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Game Changers – Representations of Queerness in Canadian Videogame Design

Zusammenfassung

Aufgrund der sich verändernden Demographie der Spielenden, sowie der Domestizierung und Entmystifizierung von Videospielen, ist das Medium in der Mitte der Gesellschaft angekommen. Weite Teile des bisherigen Zielpublikums, die Gamer, reagieren aggressiv auf den resultierenden Autoritätsverlust und den wahrgenommenen Identitätsverlust. Besonders Darstellungen sexueller und geschlechtlicher Identitäten sind zu einem Schlachtfeld in diesem Kulturkrieg geworden, während sich die Industrie an ein kollabierendes imaginäres Publikum klammert. Zusammen mit einer Diversifizierung der Designer-Community müssen inklusive Repräsentationsregime über den Indie-Sektor hinaus zum Standard werden. BioWare hat mehr zu diesen notwendigen Veränderungen beigetragen als irgendein anderes Studio. Mit Mass Effect *und* Dragon Age *haben sie die Grenzen des Akzeptablen in der Darstellung von Geschlecht und Sexualität im Videospiel verschoben.* Dragon Age: Inquisition *(2014) ist das erste völlig inklusive Spiel der westlichen Designtradition, und es kommuniziert zudem noch zutiefst kanadische Werte und Normen in seiner Identitätspolitik, seinem Repräsentationsregime und seiner sozio-politischen Ethik.*

Abstract

Due to changing player demographics, the domestication, and demystification of videogames, the medium has arrived in the middle of society. Large parts of the formerly privileged demographic, 'The Gamers', react aggressively to the resulting loss of authority and a perceived loss of identity. Especially representations of sexual and gender identities have become a battleground in these culture wars, with the industry still holding on to a collapsing imagined audience. Together with a diversification of the designer community, inclusive representational regimes must become the standard. BioWare have done more to realise this necessary development than any other studio. With Mass Effect *and* Dragon Age*, they have pushed the limits of acceptable representation in terms of gender and sexuality in games.* Dragon Age: Inquisition *(2014) is the first fully inclusive game in the western design tradition, and additionally it communicates deeply Canadian values and norms in its identity politics, its representational regime, and its socio-political ethics.*

Résumé

À cause de la démographie changeante des joueurs et suite à la domestication et dé-mystification des jeux-vidéos, le médium a désormais sa place certaine au cœur même de la société. Une partie importante de l'ancien public cible, les Gamers, réagit de façon agressive à la perte d'autorité qui en résulte, et y perçoit une perte d'identité, comme l'a montré la controverse du Gamergate. Les représentations d'identités sexuées et sexuelles sont devenues de véritables champs de batailles dans cette guerre culturelle, alors que l'industrie continue à cibler un public imaginaire en voie d'effondrement. Or, les discours autour des droits civiques remplacent la logique de propriété des maisons d'édition, et en plus d'une diversification de la communauté des designers, des régimes de représen-tation inclusive doivent devenir – bien au-delà du secteur indie – la nouvelle norme sur le marché. Bien plus que tout autre studio, BioWare d'Edmonton (AB) a contribué à ces changements nécessaires du médium. Avec leurs séries Mass Effect *et* Dragon Age*, BioWare a lentement mais continuellement déplacé les limites de ce qui, au niveau de la représentation des sexes et de la sexualité, paraissait acceptable.* Dragon Age : Inquisi-tion *(2014) est le premier jeu-vidéo de la tradition occidentale de design qui est vérita-blement et à cent pourcent « inclusif », en plus de transmettre des valeurs et des normes profondément canadiennes pour ce qui est de sa politique d'identité, son régime de représentation et l'éthique socio-politique dont il témoigne.*

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Gamergate, or: Empire Falling

In his article "Competing Narratives in Virtual Worlds", Ren Reynolds delineates the basic logic of media change according to Science and Technology Studies: new technologies take on already accepted cultural values in highly complex and often-times contested processes (2009, 399). Videogames continually increase in social impact and develop new functions in social and cultural debates, they thus become potentially highly disruptive forces. As researchers working with this relatively new medium, we need to "inquire what kinds of meaning we attribute to [virtual worlds] as artifacts and social practices that become associated with them", the author ar-gues (ibid.). We need to ask ourselves what discourses dominate our understanding of them.

Unfortunately for the medium, the Gamergate controversy has recently been the most visible public discourse associated with videogames and the people playing them. It started in August 2014 with a series of sexist and misogynistic attacks on twitter (#gamergate), and in several online forum entries targeting prominent fe-male game developers such as Zoe Quinn or Brianna Wu, as well as women active in the field of videogame criticism, with Anita Sarkeesian of *Feminist Frequency* fame taking the brunt of the onslaught (cf. *Feminist Frequency* 2015). The situation quickly escalated into open threats of rape, murder, and eventually even mass murder.

A strong and decisive reaction from the industry followed. Game designers and journalists used the means of communication at their disposal to distribute open letters and to collect signatures against the Gamergate movement. In a statement issued, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), reuniting the biggest producers and publishers in the medium, made it clear that "[t]here is no place in the video game community – or our society – for personal attacks and threats" (Tsukayama 2014). The tenor of these voices was that the participants in the unacceptable attacks were only a small but vocal minority, and that their behaviour was damaging to the community as a whole and the medium as such. The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) immediately took steps to address the issue of a lack of diversity in an industry where 76% of game designers self-identify as male, 86% as heterosexual, 79% as Caucasian, and only 17.5% of game designers openly live with disabilities (IGDA 2014). Strategies to increase the support for and inclusion of women and other minorities and to remove structural discrimination were installed and reviewed. Industry leaders were openly taking a stand on this.

