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Mark Maletka

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MARK MALETSKA

Abstract

This narrative literature review discusses peer-reviewed research articles connecting queer gender identities and videogames. Its main purpose is to describe directions of research on connections between queer gender identities and videogames, and to indicate gaps and missing connections in existing studies. The analysed material was collected in April–August 2023 using *Google Scholar*, *Web of Science*, and *Scopus* databases. Three major thematic categories were identified in the publications: representation of queer gender identities in videogames; player–avatar connections and gender dysphoria; and queer gender identities in game-related spaces. The main finding of the review is that articles focused on queer people do not tend to address the inherent queerness of videogames. Queer temporality and spatiality are not sufficiently studied in interaction with queer players, and narrative and/or visual elements remain in focus, even when potentially interactive activities like avatar creation are being researched.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+; videogames; queer game studies; narrative literature review

Queer theory has been challenging fixed norms for decades. Queerness has been considered from various perspectives, both as “a term which refers not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities, but to a range of identities who cannot (or will not) be accounted for within existing normative categories of sex, gender and sexuality” (Greer, 2013) and as a phenomenon “attempting to disturb the ‘norm’” in broader senses (Nylund, 2007). When mixed, these approaches to queerness aim to disturb anything regular and stable in various parts of life—videogames and game studies included.

In queer game studies, the focus on queerness as an identity category preceded the shift to consideration of queerness as various forms of non-normativity in videogames. Earlier publications in queer game studies primarily considered LGBTQIA+ representation, and queerness as difference from the norms was not sufficiently discussed. Ruberg argues that “queer game studies changes the dominant narrative about the place of LGBTQ subjects in videogames and aims to reclaim the medium by imagining videogames themselves as queer,” and, thus, “queerness ‘beyond representation’—that is, queerness as a function of video game systems themselves” comes to the forefront (Ruberg, 2018). Since this shift, much more attention has been drawn to the queerness inherent in videogames, and various ways to make them non-normative—such as the creation of queer game engines (Freedman, 2018) or the non-normative use of controllers (Harrer et al., 2019).

At the same time, studies on gender identities in videogames are still dominated with works focused on gender binaries (Richard, 2013). There are works that, although using queer studies as a part of their theoretical background, focus mainly on binary divisions, sometimes noting that nonbinary representatives are simply out of scope or do not make a significant difference in studies. Lacey (2023) noted in their research on nonbinary representations in videogames that even if a study starts with diversity, its practical part either does not contain or does not mention transgender and nonbinary people. This has resulted in a situation where the focus of queer game studies has shifted from queer identities to queerness as an inherent characteristic of videogames instead, while studies on games and identities beyond queer game studies typically pay more attention to traditional gender binaries.

This poses the following question: how homogeneous are the tendencies within queer game studies, particularly considering those focusing more on abstract queerness or binary genders in respective areas? To answer this question, it is necessary to address the gaps in game studies that could help include more diversity in research outside of queer studies not only in terms of theory, but also in practice.

The aim of this literature review is to find out which areas remain underdeveloped and could be addressed in further studies, and to highlight the need to continue challenging binaries in studies of gender and gaming. The main tasks of this review are: to describe directions of existing research on connections between queer gender identities and videogames; and to highlight the directions that need further work.

Conceptual background

This study is positioned in the domain of queer game studies—the paradigm embracing queerness as an approach to game studies and games critique (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). Key works of the domain, including *Queer Game Studies* (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017) and *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019), offer a set of tools to challenge traditional and normative approaches to games and game studies. From

a critical exploration of queer as a term applied “not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities, but to a of range of identities who cannot (or will not) be accounted for within existing normative categories of sex, gender and sexuality” (Greer, 2013), queer game studies has moved towards a strong association of queerness with non-normativity in a broader sense (see e.g., Chang, 2015; Krobová et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2018; Shaw, 2011). Queer games studies aims at queering the very structure of games and the ways people play, going beyond queerness as non-cis-heteronormativity. This change has been later described as follows:

Recently, queer theory has extended its scope beyond the representation of gender and sexuality, to help re-conceptualize the design of interactive technologies, and from a non-cis-heteronormative angle (e.g., exploring technology as a site for queer freedom [Blas, 2006], centering transgender and nonbinary people towards inclusive technology design [Haimson et al., 2020], etc.) (Hantsbarger et al., 2022)

Recent studies consider non-normative videogames and mods as manifestations of ‘queer posthumanism’ (Ruberg, 2022) and as a means to go beyond oppressive norms of society through unusual ways to play games (e.g., playing for ‘no-fun,’ observing non-playable characters).

