

# Master Degree Project



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## **QUEER GAME DESIGN**

What kind of game design practices are favored by queer players?

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# Abstract

The thesis aims to further the research revolving queer game design and explore and expand upon a taxonomy of queer game design (Alexandersson, 2022) to create a queer design framework. The background explores the complexity of queer stress and resilience and queer individual's reliance on virtual spaces to find safe harbor. To iterate upon the taxonomy, two surveys with queer players and one co-design workshop with queer developers have been studied to establish what is important for queer players and to explore how queer developers work with game design. The study shows that inclusivity regarding gender, body image, pronouns and good, extensive representation are crucial for queer players seeking escapism, while queer developers might develop games in a more cathartic way to explore personal experiences of being queer.

**Keywords:** Queer play, LGBTQ, game design

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# 1 Introduction

Queer individuals are a diverse group that cannot be combined into one general image or ignored as consumers. Yet, that's exactly what popular media, like video games, have done for many years. Failing to both address the complexity of the queer community and their strength as consumers, media portrayals and game design tend to oppress and push queer players to the side, furthering the neglect and harmful representation of queer individuals in media. According to Shaw (2015), 91.6% of game developers identify as heterosexual and 89.1% are men, which might explain the lack of good queer representation in games. This, in turn, does nothing to alleviate queer stress and trauma, and today many queer individuals use virtual communities to find safe harbor, especially video games, despite their often lackluster treatment of queer players.

With this in mind, it is time for game development to take a step into a direction of inclusivity and see queer players as a group of players to respect and cater to. Queer players have the right to be seen in the media they consume and it is way past the time that the game development industry lets go of the notion that a "gamer" is a straight, white man as the sole consumer. To expand on the idea of queer game design, the thesis will further expand and explore the taxonomy developed in Alexandersson's study (2022). Through the help of surveys and a co-design workshop, the thesis aims to further expand on the unexplored subject of queer game design and work towards a framework of queer game design.

## 2 Background

The background aims to diversify and deepen the knowledge around queer play and queer communities based on previous research. It has been found that aspects like social play, avatars, identity, escapism and transgressive play might be pillars in games that harbor queer gaming communities and possibilities of queer play (Alexandersson, 2022). To extend the critical discourse and attempt to work against a queer design module, the background covers aspects relating to queer research, queer usability and queer experiences both in the digital and offline world.

To prepare for the upcoming research, the background also presents studies and suggestions for queer study design surrounding surveys and co-design workshops. In this thesis, the term queer is used in a similar vein as Jenny Sundén's paper about transgressive play, where she defines queer as a "shorthand" to encompass multiple ways of identifying and positioning oneself as non-straight or on other ways going against stable identity categories (2009).

### 2.1 MMO's and Previous Work

Queer gamers and queer communities seemingly have found a space to call their own in MMO games, but that extends the question of what constitutes as queer play and what game design decisions might be undertaken to further embrace queer players. MMO games seems to have cracked some of these questions regarding community and queer play, however, seemingly by chance.

MMO games, Massively Multiplayer Online games, sometimes referred to as MMORPG's, are games designed for social (computer) play where players inhabit avatars in a fictional, virtual world where they undertake quests, form guilds and role-play (Ducheneaut, 2010; Martončík and Lokša, 2016; Sihvonen and Stenros, 2018). The games usually attract a diverse audience, far from the expected young western male that tends to be seen as the primary demographic (Ducheneaut, 2010). While MMO games have a strong focus on levelling characters, fighting enemies (solo or with a team of players) and trading, scholars argue that the gameplay experience offered to players is dominantly social in nature (Ducheneaut, 2010; Taylor, 2003; Lo et al, 2005). As the game progresses, the mechanics and design of the game grows more complex, eventually reaching a point where players have to team up with each other to progress further (Ducheneaut, 2010). Guilds, a staple in a lot of online games, allows players to join together in a community and tackle these growing threats together, and at the same time the guild works as a social hub for its members (Poor, 2015; Ducheneaut et al, 2007).

It is through these guilds that queer players have found a safe space to enact community, explore identity and be themselves, and through this, the queer guilds have risen in prominence and numbers (Alexandersson, 2022). Guilds can become a part of a player's identity, as well as foster trusted connections with other players (Poor, 2015) and creating a sense of "home" (Sundén, 2009). This can be observed in *Final Fantasy XIV* (2013), where queer players have amassed queer friendly guilds on a personal website

(Alexandersson, 2022) to welcome and signal boost their existence to potential new members.

However, regardless of this potential of safe space, mainstream, or AAA games, aren't exactly known for its good representation of queer individuals, a lot of the time opting out of any representation at all (Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018; Taylor Howard, 2021). Instead, queer players have to "queer" the game world, playing outside the margins of intended design. Jenny Sundén presents a personal experience of queer play in *World of Warcraft*, recounting that even though the heteronormative frame of the game does not allow characters to even partake in a hug, this instead makes the available gestures even more loaded with meaning (Sundén, 2015). The feelings of the players as the characters fight, celebrate and travel together queers the game into something deeper (Sundén, 2015).

Molding the game through transgressive play, play that was not intended (Sundén, 2009; Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018), allows the users to shape their own experiences in the game world, challenging the pre-existing heteronormative narratives and designs intended by developers (Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018). Modding, as noted by Taylor Howard, is another avenue for queer players to "fix" or add queer representation to games that might not include it or which have included it poorly (2021). Seemingly, queer play always remains on the fringes of intended play, and through transgression of these intended ideals, queer players manage to create a world that might be their own even though the design of the game does not obviously allow it.

### **2.1.1 Queer Game Design**

Previous studies have attempted to more directly theorize about queer game design (Alexandersson, 2022; Pelurson, 2020; Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018; Taylor Howard, 2021). Pelurson suggests that soft and cute game design allows for a lot of potential of queering (2020). Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan argue that the most accessible gaming platforms, like Unity and Unreal Engine, are designed in a way that resists queer designs and queer narratives, due to mechanics making transgressive design more difficult to attempt (2018). Taylor Howard does note, however, that indie developers manage to queer games to a much larger extent than mainstream developers, and that queer indie games operate towards vastly different design goals and aesthetics compared to mainstream games (2021).

Alexandersson, in turn, presents a suggested taxonomy of queer play and queer game design (2022). The taxonomy presented theorize that social play, character creation, classes and (gameplay) tasks, gestures, colors and environment could all impact a game to become queer friendly (Alexandersson, 2022). This given the fact that some of the presented categories could open up the potential of queer play, for example being able to divert from expected norms through avatar clothing, gameplay tasks and gestures directed at other players (Alexandersson, 2022), see table 1.

**Table 1** The theorized taxonomy presented in the previous study (Alexandersson, 2022)

<b>Elements for Queer Game Design</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Social Play	The game should allow social play where players can interact through, ex: gameplay, guilds or roleplay
Character Creation	Character design and in-game customization should allow subversion of gender norms/roles. Ex: clothes not changing design based on avatar gender, hairstyles and makeup not being genderlocked, inclusive body sliders
Transgressive play through flexible class/tasks relationships	Character classes/gameplay tasks should allow players to subvert and transcend existing gender norms/roles. Ex: male avatars sewing and female avatars smithing
Gestures	Gestures that allow for queer play/queer readings (especially in response to poor queer representation) should be included in the game. Ex: letting players marry each other with same-sex characters or include romantic gestures or gestures that allow subversion of gender norms/roles
Color and Environments	The game should include colorful, nature-themed environments. Theorized based on a feminist lens where women found these aesthetics far more appealing than masculinist design.

Notably, the taxonomy includes no mention of queer representation as a needed component to attract queer players. This because the taxonomy was developed through research on MMO games, who are known to harbour little to no queer representation built into its design or story (Alexandersson, 2022). This goes in line with the overall notion of mainstream games ignoring its queer player base (Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018; Taylor Howard, 2021).

Yet, these games have been a place where queer players have built their own thriving communities, in a similar way to how queer players navigate the often-hostile offline world. Be it online or offline, queer individuals and queer communities thrive and find a place to

belong even in a world that does not always accept them. This resilience and creativity bleeds into colorful and strong community bonds. In an ideal world, however, it would of course be optimal to have queer players inhabit worlds that represent them well and respectfully, something games are known for doing poorly, if at all.

However, that begs the question: does this mean that queer players care less about queer representation than one might think, or are queer players simply so used to not being represented that it has become the norm? Can it simply be that fun gameplay, appealing aesthetics and good community trumps the need for virtual representation? The community aspect, where queer players might find a place to belong with likeminded individuals, regardless of the beliefs and pressure of the “outside” world (be it in the game or offline), might be of crucial importance. This has been observed in previous research, where the digital world has harboured queer people in similar ways that queer neighbourhoods did in the past, before the rise of the internet.

## 2.2 Queer Community and Digital Worlds

That MMO games are built to encourage social play and that their guilds can be used to foster community has been established by research for many years (Poor, 2015; Sundén, 2015; Sundén, 2009; Vela, 2021; Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al, 2007; Ducheneaut, 2010; Alexandersson, 2022). But gazing past the vast expanse of the virtual game world, how has queer people interacted with the virtual internet? And how is queer community formed in the offline world? Easterbrook et al defines “gay community” as:

“Gay community” is often conceptualized as a “melting pot” in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) persons are united and integrated into one sexual minority community. Evidence, however, indicates that GLB community may also be conceptualized as a mosaic of sexual minority communities with differing goals and ideologies.