At the heart, however, Gamergate was and is only a symptom, one battle in a culture war that has been raging for years now over several critical issues regarding videogames and the cultures surrounding them: artistic and academic criticism and recognition of videogames as forms of cultural expression, shifting gamer demographics and the resulting diversification of game content, and the social and cultural attributes of a 'Gamer identity' itself. The aggressive nature of the attacks becomes understandable – but must not be condoned: Certain groups of players see their authority, even their core identity eroded as videogames follow the, as Ian Bogost put it, "violent and tragic" trajectory of domestication and demystification other 'new media' such as comics, film, or TV have taken in the past (2011, 150-151). The formerly secret garden of videogame culture is now thrown wide open to the masses, and Gamers "find themselves disturbed and disoriented at the domestication of what was once a private, dangerous wilderness" (ibid., 150).

But according to leading critics 'The Gamer' has been dying for years now. In *How to Do Things with Videogames* (2011), Bogost entitles his conclusions chapter "The End of Gamers" (ibid., 147-154). Since the domestication of videogames, the acceptance of the medium into the everyday lives of more and more people, rapidly advances, it becomes more "ordinary and familiar" on the one hand, while on the other hand games also "realize their place in meaningful art and culture" (ibid., 159). Yet this process, accompanied by a fundamental demystification, is a mixed blessing: what videogames win in reach and scale, they also lose in courage and vibrancy, growing into a "tame and uninteresting" medium (ibid., 150). What used to be a sub- or even a counter-culture has now become mainstream. Studios have moved from family garages to glass skyscrapers, and publishers control the biggest entertainment market, ahead of the film or music industry, in most western societies (cf. Charlton 2012). For Bogost, this development is not threatening, or even deplorable, it is just the way all media go: "Soon gamers will be the anomaly. If we're very fortu-

nate, they'll disappear altogether. Instead we'll just find people, ordinary people of all sorts. And sometimes these people will play videogames. And it won't be a big deal" (2011, 154).

While Bogost wrote this swan song to 'The Gamer' years before the violent backlash he predicted actually broke out, Leigh Alexander's article "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over" (2014) was a direct, immediate, and outspoken response to the Gamergate events. She criticises the appropriation of gaming by commercial interests and the catering to the supposed tastes of what she calls "young white dudes with disposable income who like to Get Stuff [sic]" (Alexander 2014). What is widely understood to be 'Gamer culture' is exposed as the product of marketing strategies prevalent during the 1990s and early 2000s, succinctly and scathingly summarised by Alexander as follows: "Have money. Have women. Get a gun and then a bigger gun. Be an outcast. Celebrate that. Defeat anyone who threatens you" (ibid.). Like Bogost before her, the author goes on to explain that the situation of gaming and the industry has drastically changed since then, and that these changes must also impact the values expressed in videogame production. A shift towards diversification and inclusion must and will happen as the medium is accepted as a valid and valuable form of cultural expression: "Developers and writers alike want games about more things, and games by more people. […] We will get this, because we're creating culture now. We are refusing to let anyone feel prohibited from participating" (ibid.).

In Alexander's reading of the Gamergate controversy, it marks a watershed moment in the development of videogames, not in spite of but rather because of the excessive and specifically targeted aggression. 'Gamer' is no longer a meaningful category – who would self-identify as a 'filmer', or a 'booker' for that matter? – it has become a "dated demographic label" (Alexander 2014). And, like Bogost years before her, she also ends her contribution on the notes of a swan song: "Gamers are over. That's why they're so mad. […] There is what's past and there is what's now. There is the role that you choose to play in what's ahead" (ibid.). 'The Gamer', for Bogost, Alexander, and many other critics, is a relic of a past that rapidly loses its power over the present. He – for gender is a key issue here – has ridden off into the sunset to join this other icon of an out-dated and misconceived masculinity. And gamers – lower-case g and plural – *are* no longer defined, they *self*-identify as such, appropriating and actively creating their identities.

So, the Empire of the Gamer is falling, as the formerly targeted and therefore privileged demographic has to come to terms with a shift towards a plurality of new voices and representations. The figures for the US, the biggest videogame market in the world, could not paint a clearer image of the changes: 50% of people now play games on a regular basis, with an average of two gamers per household; 51% of households own a dedicated gaming console, and those that do on average own two; the average player age is 31, with the age cohort of 36+ already being the dominant segment, and 48% of gamers are female (ESA 2014).

In their *Developer Satisfaction Survey* of 2014, IGDA asked its participating members to identify the issues creating a negative perception of the industry, and the top answers show a keen awareness of the problems the medium and its culture are facing: right after the deplorable "working conditions" of game creators at 68% come "sexism in games" at 66%, the "perceived link to violence" at 61%, and the rampant "sexism in the industry" at 51% (IGDA 2014). As the top three most critical issues for the future of game design emerge "advancements in game design" (74%), "more diversity in game content" (65%), and "advancements in storytelling" (59%) (IGDA 2014). These figures show that the makers of games have acknowledged the changing situation and are very much aware of the steps they must take to guarantee a positive development of their medium and its place in society. Games have reached the middle of society in terms of gender, age, and class, and they are quickly becoming a leading medium of cultural expression and experience.

Canada's contribution to the rise and development of videogames is disproportionally important: it is the largest producer in the world in employees per capita, and even in absolute figures it is now number three after the US and Japan; there are 329 videogame companies in Canada that completed 910 projects in 2012, 48% of which were designed for the console market (ESAC 2014). The Canadian games industry originally started in British Columbia over 20 years ago in one of the oldest clusters in North America, but today it is Québec that has the highest concentration of companies and employees, with Montréal boasting the largest population of game designers in the country. Ontario is lagging behind in comparison, mostly focused on small and medium sized companies. The Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC) in its annual 2014 report also lauded the close relation between the educational sector and the industry in Canada: 65 relevant post-secondary programmes at universities across the country have formed a sound basis for strong and lasting collaborations between educational institutions and the industry that hires 97% of the graduates (ESAC 2014). It is therefore essentially young, well-educated Canadians and Canadian-trained foreign professionals that push the medium forwards in terms of quality and types of content, supported by 67% of the Canadian population that see good opportunities for young people in these programmes and the industry (ibid.). This is certainly a major contributing factor as to why Canadian-produced games have become global leaders in terms of the diversity of representations and experiences they make available to their players during recent years.

