Cultures of Experimentation: Role Playing Games and Sexual Identity

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Abstract

This study uses the 'Dragon Age' series by BioWare as a case study to examine the impact of greater video game player diversity, and the effect of inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) content in mainstream games, on gaming and gamers today. We wanted to explore the degree to which the perception of video games being 'hegemonically masculine and heternormative' was a true reflection of the state of play, and whether the potential of the 'Proteus Effect' of the inclusion of LGBT content was being realized. We administered an online survey in the Dragon Age community forum, including open-ended qualitative questions. The main findings show that respondents widely believed in the presence of heterosexual (male) privilege within gaming culture at large. However, respondents' own personal views and experiences contradicted this - their answers demonstrated that they are largely accepting of the inclusion of LGBT content in games. We find that an unprecedented greater proportion of gamers being female, combined with players' exposure to the possibility of playing characters of diverse sexualities, has produced a greater acceptance of diversity among game players and a willingness among gamers online to adopt sexual identities other than their offline ones. Respondents showed considerable 'disinhibition' when it came to experimenting with sexuality in video games compared to in real life. Although this was a small exploratory study and was limited by its size and a possible self-selection bias, the practical and social implications of our findings, indicating greater gender and sexuality diversity and more inclusive norms in gaming, calls for more research in this area.

Keywords: Sexualities, LGBT, video games, gender, inequalities

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Reducing Inequalities in Representation Increases Tolerance: the Case of LGBT Content in Role-Playing Games.

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Introduction

Video games have a long history of catering for young males, with a corresponding focus on heteronormative (male) content. This, the paucity of female characters, and the almost non-existence of non-heterosexual content (not including 'lesbian' representation calculated to titillate the 'male gaze'), combine to promote the common perception amongst the wider public that gamers represent a group that are both misogynistic and homophobic. One of the few companies that buck this trend, game developer Bioware, has included LGBT content in a number of their games over a number of years, including Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, their Mass Effect series, and their Dragon Age series. The developers of the Dragon Age series actively go against the tradition within mainstream gaming when it comes to representation of various sexualities, including LGBT content in each of the three iterations of the series released since 2009. Even in the aftermath of controversy and backlash from some gamers regarding the inclusion of LGBT characters and gaming features (discussed in Kelly, 2015; and Slobogian, 2011) BioWare's Dragon Age series has continued to include LGBT content. We investigate what the increasing expansion of the number and types of people playing video games and the possibility of role-playing diverse sexualities means for norms and acceptance in gaming. This paper uses quantitative and qualitative data from a convenience sample of Bioware gamers to examine the views and experiences around LGBT content in Dragon Age.

Context

The video game industry is expanding rapidly: in 2003, the industry was worth approximately $7 billion and by 2013 had grown to a value of $15.4 billion (Entertainment Software Association, 2014). At the global level, the video game

industry has been estimated to be worth over $101 billion (Statista, 2014). Video games and their online connectivity are becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment globally (Bailenson et al, 2013). According to Lenhart et al (2008), almost half of American teens play games on their phones, and similarly, over half (55%) of the UK's online population play video games in the form of phone apps (The Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2014). This form of media is also experiencing a continual growth in the number and diversity of individuals who are beginning to play these games on a regular basis. Players are diverse in gender, class and ethnicity. The popular stereotype of the heterosexual (white) teenage male gamer has been completely discredited in a growing number of reports both in the USA (ESA, 2014; Lenhart et al, 2008) and the UK (Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2014), and in general gaming research (Yee, 2014; Crawford, 2012).

There are almost as many females playing games as males, and the average gamer is in fact around thirty years old (Crawford, ibid). A recent publication by the Entertainment Software Association (2014) noted that in the United States female gamers amounted to 48% of gamers. As was mentioned previously, this is also the case outside of the U.S. (Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2014). What is becoming more apparent is that females appear to be playing games almost to the same extent that males are. With the gender of gamers becoming increasingly varied, it is also highly probable that other demographic characteristics such as sexuality are also far more varied than commonly thought. "Whether it's the frivolous nature of video games, the people who play online, or online gaming addiction, our cultural stereotypes often detract us from the reality of gaming" (Yee, 2014: 38).

Notwithstanding the increasing diversity of players and exciting possibilities for influencing behaviour offline, video games are dealing with the legacy of the common perception that gamers represent a group that are both misogynistic and homophobic. In many ways this viewpoint is dependent upon, and encouraged by, a series of controversies, including the so-called 'GamerGate' in 2014. This referred to a campaign of misogynistic threats and abuse aimed at driving feminist critics from the video game industry. The campaign of harassment was coordinated in IRC channels and online forums such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan by an anonymous and amorphous group that ultimately came to be represented by the Twitter hastag

#gamergate. Gamergate has been described as a manifestation of a culture war over gaming culture diversification, artistic recognition and social criticism of video games, and the gamer social identity, i.e. a heterosexual male backlash against the increasing diversity of players and content. The inference in the objections to the feminist critique was that the 'good old days' of gaming when teenage males were seen as the main demographic, and game content reflected this were under threat (Lewis, 2015). Within a few days, and over the subsequent weeks, the GamerGate conflict became prolific in social media, and in gaming discussions within and outside of the gaming community. A consequence was the growing public perception that gaming culture was both misogynistic and homophobic. With a long history of negative associations between games and various social ills, an obvious example of which is violence in video games, Sullentrop (2014b) suggests that GamerGate has come to represent one of the more recent manifestations of this tradition.

The topic of sexuality (in its various forms) in video games has remained largely unexplored when compared to other areas (Burkley and Stermer, 2012). In a typically viewed male space (Yee, 2014) where 'heteronormativity' appears to be the norm (Shaw, 2009; Pulos, 2013), there exists an '...emphasized rarity of LGBT representation in video games' (Shaw, 2009:228; Todd, 2012.). Traditionally, research on video games has long been focused on issues other than sexuality, focusing on issues like violence, and social isolation (Burkley and Stermer, 2012). More recent research has begun to branch out into other areas. However, there still remains a comparative lack of research into sexuality, and specifically, research into the effect of the presence or lack of LGBT content within games (Todd, 2012). The absence of research is further highlighted by Shaw (2009), who offers a quote from a conversation with game designer Scott Campbell in 2007, in which he states "Violence is OK. Sexuality is still taboo" (Shaw, 2009: 241).

There is also a growing recognition that gaming has a serious cultural impact with large potential for influencing social change. A type of video game dubbed 'serious games' is emerging - computer games that serve a purpose other than pure entertainment (Arnab et al, 2013). Games have increasingly become tools through which education, social impacts and other areas of interest have been explored and engaged with. Within the Games for Change website for instance, it is noted that games are being used as tools for 'humanitarian and educational efforts' (Games for Change, 2015).

This potential impact is also important when we consider the 'Proteus Effect' (Yee, and Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al, 2009): that avatars that we choose to embody and customise have a direct impact on how we behave in the online world and can have a role in shaping our behaviour offline also, with potential for using role-playing games to increase empathy, tolerance and to boost confidence in marginalized populations.

