Being the Other: Representation and normalization of queerness in video games

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ABSTRACT

Intersecting various critical discourses, like critical play, feminist theories, and queer video game theories, our research interests lie in the potential of digital literary works (e.g., visual novels, video games) in raising awareness towards social issues, such as equity, inclusivity, and diversity. Analyzing digital literary works as text-objects, we can question the ideas they convey through their procedural rhetoric. With the growing interest in empathy-driven games and their mobilization of social issues, especially those related to queerness, we decided to explore these designed experiences and the ways in which they may provoke awareness (or lack of) in players. In this article, we analyze through a socio-semiotic approach two video games drawn from a larger queer video game corpus, each dealing differently with social issues such as representation and normalization of queerness.

KEYWORDS

identity; queer; representation; socio-semiotic; video games

RESUMO

Cruzando vários discursos críticos, nomeadamente o jogo crítico, as teorias feministas e queer dos videojogos, a nossa pesquisa foca-se no potencial das obras literárias digitais (por exemplo, romances visuais, videojogos) na sensibilização para questões sociais, como a equidade, a inclusão e a diversidade. Analisando as obras literárias digitais como objetos-texto, podemos questionar as ideias que estas transmitem através da sua retórica processual. Com o crescente interesse na indústria dos jogos orientados para a empatia e a sua mobilização de questões sociais, especialmente as relacionadas com *queerness*, decidimos explorar estas experiências e as formas como podem provocar (ou não) a consciencialização dos jogadores. Neste artigo, analisamos, através de uma abordagem sociossemiótica, dois videojogos, retirados de um corpus de videojogos queer mais vasto, que lidam de forma diferente com questões sociais como a representação e a normalização da queerness.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

identidade; queer; representação; sócio-semiótica; videojogos

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1. INTRODUCTION

> "Remember, wielding isn't romantic. Perfectly platonic friends can wield each other, okay?"—
>
> Jesse (*Boyfriend Dungeon*)

Since video games have often been associated with various scandals in media (e.g., the #GamerGate[1] and the Activision Blizzard scandal[2]), it may appear contradictory to think they can help players to develop a sense of empathy. We cannot ignore the gaming culture harmful track record of bigotry, stereotypical representations, abuse, and harassment, particularly towards people of colour, women, and LGBTQ2S+ people (Fox and Tang, 2014; Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman, 2013; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). As implausible as it might be, many researchers like Ian Bogost (2011) and Katherine Isbister (2016) argue that some games have successfully inverted this tendency. Simulating experiences constrained by rules, in which players are (most of the time) not empowered and (sometimes) are offered commentary on various issues, empathy-driven games may indeed induce empathy, as they enable the possibility to feel and to connect with other human beings. As Kishonna Gray and David J. Leonard wrote, games have the potential to be "teachers of alternative narratives and histories,

1 The Gamergate was an online harassment campaign, initially carried out with the #GamerGate keyword, focused on sexism and anti-progressivism in video game culture. In August 2014, this initiative targeted women in the industry, including developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, as well as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian. The campaign included doxing (the search for and publication of personal information online), as well as rape and death threats against these women.

2 This scandal refers to a series of allegations and legal actions against one of the largest and most prominent companies in the gaming industry, Activision Blizzard. The lawsuit contained numerous disturbing allegations, including instances of sexual harassment, unequal pay, a "frat boy" culture at the company, incidents of misconduct at company events, unequal treatment of female employees, and retaliation against those who reported misconduct. While Activision Blizzard initially denied the allegations, in the wake of the lawsuit, many current and former employees of Activision Blizzard organized protests and walkouts to demand a safer and more inclusive workplace. Several high-level executives left the company in the aftermath of the scandal, including the President of Blizzard Entertainment J. Allen Brack, and the CEO of Activision Blizzard, Bobby Kotick.

[to challenge] the ideologies of hate, persistent inequalities, and violent injustices" (2018). In other words, games are not inherently reactionary or progressive; they possess the potential to be both.

Hence, interest for empathy games and their affiliation with social issues has grown in the last decade, within academia and within the industry. But, as Bo Ruberg (2018) says, "empathy" is increasingly being used as a selling point or as a marketing tool for video game technologies and game-related initiatives that tackle difficult subjects. "Empathy" became a repeated catch-all term for any video game, imagined as a feeling and as a call to feel. It is also presented as the "good" feelings in opposition to the "bad" feelings associated with video games. While empathy is still widely seen as a new frontier in video games, many queer game developers (e.g., Anthropy, 2012; Brice, 2017; merrittk, 2015) and scholars (e.g., Ruberg, 2020; Pozo, 2018) wrote to protest against this rhetoric, as it fosters the unspoken dynamics of belonging—to a group, to a community—, to walk in the shoes of someone else to better understand them, and settles on what sorts of players and feelings should be valued within the cultures surrounding video games.

While "queerness in games" has appeared in the media and public discourse primarily as a question of representation and inclusion, several researchers propose to look further, with works such as the book *Queer Game Studies* (2017) edited by Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. In another work, the special issue on queerness in *Game Studies*, Teddy Pozo (2018) argues:

Queerness and games must exceed the limitations of "empathy games"—not by ceasing to write about and teach key texts in queer games, nor by dismissing any version of empathy as a critical framework for understanding independent game design, but by contextualizing empathy within a broader repertoire of queer game design strategies focused on affect, embodiment, and tactility.

It is through elements of affect and phenomenology that queer video games attempt to make players feel a queer experience, thus providing an opportunity to explore other ways of feeling, desiring and being for players (Ruberg, 2019). Hence, queer games that offer greater diversity, not only in the characters they feature, but also in the stories they tell and the ludic mechanisms they employ, "increased [the] scope for the empathic possibilities of games" (Clark, 2017:4).

