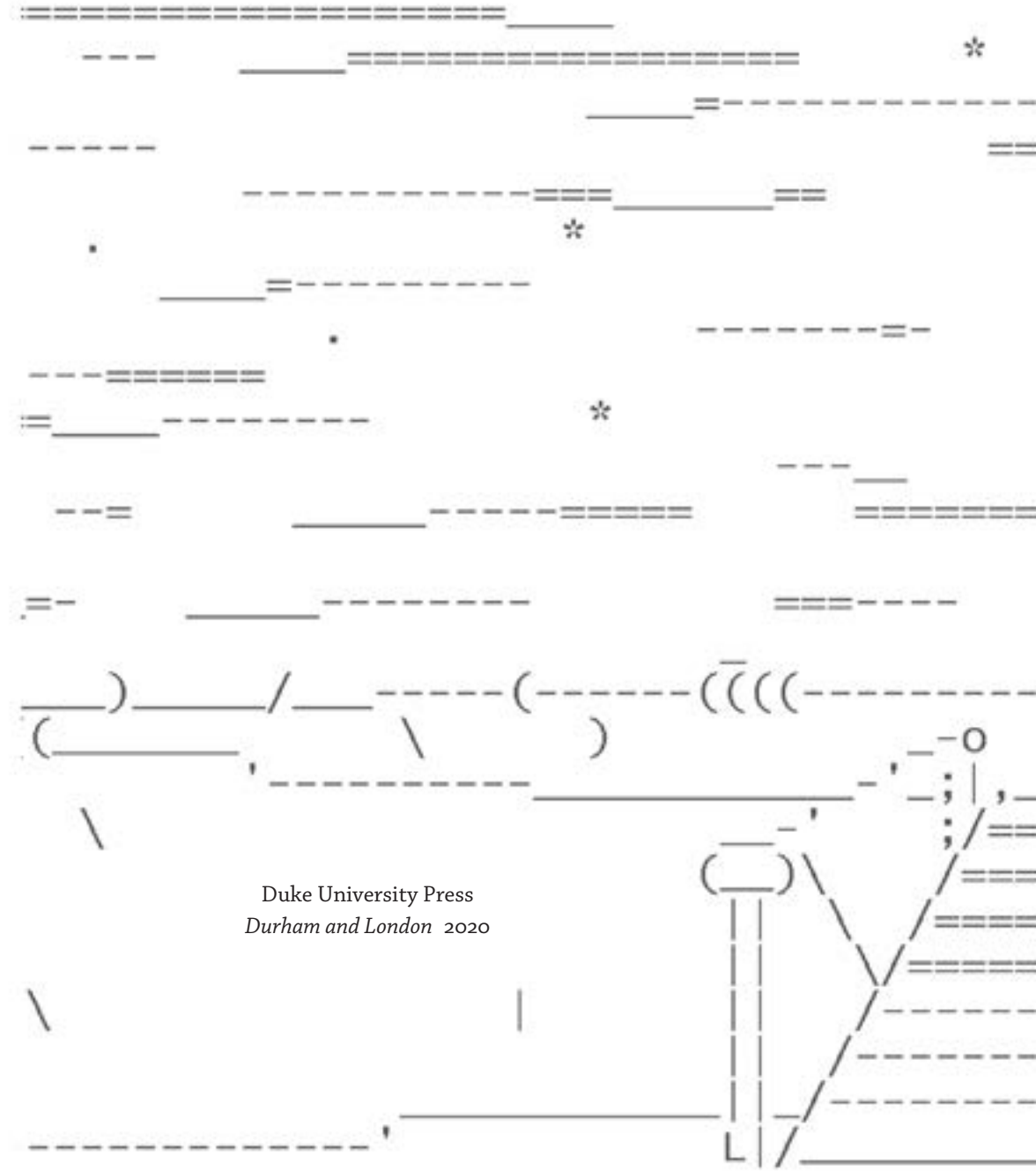
Bonnie Ruberg

# THE QUEER GAMES AVANT-GARDE

How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games

The Queer Games
Avant-Garde





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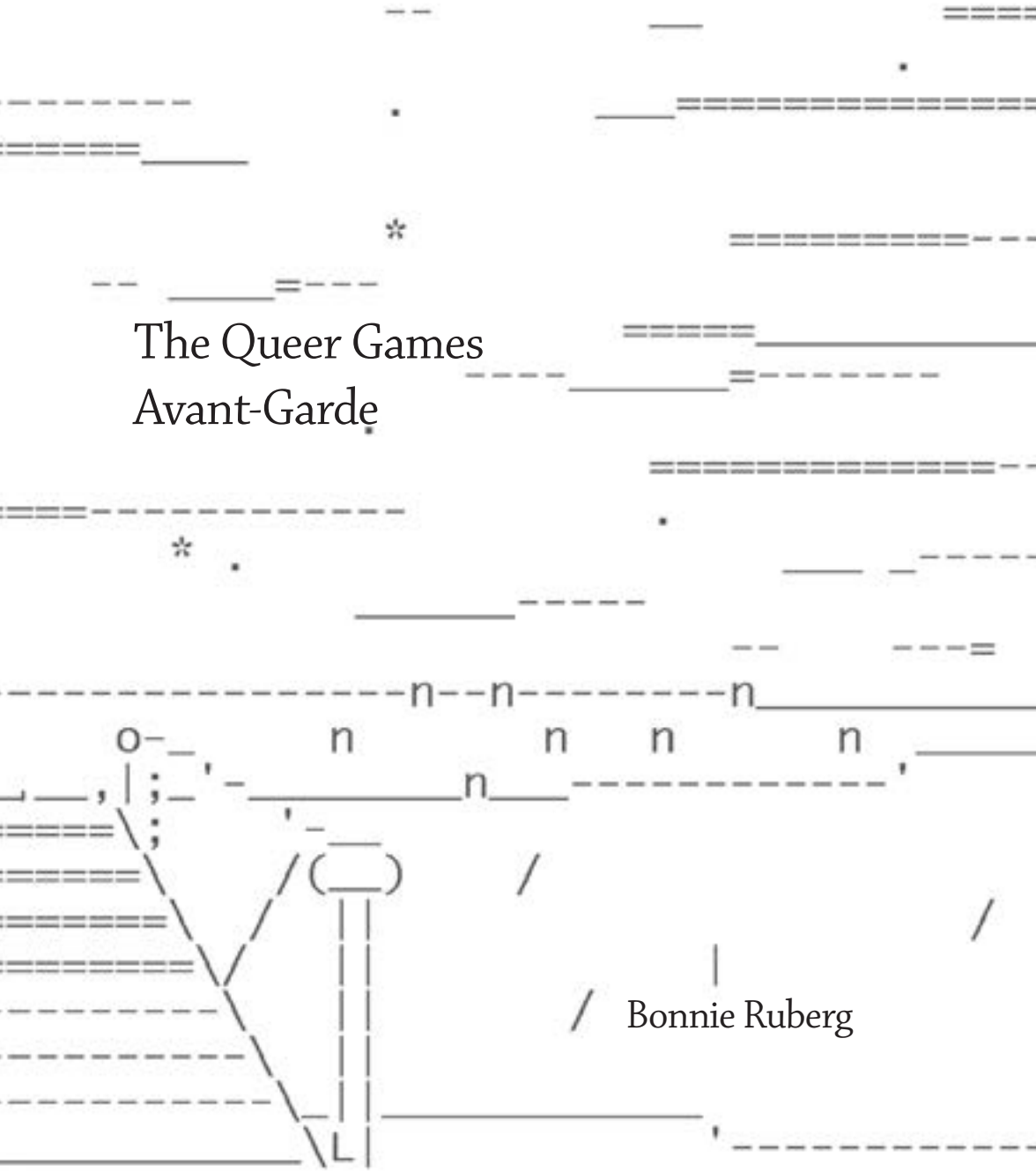