Sexualities in Video Games

Sexuality in gaming is very influenced by gendered stereotyping. In terms of social norms, Goffman (1990) proposes that "it can be assumed that a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all participants, the norms being sustained in part because of being incorporated [by individuals]" (Goffman, 1990:152). Such norms exist in the form of expectations that are held by participants, forming an unspoken guide to what is seen as appropriate behavior within a certain space or setting. The question of norms in this space returns us once again to the issue of heteronormativity in video game culture. A common topic discussed in the research examining sexuality in video games is the design and aesthetics of the avatars and characters that are created for these spaces, which have therefore become visible signifiers of the norms within most video games. This is a point that is further described by Downs et al (2010), who also discuss the presence of sexuality and sexualised characters in games. They note that there was an absence of female characters in roughly '41%' of the games that they studied, and highlight the fact that when females are included in games, they are often overtly sexualised. Burkley and Stermer (2012) found that the portrayal of females as sexual objects is common, a point that is also made by Cross (2014). What emerges from discussing these literatures is the view that the gaming space is a predominantly male space, and that it enforces heteronormativity as the norm (Shaw, 2011).

Previous research has noted that wherever sex and sexuality are present in video games as a more prominent feature, they have tended to "[reify] conservative beliefs about heterosexuality and 'proper' romance" (Consalvo, 2003:171). One of the main reasons for this is the presence of what she refers to as 'compulsory heterosexuality', which is visibly pervasive in the majority of games.

Although sexuality in games is comparatively less explored than some other areas, it has not been entirely ignored. Shaw (2011) examines the relationships between gender, sexuality and race, focusing on whether or not individuals self-identify as gamers. When taking these variables into account, she notes that it is gender that had the most influence on whether or not individuals identified as a gamer. It was

often the case that sexuality was only mentioned in relation to the 'homophobic' industry; and the view that gaming represents an 'unwelcoming space' for them. This is largely because of the norms within gaming, which have meant that gay gamers, alongside other gaming minorities, operate within a space that appears to be predominantly dominated by and for (heterosexual) male interests. This can be more clearly seen in the way that the dominant heteronormative narrative of romances in games can become especially problematic, particularly when heterosexual woman or gay men are playing a game in which their character has no other plot or dialogue options other than being forced to flirt with a female. This acts as one of the principle ways in which 'minority gamers' such as female and gay players are reminded of their 'otherness' within this space (Consalvo, 2003).

In relation to these common themes within gaming culture, companies like BioWare (to use the language of Garfinkel (1964)) have breached the norms of this space, with the creation of games that do not conform to heteronormativity, choosing *instead*, as Slobogian (2011) states, to create a sense of gender and sexual 'inclusivity' within their games.

There have been some exceptions to the heteronormativity of content within games. Greer (2013) describes the 'affordances' (which he states as opportunities to play with various sexualities) in the 'Fable' and 'Dragon Age' game series. Both of these game series offer various opportunities for the players to define their avatar's sexuality as they see fit, which transcends the normative restrictions of heterosexuality. Greer (2013) outlines the various relationship possibilities within Dragon Age: Origins and Dragon Age 2; and suggests that in these games, sexuality remains a feature of the player's agency, where sexuality "appears primarily as a reflection of the player's character's own performed desire" (Greer, 2013:14). The author suggests that the inclusion of such content can be seen as a sign of the industry shifting beyond a presumption of heterosexuality. While Fable and Dragon Age contain within them the possibili-ties of a certain queer, performative plurality – of identities and identifica-tion that resist or exceed singular categorization – such potential radicalismis bordered by dominant or normative constructions of sexuality and desire,most clearly in the form of the institution of marriage.

This is a suggestion that is reinforced by Slobogian (2011), who states that "rather than assuming that the games "implied player" is straight or, conversely that they are gay, BioWare assumes neither" (Slobogian, 2011:15). Therefore, companies like BioWare appear to recognise the varied demographics of their gamers, and through

decisions to include content for all sexual orientations, may provide the impetus for other companies and developers to do the same. What is also important is the suggestion that by allowing players to pursue content like this, games have the potential to be highly effective in allowing players to immerse themselves in and experience alternative forms of identity.

> "As the rules of real life are temporarily lifted, so are social expectations, at least for some players. Thus, "normative" aspects of identity may be played with – altered or rejected – because the experience is "only a game"". (Consalvo, 2003:180).

This also shares considerable similarities with the concept of the performativity of gender (as outlined by Butler, 2008), where players can choose to engage with, transgress or conform to the roles and behaviors assigned to the gender of their avatars. Consalvo (2003) analyses 'The Sims', a game that "in some ways challenges norms of heterosexuality but in other ways reaffirms them" (Consalvo, 2003:182). The game provides the opportunity to create non-heterosexual relationships, but these relationships are not allowed to pursue marriage. She refers to the term 'gay window advertising', a concept that describes advertising that is so ambiguous by design that it appeals to both heterosexual and homosexual readers. Consalvo applies this concept to gaming – 'gay window gaming' – and her analysis of the Sims. It is visible through the emphasis of the agency of the player - gay romances are possible in this game, but only in so far as the player chooses to create them. If the player chooses not to create them, then they do not exist. This concept is therefore perhaps more appropriate in games such as the Sims than it would be in games like 'Dragon Age: Inquisition' (2014), where the sexuality of some characters *are* coded to be homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual.

The inclusion of LGBT content in games, depending on the quality and presentation, can sometimes be problematic. Schröder (2008) examines the 'Gothic' series of video games, noting that alongside the presence of female stereotyping within the game world, there are also some subtle allusions to homosexuality. One example of implied homosexuality is the character of Mud. Schröder notes a number of ways in which Mud becomes read by players as homosexual, and seems to only serve the

function of annoying the player; these players often demonstrated a tendency to behave aggressively towards this potentially gay character; particularly because of the negative way in which his character was being presented. Through examining the Gothic game series, the author concludes that: "Altogether, by the interactions in the in-game society and the portrayal of characters, sexual division of labor, traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality are not challenged but affirmed by the Gothic series" (Schröder, 2008:11).

Once again, BioWare's 'Dragon Age' series will be examined in this research as an example of games that transcend this normative 'compulsory heterosexuality' and provides representations that are less problematic. Slobogian (2011) discusses the prevalent til now conception of games as a male space, which is often accompanied by a presumption that those who are not straight males will not mind having to role-play being straight.

> "Until recently, relatively few role-playing games (RPGs) have provided players with the option to game as either male or female, let alone to explore non-heteronormative possibilities" (Slobogian, 2011:2).

The author describes what was the common reality for 'queer players' before inclusive options were present in games. What she refers to as the act of "transgressive play", which describes the activity of playing in opposition to the perception of the 'ideal' or 'implied' player. An interesting point that she describes is that it can be, and in some cases is, a two-way process, namely, with heterosexual gamers playing gay. The world of Dragon Age abounds with various sexualities, and aside from having the chance to pursue a sexuality of their choice for their own character, gamers will also encounter individuals of various sexualities along their adventures (including their companions). In relation to this shift from traditional video games, Slobogian (2011) suggests that BioWare had assumed that their players would be tolerant of sexual diversity, and through their agency within the game, be "…able to choose for themselves what to pursue in terms of romance and pleasure" (Slobogian, 2011:15).