'Queering' the Medium?

For Ren Reynolds the key questions at the heart of the current debates and controversies are: "Who's in control?", and "Who controls the processes of governance?" (2009, 399-400). Unlike the studios designing and *making* games, intrinsically motivated and inherently interested in the creative process per se and the resulting experiences, the publishers distributing and *selling* games are extrinsically motivat-

ed and follow only the logic of property. Asymmetrical power relationships between publishers on the one hand and studios but also players on the other reinforce mechanisms of technical and social control. Alternative voices can either surface as disagreements within the narrative of property and therefore contest ownership, or they can assert counter-narratives, such as turning the debate about games into an issue of civil rights.

Since players experience virtual worlds as diegetic *spaces*, Reynolds argues in the tradition of Richard A. Bartle (2004) and Henry Jenkins (2004), this gives rise to "the potential for civic discourse" (2009, 402). What we see is a perceptual and conceptual shift of the game space from a purely "ludic utility" (ibid.) to a much larger and contextualised discourse of citizenship and participation that stands in open tension with the publisher's logic of ownership and control. Reynolds here refers to Sal Humphreys' understanding that it is typical for alternative narratives of society or community to be established in and around "social relation-based narrative[s]" (2009, 403). As players form relationships and constantly (re-)negotiate them in hybrid spaces that bring together aspects of the physical and the virtual in the social, they create social capital in two processes that Robert Putnam called bridging, "individuals from different backgrounds making links between social networks", and bonding, "providing a substantive form of support to each other" (in Reynolds 2009, 403). The resulting sense of embodied virtual community and citizenship can lead to events such as in-game protests that have already happened in several massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs) such as *Ultima Online* (Origin et al. 1997-present), *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company 1999-present), or *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony Online Entertainment and Electronic Arts 2003-2011), knowing virtual performances of real-world protests carried by adopted and adapted narratives of civil disobedience and civil rights in what Reynolds defines as "a notion of civic identity and society that embodies those rights" (2009, 404). What becomes evident in such examples is that videogames can and will be used as a culturally disruptive force by their players, or, to be more precise, "by those able to harness the power of the virtual for social change" (ibid., 405).

If what Reynolds claims holds true, Adrienne Shaw's article "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Videogames" (2012) asks the justified question why then there is still such a lack of LGBT[1] representations in videogames, even in comparison to other forms of popular culture. She takes a cultural production perspective, investigating the mechanisms of "[h]ow meanings are produced and reproduced in the complex interrelationship between the game development industry, video games, and players" (2012, 228). In her conclusions she identifies five critical issues related to central industry concerns that account for this intriguing *décalage* between videogames and other popular media (ibid., 242).

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1   Shaw uses the abbreviation GLBT for „gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender", whereas I prefer the order LGBT. Political issues aside, the meaning of the letters remains the same.

First of all, there are the predominant attitudes of industry members, which means that the creators of content must be personally, politically or commercially motivated to include LGBT content, which is a challenge in such a homogenous community. The second problem diagnosed by Shaw is the construction of the audience: The industry conceptually clings to an imagined audience of 18-25 year old, white, heterosexual males (aka 'The Gamer') and follows what Shaw – using the terminology of DiMaggio/Hirsch (1976) – terms "imaginary feedback loops" (2012, 242). Since this imagined audience is no longer representative of the majority of the people actually buying and playing videogames, the imaginary feedback loops holding the industry hostage must be identified and deconstructed to make new developments possible. Issue number three are market and institutionalised risks, or the constant fear of public backlash that paralyses developers – ironically enough, Shaw states, from both the LGBT community *and* right-wing conservatives (ibid., 242). Industry-based reprisals studios have to face, such as age-rating systems, and the rampant self-censorship they cause add another dimension to the risk aversion typical of mainstream studios and publishers. The fourth issue Shaw identifies also directly impacts risk aversion: the very structure of the industry, how it is funded and organised into big companies to raise the money necessary for a AAA game today. To put this into perspective, the most expensive game ever made, *Destiny* (Bungie 2014) with its $500mio budget (Grover/Nayak 2014), easily tops the most expensive films ever made, *Cleopatra* (1963) with $339.5mio and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007) with $341.8mio respectively (Acuna 2014). The fifth and last issue on Shaw's list is the quality of LGBT representations, as producers try to avoid stereotypes and to find that precarious middle ground between making games *about* LGBT, ironically reinforcing hegemonic discourses of deviancy, and a merely *incidental* inclusion that lacks political vigour.

In accordance with the title of her article, it is finding a satisfying and respectful way of "Putting the Gay in Games" that Shaw is most interested in. For her, the best solution to include sexuality organically in games would be to tie it to game mechanics: "[I]t makes sense", she writes, "that games centred on choices and inter-character relationships are the place where homosexuality and bisexuality have been incorporated" (2012, 240). Even so, several potential problems with LGBT representations must not be underestimated: less gender normative or less socially privileged LGBT people in terms of class or race could be under- or mis-represented; a narrow definition of 'The Gaymer' is just as problematic as 'The Gamer' has been; non-LGBT designers can produce relevant LGBT representations, and LGBT-inclusive games can also appeal to non-LGBT players; and, finally, relegating LGBT inclusion to the indie scene leads to a ghettoization which must be avoided (ibid. 2012, 242). Shaw fervently argues, like I do, for the incorporation of LGBT representations into mainstream videogaming culture and AAA games (ibid., 229), and it is a Canadian company that has in the meantime since her article was published proven her right …

And Then There Was 'The BioWare Way'