With these thoughts in mind, we explored queer designed experiences in narrative video games and the ways through which they may provoke awareness (or lack of) towards queer issues. This paper presents an explorative analysis of a queer video game corpus dealing, consciously or not, with social issues such as the representation and normalization of queerness. Through the lens of a socio-semiotic approach (Pérez-Latorre, Olivia and Besalú, 2017), our explorative research seeks to understand

how queer game design strategies might be related to the development of empathy to better understand the mechanics of play. Before covering our analysis framework, we will present *Boyfriend Dungeon* and *If Found...*, the two video games discussed. Afterward, we will present the results of our research, with an emphasis on the depiction of characters and the interrelation of the game mechanics and the diegesis of the games.

2. A CORPUS OF QUEER VIDEO GAMES

To investigate the intricacies of the queer "Other[3]" in narrative video games, we opted to study two distinct, yet complementary works crossing divides between themes, structures, and forms of interactivity. As more creators can access development tools and reach specific communities (see Anthropy, 2012), more queer video games or video games with queer components are published each year, granting us the possibility to carefully select two games among an ever-growing corpus. Although we discuss only two specific games in this paper, one should keep in mind that they offer insights into queer experiences: they do not represent the whole spectrum of possible experiences. To develop our analysis beyond the scope of queer representation, we decided to focus on games with a pronounced level of agency, or incorporation as Gordon Calleja proposed (2011), and a high level of interaction to better grasp the queer experience. Drawing upon our previous works on the interactivity spectrum and their characteristics in narrative video games (Dumoulin and Lescouet, 2023), we chose to analyze *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021) and *If Found...* (Dreamfeel, 2020), two independent and well-received video games. Respectively developed in Canada and Ireland, these games invite players to discover queer characters through game mechanics and narrative devices, but each with their own twist. Other recent games could have been discussed in length, notably those from the visual novel genre, such as *Coffee Talk* (Toge Productions, 2020) and *Va-11 Hall-A* (Sukeban Games, 2016–2019).

2.1. *BOYFRIEND DUNGEON*: LOVE AT FIRST STRIKE

Boyfriend Dungeon is categorized as both a dating simulator and a dungeon crawler, and each genre generates its own gaming experience. First, the player must engage in social activities with non-playable characters

3 In this paper, we use the capital letter when speaking of the 'Other,' as to distinguish the concept from other theories on alterity and otherness, following the works of French scholar Antoine Berman (1984), himself influenced by German translation writers and scholars. The capital letter is used for the noun and the adjective.

through dialogue sequences with sporadic choices to be taken by the player. Second, the player must explore dungeons—closed spaces with maze-like designs—and fight object-like monsters to gather resources and gain new abilities. Both activities are mandatory to progress in the game, and each has their own mechanics and aesthetics. For instance, the social activities are presented with still images of the characters and a dialogue box, while the dungeoneering sequences are introduced in an isometric, pixelized 2D view (similar to a bird's-eye view). This hybrid game, between narration and fighting, has been both praised and criticized for its themes, plotlines, and character developments (Sullivan, Stanfill and Salter, 2023).

When starting *Boyfriend Dungeon*, the player must customize their avatar (hairstyle, eyes, skin colour) and choose their pronouns (he/his, she/her, they/there, in the English version). The player does not choose their gender, as the gender identity is implied to be that of the player's, and only pronouns are selected, even if the options are somewhat limited (see Fig. 1). In this queer dating game, where it's love "at first strike," the player engages with non-stereotypical characters to develop romantic or platonic relationships. The game opens with the player's avatar moving in their cousin's flat, in a town called Verona Beach. Their goal is crystal clear: they must go on a dating quest to face off their social insecurities. As the game progresses, the player meets up to seven characters with whom they may develop relationships. Each of them has their own personality, quirks, and background, all of which *can* be discovered through dialogue sequences. We said "can," because the player is not forced to date nor interact with all of them; a player's playthrough (or experience) thus reflects their own choices, with the risk of leaving plot holes in the narrative experience.

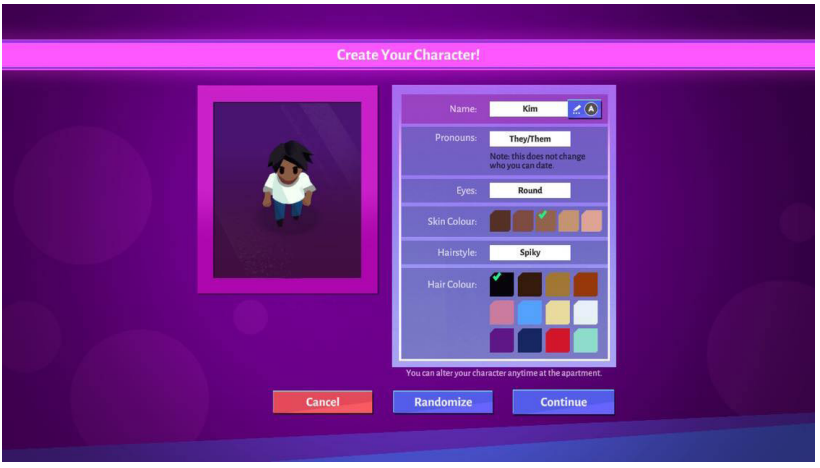

Fig. 1. Screenshot of *Boyfriend Dungeon*. Avatar customization interface (Nintendo Switch screen capture)

Boyfriend Dungeon distinguishes itself from other games in its core mechanics and how the developer Kitfox Games embedded the narrative elements into the game mechanics. Between dates, the player must enter dungeons (e.g., a commercial mall, a bar filled with monsters), called "dun." When the player enters in one, each dateable character will transform in a unique weapon form, which is to be *wielded* by the player. These bladed or blunt weapons are needed to progress in the game, as the player must defeat enemies representing the avatar's inner fears. To survive and overcome them, the player must deepen their relationships with the other characters to increase the weapons' strength and abilities, which, in turn, allow players to further explore dungeons. This connection is built through dialogues, text messages (narrative interactions), and repetition in combat.

