Queer Audiences & Video Games

By: Cobe Alvarez

Abstract:

This proposal presents the question: Why do certain video games attract a large number of Queer players while others do not? By using Queer Theory and Media Studies, this proposal approaches this question through a theoretical framework in order to go beyond a simple answer of Queer representation. This project would examine video games and Queerness through several lenses, including Queer aesthetics, Queer coding, and ludology. Through a process of analyzing games as text and interviews, this paper proposes a research project to answer this question and understand the complexities and nuances of the Queer gaming community. As a final deliverable, the creation of a "zine" is proposed to showcase the findings of this research project through a medium which would showcase Queer aesthetics.

Proposal:

On March 20th, 2020 Nintendo released the highly anticipated fifth installment of the *Animal Crossing* game franchise, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The game found great success upon release, breaking several records including the console game record for selling the largest number of digital copies in a single month. Shortly after release, the game developed a huge, and loud, queer fanbase. Some felt the game provided them with a safe space to exist in an, albeit virtual, queer body (Lieberman). Others found pleasure in speculating which of the many flamboyant animal villagers were queer.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is by no means the first video game to have a sizeable queer fanbase and it certainly will not be the last. So why is it that certain games like *Animal Crossing* attracts queer games to a greater extent than other games? That is the question I hope to answer in this research project. In recent years, research in queer game studies has grown in popularity, however this particular question has rarely been at the center of this research. As for my personal experience with the topic, I have taken multiple courses in media studies and gender studies, which have given me a strong foundation to begin this research with.

In performing this research, there are a few main concepts of queer theory and video game production I will focus on. The first concept I would like to research is the concept of queer storytelling, and queertime, which is the theory that the bending and breaking of a "straight" timeline creates a space for queerness in storytelling. Although most research on this matter relates to film and television studies, I would like to analyze this idea through the lens of video games. One game I am interested in using as a case study, for example, is *Life is Strange.* The game in which both the plot provides the queering of time, and the player has the ability to change and interrupt the straight timeline of the game.

The second concept is the queer coding of characters in video games, with a focus on non-binary and gender queer coded characters. Queer coding is the concept that a fictional character can be written or designed to be subtextually queer, without their queerness being made explicit. One example of queer coding in video games was in early Nintendo Games such as *Metroid*, where the character Samus's suit has no particularly masculine or feminine features and how early on their was a lot of speculation on Samus's gender (Goetz 243). This led to the character being coded as both a transgender woman and a lesbian, and has caused her to be an icon in the queer gaming community. In addition to established characters I am also interested in researching how character customization allows for players to experiment with gender identities in their avatar. For this I would research games such as *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing*, and *The Sims*, and how they support nonbinary and transgender players by giving them an outlet for gender expression (Squinkifer 33).

One final concept I would explore is camp in video games, primarily through the lens of stylized animation. Camp is an aesthetic style that finds appeal and attraction because of its purposefully bad taste and ironic value. Camp as an aesthetic style and artform, has become a large part of the queer community, especially in the forms of art and fasion. For this I would analyze games such as *Stardew Valley* or *Animal Crossing,* which are very stylized in their animation. I would ecamine how this campiness in the stylized animation allows for more queer coding and playing with gender.

The goals of this research project are to research and analyze how these ideas of queer theory translate into the production of video games and the reading of video games as texts. I hope to use what I learn to find connections between queer theory in video games and the appeal of video games to the queer community. To perform this research, I will play through several

video games that have both overt and covert queer themes and analyze them through a queer lens. The four main concepts I will be researching will be queer time, queer coding of characters, the use of character creation for gender expression, and campiness in video games. Therefore, to research these themes, I will focus respectively on cut scenes, character design for queer coded or queer characters, character customization, and the art direction or the video game. To understand the way that these queer games impact the queer community, I will reach out to queer gamers and survey them on how they read the same video games, and how they experience queerness in games.

Should I have the opportunity to perform this research in person, there are certain resources I hope to take advantage of while on campus. The first of which would be to utilize the new eSports facilities in the Burns Recreation Center to play these games. I also plan on contacting game developers from Electronic Arts, which is stationed in Playa Vista, in order to conduct interviews on games such as *Sims, Apex Legends*, and *Dragon Age*, which are all developed by EA. As for researching queer culture and concepts I will mainly be reading queer scholarly articles and conducting field reaserch on queer communities' response to video games.

As a final deliverable, I plan on creating a zine which summarizes my findings and showcases examples of queerness in games. Since queer aesthetics are an important aspect to this research, I would like to use the zine format to showcase some of these aesthetics. Looking forward, I expect to find a correlation between queer audience numbers and how prevelant queer aesthetics are in a given game. Based on my preliminary research, I also expect escapism to play in important role in attracting queer games to certain types of games.

Should this project be approved, I expect that completing this research project will take four months to complete, starting in January and ending in April. The first moth will be spent

finding games that, either through their characters, gameplay, or asethetics, potentially reflect/do reflect queer concepts. I will also be looking for scholarly articles, collaborating with faculty, and doing field research to be more educated on queer culture. While I have done preliminary research on queerness in video games, I feel like I should still allocate some time during the first month to solidify my basic understanding on this topic. The second month will be devoted to completing and analyzing the game *Life is Strange* in the context of how its focus on time travel as both a mechanic of the game, and plot device, reflects the notion of queer time, or non-linear time.

The third month will be devoted to analyzing several different games such as *Metal Gear Solid, Metroid*, and others in the context of how some characters are queer-coded aesthetically in their design and characterization and the implications/significance it has for the story and gameplay. During this month, I will also analyze several games with custom character creation, especially ones with gender neutral/nonbinary options, such as *Animal Crossing, Stardew Valley, The Sims*, and the impact that had on the nonbinary and transgender gamer commmunity.

I will begin the final month with analyzing campiness in games such as *Bayonetta, Animal Crossing,* etc, and what this aesthetic lends to the gameplay, experience, and tone of the overall game. The remaining time will be spent compiling my research, and concluding what queer concepts add to the overall story/gameplay of video games, and the effect that this has on the queer community. I will allocate the final two weeks of this month to the creation of zine.

As future entertainment industry workers, it's important that I continue to hone my critical analysis skills to better understand the media that I consume and create. I have interest in joining the field of video game production and studies, so this research project will provide me with insight into both the production of video games, and how I can create impactful stories in

video games that provide space for queer gamers. Its important to understand the way queer culture has influenced the media that we consume, and to recognize and celebrate its contributions to the video games we play. Queer representation in video games in recent years has been met with hostility and research projects such as these help to not only validate queer inclusion, but prove that queerness in games has existed for decades. I hope that with this research, I will be contributing to a meaningful discussion in media studies that deserves to be continued.

Work Cited

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Budget:

In order to complete this project, I would require funding for both the research processes and the time and software used to create the zine. The cost of performing the research would come from compensating those who I interview. I plan on interviewing five members of the queer community who activly play video games, and two professors; one from the Film, TV, & Media Studies department, and the other from the Women's and Gender Studies department. The compensation would be $10 per hour, so to interview them for an hour each, I would require $70. As for the creation of the zine, I would require access to Photoshop for one month which would cost $20. I also would like to request reimbursement for my own work, since I will be using my own hardware. I plan on the creation of the zine to take about ten hours in total. In accordance with the Los Angeles minimum wage, I would request $15 an hour as proper compensation. In total, I am asking for $260 to complete this project.