This was not the case for some players, who felt that the inclusion of LGBT characters in Dragon Age 2 was problematic. Some of the games players went onto the forum website devoted to BioWare games to voice their objections against the inclusion of this 'unavoidable' content within the game. This contact with LGBT content meant that the more homophobic gamers could not distance themselves enough from it. This self-proclaimed 'dominant' group of male heterosexual gamers felt as if they had been comparatively ignored compared to what they perceived as gaming minorities. However, what Slobogian (2011) found in her research, which analysed the comments from a number of forum discussions, was that there were a number of different responses. Some gamers expressed encouragement regarding the ability to experiment with sexual orientations; others were simply indifferent to it. However, there was a comparatively small contingency of gamers who were critical of the gay content in the game. What was interesting was that

> "…the few posters who expressed homophobic views or were critical of the idea of roleplaying queer were often attacked by other users who accused them of being latently gay or too sexually insecure to explore their own sexuality, even via a video game" (Slobogian, 2011:17-18).

What are the implications for the norms of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity in this instance? She concludes that, in her opinion, a greater understanding of the experiences of these players (namely those who are gay, and those who play gay) "…are needed and might change any lingering impressions of gamers as homogenously young, male, and homophobic" (Slobogian, 2011:22). Although the work of Slobogian offers interesting results, her analysis is limited by being based only upon forum discussion threads.

Masculinities

Events in the gaming space, among other sites, indicate that 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005) is beginning to be challenged by a more 'inclusive masculinity' (Anderson and McCormack, 2010; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; McCormack, 2012). Connell's (ibid) theory of hegemonic masculinity suggests that masculinity exists in multiple forms, but is organized socially through relations that exist in a

hierarchical structure of dominance, compliance and subordination. In short "there is a gender politics within masculinity" (Connell, 2005:37), a form of politics that is not static in its configuration. Indeed, Connell made the point in 2005 that "…sport has come to be a leading definer of masculinity in mass culture" (Connell, 2005:54) due to the aspects of performance and competition located within this space, but that is recently indicated to be challenged, in empirical and theoretical studies (see below). Similarly, now that the demographics indicate a much greater diversity of gamers, the hitherto association of gaming with the young heterosexual male is under negotiation.

Nonetheless, the persistence of hegemonic masculinity within gaming is visible in multiple areas, particularly in/on the bodies of highly masculine male characters and heterosexual game plots. Hegemonic masculinity in its simplest form is "…the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (Connell, 2005:76). However, the theory of hegemonic masculinity may also be useful in explaining the response of some gamers to 'gay-friendly' games, with the existence of a 'dominant' group of heterosexual male gamers who seek to maintain their levels of dominance within the industry and over other gaming 'minorities'. The result of this would most likely be a form of boundary maintenance that actively criticises the allowance of non-heterosexual game content and characters.

In trying to identify the possible existence of 'hegemonic masculinity', Connell further illustrates the concept. "Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (Connell, 2005:78). The relationship between straight and gay men is one of the most common examples of this form of relationship; gay men are often subordinated not just culturally, but also within institutions. In the case of video games, this is emblematic of what Pulos (2013) describes as the bottom-up and top-down practices of maintaining heteronormativity in World of Warcraft.

Hegemonic masculinity may not wholly account for the response of gamers to LGBT content in the games that they play. The theory of inclusive masculinity provides an

updated perspective on hegemonic masculinity, in so far as the latter may no longer be fully applicable (Anderson and McGuire, 2010; and Anderson and McCormack, 2010; McCormack, 2012). Within their studies of university rugby and teenage boys in schools, these works refer to what they call 'inclusive masculinity'. What this theory suggests is that with a decline in cultural homophobia in certain spaces and cultures, we will see a steady dissolution of the 'hegemonic' ordering of masculinities. In both these studies, they found that homophobia and homophobic discourse were all but non-existent, and instead of an inherent hegemonic masculinity that included heterosexuality, they found that inclusive masculinities were present, namely a social organisation of masculinities without an apparent hierarchical structure. This inclusive masculinity directly challenges the previous orthodox of masculinity, it is also "…one that is also esteemed among male peers" (Anderson and McGuire, 2010:250). Once again, this theory has primarily been used in male spaces like sports and schools. As our research begins by indicating that gaming culture is largely seen as hetero-normative, the status of 'masculinities' in games is relevant.

Anderson & Maguire (2010) do not dismiss Connell's work; instead they suggest that in cultures with high levels of homophobia a hierarchical structure will persist, but that homophobia is diminishing and a more inclusive model of masculinity is emerging. Though Connells work is not wholly abandoned, it becomes evident from their work that it can no longer fully account for the relationships between males in cultures that are less homophobic. Inclusive masculinity theory is useful because it "…helps capture and explain men's gendered behaviours, attitudes and identities in a culture (or setting) of diminishing homophobia, something Connell's theory was unable to account for" (Anderson and McGuire, 2010:258).

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to provide insight into the experience of gamers who have come into contact with LGBT content in games, and to examine the ways in which they react and respond to such content.

We employed a mixed methods approach. Some basic statistics were needed on the respondents, such as the distribution of gender and sexuality, and their age. For

this, quantitative data seemed to be more appropriate. However, a deeper understanding of their experience with playing games that had LGBT content was also required, which was achievable through the collection of qualitative data (in the form of open questions). One of the most efficient ways of fulfilling both of these needs was the adoption of a questionnaire that incorporated both open and closed questions. By incorporating both types of data, it was then possible, through bivariate analysis and comparing demographic information with the open answers, to examine whether there was a difference between male and females, and different sexual orientations. The terms 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' and 'bisexual' were used for universal clarity in the questionnaire, as there is a range of possible terminology used by people of different sexual orientations. To be consistent we continued using these terms in the analysis.

An online survey provided a more direct way of researching how gamers are responding to LGBT content in games, than the method of forum analysis employed by Slobogian (2011). The adoption of an online survey also allowed the respondents to complete the questionnaire at their own convenience, which was important given the likelihood that respondents were from different geographical locations and time zones. The questionnaire contained both open and closed questions, which served the purpose of eliciting the necessary quantitative and qualitative data. In many ways online questionnaires can help to provide more honest answers from respondents who don't feel the same need to perform the appropriate response as they do in face-to-face interactions, resulting in a decrease in the occurrence of what Lensuelt-Mulders (2008) calls the 'socially desirable answer' (also partly suggested to by Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

The final questionnaire consisted of a total of 19 questions (5 open and 14 closed), which covered a variety of topics, including: demographic information, engagement with various forms of sexuality in games and in the real world; and the general response of gamers to a wider repertoire of sexuality in video games (see Appendix A).

This questionnaire was posted on the BioWare forum website on December 1st 2014, and remained there for approximately one week. The Bioware Forum was selected because it functions as what is described as "a community discussion board" (Haque

and Swicegood, 2014:223). At the time in which this research was conducted. the site had an approximate population of 500,000.