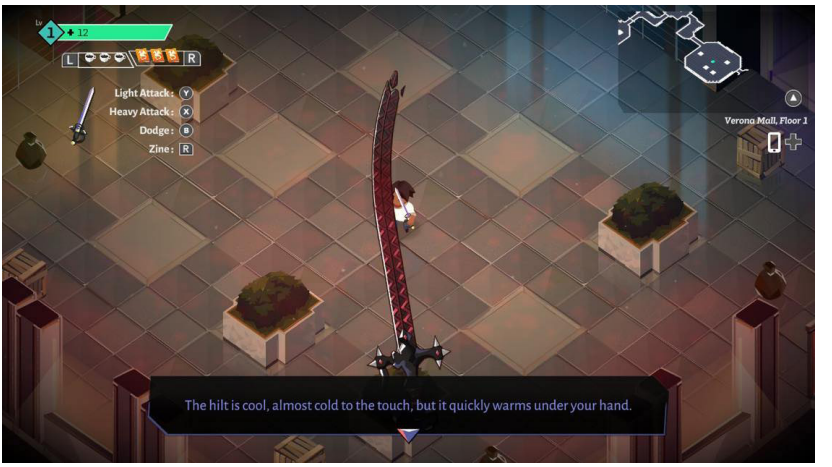

Fig. 2. Screenshot of *Boyfriend Dungeon*. First encounter with a broken weapon (Nintendo Switch screen capture)

While exploring dungeons, the player may encounter new characters as they lay injured on the ground in their weapon form (see Fig. 2). As the story unfolds, the player seeks to discover who is the attacker and to deliver justice for their new friends and lovers. The plot revolves around the manipulative and secretive behaviour of Eric, who becomes violent when his romantic advances are rejected. The game ends with a final battle against an artificial weapon created by Eric from all the broken parts he has gathered from his previous dates. In other words, the game ends with a battle between, on one side, genuine friendship and love, and, on the other side, aggressive, harmful, and self-hating emotions. After the battle, the player can kindly ask Eric to go seek therapy.

2.2. IF FOUND...: ERASING A BLACK HOLE

The game *If Found...* has the player advancing through two interwoven stories by erasing journal entries or images. One story follows an astronaut named Cassiopeia trying to prevent a black hole from destroying the Earth, while the other follows a young transgender woman named Kasio, who is returning to her small Irish hometown, in December 1993, as she navigates her relationships with her family and friends. The two stories alternate chapters, eventually connecting metaphorically through the figure of a black hole (McArthur, 2020).

In Kasio's story, the player witnesses the tension created in the family regarding her gender identity, leading the protagonist to argue with her mother and to run away. The young woman finds refuge in the old, abandoned mansion where her childhood friend, Colum, and his boyfriend Jack live, as well as the third member of their music band, Shans. Kasio slowly gets used to the feeling of being with people who seem to accept her for who she is, despite their limited resources and precarious situation. She begins to grow closer to Shans, discovering common difficulties in integrating into the local culture—Kasio because of her gender expression and Shans because of his ethnicity and discomfort with traditional masculinity. After the band's first gig, Shans makes amorous promises to run away to Dublin and Kasio flatly refuses. He leaves the house and the group, while the protagonist and her two friends are evicted from the increasingly decrepit and dangerous house.

After being taken in by Colum's aunt Maggy, the protagonist tries to reconcile with her family for Christmas dinner, but she is reprimanded by her brother for squatting in an abandoned house with misfits, and living with Maggy, a gay woman, instead of returning home. Distraught by her family estrangement and feeling unworthy to stay with Maggy, in addition to being rejected by Shans, who tells her that he wants to be "normal," Kasio takes refuge in the mansion. Depressed, she stays there despite the freezing temperatures, not responding to her brother's and friends' attempts to approach the now dangerous house. Kasio, increasingly ill, burns her diary to keep herself warm before succumbing to hypothermia and the black hole of her emotions.

At the same time, Cassiopeia shares her newly discovered data with Control, the only person who replied to her when she announced the appearance of the black hole. Through this information, Control discovers that it takes the form of an image. Cassiopeia reaches Earth, only to discover that Control is actually Mac McHugh, an accountant with an interest in astronomy. They take the image, a child's drawing of a scene with an astronaut in space drawn by Kasio as a child, and slide it into the mailbox to be sent to a woman resembling Brid, Kasio's mother, before the black hole hits Earth.

While the second story follows the conventions of the visual novel genre (Reed *et al.* 2020), the first is mainly presented in the form of a diary. The player does not take direct control of the narrative, and they must use their cursor or their finger (depending on the device) to erase the texts and sketches recorded by Kasio to progress in the game. The action is represented by an eraser that shrinks the more the player progresses. Various animations may happen, depending on the moment, the context, or Kasio's statements at the time (see Fig. 3, 4 and 5). Thus, it is possible to have access to the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist in a more intimate way. In addition, the diary is far from clear and clean, since, among the sketches and the writings, some are crossed out, showing the rereading of Kasio's diary after certain events experienced during the game.