Positioned within queer game studies, this study stands close to the intersection between LGBTQIA+ game studies and queer studies, or what could be described as “scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQ topics—from LGBTQ players or designers to games with LGBTQ representation—and work that seeks to understand videogames through the conceptual frameworks of queerness” (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). Thus, it seeks queerness as, first of all, a range of gender identities outside the normative categories, while acknowledging the broader views on what queerness is.

Gender identity here refers to “a person’s internal sense of their own gender” (Ok & Kang, 2021). Although in some existing works it is separately underlined that the term ‘queer identities’ is used for identities outside the binaries or those deviating from heterosexual cisgender norms (Worthen, 2023), for this review I include transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and other gender nonconforming identities into the umbrella term ‘gender identity.’ This decision aims at underlining the inclusion of nonbinary identities into research surrounding gender identities as they are, one way or another, a part of broader spectrum.

As Shaw and Ruberg (2017) note, diverse gender identities have been studied for a while in terms of representation, and work on queer players has also been undertaken for a while. Games have been looked at not only as a medium representing queer people, but also as a tool for self-exploration. Shaw’s dissertation (2010), for example, was dedicated to understanding the self-identification processes of people

playing videogames in general and in relation to their in-game selves. In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Videogames* (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017), there is a particular focus on how gaming could be seen as the reflection of a player that is linked directly to the perception of oneself. Moreover, *Queerness in Play* (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018) discloses various topics related to queerness and points to the impact of interacting with game characters. This review, however, looks at various connections between gender identities and games and focuses on videogames in particular, but does not cover analogue games. In this study, videogames are defined as “a game which we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and which can be based on a story” (Esposito, 2005). Digital copies of analogue games are consciously excluded from the talk of videogames as well—I consider them a way to play analogue games, not separate entities.

Queer game studies not only focuses on narrative, but also on the ludic aspects, and the ludic dimension of videogames is another direction to seek intersections with research on gender identities. Game mechanics can be defined as “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state” (Sicart, 2008), where methods are mechanisms of interaction or actions within a process of playing. These mechanisms, in essence ludic elements of videogames, could be considered as queer, and—as in case with mechanics of avatar creation—are sometimes seen as connected with players’ gender identities.

The key terms of this review, used in various combinations as keywords for material searches, reflect a deep dive into the cornerstone publications of queer game studies.

Material and method

The collected sources are presented according to central themes in a traditional narrative literature review form. To formulate the tasks of the review, I investigated key publications and concepts of queer game studies, while formulating keywords and designing steps for processing the acquired material. Although I framed this article as a traditional review aimed at critically assessing results of existing studies, it also functions as a scoping review (Jesson et al., 2011), pointing to directions for further research within queer game studies.

To collect the material, I conducted two searches using *Google Scholar*, *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases. The first was conducted in April–May 2023, and the second in July–August 2023. The following keywords were used for searches: ‘queer game studies,’ ‘queer’ AND ‘video game*,’ ‘queer studies’ AND ‘mechanics,’ ‘queer identity’ AND ‘video game*,’ ‘gender identity’ AND ‘video game,’ ‘trans identity’ AND ‘video game,’ ‘transgender’ AND ‘game mechanic’. The symbol ‘*’ was used to allow searches with various forms of the words.

The articles included in this review were identified through the following steps:

1. Initial screening. After identifying keywords, I collected materials from databases based on titles and keywords mentioned in an abstract and/or in the text. As some text relevant to the search could use different wording for same phenomena (for example, the interchangeable use of acronyms SGD [sexual and gender diverse] or MOGAI [marginalised orientations, gender alignments and intersex], or not mentioning identity in the title and abstract while talking about identities in main text), including sources to initial material based on keywords present in main text appeared to be a necessary condition.
2. Excluding the same sources appearing in different searches/databases. As most sources indexed by *Web of Science* and *Scopus* are also indexed in *Google Scholar*, and some of them appeared in different searches, it was necessary to distinguish unique sources for further examination. At this stage, 293 unique sources were selected for further detailed screening, from which: 0 from *Web of Science* (all 16 were also present in *Scopus* and *Google Scholars*), 1 from *Scopus* (out of 25, where 24 were also present in *Web of Science* and *Google Scholars*), 292 from *Google Scholar*. Only works with openly available full texts were collected.
3. Categorising material based on publication type. At this point, I categorised the collected material according to its type (article, book chapter, thesis, etc.). Table 1 presents the division of the collected sources:

Type	Definition	Number of texts
Abstract	Only abstract available	8
Article	Full text of an article	148
Bachelor's thesis	Full text of a bachelor's thesis	8
Book	Text or description of a book content	1
Book chapter	Full text of a book chapter	15
Conference proceedings	Full text of conference proceedings in form of an article, extended abstract or short abstract	19
Essay	Full text of an essay	1
Honour's thesis	Full text of an honour's thesis	2
Invited talk	Text of an invited talk	1
Journal introduction	Full text of an introduction to a journal issue briefly describing the further content of the issue	2
Master's thesis	Full text of a master's thesis	44
Other	Course papers, study tasks, minor's degree papers, lists of sources / bibliographies, project descriptions	22

PhD thesis	Full text of a PhD thesis	19
Presentation	Presentation visuals	2
Research proposal	Full text of a research proposal	1
Review	Review of a book	13

Table 1. Material categorisation according to the publication type.