Beyond the relative quantitative 'over-representation' of Canadian-designed games in the market, there is also a tradition of internationally highly acclaimed games and game series as far as their quality is concerned that have originated in the country: the *Homeworld* series (Relic Entertainment and Barking Dog Studios 1999-2003), the 'new' *Prince of Persia* series (Ubisoft Montréal 2003-2008), *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver 2006), the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft Montréal 2007-2014), the *Far Cry* series (Ubisoft Montréal 2005-2014), *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game* (Ubisoft Montréal 2010), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montréal 2011), or *Fez* (Polytron Corporation 2012) to name but a few. While some of these provide differentiated representations on the level of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity (*Assassin's Creed*), or deeply engaging meditations on the nature of the transhuman subject (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*), on the level of sexual and gender diversity the lack is surprising.[2] The only exception to this rule is *Bully*, a game thematising high-school bullying that created a controversy not for its violent content but the mere possibility to have the male player avatar kiss other boys. Unfortunately, there are even people who use the profiling feature of *Watchdogs* (Ubisoft Montréal 2014) to 'purify' their virtual Chicago of unwanted individuals such as immigrants or LGBT people, and who then brag about it online (cf. 4plebs 2014).

The studio that would change all this in their very special manner, BioWare of Edmonton/AB, was founded in 1995. It first established itself firmly in the hearts and minds of gamers with *Baldur's Gate* (1998), a *Dungeons&Dragons* adaptation. More of those were to follow, *Baldur's Gate II* (2000/2001) and *Neverwinter Nights* (2002/2003), before the studio branched into *Star Wars* as well, with *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) that included the franchise's first ever LGBT character, the lesbian Jedi Juhani. The 'BioWare way' began in 2005, when adaptations of pre-existing content were abandoned in favour of self-developed franchises. *Jade Empire* (2005) used a far-eastern fantasy setting, and this time BioWare did not only include two female bisexual characters, but also a male bisexual romance option with Sky. The game never had a sequel, however, in spite of the metascore of 89/100 the Xbox-version still holds, calculated as the weighted average of 82 reviews by industry-relevant critics (Metacritic 2015).

Mass Effect in 2007 was to become the first instalment of BioWare's first lasting in-house IP. The science-fiction epic already created a splash at the time of release, as FOX News and other conservative media outlets accused the game of being a porn simulator for an erotic 3-minute video sequence in a 30-hour experience that would have been perfectly fine on TV. In reaction, BioWare locked all male bisexual content in the game, which means that the code and the assets are still there but they can-

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2   Japanese videogames have been more inclusive of LGBT characters ever since the 1980s, but companies like Nintendo or Sega would remove all such content for their western release (cf. Marr 2013).

not be accessed. Interestingly, the female bisexual content was left intact, raising unpleasant questions about pandering to the straight male Gamer-gaze. The acquisition of BioWare by Electronic Arts (EA) of Redwood City/CA during the production of *Mass Effect* is just one factor that might have contributed to this decision, another example of the tendency towards self-censorship in the industry in anticipation of imaginary feedback loops.

To cover the two more easily sellable core genres of the Fantastic[3], BioWare also created their own Dark Fantasy setting with *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). In this game, there are four possible romance options for players: a male and a female straight character, as well as a male and a female bisexual one. While the female bisexual option, Leliana, is praised for her complex personality and representation, her male counterpart, the elven assassin Zevran, comes across as an unfortunate collection of stereotypes about MSM (men who have sex with men).

Possibly anticipating criticism after their experiences with *Mass Effect*, BioWare again resorted to self-censorship with the second instalment of the series, *Mass Effect 2* (2010). This time, all three romance options for a male player character were straight ones, whereas three out of six for a female player character were same-sex options. The sheer disproportion in the number of romanceable characters for male and female characters already paints a dreary picture as far as gender stereotyping is concerned, following the line of argument how "women are more romantic than men" and therefore need twice the romance options males do. But the inclusion of female same-sex relationships while male characters are refused the same right is again an example of how the imagined audience of the heterosexual, adolescent male and his supposed sexual fantasies are catered for in the design.

It was not until *Dragon Age 2* (2011) that BioWare finally found their own voice in terms of gender and sexuality. Unprecedented in the history of western game design, for the very first time a male character not controlled by the player attempted to initiate a same-sex romance. Straight male gamers were in uproar in the media and on internet forums, expressing their rage because they felt threatened in their sexual identity by these unwanted advances. Yet the mechanics of the design left players in control of their avatar's sexual identity at any given moment and gave them ample opportunity to refuse any offers to take the relationship beyond mere friendship. This time, however, BioWare did not back down again and instead chose to make a stand on the issue in an open letter by the series openly gay lead-writer, David Gaider. The central claims he makes are that all players have a right to be equally represented and find equal opportunities in a game, that the hitherto privileged majority must get used to representations of minority and marginal identities, and that subsequently a de-naturalisation of majority expectations and of any claim

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3   The core genres of the Fantastic are Science-Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. While BioWare have not produced a horror IP yet, they have integrated more palatable horror elements in both the *Mass Effect* and the *Dragon Age* settings. The *Shadow Realms* project, which would have been based mostly on horror elements, was cancelled early in 2015.

to sole representational authority is necessary (Gaider 2011). After a reminder that all controversial content is purely optional in nature, he concludes: "And the person who says that the only way to please them is to restrict options for others is, if you ask me, the one who deserves it least" (ibid.). In perfect symmetry, *Dragon Age 2* therefore proposes four romance options, one of each gender straight and one of each bisexual, so that all players have a choice. There are two problems with this approach: firstly, gay or lesbian sexual identities are still excluded from representation, and secondly, bisexuality is used as a 'compromise' to accommodate players interested in same-sex romances. Gaider himself addressed the latter issue in a GaymerX2 BioWare-panel when he warned: "I don't think bisexuality is a great compromise, because bisexuality *itself* is not a compromise" (GaymerX 2014).

