much that sometimes it leaks into the physical world. This play between worlds is embodied insofar as games make us laugh, cry, get angry, empathize, and ultimately move us emotionally as players.

Centering on a discussion of gaming as an embodied experience, this essay explores the affective relationship between LGBT/queer gamers and video games through their own stories of and reflections on playing video games. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven queer gamers, I argue in that we should understand gamers as socio-technological assemblages. I employ the language of feminist science and technology studies (STS) to illustrate how gamer identity, subjectivity, and sociality are enacted through the relationship between the body of a gamer and the game technologies. I further expand upon this by tending to how queer gamers talk about their embodied experiences and affective connections to various games through 'worlding' and storytelling elements. These stories illustrate how games create affective possibilities for connection and belonging for queer gamers. I conclude this essay by arguing that an attention to gaming as an embodied experience expands our conceptualizations of play and helps us understand the worldmaking practices that queer gamers often employ.

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[1] I specifically chose a section of Tina's interview that did not name the character she relates to as a way to avoid spoilers.

Methods in Queer Worldmaking

This paper stems from a larger qualitative research project with a focus on the queer worldmaking practices of LGBTQ gamers. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) describes queer worldmaking as a process that allows us to strive beyond the here and now to imagine alternate modes of being and feeling.

> We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. […] Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. […] Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (p. 1)

For Muñoz, queerness functions as a hopeful and utopian longing for a world beyond the horizon—"world-making potentialities" that attract us by offering multiple possibilities for social change—"by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*" (p. 35, original emphasis). We strive for queer futures, and queer worldmaking practices are "an invitation to desire differently, to desire more, to desire better" (p. 189).

While Muñoz reads queerness and queer worldmaking through novels, visual art, and performances on stage, I view gaming and game cultures as additional sites for queer worldmaking possibilities. The larger project from which this paper is derived foregrounds this. In my research I ask, *what does it mean to be a queer gamer, what do these gamers understand sexuality and gender in relationship to their gamer identities, and how do they participate in worldmaking practices*? This paper attends to these answers to these questions with a focus on the interview portion of my larger project by examining how it is that queer gamers connect to the games they play.

I interviewed seven queer-identified individuals who identified as gamers. These folks claimed a diverse set of identity markers in regards to their gender identities, sexual orientations, and racial identities. I asked them questions about their experiences playing video games and what it means to be a gamer. I also asked them to share stories with me when they felt particularly connected to or drawn into game worlds, stories, and characters. Grounded in queer theory, feminist STS, and game studies, I then analyzed their stories to examine how these queer gamers' relationships with games might articulate their own queer worldmaking values and practices. How these queer gamers connect to games might create new modes of understanding different strategies for queer gamer worldmaking. While the focus of this paper is the embodied and affective elements in games for these queer gamers, I return to the question of worldmaking in the conclusion by looking at the implications for studying embodiment, affect, and worldmaking in games.

Gamers as Socio-Technological Assemblages

While scholars such as Adrienne Shaw (2011) and Carly Kocurek (2016) have attempted to understand the social, political, and historical constructions and barriers to who can and does identify as a "gamer," my interviewees and I choose to understand gamer identity in terms of self-identification. One of my interviewees, Jose, said that while "there are some barriers to what it means to be a gamer," he believes that "whoever says they are [a gamer] is one—just like whoever says they're gay or bisexual is." If being a gamer is a practice of self-identification, what is to be said about the relationship between gamers and their game technologies? What does donning such a technologically mediated identity mean for these gamers? And how do these gamers understand themselves, their bodies, and their emotions through these game technologies? Drawing on feminist STS frameworks, I argue that we should understand gamers as socio-technological assemblages in order to better articulate the embodied and affective possibilities of video games.