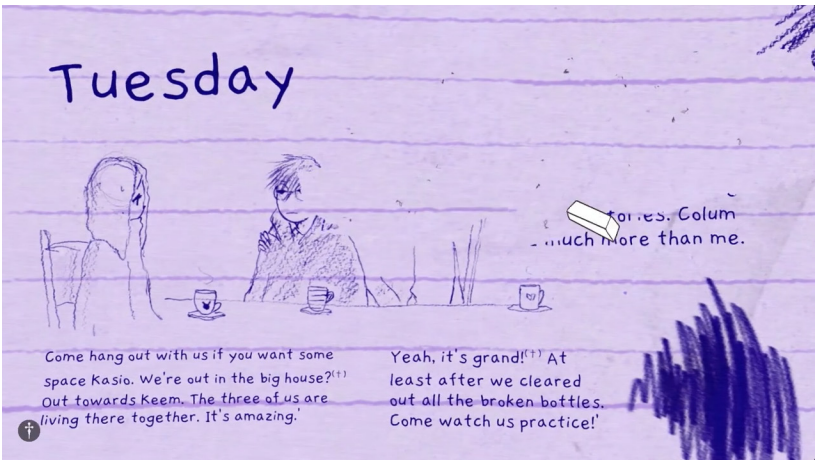

Fig. 3. Screenshot of *If Found...* Journal entry of Kasio reuniting with her childhood friend, Collum, and his boyfriend Jack, being erased by the player (computer screen capture)

Fig. 4. Screenshot of *If Found...* The erasing mechanics changing the colours of the abandoned house and representing the passage of time in this journal entry (computer screen capture)

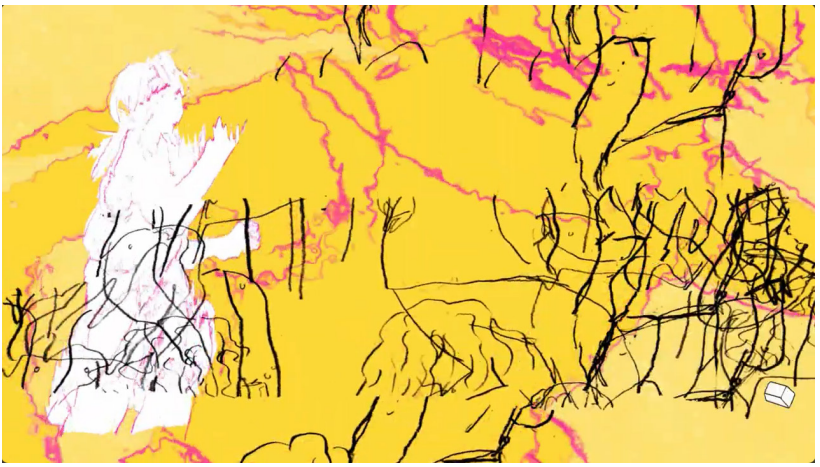

Fig. 5. Screenshot of *If Found...* Kasio's dancing figure gets buried through the crowd of the show. Instead of "erasing," the mechanic overlays more and more scribbles with each stroke of the player (computer screen capture).

3. OUR VIDEO GAME ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Behind every video game, there is a specific vision of the world, a perspective on the usefulness of certain actions, and a point of view on the meaning of "victory" and "defeat" and how to reach them (Shaw, 2014). Thus, it seems logical to focus on video games as a means of expression as well as on the discourses they promote, explicitly and implicitly, for any given community. This is why we draw on the social-semiotic approach to video game analysis proposed by Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Mercè Olivia and Reinald Besalú (2017). As they point out, semiotics "can be useful for understanding not only the audiovisual surface of video game design but also its overall structure, including the game's deep structure: its procedural core, formed by rules and game mechanics" (588). Additionally, social semiotics is a suitable framework for integrating different theoretical currents and analytical perspectives, such as narrative approaches (Murray, 1998), ludological approaches (Aarseth, 1997, 2001; Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2001), ludo-narrative approaches (Ryan 2006), approaches based on procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2006, 2008), video games as assemblage (Mukherjee, 2015), and semiotic approaches (Sicart, 2013; Seraphine, 2016).

Their model is based on four levels: audiovisual narrative, ludo-narrative, system-gameplay, and designer-player (see Fig. 6). Each of the last three dimensions is associated with a function from Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (2006): the ludo-narrative deals with the representational value of game design and its connection to audiovisual narrative ("representational function"); the system-gameplay is based on

the frame of the video game as designed problem-solving and focuses on the compositional signification ("textual function"); lastly, the designer-player covers the "interpersonal function" of social-semiotic theories.

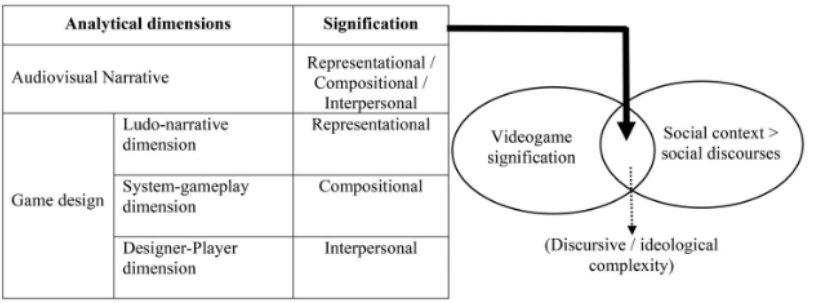

Fig. 6. Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017) social-semiotic approach to video game analysis

In this video game analysis model, games must be considered as multimodal texts, where not only audiovisual narration and game design coexist, but also other semiotic modes, such as written text, music, 3D design, etc. Game rules and gameplay loops are said to be the main (or most distinctive) "semiotic resources" of video games (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017), thus explaining why the ludo-narrative and system-gameplay dimensions are further detailed in their studies. And, since our research tries to better understand a broader repertoire of queer game design strategies focused on affect, embodiment, and tactility, we opted for the analysis model elaborated by Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017), which takes into account both the audiovisual dimension and the relevancy of game design as a means to create sense.