4. Separating peer-reviewed articles for further coding. For 148 items appearing as an 'article' or both as 'article' and 'conference proceedings' (for texts published as outputs from conferences), I checked the web sites of venues, calls for papers, and information about article issues to find out whether publications had gone through a peer-review process. Out of 148 texts, 126 were peer reviewed. Articles not identified as peer-reviewed were not processed further.
5. Coding. 126 peer-reviewed texts were coded to distinguish works relevant to this review and separate those that were out of scope. The code group 'content' and a description of the main topic(s) of the articles were assigned to items, and further exclusion/inclusion of items was based on the codes assigned. Overall, I assigned 83 'content' codes. Coding was conducted with the use of ATLAS.ti, so all the codes were assigned and defined to the texts within the ATLAS.ti software. At this stage, I read through each text to develop 'content' codes corresponding to the main topics discussed in a publication and the ways queerness and games were mentioned.
6. Distinguishing items out of scope. The codes used to exclude articles were grouped into following themes:
 - a. Out of scope (39)—content not including gender identities and/or videogames.
 - b. Only binary genders (25)—articles focused only on binary division of gender identities.
 - c. Focus on queer sexuality (15)—articles focused on sexuality, even when mentioning gender identities indirectly.
 - d. Only mentioning LGBTQIA+/queer (7)—articles only mentioning queerness as a part of theoretical background or as an example, but not being focused on queerness or queer identities.
 - e. Queer player (queergaming) (7)—articles giving a perspective on queer play as a way to play differently than anticipated by designer.
 - f. Queer game studies theory (6)—articles focused on the theoretical background of queer game studies.
7. Developing themes. After I separated items that were out of scope, I analysed texts and codes assigned to them to identify generalisable characteristics that could be developed into themes. For developing the themes, I worked

with the 'content' codes assigned, identified the codes that reflected the most developed topic of each article, and grouped articles according to the most developed codes. Content codes assigned to publications can be found in Appendix 1.

The connection between queer gender identities and videogames was discussed in 27 peer-reviewed journal articles. I developed three central themes discussed in the works: representation of queer gender identities in videogames (17 articles); player-avatar connections and gender dysphoria (6 articles); and queer gender identities in game-related spaces (4 articles).

Main findings

General characteristic of studies on queer gender identities in videogames

To start forming an overview of currently available works, I would like to point to the general characteristics of analysed texts. First is the noticeable difference in the distribution of texts between themes—representation of queer gender identities in videogames is discussed in 17 articles, which is much more than works that address the player-avatar relationship or queer gender identities in game-related spaces. Also, although there are several articles from 2010s, most of the present studies were published after 2016.

In terms of theoretical backgrounds, the articles can be conditionally divided into two bigger groups, presented in detail in Appendix 1: the first group (e.g., Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Smith & Decker, 2016; Thach, 2021) is mostly based on (queer) game studies and their sources; the second group (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2022; Rivera, 2022) leans towards a background from psychology and medical sciences.

Some works use similar lists of games for research purposes and as examples of gender diverse characters. Although it is hard to state whether the reason for this is the popularity of these games or lesser prominence of others, in this way, only certain areas are covered by published research. Among the games that gained more attention than others were *World of Warcraft* (Gillin & Signorella, 2023; Griffiths et al., 2016; Shaw, 2011), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Cantrell & Zhu, 2022; Howard, 2020; Thach, 2021), *Gone Home* (Blume, 2021; Kohlburn et al., 2023). Some of the analysed studies are also based on *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, which is a "curated/researched collection of information of LGBTQ content in digital games from 1980s-present" (*About...*, 2017), using it as the main source base even after it started being updated less frequently.

The gradual shift of focus from text to players could be seen in the identified themes. The biggest one, namely, representation of queer gender identities in games, is

mostly text focused, while articles revealing the avatar-player relationships are built around interactions between a person and a game, and publications on queer gender identities in gaming communities are subject focused. The following subsections proceed accordingly, moving from a focus on texts to intersubjective relationships.