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# INTRODUCTION Reimagining the Medium of Video Games

Queer people are the avant-garde of video games because we're willing to do things other people aren't. . . . We take the work of disrupting systems farther than other people can. . . . I'm already asking, "What's the next thing that needs to be shaken up?" If you're really interested in queering games, you can never rest. —NAOMI CLARK

Traditional gamers thought indie games would destroy the medium, which didn't happen obviously—but, for this brief period, I was like, "I can destroy something? Great, I have this awesome destructive power!... I'm going to make something so avant-garde it will actually destroy the medium and there will be nothing left." —ANDI MCCLURE

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**The medium of video games** is currently undergoing a momentous shift, both artistically and politically—and, in many ways, it is queer, independent game makers who are leading that change. "At this moment, there's a renaissance taking place in games, in the breadth of genres and the range of emotional territory they cover," writes games researcher Katherine Isbister.[1] This renaissance is in large part driven by radical, experimental, vibrant, and deeply queer work from a wide-reaching and constantly evolving network of LGBTQ game makers: today's video game vanguard. These game makers are creating digital (and analog) games inspired by their own queer experiences. This is what I term the "queer games avant-garde," a "movement," loosely defined, that began in approximately 2012 and has continued for more than half a decade. Commonly, the games produced by the queer games avant-garde are scrappy and zine-like, to borrow a term from Anna Anthropy's prescient book *Rise of the Videogame*


Fig I.1 :::: *Dys4ia* (2012) by Anna Anthropy, arguably the best-known video game from the queer games avant-garde

*Zinesters*, a source of inspiration for many contemporary queer game makers.[2] These are "indie" games, developed largely outside of the traditional funding and publishing structures of the games industry. Though games like Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012) (see figure I.1) are among the best-known (and indeed most influential) examples of work from the queer games avant-garde, there are dozens if not hundreds of active queer game makers currently creating queer indie games. The number of games they have developed is growing every day.

The cultural landscape in which the queer games avant-garde is staging its intervention is a turbulent one. Described by some as the most influential media form of the twenty-first century, video games are played by billions around the globe each year and have a profound potential to impact how players view themselves and the world around them.[3] Yet, despite the fact that women, queer people, people of color, and others who are often perceived as "different" have been playing and making video games for decades, games and the cultures that surround them have a long history of underrepresenting, misrepresenting, and at times fostering open hostility toward those who do not fit the image of the white, straight, cisgender, male "gamer."[4] This tension between video games as

a progressive and a reactionary medium has culminated, in recent years, in the outbreak of online harassment campaigns against "social justice warriors," such as #GamerGate.[5] Despite this backlash, however, video games are indeed becoming more "diverse." Increasingly, the AAA video game industry, which produces widely popular games with multimillion-dollar budgets, has demonstrated efforts toward greater inclusion in the form of increased LGBTQ representation—for instance, in the popular competitive titles *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) and *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009).[6] While many LGBTQ players have celebrated these gestures toward inclusivity, others remain rightly wary of corporate attempts to cater to non-straight, non-cisgender players: such attempts typically operate under the neoliberal logic that "diverse" players constitute an untapped consumer market and that increasing diverse representation will also increase profits.[7] However, queerness is coming to video games in many more ways than one. As the mainstream games industry takes its slow steps forward, the queer games avant-garde—this rising tide of indie games being developed *by*, *about*, and often *for* LGBTQ people—is laying its own claim to the medium for people who have traditionally been made to feel unwelcome, invisible, or even unsafe in games.

Though the games emerging from the queer games avant-garde share a commitment to engaging with queer perspectives, these games are also as varied as the individuals who create them. Some games manifest their queerness through the inclusion of LGBTQ characters, such as Dietrich Squinkifer's *Dominique Pamplemousse in "It's All Over When the Fat Lady Sings!"* (2013) (figure I.2). Others explore queerness in a more conceptual register, playing with embodiment, desire, and intimacy by subverting the standard rules of game design—for instance, Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt's *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (2014). The work of the queer games avant-garde represents far more than video games as we already know them with a rainbow veneer.[8] These are games that disrupt the status quo, enact resistance, and use play to explore new ways of inhabiting difference. Queerness and video games share a common ethos, a longing to explore alternative ways of being.[9] This is nowhere more apparent than in the work of the queer games avant-garde.

Though queer indie games are quickly gaining visibility in North America and beyond, there are still some who would dismiss this work as "niche." Much to the contrary, by demonstrating how games can be a powerful medium for expressing and complicating experiences of identity, the queer games avant-garde is paving the way for artists from a wide range of


Fig I.2 :::: *Dominique Pamplemousse in "It's All Over When the Fat Lady Sings!"* (2013) by Dietrich Squinkifer, an example of a video game that includes LGBTQ characters

marginalized subject positions to make their voices heard in and through games. The growth of the queer games avant-garde also has notable implications for contemporary queer art-making beyond video games. These games sit at the avant-garde of interactive media as well as at the avant-garde of games. They are regularly shown in galleries and other fine arts spaces; they are also increasingly moving into settings associated with the performing arts. In this way, the queer games avant-garde is pushing the boundaries of how queerness is presented in digital and playful media art more broadly. Whether we see the effects of the queer games avant-garde as a sea change or a landslide, whether we are interested in making video games "better" or simply queerer, this much is true: following the work of the queer games avant-garde, the cultural and artistic landscape of games will never be the same.

This book is structured around a collection of twenty original interviews with twenty-two artists and activists contributing (or working adjacent) to the queer games avant-garde. Rather than approaching queer game-making through the lens of academic analysis, this project foregrounds the voices of queer game makers themselves. Most often, when they have been featured in new reports and other writing, these artists

and their work have been referenced in order to tell overly simplified, "uplifting," and often tokenizing stories about how LGBTQ issues in video games are "getting better." By contrast, the stories presented in these interviews are those that queer game makers tell about *themselves*—their own lives, their inspirations, the challenges they face, and the ways that they understand their places within the wider terrain of video games. These artists speak with insight and candor about their creative practices, as well as their politics and their passions. Their perspectives and opinions vary widely. What emerges across these interviews, however, is a web of related themes, productive tensions, and multiple visions for how queerness can reimagine the future of video games.