Based on the successes of their earlier games, and supported by the momentum of the *Dragon Age 2* controversy, BioWare managed to realise the next milestone on their way towards realising a more inclusive representational regime for all sexual and gender identities with *Mass Effect 3* (2012). For the first time in western game design, they created an exclusively gay and an exclusively lesbian romance option: shuttle pilot Steve Cortez and Comm Specialist Samantha Traynor. The studio's aim was to include believable, life-affirming same-sex relationships that progress realistically and avoid stereotyping as much as possible. And while all LGBT content was still written by white straight male authors (Patrick Weekes[4] and Dusty Everman), they worked in a constant feedback loop with LGBT staff at BioWare (Weekes 2012). To make up for past mistakes, Kaidan Alenko, the originally bisexual Ukrainian-Canadian male character who was supposed to be available as a romance option for male player characters in the first *Mass Effect*, was reinstated in all aspects of his identity.

But while the female-female romance was seen as unproblematic, the male-male option was still given extra attention during production (Weekes 2012). In addition, BioWare also instated a policy of double-gating the male same-sex romance to prevent what Everman calls 'ninja romancing', turning a bromance into an unwanted romance with a single choice made in the dialogue wheel (Weekes 2012). In order to safeguard (straight/male) agency, the player has to confirm twice that they want to engage in a male-male romance. Compared to all other romances (male-female, female-male, and even female-female), the male-male romance is thus marked as 'other', which can be seen as an implicit acknowledgment of a perceived threat it might pose to The Gamer's sexual identity. Intradiegetically, things are very different. This fictitious 22nd century society is presented as generally gender-blind, without stereotypical gender roles or expectations, and loving same-sex relationships are not marked as other, they are completely unmarked. Sexual preferences are relevant for sexual relationships only and do not constitute an individual's identity, nor do those who are the target of unrequited sexual attraction feel threatened in

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4   Weekes has in the meantime taken over as lead-writer for *Dragon Age* from David Gaider.

their own identity. Not even the hyper-masculine and straight space-marine James Vega can see a problem when his gay team-mate Cortez appreciates his physique during training sessions. The witty and friendly sexual banter between the two makes for a very special friendship while both respect each other's sexual desires.

Mass Effect 3 is already very close to best practice, but there is an unfortunate bias that leaves an unpleasant aftertaste: A female main character has 60% of her romance options with members of her own sex, while a male main character only has 25%. So even if the game is approaching an egalitarian representational regime for LGBT players, BioWare were also still indebted to common misconceptions about gamer demographics and imagined feedback loops when they created it.

Game Changer *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

In 2014, BioWare finally managed to break free and they released an accomplished masterpiece in game design, the first ever fully inclusive western videogame: *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Its plot is about disruptions of order: A civil war between Mages and Templars, a knightly order created to control Mages and their dangerous powers, tears apart the societies of Thedas ("The Dragon Age Setting"), while at the same time the last representative of a fallen Mage Empire tears apart reality itself to ascend to godhood. Characters in the game are portrayed in a differentiated way, and their identities emerge from complex intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. There is no 'queerness' in *Inquisition*, or at least not in the common sense of 'queer' as: "[s]trange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious", or "[o]ut of sorts; unwell; faint, giddy" (OED 2015). Being queer is no longer 'queer' in the secondary reality of the game, and characters are given agency in creating their identities through the dynamic performance of roles, reminiscent of Judith Butler's ideas about the performativity of gender (cf. Butler 2008). Characters are accepted for who they are, and *Inquisition* exudes a pervasive post-queer sensibility, moving beyond the issue stage of representation. Taking its ethical framework beyond questions of sexuality and gender, the game openly includes other touchy subjects such as euthanasia, addiction, religious fanaticism, colonialism, and the political 'game' in a serious, responsible, and differentiated manner.

Inquisition also exemplifies how the 'BioWare way' implicitly puts a strong focus on interpersonal relationships over more traditional interactive opportunities in videogames such as combat or puzzle solving (cf. GaymerX 2014). The game mechanics used to simulate the dynamics of friendship and romance show considerable complexity, in comparison to other similar games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), or *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt RED 2015), but also to other mechanical aspects of *Inquisition* itself, such as its extremely streamlined combat system, character development, or even quest design. Every companion character has a friendship arc, and the player can build relationships by having their character interact with them, making decisions in line with their respective worldviews. If a

character is potentially romanceable, at a certain intensity of the relationship flirting options pop up in the dialogue wheel that, if chosen, set flags for later dialogues, starting the two characters on their way towards romance. Conditionals control the firing of dialogue lines and the progression of a relationship. The general sequence goes like this: After the opt-in choice for romance, flirting is active; if the flirting is confirmed, the characters enter the romance state; next, the offer of an exclusive relationship will be made, and finally, the characters will get the opportunity to sexually consummate that relationship. All possible romance options vary this scheme according to their personalities, so with some it is easier to have sex than to enter a loving relationship. Others only go all the way at the end of a long journey of trust and reliability. Gating mechanisms are used to spread romance arcs equally throughout the game experience. The aforementioned approval system is one dimension here, controlling how interactions, decisions, and items add up points until certain romance scripts are triggered. The second dimension is plot, and certain narrative developments will trigger progression in the romance arc to pace its development across the entire game in a satisfying way.

In order to manage the resulting intricate web of interpersonal possibilities, BioWare have created The Chart, according to Karen Weeks, lead editor of *Inquisition*, who also describes it as "just this rainbow of amazing" (GaymerX 2014). Here all of the different options for players of all interests are mapped out, and the creators are looking for breadth in the representations and opportunities provided, balanced by the possibilities of characters and the necessities of plot. BioWare show that they are well aware of the responsibility they have to assume through the representations of romanceable characters in their games, since they implicitly make statements about what desirable traits in people are.