Representation of queer gender identities

The first theme presented here is the representation of queer gender identities. As already noted, this theme includes the biggest number of articles compared to other themes, and it was developed based on publications including a broader representation of gender identities or transgender/nonbinary representation. The works belonging to this category present various frameworks, not only reflecting representation, but also contextualising or positioning it within various research areas.

One of the oldest works pointing to the issues of LGBTQIA+ representation including queer genders was written by Shaw (2009). In this article, she discusses issues of representation in videogames, the backlashes the developers were afraid of, and stereotypes present both in games and gaming cultures. As Talbert (2016) notes, because of Shaw's article, multiple companies implemented changes, and while the difference is notable, the discussion around stereotypes in representation and diversity in game industry is still relevant.

Talbert (2016) also discusses the dynamics of LGBTQIA+ representation and different attitudes towards it. The article raises questions about misunderstanding of proper queer representation in videogames and negativity towards it and emphasizes the importance of involving queer people in game development. Talbert discloses the results of a survey aimed at collecting thoughts about the representation of marginalized groups. Smith and Decker (2016) talk about representation of queer people of colour, and its impact on queer players' feelings. The authors disclose the results of an online survey conducted among queer people of colour in 2015–2016. Although this study does not focus separately on queer gender identities, it does record and give some quotes of thoughts expressed by trans and nonbinary individuals.

In one of the later works that was collected during the search, Shaw and Friesem (2016) talk about different approaches to representation using the games collected in *LGBTQ Game Archive* that they review in the article as examples. Later, Shaw et al. (2019) cover representation trends in videogames between 1985 and 2005. Using two open databases, *Queerly Represent Me* and *LGBTQ Game Archive*, the authors analyse the frequency of races, genders, and sexualities, as well as humanness/non-humanness represented by game characters. These two articles also document homophobic and transphobic content in listed games.

Thach (2021) has conducted an analysis of 63 games from *LGBTQ Game Archive* and found trends regarding the ambiguity of trans representation, the depiction of dysphoria/'wrong body,' physical transition, mental illness and/or trans people being

killers, as well as trans shock and trans reveal. The author points out that only four games had “narratives centering trans perspective” (Thach, 2021) and mentions the need to analyse character-creating tools as a limitation. This comprehensive study gives an overview of how trans people are depicted, and consequently, perceived by people playing videogames. As character design is often created not simply to represent gender identities, but to portray stereotypes more understood by cisgender people, Kosciesza (2023) provides a perspective that deals particularly with trans non-player characters (NPCs) in role-playing videogames. The point of interest of this study is queer characters in the role of moral service. The author proposes the term ‘magical transness’ to describe the trope where trans characters who are victims of violence become a trigger or catalyst to cis characters’ advancement or moral redemption. In addition to offering an interesting point for further discussion, this study shows preservation of some video game plots’ orientation towards cis players, thus reinforcing the view on game culture as one that is cis-heteronormative.

Howard (2020) compares queer representation in mainstream and indie gaming, formulating the reasons for communities’ dissatisfaction with LGBTQIA+ representation in many games. The most important point concerns the quality of queer content in mainstream gaming, illustrating how the reduction of representation to a few characters and cis-heteronormative narratives influences its quality. Howard sees modding as one of the ways queer people add diversity to mainstream series like *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls*, framing it as a possible way of exploring queer representation (2020). Another way to address representation not in the game but around it is fan fiction, and in their research of this field, Dym (2019) once again point to the issue that in-game representation is made by and often for straight cisgender people.

Another example of this is Látal’s study (2022) of *Reddit* posts that shows how queer representation in different videogames is perceived by participants of LGBTQIA+ threads. Among the first statements in the article, Látal mentions that heterogeneity of LGBTQIA+ communities should be considered in such studies, as well as the silence of a larger part of communities where representatives who speak of themselves louder are engaged more actively, so voices of silent representatives are lost. These close ties between how queer identities are represented and perceived by players may impact LGBTQIA+ (non)identification with characters, and the use of them in self-exploration process. Similarly, Kohlburn et al. (2023) study queer representation in four games through the lens of player reviews on *Steam*. As the authors point out, they chose games with significant LGBTQIA+ characters and themes important to LGBTQIA+ communities that were “reflective of their lived experiences in various ways, for example, having LGBTQ+ protagonists, depictions of the experience of LGBTQ+ characters, relationships, or culture” (Kohlburn et al., 2023, p. 385). In this way, the article discusses how queer identities are both presented and perceived by communities.

Ho et al. (2022) discuss queer content in LGBTQIA+ games on *itch.io*, carrying out both quantitative and qualitative studies. They present numbers of nonbinary and transgender characters and demonstrate how the life of a trans woman is shown in the study of a game called *A Normal Lost Phone*.