## LGBTQ ISSUES AND VIDEO GAMES: IMAGINING OTHERWISE

To understand what makes the rise of the queer games avant-garde so significant, it is crucial to understand the historical and cultural context around LGBTQ issues and video games that surrounds this work. From the release of the first commercial video games in the 1970s to the present, the relationships between gender, sexuality, and notions of legitimacy (that is, who gets to count as a "real" gamer or a "real" game maker and what gets to count as a "real" game) have been fraught, especially for women and other subjects pushed to the fringes of game cultures, as historians such as Carly Kocurek have noted.[10] Over the past four decades, LGBTQ characters in video games have been conspicuously scarce—though scholars like Adrienne Shaw are currently in the process of documenting the presence of these characters across games history, complicating the often-repeated myth that LGBTQ game characters did not exist until recent years.[11] Still, video games' track record of representing queer identities has left much to be desired. Prominent early examples of queer characters in video games, like the transgender dinosaur Birdo first introduced in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988), have typically been reductive or outright offensive. In more recent years, as mentioned, AAA game companies have begun introducing more and "better" LGBTQ characters and romance options into their games.[12] Popular titles with LGBTQ content include, for instance, the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007–2012) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014). Indeed, the topic of "diversity" in games has been given a growing spotlight, with inclusivity funding initiatives from companies like Intel, numerous media reports on women in gaming, and an "advo-

cacy" track at the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC). The extent to which these corporate efforts, with their questionable motives and arguably conservative identity politics (to draw from Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher's writing on the "post-feminism" of initiatives designed to bring more women into the games industry), are enacting systemic change is debatable at best, however.[13] Homophobia and anti-LGBTQ sentiment continue to be rampant and well-documented concerns within the games industry and reactionary sectors of games cultures.[14] Many of the queer game makers profiled here have been among the primary targets of #GamerGate.

The problems of underrepresentation and discrimination in video games are by no means limited to queer and transgender identities. Such issues are fundamentally intersectional. They also deeply affect people of color, for example, as scholars of games and critical race like Kishonna L. Gray, Soraya Murray, Lisa Nakamura, and David J. Leonard have demonstrated.[15] This larger system of marginalization and oppression emerges from what Janine Fron et al. have called the "hegemony of play," an "entrenched status quo" that pervades the games industry and the cultures around it and which dictates what video games should look like and whom they should be made for.[16] In addition, the issues that surround LGBTQ representation and experiences in video games are inextricable from the broader political situation today, both in America and internationally. Video games are far more than a mere entertainment medium; like all forms of cultural production, they reflect and react to the society around them.[17] It is no coincidence that the rise of the queer games avant-garde is taking place alongside the rise of the alt-right or the election and governance of a president who is unapologetic in his racist, sexist, antigay, antitrans agenda. As these interviews demonstrate, the contributors to the queer games avant-garde are acutely aware of the political backdrop to their work. For many of those whose voices are featured here, simply making video games as queer people is a political act. Given the deeply entrenched biases found in video games and the dangers of the current political situation, simply by making games as queer people these creators are engaged in fundamentally radical work.

Luckily, the artists of the queer games avant-garde are not alone in insisting on the value of bringing queerness to video games. The network of game makers profiled here operates alongside other, related queer games networks from areas of academia and community organizing. Queer game studies is a burgeoning scholarly paradigm, led by schol-

ars such as Edmond Chang, Todd Harper, Josef Nguyen, Amanda Phillips, Adrienne Shaw, and many more. Like the queer games avant-garde, queer game studies represents a vanguard, pushing game studies toward a more meaningful engagement with identity and social justice.[18] Many of the game makers contributing to the queer games avant-garde are hybrid artists-academics themselves, and it is common to see collaborations between those who develop queer indie games and queer game studies researchers. These interdisciplinary, inter-industry dialogues are exemplified by the annual Queerness and Games Conference, an event that combines theory and practice and which, along with similar events like the Different Games conference, has become a hub for sharing, discussing, and building community around the production of queer games.[19] Player-oriented expos like GaymerX are also creating supportive spaces for LGBTQ players to express themselves as "gaymers." In the past few years, a handful of indie video games that notably foreground queer representation have even achieved widespread popularity and/or recognition. Some of these include Game Grumps's *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017) (figure I.3), Toby Fox's *Undertale* (2015), and Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016) (figure I.4). As the queer games avant-garde grows, so does the diverse ecosystem of thinkers, commentators, and players committed to exploring queerness in video games.

At the same time, with increased reach and visibility come new challenges for the queer games avant-garde. As the number of queer indie video games continues to grow, so too do the number of people who play them, creating more room for differences of opinion even among LGBTQ players. For instance, queer game maker Aevee Bee's latest visual novel, *Heaven Will Be Mine* (2018) (figure I.5), recently drew (largely unwarranted) criticism sparked by a much-liked tweet from a queer-identified player who asked, "Can we please have more queer games that aren't visual novels?"[20] In addition, as queer games are increasingly being sold through mainstream distribution platforms, they become susceptible to the often discriminatory whims of corporations. In the summer of 2018, for example, the online game retailer Steam quietly and abruptly erased its "LGBT" tag, making queer games harder for potential players to find and the presence of LGBTQ content on the platform less visible.[21]

To what extent are today's queer indie video games bringing change to the games industry, games culture, and the shifting history of LGBTQ issues in games? How can we understand the forces of influence through which progress comes to the mainstream? Should the purpose of queer


Fig I.3 :::: *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017), a widely popular queer video game developed by the studio Game Grumps


Fig I.4 :::: Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016), which has earned recognitions like the 2017 Excellence in Narrative Award from the Independent Games Festival


Fig I.5 :::: The 2018 queer visual novel from Aevee Bee and Mia Schwartz, *Heaven Will Be Mine*

indie game-making even *be* to make the broader medium of video games "better," or does that narrative instrumentalize queer art and queer artists, reducing the transgressive potential of their work by making them agents of "diversity" and potentially exploiting their already precarious labor? These are questions that cross many of the interviews found here, and they have no easy answers. Different contributors to the queer games avant-garde understand their roles, the messages behind their work, and the value of speaking from the margins in very different terms. For example, game designer Naomi Clark states in her interview:

> Queer games have already changed the medium of video games quite a bit. [However,] like any process of cultural recuperation, a lot of what is unique about queer games is already being reintegrated into the various parts of the game industry, all the way up to AAA game makers who are not queer themselves. Historically, that's been true of things like queer photography or queer Riot Grrrl punk music. They went on to influence plenty of people who were not queer because they changed how people thought about a medium. That is what is most valuable to me about queer games. Their impact is already rippling back and affecting how games are made today, even in the most traditional parts of the industry.