Easterbrook et al, 2013, p. 684

Kay Siebler highlights in her book that a majority of LGBT individuals, especially young or isolated ones, use the internet to find information and other likeminded individuals, as opposed to finding physical groups (2016), and Vela notes that LGBT individuals in rural areas especially benefit from digital communities (2021). Siebler also notes that some individuals prefer to gather in physical groups, while others are more drawn to digital communities, and that a sense of community might hinge on digital connections in today’s age, and a lack of community might correspond with a lack of identity (2016).

Interestingly, in Siebler’s focus group studies she found that when a physical community moved online it could negatively impact participants due to a sense of connection loss, and that young participants would start to “miss” the idea of queer neighborhoods when hearing stories from older participants (Siebler, 2016). She notes that when she started her focus group research, she expected to highlight how digital texts informed queer identity. Instead, the study revealed that the digital world more was used as a way to gather information about

events, entertainment and activism and that ““real” community existed outside the digital spaces (Siebler, 2016, p. 42).”

The study reveals interesting anecdotes about the way queer community operates today, and seems to indicate that digital space cannot replace physical space. However, Siebler notes that due to the way the society and culture has changed, now being more accepting of LGBT people, that has decreased the need for “queer-only” space in the physical world, and instead LGBT youth seek out digital spaces that interest them (2016). In her research, she found that games were a quite popular outlet for these individuals (Siebler, 2016).

The digital world allows many LGBT individuals to “try out” their identity for the first time in a safer environment, something some researchers has criticized as avoiding homophobia and being lulled into fake security, as retold by other queer scholars (Siebler, 2016; Bromseth and Sundén, 2011). A rather bizarre take, one might argue, given that avoiding queer trauma should be both natural and healthier than being exposed to traumatic life events in a physical space.

At the same time, virtual worlds aren’t utopias freed from oppression and homophobia. Rather, online communities are part of larger sociopolitical structures and cultures that are embedded in society as a whole (Bromseth and Sundén, 2011; Crowe and Watts, 2012). This means that abuse and oppression transfer into the virtual world as well, for example through the use of degrading slurs in online games or censorship on forums (McKenna and Chughtai, 2020; Pulos, 2013; Nardi, 2010; Condis, 2014). As Gaspard Pelurson notes, small gatherings of queer individuals are possible even in environments made the most hostile, and being queer signifies nurturing queer space and queer identity outside normative Western discourse (2020). Being forced to create and nurture space in oppressive environments should, however, never be an expected experience of identifying as queer, but brings to light the hostility a lot of queer individuals consistently face both online and offline.

### **2.2.1 Queer Stress, Trauma and Resilience**

Maura Kelly et al argues that understanding collective trauma in queer communities may be crucial in understanding the dynamics of said community, including exclusion within the community itself which might indicate a lack of solidarity (Kelly et al, 2020). Cultural trauma can be described as something that can occur if a collective is subjected to:

a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Alexander et al, 2004, p.1

Alexander et al continue to describe that the cultural trauma might result in both loss of identity and meaning, but that it need not affect everyone in a community (2004). Studies reveal that queer individuals are substantially at risk to experience some kind of discrimination or harassment, be it workplace discrimination, harassment in school, assault, both physical and sexual, as well as emotional abuse (Katz-Wise and Hyde, 2012). This “minority stress” might in turn lead to greater prevalence of psychiatric disorders in the queer community (Meyer, 2003).

With these statistics in mind, it deepens the understanding of the need for safe queer spaces, be it online or offline. Community might be found in physical places, but also mean that individuals find friends online through networks and chats, leading to the belief that a community can be seen as an experience rather than a place (Easterbrook et al, 2013).

Using online communities, be it through sharing thoughts on social media, tweeting at celebrities spouting homophobia or engaging in fandom, becomes an act of resilience and coping for queer youth (Craig et al, 2015). Asakura highlights that taking part of collective healing (and action) was a cornerstone of queer resilience in his study, which connects to the findings that the online space might help foster this healing, on top of the need to develop meaningful relationships (2016a).

In another study, Asakura notes that adapting resilience in the face of queer marginalization is not only up to the individual; it takes a lot of people and resources to create and promote queer resilience and well-being (2016b). Building upon this idea in yet another study, Asakura does problematize the idea of “doing well”, noting that one need to keep hetero-cis-normativity (and how this norm affects society and queer stress as a whole) in mind when queer individuals note that they are well (2016c). “Doing well” in this context usually entails experiences of emotional pain and oppression due to negative experiences related to queer identity, but despite of this, queer individuals in the study report resilience in how they live well despite these hardships (Asakura, 2016c).

Saewyc highlights a similar finding in her own study, noting that while sexual minorities face more stigma and rejection compared to their heterosexual peers, most queer individuals experience similar well-being to heterosexual individuals in the end (2011). Having social support available, developing a sense of good self-esteem and personal mastery has been found to help queer individuals develop resilience in the face of hardship (Grossman, D’Augelli and Frank, 2011).

It is clear that queer stress and trauma does not only work to bring queer individuals down. Despite struggles of rejection and oppression, the queer community triumphs over their emotional pain and live well despite these factors, and communities and bonds are built with like-minded individuals. Queer individuals excel at finding and making space in environments that might not welcome them. However, while queer individuals showcase tremendous power and resilience in the wake of this oppression, it is ever important to note that their journeys are mired with more rejection than heterosexual individuals.

Knowing this traumatic history, it is crucial for researchers, developers and brands to respect, listen and nurture an understanding, open space for queer users. This also includes aspects of queer game design and queer usability in research design.

## **2.3 Queer Usability**

Mari Ramler has written an article focused on queer usability, and highlights the need for queer usability in for example UX design (2020). She defines queer usability as the process of anticipating, predicting and answering problems before they actually occur and notes that queer usability means that marginalized uses can use a product with ease (Ramler, 2020). The fluidity of queer identity needs to be kept in mind when designing for queer users, for example

when developing surveys (Garvey, 2017; Ruberg and Ruelos, 2020) or dating apps (Ramler, 2020).

Ruberg and Ruelos call out the problematic aspect of demographic data implying that identity is something static and singular, as opposed to being seen as something fluid and multiple, which in turn fails to measure the complexity of queer lives (2020), a belief that is shared by Kath Browne already in 2008. Browne states that “queer” needs to be seen as something inherently critical of norms and resistant of limiting categorisation of sexuality and gender (2008).

Queer usability means that you develop for anticipated marginalized users (Ramler, 2020) and listen to their voices, which lead to Browne removing the word “queer” from her research (2008). This in response to respondents in her study who connected the word to homophobic bullying in school, which made Browne note that while the term had been reclaimed in academic circles, it was not suitable “in the field” (2008). Notable is that Browne’s research was undertaken in the early 2000’s and the cultural landscape has changed since then. However, her experience provokes thought in how to conduct research with queer individuals, and several scholars have attempted to develop queer friendly research designs to work with queer individuals in a positive, more affirming way.

### **2.3.1 Research Design**

As mentioned, many scholars have undertaken attempts to “queer” research methods and demographic data. Garvey suggests alphabetizing or randomizing response options, as well as allowing users to “select all that apply”, in an attempt to capture fluid and complex sexuality and avoiding heterosexuality as the norm (Garvey, 2019).

However, in Browne’s study there was an attempt to separate sexuality into identity and relationships/sexual behaviour, but in the end, it was found that the interest in these fluid questions were small (2008). Browne also notes that a lot of respondents were confused by questions asking about biological gender that had been developed with the help of queer and trans activists, since a lot of respondents were unaware of this way to deconstruct gender to begin with (2008). Once again it is important to highlight the age of this research, and that the cultural climate might be different now, but Browne found that in the end, her questionnaire did not end up “queer” after testing was completed with queer users (2008).

It is then interesting to put Browne’s older research in context to Ruberg’s and Ruelos much newer study, where their respondents reported a shifting understanding of sexual identity that overlapped with gender and transgender identities (2020). They also highlight the need to allow users to select multiple options, similar to Garvey (Ruberg and Ruelos, 2020; Garvey, 2019). Their suggestions of a broad range of options to pick from correlates with the survey design by ACPA, where a template of approved demographic questions have been published (2013), something Garvey highlights and recommends (2019).

Ruberg and Ruelos ask what queer data is, and answers that queer data serves queer lives and takes fluid queer identity, information and meaning into consideration, all while challenging heteronormative logics (2020). With this in mind, there are a vast number of resources out there to conduct queer research in a way that account for lived experiences with respect and nuance.

## 2.4 Collaborative Research

Another way to conduct research, besides surveys, as discussed above, is the idea of collaborative research, or co-design. According to Theodore Zamenopoulos and Katerina Alexiou, co-design is a process where people come together and share knowledge, skills and resources to create or design something (2018). Co-design usually involves designers and non-designers working together to shape and make sense of the future (Sanders and Stappers, 2014; Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018).