The previously mentioned studies are mostly or fully focused on a set of games or communities' attitudes towards representation; however, more detailed context or case studies are seldom provided. Other works study representation in particular contexts. As an example, learning games and games used for learning have been studied by Blume (2021) as tools that could teach inclusive language and help with raising LGBTQIA+ awareness on a school level. The main aim of this study is "to facilitate the exploration of all language learners' identities, regardless of gender or sexual identity" (Blume, 2021). Not only games designed for learning are mentioned here, but also commonly known queer-themed titles such as *Gone Home*.

Two studies are built around one character's story and queer representation through the character. Youngblood (2013) talks about queer representation using the *Persona 4* character as an example. Here, the search for one's identity and personality are also shown through the prism of the game and the relationship between characters. Pow (2018) also talks about a character's gender identity through the prism of one game. Discussing *Curtain* software interface, the author also discloses how the game tells the story of a main character who is a trans woman.

Although Hester's (2021) study contains game mechanics in name, it should be a part of the category of representation of queer gender identities. Generally, this study explores the phenomenon of Bowsette, a character created by fans based on the *Super Mario* character Bowser. While Hester tries to show further opportunities to queer videogames, most of the article is dedicated to the interaction between a game series and its fanbase. However, the theoretical part of the article is worthy of particular attention, since it raises a similar question, namely what characteristics allow a player to define a character's gender identity and navigate around it.

While the articles in this theme show how gender identities are represented in various games, most of them do not focus on transgender or nonbinary representation. They either cover various sets of diverse identities reflected in videogames—considering these identities as a single group—or contextualise these reflections.

Video game avatars, gender exploration, and gender dysphoria

The theme of player-avatar relationships has been developed around studies on the connections between gender diverse players and the videogames they play. Several publications reflect on how videogames can lead to paths of self-exploration and how media can help people cope with gender dysphoria.

Most of the publications under this theme are quite recent, the earliest study on gender identity framing through gaming experience among the collected material

was conducted by Griffiths et al. (2016). This work looks in detail at the personal stories of people who experienced gender dysphoria and who felt at ease when playing videogames, creating avatars different from their real bodies, and talking to online communities using their preferred names and pronouns. Although the study has some concern regarding the escapism of trans people into video game worlds, it generally describes game worlds as helpful in terms of figuring out one's gender identity. Griffiths et al.'s study of four people's cases has shown that gaming can be used as a 'testing area' for gender feelings, as a space to come out, and as an environment that is safer than the offline one. Although the authors state a small number of cases as a limitation to their study, it complements existing research on important questions concerning trans people's experiences in videogames.

Baldwin (2018) argues that avatar choosing could be a part of self-exploration and that it could further understanding of one's queer gender identity. The author shows the participants' close connection with their avatars, which then reveals their desired identity and eases their dysphoria.

Rivera (2022) also studies the therapeutic effect of engagement in virtual life and of playing videogames. This work is directly focused on using an avatar to express a true self. Particularly, it discloses a case where the video game avatar helped to achieve "a more stable sense of true self-expression during a difficult medical transition" (Rivera, 2022) since it was previously used for self-exploration.

Avatar creation as a gender-affirming experience has been studied by McKenna et al. (2022) through interviewing transgender and gender diverse youth in the United States. This study attracts special attention due to the involvement of not only trans people, but also nonbinary and other gender diverse participants to address the limitations of previous research. Cantrell and Zhu (2022) focus on choice-based videogames as a tool for resilience building, and they describe avatar creation as one of the important steps of engagement in playing.

Di Cesare et al. (2023) conducted a literature review on studies of videogames and sexual and gender diverse youth, including those concerning avatar creation, videogames as a means of supporting and coping, and as transmitters of social interactions and even civic engagement. This review separately emphasizes the usefulness of videogames as spaces providing gender-affirming experiences through interaction with both games and game communities.

All of the publications discussed above deal with a particular set of mechanics, namely avatar creation. The study participants described in these publications often reflected on connections between their gender identities and the process of creating a character that could represent their true self. There is, however, one article that does not deal with player-avatar relationships, yet I included it in this theme as it highlights exploration of queerness and queer mechanics by gender diverse players.

Hantsbarger et al. (2022) describe the game creation of *You're Going To Be Late*, built around queer temporality and then playtested by LGBTQIA+ participants. This work is the only study focused precisely on video game mechanics, which shows how players search for ways to play differently from designed playing solutions and create queer models of playing. It is worth noting that this study separately focuses on LGBTQIA+ playtesters, and not only on the non-normativity of game mechanics. In addition to exhibiting the game testing in detail, the authors describe encounters of queer players with queer mechanics, and their attempts to search for queerness in video game structures.

