

The Freedom To Play As Yourself.
Examining How Medium Specificity Allows For Marginalized
Identity Exploration.

Kelsey Vis
S1030182
Bachelor's Thesis – Arts and Culture
Elisa Fiore
10 June 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Game studies: A general description of the research field	4
Methodology	6
Assemblage, Video Games And Mods	8
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i> (2014) And Romance	12
<i>The Sims 4</i> (2014-Present), Victories And Flops	18
<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i> (2013-Present) And Queer Communities	23
Conclusion	27
Works cited	29
Bibliography	32
List of Figures	35

Introduction

The video game industry has been growing for ages. As the COVID pandemic forces us indoors, many take to video games as entertainment, escapism or a way to stay in touch and do activities with friends and loved ones. Some people have been playing video games for years; others are only just now getting into the hobby for lack of better things to do. Yet video games have largely been associated with straight white men. This was reflected in the often violent, racist, homophobic and misogynistic stories that games used to tell. In 2014 a group of self-proclaimed “gamers” started a campaign of targeted harassment aimed at minority journalists and industry professionals. Later this would be dubbed the GamerGate controversy, and while some argue it led to the growth of the alt-right (Lees), it is also a sign that video games were changing. Whether it is due to the popularity of free-to-play games such as Epic Games’ *Fortnite*, the growing demand for accessibility in options or a shift towards more diverse stories by both independent and mainstream game developers, gaming has seen a definite progressive shift.

But there have always been diverse gamers who found ways to infuse their identity into the games they played. Video games offer a unique agency that arguably cannot be found in other mediums: more than in other forms of art, video games allow their audience to become a participant in their stories. This agency allows the player to use the video game character as a vehicle or avatar to explore not only the game’s world but also to safely explore identities in ways they cannot in their real-life environment. This thesis will analyze the way this is achieved by exploring the following research question:

In what way does the medium specificity of video games with character creators published between 2014-2020 open up new ways for marginalized people to explore identity and representation?

Answering this question will provide insights into how combining both the gameplay and narrative aspects of video games allows one to establish and explore their identity in games that are not necessarily designed with space for them.

Game studies: A general description of the research field

Game studies as an academic discipline is a fairly recent phenomenon that has only grown over the past few years (Mukherjee 1). In the discipline there appears to be two strands of theory: Ludologists and Narratologists. The former see games as primarily games, though they do admit game developers may have artistic ambitions. Among the Ludologists is Jesper Juul, a video game theorist who has published several books on video games and runs an academic blog about the field. For Ludologists such as game theorist Markku Eskelinen, the story is extraneous.

On the other hand, the Narratologists are not a unified group. Professor Janet Murray authored *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), in which she argues for an approach where the players are “the recipient for an externally authored world” (Mukherjee 4). Murray sees video games as a medium that can depict human life in ways that was impossible before (Murray 11). She offers up the possibility of replaying a situation with a different (cultural) viewpoint to see how it ends differently as one of the new possibilities that video games offer, while also remarking on video games offering access to expressiveness (12). At the same time professor Espen Aarseth introduces the idea of video games as ergodic literature: meaning a sort of literature that invites the audience to utilize more skills than just reading and turning pages (Mukherjee 5).

The academic camps of Ludologists and Narratologists appear starkly opposed, to the point of annoying video game designers who have seen a lack of common verbiage. Professor Souvik Mukherjee suggests a more flexible framework to study video games, as strict division ends up missing the complexity of video games-as-text: assemblage. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Mukherjee puts forward the idea of a need to study the multiple characteristics of video games rather than simply the narrative of gameplay. This is where the concept of assemblage comes in. Rather than envisioning a video game as a fixed end product, thinking of games as assemblages allows us to study them as ‘dynamic bodies’ that exist in relation to other objects. A video game is influenced by other objects and in turn influences these objects (Mukherjee 33). These objects can range from the controller used to play the game with to the player themselves and the way a video game can affect their mood. Vital is the fact that assemblage includes the players themselves. One of the medium specific characteristics of video games is how they allow the players to engage with the fictional world in a way that gives them more agency than a film or novel. This sense of agency allows for unexpected results as players often find unintended ways to break the game. By envisioning the player just as integral to a game’s experience as the gameplay and stories, one can begin to understand the way video games are capable of telling diverse stories outside of the creators’ intentions.

Finally, using assemblage allows me to take into account ‘mods’ or player made video game modifications that can be used to alter or upgrade graphics, quality of life improvements or even change characters’ sexualities in romance games. Though much has been written and continues to be written about diversity in games, most of this literature focuses on the narratives of games. Using assemblage, the idea of player agency and mods allows for a closer look at the more subtle ways players might reshape video game narratives into something more diverse.

Methodology

This thesis is an analysis of three video games taken as ‘texts’ from various genres: Bioware’s *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), EA’s *The Sims 4* (2014-present) and Square Enix’ *Final Fantasy XIV* (2013-present). All of these games offer character creation, but they are all a different type of game; *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a choice-based action roleplaying. *The Sims 4* is a life-simulation; and *Final Fantasy XIV* is a massively multi online roleplaying game. Therefore, while they all offer character customization, they all offer a different way of expressing and exploring one’s identity.