Inquisition has eight romance options: four straight (Cassandra the female paladin, Cullen the male paladin, Blackwall the disgruntled warrior, and Solas the distant elven Mage), two bisexual (the pansexual mercenary leader Iron Bull and the refined diplomat Josephine), as well as one gay (the decadent fallen Mage Dorian) and one lesbian (the rebellious female 'Robin Hood' Sera). Regarding the inclusion of the latter two, David Gaider commented: "That was pretty important, because those are different stories to tell" (GaymerX 2014). The cast of companions is carefully balanced: "You wanna make sure that there is variety. So if you have three straight options, couple of bis and couple of gays, you want them […] to hit all over the map", Gaider explains (ibid.). It is essential to avoid samey characters and to fill possible gaps to give attractive options to the maximum number of possible players.

Even though it is frequently held against the studio, BioWare's characters are not 'player-sexual', Gaider and Weekes claim, i.e. they do not change their sexuality according to player interaction (GaymerX 2014). A bisexual character will also be expressly written as such to preclude the danger of 'bi-erasure', the defining of bisexual persons as *either* gay *or* straight. And while the writers of the studio find it important to establish their characters' bisexual identities, Gaider also hastens to

add: "we don't want to tell a bunch of only bisexual stories either. That's not representation" (ibid.). Talking about the Iron Bull, Patrick Weekes muses: "[Characters] are not just their sexualities, but their sexualities are part of them. And when you leave that ambiguous, you are weakening them as characters" (ibid.).

In spite of all their serious efforts to break new ground in the representations of the sexual identities of videogame characters in general, and LGBT characters especially, BioWare also have to face limitations that are based on the technical platform, as well as the production process of the medium. "A lot of times", Gaider admits, "doing what is more realistic or adding more variation to the romance, it means that we have to write more. And there *is* only so much writing we can do" (GaymerX 2014). *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is available in three full voice overs, English, French, and German, and translated into eight more via subtitles and in-game texts. Also, the more the writers add in terms of character and plot development, the more costly cut-scenes will be needed.

Polyamorous relationships are really difficult to script due to the possible combinations and interactions between a large cast of characters, but Weekes announced that they will be included in future games with sets of characters written specifically for this set-up (GaymerX 2014). There is an increasing demand for asexual romance in the community, and this, too, will be respected in future games once enough research has been done to be able to do it justice. The easiest way out would be to implement romance arcs that just do not lead to a sex act, but Gaider refuses this as "not necessarily the most respectful way" to represent this specific sexual identity (ibid.). Another decisive step forwards from *Mass Effect 3* to *Inquisition* as far as their representational regimes are concerned was an increase in the diversity of body types. The excellent non-heteronormative interpersonal relationship mechanics of *Mass Effect 3* clashed very uncomfortably with the fact that everyone in the secondary reality had ridiculously unrealistic bodies. BioWare have been aware of this problem for a while now and frequently point towards technical limitations as one major factor in why everyone used to look the same body-wise. As so-called 'rigs' have to be created and animated for each virtual body in the game, having more diversity increases the investment in terms of time and money needed to create a near-realistic variety. Starting with *Inquisition*, all BioWare games will use the Frostbite engine, so future projects will be able to access and use the catalogue of past assets which in turn will make more diversity feasible. Beyond the issue of the mere 'sameness' of body models, *Inquisition* also drastically reduces the exaggerated perfection of bodies and relates the body types of characters logically to their way of life and the professions they follow. Even if the player decides to play a testosterone-fuelled warrior swinging a two-handed axe, their avatar will appear fit and muscled, but not beyond the limits of a professional athlete. There is even the hint of a tummy, replacing the rippled six-packs of earlier games.

It is thus that diversity is not only an issue on a mechanical level, but also on a narrative and aesthetic one. Travelling through the world of Thedas and interacting

with it, the player character will unlock codex entries providing them with in-depth information about the individuals, societies, and places of the setting. One entry that is highly relevant for this paper is "The sex lives of everyday Thedosians":

> Typically, one's sexual habits are considered natural and separate from matters of procreation, and only among the nobility, where procreation involves issues of inheritance and the union of powerful families, is it considered of vital importance. Yet, even there, a noble who has done their duty to the family might be allowed to pursue their own sexual in-terests without raising eyebrows. […] Nowhere is [sex between mem-bers of the same gender] forbidden, and sex of any kind is only consid-ered worthy of judgment when taken to awful excess or performed in the public eye. – From *In Pursuit of Knowledge: The Travels of a Chantry Scholar*, by Brother Genitivi (BioWare 2014)

The sexual mores of the world BioWare have created breathe the sexual ethics of the studio. Thedas becomes a learning environment for the player, a 'what-if' scenar-io in the best tradition of speculative fiction showcasing the effects of societies based on the principle of diversity and respect for the other. Sometimes the charac-ters even show their awareness of gendered stereotypes in earlier genre fiction and videogames, pointing the player towards the need for their deconstruction in a tongue-in-cheek way. Female armour styles in Heroic Fantasy have tended to be less than practical from a warrior's point of view, geared more towards pleasuring the sexual imagination of the male reader- and playership. This is why the knowledge-able player of *Inquisition* cannot help but smile when the Iron Bull and Cassandra engage in a very ironic bit of banter:

> Bull: Some high-ranking women wear ornamental crap with tits ham-mered into it. One good shot, and all that cleavage gets knocked right into the sternum. Real messy. Good on you for going practical.
> Cassandra: I aim to please.
> Bull: Leaves something to the imagination, too. (BioWare 2014)

Inscribing and breaking the cliché at the same time, exchanges like this one are frequent in the game and a testament to the designers' commitment to both enter-tain *and* educate.