Overall, the articles under this theme provide insights on the interaction of queer players with videogames, and in most of them, queerness in study participants is more in focus than the games themselves. This makes the theme to some extent opposite to the previous one, where the queerness represented in videogames was central.

Queer gender identities in game-related spaces

Studies on gender nonconforming players and in-game interaction and/or interactions with communities are the most player-focused and experience-focused included in this review. They contain both research on particular in-game communities, and communities built around playing videogames. What unites them is an interest towards intersubjective relationships. In contrast to the publications in the themes above, these works pay less attention to interactions with games.

One of the oldest detailed studies among collected articles is research on *Second Life* (Brookey & Cannon, 2009) that deals with the struggles of gender-diverse people observed in certain gaming communities. The study itself is focused on two dimensions, namely virtual objectification and virtual sexuality. Although it is not focused mainly on queer genders, it considers such questions as 'GVF' (Gender-Verified Females) and the transgender experience of *Second Life* players. A large part of the study is about transgender people and the use of voice in game to verify the 'real gender identity.' It is also of a special interest due to its mention of 'furries,' people who perceive themselves as anthropomorphic animals. The authors call furries "the queerest of the queer" and describe both pro-furry and anti-furry moods in *Second Life*. Among the analysed texts, this was the only study considering furries as a part of queer communities.

Among the sources collected for this review, the earliest study that focused on LGBTQIA+ outside of the gaming environment—with insights on gender identities—was conducted by Shaw (2011) among gamer website users. Although sexuality was discussed more than gender identity with the interviewees, the question of transphobia and underrepresentation of gender diverse people can also be traced. Shaw's article, while not dealing with the topic of queer gender identities directly, is one of the pillar articles that led to further player studies carried out in the area.

The articles by Brookey and Cannon (2009) and Shaw (2011) were published quite close in time. Other publications are more recent, and the focus of these is broadened as new phenomena such as streaming become more widespread. Particularly, the study by Freeman and Wohn (2020) on gender identity and sexuality presentation through the live streaming of games illustrates that streaming games can be a part of a gender acknowledgment process.

Gillin and Signorella (2023) continue studies on queer identities in gaming spaces with the hypothesis that there are several encounters with negativity towards LGBTQIA+ people, which has been demonstrated through research with LGBTQIA+ and cis/hetero participants. This underscores the need to work with inclusivity in gaming communities and shows that the work for tolerance and acceptance in this environment has just begun.

All the publications united by the theme of queer genders and communities around gaming present various facets of game-related communities. Most studies focus on the interaction between people, and videogames are mostly a background phenomenon there, apart from the study on *Second Life*, where peculiarities of in-game interactions are discussed in detail.

Discussion

The discussed themes partially stand in line with topics in LGBTQIA+ studies distinguished by Shaw and Ruberg, namely “community/cultural research, textual analysis, and design studies” (2017). In this review, design studies are not presented in much detail. However, articles under the theme of queer representation focus mostly on textual analysis, and the theme of community studies is present, although the least featured.

Among the three themes described above, queer representation contains the biggest number of sources and is discussed thoroughly. This reinforces the statement that queer representation features as the most dominant research topic. At the same time, many of the works mentioned cover more narrow topics related to queer representation, including representation of queer people of colour, as well as a focus on trans or nonbinary characters.

All of the articles on representation mostly deal with the narrative parts and images of in-game characters. Interactivity is not in focus, and while some information about gameplay or mechanics is provided (as, for example, a detailed analysis of interface in *Curtain* [Pow, 2018]), the connection with (queer) players’ experiences remains undiscussed. Several of the mentioned studies provide insights on players’ experiences through analysis of comments or quoting players’ thoughts otherwise.

In articles united under the theme of player-avatar relationships, the interest shifts towards players’ experiences. Studies described in this theme are framed less as a

part of game studies, and most of the attention is paid to avatars and not the other characters providing gender-affirming experiences.

The articles in the section on queer gender identities within communities show that gaming communities, one way or another, affect people's self-exploration and the formation of their self-perception. All of the environments mentioned in the articles—from in-game communities to ones built around streaming—create an image of people representing queer gender identities, which further affects those who are searching for their own identity and self-image.

The articles in all these themes have several things in common, apart from dealing with gender identities and videogames. Except the works by Hantsbarger et al. (2022) and partly Pow (2018), the articles focused on queer people do not at the same time address inherent queerness of videogames. Queer temporality and spatiality are not sufficiently studied in interaction with queer players. Narrative and/or visual elements remain in focus, even when potentially interactive activities such as avatar creation are being examined.