In her well-known essay, "The Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway (1991) explores how the image of the cyborg opens up new possibilities for theories of embodiment and subjectivity through the interconnectivity of the natural, social, and artificial worlds. Haraway's cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 191). Cyborg bodies blur the lines between the organic and the inorganic, fusing human bodies with machinic bodies to generate new modes of consciousness and being. Assemblage is another term that both those within and outside of feminist STS have used describe the relationship between science, technology, and human bodies. Reading Haraway's cyborg as an example of an assemblage, Jasbir Puar (2011) writes:

> Assemblages are interesting because they de-privilege the human body as a discrete organic thing. As Haraway notes, the body does not end at the skin. We leave traces of our DNA everywhere we go, we live with other bodies within us, microbes and bacteria, we are enmeshed in forces, affects, energies, we are composites of information. Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman animal binary. (p. 57)

The cyborg body then is an example of assemblages—an intersection of machine and human that challenges our understanding of discrete categories. Assemblages then allow us to explore the synergistic relationships between bodies, desires, affects, objects, and environments as they encounter and come into contact with one other.

For Puar, categories of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality are also assemblages—they "are considered events, actions, and encounters, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects" (Puar,

2011, p. 58). Identities are embodied and relational; they become donned and claimed at particular crossroads within very particular historical, cultural, and social contexts. Bodies are thus the sites for articulations of race, gender, sexuality, and identity more broadly.

Games studies scholars such as Taylor (2009) and Jenson et al. (2015) have articulated the usefulness of imagining play through then lens of assemblage. Expanding on Taylor's notion of the assemblage of play, I use cyborg and assemblage frameworks to unpack how gamer identity—and not just the act of play—blurs the line between technology and organism. Gamers come to embody Haraway's cyborg as they exist betwixt and between the fictional worlds of the game and the physical worlds of their lives—all where human hands, game controller, and digital landscapes meet. As an assemblage, the identity category of "gamer" only comes into existence at the encounter of a physical organic body with the digital game technologies; it is the interaction of human bodies "becoming with" (Haraway, 2008) machinic bodies that identifying as a gamer even becomes possible. Thus, as a social identity at the conjuncture of human and technological bodies, the category of "gamer" should be understood as one example of the cyborg body as a socio-technological assemblage.

When we play them, games also make us rethink who we are—our bodies, identities, and subjectivities. For example, many games thrust you into the role of a character, expecting you to play the life of a different person and assume their identity when you make decisions. Others allow you to construct an avatar of your choosing, even if choices are always limited and within the possibilities of the design of the game. Nonetheless, you often become a different person, one who you know is not you, but whose story and life you experience as if you were them. As Jenson et al. (2015) illustrate in their study of massively multiple online role-playing games, "digitally-mediated identities (like all identities) are multiple and contingent, reproduced or altered through the socio-technical affordances of different virtual worlds" (p. 874). Like Haraway's cyborg, gamers find "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (Haraway, 1991) between what it means to be themselves as players and what it means to be themselves as characters. This blurring of self and other, and of the material and virtual, facilitates different embodied and affective possibilities between players and games.

As Burrill (2017) suggests, Haraway's cyborg is already queer because of its challenge to the stability of identity categories. The cyborg as socio-technological assemblage becomes a key figure for understanding queer gamers. Echoing the insights of those queer gamers in the documentary *Gaming in Color* (Jones, 2014), my interviewees commented on how sometimes being queer and being a gamer felt irreconcilable. Homophobia in toxic gamer culture and communities (Consalvo, 2012), anti-nerd and -geek discourse in mainstream LGBT culture, and heteronormative design in video games are just a few of

these reasons. Understanding how these queer gamers connect to the games they play sheds light on how they navigate this irreconcilability and imagine games as a space for worldmaking possibilities.

Centering the experiences queer gamers, viewing gamers as socio-technological assemblages allows me to center games as an object of analysis for understanding players' affective engagements. Games create the possibilities for both world- and meaning-making. As I explore below, many gamers will tell you that they connect with characters, stories, and game worlds in a variety of ways—through joy, excitement, nostalgia, empathy, and anger. These embodied connections with digital bodies are one way we as humans (or players, cyborgs, assemblages, or combination thereof) can have joint kinship with technology.