4. BECOMING THE OTHER: RESULTS OF OUR ANALYSIS

Our semiotic analysis showed that *Boyfriend Dungeon* and *If Found...* address queer representation, and, more broadly, the normalization of queer representation, through two distinct yet complementary dimensions in regard to how characters are depicted. The first is the ludo-narrative dimension, that is, the dimension that focuses on the relations between narrative representations and game mechanics. Among other things, narrative elements include the narrative design, the story's progression, the text itself, and the effects it developed. Regarding the game mechanics, they include the interface through which the game is accessed (the screen, the user interface, the keyboard or the controller, etc.) and how the game mechanics (in-game actions) are interrelated. The second dimension is the system-gameplay dimension, which focuses more on the game's structural

elements, such as the rules, the dominant strategies, the game mechanics, and the roles of key agents in the gameplay. In this second part of our analysis, we focus on the mechanics and how they work as a system. The yielding results describe the systematic approach to queer representation in the video games studied and provide insights on how game design mobilize the themes of Otherness and queerness in ludic works.

4.1. DEPICTION OF CHARACTERS

In *Boyfriend Dungeon* and *If Found...,* we found that both games generally depicted queer characters in a similar, positive way. They are not described as being strangers to the protagonist, nor are they depicted as being weird nor crazy; rather, they are intrinsically complex characters. Following the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1972), the Other is to be understood as a reflection of the self. Furthermore, Michael Cronin argues that one's identity is composed of multiple identities and forms of representations (Cronin, 2006): representation and alterity(ies) thus give insights on the individuals or groups depicting them. In order to bridge the divide between the self and the Other, we first observed how the characters were not only represented or depicted, but also designed.

Our research framework acknowledges that queer characters in these games: (1) define themselves beyond their queerness (Cavalcante, 2013), with distinct, evolving personalities; (2) live in communities and are not reduced to only secondary positions or to the background (Shaw *et al.*, 2019); (3) are represented as outsiders or the figure of the Other, but not in a dangerous, vicious, or monstrous way (Benshoff, 1997; Halberstam, 2017). To study and analyze the queer or the Other in video games, these three key characteristics are essential to open and sustain an ethical framework, as they force scholars and players alike not only to *interact* with these characters (e.g., to move a character, to decide on textual choices) but to *become* them in a genuine manner, embedded in the game mechanics and narrative devices (e.g., to develop affects towards the characters, to use the character as an extension of the self).

4.1.1. *BOYFRIEND DUNGEON* AND DISCOVERING THE OTHER QUEER

In *Boyfriend Dungeon*, as noted, the player's character engages in various dating activities, while *wielding* their date when exploring a "dunj." Among all the characters in the game, the dateable ones are those with the most complex background. Each of them has been carefully designed and tailored

to reflect specific social and personal issues. Some draw on narrative archetypes in mind (such as the morally grey and mysterious Sunder), but they are not necessarily stereotyped. The seven love interests have their own different background, with their own communities. This helps shaping character with their own voice (how they express themselves, how they see the world), which is, in turn, reflected in their interactions with the player and how they may show their love towards them. For instance, Jonah is an unemployed man with a passion for surfing. If he shows the player's avatar how to surf at the beginning of their relationships, he slowly comes to talk about his own insecurities and struggles in finding a job. He is fond of (terrible) puns and is a wholesome character with whom to interact, which becomes more and more obvious as the player interacts with him. A counterexample would be Sunder (see Fig. 7), who is overly flirty and can make people (and players) uncomfortable through its excessive flirting. When dating him, the relationship is doomed to fail: he will break up with the player's character at the end of his character arc, no matter what happens.

Fig. 7. Screenshot of *Boyfriend Dungeon*. One of the first interactions with Sunder (Nintendo Switch screen capture)

These characters were designed to represent multiple communities (from various backgrounds and with a diversity of gender identities) with different ideals and ways of thinking, which may confront the player in their own individuality. Much like the player's character going through "dunj" to confront their fears and insecurities, the dateable characters will have to face their own issues, but with the help of the main character: family issues, lack of confidence, depression, mourning, stalking, manipulation, even territorial behaviour (there is a cat among the dateable characters, adding a touch of humour while addressing possessiveness). While a more

thorough discussion on how these issues are being represented in the game is of relevance, our present scope is to identify them and highlight how such sensitive issues in a dating simulator is, in itself, an opening towards the Other's emotions and thoughts: the player's goal is not to solve their own problem (i.e., to actively engage in solving their issue), but rather to give support and comfort to other characters when they need it, notably by listening to them and acknowledging their feelings. For the semioticians Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, "listening" is one of the key behaviours when encountering the Other, as it implies an openness and willingness towards the Other. It "allows for manifestation and is turned to signs in their constitutive multi-voiceness and contradictoriness" (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2006: 201). From an ethical perspective, confronting opposing values or beliefs fosters self-reflection and dialogue, that is, a queer exchange about personal experiences that enables growth.

Thus, the game mechanics and the narrative elements come together to create situations in which the players must actively listen to their date's personal problems, whether they would like to develop a platonic or a romantic relationship with them. To develop affinities with the characters, the player must take into consideration their values, their backgrounds, their behaviours, and their motives. In other words, they must discover and respect who they are. By listening to them, the player is invited in a fulfilling approach towards the Other, in an ethical fashion (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2006), to develop their critical awareness towards the Other (Freire, 2021) and to discover themself in alterity (Levinas, 1972).