One of the initial keywords of this review was 'mechanics,' yet I had to exclude almost all the works considering queer mechanics from the review as they are often not connected with gender identities, and search for non-normative interactions that may be inspired by gender diversity or queerness overall. While these topics are important for queer game studies, connecting them to gender identities could be useful as an argument supporting the inherent queerness of videogames, and, perhaps, paving new ways to deal with the heteronormativity that still dominates many gaming-related environments.

The starting point for bridging gender identities and the queerness of videogames could be to research player perspective, as done by Hantsbarger et al. (2022). The player perspective could also make a concept of 'queer mechanics' known outside of academia and, as a potential result, be understood by more people.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. The first limitation lies in the fact that only English-language texts were analysed. Being a non-native English speaker myself and having grown up in a non-European environment, I know how national fields can differ from the general picture. Therefore, it is fair to assume that studies on queer mechanics and queer gender identities could be conducted in other languages and therefore not be represented in this review. The same limitation concerns the use of sources available through open access or institutional library access. The texts that require additional payments to be accessed have not been included in this review.

Another limitation is that the article covers peer-reviewed publications, which might exclude some topics described in books, theses, blogs, personal notes, etc. Several

of the central works of queer game studies are books, including *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) and *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019), and some appear in databases either in parts, or, as in the case of books, mentioned in reviews. Being essential to queer game studies, these books have formed the basis of the field and are often mentioned in texts that could belong to various other fields. Yet this particular review focuses on works built on these cornerstones, and that is why I chose to focus particularly on peer-reviewed articles.

Conclusion

This review deals with a set of publications connecting queer gender identities and videogames. One of its findings, namely the significant number of works on the representation of queer genders in videogames, is in line with claims that the focus of queer game studies needs to be broadened. At the same time, many of the studies focus on one or several smaller topics that have not received much prior coverage. However, most works on representation are text focused, and together with studies on player–avatar relationships, they tend to be narrative focused and pay less attention to mechanics.

This lack of connections between the shift towards looking at videogames as a queer medium and the consideration of queer identities mostly based on narration and visuals could be addressed further in future research. Establishing these connections may be helpful for blurring the division between ‘gender identity’ as a term for binaries and ‘queer gender identity’ as something separate in research. However, for queer game studies, it is not the only—and certainly not the most significant—positive impact. Combining perspectives on queerness and adding gender identities to the inherent queerness of videogames could also give insight on identity exploration through various ways of interacting with videogames as well as new perspectives on the ways in which videogames a queer medium.

Studying queer players could be a way to deal with this lack of connections, and the need for a player-focused approach has been voiced in queer game studies, although for a different direction. In *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), Shaw argues that talking about representation, identification, and other matters needs people’s voices in addition to developers’ voices, as “analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed” (p. 63). Working on representation issues, Shaw shares the voices of people playing videogames and their experiences of identifying with game characters and being represented by the videogames. This is not the first point of focusing on the importance of talking about videogames in players’ voices, yet even today, a significant number of studies remains theoretical or text oriented, as demonstrated by this review.

Moving away from cis-heteronormativity may be more impactful when queer players are invited to talk about their identities and seek out the inherent queerness of videogames. Adopting such an approach may become a way to broaden knowledge, influence game development, and facilitate the further spread of various types of queerness in videogames. However, a systematic and comprehensive review of the field is needed, as it could point to other underdeveloped topics.

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Appendix 1. Peer-reviewed articles separated according to the themes

Title	Author(s)	Year	Venue	Content codes assigned	Background of sources
Representation in games					
Inclusive digital games in the transcultural communicative classroom	Blume, C.	2021	<i>ELT Journal</i>	inclusivity game-based learning representation in games	psychology / medical studies
The burden of queer love	Dym, B.	2019	<i>Press Start</i>	game analysis queer romance representation in games	game studies
Nintendo Switch-ing genders: Bowsette and the potentiality of transgender video game mechanics	Hester, J.	2023	<i>Visual Resources</i>	fan queering representation in games	game studies
Queer indie games on itch.io, 2013-2022	Ho, X., Perez Escobar, R., & Tran, N.	2022	<i>Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games</i>	representation in games queer indie queer creator(s)	game studies

