

PERFORMING CRITIQUE: QUEER VIDEO GAMES AS CRITICAL METHOD

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Performing Critique: Queer Video Games as Critical Method

Abstract

Against the backdrop of a growing concern for the fate of critique in the current era, queer video games such as *tranxiety*, *Dream Daddy* and *Gone Home* have begun to engage players in the process of critically examining their own assumptions and immersing them in a performative critique, particularly as it relates to non-normative lived experiences. Alongside exploring whether these games are ‘merely’ the result of critical game design, such that players are enlisted to perform critique, or if queer play is more than a prescribed behavior, this article will utilize examples from across various video game platforms and genres to demonstrate that whether trying to survive daily life as a trans woman in the beginning stages of transition in *tranxiety* or exploring the dating life of Maple Bay’s latest resident in *Dream Daddy*, queer video games serve as a platform through which players are encouraged to perform critique via queer play, that is to say, playing outside of traditional video game and character norms. Embracing a productive nexus of critical reflection and performativity, queer video games demonstrate that critique is well served by participatory media. Critique has entered the digital era and, though transformed, it is alive and well.

1 Introduction

In his 2004 article, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” Bruno Latour highlights the ways in which his deconstructivist approach to science has come to be seen as an enemy of scientific inquiry and a friend to anti-science movements such as climate change deniers.¹ He asks his readers to undertake a new initiative across critical discourses, namely to, “devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care ...”² While Latour provides little in the way of suggestion, except to note that Heidegger’s notion of *gathering* might prove useful, his 2004 article resonates deeply with the current political and academic landscape. At present, critical theorists and those with a penchant for tearing constructs apart face a similar dilemma: navigating the precarious act of ‘troubling’ particular notions of reality without entirely dismissing objective reality as something that exists.

One answer to the question of critique and its role in modern society is to be found within queer video games. Drawing on Malaby, within this article I define games as, “semibounded and socially legitimate domain[s] of contrived contingency that generate interpretable outcomes,” which includes traditional video games, as well as walking simulators and visual novels.³ Additionally, I turn to Ruberg & Shaw’s 2017 edited

volume and seminal work, *Queer Game Studies*, to define queer video games both as those video games that forefront the representation of queer characters, as well as games that “question norms and conventions about how games, or specific games genres, are meant to function.”⁴ By highlighting the manner in which three queer video games: *tranxiety*, *Dream Daddy* and *Gone Home*, encourage their players to engage in a critique both of game genres and of broader society through the very act of playing said games, I aim to demonstrate that these forms of media exhibit a more productive form of critique that rises to Latour’s challenge to transcend superficial forms of deconstructivism. Simultaneously, I argue against accepting the performative power of play at face value, instead suggesting that a certain level of structuration à la Giddens is involved in pushing players and designers to alter the preconceived notions of the worlds around them.

2_ Queer Video Games

Key to understanding queer video games as a form of productive critique is an understanding of this label as simultaneously encompassing video games centered on matters of queer representation, as well as those that push players to transgress normative understandings of video games as a media form. While recent work has rightfully sought to push queer analyses of video games beyond solely those that are “merely” representational of queer identities, there is much to be said for that which is labeled as ‘mere.’⁵ As Herzfeld reminds us, “mereness is not a matter of essence but of attribution – and thus of the power to attribute.”⁶ Any portrayal of queer video games that opts to label discussions of queer representation in video games as “bird-watching for queer characters” is a political move to relegate matters of representation and queer existence in video game media to the realm of ‘mere’ and unimportant.⁷ It is also a move rooted in particular understandings of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ analysis; in labeling discussions of queer characters as ‘mere,’ those who neglect to consider the significance of queer characters in video games misrepresent the often deeply political and subversive act that studio employees engage in when including queer characters in their games. To ignore such representation in video games and relegate analyses surrounding the existence of queer characters to the sidelines is to create an unnecessary binary division between representational analyses and those analyses that consider what Sundén terms

“queer play” or “playing the game in ways not anticipated by design.”⁸ Instead of engaging with said binary division between discussions of representation and matters of queering games beyond including queer characters, I instead embrace multiplicity and understand queer video games to be not only games with queer characters in them, but also games that push players to consider their own presuppositions and societally-rooted normative constructions such as gender and sexuality.

As Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler note in their recent work on queer fan fiction, queer representation in video games and on television is significant not simply because it exists, but because the existence of certain types of marginalized identities speaks to the norms that inform the broader video game development industry and, in turn, expose particular societal norms that shape said industry.⁹ Representation on screens can help create safe spaces for marginalized players within cyberspace.¹⁰ Representation is not ‘mere;’ it matters. Accordingly, through my analyses I aim to demonstrate that taking seriously matters of representation alongside considerations of ‘queering’ play paints a more holistic image of queerness in games. This image, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of the critical power behind queer video games both as tools of representation and of challenging normative means of thinking. Ultimately, it is important to push beyond a binary conversation of queerness in games as either representation or ‘other’ in order to realize queerness as Muñoz defines it: a continued practice of desiring differently toward a better future.¹¹

Discussions of ‘mere’ representation aside, it is worth noting that I draw partially on the LGBTQ Video Game Archive to determine whether or not a video game includes queer characters.¹² Adrienne Shaw and her collaborators’ work in the archive challenges depictions of queer characters as solely those that explicitly mention their sexuality, but instead understands queer characters to exist in the margins of games and in the subtext of broader narratives. In *Banjo Tooie*, a game developed by Rare and published by Nintendo in 2000, for example, there are several references to queerness in Jolly Roger’s cartoon bar. Included among these are the “grab a sailor” nights and the bar’s signature “Ginger Beer” drink, an old Cockney rhyming slang term for queer.¹³ Such an expanded definition of what constitutes queer representation in video games is significant due to the frequently allegorical manner in which said games choose to speak to queerness. Simultaneously, queer video games are also those that “question norms and conventions about how games ... are expected to function.”¹⁴ Furthermore,

they engage with questions about the limitations of video games, of computers, and of digital technologies, thereby challenging assumptions about what a video game both can and should do.

This multiplicitous understanding of what constitutes a queer video game informs my analyses of *tranxiety*, *Dream Daddy* and *Gone Home*. Each game demonstrates a powerful intersection of queer representation and what Chang terms “queergaming,” or a “refusal of the idea that digital games and gaming communities are the provenance of adolescent, straight, white, cisgender, masculine, able, male, and ‘hardcore’ bodies and desires and the articulation of an investment in alternative modes of play and ways of being.”¹⁵ Each of these games pushes players to reconsider normativity as it exists both within games and within the world, albeit in markedly different manners. Via their divergent methods and the means by which each game encourages players to consider both matters of queer representation within games and notions of normativity within broader society, these three video games demonstrate how queer video games exhibit precisely the sort of productive critique Latour calls for when reflecting on the purportedly destructive nature of critical theory in the early 2000s.¹⁶ Though critical in their nature, queer video games encourage players and designers alike to consider how they might further expand their understandings of the world around them and of video game principles. They do not destroy current norms entirely, but instead ask how such norms come into existence and if there might be room for multiple norms within our multiplicitous realities.

3_Games as Structuration

Though masterfully designed to cause players and designers alike to question normativity within games and broader society, particularly with regards to gender, romance, and sexuality, any analysis of the productive critique the following games offer players would be remiss not to include the caveat that players must choose to engage in the playing of the games in order to participate in critique. Designers cannot force people to play their games and, even when playing, cannot force players to engage with them in the expected manner. In *tranxiety*, players can choose to remain in the lobby for time untold, and in *Gone Home*, players can opt never to enter the attic, but instead to wander the house aimlessly. Indeed, even in *Dream Daddy*, players can, by means of downloading a file originally excluded from the game, play an ending that entirely usurps

the game's current focus on fatherhood and relationships and instead reorients the narrative toward one tied to the dark power of cults. How, then, are these games to be understood as producing productively queer critique? I suggest that an understanding of gameplay as informed by Giddens' structuration theory offers one potential answer.

A simultaneous enactment of game design and the reproduction of game design principles, or reshaping of said principles as encouraged by each of the three games mentioned, bears marked similarity to Giddens' conceptualization of structure and agency as intertwined and predicated on ontological security.¹⁷ Though focused on carefully crafting definitions so as to build a framework for social analysis, Giddens' *The Constitution of Society* emphasizes that structures are façades of stability enacted through performance on the part of agents. In essence, structure both informs actors' actions and those actors' actions in turn create structure. The process is dualistic and neither structure nor actions exist outside of the other.¹⁸ As Fuchs notes, Giddens' theory is ultimately a claim that "In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible," that is to say that structure and agency are not in binary opposition to one another but rather an amalgamation of dualistic interaction.¹⁹ Similarly in video games, designers can build a particular structure but the manner in which players engage with that structure will ultimately reshape the structure itself. Taking the academically popular *Second Life* as an example, players frequently created structures and games unexpected by Linden Lab employees and designers, building entire islands that preserved artifacts from otherwise shuttered massively-multiplayer online games.²⁰ The developers of *Second Life* in turn implemented tools by which *Second Life* users were better able to mold and modify the architecture of that virtual world.²¹ As evidenced by this example, players must first engage with a particular structure in order to participate in the process of structuration.