Three Mechanisms for Game Affect and Embodiment

If Shaw (2014) is right in her claim that identification is not the primary mode of engagement for gamers with their games, what are the different ways that gamers connect with game worlds, stories, and characters? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to create an exhaustive taxonomy of gamers' affective modes of connection with games, I explore several possible modes of embodied and affective connection. Affect refers to the experiences of intensity, emotions, and feelings that constitute and structure social, political, and economic worlds (McGlotten, 2013). As queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003) articulates, affect is always embodied; it is rooted in the body through encounters, sensations, and stimuli that produce anger, excitement, joy, pleasure, and fear. "Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 19). Affects then move us and create bodily reactions. Our faces turn red when we become angry, we smirk when feel accomplished, and we cry when we feel sad and upset. Affect, feelings, and emotions help us experience, navigate, and understand the world and thus help shape our senses of self.

Drawing connections across the interviews, I identify three broad mechanisms that mediate my interviewees' game-playing experiences and affective connections: the 'worlding' elements of games, the practices of storytelling, and the gamer's own personal experiences. Drawing on these three mechanisms for the embodied and affective possibilities in games, I then focus on three specific stories from my interviewees to illustrate how these mechanisms facilitate embodied and affective play. These stories and their specificities bring the games to life and illustrate the possibilities for player's "inanimate affections" (Chen, 2011) with video games.

Worlding Elements of Games

The first mechanism I identify is what I call the 'worlding' elements of games. I borrow the concept of worlding from STS literature "to draw our attention to the ways that worlds come together through collective action and how they attract, repel, enroll, animate, and incite us" (Kenney, 2013, p. 137). For Stewart (2011), worldings "matter not because of how they are represented, but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements" (p. 445). Our attention becomes "attuned" to these "atmospheres," and we are swept up into these worlds through feelings, senses, affects—sometimes purposefully and sometimes not. Games are particularly interesting worlds where atmospheric landscapes and soundscapes immerse players deep into the game. An excerpt from Ethan's interview illustrates some of these worlding elements of video games.

> I remember being in my room playing *Baldur's Gate* by myself, and it was raining and lightning in the game. I think I had headphones on so it was super immersive. Then it was actually raining outside in real life, and I remember there being a point where I forgot that I was in my room…it just felt like I was inside the game. Then the music was great and I think that just kind of sucked me in too. Then in *Tomb Raider*, I remember distinctively feeling like I was Lara Croft, because there is a point in the game where you turn a corner and there's a T-Rex there. So I remember being genuinely terrified…like I wasn't able to control the character at all. I was panicking. But it felt like I was actually in the game.

The first game that Ethan references, *Baldur's Gate*, draws him into the game world through its atmosphere and music. He was so caught up in this atmosphere that he felt like he had been lifted from the comfort of his room and dropped into the world of the game. He was immersed in this world and felt like he was a part of the game. In the second game, *Tomb Raider*, Ethan feels like he is in the game because of the fear of creature in the game world. The game draws him in through suspense and surprise, and the game is so effective that it physically stunts his ability to play the game. He panics, and his interactivity and kinesthetic agency is temporarily diminished.

Another media-specific worlding element of games is interactivity through game mechanics. Game mechanics are the design functions and rules that facilitate player interaction. Mechanics such as shooting a gun or making your character walk forward further immerse us in the digital world of the game. Mechanics themselves can also be queer, insofar as they challenge the social norms of not only gender and sexuality, but also expectations of play. Pat identifies an example where the queer mechanics in *Bully* challenge the dominant expectations of sexual gameplay and the assumptions of heterosexual men as the ideal player:

> One of my favorite things that developers have ever done in a game was in the Xbox version of *Bully*. They made an achievement that you can only get by kissing boys. So for all of the people who are completionists and wanted to get 100% on everything, they had to go and kiss a boy at some point. It's not like my goal is to indoctrinate all the straight boys, but I think that the fact that you wanted to get to this thing, you had to have this one experience that all the gay people have had to had—playing through all the straight characters. And like for this one moment, your character was at least bisexual. And you had to experience that, and that made me incredibly happy.