To analyze them, I will base myself upon the methodology outlined by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton, which divides games up into four examinable parts: object inventory, interface study, interaction mapping and gameplay log. Taking stock of the object inventory is useful because it allows for examining how items are used in games; are they more valuable than other characters? Is the player meant to collect them or use them? What are the game’s priorities? Interface study allows for a similar examination of what the player interacts or interfaces with. Examining not only the ease of use, but also what options an interface allows a player will reveal which information is privileged and prioritized and how free players are. Interaction mapping is more story-related: it looks at how the player’s avatar interacts with non-playable characters (NPCs) and other player characters. This is arguably where the bulk of the story takes place. Interaction mapping can give a researcher valuable insights about traditional stereotypes and themes. Finally, the gameplay log is less interested in what options are offered to the player, and more about what unintended interactions can happen during the actual gameplay (Consalvo and Dutton).

One problem for this thesis is that Consalvo and Dutton’s original methodology does not take player-made modifications (mods) into account. Mods work on two levels: the visual

level, where modders swap out or alter the game's designs, maps and character models, and on a gameplay level, where modders alter the gameplay mechanics and rules (Welch). Mods can alter games on all four aspects of Consalvo and Dutton's methodology; from changes to the interface to whole new gameplay mechanics that would change the gameplay logs, mods take on a variety of shapes and forms. One way around this is to think of how video games function as an assemblage, as will be explained later, and pay special attention to the difference mods make.

When working on a methodology for analyzing games, Aarseth suggested playing the game in question, reading reviews and studying the design as some of the most valuable ways of analyzing games (Consalvo and Dutton). Reviews will prove useful to gain insights on issues that I myself have missed. Where possible, I will also take developer interviews into consideration. Examining the developer's intentions will better show the gap between intended and unintended gameplay. In order to combine all these aspects and see how they influence each other; it is useful to think of video games as an assemblage that includes the video game, the player, the mods and the developers.

Assemblage, Video Games And Mods

To understand why the concept of assemblage is useful for analysing video games, it is helpful to go back to video games of the past. Games have come a long way from the tennis-like game *Pong* (1972). In *Pong*, one of the oldest video games, the objective is to keep the game bouncing back and forth on the black screen for as long as possible. The design was minimal and the story non-existent. It is no surprise then that there are plenty of Ludologists who fiercely believe video games are less or even incapable of telling a story. Yet the storytelling potential of games has come a long way. Santa Monica's *God of War* (2018) can be seen as an exploration of toxic masculinity; reviewers have called it a "thoughtful fable about a man contending with surpassing his sins to keep them from his child", "excellent story" and a "new bar for storytelling" (MetaCritic). It is equally telling that a variety of games now offer a "story mode". These modes frequently adjust the game's difficulty so that players can focus on the story more—but they do not remove the gameplay. Story mode therefore is not equal to watching a movie, as much of the story takes place *during* game play. Interactivity here is key.

While interactivity has always been a core component of video games, something else has grown more prominent since the early days: the concept of choices. While originally players made choices while playing, i.e. how their character would move or what upgrades to take, many games now offer dialogue options and other story-altering choices. This attribute has become increasingly more explicit and popular (Muriel and Crawford 139). From life simulation franchise *the Sims* to action roleplaying game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) or the entirety of the visual novel genre—all of these are video games that emphasise player choice. Interactivity and choice have often been seen as the main factors that separate video games from other media (Muriel and Crawford 138). In research done by Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford into video game agency, participants experienced video games as a more

interactive medium (147). Yet while the possibilities may seem endless, players are limited by the game's rules and programming—or are they?

Some games are capable of being modified by so-called “mods,” files and programs made by players meant to change some of the games' parameters. The people who create these mods, colloquially called “modders,” often do this as a labor of love: most mods are non-commercial and free to download (Welch). These mods can vary from different types of hair, clothes, new objects for games like *the Sims*, to bug fixes, gameplay alterations or even entirely new sections of a game. Modders are always finding out new ways to interact and transform the game texts (Welch). While some mods are made for explicitly lewd purposes and therefore have given several modding communities bad names, some of them serve very different functions.

Professor T.L. Taylor offers another example of a mod, CTRA, which is used to help coordinate in the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*. Rather than being a visual mod or an asset swap, CTRA adjusts the interface of the game. Taylor posits that the mod almost functions as a 41st player in a 40 player event, calling out important gameplay mechanics and thus aiding the team (335). CTRA fulfills an important need in interface study: coordinating chaotic encounters by adjusting and interacting with the pre-existing interface. There are other needs that mods fulfill: mods created by modders that perform what Tom Welch, borrowing from Gayatri Spivak, calls “necessarily affective labor”. He uses an example of a mod for farming simulator *Harvest Moon* called *True Love Edition*. The creator of the mod swapped assets in order to make same-sex marriage a possibility. The modder therefore did labor that was not profitable in currency, but still offered value for the community and from an identity perspective (Welch). The value was in the pleasure of a space for a marginalized group.