For queer video games, then, players must first find these games and choose to play them in one of the manners designed for by their creators. When they do, the designers succeed in aiding players to participate in a ludic form of structuration, and in the case of each of the three games mentioned, manipulating expectations about how to play games in the first place. When engaged with as designed, queer video games alter and challenge broadly accepted norms of gameplay and design beyond games. In short, queer video games evidence structuration and appear to purposefully utilize the process of structuration in order to produce queer critique via play. That being said, as Dibbell

reminds us with his example of *LambdaMOO* and its ultimate demise due to events surrounding a virtual form of nonconsensual cybersex, there is always the potentiality of a designed system collapsing in the process of structuration and of a game producing unexpected and unwelcome outcomes.²²

4_ *tranxiety*

On December 27th, 2014 Leelah Alcorn, a seventeen-year-old girl, wrote a deeply chilling note, posted it on her tumblr page, and took her own life. In the note she detailed how she had struggled with her gender identity since the age of four, having been assigned to the male gender at birth. This struggle and her coming out as a trans woman led her parents to pull her from school and force her to attend so-called ‘conversion therapy.’ The psychological trauma of that experience was the root cause of her death.

In honor of Leelah’s struggle and her love of gaming, as well as game design, *twitch.io* users *asciibears* and *tegothica* organized a month long game jam to focus on games that raise awareness of LGBTQ+ struggles, specifically those that impact trans youth.²³ A laudable and widely acknowledged success of community organizing, the jam produced a number of queer video games, but one in particular highlights a powerful intersection of matters of representation and of queering notions of gameplay: *Riotjayne’s tranxiety*.²⁴

After acquiring *tranxiety* for a single Australian dollar, the transaction itself an act of queering norms about the cost of more mainstream games, players start *tranxiety* in a black and white room. This not-so-subtle callout of binary approaches to understanding the world is the setting for the player’s first queer encounter, namely with a Professor Oak-like character who immediately requests the player identify themselves as either cisgender or trans.²⁵ Three options appear on screen following this brief dialogue: cis, trans, and ‘I’d rather not.’ It is well worth noting that I and several cisgender friends who have played the game continue to struggle to choose the trans option given we do not feel it our place to opt into the trans dialogue at the start, even within a game. This productive discomfort that the game produces in cisgender players is one example of how *tranxiety* creates and forces players to engage in productive critique via self-reflection. Discomfort aside, each option presents its own dialogue tree and each queers players’ understandings of what a ‘normal’ interaction in any other game would entail. Whereas being trans is not often understood as normative by broader society, within

the game world players who identify as trans and choose that option are greeted warmly, with enthusiasm and then briefly warned about the game's transphobic and transmisogynistic content. The greeter concludes by situating this play experience as but a small glimpse into the multiple intersections of oppression and acts of violence that trans people face across the globe.

Players who identify as cis and choose that option face another queering of expectations. Often accepted as the 'normal' gender identity, the greeter immediately exclaims, "You're a cis? Really? I never would have known! Don't worry, you can barely tell you're cis! You're totally passing as trans!" before ultimately saying, "Oh wait! Yea I see it there. You almost fooled me there! I almost believed that you were trans!" Trans people face such discourses of their identity as somehow deceptive, as well as frequent micro-aggressive uses of language like labeling trans people as 'a transgender' or worse yet 'a transsexual' every day. Accordingly, this outburst by the greeter and their use of language highlights for the cisgender player one way that their gender identity is privileged by confronting them with problematic discourse surrounding said identity and flipping traditionally transphobic micro-aggressions on their head. This outburst by the greeter and their use of language is but one instance of this game's near constant productive critique surrounding the quotidian struggle some trans people face in navigating the world, as well as how said struggle is often glossed over.

As the game continues, the player must confront, or rather experience, a wide array of issues through the game's narrative, including bathroom accessibility, public usage of transphobic language, and feelings of isolation that often exist during the early stages of transitioning. Still, it is in-game mechanics such as navigating the game world and its story that its queer critique most shines through. This is because moving through the game can prove challenging to players as the avatar, Jess, chooses to disengage from her environment except to sleep. Players unaware that, despite Jess' frequent mentions of hunger or boredom, they can do nothing except to sleep and have a brief encounter in Jess' home with her best friend, Denim, are likely to grow frustrated at the limitations of the game. Such limitations are purposefully designed into the game to push players to consider what it means to engage in the act of playing and, accordingly, the limitations that exist in social realities such as trans lived experiences.