For Pat, *Bully*'s game mechanics of kissing boys as a male protagonist make it possible for straight men to temporarily embody a bisexual character, thus providing an alternative possibility to how games can grapple with issues of gender and sexuality. Game mechanics are immersive elements that can provide a glimpse into someone else's life, or what feminist scholar María Lugones (1987) describes as "world"-travelling. Here, the game mechanics make queerness persistent and explicit, turning the tables on the normative cisgender heterosexual male orientations to game play. Sadly, since mechanics inherently rely on player choices, this example of queerness is easy to miss and not necessarily a mandatory experience for everyone playing *Bully*. Nonetheless, it serves as an excellent example of how queer game mechanics allow for embodiment and affective connections through gameplay. Games as interactive media allow players to immerse themselves in game worlds, to get swept up in interacting with digital atmospheres, and to get lost in virtual landscapes and soundscapes.

Storytelling Practices in Games

A game's storytelling practices are the second mechanism that facilitates a gamer's bonds with games. Also a part of the worlding experience, storytelling is not unique to digital games. However, the queer gamers I spoke to reference interesting stories, nuanced and developed characters, and plot twists as three different ways that games give players a sense of interest, embodiment, and connection. Tina states that while game atmospheres are not particularly important to her, "I think I need to have the right story and character I can relate to really draw me in. With stories where I can go, 'OK! I can't figure out the structure of the story,' then they've really done a good job with it." For many gamers, stories and characters that they can relate to draw them into the game world. However, relating to these stories and characters does not necessarily mean connecting with them through a means of identification—gamers often relate and empathize with stories and experiences that they themselves do not have (Shaw, 2014). More importantly, for many gamers, a story that can surprise them with interesting plot development and narrative twists ground them into the

game, further immersing and worlding them in these digital fictions and creating a sense of investment and belonging in these game narratives.

All of the gamers that I spoke with said that they were partial to role-playing games, or RPGs. In RPGs, players are thrust into a world where they control and make the decisions for a character. Oftentimes, this is a character with a pre-established history, personality, and motivations. Characters with already developed personalities allow gamers to experience worlds and narratives different than their own. Emily told me that she enjoys immersing herself in someone else's story, sometimes as a means of escaping the atrocities of the physical world.

> One of the reasons that I play video games is so that I'm not bombarded with war and stuff that is happening in this world. Because you can explore different dialogues in games without having it be set in reality. Like the story itself can be a metaphor for different things that happen in this world.

While Emily still plays games filled with violence, death, and crime, the storytelling aspect of games transports her out of this world, so that she can temporarily forget the real-life tragedies. It is important to note that her escapism is a form of privilege; she can choose to escape reality and disengage from material realities of the physical world because of her social position especially as a white woman. But it is in the digital nature of these games that stories, characters, and escapisms become possible. As I show with interviewee's specific stories below, storytelling and character development are a major site for gamers to connect with games and be affected by their narratives.

Connections through Personal Experience

Lastly, while not a specific element of video games themselves, the personal experiences of the player make it possible for a player to enjoy and relate to a game. As illustrated by studies such as Bell et al. (2015), embodied subjectivities and personal experience influence how players interact and connect with games. Personal experience might be sharing an identity marker with a character, just as Tina shares when she realizes the similarities between her and Aurora James, a lesbian character from *Gangsters in Love* by Voltage Games.

> I don't know how many times I was playing through a Voltage game, and I took a screenshot of it and sent it to my best friend to say that this woman gets me she's not even real…. Aurora James says something like, "Oh, every good lesbian has a 'treasure box.'" She was talking about having a box of sex toys, and I took a picture and sent it to my friend. I said, "I swear to god that she just gets me!"

