

# Representations of Queer Identity in Games from 2013–2015

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Representation of diverse sexualities and genders has traditionally been uncommon in games (Shaw 2009). As the influence of independent developers grows (Anthropy 2012) and interest in queer content increases (Gravning 2014), the heteronormative nature of the medium is beginning to be challenged; however, gaps remain in the study of queer content in games.

Queer game studies have typically focused on the response from players (Chang 2015; Condis 2015; Pulos 2013; Sundén & Sveningsson 2012) or the production of queer games (Harvey 2014; Shaw 2009). While there is also some existing research into queer representation and queer readings of games, this work is typically directed towards specific titles (Consalvo 2003; Greer 2013; Youngblood 2013), rather than approaching the analysis holistically.

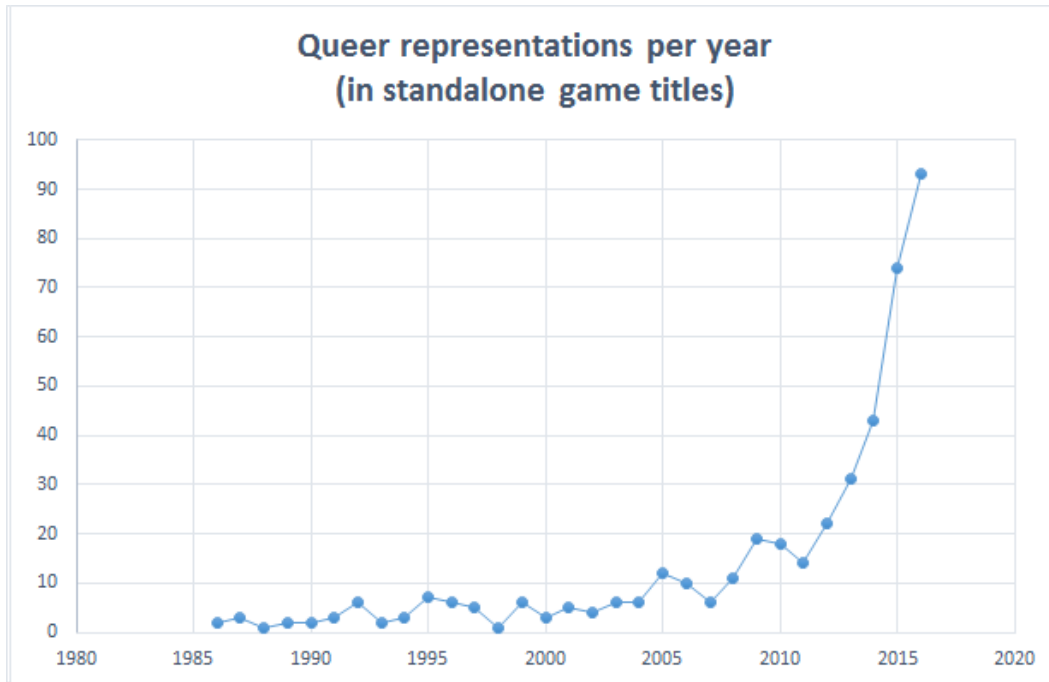
In this research, we are examining games featuring queer content that were released from 2013–2015, in collaboration with in-progress qualitative and quantitative studies that are attempting to holistically analyse the history of LGBTQ representation in digital games by documenting all instances of representation, regardless of their in-game significance (Shaw, Lauteria, Persaud & Cole 2017). Prior research conducted for a component of this

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existing project (Queerly Represent Me 2017) revealed a statistically significant increase in titles featuring queer content during this three year period (**Fig. 1**), highlighting this period as warranting further study.

**Figure 1.** Preliminary research reveals the number standalone games (not part of a series or franchise) featuring any queer representation from 1986 to 2016.