Once the player arrives at the third day and is able to move Jess outside into the world on a mission to acquire a resupply of her hormones and some basic groceries,

they are faced with the reality that not every struggle can be overcome. Making the wrong navigational choice, the player can come across a non-playable character (NPC) that immediately shouts a transphobic slur at them. Jess is reduced to tears and, without the player controlling her, rushes home only to stay indoors for the rest of the game. Even if the player successfully avoids that particular encounter, they will find themselves unable to move Jess to the grocery store due to her anxiety surrounding crowded public spaces. When they attempt to move the character, she simply will not move past an invisible wall within the game world and instead turns around while voicing the fact that her anxiety will not allow her to enter the grocery store or leave her home. During the game, these and other similar interactions between Jess and the player challenge player notions of control over avatars and environment by carefully usurping player control over most movements on the part of the avatar. While players are nominally able to navigate Jess about the screen, *tranxiety*'s use of 'on-the-rails' play is quick to remind those that engage with it that trans people are often unable to control aspects of society that work to marginalize and oppress them.

Throughout the play experience of *tranxiety*, the game itself productively critiques assumptions players are likely to have about trans experiences, be they surrounding micro-aggressive uses of language, blatantly aggressive slurs, struggles of anxiety and depression, or basic notions of control in video games. In doing so, *tranxiety* pushes its players to question their own stances and understandings of trans realities, in effect "adding reality to matters of fact" instead of "subtract[ing]" from them.²⁶ Additionally, the means of playing the game and lack of control on the player's part to alter events within the game narrative or even move the character at will encourage a critique of game design norms surrounding agency. Nevertheless, it is in the act of playing *tranxiety* that players perform a critique designed by the game's creator. Simultaneously, the ability of players to choose to play the game as intended or simply abandon the game due to frustration demonstrates how all games are part of a process of structuration. In playing or not playing the game, players either engage with the 'structure' of the video game and interpret its ideas or, if they choose not to participate, they forego the act of performing critique through play. Should they choose to participate in the game, players will encounter intersecting critiques of trans representation in video games and character agency in game narratives, which aid *tranxiety* in creating a space for players and

designers to productively critique video games and broader society by considering realities they may not experience or have considered.

5_ *Dream Daddy*

Notably more lighthearted in its approach to queering gameplay than *tranxiety* while still committed to furthering player understandings of queer realities, *Dream Daddy* is a romance game centered on fatherhood, emotions, and positive masculinity that was released in 2017 and was developed by Game Grumps contributors Vernon Shaw and Leighton Gray. In contrast to recent work on *Dream Daddy* that places the game squarely in the genre of a ‘dating simulator’, I argue that this game is situated somewhere between a visual novel style game and a dating simulator.²⁷ Drawing on genre norms of both visual novel and dating simulator, *Dream Daddy* blends matters of queer representation with what Chang terms “queergaming,” the questioning of norms surrounding games and particular game genres.²⁸

Dating simulators are defined by Katherine Isbister as games in which,

The player works to woo over an NPC (usually female) so that she and the player are ‘dating.’ ... [Players] must choose the right things to say and do to court her and keep her love once she has admitted that she cares.²⁹

While *Dream Daddy* certainly involves ‘wooing’ any or all of the father figures in the game, it also follows a relatively ‘on-the-rails’ play-style that arguably pushes the game into the ‘visual novel’ genre, defined by Lu as,

a digital narrative-based medium featuring interactive decision-making gameplay – much like that of choose-your-own-adventure books – which allows the player to decide how the visual novel progresses and eventually how the visual novel will end.³⁰

Emphasizing both romancing father figures from your new home in Maple Bay, as well as interacting with your own daughter as she applies to various art schools, *Dream Daddy* foregoes gameplay that places it squarely in the realm of dating simulators or visual novels and instead queers the boundary between the two, existing somewhere between them given its equal emphasis on the narrative of fatherhood, the act of dating, and the significance of emotional connection.³¹

Opening to the relaxing original song ‘Dream Daddy’ with lyrics such as “Dream Daddy, who’s gonna love you baby,” the very act of beginning *Dream Daddy* queers the notion of what the game is ultimately about.³² In queer lexicons, specifically those of gay men, ‘daddy’ often implies an older, wealthy man who dates a significantly

younger man in a ‘questionable’ partnership predominantly based on financial gain for the younger partner and companionship for the older partner.³³ Players will not find such ‘daddies’ in this game. Instead, the player begins the game by designing an actual father character, choosing from a vast array of character customization options available, including three variations of a ‘dad bod’ and a trans-inclusive ‘binder bod’ model. While wide-ranging customization has begun to be more commonplace across game platforms, within visual novels it remains rare to have the ability to choose from such a diverse and somewhat comical selection of customization options such as: Space Warrior Eyes or Kitty Mouth as a customization option, thereby beginning the play experience with a challenge to what players consider normative for the genres of visual novels or dating simulators.