Because the character of Aurora James is a lesbian and references a common experience that lesbian women have, Tina feels a connection to

her—that this fictional character understands what it is like to be a lesbian. Queer game scholar Jenny Sundén (2009) argues that queer identities and subjectivities of gamers orient their bodies and perspectives in ways that promote connection. She also illustrates how these queer orientations provide possibilities for queer play, even within games without LGBT content. I return to this understanding of queer play in the last section on David, Pat, and Gage's stories.

For some folks, characters share particular traumatic or difficult life experiences with the player. David mentioned that he felt particularly connected meeting Zoë Quinn and being able to play her game, *Depression Quest*, since he too grapples with depression and anxiety. And for others, the personal connections they have with games relate to reconnecting to the past. For example, Emily tells me that she enjoys the "cultural significance" of the *Assassin's Creed* games.

> I like immersing myself in the history and just exploring those cities. In *Assassin's Creed 2*, you get to explore Venice and Florence and climb up the Medici Chapel and the San Lorenzo Basilica and the Florence Cathedral. I like to travel and I have been to some of those cities. Then when I played the game, it was like, "Hey! I've climbed up that in real life before. Now I'm climbing up it as an assassin."

Because personal experiences are carried along with the gamer as they encounter game stories and worlds, these personal experiences are an integral component to possible ways that players can connect with games.

Three Case Studies for Game Affect and Embodiment

In the remainder of this essay, I turn my attention to three particular examples my interviewees brought up to understand these mechanisms in action. Exploring these three cases allows me to world you, the reader, into the affective and embodied possibilities of digital gaming. Close readings of these games and my interviewee's stories about them allow me to animate some of the ways that players forge connections with specific games. All of these games are RPGs, which world the players through their use of atmosphere, mechanics, and storytelling. Where necessary, I provide a brief plot description of the game to understand the context for my interviewees' stories.

Final Fantasy has been a popular games series since 1987. These Japanese RPGs take place across several science fiction and fantasy worlds that include advanced technology, magical creatures, and the typical hero's journey in which the protagonists set off on an adventure to save the world from an impending doom. Two of the case studies below involve the *Final Fantasy* series. Both David and Pat reference how different elements of these games illustrate the potential embodied and affective possibilities of digital gaming.

David told me that *Final Fantasy* played an important role in his history with gaming. He spoke to me about his connection with a character from *Final Fantasy IX (FFIX)* named Freya. For David, Freya symbolizes both as a strong female character as well as a character whose story he feels he can relate to.

> I can feel myself getting emotional just thinking about it. I really responded to Freya probably because she's the strongest, because she has a very tragic arc in the first third of the game. She is also the quintessential strong female character in the game that almost every *Final Fantasy* has. Yet there was this fragility to her in regards to her past. She lost the love of her life, and upon finding him, she discovers that he lost all of his memories and has no idea who she is. And, she was just devastated by that. At the same time, she loses her home. And she still survives and still persists as a strong role model for the main character; she manages to push through that tragedy to still represent a sense of strength.

Freya's story is about abandonment, loss, and emotional resilience. I asked David to explain a little more in detail about why he felt so emotional about Freya's character and her story, and he mentions that he is able to "empathize with her" and that he can "relate to her situation."

> I think the sense of being forgotten and what she had to go through. *[Continues to tear up.]* I think it's kind of a hidden phobia of mine—it ties back to friends disassociating themselves from me. Like in my childhood, where suddenly they just didn't want to be my friend. They didn't want to be around me. They didn't want to associate themselves with me at all. And Freya goes through that with her lover. *[Still lightly crying.]* And she still finds meaning in her life and works her way through that. I feel like I know what she goes through when suddenly she isn't recognized or she has nothing to go back to.