While the future of video games is still uncertain, the rise of the queer games avant-garde suggests that we are standing at a pivotal point in which, as Clark says, queerness is changing the very ways we think about the medium. Through their work, the contributors to the queer games avant-garde are inviting players to reconsider what the relationship between sexuality, gender, identity, and games can be, to look past long-established standards of gameplay and entrenched norms of discrimination, and instead to imagine video games as spaces for (in the words of queer theorist Jack Halberstam) "living life otherwise."[22]

## WHAT IS THE QUEER GAMES AVANT-GARDE?

*Curtain*, a 2014 game from Llaura McGee, bears little resemblance to the action-packed adventure games and sprawling online worlds that come to mind for many people when they imagine video games. McGee's game is a reflection on an abusive relationship between two young women, Ally and Kaci—punk rockers on the rise in Scotland's music scene. Yet, unlike so-called "serious games" or "games for change," which are often didactic and heavy-handed, *Curtain* and many other works that emerge from the queer games avant-garde are not primarily designed to educate or elicit empathy.[23] Instead, *Curtain* invites players to spend time inside an emotionally complex situation, one which is queer both in its narrative content and its interactive form. While the player explores the women's apartment from the first-person perspective of Ally, a constant stream of commentary from the absent Kaci fills up the screen: the voice of Ally's abuser, which she hears in her head. The game is colorful and shimmering but so highly pixelated that even the most mundane features of the apartment (like a guitar or a napping house cat) become disorienting and strange (figure I.6). In *Curtain*, the passage of time is represented by a magical-realist hallway that appears in the back of the shower. By walking through it, the player enters the future, where Kaci's words continue to haunt Ally long after their relationship has ended. Though *Curtain* draws from McGee's own history, it intentionally refuses to offer the player a direct or immediately comprehensible depiction of her experiences.

McGee's *Curtain* is one of numerous examples of the video games being produced by the queer games avant-garde. Those who are familiar with queer indie games have usually heard of artists like Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, merritt k, Christine Love, Porpentine, and Robert Yang. These game makers have been instrumental in exploring how queerness can be


Fig I.6 :::: *Curtain*, a 2014 game from Llaura McGee (DREAMFEEL) that uses pixelated aesthetics to disorient the player

expressed through games and in bringing queer indie games to a wider audience. Yet their work, while foundational and compelling, represents only a selection of the queer games being developed today. Queer game makers are producing their art across a variety of genres, from story-driven games to platformers, from unstructured play experiences to games made entirely of interactive text—such as Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive* (2014). These games are most often made by individuals or small teams. Typically, they are inexpensive to purchase or free to download (though compensating queer game makers and other marginalized artists whenever possible is crucial). Often, the increased availability of so-called accessible game-making software, such as Twine and GameMaker, is credited for driving the rise of queer indie game-making, though the interviewees in this volume productively challenge this narrative of technical accessibility.[24] Queer indie game makers build games for virtual reality, for mobile phones, and for multi-interface art installations, to name just a few platforms. This book focuses primarily on digital game makers, but non-digital game design—such as tabletop and role-playing games—is also an important part of the queer games avant-garde.[25]

Though the scale and impact of the queer games avant-garde makes it exceptional in the history of video games, precursors to today's queer

indie game-making can be found going back nearly four decades. Graeme Kirkpatrick has documented the game-making practices of "bedroom coders" in the early 1980s in the United Kingdom, for example.[26] Melanie Swalwell has looked at a similar early "home coding" phenomenon in New Zealand. While this coding was largely done by straight, cisgender creators, its "do-it-yourself" quality does resonate with the work of queer game makers, who create video games not with large AAA teams but individually or with a handful of collaborators. Swalwell also describes the development of video games by early home coders as "a highly experimental practice" that "presaged many of the contemporary practices involved in digital culture," such as "appropriation, modification, and remixing."[27] In Czechoslovakia, as Jaroslav Švelch has demonstrated, "homebrew" communities used the Sinclair ZX Spectrum console to create expressive games that were, in their own way, resistant to dominant political power.[28] Anne-Marie Schleiner has argued that 1990s "KiSS" dolls, digitized and user-edited versions of the paper dolls found on the back of manga, can be understood as a "queer, edgy, erotic . . . adult game."[29] Experimentation with the handcrafted, gendered art style seen in work by queer games avant-garde contributors Kara Stone and Llaura McGee has a predecessor in the aesthetics of Theresa Duncan's mid-1990s games for girls, like *Chop Suey* (1995) (figure I.7).

Who are these game makers? More so than in any other area of video game development today, the queer games avant-garde has an overwhelming representation of women, nonbinary people, and transgender people—with a notable presence of trans women. The majority of contributors to the queer games avant-garde are white, but there are also many artists of color working in this field, including eight of the game makers interviewed here. Most of these artists are based in America or Canada, but queer indie game-making is also taking root internationally. In the early days of the queer games avant-garde, roughly between 2012 and 2014, an important "scene" existed in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it later disbanded, and today New York, Montréal, and Toronto are all important hubs for the work of the queer games avant-garde.[30] With a few important exceptions, the artists contributing to the queer games avant-garde are in their twenties and thirties. Though each queer game maker brings a unique background to their work, a number of those interviewed for this project grew up in geographically or socially isolated environments; they found connection to the "outside world" and to queer community through games. The relationship between the queer games avant-garde and aca-


Fig I.7 :::: Theresa Duncan's 1995 *Chop Suey*, predecessor to the handcrafted aesthetics found in the queer games avant-garde

demia is a complicated one, and while some of these artists are employed at universities or currently completing PhD programs, a number of others chose not to finish their undergraduate degrees. Among their commonalities, contributors to the queer games avant-garde often have strong creative skills in a variety of areas, and many bring previous experience in theater, writing, visual art, or music to their work on games.

The socioeconomic realities and undervalued labors of indie game-making are issues that are too rarely addressed. As Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux have argued, the dominant discourse around "indie" games valorizes the work of game-making only when it "pays off."[31] For the artists interviewed here, creating indie games and the community networks that support them also requires forms of labor that are rarely compensated, are highly gendered, and remain largely invisible, such as emotional labor.[32] Even as queer games inspire change in the mainstream industry, which in turn reaps financial benefits, queer indie game-making itself remains precarious. The artists who contribute to the queer games avant-garde support themselves in a variety of ways, from working full-time jobs at tech companies to relying on crowdfunding and Patreon ac-

counts. In many of these interviews, game makers speak frankly about their experiences with financial hardship and homelessness, as well as their frustrations with the expectation that they should tailor their work so that it changes the hearts and minds of straight consumers. As these interviewees point out, we need to continue to ask: who benefits monetarily from the ways that queer indie games are shifting the medium? In this way, the work of the queer games avant-garde could also be placed in dialogue with other forms of precarious digital labor, much of it similarly performed by women, people of color, and otherwise marginalized subjects whose undercompensated work has driven technological "progress."[33]

It is tempting to call this wave of queer games and their creators a "movement." However, this term raises mixed feelings for the participants in the queer games avant-garde themselves. There is no one, singular group of game makers who are creating queer games today, nor is there one vision of queerness and games that is shared among these creators. It is preferable to imagine the queer games avant-garde as a network or a series of interlocking constellations. Some of the artists interviewed here are actively in dialogue with one another, while others have their primary community ties elsewhere. After the initial #GamerGate attacks, some contributors to the queer games avant-garde chose to stop making video games. At the same time, more and more creators are coming to this work regularly. In truth, the queer games avant-garde is not one entity but multiple, interrelated creative practices. Yet there is still value in thinking of this work as a "movement," at least in one sense. Even in moments when queer game makers feel their own differences keenly, together they represent a force that cannot and should not be ignored. There is strength in numbers, and the sheer number of queer game makers creating work in this area makes the growing prominence of the LGBTQ presence in video games undeniable in its importance.