Queerly Represent Me contains a database of games (N=754) featuring queer content. The existing categorisation within this database has been used to inform the ongoing analysis within this paper. Games featured in the database have been categorised in a number of ways, including which specific identities are represented within a game, and whether these representations are featured through a game’s ‘protagonist’, ‘non-player character/s’ and/or ‘references’. Specific diverse sexualities and genders within each of these character types have been categorised as: Asexual / aromantic, Bisexual / plurisexual, Cross-dressing, Gay, Intersex, Lesbian, Nonbinary / non-conforming, Playersexual, Polyamory, Trans woman, Trans man, and Other. These categories were designed to be broad enough to provide valuable data for researchers while also being specific enough to be relevant for Queerly Represent Me’s non-academic user base.

The categorisation of standalone games released from 2013–2015 (N=147) as well as games that are part of a series of franchise and were released within the same time period (N=67) were used to guide the formation of the following research questions:

RQ1: Why did the number of games featuring queer content double from 2013-2015?

RQ2: Have the representations of specific diverse sexualities or genders increased at comparable rates?

RQ3: If some representations have increased at different rates to one another, why has this occurred?

In addition to these guiding research questions, we identified a number of hypotheses to assess as part of our analysis of recently released titles, in an attempt to identify gaps in representation.

H1: Representations of diverse sexuality are more common than representations of gender.

H2: Representations of monosexual identities (lesbian and gay) are more common than other sexualities.

H3: Most instances of monosexual representation are from the visual novel genre.

H4: Most instances of ‘implied’ representations are gay men.

We have conducted preliminary quantitative analysis in response to H1 and H2. For H1, a between-subjects t-test was performed to compare the total number of representations of sexuality per game with the total number of representations of gender per game ( $M = .62$ ,  $SG = 1.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with the resulting supporting the original hypothesis.

A chi-square test for goodness of fit was used in response to H2, to test whether some types of representation appeared more frequently than others. The chi-square test was statistically significant— $\chi^2(10, N = 12) = 336.00$ ,  $p < .001$ —which indicates that some diverse sexualities and genders are represented within the data more significantly than others. Further examination reveals that the values for representation of gay men and lesbian women are higher than the expected average, supporting the original hypothesis.

These initial analyses indicate that there are gaps in the representations of diverse genders, and of sexualities that are not gay or lesbian identities; these initial findings warrant further research. We are yet to establish whether representations of gay and lesbian identities are increasing at the same rate as other identities (in response to RQ2), but early speculation in response to RQ1 indicates that the rising influence of independent game developers, as well as greater access to game development tools, are significant factors in the drastic increase in game releases (Anthropy 2012).

In responding to these research questions—as well as supporting or rejecting these hypotheses—we hope to create connections to other in-progress qualitative and quantitative holistic studies of queer content in games, as well as reveal opportunities for future research.

## BIO

Alayna Cole – Alayna Cole is a lecturer in Serious Games and a doctoral candidate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She has broad research interests, but she is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. Her doctoral thesis—entitled *Queerly Ever After*—comprises a collection of reimagined fairy tales that seek to incorporate plurisexual perspectives. She is also the founder of Queerly Represent Me, an online database collating more than 700 game titles that feature queer representation.

Adrienne Shaw – Adrienne Shaw is an Assistant Professor in Temple University’s Department of Media Studies and Production, a member of the School of Media and Communication graduate faculty. Her book *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota, 2014) won the 2016 Outstanding Book Award from the Popular Communication Division of the International Communication Association. She also recently co-edited a special issue of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* with Katherine Sender and an edited collection, *Queer Game Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) with Bonne Ruberg. Her ongoing research project is the LGBTQ Game Archive, documenting LGBTQ game content from the 1980s to present.

Jessica Zammit – Jessica Zammit is a tutor in statistics and research methods, and an MPhil (Psychology) candidate. Her primary research focus is the area of language, memory, and cognition. She is the primary data analyst for Queerly Represent Me, a database and resource hub for games featuring queer content.

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