Following the character creation screen, *Dream Daddy* opens with a meaningful conversation between the player as a father and their daughter, Amanda. Amanda shows the player several photos and through the conversation surrounding the photos, the player determines whether their recently deceased partner was a father or mother, as well as if Amanda was adopted or born to the couple. Notably, no questions are raised based on these choices and if the player’s character was partnered with another father, they are still able to choose that Amanda was born. These initial choices continue the multi-faceted act of critiquing the genre of visual novel-dating simulator through queering understandings surrounding it. By allowing the player significantly greater autonomy in shaping both the appearance and backstory of the character they are playing as compared to other queer visual novels such as *Coming Out on Top*, *Dream Daddy* pushes players to reconsider what the limits of the genre are and why only particular configurations of characters, namely white cisgender gay men, are made meaningful in other games.³⁴ Simultaneously, *Dream Daddy* queers the notion of queer community, highlighting that to be queer is not solely to be gay.

Perhaps the most striking concurrent queering of social norms and game genre that *Dream Daddy* engages in is evidenced by what Game Grumps chose to exclude from the game: sex. Unlike *Coming Out on Top* or other visual novels, sex is only ever hinted at in the gameplay of *Dream Daddy* and never explicitly mentioned or shown on screen. Queer visual novels do not always contain depictions of sex or explicit mentions of sex acts, but queer dating simulators rarely exclude them.³⁵ Situated between visual novel

and dating sim, *Dream Daddy* foregoes explicit sexuality and instead chooses to explore “character driven paths.”³⁶ In doing so, it challenges queer notions of explicit sexuality in dating simulator games. Simultaneously, it challenges the notion that queer relationships often center on sex by highlighting the rich and deep relationships that are forged throughout the game, both between the player’s father character and his daughter Amanda, as well as between the character and his dating partners, the dream daddies. This explicit decision to exclude sex received mixed reviews by players, in part because it was seen as a critique of non-monogamous sex lives and relationships.³⁷ Such a reception does, however, demonstrate that the game achieved its queer goal: to push players to consider norms of sexuality as they intersect with norms of queer communities and dating.

Instead of solely aiming to engage in a queer critique on heteronormative perceptions of queer community dating, *Dream Daddy* opts to also engage in a productive critique of what queer dating looks like in a world where sex is not assumed when two men date. Troubling normative and generalizing portrayals of queer men’s dating lives in dating simulators, *Dream Daddy* utilizes a queergaming model of pushing the genre outside of its norms to simultaneously critique players’ perceptions of what queer dating looks like, particularly as it relates to fathers. The multi-faceted queer critique that *Dream Daddy* produces is far from a homonormative stance on celibacy, but instead a challenge to broad generalizations that surround queer romance both in games and outside of them.³⁸

6_ *Gone Home*

Labeled a ‘walking simulator’ in the online video game store Steam, *Gone Home* was released by the Fulbright Company in 2013 to largely positive reviews.³⁹ Gameplay is indeed limited to walking through the abandoned mansion your family moved into while you were abroad for a year, but also includes clicking on objects, listening to audio logs from your missing sister that are triggered by touching some of those objects, and reading the various memorabilia left strewn around the house. In this sense, *Gone Home* certainly is a simulation of walking through a foreign house one is now meant to call home. It is also more than this. Despite a label that has come to be used more pejoratively than categorically, this game has been heralded as not only providing a rich play experience, but also pushing game design principles into new territory while

fighting against heteronormative character experiences by means of exhibiting a positive and widely-praised example.⁴⁰ Through its unapologetic centering of a lesbian romance tale as the key plot point and its queering of game design principles as well as genre tropes, *Gone Home* evidences an intersection of queer representation and queer game design that causes both players and designers to productively critique their assumptions about normative standards with regards to queer people as well as game design.