The impact that BioWare have had on individual players and the community as a whole is considerable. For some, their games help them to develop their identity and personality. At GaymerX2, David Gaider quoted from letters he received that contain statements such as "Your game helped me come out […], made me feel like it was possible for me to be attractive" (GaymerX 2014). Even though the author later adds that sometimes these messages are hard to read, in the meantime the

media also have picked up on the extraordinary contribution this one studio from Edmonton/AB has made to the medium in general. In the Postscript to its review of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Edge* magazine gives credit to the unparalleled achievement in western videogame design this game constitutes: With two thirds of its main characters being women (even more if the player chooses to create a female Inquisitor), "*Inquisition* not only passes the Bechdel test, it proves that it is eminently possible to do so without breaking a heroic narrative" (*Edge* 2015, 106). The eulogy goes on, focusing precisely on the politics of diversity that underpin the representational regime of the game:

> The companion roster includes gay characters, bisexual ones and people of colour; romantic characters, promiscuous characters, and characters who reserve the right to express their sexuality. Vitally, the identities of your companions are not held in isolation from their mechanical and narrative role in the game. Instead they are folded together subtly, BioWare understanding that the *Dragon Age* setting is not Earth and does not need to inherit the same social prejudices. (*Edge* 2015, 106)

Narrative, mechanics, and aesthetics are "folded together" to support a specific sense of identity politics, as BioWare keenly understand the intricate communication situation of the medium. The deeply professional quality of the criticism in *Edge* magazine shines through at the end of the text, when the author spins the praise of the achievement that is *Inquisition* as a criticism of the prevalent policies of the contemporary industry:

> To say that no other mainstream videogame studio is operating at this level is an understatement. *Inquisition* might be a technically advanced game, but its identity politics are – strikingly, almost sadly – its most futuristic feature. (*Edge* 2015, 106)

This uniqueness of the game and what BioWare have managed to create within the institutional and commercial framework of an industry that is still dominated by risk-aversion, self-censorship, and imagined feedback loops make it stand out not only as a credit to BioWare with fifteen Game of the Year awards so far (Wikipedia 2015), but also as a silent, understated, almost passive-aggressive accusation against other AAA studios who choose to hide behind 'The Will of The Gamer' and projected sales figures, even though the numbers themselves speak differently (Savage 2015). Canadians are often associated with such passive-aggressive ways of voicing criticism (cf. MacGregor 2008; Fergusson 2006, 2007; Mochrie 2012), and especially in the light of the overpowering brutality and aggression of the Gamergate movement, maybe simply designing a game such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and then succeeding critically and financially was indeed a most Canadian reply.

Even beyond this, Thedas is a deeply Canadian setting in its geographical and conceptual make-up.

Your character is pushed into a position where the hopes of the many rest on them to stop an ancient Mage, Corypheus, from ravaging reality in his egotistical quest to become a living god. The first act of the game ends with your first direct conflict with Corypheus, as your basis of operation, the mountain village Haven, is attacked and utterly destroyed. Defeated, you have to flee, and the elven Mage Solas leads you to the ancient fortress of Skyhold, far away from civilisation, in the middle of the highest peaks, where you rebuild your community. The journey to Skyhold is presented in a cut-scene whose aesthetics invoke the concepts of the sublime (cf. Kant 1764; Burke 1757) to impress the player deeply with the sheer beauty of the landscape that is traversed, and the weight of the decision to settle at a place previously sacred to the Elves (Schallegger[5] 2015a). The virtual space created is a northern space, reminiscent of the Canadian Rockies, and there is a pervasive sense of awe of unconquered nature among the icy fields and rocky ridges, but at the same time this nature is also fragile: "Mankind blunders through the world", the witch Morrigan warns you, "crushing what it does not understand" (BioWare 2014). Nature the monster and nature the victim co-inhabit this northern conceptual space spanned by the narrative architecture of the game (cf. Grace 2007; Atwood 2004).

What drives the player character to this extraordinary place is not achievement and victory, however, and Skyhold was never the aim of their efforts. It is the defeat at and loss of Haven, the place that provides security and community in the early game, that propels your Inquisitor towards Skyhold. Failure, not success, becomes the defining force of development in *Inquisition*, as your Inquisitor is not the super-human prophet-to-be of traditional Fantasy literature but an ordinary and fallible individual, making choices and facing their uncertain consequences: "I'm not *chosen*. I *have* chosen", the Inquisitor explains when after your arrival in Skyhold they are made the leader of the newly reinstated Inquisition (Schallegger 2015b). Other characters throughout the game support the role of failure and pain in human development. There is Varric, dwarven 'storyteller extraordinaire' and entrepreneur, when he talks about Cole, a member of your company who used to be a Spirit of Compassion but chose to become human: "Humans change, and they hurt, and they heal" (BioWare 2014). And in the Fade, the spirit realm, a spirit impersonating Divine Justinia, religious leader of most of Thedas, provides your group with the following guidance: "Without fear and pain and failure we cannot learn, we cannot grow" (ibid.). This central role of failure and defeat in Canadian culture was already pointed out by Cohen (1993) and Atwood (2004), and it stands in stark contrast to

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5   All such references are to my *youtube* channel where the interested reader can watch essential sequences from one of my personal play-throughs of the game. I have made a point of waiting at all decision points so that the viewer has time to read all options, including those I did not actualise in this specific play-through.

the discourses of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream on the other side of the border.

   Skyhold becomes "a place where the Inquisition can build, grow", as Solas puts it (Schallegger 2015a), in a constructive, non-violent act of settlement harking to an organic concept of society. Canadian icons and discourses, such as the Beaver as the national animal and the Living Tree Doctrine, come to mind here, not necessarily reflecting the historical and social realities of Canada, but rather the ideals and the aspirations communicated in its national culture. But Skyhold is also very much Frye's garrison town surrounded by hostile nature (cf. Frye 1995), its Great Hall the beating heart of the Inquisition, a community brought together by an enclosed and sheltered space. There is also an Aboriginal element to the fortress, as it was built by human settlers atop Elven ruins, and the Inquisitor is even led there by the elven Mage Solas. Thedosian Elves bear several similarities to the traditional First Nations and Inuit of Canada, as they engage in a semi-nomadic life-style, create petroglyphs to commemorate key events of their history and important stories, and they also build inuksuit to mark special places. When Skyhold can be seen as Canada in a nutshell, all of Thedas could just as easily be read as an 'inverted Canada': there are the English-speaking Fereldans in the East, and the French-speaking Orlesians in the West of the continent; Orlais is the colonising Empire here, the Fereldans the colonised subjects; there is even a dying Empire in the North that used to dominate world politics, an Empire "built upon the bones of my people", as Solas muses (Schallegger 2015b).