Pablo Helguera calls it socially engaged art and highlight the community aspect of creation, due to the projects helping communities find their own voice and building stronger bonds (2011). The process of co-design usually involves prototyping ideas through the formation of a group, and the knowledge gathered can be turned into meaningful solutions, due to the participants infusing the work with previous life experiences and situations that researchers/experts lack (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018) This sentiment is shared by Sanders and Stappers, who note that the process is more creative than performative as meaning is transformed and constructed (2014).

Finding participants to work with often proves a challenge, however, but social media has proved to help with this problematic aspect of the method (Helguera, 2011). The method of co-design gathers individuals from a desired group and creates a creative process where lived experiences and community thoughts can bloom into a collaborative prototype. This in turn can enlighten researchers of ideas, ideals and wishes for the future.

### 3 Problem

With the presented background in mind, it opens up the questions: 1) if the theorized taxonomy can inform researchers and developers of queer design and 2) what design decisions could be undertaken to further the usability and community in games for queer players. Queer community continues to evolve, and in the current day and age, the virtual world has taken a large step forward in accommodating for queer gatherings. This both because of its accessibility but also due to the cultural landscape changing and slowly becoming more accepting of queer individuals.

Despite of this, mainstream games continue to either completely ignore or make stereotyped portrayals of queer representation. As the demographic of gamers grow wider and wider, surpassing the idea of the young white male as the standardized player, mainstream game developers seem keen to uphold this outdated demographic ideal. In turn, games continue to uphold heteronormativity both in its design, characters and narratives. Queer players have to exist on the margins of intended play. It is time for developers to see their queer consumer base and step into the future and develop games for individuals that are not straight, white and male. Queer trauma and abuse cannot continue in the virtual game world. Queer representation should uplift queer players, not belittle or mock them.

But how?

There is a lack of research about queer design practices, not only in games but in usability as a whole. By combing UX with queer studies, the project aims to further deepen and explore the previously developed taxonomy (Alexandersson, 2022), in an attempt to find a basis for queer game design. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What kind of game design practices are favored by queer players?

RQ2: How can the taxonomy be further developed to support the design of queer-friendly games in practice?

#### 3.1 Method

The study aims to use both surveys and co-design practices to facilitate desirable data. With the help of the proposed suggestions of queer survey design and co-design research presented in the background, the study aims to further develop the presented taxonomy (Alexandersson, 2022) with the help of queer game designers and queer players. Using surveys as a way to gather unique data from the the desired target groups, the co-design method aims to deepen the understanding of the taxonomy as a framework tool to create game concepts, which then will be transferred to a survey and researched with the help of queer players.

The first survey will ask quantitative questions related to the taxonomy. Examples of questions might be how important an aspect of the taxonomy is to the player. There will also be options for queer players to expand on their answers, giving the survey the option of collecting qualitative data to back up the quantitative results.

The study also aims to conduct a workshop with queer game developers to further expand the taxonomy. Firstly, the taxonomy will be surveyed with queer players and then updated based on the responses from the survey. The updated taxonomy will then be used in a workshop with queer developers.

Queer game developers, found through online networks like sites created for queer game development or discord groups for queer game developers, will be asked to develop queer game concepts based on the proposed taxonomy. The developers will also have the freedom to expand on the taxonomy and insert their own unique ideas, with the purpose to develop queer games. Through a process of creation by queer game developers, storyboards will be created and then collected by the researcher to be used in further research. The storyboards will then be analyzed to find how well the taxonomy is presented in the storyboards, as well as finding new aspects of queer design the taxonomy does not yet include.

Once the co-design workshop is concluded with queer developers and the analysis of the created material is complete, a survey will be created that allows queer players to rate the games based on how queer friendly/playable they are.

All participants will remain anonymous and all data will only be used for research purposes to conclude the thesis. Participants can withdraw at any time before the submission of the thesis.

## 4 Method Execution and Results

In this section, I will outline the various methods used to conduct the study and their results. The method consisted of two surveys and one co-design workshop to further test and evaluate the taxonomy (Alexandersson, 2022) to work towards a queer design framework. As the study demands analysis of each method before continuing to the next, the upcoming sections will present results and analysis of these to build towards the future methods.

### 4.1 The First Survey

To start off the study, a survey based on the existing taxonomy presented in the background was created. It can be found in its entirety in Appendix A. The question about game genres was developed with the intention of including the most common genres in gaming. This due to the importance of not only testing the taxonomy but also understanding some gaming habits from the desired target group of queer players. If a specific genre would amass a majority of answers, that could be indicative of what kind of gameplay queer players seek out and enjoy.

Demographic questions were developed with a strong inspiration from the study conducted by Ruberg and Ruelos (2020), with the sole difference that the question regarding a participant's sexuality before the age of 18 was removed in the current study. This due to the fact that it was deemed less important to explore the fluidity of identity in context to the research questions. While Ruberg's and Ruelos' (2020) suggested survey design of demographic questions was used, studies from the likes of Browne (2008) and Garvey (2019) and guidelines from the ACPA (2013) were used when evaluating how the demographic questions should be designed.

Ruberg's and Ruelos' method (2020) was picked due to the clarity of questions and the inclusion of a diverse range of sexualities that still remained clear and concise. This in context to Browne's discussion in her own study that participant's confused questions about biological gender and fluid questions regarding sexual identity (2008). While Browne's study was conducted during a time when these discussions weren't as widespread and accepted, it was still deemed valuable to maintain a survey that did not provoke too much fluidity and potential confusions in its questions and answers relating to sexual and gender identity.

The survey then posed questions related to the taxonomy criteria. Most questions operated on 1-5 likert scale, but there were a few instances where questions diverted from this design. In question 4c participants got the option to select what kind of social play interests them. This to be able to gauge if there are specific social habits that are more popular than others.

The questions were split into activities relating to in-game social play, off-game social play, as well as one option that touched upon both activities and two questions that could be picked if the participant did not have any interest in social play whatsoever. Here an option was included where a participant could answer that while they like having access to these social options, they don't participate. This to accommodate for the fact that a lot of online users enjoy reading and engaging with user generated content without getting personally involved.

Two questions were included in the end of the survey that did not have any basis in the taxonomy. This was in relation to the inclusion of queer characters in games. The taxonomy did not include this as a criterion due to the previous study (Alexandersson, 2022) indicating that the lack of queer characters did not heavily influence the influx of queer players in a game.

However, it was deemed important to explore this in more detail to evaluate whether this could be an important criterion to add to the taxonomy going forward in the study. Here the likert scale was removed. This due to the belief that it would be interesting to gauge if representation of queer characters would only matter to queer players if these characters would be well-made. Therefore, two yes options were made available. One where the participants could note that all queer representation is important for them, and one option where participants could respond that they only deem well-written representation important.

As a follow up to this question, participants were asked if the inclusion of queer characters could influence their purchase, play and emotional habits when choosing a game/playing a game. The hypothesis was that well-written representation was going to be deemed the most important, and that the inclusion of queer representation could influence players a little when picking what to play, but not to a substantial scale.

To wrap up the survey, it was concluded with an optional question asking if there were any other design aspects not touched upon in the taxonomy that the participants believed could influence queer friendly play. Participants then had the option to fill in their answer in a free-writing format or skip the question entirely.

#### **4.1.1 Distribution**

The idea was to distribute the survey on social media sites like tumblr, reddit and twitter, but to also approach communities on discord. These discord communities would be found online through networking sites for Final Fantasy XIV guilds, sites promoting queer online communities, and by googling LGBTQ+ gaming communities.

This proved to be a challenge. All subreddits found that could relate to the purpose of the study (ex. Communities focused on queer gaming, LGBTQ+ hang-out spots) had distinct rules that either no studies/self-promo was ever allowed, or that you needed approval from moderators to post about a survey. Even in the few cases where smaller subreddits were found that completely lacked visible rules, it was deemed important by the researcher to ask permission from moderators before posting. With those restrictions, several messages were sent to various subreddits, describing the purpose of the study and asking if the survey could be posted.

These messages went unanswered, and therefore LGBTQ+/gaymer subreddits could not be used to promote the survey.

Getting in touch with queer guilds/discord servers proved equally difficult. Most were locked from posting surveys/self-promotion, or community admins did not want the members of the discord disturbed by a survey. A majority of communities where also locked from making posts unless you were a long-term, active member of the group. As a newcomer, one would have needed substantial time to assimilate oneself in the group before being given permission to

promote or post anything. This to reduce the risk of spam and harassment within the community. While providing safe space through strict community guidelines, it proved difficult to get access to these spaces as a researcher.

In an attempt to get in touch with other queer communities, some organizations located in Europe with focus on assembling queer gamers offline and online was emailed through their contact forms on their websites. Only one of these responded and was then positive about distributing the survey to their members, but by then the survey had already been closed since the response came weeks later.

Due to the struggle of getting in touch with community members, social media became the rallying point for promoting the survey. The survey was promoted on the researcher's previously active Tumblr account and through tags it attempted to reach queer players. Once the post had been published, it was reposted a few times during the eight days the survey was available. The survey was also published, albeit fewer times, on twitter, using hashtags targeting queer players as well.