At the start of the game in June of 1995, the player arrives on the front porch of what has been playfully labeled a “Wunderkammer” by Gregory L. Bagnall in his analysis of *Gone Home*’s game design principles.⁴¹ Controlling Katie, a daughter, sister, and woman who has been away from her family for the past year while traveling abroad, players set off to investigate the mansion that serves as the game’s setting, a house in slight disarray following the family’s recent move and yet somehow filled to the brim with objects both useful for moving the narrative forward, as well as trinkets placed carefully throughout the setting to make the house feel like a ‘real’ home. Similarly to both *tranxiety* and *Dream Daddy*, *Gone Home* begins by pushing boundaries and questioning norms of game design principles. As a character, Katie does not truly exist. She is given a rather minute backstory and her sudden appearance at the undeniably eerie mansion in the middle of the Oregon woods is explained, too, but she is never seen or heard from. Instead, the player experiences the world through Katie as a lens, as a looking glass of sorts. As kopas describes her, “She is an absence ... She’s mostly outside of the game’s story because the space doesn’t have any real stories to tell about someone who has never lived in it.”⁴² The narrative of the game immediately begins by reminding you as the player of your character’s absence. This move pushes players such as kopas to not only question their significance within the tale being told, but also the nature of being away. It creates a moment of positive critique in that this omission produces a valuable line of inquiry for player and game designer alike, namely, ‘What does it mean to be absent, to observe, and return? How does it feel to discover, to fail to change the situation at hand both as a person and within the game as the purported main character?’

By decentering the player character, *Gone Home* critiques the accepted norm of game design of the player character and their narrative as central to the story being told. Instead of Katie taking center stage, the love story of her sister, Sam, instead shines

through. There are other family storylines told through objects and hidden files within the home, most notably the story of Katie's parents struggling to find harmony in their marriage, thus ultimately going on a couple's therapy trip, and thereby leaving the house abandoned for Katie's arrival, due to a complicated narrative involving Katie's mom falling for her park ranger subordinate and Katie's father processing an unnamed childhood trauma. While such tales are to be found within *Gone Home*, it is clear, based on Sam's ever-present audio logs, as well as what triggers the final credits, that Sam and her girlfriend Lonnie are the tale to which one should pay most attention.

In addition to queering implicitly accepted game norms about the player's role in game narratives, *Gone Home* also queers genre tropes. Arriving at 1:15 in the morning in the middle of a heavy thunderstorm at what by modern standards can only be considered a mansion, the player immediately finds themselves in a strange and empty house surrounded by sounds of rain, thunder, and the creaking of the house in the storm. As it becomes obvious through playing that the story is about a burgeoning romance between two women, anyone familiar with tropes surrounding abandoned houses in thunderstorms and queer romance in media, as kopas notes, expects either monsters or suicide.⁴³ With journal logs from Sam strewn about that describe vaguely paranormal phenomena, the flickering lights and creaking doors of the mansion place one on edge, fearing that death in the form of zombie, monster, or ghost waits just around the next corner or behind the next secret panel. Indeed, while playing the game myself I discovered a secret passageway from the father's eclectic library to a bedroom and let out an audible scream as the light bulb in the passageway shattered for no apparent reason. Typical tropes such as the shattered light bulb, abandoned house, stormy weather, and superfluous amount of secrets revealed in letters create a sort of tension in the player who awaits the game to take a turn toward the grim at any moment. *Gone Home* never does.

Having wandered through the poorly lit home searching for clues as to where Sam is and why the house is completely empty, the player ultimately arrives upstairs at an attic stairwell ringed in red lights that evinces a feeling of dread. Facing a sign that in no uncertain terms declares that the player should not enter the attic if the red lights are on, the player is faced with a choice. The previous audio log has clearly stated that Sam has gone to the attic to muse on Lonnie leaving for military basic training. Given Sam is not anywhere else to be found in the home, it follows that she might still be up in the

attic. Bravely, the player opens the attic stairwell expecting the game to finally turn into the grim horror game its ambience, and even its artwork in the Steam store, have been building up to. Contradicting ‘common sense’ surrounding video game and media tropes about abandoned homes in storms, signs that say do not enter, and sisters who sound grief-stricken, the game eschews horror and instead ends its narrative on a positive note. As the player climbs the stairs to the attic and finds a sketch of a two-piece heart locket, the final audio-log triggers and informs Katie that her sister is alive and safe. Lonnie, Sam’s girlfriend and an initiate in the United States military, has abandoned her basic training and asked Sam to come find her in Salem, Massachusetts. Sam has agreed and by the time Katie arrives home, she has already driven off in her car to begin an adventure with Lonnie away from her unaccepting parents and a house that never felt like home. There are no monsters, there is no horror. *Gone Home* has usurped what is normal in a game centered on queer romance in an abandoned house in the middle of the woods during a storm.