## WHY QUEER INDIE VIDEO GAMES AS AN AVANT-GARDE?

Of all the ways to characterize the contemporary wave of queer indie gamemaking, why call it an "avant-garde"? Doing so has the potential to make a powerful statement, but it also calls for critical self-reflection. Most commonly applied to forms of artistic production such as literature, music, film, and the visual fine arts, avant-gardism has been widely theorized in classic works like Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real*.[34] Indeed, precedents for contemporary queer indie

game-making can be found outside of the realm of video games in earlier avant-gardes whose contributors, while working in non-digital media, were similarly interested in playfulness and games. Today's queer game-making shares an investment in the subversive potential of play with movements like Dada and Surrealism, for example.[35] It also brings to mind the Situationist manifesto, which "[calls] upon the revolutionary potential of play, for the 'invention of games of an essentially new type'" in order to "bring about the future reign of freedom and play."[36] The queer games avant-garde could also be seen as part of a lineage of experimental games like those created in the 1960s and 1970s by the Fluxus group, or perhaps as a reengagement with the social critiques found in the 1970s New Games movement, or even as a return to the spirit of game design as counterhegemonic, anticapitalist political statement exemplified by Elizabeth Magie's 1924 board game The Landlord's Game.[37] While there are many echoes between these earlier moments and the queer games avant-garde, the queer indie games discussed in this book also bring something new and crucial to avant-garde game-making. They bring queerness: queer identities, queer politics, queer joy, queer pain, queer resistance, queer worlds of play.

Importantly, the contributors to the queer games avant-garde *see themselves* as building from existing avant-garde traditions. Though not all, many of these game makers used the term "avant-garde" to describe their own work. A number of the game makers interviewed, including Mattie Brice, Kara Stone, Tonia B******, and Emilia Yang, cite feminist performance artists like Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović among their inspirations. Embodiment, vulnerability, and the reclamation of the female body (or, in the case of these game makers, often the queer and/or trans body) emerge as key themes that echo across past avant-gardes. Among the additional avant-garde artists that the interviewees profiled here point toward are musical composers like John Cage (Andi McClure), literary authors like Virginia Woolf and J. D. Salinger (Robert Yang and Aevee Bee), beatnik poets like Allen Ginsberg (Nina Freeman), and directors of nontraditional narrative cinema from the Iranian New Wave (Dietrich Squinkifer).

To call queer indie game-making an avant-garde is also to raise debates around video games and the ontologies of art. If queer games are an avant-garde, then video games must be an art form. For those who approach games as a medium of cultural production, this may seem like an obvious statement, but the question of whether video games should be considered art has a long and rocky history.[38] The work of the queer games

avant-garde itself occupies a liminal space between the video game and art worlds, raising questions about how this work is situated and how it is received. Queer indie games, while undoubtedly the products of art-making, fall outside of what was termed in the 1990s "game art," for example. In a 2018 presentation titled "20 Years of Game Art: Reflections, Transformations, and New Directions," Eddo Stern noted that past game artists were not interested in gameplay or the "practice or craft of making games."[39] By contrast, the "younger" (Stern's term) artistic game makers of today make playable games and, I would add, are deeply invested in game-making as a practice. The network of contributors to the queer games avant-garde is also notably more diverse, especially in regard to gender and sexual identity, than the "game art" movement. Perhaps the biggest difference, however, is that today's queer indie games are primarily created not to exist in galleries but to be widely purchased, shared, and played. This is part of the politics of inclusion. Wide distribution is what gives players of a wide range of backgrounds access to queer games.

Admittedly, claiming the term "avant-garde" for queer indie game-making is a way to argue for the legitimacy of this work. This legitimacy, however, has the potential to directly benefit marginalized creators by giving them access to material resources and support from established cultural institutions. If queer indie game-making is an art form, then queer indie game makers deserve to be the recipients of artists' grants, residencies, and other opportunities. At the same time, this strategic bid for legitimacy must proceed with caution. I think most of the game makers interviewed here would agree when I say that the queer games avant-garde, taken as a whole, is not interested in seeking approval from the art world for its own sake. Yet this approval is one potential tool for supporting queer creators and their subversive work.

What does an avant-garde look like for video games and how does the work of queer indie game-making embody that avant-garde? Game studies scholars Mary Flanagan, Brian Schrank, John Sharp, and Alexander Galloway are among those who have theorized the notion of a video games avant-garde—though it is notable that queerness, gender, and sexuality are topics that rarely appear in their texts (with the exception of Flanagan's work). In his 2006 essay "Countergaming," Galloway describes what he sees as a (then) unrealized potential for an "independent gaming movement" that, rather than replicating the existing structures of the medium, will "redefine play itself and thereby [realize] its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde."[40] Today's queer indie video games, I believe,

do realize that potential. In addition to representing LGBTQ identities and experiences, they disrupt the accepted formalist and aesthetic qualities of the medium—scrambling graphics, rejecting win states, and suggesting vulnerable, tangible modes of interaction with machines that are at once "political," "cultural," and deeply queer. Mary Flanagan writes in *Critical Play* (2009) that avant-garde games "rework contemporary, popular game practices to propose an alternative, or 'radical,' game design." Such games, Flanagan continues, are "designed for artistic, political and social critique or intervention, in order to propose ways of understanding larger cultural issues as well as the games themselves." In this way, avant-garde games offer a "careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes."[41] The work emerging from the queer games avant-garde does just this. It speaks to pressing social issues by drawing from the personal in order to intervene on the level of culture.

Though contemporary queer indie games are conspicuously absent from these later works, more recent writing by Brian Schrank and John Sharp describes avant-garde video games in language that likewise seems tailor-made for the queer games avant-garde. In his 2014 *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*, Schrank states his vision of avant-gardeness for video games in this way:

> The avant-garde challenges or leads culture. The avant-garde opens up and redefines art mediums. . . . Avant-garde games are distinguished from mainstream ones because they show how the medium can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how we make, think, and play with games. The avant-garde democratizes games, and makes the medium more plastic and liquid.[42]

The queer indie game makers interviewed in this book challenge and lead culture. They are setting new precedents for inclusive representation and destabilizing accepted paradigms for how and by whom games should be designed and played. In this way, echoing Schrank's description, their work "manifest[s] a greater diversity of gameplay" and models how games can "be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people." In their interviews, a number of these game makers, such as Avery Alder, Andi McClure, and Liz Ryerson, describe how their creative work is driven by a desire to upend traditional notions of gameplay—making manifest, as Schrank writes, the drive toward "breaking apart and expanding how

we make, think, and play with games." While the focus of John Sharp's 2015 *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* is the relationship between games and art, rather than avant-gardism per se, Sharp's notion of "artgames" offers another productive parallel to the work of the queer games avant-garde. "Artgames [use] the innate properties of games . . . to create revealing and reflective play experiences," writes Sharp.[43] Indeed, like the creators of "artgames," the contributors to the queer games avant-garde use the properties of games as the raw material from which to build play experiences that reflect on culture and identity.