Instead of publishing on subreddits dedicated to queer gaming, the choice was made to post the survey on subreddits dedicated to surveys. The most prominent of these, r/SampleSize, was used to post and repost the survey a few times during the time period. A few other subreddits, albeit smaller in size, dedicated to surveys were also used to promote the survey, but only once each.

Once the survey was closed after eight days, it had gathered 605 responses. These were then analysed to update the taxonomy and prepare for the workshop.

#### **4.1.2 Results**

The results gathered proved that, overall, the taxonomy holds ground within the queer gamer community. However, some changes were made once results had been calculated. Out of the 605 answers, 176 had written their own thoughts and ideas in the optional question. After combing through the results, all answers were deemed suitable for study, since no one largely derailed or seemed to indicate insincere answers.

Participants seemed to take the survey seriously and all identified as queer, with the largest represented categories of queer sexuality being bisexual at 53.4%, asexual at 37.5% and queer at 36.5%. 47.3% of participants identified as female, 42.5% as non-binary and 13.6% as male. Of these, 34% also identified as trans.

The mean value of the different taxonomy criteria was derived from the survey. To be deemed essential for the taxonomy, a criterion needed to net a mean value above 3.5 out of 5. This would ensure that a majority of answers would be placed in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> level of importance, while noting that participants picking a 3 (or lower) would also be possible, as long as this would not overwhelm the result as a large majority.

The mean values of all questions can be observed in table 2.

**Table 2** Mean value results from the first survey

<b>Survey Question</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>
In-game social play (ex. roleplay, guilds, gameplay)	2.6
Online social communication (ex. social media, fandom, discord channels)	2.7
Avatar customization	4.0
Gender neutral hairstyles, makeup, clothing	4.7
Inclusive body sliders	4.0
Gameplay tasks not being locked by gender/societal norms	4.8
Diverse NPC occupations regardless of gender/sexuality	4.6
Queer gestures (equal marriage, flirting, emotes/dialogue/gestures that allow for queering the game world)	4.6
Colorful environments, UI, décor	3.8
Nature-themed gameplay environments	3.6

As made evident in table 2, all categories except the ones related to social play/social communities passed the 3.5 mark. What was deemed most important was that gameplay should not hinder expression of gender or sexuality, both in character creation and when taking on gameplay tasks/seeing NPC's taking on tasks in the game. The game including color and nature in some way scored the lowest except social play, but still had a majority of answers in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> options, and hence crossed the 3.5 mark.

Social play in-game scoring the lowest did not come as a surprise. With the taxonomy being based on studies on MMO games, where the social aspect of play is one of the greatest factors to the genre's success, it would make sense that MMO players would highly enjoy social play. While almost 20% of the participants noted that they played MMO games, the answers did not indicate that participants enjoying MMO consistently rated this criterion as very important. Despite the social aspect of MMO games, several of its players in the survey still marked in-game social play as a 1 in importance.

A bit more surprising was the fact that online communities surrounding the game, for example social media, discord servers and fandoms, also scored low. Due to the fact that a majority of users were gathered on particularly Tumblr, known for its fandom heavy space, it was assumed that this could tip the scales in the favour of the criteria. Yet, this was not the case. While generally scoring a bit higher than in-game social play, it still did not even meet a

mean value of 3, garnering more responses in the range of 2 and 3 but less in the 4<sup>th</sup> compared to in-game social play. Opinions were a tad bit more lukewarm, but still generally low.

When evaluating the question asking about the importance of queer characters, the result was as expected. Only 3.8% of participants answered that queer character representation had no importance for them. 40.8% answered that queer representation was important, while 55.4% answered that queer representation was important, but only if the characters were well-written. This of course begs the question what constitutes as “good” representation, which the question did not convey an answer to. However, it can be assumed that it refers to matters of stereotyping and tokenism, which was touched upon in the free write answers.

When asked if the inclusion of queer characters could influence a participant’s willingness to buy/become engaged in a game, the answer once again proved no surprises. 7.9% noted that inclusion of queer characters had no effect on their will to purchase/become invested in a game, while 43.1% answered that it influenced them. 48.9% answered that it influenced them “a little”, which was the expected top response. This result might highlight that while it influences queer players to see queer representation, a majority, albeit not a massive one, believes this influence is slight rather than large when choosing what to buy and play.

### **4.1.3 Free Write Results**

In the free write answers asking if something was missing from the taxonomy, topics were coded and counted for the number of times they were brought up. Participants had a lot of thoughts, but once answers had been analysed, a trend emerged. One aspect that was brought up the most in direct requests was that games should include an option to pick your own pronouns. Connected to this request was also the belief that games should allow you to change pronouns and gender during the course of the game, and if possible, include gender-neutral language about the player avatar if the options to pick pronouns is not available.

Given that 42.5% of participants identified as non-binary and 34% identified as transgender, it correlates with the request for more pronoun inclusivity and potential fluidity in identity. Given the strong response for pronouns in games, it was decided that this aspect should be added to the updated taxonomy.

Another thing that stood out as highly requested/expressed was the distaste for “excessive PR” about including queer characters in a game. Several participants noted that it was off-putting to have queer representation put on display, and that if the gameplay isn’t fun, representation doesn’t matter. Fun gameplay first, representation second, was a line of thought that appeared quite frequently, which correlates with the result that queer players, in majority, would be “a little” more invested in a game with queer representation, but it needs more than that to incite purchase and play.

The note to not push queer representation to the forefront and instead include queer characters as a normalcy in the game world was also decided to be added to the taxonomy. Participants also noted a dislike of unnecessary tragedy and death surrounding queer characters (several noted the “bury your gays” trope), highlighting that queer characters should be allowed to be happy and not only subjected to trauma.

The third thing that got added to the taxonomy related to diverse characters/diverse romances. This was collected into the same category due to the request being similar. For characters, participants wanted a more diverse range of genders, sexualities and ethnicities in their games, and several requested that queer characters also should interact with one another as romantic interests, instead of just responding romantically to the player. Several participants mentioned that romance in games should include polyromantic options, instead of forcing monogamy, and that the polyromantic romance should exist without jealousy and hard feelings.

On the other side of the hand, many participants noted the lack and need of aromantic and asexual (arosexual) friendly gameplay. This was described as not being locked out of getting to know a character deeper after rejecting their romantic route, and not being pushed or harassed in game for not romancing a character. Friendship routes should be displayed as just as valid as the romantic ones and not be questioned by characters in game. It was also requested that all kind of representation should be genuine, and with that, participants noted the flaw of playersexual characters (characters that have no real sexual orientation except the player character, regardless of gender) and instead requested that characters should be “strictly” heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, as an example.

Another topic was frequently mentioned, but did not get added to the taxonomy due to it not adhering to game design, but more towards game development teams. Participants noted several times that it was important for them that the games they play should be developed by diverse development teams. This would ensure that the developers are “safe”, and it was also important that the company could be proven to have a queer-friendly work policy. This included that the company/developers be strict when moderating online space in/around the game with a no-tolerance to homophobia/transphobia/queerphobia. The need for strict moderation to ensure queer player safety was noted almost as frequently as the need for diverse developers.

However, since these thoughts relate more to the development of the game and the handling of game community, it was not added to the taxonomy. There is also a concern that, if using the taxonomy as a framework, non-queer developers might “shrug off” the responsibility of working with queer representation since they “don’t fit” the criteria, which would be undesirable.

#### 4.1.4 The Updated Taxonomy

Once all results had been analysed, the taxonomy was updated for use in the workshop. The updated taxonomy can be observed in table 3, and the most popular genres can be seen in table 4

**Table 3** The updated taxonomy based on survey results

Elements for Queer Game Design	Definitions
Character Creation	Character design and in-game customization should allow subversion of gender norms/roles. Ex: clothes not changing design based on avatar gender,

	hairstyles and makeup not being genderlocked, inclusive body sliders
Transgressive play through flexible class/tasks relationships	Character classes/gameplay tasks should allow players to subvert and transcend existing gender norms/roles. Ex: male avatars sewing and female avatars smithing
Queer Play	Play that allow for queer play/potential of queer readings should be included in the game. Ex: letting players marry each other with same-sex characters or inclusion of romantic gestures or gestures that allow subversion of gender norms/roles for both avatars and NPC's
Color and Environments	The game could include color in environments, UI or décor and could include nature themed locations
Pronouns and Gender	The player should be allowed to pick their own pronouns at the start of the game independent of the chosen body type. Players should be allowed to change gender/pronouns during the course of the game, or the game should opt out of picking gender and work towards gender-neutral language.
Representation and Diversity	The game should include queer characters, but these should be well-written, diverse and not be used for excessive PR. Queer characters should merely exist in the game and not fall into stereotypical storylines of tragedy and death. <i>IF</i> there is romance in the game, this should be diverse and also include aroace-friendly gameplay. Ex. Queer romance between NPC's, the ability to opt out of romance without a penalty to gameplay, inclusion of poly romance and no playersexuality

As can be noted in table 3, instead of extending the elements of queer game design with all the new topics, they were instead collected into two new categories: pronouns and gender and representation and diversity. At first there was an idea to have romance as its own category, but this was rejected due to it potentially being misleading. Romance in itself, while popular,

is not needed in a queer game, however, *if* it is included, it should adhere to certain standards of representation.