Learning about queer representation through mods: Reviewing past challenges and outlining ideas about future approaches	Howard, K.	2020	<i>Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media</i>	representation in games game-based learning game modification	game studies
Players' perceptions of sexuality and gender-inclusive videogames a pragmatic content analysis of Steam reviews	Kohlburn, J., Cho, H., & Moore, H.	2023	<i>Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies</i>	queer creator(s) studying player(s) queer games representation in games	game studies
Reaching toward home: Software interface as queer orientation in the video game <i>Curtain</i>	Pow, W.	2018	<i>The Velvet Light Trap</i>	close readings representation in games	game studies
Putting the gay in games: Cultural production and GLBT content in videogames	Shaw, A.	2009	<i>Games and Culture</i>	game about queer(s) studying LGBTQIA+ players queer creator(s) representation in games	game studies
Where is the queerness in games?: Types of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer content in digital games	Shaw, A., & Friesem, E.	2016	<i>International Journal of Communication</i>	LGBTQ Video Game Archive representation in games queerphobia	game studies
Counting queerness in games: Trends in LGBTQ digital game representation, 1985–2005	Shaw, A., Lauteria, E., Yang, H., Persaud, C., & Cole, A.	2019	<i>International Journal of Communication</i>	LGBTQ Video Game Archive representation in games	game studies

Understanding the impact of QPOC representation in videogames	Smith, R., & Decker, A.	2016	<i>2016 Research on Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT)</i>	queer people of colour representation in games representation in industry studying LGBTQIA+ players	game studies
A gatekeeper final boss: An analysis of MOGAI representation in videogames	Talbert, J.	2016	<i>Press Start Journal</i>	representation in games studying LGBTQIA+ players	game studies
"C'mon! Make me a man!": <i>Persona 4</i> , digital bodies, and queer potentiality	Youngblood, J.	2013	<i>Ada</i>	queer character(s) representation in games digital bodies	game studies
The moral service of trans NPCs: Examining the roles of transgender non-player characters in role-playing videogames	Koscieszka, A. J.	2023	<i>Games and Culture</i>	trans representation close readings queer character(s)	game studies
LGBTQ+ representation in videogames through the eyes of the queer community	Látal, M.	2022	<i>Iluminace</i>	representation in games studying LGBTQIA+ players trans representation	game studies
A cross-game look at transgender representation in videogames	Thach, H.	2021	<i>Press Start Journal</i>	representation in games LGBTQ Video Game Archive trans representation	game studies
Avatar-plater relationships and gender exploration					
Virtual avatars: Trans experiences of ideal selves through gaming	Baldwin, K.	2018	<i>Markets, Globalization & Development Review</i>	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship	psychology / medical studies

Choice-based games and resilience building of gender nonconforming individuals: A phenomenological study	Cantrell, Y., & Zhu, X. A.	2022	<i>Digital Transformation and Society</i>	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship gender-related experimentation representation in games	psychology / medical studies
Setting the game agenda: Reviewing the emerging literature on video gaming and psychological well-being of sexual and gender diverse youth	Di Cesare, D. M., Craig, S. L., Brooks, A. S., & Doll, K.	2023	<i>Games and Culture</i>	avatar-player relationship literature review LGBTQIA+ well-being	psychology / medical studies
Video gaming and gender dysphoria: Some case study evidence	Griffiths, M., Arcelus, J., & Bouman, W. P.	2016	<i>Aloma: Revista de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i de l'Esport</i>	gender dysphoria case study studying LGBTQIA+ players	psychology / medical studies
Alienated serendipity and reflective failure: Exploring queer game mechanics and queerness in games via queer temporality	Hantsbarger, M., Troiano, G. M., To, A., & Hartevelde, C.	2022	<i>Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction (CHI PLAY)</i>	queer mechanics studying LGBTQIA+ players queer playtesters	game studies
"You can't be deadnamed in a video game": Transgender and gender diverse adolescents' use of video game avatar creation for gender-affirmation and exploration	McKenna, J. L., Wang, Y.-C., Williams, C. R., McGregor, K., & Boskey, E. R.	2022	<i>Journal of LGBT Youth</i>	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship gender-related experimentation	psychology / medical studies
From battleground to playground: The video game avatar as transitional phenomenon for a transgender patient	Rivera, S.	2022	<i>Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association</i>	avatar-player relationship queerness as play studying LGBTQIA+ payers case study	psychology / medical studies

Queer gender identities in game-related spaces

Sex lives in <i>Second Life</i>	Brookey, R. A., & Cannon, K. L.	2009	<i>Critical Studies in Media Communication</i>	<i>Second Life</i> in-game community transgender player experiences	game studies
Streaming your identity: Navigating the presentation of gender and sexuality through live streaming	Freeman, G., & Wohn, D. Y.	2020	<i>Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW)</i>	community studies streaming LGBTQIA+ genders	game studies
Attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity in online multiplayer gaming spaces	Gillin, L. E., & Signorella, M. L.	2023	<i>Psychological Reports</i>	community studies biases in gaming studying LGBTQIA+ players	psychology / medical studies
Talking to gaymers: Questioning identity, community and media representation	Shaw, A.	2012	<i>Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture</i>	studying LGBTQIA+ players web site studies community studies	game studies