In challenging existing standards of the medium, the queer games avant-garde demonstrates how formalistic experimentation is inextricable from the social meaning of games. Each of the game makers whose voice is included in this volume approaches the work of reimagining the medium in different ways. Nicky Case, for example, erases the "magic circle" by creating playful experiences that directly interface with real-world politics. Says Andi McClure of her work with algorithms and glitches, "Personally, I'm not interested in games themselves. . . . I [make] stuff that reject[s] what a game [is] supposed to be." These discussions about the nature of games and play are far from purely theoretical, however. Arguments about what does or does not count as a video game have been widely used in reactionary sectors of games culture as a thinly veiled excuse to discriminate against games created by and about women, LGBTQ people, people of color, and non-neurotypical people.[44] In short, the stakes of the queer games avant-garde as an avant-garde—that is, as an opportunity to "redefine the medium," in Schrank's terms—are surprisingly high. There are many people who play or even develop mainstream video games who would still dismiss queer games as insignificant: not technically complex enough, not challenging enough (though challenge comes in many forms), too wrapped up in "identity politics."[45] Avant-gardes may start small or initially seem niche, but they have large impacts, and their influence reverberates for artistic generations to come. Laying claim to the title of the "queer games avant-garde" is itself a political act.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE QUEER GAMES AVANT-GARDE: MESSY, POLITICAL, INTERSECTIONAL

A number of recurring themes and questions can be traced across the interviews in this volume. While each of the artists profiled here brings their own perspective to queer indie game-making, their stories suggest

a set of shared interests. Together, they point toward a picture of contemporary queer indie game-making as enacting cultural critique through artistic expression. The work of the queer games avant-garde is, by nature, a hybrid creative-critical practice, informed at times by queer and feminist theory and at other times by concepts of queerness that emerge directly from the body. Among the most prominent characteristics that emerge from these interviews are the following.

*The queer games avant-garde explores queerness beyond representation.* The popular discourse that surrounds "diversity" and video games often focuses on increasing the on-screen representation of marginalized people.[46] However, many of the artists in the queer games avant-garde are committed to thinking beyond surface-level inclusion. These game makers move beyond representation into the mechanics, aesthetics, interfaces, and development practices of games, asking, "How can these be queered?" Some of these designers are accomplishing this through what Avery Alder describes as "structural queerness." Others, like Kara Stone, draw inspiration from queer theory. Still others challenge representation itself, like Kat Jones in her game *Glitter Pits* (2016). In some instances, the "beyond" in queerness beyond representation takes on a different meaning, as in the postapocalyptic work of Heather Flowers, which places players in a time beyond time: a queer future that emerges after the heteronormative world has fallen away. There is no one answer as to what queerness beyond representation looks like for queer indie game makers. The power of these alternative visions lies in their multiplicity.

*The queer games avant-garde makes identity messy.* It might seem that an interest in "identity" would be a common denominator for the contributors to the queer games avant-garde. Indeed, queer, trans, and intersectional identities and the communities that form around them are often explored in these games. However, many of the game makers interviewed here also challenge simplistic notions of identity. Aevee Bee, for example, argues against understanding identity as a series of boxes to check; Andi McClure rejects identity entirely by representing only abstractions in her games. Those game makers who remain invested in identity often complicate the idea that a queer artist should represent their own experiences through their games and that a straight player who picks up their game can or should identify with them. The ways in which these queer indie games represent identity is often less direct. Elizabeth Sampat's *Deadbolt* (2012) seems at first unrelated to Sampat's own queer identity, yet she un-

derstands it as queer because she is a queer person. These game makers also bring into question what queerness itself means. Some describe it as a mode of desire, others as a mode of connection, still others as a call to social action. Yet even as many of these artists reject the expectation that they should make autobiographical or confessional work, most describe their games as highly "personal."

*The queer games avant-garde is interested in how games feel.* These game makers explore affect, embodiment, experience, and intimacy. Traditionally, the discourse around innovation in video games has focused on the formalist aspects of games: their rules, their systems, and their mechanics.[47] While systems also interest many of these artists, the queer indie game makers interviewed here are deeply invested in recentering feeling and the experiences of the body. Many of these artists combine digital games with material elements to create installations that literally reach out and touch the player—or which the players themselves touch, as in the soft tactile interfaces created by Jess Marcotte. Other games reimagine the role that affect can play in the formalistic tropes of gameplay, such as in Mo Cohen's *Queer Quest* (in production), where grief becomes an object that the player collects and carries with them. Intimacy is a key theme across the work of the queer games avant-garde, but that intimacy often takes on unexpected forms—as in Naomi Clark's *Consentacle* (2014), where strangers play out a sexual encounter between a human and an alien, or Seanna Musgrave's *Animal Massage* (2016), a virtual reality installation in the which the player is caressed in front of a public audience, or merritt k's *Hug Punx* (2015) (figure I.8), a game about exuberant hugging. These games build opportunities for queer togetherness and also interrogate what it means to feel alongside others.

*The queer games avant-garde questions empathy and looks for its alternatives.* As the work of contemporary queer game makers is being more widely discussed among mainstream commentators, "empathy" has become a buzzword for describing queer games.[48] This is a characterization that many queer indie game makers actively resist. A striking number of those interviewed here speak about the problems they see with players thinking that games can—or should—provide them with the opportunity to "step into the shoes" of marginalized people. Some of these artists insist outright that they do not make games for straight people. Others intentionally design their games not as mimetic reflections of queer lives but as explorations of alternative paths that their lives might have taken. Many of these


Fig I.8 :::: merritt k's *Hug Punx* (2015), a game about hugging that models one of many forms queer intimacy can take in video games

games deliberately refuse to package queer experiences as playable consumer products. The few artists who do speak in support of empathy use the term in unexpected ways or as a tool for social justice. Through discussions of empathy, these artists ask, "Who are queer games for?" Not all agree on the intended audience of their work. Some feel that queer games should educate straight consumers, whereas others believe that the goal of developing these games is creating spaces for queer people.