Another change that was made in one of the existing categories was color and environments. Instead of noting that a game “should” have colorful aesthetics and nature-themed environments, it was changed to “could.” While both color and nature passed the taxonomy criteria, it was not strong enough to warrant a “should.” Rather, it should be seen as a positive aspect of game design for queer players, but not an absolute necessity.

With character creation, character interactions and romances being popular in the free write answers, it was no surprise to see that RPG games stood as the winner of the selected genres.

**Table 4** The most popular genres picked in the survey

<b>Genre</b>	<b>Popularity</b>
Role-Playing Games	90.2%
Adventure	75.5%
Puzzle	50.6%
Simulation/Life Sim	47.9%/47.8%
Platformers	36.5%
Stealth	32.1%
Survival	29.3%
Horror	26.6%

With a 90.2% pick rate, RPG games triumphed over the rest, with adventure following up as second with 75.5%. Puzzle games was placed third with 50.6%. Simulation and life sim was collected into one category, due to the genres being similar and having more or less the same results. This might indicate a large overlap.

While broad, the genres picked indicate directions of play where queer players find themselves drawn. Both RPG and adventure indicate storytelling and characters, while puzzle games might be anything from your day-to-day Candy Crush or the much more story-driven Portal games, combining puzzle and platformer alike. More research would need to be undertaken to shed more in-depth clarity of the genres preferred by queer players.

With the taxonomy updated based on queer player feedback, it was time to apply it in a workshop with queer developers.

## 4.2 Workshop

The idea with the workshop was to invite a small team of queer game developers and together brainstorm game concepts based on the updated taxonomy. Developers were contacted during the week the survey was running and the week after while the survey was analysed. The first course of action was to locate queer developers. Firstly, this was done through the page itch.io, where developers can upload games as they please. There, the top ranked games in the LGBT tag were browsed. Many games lacked contact info for its developers, but some included links to emails/twitter pages linking to email addresses. Emails were sent out to a number of developers, explaining the purpose of the workshop, it's runtime and asking if they would have the time to participate.

The workshop was planned to run from March 14 to March 20, but with the idea that the workshop could close earlier in case the game concepts reached the selected amount (3-5) in a shorter amount of time. Keeping a casual tone, the workshop would take place on discord over chat messages, and participants were free to drop in at any given time based on their availability. This to better accommodate conflicts in time zones and schedules. The fear was that if too strict times were set, most participants would be unable to take part in brainstorming sessions. Instead, the workshop was kept looser in its structure.

After emailing queer game developers on itch.io, a call for participants was also posted on tumblr, twitter and a smaller subreddit for game developers. Twitter tags for queer devs were checked, and another queer game development studio was found through this way and later emailed.

A discord server for queer developers was found as well, alongside recommendations of joining the discord server for QGcon (The Queerness and Games Conference). After speaking to the moderators, blessings to look for participants in the servers was given. Attempts to reach out to another server for trans developers was made, and after initial contact on twitter there was a promise that the moderator would post a request in the server (due to it being tightly locked to outsiders). After information about the workshop was written down to post in the server, the contact ceased and it remains unclear whether the message was ever published.

Participants were found on various social media sites and by email. One joined through reddit, two through email (although these two ended up joining late and not talking during the workshop, which later was explained due to sudden conflicts in the developer's schedules) and two through tumblr, the rest joined through discord. One developer that joined also chatted quite a bit through direct messaging, highlighting important topics related to the queer game development situation.

In the end, nine queer developers joined the workshop, although with varying amounts of engagement. Eight concepts were created, however a problem that arose was that instead of brainstorming concepts together, the developers were much keener on submitting their own concepts. However, these were still accepted, since brainstorming was only encouraged and not a forced requirement. Only two concepts were brainstormed with several participants, and only when the researcher jumped in and took part in the brainstorming and guided participants to join their ideas together.

While the concepts weren't brainstormed to the extent that was expected, the developers shared thoughts and insights into their experiences in a way that highlighted their marginalized position in the industry and their vulnerability as queer developers.

## 4.2.1 Queer Game Developer Experiences

Some interesting thoughts were gathered from the queer developers over the course of the workshop, particularly from one participant. The most important ones will be presented here. The developers will here forth receive a random number from 1 to 9 to differentiate between them and gender-neutral pronouns will be used to maintain anonymity.

Developer 9 had an interesting insight soon after the workshop opened. In direct messaging, the developer noted that a problematic aspect with the developed taxonomy is that it is difficult to work with for solo developers: the demands are too great. They highlighted that queer player wishes do not always aligns with what is plausible for a queer developer to create. Queer developers mainly work alone or in duos, on their own free time with no benefit of pay or resources, meaning that most queer games end up smaller in scale.

With queer player demands for diverse casts of characters, for example, development time is increased exponentially, and accommodating all wishes for representation is not feasible, as noted by developer 9. Combined with the marginalization of queer developers, were most suffer from economic distress in relation to being game developers (this due to the fact that very few can actually make a living as game developers), according to developer 9, this puts queer developers under undue pressure. After this was touched upon in the workshop server, several other developers agreed.

Another experience was shared by developer 1 in the workshop server, on the same night that the workshop opened. They noted that one of the main stressors of being a queer developer is the toxicity of queer gamers, highlighting events where queer developers have been harassed, attacked and even doxed (getting their private information published and taken advantage of online) by queer players. This in response to publishing games that might lack certain representation or for doing representation “poorly”.

Developer 1 shared that after publishing their own game, they spent hours shaking and stressing out due to the fear of being doxed or threatened. The topic becomes even more complicated when a lot of games developed by queer developers are made to highlight their own personal experiences, which opens up the problem that if a personal experience doesn't appeal to someone's own view/experience of queer identity, the queer developer might suffer threats.

Developer 5 chimed in on the same discussions, and said something poignant that brings the problem to the front:

Oh, I remember the debates about the Boyfriend Dungeon, and it felt so counterproductive to actively shun the LGBTQ+ creators by making them considering every option the absolute necessity. If we only want everything, that means we're getting nothing until then. So it would discourage others from ever trying.

Developer 5

The developers agreed with the note that as solo or duo teams, appealing to all personal variations of queer identity is more or less impossible. Other discussions that arose were, for example, developers on the ace spectrum criticising that some queer players have chastised queer developers for not having NSFW content in their games, noting that “queer” does not equal sexual themes.

Other discussions that arose frequently were when the developers shared private projects that they worked on, more as a way to converse rather than as a contribution to the workshop. What became fairly obvious was that a lot of the private projects leaned quite heavily into personal experiences and struggles/musings with/about queer identity, which also could be seen in the concepts that were eventually developed in the workshop.

#### 4.2.2 The Workshop Concepts

As mentioned previously, most concepts were submitted by the developers as solo ideas, and not something they brainstormed together. This probably due to the more casual workshop setting and the fact that timezones did not always overlap. It could also be due to the fact that the developers were used to working alone from the start with their game projects. Only two concepts were brainstormed together when the researcher gave some guidance, however this was overall avoided to not influence the concepts to a great extent. This to maintain the creative integrity of the queer developers. All in all, eight concepts were submitted.

Of the six proposed taxonomy categories, the concepts developed with the most likeness to the taxonomy managed to score something from three of the different categories. No concept used all six categories as a base for its design. Notable is that several taxonomy criteria’s present several options for design (ex. Representation and Diversity tackles both diverse romances, including aroace friendly gameplay, as well as well-written queer characters). The updated taxonomy can be seen down below in table 5 for clarity.

**Table 5** The updated taxonomy used in the workshop

Elements for Queer Game Design	Definitions
Character Creation	Character design and in-game customization should allow subversion of gender norms/roles. Ex: clothes not changing design based on avatar gender, hairstyles and makeup not being genderlocked, inclusive body sliders
Transgressive play through flexible class/tasks relationships	Character classes/gameplay tasks should allow players to subvert and transcend existing gender norms/roles. Ex: male avatars sewing and female avatars smithing

Queer Play	Play that allow for queer play/potential of queer readings should be included in the game. Ex: letting players marry each other with same-sex characters or inclusion of romantic gestures or gestures that allow subversion of gender norms/roles for both avatars and NPC's
Color and Environments	The game could include color in environments, UI or décor and could include nature themed locations
Pronouns and Gender	The player should be allowed to pick their own pronouns at the start of the game independent of the chosen body type. Players should be allowed to change gender/pronouns during the course of the game, or the game should opt out of picking gender and work towards gender-neutral language.
Representation and Diversity	The game should include queer characters, but these should be well-written, diverse and not be used for excessive PR. Queer characters should merely exist in the game and not fall into stereotypical storylines of tragedy and death. <i>IF</i> there is romance in the game, this should be diverse and also include aroace-friendly gameplay. Ex. Queer romance between NPC's, the ability to opt out of romance without a penalty to gameplay, inclusion of poly romance and no playersexuality

Most concepts used the taxonomy quite loosely, taking a few bits and pieces from it but not committing to workshopping a game that would perfectly adhere to it. Interestingly, several concepts dealt with darker subject themes, such as homophobia, queer abuse or darker game worlds, which stands in direct conflict with the “Representation and Diversity” category requesting to stray away from tragedy and death.