4.1.2. IF FOUND... HAVE FOUND HER OWN IDENTITY

If Found... presents the emotional intricacies of growing up, coming out, and finding love in a raw but approachable environment, using the erasing mechanic. While the black hole plays an important role as "the physical manifestation of the terror, loneliness, shame and self-hatred that she encounters, all-consuming and impossible to outrun" (Conditt, 2020), it is the characters' representation and growth that are the most significant in this game.

In the case of trans (encompassing any gender identity differing from the sex assigned at birth, such as transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming) representation, Hobby Thach (2021) found four overarching trends in video games:

1. Dysphoria/physical transition: video games portraying trans bodies and trans minds through a "wrong-body" narrative.

2. Mentally ill killers: video games representing trans people as dangerous and/or unstable because of their transness.
3. Trans shock/reveal: video games showing transness to the in-game characters and/or audience through the revelation of unexpected gender markers.
4. Ambiguity: video games leaving out explicit information about gender identity for trans-coded characters. (20)

While the game narrative is not explicitly centred on trans perspectives, we must stress that Kasio is not presented in a stereotypical way. There is no dysphoria or physical transition depicted, no ambiguity regarding her gender and who she is, no shock treatment or sudden revelation, nor dangerousness or instability related to her. In fact, Kasio has already changed her appearance when she arrives in her hometown, and it does not seem to surprise anyone. The player does not see the family reaction but witnesses the interaction between Kasio and her friend Colum, as she declares her name (and at the same time her new identity). This does not seem to surprise Colum (see Fig. 8)—it is not even a topic addressed by the band members, except once (see Fig. 9)-or Maggy, who mentions it in a line or two in her diary and dialogues.

Fig. 8. Screenshot of *If Found...* When Colum meets Kasio for the first time since she left her hometown, he acknowledges the change she went through and her new name (computer screen capture)

Throughout the game, the player witnesses Kasio's suffering, which is not only related to her transness, but also to the incomprehension of the family regarding who she is: a graduate student living in a big city, far from her small hometown ways of living and thinking. Through the pages of the

diary, and especially with the letters addressed to Kasio, the player has access to the conflicting perspectives of the family and may infer from them the reasons as to why there is a building tension between Kasio and her family.

Fig. 9. Screenshot of *If Found...* While looking at the stars, Shans asks Kasio if she likes boys or girls and receives this answer before the topic of their discussion changes (computer screen capture).

Finally, Kasio's gender identity is an important aspect of the game, but so is the disclosure of her emotions and the transformation that occurs in her community. Eventually, her circle starts to change too: Shans reflects upon his place in this town and how he would like to be addressed (see Fig. 10); Maggy's perspective on being openly gay takes shape; and Brid, Kasio's mother, begins to accept her daughter for whom she is. Through her letters addressed to the protagonist, players know that Brid finally learns how to accept her *son's* strangeness by gradually letting *him* go, and using Kasio's name, and therefore, loving *her* as she is, even if she does not fully understand her transformation.

4.2. MAIN LUDIC MECHANICS

As rule systems, *Boyfriend Dungeon* and *If Found...* structure the player's experience through their interface and their mechanics. These systems are coded, both computationally and symbolically, to shape the player's experience, agency, and incorporation. Even when devoid of their narrative elements, the game mechanics, as semiotic tools, still produce meanings and fulfill purposes in the player's experience.

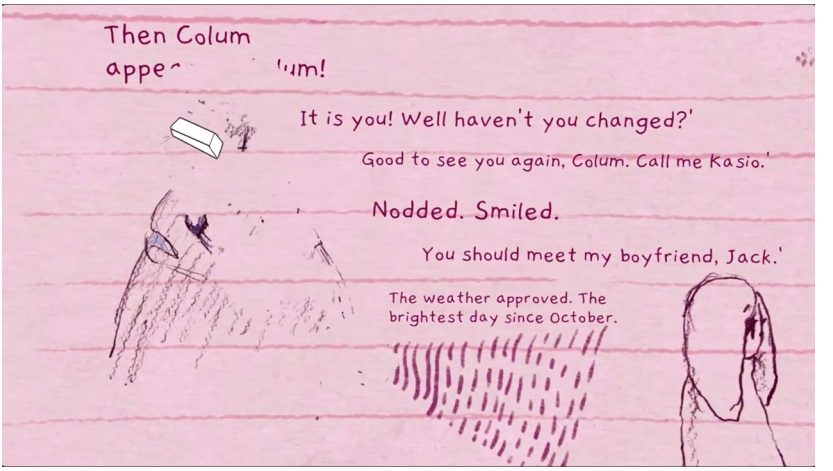

Fig. 10. Screenshot of *If Found...* where Kasio encourages Shans to use the name that feels the most natural for him, even though Ishaan is not his nicknames, nor his birth name (computer screen capture).

The system-gameplay dimension plays a crucial role in delivering the game's message and tone. From a queer perspective, gameplay can be seen as a coded and interpreted way to engage with the Others; the mechanical, physical interaction of the player is coded into the interface in specific ways, drawn from the gaming culture and the developers' culture. In the two games analyzed, we observe how the system-gameplay dimension is tied to the games' themes and efforts in representativeness.

4.2.1. *BOYFRIEND DUNGEON*

Boyfriend Dungeon discusses insecurities, fears, and social anxiety in an adult (dating) life. The player's character themself needs to address their own insecurities (fear of change and fear of intimacy) by entering and fighting the manifestation of their insecurities in "dunjs." Narrative and game designs blend in a curious, but powerful combination showcasing queer realities and perspectives.