*The work of the queer games avant-garde is political.* Almost without exception, the queer game makers interviewed here describe their work using this term. What "political" means and how it manifests differs across creators and their games, however. Nicky Case's *To Build a Better Ballot* (2016) explicitly engages with contemporary U.S. politics. Robert Yang, whose games—such as his newest work, *The Tearoom* (2017) (figure I.9)—represent sexual practices between men, describes his work as political because it refuses to desexualize queerness. For other contributors to the queer games avant-garde, the politics of their games are located in the design of consent, or their creation of worlds widely populated by queer subjects, or their rejection of the tenets of what supposedly makes a "good game." Indeed, resistance is a theme that appears in many forms across these interviews. Sometimes that resistance manifests as outright political dissent, but other times it takes alternate forms—like aesthetic abstraction or the exuberance of glitter and dancing in the face of discrimination and

hate. Many proponents of mainstream games culture insist that video games are "just for fun" and therefore apolitical. The queer games avant-garde proves that even those games that seem small, silly, sexy, or strange communicate powerful messages. As Shira Chess writes, "The playful is political."[49]

*The queer games avant-garde is fundamentally intersectional.* For contemporary queer indie game makers, experiences of queerness cannot be separated from experiences of race, socioeconomics, mental health and disability, access, religion, nationality, and numerous other factors of identity, privilege, community, and disenfranchisement. Race and ethnicity play central roles in how many of these game makers experience and express their queerness, such as in the work of Santo Aveiro. Money and issues of poverty are topics that arise in a striking number of these interviews. In some queer indie games, religion is an oppressive force, while in others it is an important form of personal expression. A number of the artists contributing to the queer games avant-garde are non-neurotypical; some of their work reflects on their practices of self-care and healing, while other work serves as an intermediary between the artist and the neurotypical world. As Emilia Yang states, paraphrasing Audre Lorde, "We're not single-issue people because we don't live single-issue lives." One of


Fig I.9 :::: *The Tearoom* (2017) by Robert Yang, a video game about gay cruising in public restrooms

the main goals of this book is to represent and value queer individuals as whole people. Each of the game makers interviewed here brings their own intersectional identity to these discussions and to their games.

## LISTENING TO QUEER VOICES: METHODOLOGY AND BOOK STRUCTURE

The methodologies of the project are a crucial component of its politics. Presenting interviews rather than scholarly interpretations is a way to foreground how queer game makers tell their own stories. This is not to discount the value of academic writing on these games. Excellent work is being done in this area by scholars like Claudia Lo, Whitney Pow, and Teddy Pozo.[50] However, the ways that queer game makers talk about *their own work* is equally if not more important—especially because, as marginalized creators, their perspectives are often overlooked, overwritten, or appropriated. Some of the game makers profiled here speak often at public events, but others have rarely given interviews. The discussions found in this volume offer valuable opportunities to learn about these artists' influences and intentions and the obstacles they have faced. Structurally, this book is inspired by Cara Ellison's *Embed with Games* and merritt k's *Videogames for Humans*, which similarly highlight individual indie game makers and their interlocutors.[51] The book also shares an interest in bringing together diverse voices around sexuality and gender in games with recent collections of analog games like *#Feminism*.[52] In its ethos, this project draws inspiration from disability studies, which conducts research "by, for, and with" people with disabilities and their communities, rather than research "about" or "on" them. The present project is one that has been undertaken "with" and "for" queer subjects; they are equal authors of this book.

In deciding which game makers to interview, I have tried to represent a wide range of perspectives and game-making practices and to highlight those contributors to the queer games avant-garde whose works merit increased attention. When speaking with queer game makers who are already well known, I have endeavored to focus on topics that resist the tokenizing narratives commonly applied to these artists. Some of the figures whose work has been instrumental in the rise of the queer games avant-garde are not featured this volume. Most notably, these include Anna Anthropy, merritt k, Christine Love, and Porpentine, all of whom declined to be interviewed. Their presence is palpable all the same. Many of the

artists whose voices do appear here cite these artists among their inspirations. As I discuss in the afterword, other artists do not appear here because they are so new on the "scene." There is also the matter of space and scope. The network of the queer games avant-garde is constantly expanding. For every queer game maker interviewed for this book, there are many more who could have been included. Any attempt to fully encompass contemporary queer indie games will prove incomplete. That is a fundamental limitation of this work but also, I believe, an excellent problem to have.

All of the interviews in this book were conducted by me in the spring of 2017, with the exception of the interview with Sarah Schoemann, which I conducted in the summer of 2018. Because these conversations took place within a relatively short period, this book functions as a snapshot: a picture of what queer indie game-making and the questions that surrounded it looked like at a precise moment in history. This was not only a moment of change for the medium of video games; it was within the first months of the Trump presidency. During these interviews, fear, concern, and anger weighed heavily in the air, not just for queer game makers in America but also for those living in Canada and Europe. In one way or another, LGBTQ game developers have been involved in the process of making video games for decades. Yet the stakes of developing defiant, ecstatic queer games have never felt more real.

Each interview lasted roughly two hours. Most interviewees received an honorarium as compensation for their time. The interviews were conducted either in person or over Skype, recorded, transcribed, and edited down to their present form. In selecting which parts of the interviews to include, I have focused on informative and unexpected moments, moments of excitement and friction, with an eye toward content that will interest scholars, players, and aspiring game makers alike. It is also important to me to acknowledge my own positionality and privilege in these interviews. I am a queer game studies scholar and an active queer games community organizer. From 2013 to 2017, I led the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), which is mentioned by many game makers in this volume. Through QGCon, I have had the honor of getting to know most of the artists profiled here. A few are close friends. I am myself queer, I have a background in the arts (creative writing), and I am a faculty member at a large research university. All of these factors, undoubtedly, have had their effects on the interviews. I can also see ways in which these interviews have been shaped by my own internalized biases. Often, I start with ques-

tions about the artists' childhood or background and move forward to the present day. In this way, I risk reinforcing "chrononormative" narratives of personal growth.[53] Thankfully, many of these game makers themselves point out the need to tell stories in ways that resist the traditional logics of linearity.

There are two points of terminology to clarify in my framing of the queer games avant-garde. The first is the word "queer." Like many queer theorists, I use "queerness" to signify both the identities of LGBTQ people and more conceptual notions of non-heteronormativity. Nearly every game maker I spoke with said that "queerness" resonated with them on a personal and/or artistic level. However, queerness meant different things to different people, and not all of these artists themselves identify as queer. There is power in describing these games and their creators under the bold, unifying heading of the "queer games avant-garde." It insists on the place of queerness at the forefront of video games. Yet, as Aevee Bee points out in her interview, there is also a potential danger in lumping all folks of non-heteronormative gender and sexualities into one category. When I use the terms "queer games" and "queer game makers," I mean these as a shorthand (albeit one with its own limitations) for indie game makers and their work that emerge from or engage with the experiences of LGBTQ people. This framework is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive. It is only one of many ways to categorize the games discussed in this volume, as well as their creators. The second point of terminology is my use of the words "game maker" and "artist," which I deploy here interchangeably. In writing on video games, it is more common to see those who make video games referred to as "designers" or "developers." I have chosen not to use these as my go-to terms because not all contributors to the queer games avant-garde are designers (some are visual artists, musicians, programmers, etc.) and because "developer" brings to mind the production paradigms of the larger game industry.