David sees a lot of himself in Freya's character; he connects his own personal history of abandonment with her story of emotional hardship and resilience. David's reflection on Freya's story triggers him to begin crying, an embodied expression of his connection with her story and to the events in the world of *FFIX*. It also seems to me that David views Freya as this strong emotional role model for himself. He strives to be resilient like her when she "finds meaning in her life and works her way through that." While he doesn't explicitly tie his coming out experience to his connection to Freya, it isn't necessarily a misstep to see the possible connections. It's a common experience for queer folks to often fear and experience their friends and family members disassociating themselves for coming out. There is a possible queer reading to David's story, since he as a gay man has potentially experienced this

homophobic disassociation; while only speculative, we see how David's experiences of being a gay man are reflected in Freya's story, allowing for a particular affective and embodied experience because of David's social identity.

Similar to David's connection with Freya, Pat also describes a strong personal connection to multiple characters from the *Final Fantasy* series. When I asked Pat about some of his favorite characters, he was quick to mention Hope, a character from *Final Fantasy XIII*; his connection with Hope stems from his own understandings of himself as a gay man.

> One of the big things for me about being gay is the ability to be both strong and vulnerable, masculine and feminine, also submissive and dominant. I guess the characters that resonate with me the most in games especially are ones who can do both—characters who actually have dimension. Like they can be masculine but they can also have feelings. I get a lot of shit for actually liking Hope from *Final Fantasy XIII*. Everybody thinks that he is a whiny emo[tional] kid, but I actually think that he is very interesting, especially because he develops in the series into an adult. And he is thoughtful, but also a guy. He is somebody who I think of as an appealing character.

While Hope in *Final Fantasy XIII* is not coded as queer, Pat reads a sense of complexity in Hope's ability to transgress gendered expectations and relates his experience of being gay to Hope's story. Pat views Hope's character as having "dimension," and thus he is able to relate to a character who can transgress social norms and expectations in order to be themselves. Pat understands his queerness here to be relational, and therefore is able to read Hope through a queer lens, even though he isn't necessarily stating it explicitly. Pat also references Yuna from *Final Fantasy X* as another character who is able to transcend social scripts of gender.

> Yuna from *Final Fantasy X*—as long as we're sticking with *Final Fantasies*—she is another character that I really, really appreciate. A lot of the female characters are these sort of princess-y healer types who just are submissive and need to be rescued. She sort of starts out as that, but she makes these very strong choices to like have a lot of agency, but also in a way that she isn't like, "I'm like super tough, grumpy"—not acting like a stereotypical male character just rendered female, but she's still sort of sensitive and still very emotional and strong when she needs to be. Those are the characters that I appreciate the most and are drawn to. Maybe this is unfair to all the straight people out there, but that is a major component of the gay experience as a gay male is for me: having both of those things and not being particularly shoved into a box.

Pat's experiences as a gay man facilitate a lot of his connections to games and their characters. In the above excerpt, Pat hints that these nuanced and complex characters with both dominant and submissive personalities who blend masculinity and femininity are what draw him into a game. Pat reads both Yuna and Hope in new queer ways, examining the ways that their stories transgress gendered scripts of what it means to be a man, a woman, queer, or heterosexual. Just as Pat's own embodied gender and sexual identity transgress social mores and expectations, so too do Hope and Yuna's. These characters, according to Pat, become interesting and relatable because of their ability to challenge binary gender scripts. Because Pat had mentioned previously that he does his best to play games queerly whenever he can, it is no surprise that he employs a queer reading strategy in order to relate and empathize with these two *Final Fantasy* characters.

While some gamers like Pat interpret characters in new and queer ways, sometimes finding canonical queerness in games can have an equally important impact on a queer gamer's embodied sense of self. Gage, an asexual and pansexual trans man I interviewed, recalled stories he read about other trans guys connecting with the trans narratives in *Dragon Age: Inquisition.* One of the NPCs in *Inquisition*, Krem, is a trans man who fights under the leadership of one of your party members, Iron Bull. In a cinematic cutscene where your character finds out Krem is trans, Iron Bull tells the story about how his people's culture embraces those who gender transition, telling Krem that they too have a place in society and aren't looked down upon. In a following cutscene, the game's dialogue mechanics give your character an option to misgender Krem when he is absent; without skipping a beat, Iron Bull metaphorically slaps the player-character's hand and reiterates that "[Krem] is not a woman," further reaffirming Krem's identity to the player-character. Gage reflects on hearing stories of trans men who played *Inquisition* and experienced a sense of gender affirmation.