The concepts will now be outlined below. Notable is that nine concepts are in the table, while eight were developed during the workshop. This will be explained further down. The concepts have been given a random number that does not correlate with in what order they were created. The only selection process for the numbering of the concepts was to make sure that concepts with similar adherence to the taxonomy would not be back-to-back. Full descriptions of the concepts can be found in Appendix B. Notably is that in Appendix B, the concept in

figure 3 was not developed during the workshop, but after it. A more detailed description of figure 3 will be given later in the thesis.

**Table 6** Taxonomy analysis of the brainstormed concepts

Design	Conce pt 1	Conce pt 2	Conce pt 3	Conce pt 4	Conce pt 5	Conce pt 6	Conce pt 7	Conce pt 8	Conce pt 9
Character Creation	x	x	x	x	x	x		~	
No Genderlock	x		x						
Body Sliders									
Flex. Classes/tasks (ex. fem. char. smithing)			x						
Queer Gestures (ex. flirting)			x		x				
Color	x		x		x	x			
Nature			x		x				
Pronouns		x	x						
Change Gender/Pron ouns			x						
Div. char.	x		x	x	x	x	x		
Romance Avatar & NPCs			x		x		x		
Aroace friendly			x		~		x		
Poly romance			x						
No playersexuali ty			x						

No tragedy and death			x			-	~		
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As can be observed, as was noted above, most concepts tend to not tick too many boxes from the taxonomy, excluding concept 3. A decision has been made to only tick the “no tragedy and death” box if the game has no possibility/intention of dealing with tragedy/death in a traumatic way. This includes concepts that work with heavy themes overall, since they might logically tackle these topics even if the description doesn’t describe it on the nose. Concept 6 got a dash through in that section, due to the fact that it actively works with traumatic death as a core in its concept, directly contradicting the taxonomy.

In some cases, boxes have not been ticked due to the queer developers not going into detail what certain aspects of the game entails. For example, having a character creator does not naturally assume that inclusive body sliders will be included, and therefore that box cannot be ticked. For concepts verging on the edge, they have been marked with a ~ symbol.

Concept 3 stands out in comparison to the rest, ticking more or less every single box of the taxonomy. This due to the fact that this was created and designed by the researcher as a “mole concept” to be used in the second survey, as well as being used as a blueprint in the workshop. It was decided to use this concept in the second survey due to the fact that the concepts developed during the workshop did not adhere enough to the taxonomy to accurately test it. As a countermeasure, a concept designed to tick the boxes has been included, to observe whether this concept is received in a more positive way by queer players than the other concepts. Notable is that concept 3 was already created before the start of the workshop. It, as mentioned, was used as a blueprint to show the developers what a concept might look like in terms of detail and length of description.

Once all concepts had been numbered and analysed, they were placed in a survey that was sent out to queer players through social media.

### 4.3 The Second Survey

The second survey was developed in response to the concepts created during the workshop. The idea was to survey queer players on the developed concepts and see how likely the queer players would be to want to play the game concepts in the case of them becoming real games. To maintain a survey that wouldn’t become too long, demographic questions were not used. This also in response to the fact that the first survey already had gathered a large amount of demographic data. Instead, the sole focus remained on surveying the concepts.

This was done through two mandatory questions, with the players also having the option to free-write their thoughts to every concept, although this was optional. Questions were kept to a minimum to, once again, make sure that the survey did not pose too many questions to extend the length to an amount that would greatly impact participation.

In the survey, the descriptions of the concepts as portrayed in Appendix B was shown to the participants, in the order of their assigned number. Concepts were not randomized to maintain clarity in the survey. After reading the concept, the first question was posed on a 1-5 likert scale, asking the participants “Would you like to play this game?”

The second question, “Does the game feel welcoming to you as a queer player?” was answered through a simple yes or no response. It was decided to omit an option of “Maybe” to force participants to take a stand on the matter. After that, participants had, as mentioned, the chance to share their thoughts about each concept, before moving to the next one.

Participants were recruited in the same way as with the first survey, but limited promotions to tumblr and one post on r/SampleSize. The survey was promoted briefly over the course of a few days, netting a total of 152 responses in the promoted time frame. Due to the potentially triggering nature of some concepts, trigger warnings were posted when promoting the survey, warning potential participants of homophobia, transphobia, body image, abuse and murder/violence. This to maintain the safety of the participants.

Once the survey was closed, responses were analysed.

### 4.3.1 Second Survey Results

The mean value of the likert scale was derived from all concepts to analyse to what extent the queer players would like to play the games. This has then been combined with the perceived friendliness of the games, which can be observed in table 7. The table has been color-coded to indicate popularity.

In the mean value range, all concepts which scored 2.9 or under has received a red mark. Concepts in the range of 3.0-3.9 has received a yellow mark and concepts surpassing 4.0 has received a green mark. In the friendliness column, concepts under 50% friendliness have been marked red. 50%-79.9% of friendliness has been marked with yellow. 80%-89.9% has received a pale green, while concepts with over 90% friendliness have been marked with a more vibrant green.

As can be observed with concept 3, which was the “mole concept”, it is the only concept scoring vibrant green on both friendliness and wanted play. In comparison, both concept 6 and 8 has scored red in both columns. All red concepts in the wanted play section has in turn received the lowest scores of friendliness, the highest being 78.9% and the lowest 45.4%.

**Table 7**

Concept Number	Mean Value of Wanted Play	Friendliness to Queer Players
1	3.4	89.5%
2	3.3	80.9%
3*	4.1	98.7%
4	2.8	78.9%

5	3.2	88.8%
6	2.2	45.4%
7	3.6	96.7%
8	2.5	49.3%
9	2.5	75.7%

\* Not created during the workshop (mole concept by the researcher)

The concepts that received the lowest marks, 4, 6, 8 and 9 were all concepts dealing with more openly triggering and heavy themes. In comparison, concept 3 operated in a game world seemingly freed from strife, with less focus on queer trauma and more focus on relaxing gameplay.

Reading the free-write results from concept 4, 6, 8 and 9, one can discern a trend of queer players not finding the bleakness and the darkness of the games appealing. Some free-write quotes will here be showcased about concept 4, 6, 8 and 9. While a few free-write results to these concepts were positive, most opinions align more with the chosen quotes.

Queer or not, who would want to play this. We've all been living this for years through the pandemic. I know I personally just want to take a break from thinking about every terrible aspect of existence and remember what good there is to life as well. Queer player or not this sounds depressing. I get little free time as it is, I don't want to spend it on making myself sad. It's be easier and cheaper to just watch the news for a bit.

Anonymous participant about concept 4

having people try to kill me because of my identity is NOT my idea of a fun game! life is hard enough already!

Anonymous participant about concept 6

Interesting concept but again feels very hostile against gender exploration which personally i would like fictional escape from rather than fictional discrimination and violence based on perceived gender, although technically welcoming to queer people as it is based on queer gender

Anonymous participant about concept 8

Again very serious, emotionally intensive, little 'fun' action or gameplay, very story and dialogue focussed and potentially hostile

Anonymous participant about concept 9

As mentioned, the quotes surrounding concept 4, 6, 8 and 9 zone in on the aspect of the games being hostile and preventing escapism. As one participant notes, the pandemic has been more than enough for most people, you don't need more misery in your games: then you might just turn on the news. Others highlight that the games are serious in nature, as opposed to being fun. More positive comments generally highlight that they like the darker themes, or that the ideas are interesting but not something they would personally play.

In comparison, concept 3 received quite different responses, with many free-write answers being more positive.

This is exactly the type of game I would love love to play!! I love cats, I love that gender and sexuality in the game is fluid but isn't the main point of the game. That's what I like to see, I like it when gender and sexuality is diverse and fluid and there, but the game isn't about an identity, it's about gathering flowers and starting a bakery and being a cute little cat.

Anonymous participant about concept 3

Many praise that the game is more relaxed and not keeping queerness as the main focus of the game, instead focusing on characters that happen to be queer and character interactions. Some negative responses comment on the fact that you play as a cat. While this was seen as positive by some participants (through the fact that cats are more gender-neutral and not bound by societal human rules), some believe that having cat characters would feel strange since it would take away from the experience of being human. Others respond negatively to the game being too alike games like Stardew Valley, making it more generic and not appealing to their taste of games, while others note that they would love to play a queer "CatDew Valley."

Concept 7, which received a wanted play score in the yellow but a high friendliness score, seems to have suffered from lack of detail, although the concept was perceived as friendly.

It feels welcoming and an exploration of friendship through shared experiences and interests is a sweet idea. But I need more to actually be interested in playing.

Anonymous participant about concept 7

Other responses mirror similar thoughts. While interesting and appealing through the representation of a queerplatonic relationship, the lack of gameplay details makes it difficult for players to gauge if they would want to play it or not. This in comparison to concept 3, which was a lot more detailed in its gameplay execution. Had more detail been given, concept 7 might have ranked higher in wanted play.