It is my hope that these interviews serve as a springboard for game makers, scholars, and players interested in the queer games avant-garde. For those who want to build their own queer games—or any kind of socially aware play experience—think of these interviews like blueprints, not so much for the technical aspects of game development as for the development of what Colleen Macklin and John Sharp have called "design values."[54] A few interviews offer direct advice on *how* to make a video game (see, for example, the interviews with Mo Cohen and with Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt), but all provide invaluable models for *why* to

make one, where to turn for inspiration, and what questions to ask before you begin. For scholars in game studies, queer studies, and a number of adjacent fields, these interviews serve as primary material from which to build analyses of contemporary queer indie video games. The artists' discussions of their work have the potential to spark numerous close readings and suggest larger themes that cross the queer games avant-garde, as well as LGBTQ issues in digital media more broadly.

Each of the twenty interviews with contributors to the queer games avant-garde found here forms its own chapter. Every chapter opens with a short essay introducing the artist or activist (or group of collaborators), their work, key elements of their interview, and connections between their work and other queer games. These interviews focus on the artistic, social, and personal influences behind the queer games avant-garde. Together, they present a vision of queer indie game makers as a network of insightful, self-reflective, passionate, and often subversive creators—and as unique people, many of whom feel strongly about their own queerness but none of whom can be defined by any one aspect of their identities.

These chapters have been grouped into seven thematic sections. Part I, "Queer People, Queer Desires, Queer Games," opens the book with interviews from three game makers who directly represent queer subjects in their work: Dietrich Squinkifer (chapter 1), Robert Yang (chapter 2), and Aevee Bee (chapter 3). By contrast, the interviewees who appear in the second part, "Queerness as a Mode of Game-Making," engage with queerness primarily through their art-making practices and aesthetics. These include Llaura McGee (chapter 4), Andi McClure (chapter 5), and Liz Ryerson (chapter 6). Part III, "Designing Queer Intimacy in Games," features Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt (chapter 7), Naomi Clark (chapter 8), and Elizabeth Sampat (chapter 9): game makers whose work creates, celebrates, and complicates queer experiences of intimacy. The game makers featured in part IV, "The Legacy of Feminist Performance Art in Queer Games," emphasize issues of embodiment, materiality, and co-presence in their work. They are Kara Stone (chapter 10), Mattie Brice (chapter 11), and Seanna Musgrave (chapter 12).

Part V, "Intersectional Perspectives in/on Queer Games," highlights artists whose games emphasize the interplays between sexuality, gender, race, and other aspects of identity—including Tonia B****** and Emilia Yang (chapter 13), Nicky Case (chapter 14), and Nina Freeman (chapter 15). In part VI, "Analog Games: Exploring Queerness through Non-Digital Play," the focus turns to queer game makers who develop analog rather

than digital games, such as Avery Alder (chapter 16) and Kat Jones (chapter 17). The final part of the book is part VII, "Making Queer Games, Queer Change, and Queer Community." Through discussions with Mo Cohen (chapter 18), Jerome Hagen (chapter 19), and Sarah Schoemann (chapter 20), this section considers how queer games and the organizations that support them are being built from the ground up. It also addresses the influence that queer games are having on the mainstream games industry, while remaining critical of the industry's interests in queer indie games.

Finally, the afterword, "The Future of the Queer Games Avant-Garde," discusses new queer games that have been released as of this writing (in the summer of 2018) and presents short profiles of four up-and-coming queer game makers: Ryan Aceae, Santo Aveiro, Heather Flowers, and Jess Marcotte. This afterword also looks ahead to the work of queer indie game-making that has yet to come. Video games are an interactive medium, and playing them is crucial to understanding them. For this reason, I have also included an appendix of recommended queer indie games, both digital and analog, which can be played at home or in the classroom.

## THE (QUEER) FUTURE OF VIDEO GAMES: CELEBRATING CHANGE, COMPLICATING "PROGRESS"

The future of video games is constantly emerging and changing. Yet what is becoming increasingly clear is that that future is being irrevocably shifted by the work of contemporary queer indie game makers. These game makers represent a true avant-garde: they push the boundaries of the medium and show players and fellow designers that video games can take on different subjects, different forms, and different meanings than many people have ever imagined. In this way, the queer games avant-garde is blazing a trail for ongoing work that will continue to expand and reimagine video games as we know them today. This new work will be done by an increasingly vast and varied array of queer and transgender people, but also by more people of color, non-neurotypical people and people with disabilities, and people of various religious, national, and cultural identities. The history of video games will look back at this moment as a turning point—in ways both hopeful and alarming. Those who are seen as "different" are being openly and at times viciously harassed online by reactionary gamers who believe, as McClure states in the epigraph to this introduction, that queer indie games are "destroying video games." In a sense, they are. They are "disrupting systems," to use Naomi Clark's

words, "shaking things up." The video games of the future will not look like the video games of the past, and this is due in no small part to today's queer games avant-garde. This implication is inherent in the very notion of a queer games avant-gardism. That which is avant-garde leads the way forward.

Yet, even as we celebrate this future, it is crucial to remain critical of our visions of progress and change. The politics of futurity are complicated at best. "Video game cultures seem to have a paradoxical relationship to temporality," writes Švelch. "On the one hand, they are obsessed with the future. . . . On the other hand, players and designers alike are nostalgic for the past."[55] This dual focus on the past and the future often leaves little room for the present: for the real, material, embodied conditions of making and playing games *now*. Paolo Ruffino, in writing about the rhetorics of innovation that dominate the discourse of the video game industry, describes how "what video games can do is always . . . projected in an imminent future."[56] Warns Ruffino, these stories about the future of the medium, with its "allegedly liberating and innovative effects," often reinforce rather than disrupt the "economic, political, and social conditions of the present."[57] I too remain wary of losing sight of the here-and-now and its dominant structures of power and privilege. However, the queer future of video games toward which the queer games avant-garde leads is different than the capitalistic future promised by the rhetoric of games industry innovation. It is a future that directly seeks to overturn the economic, political, and social conditions of the present by centering queerness and its capacity to imagine alternative ways of living, desiring, and playing in the world. Queer theory too brings with it critiques of futurity and progress. We can see this in Lee Edelman's refusal of heteronormative reproductivity, in José Esteban Muñoz's queer utopia that remains always on the horizon, in Kathryn Bond Stockton's queer child who grows sideways rather than up, in Jack Halberstam's rejection of heteronormative narratives of success, and in Elizabeth Freeman's critique of chrononormativity, to name only a few examples.[58]

To say that today's queer indie video games are leading the way toward a "better" future for LGBTQ folks and their place within the medium runs the risk of instrumentalizing queer art in the name of mainstream change. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the power of the queer games avant-garde is not in making the mainstream video games more inclusive but rather in destabilizing the very notion of a mainstream. The future suggested by the contemporary queer indie game makers is one in

which the center has not held, in which queer folks cannot simply be said to "speak from the margins" because the margins themselves have been repositioned as new centers for expression. In this future, video games belong to all—or, if not to all (because "democratizing" technologies are rarely as democratizing as they are made out to be), then certainly to more than before. Many of the games that have emerged from the queer games avant-garde themselves explore uncertain futures. These complications are not a weakness but a strength of the queer games avant-garde and its work. Like the game makers interviewed here, the future represented by the queer games avant-garde embraces change but also resists tidy narratives of progress. In this way, it preserves the transgressive spirit of queer game-making as a deeply radical art.

# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

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