Works covering themes of insecurities and of the Other's experiences must acknowledge the diversity of backgrounds and feelings potential consumers may have. Games may start with an opening statement—or a content warning—about the game's content, its themes, and its mechanics. To discuss insecurities and to open towards the representation of the Other called for such precautions to ensure the player's well-being. *Boyfriend Dungeon*'s opening message is as follows: "The game's story involves exposure to unwanted advances, stalking, and other forms of emotional manipulation.

Play with care" (Kitfox Games, 2021). While missing in the first version of the game[4], the message itself appears only briefly at the beginning. A few minutes later, another content warning appears for a specific character, that of "Mom": "This game sometimes sends you supportive text messages from a character named 'Mom.' Is that ok? If you answer 'No,' we will disable these messages" (Kitfox Games, 2021). The supportive text messages are wholesome, but excessively present, and aim to cheer the player's character up throughout the game (see Fig. 11). While providing comfort and empathy, the messages are redundant and devoid of impactful meaning since they are optional. At such, they only help to alleviate the game's theme, and may irritate some players.

Fig. 11. Screenshot of *Boyfriend Dungeon*. Text messages exchange with Mom. (Nintendo Switch screen capture)

The gameplay loop is divided between dating and fighting segments, and both are needed to develop the relations with the player's dates and acquire new skills (more damage to enemies, new special abilities, etc.). The interconnection between the dating and fighting aspects of the game ensures a coherent game experience, but the mechanics, by themselves, do not play a role in the representations of the characters and their identities. While allowing the players to date anyone, regardless of their sexual or

4 After the game has been criticized for the lack of content warning and the dissonance between the game's marketing ("a wholesome game") and the in-game content (harassment, threats, etc.), the content warning was included in a post-launch update. The exchange between critics and Kitfox Games has led to engaging discussions on how to address potential traumas in the gaming industry (see Sullivan, Stanfill and Salter, 2023).

gender identities, the game offers little to ponder on how interactivity can be used to develop further possibilities.

However, there are relevant systems at play in how dunjs are designed. To face their insecurities, the player's character must attack them with one of their dates. There is a reciprocal mechanism at play between the player and their dates: in navigating their social and dating life, the player helps their dates to confront their insecurities by interacting and discussing with them. In exchange, the same dates gain new powers when their own fears disappear; thus, they can help the player's character to confront their own fears, manifesting in the avatar's psyche, and must be literally beaten in order to progress. When entering a dunj for the first time, the player is being told that these places represent the subconscious of the person entering it; it is a place where "your own psychology will create monsters to fight" (Kitfox Games, 2021). For the protagonist, these monsters take on the forms of objects related to the fear of change (e.g., cellphones, radios, gramophones), and intimacy (e.g., lips, music notes, cocktail), and must be defeated to gain new items, but more importantly, to progress (see Fig. 12). The game's theme revolves around facing one's fears and insecurities, but there is a clear distinction between the fears of the protagonist and those of their dates.

Fig. 12. Screenshot of *Boyfriend Dungeon*. The avatar is fighting their insecurities in a dungeon, wielding one of their dates (from the developer's press kit).

On one hand, the player can help the "Others" through dialogues and interactions; they listen to their woes, and the goal is not to solve the problem for them, but to ensure they can solve it by themselves (i.e., to listen). On

the other hand, the player confronts, literally and metaphorically, their avatar's insecurities, with the help of their new relationships. In depicting differently how the player and the Other characters address their fears and insecurities, the game presents two different types of mechanics. While ensuring a diversity of mechanics, it also addresses the player's agency and incorporation in their own quests to confront their fears and help the Other characters. While the player should tackle their issues themselves with the help of their dates, they must not actively intervene in the lives of Others or act for them. Actively entering in the Other characters' lives would relay them to the role of background characters whose main purpose it to empower the player; in passively dialoguing with them, the player becomes a listener, a counsellor, and has much to gain from such passive, but important interrelations.

4.2.2. *IF FOUND…*

As stated in section 2.2, *If Found…*'s main mechanic is erasing Kasio's journal entries and drawings through the screen and the controls used to play. There is no "regular" gaming interface (e.g., status bar, menus, or pop-ups) and only the pages and thoughts of the protagonist are in full display. While the interaction may seem minimal, the mechanic of erasing the whole screen to progress or revealing a different picture with more colours becomes powerful when interconnected with the game narrative. In fact, it takes a particularly revealing meaning: at first glance, it can be assumed that the erasure represents Kasio's desire to disappear, due to her unhappiness and the argument she had with her family. As the story unfolds, the player can infer that those erasures took place before the black hole appeared and reflect the protagonist's reactions to the story itself. At that moment, the player acknowledges that they indeed "read" Kasio's present as she herself is erasing the entries in the decrepit house at the end of the game, right before burning the diary.

Furthermore, the player can see that Kasio has already reread her diary entries and "rewritten" them, with crossed-out excerpts, scribbled on her illustrations, and sketches in the margins, with her recent feelings (see Fig. 13). The interplay of superimposition that takes place in the diary before erasing entire pages is of particular interest from an interpretative perspective. Indeed, there is a first layer, namely the initial text, and then a second, made of Kasio's stripes and smears after rereading her diary.

To keep progressing, the player must erase the second layer and then gain access to the first, where the full story is told. While the mechanic is simple and the story remains clearly visible after erasing the multiple layers,

it is the interplay between the two dimensions (and the two mechanics—the layers and erasing) that might inspire the player to reflect on what really happened and how it was perceived by the protagonist.

