

INTRO: On October 7th, 2019, I attended a seminar hosted by Dr. Adrienne Shaw on LGBTQ representation in video games. At the time, this issue was entirely unknown to me. I figured maybe I just hadn't played enough games to notice— turns out I have and what I learned shocked me. Now, most of you may not be a part of the LGBTQ community, but I am certain you know at least one person who is. No matter who you are, representation of identity is important for everyone, even in video games. Today, we will break down the main problem concerning LGBTQ representation in games, its inherent cause, and how we can change the situation.

PROBLEM: Over the course of history, video games have evolved not only in terms of their graphics and design but also their content and story. Despite all this progress, however, there is an astounding absence of LGBTQ representation in video games. Our primary concern driving this absence should be the massive lack of awareness on the subject. Now, there are two main factors behind this:

POINT 1: The first of these factors, as Dr. Shaw highlighted in her presentation, is explicit vs implicit content. The former, explicit content, can be defined as undeniable; it is clear and direct. The latter, implicit content is more subtle; it can require quite a bit of digging to uncover. According to the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, far more of the content within these games is implicit and therefore hidden from public eyes. Of course, there is far more to it than the explicit vs implicit notion of categorization.

POINT 2: In terms of the types of content, there are a few important statistics to consider. According to the archive, most content present in games consists of characters (about 71%?) and relationship options. Of that character majority, the three most common sexualities presented are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Furthermore, the top game genres with LGBTQ content are RPGs and adventure games. Finally, the top countries producing these games are The US and Japan, generally implicit. While there have been some wonderful developments, there are always more strides to be taken.

Now that we've covered the central problem, let's discuss the reasons why it occurs.

Unfortunately, due to social stigmatism, the beautiful and extensive history of LGBTQ gaming has been buried; the primary cause. According to the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, LGBTQ content has been present in video games since the early 80s. Even popular games such as Super Mario and Animal Crossing are included on this list, despite more implicit content.

POINT 1: One of the major components of its hidden history is the removal of resources. The Archive is based on fan labor; this means scouring sources such as fan wikis, Reddit, Tumblr,

YouTube, and more. In fact, according to Shaw on romchip.org, “each game takes from five to eighty hours to research and involves pulling together game wikis, walk-throughs, reviews, screenshots, videos, academic analyses, news coverage, blog posts, and when possible or necessary actual gameplay.” Clearly, creating the game archive was no simple task. Small localization changes have also been known to remove said content from games entirely.

POINT 2: Additionally, bad representation has played a part in this. When LGBTQ content is discovered in a game, it is not always introduced as a meaningful part of the game. For Dr. Shaw, this means that content is used only to be neglected or to further the main story without any real significance. According to romchip.org, there are also various historical gaps and disconnects, primarily the HIV/AIDS crisis, which throw off the rhythm of the research.

Now that we’ve taken a closer look into the components of the primary cause, let’s talk about the solution and the future.

Ultimately, the solution to this issue is publicity; the more people know about the importance of LGBTQ representation in video games, the more people will want to take action and spread the word further.

POINT 1: Dr. Shaw’s Work goes beyond the LGBTQ Game Archive; according to her website, adrienneshaw.com, she has also written a number of books (Gaming at the Edge) (Queer Game Studies) and more. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment besides her game archive is the Rainbow Arcade; “the world’s first exhibit of LGBTQ game history (Dec 2018-May 2019 in Berlin, Germany)” (www.adrienneshaw.com). Finding inspiration in her projects, the future looks bright. I hope for more books to be written, more exhibits to be held, and some amazing new games to be made.

Today we have discussed the main problem LGBTQ representation in video games faces, the reasons behind it, and solutions to the predicament. I hope that in learning more about this topic, you are encouraged to raise awareness of this vital cause. As an asexual, a gamer, and a friend to many members of the LGBTQ community, both the archive and catalogue have changed the way I look at video games. Far more than a hobby; these projects are the life’s work of Dr. Shaw and her team. I can only imagine how wonderful the future of LGBTQ representation in video games will become as a result. A whole new era of gaming continues to unfold as LGBTQ gamers unite across the globe through this amazing progress and I cannot wait to play.