Through this act of tossing aside genre tropes in favor of a queer romance that ends on an optimistic and positive note, *Gone Home* questions players’ own assumptions about what is meant to occur not only within games, but particularly within games set in stormy, abandoned mansions in the middle of the woods. Adding to players’ conceptions of what belongs in a particular game environment through its somewhat banal ending, *Gone Home* critiques genre conceptions and offers a queer alternative to the tired trope of ‘bury your gays’ in the form of a burgeoning romance, a safe house, and the knowledge that despite your inability as a player to alter events, all is seemingly on the upswing for your family.⁴⁴

Gone Home critiques queerly by centering a lesbian romance as the crux of its game narrative and playing with player expectations surrounding the horror genre. It also brings into question notions of home and belonging, encouraging players to consider absence and its impact on the family through a lens that bends time to fit the context, given the audio-logs, it turns out, are hand-written notes from Sam to Katie that the player finds in the attic. The game coalesces its productively queer critique by bringing together positive queer representation, non-normative gameplay mechanics in the form of being one of the first ‘walking simulators,’⁴⁵ and a setting straight from a horror game or film that ends without the slightest hint of violence, trauma, or terror. In doing

so, it encourages the player to add to their understanding of reality with regards to games and, more broadly, queer romance.

7 Conclusion

Located at the nexus of queer representation and queergaming as a challenge to principles of genre and game design, the queer video games *tranxiety*, *Dream Daddy* and *Gone Home* draw, whether knowingly or not, on structuration as a process in order to produce queer critique. By presenting powerful depictions of trans, gay, lesbian, and other queer characters on computer screens, these queer video games center non-normative sexualities as a site of critical inquiry that in turn questions normative assumptions surrounding video games as media form. Instead of deconstructing and destroying video game and social realities, each game adds to the multiplicity of these realities by “associating criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors...”⁴⁶ The indie-roleplaying game *tranxiety* does so by adding to players’ understandings of trans lived experiences, anxiety, and granting a sliver of insight into what daily life is like as someone who is marginalized based on their gender. Productively critiquing the ignorance of players as to the multifaceted dimensions of marginalization that trans people, particularly trans women, face, *tranxiety* demonstrates that games can do things and produce realities. It simultaneously brings players to contribute to the process of structuration that informs what manner of control players should have over characters and narratives in games. As a media form, it augments that reality; it does not subtract from it by critiquing particular forms of character agency as wrong. Similarly, *Gone Home* reshapes notions of player control over narrative and the concept of the player character as the ‘main character’ against the backdrop of a queer romance gone right. *Dream Daddy*, too, uses romance to productively critique reified definitions of genre, as well as perceptions of queer romance and sexuality. In excluding sex and including tools by which the players can diversely choose what kind of character they want to play in a blurring between two video game genres known for their ‘on the rails’ character design, *Dream Daddy* highlights that queer romance games are not just spaces for singular narrative flows with gratuitous amounts of sex, but can also be multi-path stories focused on romantic narratives and emotional connections between fathers and their daughters.

Instead of engaging in an act of destroying realities, queer video games add to them and trouble stable notions of a singular reality. *Gone Home*, *Dream Daddy* and *tranxiety* augment our understanding of the worlds in which we interact socially, simultaneously engaging players and game designers alike in a process of queer structuration that reshapes the understandings surrounding preconceived limitations of certain games and game genres. In doing so, queer video games demonstrate that critique has not lost steam, but is instead reinventing itself in new forms and across new platforms.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” in *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 225–248, here: 226–227.
- ² Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” 232.
- ³ Thomas Malaby, “Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games,” in *Games and Culture* 2 (2007), 95–113, here: 96.
- ⁴ Naomi Clark, “What Is Queerness in Games, Anyway?,” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Rumberg and Adrienne (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 3–14, here: 4.
- ⁵ See Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 13; Bonnie Rumberg and Adrienne, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xi–xiii.
- ⁶ Michael Herzfeld, “Anthropology and the Politics of Significance,” in *Etnográfica* 4 (2000), 5–36, here: 18.
- ⁷ Edmond Y. Chang in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, eds. Jennifer Malkowski and Trea Andrea Russworm (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 13.
- ⁸ Jenny Sundén, “Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game Cultures,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009 Conference: Breaking New Ground* (2009), 1–6, here: 6.
- ⁹ Brianna Dym, Jed Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler, “‘theyre all trans sharon’: Authoring Gender in Video Game Fan Fiction,” in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 18 (2018), accessed January 31, 2019 <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker_dym_fiesler>.
- ¹⁰ Nicole Crenshaw and Bonnie Nardi, “What’s in a name?: Naming practices in online video games,” in *Proceedings of the first ACM SIGCHI annual symposium on Computer-human interaction in play* 1 (2014), 67–76.
- ¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- ¹² “LGBTQ Game Archive,” LGBTQ Game Archive, accessed January 31, 2019, <<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com>>.
- ¹³ “Banjo Tooie,” LGBTQ Game Archive, accessed January 31, 2019, <<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/games-by-decade/2000s/banjo-tooie/>>.