Overall, participants seem to have reviewed the concepts seriously and with attention to detail (or lack thereof). The concept with an overwhelming number of boxes ticked from the taxonomy performed notably better than the others, while concepts dealing with dark and triggering themes generally scored lower, indicating that queer players might search for a greater sense of escapism in their game experiences.

## 5 Analysis

While some analysis has already been conducted in the previous chapter, a more deepened analysis of the results will be undertaken in this chapter, looking at the results as a whole.

Overall, as stated in the previous chapter, the taxonomy seems to hold up when designing with queer players in mind. A majority of the criteria's were deemed important in the first survey and the mole concept designed to fit the taxonomy performed arguably the strongest in the second survey. The most interesting revelation is the potential mismatch of interest between queer players and queer game developers.

As was noted during the workshop, many queer game developers work alone or in small groups, creating games on their free time without any payment. The games, naturally, have no funding and no large team working on them, which in turn limits what one can create as a solo developer/smaller team, especially since many have other commitments beyond creating games. This leads to games being smaller in scale and usually focused on a singular strong aspect, like theme, graphics or writing, while other aspects of the game become less refined in its execution.

There are few solo game developers that have mastered the skills of art, writing, music, sound, programming, design, ui and all that comes with a solid game. Those that have produced marvelous games as solo devs, like for example *Stardew Valley* (2016), spent years upon years in development. Queer game developers are crawling uphill in a demanding industry and produce products for demanding players.

This is where the taxonomy becomes problematic, as also noted during the workshop. The demands of queer players far exceed the development potential for small scale queer developers, making it, while not impossible, difficult to meet all the criteria. This, in turn, as noted once again during the workshop, might lead to queer players harassing and doxing queer developers that "fail" to portray the queer experience/the diversity of the queer experience to an extent where they feel well represented. This begs the question if queer developers and queer players are seeking very different things from games.

Queer developers seem to possibly focus on exploring personal trauma and personal lived experiences through their games, leading them to create more serious games than what is normally consumed in mainstream media. The experience of creation might be cathartic, as the game is used to explore, work through and further understand oneself. Queer players, on the other hand, as observed in the second survey, seem to shy away and react negatively to heavier themes regarding the queer experience. They expressed discomfort and dislike about all mentions of a dark world, instead reacting more positively to games that just "happened" to be queer while the plot/gameplay focus on something seemingly redundant to queerness (being a florist/adventurer).

The need for escapism seems to be a lot stronger, wanting to experience a lighter, less heavy game world where one can "live" in peace. This could be a result of the huge gains queer rights have made in many countries, resulting in media portraying queerness in a "sweeter", less traumatic way and queer individuals ready to fully embrace this new change and not look back at the traumatic past of media portrayal.

If this hypothesis is true, it puts queer developers in direct contrast to queer players when it comes to artistic expression vs consumer demand, which is notable. Queer players want a lot: from avatar creation freed from gendered play, to pronouns and bodies that should have the potential to change during gameplay, to a large, positive and diverse cast of characters to romance and befriend, friendly and well-written stories and, in the best of cases, a development team that themselves are queer.

Are these demands obnoxious? Absolutely not. Instead they shine a light on where game development should strive to become more inclusive and welcoming to queer play. Yet, it poses problems due to all these demands being a heavy weight upon a development team, which leads to them being more suited for AAA studios or larger indie teams. These teams, in turn, probably work with a majority of developers not being queer and working with a specific audience in mind (usually straight and male), which makes queer features less accessible due to the demands of profit when releasing a game. However, as the world becomes more tolerant, one can hope that this changes.

## 6 Conclusions

### 6.1 Summary

As noted in previous chapters, the taxonomy, with some iteration, seems to hold ground when designing games for queer players. Queer players seem especially drawn to story based games with a strong cast of characters, all while favouring good gameplay over queer representation. Queer representation means little if the game is not enjoyable to play. Representation should be smart and not heavily marketed, merely existing as a natural part of the game world, yet queer players also noted that inclusion of queer representation influenced their purchasing habits in a positive way.

Queer developers, in turn, seem inclined to work in smaller teams or alone, focusing on heavier themes derived from personal experiences with queer identity. This led to several games with darker themes being developed during the workshop. These concepts, in turn, were not popular amongst queer players, who instead favoured more easy-going gameplay that would allow them to play “peacefully” in an accepting game world.

The concept surveyed that followed the concept to more or less every single criterion performed the best amongst queer players, which highlights the taxonomy's relevance when used for queer design. Queer players and queer developers seem to strive for different ideals, where the taxonomy is well-received by queer players but difficult to work with for queer developers due to its excessive demands.

### 6.2 Discussion

As noted in the background chapter, there is a lack of research about queer game design. Pelurson's (2020) note about queer players enjoying softer and cuter aesthetics seems partially confirmed. While the taxonomy did not measure “cuteness” and “softness” directly, queer players did find color (which might be perceived as more soft/cute) and nature important to some extent, which might lead to game worlds more “soft” in its design. This in comparison to more masculinist game worlds taking place in steel bunkers or in concrete worlds, leaving them grey and monochromatic.

Taylor Howard's findings (2021) about indie game developers being much more likely to work with queer themes seem particularly well founded. Notable is that the indie developers that this study worked with were developing games in a very small scale as hobby developers, not being affiliated with any team or company, be it indie or not. No one in the workshop had access to the engines Unity and Unreal Engine, as mentioned by Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan (2018), instead working in engines like Ren'Py (2004) to make games that demand less programming and instead becoming more user-friendly to develop. This in turn leads to the fact that the queer developers in this study do not work with the restrictive engines of Unity and Unreal (Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan, 2018), instead allowing for more transgressive play in their games.

As noted by Shaw (2015), Ruberg (2019) and Sundén (2009), game developers tend to see gamers as a singular group of white, heterosexual men. This, probably, because game developers themselves fit these criteria to an overwhelming degree (Shaw, 2015.) This puts Taylor Howard's and Salter, Blodgett and Sullivan's (2018) findings in a sharp light. While indie developers are keener to develop queer games, the queer developers in this survey were not using the more "competitive" engines of the industry and no one was employed in the games industry.

This leads to the (unsurprising) note that even in indie game development, numbers are skewed in the favor of heterosexual men. Many queer developers most likely don't make it that far, unless queer developers form their own studios or queer developers work on non-queer games in more "traditional" game development companies.

### **6.2.1 Limitations**

The study, naturally, suffers from limitations. One of them is the fluidity of queer identity in itself, which makes it difficult to categorize. With queer identity encompassing a vast range of identities, it has proven challenging to create a framework that can be a "one size fits all." For example, a person who is asexual, heteroromantic and cisgendered most likely have different needs in a game compared to a person who is non-binary, polyromantic and asexual. This is also reflected in the updated taxonomy, where it became significantly larger after the first survey to reflect all kinds of design choices that would benefit the players. With queer identity being such a wide term, one can argue that it in turn makes the taxonomy difficult to work with, especially as a developer, since it attempts to appeal to all groups simultaneously.

The study also made use of a workshop in a bit of an unorthodox manner by holding it online over text chat only without a set time frame for participants to attend. This was a success in many ways but also posed some problems. A successful aspect was the casual aspect of the workshop. It was low commitment without pressure, which seemed to be a reason why participants joined in the first place. Not using voice chat also made it easier for participants to drop in and start talking, which in turn sparked interesting conversations. Through the aspect of creating a sphere to talk and observe thoughts, the workshop was excellent. However, the more laid-back, non-committed manner of workshop also made it more difficult to direct the participants, which was a limitation in its design.

As mentioned earlier, the taxonomy was not used nearly to the extent that was expected. This could be a limitation of the way the workshop was held, but also from the design of the taxonomy in itself. It might have been too demanding to work with all aspects of its design, or it might have limited creativity for the developers. The study could have benefitted from a follow up question at the end of the workshop asking about how it was to work with the taxonomy and how it influenced (or failed to influence) the creation of concepts.

### **6.3 Future Work**

Due to the lack of research, there are lots of potential for further studies. First of all, it would be interesting to talk more with queer developers creating games as a hobby, both through interviews and surveys that might reach a larger number of participants, to explore their

reasons for creating games. Is catharsis a common theme for exploring game development, or is it an observation that doesn't hold up when challenged by more individuals?

As a response to that, it would also be beneficial to talk with queer game development studios, with a larger theme of developers and with the primary focus of making queer games. Would they find the taxonomy less demanding and are their experiences with the player base different since they have more assets at hand to create larger games?

One could also explore topics relating to discrimination in the games industry, lack of resources, unique viewpoints about game design and other topics related to the experience of being queer in an industry that paints it out to be very not so.

To expand more on the taxonomy and its use as a game development framework, it would be interesting to use it in more workshops. Firstly, a secondary workshop with queer developers with stricter guidelines for its use (since the concepts in this study ended up mostly not following the taxonomy to any great extent) to see if different games would be created.