   The Inquisition of the game's title is not created to persecute dissidents and heretics, rather it proves to be a catalyst for change. Rulership seemingly is in the hand of one person, the Inquisitor, but the game makes it clear that their mandate is derived from a social contract based on the trust and confidence of the ruled (Schallegger 2015b). Decisions are not made alone, as for large, strategic problems the Inquisitor gathers their Council, the diplomat Josephine, the Spy Master Leliana, and the War Leader Cullen, around the iconic War Table. Altogether, this makes the Inquisition uncannily alike to the Canadian and the British monarchies and what Frye termed the "quest for the peaceable kingdom" in Canadian culture (1995, 251).

   Central principles of the Canadian socio-political landscape, such as the Rule of Law, the anti-revolutionary bias, and again the Living Tree Doctrine, converge in the founding moments of the Inquisition: It is established based on a Holy Writ, a body of laws drafted by Divine Justinia, with the task to question how existing institutions need to adapt in order to reflect the changing needs of the people. Cassandra, as a Seeker of Truth and the Right Hand of the Divine the guardian of both the Divine's intentions and the traditions of the Inquisition, calls it "[a] means to preserve, as well as an agent of change" (BioWare 2014), and later in the game, when she starts to question her own motives and methods, she adds to that: "I want to respect tradition, but not fear change. […] And I have no idea whether my wanting these things makes any of them right" (Schallegger 2015c). So there is no metaphysical Truth

available, not even for a Seeker, only the ambiguity of real world political and social ethics, human-made constructs that must undergo a continuous process of re-evaluation and evolution to remain viable. Constant evolutionary change, not drastic revolutionary rupture, is seen as guiding principle to prevent encrusted structures and ideas from calcifying society. As a counter-example, *Inquisition* provides the Tevinter Empire, a nation of slavers that, using the magic it had learned from the Elves, conquered an Empire, only to fall prey to stagnation and stasis. "Because that's how it's always been done. *Excellent* reasoning", your Tevinter companion Dorian scathingly analyses his compatriots' mindset (BioWare 2014). The Inquisition itself is shown not to be immune to the lure of the illusion of certainty and Truth. It is the New Inquisition, because there was already another one earlier in history. "Protection, counsel, justice, the inquisition offered these once to those in need", Josephine enlightens you, but then they "lost their way", Cassandra interjects (both BioWare 2014).

The purpose of the Inquisition is to restore order in times of chaos, to guarantee survival, not the fulfilment of Manifest Destiny. All of the key figures of the New Inquisition are obsessed with notions of "peace, order, and good government", to quote the Canadian Constitution (Government of Canada 2015). Dorian defines their task as "restoring order in a world gone mad" (BioWare 2014), and Leliana reminds you that what is essential is to stand against Corypheus because he "is willing to tear this world apart to reach the next" (ibid.). The war you wage is not about power or belief, and indeed the game clearly communicates that its ethical framework is opposed to all kinds of fanaticism: "All of this happened because of fanatics and arguments about the next world", your character analyses the situation after he is styled the Herald of Andraste, a prophetical figure, by the people, "It's time we start believing in this one" (Schallegger 2015b). The system that is presented as an alternative is one driven by participation in the community and responsible individual action, regulated by the Rule of Law. "I did this myself. Through my actions. No Maker required", your character exclaims after successfully safeguarding the Inquisition's new home, and Josephine supports you adding: "You are a beacon of law, Inquisitor, as others shirk from responsibility" (BioWare 2014).

But the morals of *Inquisition* are not easy, which is why we see Cassandra warning you early on in the game that "[a]s to whether the war is holy, that depends on what we discover" (BioWare 2014). And even 'victory' is a concept that *Inquisition* deconstructs. After you defeat Corypheus and prevent him from unravelling reality in his mad grab for godhood, Morrigan reminds you of the cost of your actions in a melancholy tone of voice: "a victory against chaos but the world remains forever changed" (BioWare 2014). The game ends with a coming together, a last banquet in the Great Hall. And as you chat one last time with all those characters that have been your companions for 120 hours of gameplay, Dorian muses about the absence of triumph in this world: "We'll just have to be satisfied with being alive, and together" (BioWare 2014). The very last scene of the game has your character, lovingly held

by your chosen love interest, watching the sun go down from the balcony of Sky-hold (Schallegger 2015d).

   Even though the player character acts as a point of crystallisation for the Inquisi-tion, this game is not about the individual. Facing Corypheus in Haven, the Inquisi-tor exclaims: "You expect us to surrender and kneel. We will *not*. You will face us *all*. When *we* choose" (BioWare 2014), and even after you overcome your nemesis, Cas-sandra reminds you that "this is a victory of alliance" (ibid.). The player must be aware that their actions have contributed to the resolution, but they are not the centre of this world. "It is all one world, Herald", your spiritual counsellor Mother Giselle explains after your defeat in Haven, "All that changes is our place in it" (Schal-legger 2015b). The collective here is the source of all authority and power, and it is represented as far superior in importance to the individual. A highly ironic design strategy in a medium that for a long time was defined by the power fantasies the agency experienced by players in virtual worlds can provide (cf. Bogost 2011). The central values of BioWare's game are reason, order, and collaboration, not impulse, unfettered freedom, and individual self-fulfilment.

   Dragon Age: Inquisition emerges from this first and superficial reading as not only a deeply Canadian game in terms of the socio-cultural narratives it expresses, but this is also true for its identity politics and its representations of post-queerness. With this game, BioWare have single-handedly changed the face of videogames and what they can do. And that is their specifically Canadian contribution to the history of the medium.

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