The questionnaire initially yielded a total of 140 responses over the course of a week. Subsequently, 11 respondents were removed because they had not completed the main parts of the questionnaire, leaving a total of 129 respondents. However, it emerged that of the 129 respondents, 25 did not list games from the Dragon Age series as games that they had played and were therefore removed. This left a final number of 104 respondents in the sample. The use of such 'convenience sampling' (Bryman, 2012; Bernard and Ryan, 2010) implied a potential self-selection bias among respondents. However, this is mitigated by our acknowledgement that generalisation is not the goal; a case study such as this one doesn't allow for generalisation (Yin, 2013) but can provide a springboard for further research (Bryman, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics remain a central concern in research, and Kozinets (2010) makes the point that when research is conducted online, ethical considerations remain important and in some ways can become even more complex. With the intimate topic of respondents' sexuality and their response to sexualities in games as the central aim of inquiry here; it was necessary that a responsible consideration of the ethical implications was taken into account. Accordingly, ethical considerations were included within all levels of the research process.

Consent is an important aspect of ethical consideration within this research; since all of the data came from those who replied to the questionnaire, an outline of the purpose and aims of the research was attached as a coversheet to the questionnaire itself, and was a part of the original post to the forum. In this way, the respondents gave their 'implied consent', as they were notified that they could cease taking part in the questionnaire at any time if they became uncomfortable or did not want to continue. Therefore those who took the time to respond to the questionnaire did so of their own volition.

The emphasis on the privacy and anonymity of respondents was stressed in both the original post on the Bioware Forum, and on the opening page of the questionnaire also. The respondents who took part in the questionnaire did so without having to give their names (real or screen names). The purpose of this was to avert soliciting socially desirable answers (Lensuelt-Mulder, 2008) where respondents, particularly in relation to sensitive issues, sometimes alter their views when they know that they can be identified.

Findings

Findings from this research have corresponded with the growing body of literature, reports, and research that have shown that a diverse range of demographics exists under the label of the 'gamer'. When examining reports such as those from the Entertainment Software Association (2014), it is suggested that the gender of gamers is almost equal, with 48% of gamers being female in their most recent report. As Figure 1 shows, our research had a similar division among the genders; with 43% of respondents being female and 54% being male (the missing 3% didn't provide their gender). Aside from gender, a number of other findings from this sample also shared similar results with the report by the ESA: 44% of our respondents were between the ages of 26-40, which is unsurprising when we consider that the average gamer is 30 years old (ESA, ibid). The scope of this study was small and limited to gender and sexualities; for this reason, we did not include race and ethnicity as variables or analytic categories. Change is afoot there too, but is beyond the scope of this paper to address.
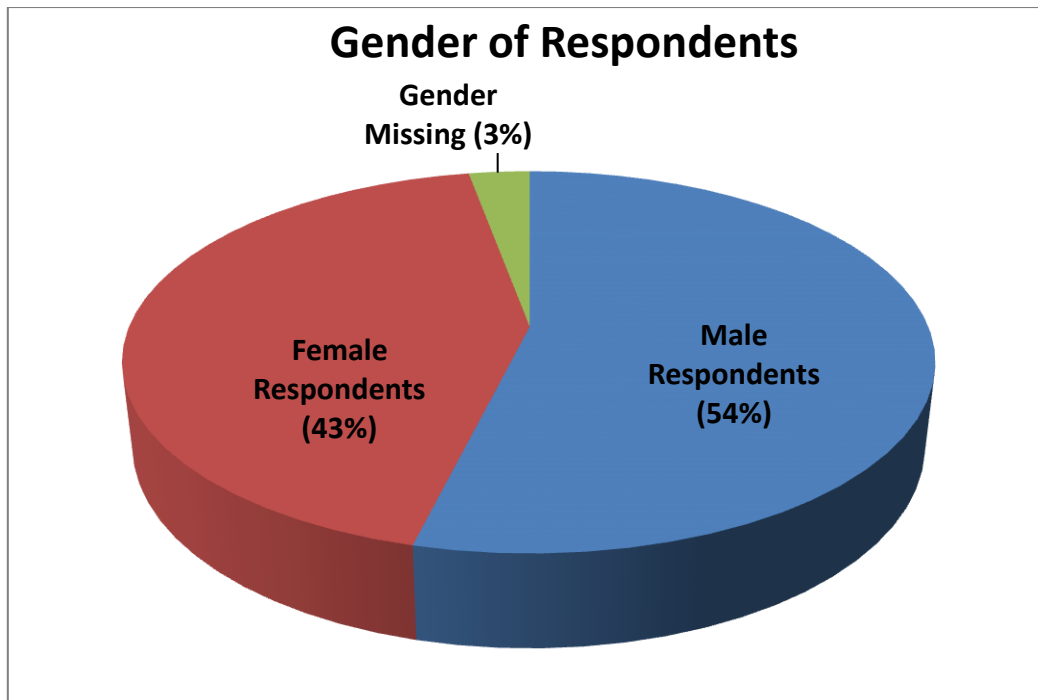
Figure 1: Gender distribution of Respondents (3% of respondents did not disclose their gender).