It would also be interesting to test the taxonomy with non-queer developers and test their game concepts with queer players, to see how non-queer developers would handle the demand for queer themes due to the lack of lived experience. Game development students with no experience in professional game development would also be an interesting group to have test the taxonomy. This to potentially infuse the taxonomy/game concepts with new and fresh ideas from aspiring developers from different walks of life.

As a framework, it would also be illuminating to also use the taxonomy as a tool for game analysis. How does it hold up to popular games with queer themes/popular games with a lack of queer themes but a large amount of queer players? Can the taxonomy be used both as a tool for creation and analysis when talking about queer game design and queer play experiences?

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# Appendix A - If needed

The first survey used in the study:

**1. What kind of game genre do you enjoy the most? Check all that apply.**

Role Playing Games

First Person Shooter

Massively Multiplayer Online Games

Real Time Strategy

Stealth

Fighting

Survival

Horror

4X

Grand Strategy

Simulation

Life Sim

City Building

Puzzle

Racing

Sport

Platformers

Other

**2. What is your gender? Check all that apply.**

Man

Non-binary

Woman

Other (please specify)

**2b. Do you identify as transgender?**

Yes

No

Decline to state

**3. What is your sexual orientation? Check all that apply.**

Asexual

Bisexual/Pansexual

Gay

Heterosexual

Lesbian

Queer

Other (please specify)

**4. Is it important for you to be able to engage in some kind of in-game social play when you game? (ex. through gameplay, affiliation in in-game communities, role play)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**4b. Is it important for you to engage socially in online communities related to gaming? (ex. through fandom, discord servers, social media sites)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**4c. What kind of social play/social interactivity is the most important to you? Check all that apply.**

Role play with other players

Working as a team with other players

In-game chat with other players

Engaging in fandom

Discussing the game online

Communicating with game developers

Helping others with the game (in-game and off-game)

I like having access to these things but I don't socialize with other players/online media users

I'm not interested in social play/interaction

**5. Is it important for you to be able to create/customize your own avatar at the start of a game/during gameplay?**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**5b. Is it important for you that the games clothing, hairstyles and makeup are available regardless of avatar gender? (ex. clothing/gear sets not drastically changing design depending on avatar gender, traditionally feminine/masculine hairstyles being available for all avatars)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**5c. Is it important for you that the game includes body sliders for your avatar? (ex. changing an avatars height, width, body shape, musculation/chest area)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**6. Is it important for you that the game allows gameplay tasks not restricted by gender/societal norms? (ex. male avatars sewing, female avatars smithing)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**6b. Is it important for you that NPCs in the game world are shown as having a diverse range of occupations regardless of gender/sexual orientation?**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**7. Is it important for you that the game includes gestures/emotes/gameplay decisions that allows you to "queer" gameplay? (ex. same-sex avatars/characters being allowed to marry/have relationships, being able to flirt with other characters/NPCs through emotes or dialogue, being able to use gestures/emotes/dialogue to subvert gender norms/roles)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**8. Is it important for you that the game is at least partially colorful? (ex. lush colors in the environment, the potential of colorful clothes, pops of color in décor or UI)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**8b. Is it important for you that the game at least partially allows gameplay in nature-themed environments? (ex. being able to traverse a forest area, overlooking flower fields, traveling up a mountainside)**

1-5 response (1: Not at all, 5: Very important)

**9. Is it important for you that the game includes representation of queer characters?**

Yes

Yes, but only if the characters are well-written

No

**9b. Does the inclusion of queer characters influence how likely you are to purchase/play/become invested in a game?**

Yes

A little

No

**10. Are there any other game design potentials not mentioned in this survey that you believe makes a game especially welcoming and available for queer players/queer play?**

Write their own response

## Appendix B -

### Figure 1 Concept 1

A game focused on exploring gender identity and gender expression. You start as a greyscale avatar, not much more than a dark outline in a world void of color.

During gameplay you can traverse different paths, some common, some hidden. The hidden paths are more complex and challenging to complete. In the common ones you find yourself unseen and misunderstood by characters that doesn't understand your struggles of being queer, but in the hidden ones, you might meet other queer characters, filled with color.

Talking to them and unlocking their bonds gives you the option to further customize your character and your identity. As you do so, your avatar gains more and more shape and fills with color.

### Figure 2 Concept 2

In this dress-up/raising sim you get to play a random human in an apartment where you choose their pronouns, clothing, and job. Then you watch as their stats change and read blurbs of their daily life.

Your ostensible goal would be to "raise" a successful citizen well integrated into the community. You are free to shape them into whatever human you want. The secret plot is that you are part of a cyber-overlord system that controls and monitors every citizen and controls their free will.

You can choose to aid them to freedom but their freedom results in your destruction, ending the game. The alternative "win" state is that you control them until they die and then you get another citizen to repeat the cycle.

### Figure 3

In this calm RPG game, you play in a world inhabited by cats. Taking the reins of the gender-neutral cat that is your avatar, you are allowed to pick your pronouns and unlock options for clothes and accessories to express your gender identity over the course of the game. Pronouns and appearance can be changed at any time.

You are the new resident florist in town, and set up shop to help and build relationships with a diverse cast of characters. Diverse both when it comes to sexuality, gender identity, occupation of work and in the way they are interested in you. Be it romance or friendship, the game offers deep routes to explore as you get the chance to flirt, marry or be best friends with the character(s) of your choice.

Taking place on the outskirts of a lush forest surrounded by flower fields, your journey as a florist has just begun. Collect flowers, mix seeds, grow flowers, fashion bouquets, tend to your shop, gather resources from the nature around you. Once the winter months draw closer and the flowers stop growing, you might even have enough resources to start your own little bakery. Who knows who will drop by?

#### **Figure 4** Concept 4

In this game, nuclear war is on the verge of occurring and you are a member of the government emergency preparedness operations. Faced with a limited budget and time the choices you make can save or end lives. After the initial “character creation” involving picking a gender, policies and management of the crisis, you are placed in a daily “maintenance” mode where you have to manage and talk to a diverse cast of traumatized people who just survived nuclear war and try to hold the threads of the government together with them.

This “maintenance” mode would be top down in a “bunker” type environment to keep scale of environment and the people you manage. The scale would be the first three weeks after a blast. You have to live through the policies you set and see how they impact other people. During this you can redefine the new society to come through social conversations. Do you try to enforce the old world or find a new way to have a society?

The ending of the game is that your survivors open the fallout shelter after three weeks because they survived, they all step outside briefly into the new world only to find there is nothing left to do except go back down, everything around them above is dead, red forests, and silence. Their fate is left unknown.

#### **Figure 5** Concept 5

In this adventure/survival game, you're trapped on a tropical island. In the midst of this colorful jungle, you and other survivors are hunted for sport.

To have a chance of escape, your customizable avatar has to team up with a diverse cast of characters and pick those that should be in your closest group. Manage both yours and their relationships with one another to have a chance to flee the island. Deep friendships, passionate romances and cold betrayal might ebb and flow as you make your way through the game.

As you adventure through the jungle to find the key to your survival, your hunters are never far behind.

### **Figure 6** Concept 6

In this stealth immersive sim/visual novel hybrid you play as a customizable closeted queer avatar in a largely conservative, queerphobic town, void of color and filled with plastic-like inhabitants reinforcing the need to be cis and heterosexual. To go outside, as an individual brimming with color, you need to disguise yourself, but risk suffocating.

Outside, you can find other equally colorful queer characters of a diverse range of identities and subcultures, but they are equally closeted. Being around the queer character reduces your "suffocation" from being outside, and through dialogue you can search for other queer characters.

However, outside the NPCs of this conservative town will avoid you, be hostile and aggressive and even attempt to kill you since you are queer. There is no specific goal to the game, except avoiding being murdered by the NPCs and potentially fleeing the town, alone or with others joining, or potentially creating a community with other queer characters in the game.

### **Figure 7** Concept 7

In this explorative adventure, your player character(s) ventures from adventure to adventure and their exploits are punctuated by video chats/calls/letters to/with their queer-platonic partner who is not on the adventure with them.

The gameplay and narrative show the player character growing/changing/understanding themselves better as a result of their journey, while their relationship with their partner grounds them and enforces their sense of self.

### **Figure 8** Concept 8

In this rogue-like game, you have a passing stat that indicates whether you present yourself as more feminine or masculine. Your gender presentation impacts how likely you are to be in combat or your ability to go to stores.

You are safer masculine presenting but ostracized from others when doing so in game. The player can choose to participate in gendercide or try to uncover the mystery of the angels who have weaponized human sexuality to eradicate humanity.

The primary gameplay element would be in using your gender presentation as key to survival.

### **Figure 9** Concept 9

In this RPG game you take control of a number of pre-made player characters in selectable, different routes who's every day is a literal inner battle against their conflicts.

A parent might confront them for not doing chores, and here they have to battle with their inner guilt – which might be won through argumentation or lost and causing the main character to become dispirited. The plot will change depending on if you win or lose these inner battles.

In some battles the player character(s) faces off against homophobes, and to win they would need to level up their argumentation skills by practicing or reading. The game would take part during three days and create many different variations and outcomes depending on how the game is played.