> I remember reading about *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and reading about some trans guys who played through it. There's when Iron Bull is like, basically, "I don't care. He exists! Whatever." People were just like "this isn't something that I experience in real life." So for people to experience that sort of thing in the game— someone saying that "I don't care if this group of people don't recognize this," it's great! Like it's great that there is someone in the game that doesn't care that you are a trans guy because you exist as a guy and that's who you are. And that was really validating for them, even though you're not directly involved in that story necessarily.

Iron Bull's affirmation of trans lives and unwavering support function in response to the player-character's misunderstanding, actively grappling with transphobia and issues of gender identity. Both Iron Bull and the game itself behoove you to take Krem's gender identity seriously, which

is one of the first AAA games to actively grapple with the lives and experiences of trans characters. For this trans gamer who played through this scene, Gage imagined that he felt a sense of validation and authenticity in seeing a trans narrative in a game. Canonical narratives of queerness and trans lives in games send an important signal to these queer gamers—like Gage and the trans men he talks about—that they both exist and that their stories belong not only in places like video games, but also in popular culture and society at large. Attempts to address transphobia like in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* also creates possibilities for educating non-trans gamers on some of the common experiences of trans people without the fear to actual trans people to put their lives and bodies at risk of violence.

As we can see in these stories above, both the *Final Fantasy* series and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* do an excellent job creating complex, relatable characters and telling interesting stories to which queer gamers can relate. As RPGs, *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* gives us a lens into understanding some of the multiple ways that queer gamers connect to games. The story arc of Freya moves David. Through his connection, David begins to understand his own ability to grapple with past traumas and his fears through her development and perseverance. Pat connects with Hope and Yuna's complex and nuanced character qualities and their abilities to transcend binary understandings of gender. And to Gage and the trans gamer whom he read about, Krem and Iron Bull provide an example of stories and mechanics that affirm transgender lives. In each of these stories, gender and sexuality act a starting point for these gamers to connect with games narratives, allowing for a new possibility of Sundén's (2009) concept of queer play. Their play is queer because the affective affiliations they build with games grants them a form of meaning-making for their own queer selves. These game characters are important to these players in different ways, but all three of them find affective connections to stories and characters that help them understand their own senses of self and their senses of embodied identity.

Play as Embodied, Games as Worldmaking

In conclusion, games are technologies that mediate both gamers' identities and senses of self as well as create the possibilities for embodiment and inanimate affection. As I have argued above, centering gaming as an embodied practice allow us to delve deeper into understanding gamers' relationships with their game technologies. In this paper, I discuss how we, as game scholars, should view gamers as socio-technological assemblages and critically examine how they connect and relate to game worlds, narratives, and characters. I offer three potential affective mechanisms to help understand how players connect to games: worlding elements, storytelling practices, and previous personal experiences. To illustrate this, I used three case

studies from my informants to illustrate how these mechanisms for affect and embodiment operate for the queer gamers I interviewed.

How we play games affects how we come to understand our own experiences, bodies, emotions, and identities, which illustrates how queer worldmaking can happen through gaming. Cage's story is particularly illustrative of this, as it describes the possibilities of trans gamers to feel validated, to see trans narratives in media, and to imagine a world where transgender experience is common and accepted. It also allows them to share their stories of connections with other gamers, creating new queer gamer worlds and communities for them to find a sense of belonging. Understanding the embodied and affective possibilities of play give us one understanding of how queer gamers view the importance of digital gaming. Playing games allows queer players to flourish in between physical and digital worlds to create new senses of queer belonging, and it becomes apparent that we, as scholars, should continue to understand how gaming as an embodied and affective experience shapes how different types of gamers understand and situate their gaming practices.

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