When the demographics of respondents were further broken up to include both gender *and* sexuality, the stereotype of the heterosexual male gamer is further eroded (see Figure 2). The straight male, who has reportedly been the recipient and shaper of game content for many years, is not the only demographic present. Games have long been presented as the pastime solely of the heterosexual (white) male (Crawford, 2012), but the data from research projects like the ESA actively undermine this assumption. The data found in this research project also shows that 'gamers' actually consist of a variety of gender and sexual orientations. Despite this, the historic recipients of this sense of privilege, heterosexual males, in the case of this research are still the largest single demographic, accounting for 40% of respondents.
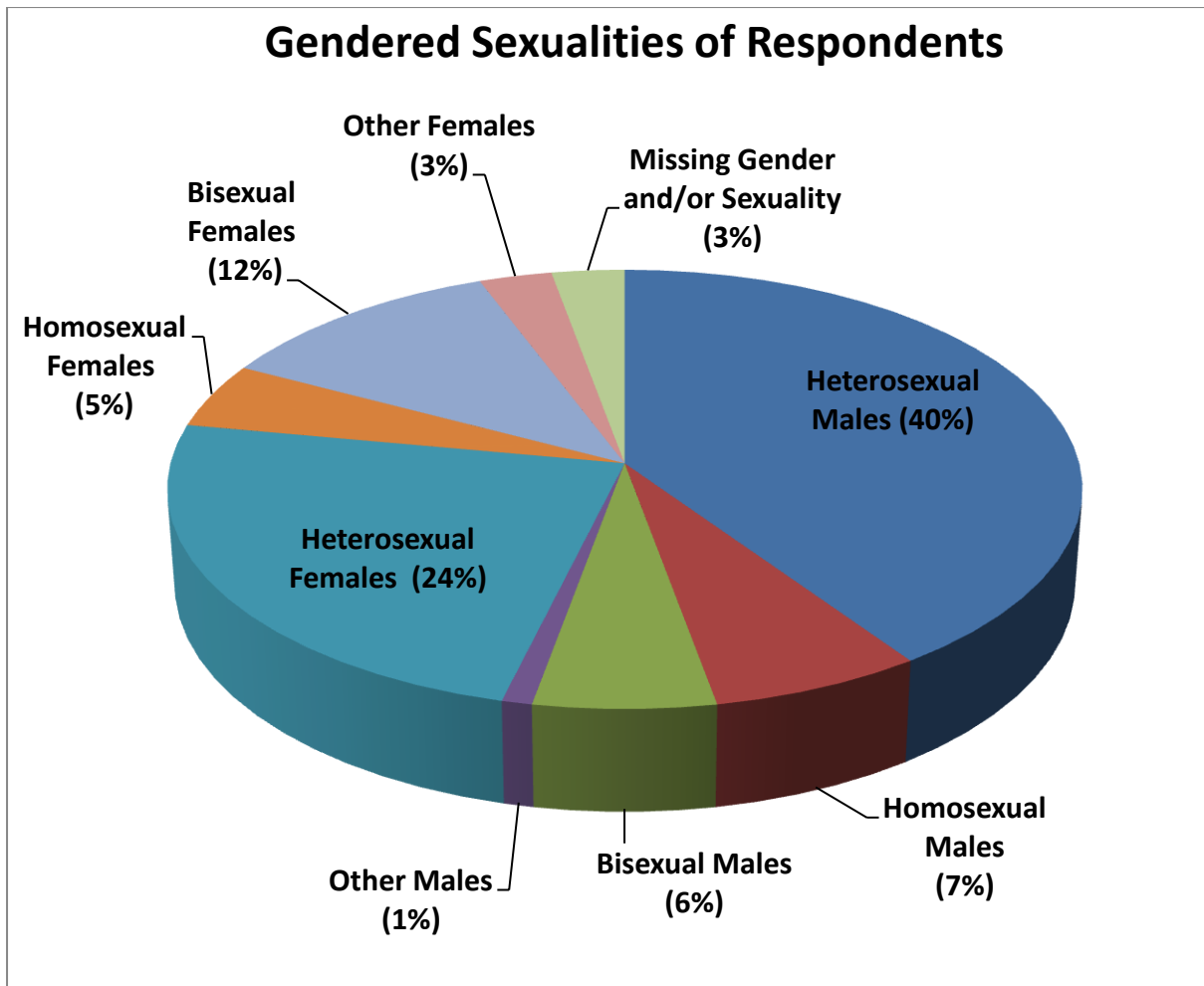
Figure 2: The distribution of the self-reported gendered sexuality of respondents. (**Note:** Percentage error due to rounding).

To Role-Play or Not, That is the Question

Whether or not gamers engage with LGBT content in games was largely driven by whether they saw themselves as playing the role of a new character, or as themselves. This was demonstrated through a thematic analysis of the responses provided by participants regarding whether or not they experimented with sexuality in games and the reasons why. Through this analysis, there appears to be two main themes. The first and most popular theme was in relation to role-playing. Similar to the work of Fine (1983), who explains that in relation to fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, some aspects of gameplay are influenced by whether or not gamers are playing as themselves or playing as their character. The results of this study suggest that this is also the case here. Whether or not gamers engage with LGBT content would appear to be linked in most cases to whether they associate themselves with the characters that they are playing as within these games, or if they

are simply playing as a separate character that they have created, absent any self-identification.

Among the respondents who believed that they were controlling a separate character, it was common for them to express less inhibition and more willingness to explore and experiment with the various sexualities within the game. As one respondent answered:

> "If I'm playing [a] role playing game then I don't want to limit myself to playing as a fantastical version of me. Why shouldn't I as a straight female human play the game as a homosexual male dwarf? It's not all about my sexuality, preferences, religious and political views or background. It's all about the character that I've created." (Jennifer, a heterosexual female gamer).

Although this was the most common theme found within respondents' answers, it was not the only one that frequently emerged from the data. As noted before, other gamers expressed views that their characters were in some ways seen as an extension of themselves, as a form of virtual embodiment. The theme of 'playing as self' was used to refer to when players associated themselves, at least in some way, with the character that they were playing as. In some of these cases, the gender of the playable character was experimented with, but a more rigid rule existed in relation to sexuality. Sometimes gamers stated that they were simply uninterested in engaging with LGBT content in games, and in other cases they explicitly listed their own sexuality as the reason behind not pursuing LGBT romances in Dragon Age games.

> "Because my personal preference in game is to create an extension of myself. So I always play characters that are in some ways like me. For me to play the game as female (which I am) and romance a girl feels strange and [out of character], especially when I find male characters more attractive" (Stephanie, a heterosexual female gamer).

Another variant of this that emerged through the process of analysis was that a small number of gamers, who reported that they did explore sexuality in games, did so under the guise of heteronormativity; the most frequent case was in the form of straight males playing as female characters that became lesbian.

> "When I play female characters I still find female characters attractive" (Scott, a straight male gamer).

Therefore it is important to note that for the gamers who took part in this research, one of the main reasons given for the reason as to why some gamers engage with LGBT content in their games and some do not, was due to whether or not they chose for the characters that they were playing with to be extensions of themselves, or altogether independent characters, with the latter inducing a greater likelihood of the avatar adopting a sexuality different from that of the player offline.

.*The 'Disinhibition Effect' and 'Proteus Effect'*

A greater number experimented with LGBT content in the game than offline: the virtual world offers possibilities of role-playing and experimentation that goes beyond that typically taken up in the offline world.
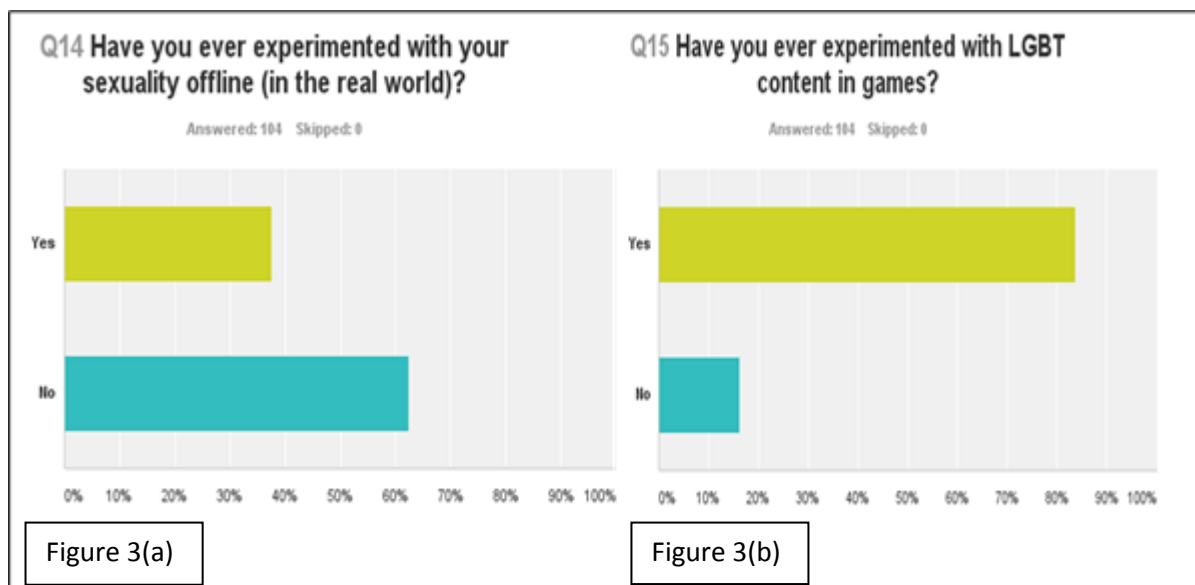
Figure 3(a)

Figure 3(b)

Figures 3(a) and 3(b): Figure 3(a) shows the percentage of respondents who reported experimenting with their sexuality in the real world, against 3(b) which shows the percentage of respondents who reported experimenting with LGBT content in games.