Fig. 13. Screenshot of *If Found...* Pages from Kasio's diary, with crossing and scribbles (computer screen capture)

Another use of those mechanics which might have an impact on the player is when they must accumulate the layers (e.g., the dancing scene at the show). While erasing the journal entries may echo Kasio giving up on her situation until the final act, the idea of accumulating and saturating layers takes a particularly appropriate turn, especially when the black hole appears. Indeed, in the same way that the erasure mechanic adds scribbles during the show, the player must erase the house, the island, Ireland, the world and then space to reach Kasio's tumultuous feelings. During these moments, the erasure seems to take the form of added layers of colour, progressively larger, to eventually make a zoom-out to space effect until a multicoloured black hole appears. In a way, the player is actively creating the black hole and erasing Kasio from the game and filling it with all the harsh feelings and pressing words the protagonist heard. It is only when the screen becomes fully black that the writing mechanic appears, submerging the player (and the protagonist) in a multitude of "Everything's okay." At first, it seems as if Kasio is in full denial, saying "Everything's okay," as a call back from the first pages of her diary, but this new mechanic causes some changes, since the sentence is turned into Brid's (Kasio's mother) words, who cradles her (see comparison in Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Screenshots of *If Found...* On the left, when the writing mechanic appears and Kasio seems in denial; on the right, when the words become her mother's, with the same mechanic (computer screen capture).

Afterward, the erasing mechanic is fully replaced by the actions of writing or drawing using the cursor (or finger for the Nintendo Switch). While it can be seen as a way to merge the diverse tenses of the diary and the black hole story, it becomes a means to show the changes happening around Kasio. The game ends with epilogues for Kasio and her social circle, in which the player can make choices about each story, mostly about relationships, and "write" it in a new diary (see Fig. 15).

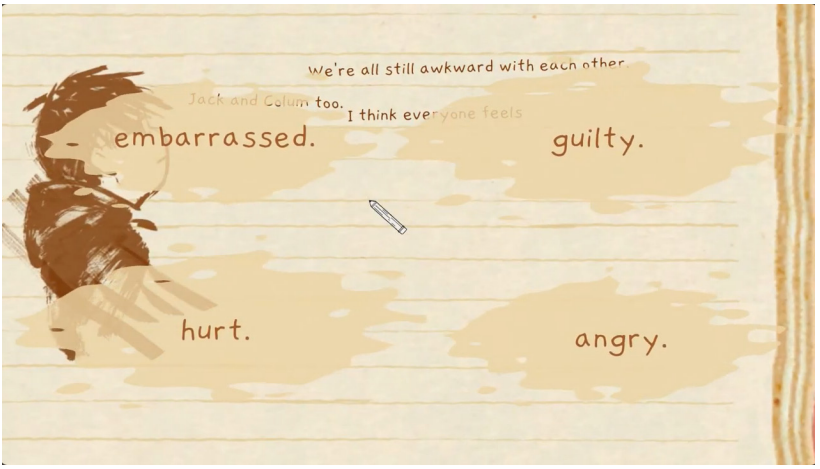

Fig. 15. Screenshots of *If Found...* Kasio writes in her new journal, and the player can choose how the protagonist feels and how she thinks everyone feels after the incident (computer screen capture).

It should be noted that the game initially did not have an epilogue; along with extra scenes and artworks, it was added to all versions of the game for the release on the Nintendo Switch (Conditt, 2020). *If Found...*'s developer Llaura McGee stated in an interview that her primary goal for the game was to get players to relate to the feelings conveyed by the story, and to acknowledge that expressing love for people is more important than fully

understanding them (McArthur, 2020), thus echoing the need to listen and support the Other.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude our exploratory paper, we would like to argue that queer games attempt to make players feel, through elements of affect and phenomenology, a queer experience, in addition to providing an opportunity to explore other ways of feeling, desiring, and being (Ruberg, 2019). Following Nakamura (2002), we argue that the appropriation of affect, which is telling players what they should feel when playing a video game, is not the same as "walking in someone else's shoes." As it was shown with *Boyfriend Dungeon* and *If Found...*, queer video games offer diverse stories and game mechanics. They play a role in finding ways to represent different communities and in raising awareness towards personal and social issues. They can be a space where the Other is met in a respectful and non-invasive way. Like Dreamfeel designer Laura McGee said about her game *Curtain* (2014), queer games emphasize what the player feels and brings to gameplay. They "give [the players] space. [...] By respecting player[s] as [peers], the creator/game is both close and distant, both listening and detached." (McGee cited in Pozo, 2018). It goes beyond the "understanding and sharing" (McGee cited in Pozo, 2018) promulgated by the rhetoric of empathy in video games. As Mattie Brice (2017) points out: "Play doesn't need systems or rules to exist and make sense; it needs honest engagement with context. Mainstream games completely dodge dealing with reality and don't allow people to actually be present. [...] we haven't gotten used to the idea that play is about confronting contexts, as empathy" (79). All kinds of play can take place in contexts that mean something to us. Following the results yielded by our two analyses, we showed that queer games mobilize both themes and mechanics to deliver their themes and messages. As such, further research could develop on methodologies to assess the similarities of play in a broader corpus of queer games or follow on the interplay between ludic and narrative elements that ensure the production of queer affects. Due to their emphasis on interactivity (and thus agency, incorporation, immersion), video games provide new grounds to ponder on the complexity of the perpetual tensions between the self and the Other and allow scholars and players alike to tackle these issues from new, and queer, perspectives.

Primary Corpus

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Kitfox Games. (2021). *Boyfriend Dungeon*. [Linux, macOS, Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 5, Xbox One]. Kitfox Games.

Secondary Corpus

Dreamfeel (2014). *Curtain*. [Linux, macOS, Microsoft Windows]. Dreamfeel.

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