- 14 Naomi Clark, “What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyway?,” 4.
- 15 Edmond Y. Chang, “Queergaming,” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg & Adrienne (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15–23, here: 15.
- 16 Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”
- 17 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press 1984), 50.
- 18 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 50.
- 19 Christian Fuchs, “Structuration Theory and Self-Organization,” in *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 16 (2003), 133–167, here: 140.
- 20 See Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2009).
- 21 See Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008) and Thomas Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2009).
- 22 See Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1998).
- 23 *twitch.io* is a platform aimed for indie-game developers’ usage where they can host, sell, and disseminate their creations.
- A game jam is a period of time (often a weekend, two weeks or a month) wherein game developers are encouraged to work on a particular game project that abides by a certain theme and adheres to certain rules. At the end of each jam, games are often made available to the public and games of particular note are awarded prizes. It is similar, in many ways, to a game developers’ science fair.
- 24 Riotjayne, *tranxiety* (2015).
- 25 The beloved Pokemon professor, Professor Oak begins the player’s journey in gaming classics Pokemon Red and Pokemon Blue with a brief introduction to the world that also serves to allow the player to name themselves and their main rival.
- 26 Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” 232.
- 27 See Braidon Schaufert, “Daddy’s Play: Subversion and Normativity in Dream Daddy’s Queer World,” in *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 18 (2018), accessed January 31, 2019, <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/braidon_schaufert>.
- 28 Chang, “Queergaming,” 16.
- 29 Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion By Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2016), here: 25–26.
- 30 Brian Lu, “Hikikomori: The Need to Belong and the Activation of Narrative Collective-Assimilation through Visual Novels,” in *Journal of Interpersonal Relations, Intergroup Relations and Identity* 7 (2014), 50–61, here: 55.
- 31 See Schaufert, “Daddy’s Play.”
- 32 Game Grumps, *Dream Daddy* (2017).
- 33 See Schaufert, “Daddy’s Play.”
- 34 Obscurasoft, *Coming Out on Top* (2014).
- 35 Anastasia Salter, Bridget Blodgett, and Anne Sullivan, “‘Just Because It’s Gay?’: Transgressive Design in Queer Coming of Age Visual Novels,” in *FDG '18 Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2018), 1–9.

- 36 Leighton Gray in “How Game Grumps Created Dream Daddy,” ed. Noclip (2018), accessed January 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y_D4kAmmMw>.
- 37 Derek Heemsbergen, “Dream Daddy is a dating simulator for straight people,” accessed May 20, 2019, <http://www.rpgfan.com/reviews/Dream_Daddy_A_Dad_Dating_Simulator/index.html>; Gita Jackson, “What We Liked And Didn’t Like About *Dream Daddy*,” accessed May 20, 2019, <<https://kotaku.com/what-we-liked-and-didnt-like-about-dream-daddy-1797270467>>.
- 38 See Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 175–194.
- 39 Steam, “Gone Home,” accessed May 20, 2019, <https://store.steampowered.com/app/232430/Gone_Home/>.
- 40 See Jim Sterling, “Jimquisition: ‘Walking Simulators,’” accessed January 31, 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdHWGMkMorg>>; Gregory Bagnall, “Queer(ing) Game Technologies,” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15–144, here: 139; merritt kopas, “On Gone Home,” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 145–149, here: 146–147.
- 41 Bagnall, “Queer(ing) Game Technologies,” 138.
- 42 kopas, “On Gone Home,” 148.
- 43 kopas, “On Gone Home,” 146.
- 44 ‘Bury Your Gays’ as a trope is commonly referenced throughout the literature as purposefully murdering queer characters in narratives. The phrase appears as early as 2010 on TVTropes.com.
- 45 Bonnie Ruberg, “Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in *Gone Home*,” in *Games and Culture* (2019) <doi: 10.1177/1555412019826746>, 1–21, here: 5.
- 46 Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?,” 247.