0nce again, this was different for those who reported that they role play and therefore distance themselves more from their characters in terms of identification. Not only is this described in relation to more traditional roleplaying (board) games by Fine (1986), but these findings also corroborate the findings from Slobogian (2011) who notes the effect of roleplaying and gameplay on gamers' engagement with sexuality. This concept is further described in the work of Suler (2004) as what is referred to as the 'disinhibition effect', where "…people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world" (Suler, 2004:321). It is important to note that although Suler discusses this in relation to the internet in general, the concept is also applicable to many video games, where gamers are either playing the game alone (and are the sole audience member) or in multiplayer games. In either case, gamers and their actions remain largely anonymous in these spaces too, which can thus contribute to disinhibition and an increased likelihood to engage in the broad variety of content that the game provides. As is visible in Figures 3(a) and 3(b) (above), there is a clear inference that the concept of the disinhibition effect could play an important role shaping the behaviour of gamers while playing video games. In 3(a), the majority of respondents (63%) stated that they have not experimented with their sexuality in the real world. However, as shown in 3(b), 84% of respondents stated that they experiment with sexuality in video games. Therefore, across all demographics, there is a very clear pattern among respondents that individuals largely do not experiment with their sexualities in the real world, but almost all respondents appeared to be more adventurous and experimental when it came to their choices and actions in the virtual settings of video games (again signifying what Consalvo (2003) and Slobogian (2011) refer to as the transgressive potential of video games). Of course, experimenting offline is significantly different than online, but the critical point is that video games provide a space for people to say and do things they wouldn't do in the face-to-face world.

The results confirmed Slobogian's (2011) finding that players commonly reported in forums that they had experimented with sexuality within games. This suggests that the 'disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004) is not just applicable to the Internet, but also to video game environments. Respondents showed a lack of inhibition when it came to experimenting with sexuality in video games compared to in real life. In a similar way

to anonymity provided by many environments online, which Suler (2004) states is an important dimension, single player games (like Dragon Age), also represent another environment in which individuals can experience their choices and actions in a forum that is isolated from their everyday offline identity.

The allowance of cyberspace and video games make for trying on new identities and behaviour has a significant impact, as demonstrated by the 'Proteus effect,' which shows that the behaviour of an individual within online virtual worlds is changed by the visual characteristics of their avatar, and that the change can persist in the offline world after the game is over (Yee and Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al, 2009; Yee, 2014). Not only are video games becoming a common means of entertainment among the wider population, but the concept of the 'Proteus effect' has also shown that video games have the potential to shape our behaviour not only within but also outside of the games (Potts, 2014). This has implications for shaping levels of tolerance and acceptance among gamers through engagement with LGBT content and/or characters. This suggestion is particularly important considering the findings from this research that the majority of respondents have experimented with sexuality within games instead of offline. An interesting future line of research is to test the impact, if any, on levels of acceptance of diverse sexualities. In sum, the findings (although interesting) cannot be generalised beyond the boundaries of this study. However, their strength lies in the suggestions that they provide for further research.

Inclusivity

Respondents were asked directly about their attitudes towards the inclusion of LGBT content in games, and their responses to it. The largest theme that emerged when respondents were asked why they thought that some gamers were offended by the inclusion of such content was heterosexual privilege. Case et al (2014) provide a discussion which notes that heterosexual privilege 'refers to social norms, which reinforce heteronormativity and confer automatic unearned benefits upon heterosexual individuals' (Case et al, 2014:723). This is an unsurprising finding, given the discussion within the literature on sexuality within video games. Heterosexual privilege was discussed in this research as one of the main reasons for

some gamers being offended and uncomfortable with the inclusion of LGBT content in video games.

> "I think there's a lot of homophobic males who think that it's stupid that LGBT characters are taking over video games~ because their "precious" games cannot handle having one transgendered character, such as the one in [Dragon Age: Inquisition]. They're not so much offended as they are just being selfish and closeminded" (Allison, a heterosexual female gamer).

What becomes clear from the analysis of the answers is that the belief that gamers are largely homophobic is held by members within the community itself and that it results from a sense of entitlement among some in the gaming community, in essence, heterosexual privilege. The idea that the straight white male occupies a place of privilege within gaming is in no way a new suggestion, there is ample literature that suggests this, alongside common perceptions amongst the gaming community itself.

Although a sense of heterosexual privilege among some gamers appears to be an important cause, participants also explicitly stated that there was a general presence of homophobic views among gamers. As was the case with Edward, who described both of these themes as causes:

> "I think that there are two things happening with this: 1.) People have strong anti-gay views in their personal lives and don't want to see it represented anywhere. And 2.) People are indifferent to gay content, but feel that it's inclusion in video games is part of an agenda to oppress straight male players and 'corrupt' gaming by turning it into a platform for social commentary. I don't agree with either viewpoints" (Edward, a gay male gamer).

The combination of these two themes appear to explain why some gamers are offended by LGBT content in the games that they play, and fits neatly into the results expected when a structure of hegemonic masculinity exists in this space. The pre-conceptions regarding why some gamers are offended by LGBT content would easily fall within the arguments made by Connell (2005) regarding the hegemonic structure of relationships between masculinities. Within this structure, the heterosexual male is at the top of the hierarchy; and homosexual males are subjugated below them. The gaming community is, as has already been suggested,

viewed as a traditionally masculine space, and occupied commonly by the myth of the heterosexual teenage male gamer. It would seem fitting that those located at the top of the masculine hierarchy would come to defend their space from challenges made to their dominance. One only needs to visit gaming forums, or chatrooms within the games themselves to see some of the ways in which homophobic language is employed by gamers (Shaw, 2009; Slobogian, 2011).

The sense of heterosexual privilege was also highlighted when respondents were asked if they felt that their sexuality was adequately represented within video games. The results (see table 1 below) show that the majority of heterosexual gamers (around 87%) felt that their sexuality was adequately represented. The majority of homosexual gamers and bisexual gamers both stated that they felt that their sexualities were not adequately represented (67% and 44% respectively). What this table shows is that there is a deficit of representation for the sexual minorities within gaming; while heterosexuals enjoy the most widespread representation.

| | | Do you feel that your sexuality is adequately represented in video games? | | | |
		Yes	No	Don't know	Total
Respondents Sexuality:	Heterosexual	58	5	4	67
		87%	7%	6%	100.0%
	Homosexual	4	8	0	12
		33%	67%	0%	100.0%
	Bisexual	6	8	4	18
		33%	44%	22%	100.0%
	Other	0	5	1	6
		0%	83%	17%	100.0%
Total		68	26	9	103
		66%	25%	9%	100.0%

Table 1: Shows a crosstabulation of the various sexualities of respondents in relation to whether they feel that their sexuality is adequately represented in video games. One individual was removed from this analysis because they did not disclose their sexuality. (**Note:** Percentage error due to rounding).

Comfort with LGBT Content

The vast majority of respondents were comfortable with the presence of LGBT content in the games that they play. This comes in direct contrast to the data outlined in the previous section which largely supported the notion that gamers are a homophobic community, while also reinforcing the suggestion that a hegemonic masculinity structure is located within this space. These points however, came from questions that concerned respondents' views of others responses.
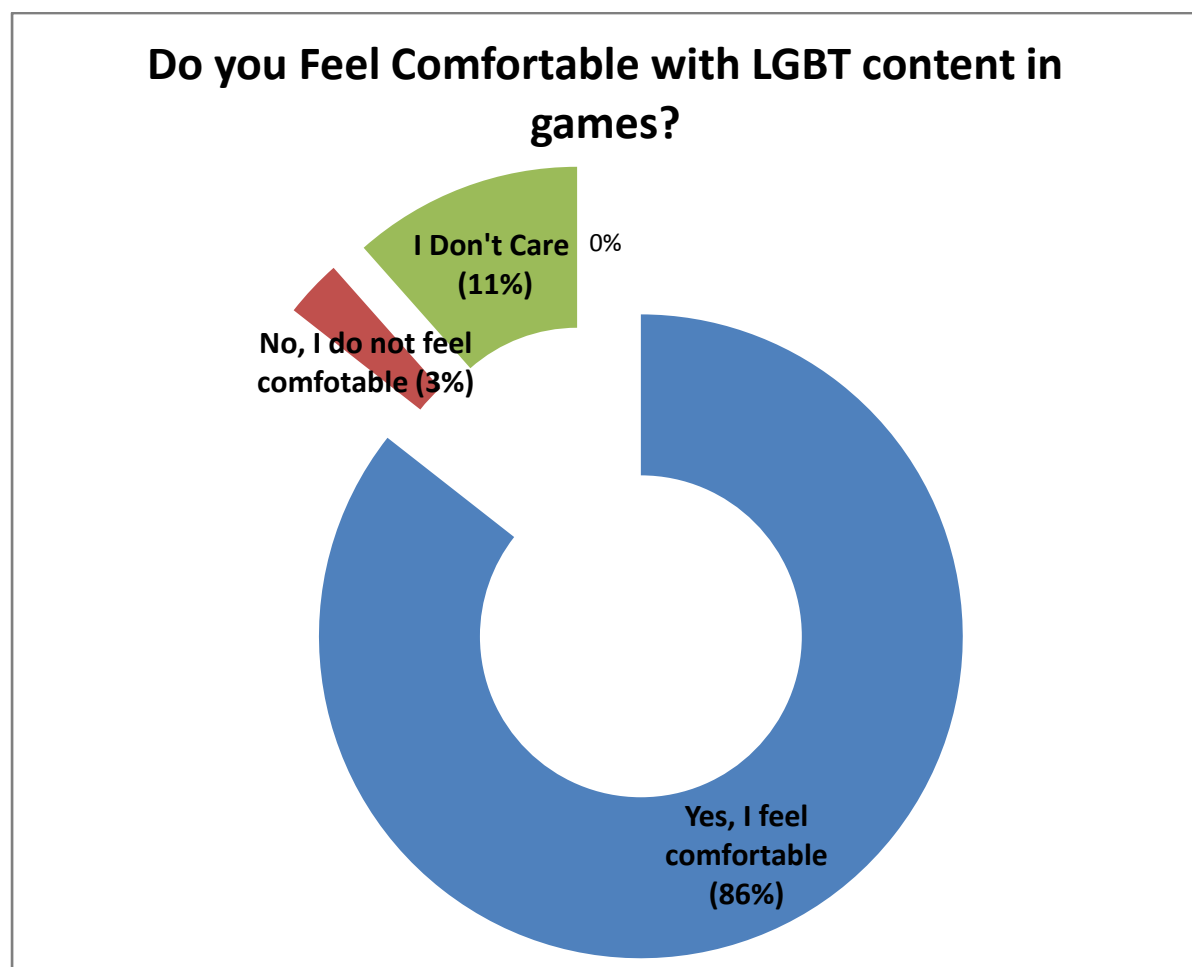

Do you Feel Comfortable with LGBT content in games?

I Don't Care (11%)

0%

No, I do not feel comfotable (3%)

Yes, I feel comfortable (86%)

Figure 4: Level of Comfort with LGBT Content in Games

As Figure 4 shows, a resounding 86% of respondents stated that they themselves felt comfortable with the inclusion of LGBT content; the next largest group were those who said that they do not really care if such content is included, accounting for 11%. Finally, the individuals, who expressed that they felt uncomfortable with this content was comparatively small, with only 3% of respondents. Findings like these seem to encourage the view that the gaming community, or at least the particular sample of community examined here, are not as intolerant as they are reported to be; and that those individuals who are against such content would appear to actually account for only a few individuals. In fact, it was found that of the 104 total respondents in this study, there were only 3 of these individuals, all heterosexual males, who expressed negative views towards the presence of LGBT content in video games. Although this is one of a number of questions that assessed the responses of gamers (in this sample) to the inclusion of LGBT content in games, it is reflective of similar findings that emerged at the general level, regarding how respondents felt about and engaged with such content. Slobogian (2011) also noted similar findings in relation to the discussions that she examined within forums, in most instances where homophobic views were displayed; she stated that these individuals were disciplined by other members.

In particular, the most common and recurring theme that emerged from respondents (particularly respondents with minority sexualities) regarding LGBT inclusion in video games was that it resulted in games appearing more realistic. It was suggested by a number of respondents that if people were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender in the real world, then it didn't make sense for these individuals to be removed from video game worlds. These gamers saw that the inclusion of such content was not only tolerable, but they also stated that they saw no reason as to why it should be censored or ignored in the first place.

> "In the same way as I feel comfortable with representations of other races and sexes in games: LGBT people exist in the real world and there's no reason they shouldn't exist in the games made in said world" (Sam, a homosexual male gamer).

Although it was important to examine the way in which the wider gaming community are responding to LGBT content in the games that they play, there is one remaining area that needs to be examined. Corresponding to one of the aims of this research, particular attention needs to be given to the responses of heterosexual male gamers in relation to the ideas put forward in both hegemonic masculinity theory and inclusive masculinity theory.

The main finding that emerged from separating heterosexual males for analysis was that their responses were more indicative of inclusive masculinity theory than hegemonic masculinity. Generally, across all areas of examination within this research, there was no real difference that was observed between this specific demographic and the wider sample studied. The general pattern that emerges from this research is that the almost all of the individuals within this sample of gamers (including heterosexual males) are largely both tolerant and encouraging of LGBT content in video games. What this offers is a direct contrast to the depictions in a number of media sources, and the commentary that surrounded GamerGate in relation to homophobia.

What table 2 shows us is that contrary to the more negative views held by both the respondents themselves and individuals outside of the gaming community, the vast majority of individuals in this sample (including the heterosexual males) are generally comfortable with LGBT content in their games. Although the heterosexual male is the demographic group that reported to be the least comfortable with LGBT content in games (with 12% of heterosexual males), it is largely eclipsed by the remaining 71% who reported to generally feel comfortable with LGBT content in the games that they play. In particular, this finding from this research actually begins to paint a different picture to the one outlined above by respondents regarding the presence of heterosexual privilege within the gaming community. The heterosexual male gamers who took part in this research directly contradicted this association, often expressing largely tolerant and encouraging answers regarding the inclusion of LGBT content in games. The majority of heterosexual males did not believe that games were becoming undermined or challenged by the inclusion of LGBT content. By extending this, the responses and analysis that was produced here actually lends itself more to the concept of inclusive masculinity theory rather than the theory of hegemonic masculinity.

What is your sex and sexual orientation?		Do you feel comfortable with LGBT content in games?			Total
		Yes	No	Indifferent	
Male	Heterosexual	30 (71%)	5 (12%)	7 (17%)	42 (100%)
	Non-Heterosexual	12 (86%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	14 (100%)
	Total	42 (75%)	6 (11%)	8 (14%)	56 (100%)
Female	Heterosexual	22 (88%)	0 (0%)	3 (12%)	25 (100%)
	Non-Heterosexual	18 (90%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)	20 (100%)
	Total	40 (89%)	1 (2%)	4 (9%)	45 (100%)
Total	Heterosexual	52 (78%)	5 (7%)	10 (15%)	67 (100%)
	Non-Heterosexual	30 (88%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)	34 (100%)

Total	82	7	12	101
	(81%)	(7%)	(12%)	(100%)

Table 2: A crosstabulation of the gender and sexuality of respondents, with their level of comfort with LGBT content in games. 3 respondents were removed from this analysis because they did not disclose gender and/or sexuality.

Similar to the findings from studies within schools and sports, in the work of McCormack (2012); Anderson and McCormack (2010); and Anderson and McGuire (2010), it is suggested by these scholars that the theory of hegemonic masculinity is no longer applicable to fully understanding the relationships and interactions that occur among the various types of masculinities. Instead they suggest that with the decrease in levels of 'homohysteria', which is described as "the cultural fear of being homosexualized" (McCormack, 2012), there is an emergence of inclusive masculinity. If we take this in conjunction with some of the findings taken from this research, what becomes clear is that there are some clear similarities between the males within the sample researched here, and those studied within the above pieces of research. The heterosexual males examined here, appear to conform to the idea that masculinities are no longer formed and regulated in hierarchical structures. The common perception that, in particular, heterosexual males are defensive regarding their position within gaming culture, and are the group that are the most vocal about any attempts to alter this appear to be misleading. What the findings of this research seem to suggest, is that males are largely becoming more inclusive within gaming culture.

> "There are a lot of straight male gamers who are tired of a small minority of straight male gamers making us look so afraid of different people and different people's sexual orientation" (Charlie, a heterosexual male respondent).

Conclusion

Similar to reported game demographics by the ESA (2014) and Crawford (2012) the gamers in our study are increasingly diverse in age, gender, and even sexuality. An interesting contradiction was found within the data. Respondents typically believed

that there was an overarching presence of heterosexual privilege and homophobia among some contingencies of the gaming community; however, the personal responses provided by the respondents largely contradicted this. Rather than individuals expressing these privileged and/or homophobic responses, the vast majority of respondents in this study expressed tolerance and acceptance towards the inclusion of LGBT content in the games that they play. Heterosexual male gamers, seen as the traditionally privileged demographic within gaming, were isolated in order to analyse their responses to this content. The results of this analysis showed no real difference between heterosexual male gamers and the wider sample in terms of the themes and patterns that emerged. The main implication of this was that the theory of inclusive masculinity (as proposed by Anderson and McCormack, 2010; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; and McCormack, 2012) would appear to be applicable to the sample used in this research. Rather than a structure of hegemonic masculinity that dictates a hierarchical structuring of the relationships between the various sexualities of men, heterosexual males expressed a general level of tolerance towards other sexualities being present and catered for within games. This finding represents one of the main empirical contributions that this research provides, because no research has yet directly assessed whether inclusive masculinity has transcended beyond schools and sports settings (as outlined in the inclusive masculinity readings mentioned above) and found its way into gaming.

Our results confirmed Slobogian's (2011) finding that players commonly reported in forums that they had experimented with sexuality within games. This suggests that the 'disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004) is not just applicable to the Internet, but also to video game environments. Respondents showed a lack of inhibition when it came to experimenting with sexuality in video games compared to in real life. Our findings also support the importance of the 'Proteus effect' (Yee and Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al, 2009; Yee, 2014) where the role one takes online has an impact on one's behaviour not only online but also subsequently offline. Not only are video games becoming a common means of entertainment among the wider population, but the concept of the 'Proteus effect' has also shown that video games have the potential to shape our behaviour not only within but also outside of the games (Potts, 2014). This has implications for shaping levels of tolerance and acceptance among gamers

through engagement with LGBT content and/or characters. This suggestion is particularly important considering the findings from this research that the majority of respondents have experimented with sexuality within games instead of offline. In sum, the findings (although interesting) cannot be generalised beyond the boundaries of this study. However, their strength lies in the suggestions that they provide for further research.

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Appendix A

Online Questionnaire:

Q1) What is your Sex?

    (a) Male

    (b) Female

    (c) Other (Please Specify)

Q2) What is your age?

    (a) 18-25

    (b) 26-40

    (c) 41-60

    (d) 61+

Q3) What would you classify yourself as:

    (a) Heterosexual

    (b) Homosexual

    (c) Bisexual

    (d) Other (Please specify)

Q4) Do you feel that your sexuality is adequately represented in video games?

    (a) Yes

    (b) No

    (c) Don't Know

Q5) How long (in years) have you been playing video games?

(a) 1-5 years

(b) 6-10 years

(c) 11-20 years

(d) 21+ years

Q6) How many hours (approximately do you spend playing video games per week?

(a) 1-5 hours

(b) 6-10 hours

(c) 11+ hours

Q7) Please list a few of the games that you have played recently (as many as you

can)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q8) Which of the games that you have played have had LGBT content?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q9) What was the LGBT content in these games?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q10) Do you feel comfortable with LGBT content in games?

    (a) Yes

    (b) No

    (c) Indifferent

Q11) Why? (Please account for your answer for question 10)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q12) Do you think that some gamers are offended by LGBT content in the games that they play?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q13) Why? (Please explain your answer for question 12)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q14) Have you ever experimented with your sexuality offline (in the real world)?

    (a) Yes

    (b) No

Q15) Have you ever experimented with LGBT content in games?

    (a) Yes

    (b) No

Q16) Why? (Please explain your answer for question 15)

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Q17) Do you believe that future games should continue to include this content?

    (a) Yes

    (b) No

    (c) Don't Care

Q18) Why? (Please explain your answer for question 17)

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Q19) If you have any further points to make about the topic of sexuality in video games, please do so here

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Table of Graphs/Figures