Players are therefore able to alter the text both through play and modification. The video game is a text that is not unidirectional (Mukherjee 48). That is to say it both takes input and produces output. In its most basic form, the player reads and therefore interacts with the video game: the video game ‘reads’ this interaction and responds in turn. This goes for the player directing the bar in *Pong* the same as it goes for the player selecting an action in *the Sims*. Some might argue that players are targets manipulated by games (Mukherjee 55) while others suggest that a player is *both* “prisoner and active agent”: the game only comes into being by virtue of the player playing it (Muriel and Crawford 146). I would argue that this position is complicated by the existence of mods, which manipulate the parameters and possibility of games. The conflict between gameplay and story and limits and agency is therefore perhaps best thought through by using the concept of assemblage.

This is a term conceptualized by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. An assemblage consists out of a variety of parts that are not always necessarily uniform; its only unity is that it is a symbiosis, a “co-functioning” (DeLanda 1). It is a dynamic body: it exists in relation to other objects and is influenced by them (Mukherjee 33). A video game assemblage includes a whole range of objects: the gameplay and story, but also the console or device used to play the game, the box it came in and the art used for it, the mods and most importantly for this thesis: the player themselves. Studying an assemblage allows us to look not just at these individual agents. It allows us to look at the spaces in between, the ways all these factors interact and influence each other. An assemblage furthermore does not stand on its own; frequently it is part of other assemblages. The video game assemblage can be part of further assemblages such as the war assemblage (propaganda), the economic assemblage (video game and console sales) and the political assemblage (what is appropriate to show and do?). By including the player and their ability to interpret, interact with and change the game both on an in-game and systematic level in the video game assemblage, we open up the

possibility of studying how these players are capable of taking the reigns and telling diverse stories that the developers did not necessarily account for.

Some video game studies mention assemblage as a concept, but do not utilize it much within their analysis. I would argue that assemblage offers an interesting way of thinking about video games: it allows researchers to combine all factors of a video game, but also consider its broader context. This will prove especially fruitful when examining the latest installment of Bioware's multimedia *Dragon Age* franchise, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014) And Romance

Set in a fictional high fantasy world, BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) is the third game in the *Dragon Age* franchise. As an action roleplaying game that emphasizes choice and romance, this chapter will primarily focus on how queer sexuality is explored and treated in the game, and how the player can take this into their own hands. It will do so by examining the way that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is part of an assemblage that can be expanded by the way of mods.

From conception to release, it was already part of a Bioware-*Dragon Age* assemblage that includes comics, novels, encyclopedias and art books that are meant to create one overarching story. As with all games in this assemblage, *Inquisition* highly emphasizes the importance of the player's choices: so much so that BioWare encourages the player to implement the choices made in the previous two installments through an online tool, *Dragon Age Keep*. While *Dragon Age: Inquisition* innovates little when it comes to object inventory or interface study, it presents a wealth of interactions to map and gameplay to analyze. Inventory wise, the player has 9 categories: weapons, armor, accessoires, upgrades, valuables, crafting materials and schematics. The first five categories only have limited space, in order to force the player to update their gear to improve their character. The other categories offer endless space. Interface wise, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* has a fairly standard one that offers a health bar, a class based resource tracker, and the health of the characters you travel with. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the interface for the purpose of this thesis is the approval/disapproval system. The player character has several companions join the player's characters endeavors. When the player makes a choice, the interface will show whether these companions approve or disapprove. A mage character will approve of actions that support mages in the story, while the elvish character will disapprove of anti-elf actions.

Too much disapproval will lead to companions leaving. The player is thus made to feel they impact the game's world through both individual choices and companion approval. Small choices early on may be remarked upon by the environment later, while larger choices may unlock different aspects of the ending and close others off. Can this (limited) agency be seen as a part of the assemblage? Possibly: it is here where the game and the player's desires come together, though arguably the influence a player exerts is limited by the programmed options—in a basic version of the game, anyway.

The player exerts more influence during the character creation, which involves some of the most important choices in the first minutes of gameplay. After starting, the player is offered an extensive character creation tool that forces them to make several choices. These include what type of combat class they want to utilize (archer, melee warrior or mage) followed by one of the four potential races: human, elf, dwarf or type of bull-person called Qunari. Finally, a player selects whether they want to play a male or a female character and designs their appearance by moving things around on graph-like grids to change the features, colors and hairstyle. There are two important elements here: first is the ability to design a player's visual appearance to their own wishes. Like many games of the time, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers only limited options when it comes to ethnically diverse features: while offering a wider range of skin tones than previous installments, the hair options for Black people are limited (Parrish) and there are very little options for Asian people, nor is there an option to select a non-normative body. But another important element is the choice of race and class. In the world of *Dragon Age*, mages are feared and mistreated. An important story element in *Inquisition* is the fallout of a mage rebellion. Simultaneously, the player's race also changes how NPCs interact with you. Elves are a persecuted minority in the world of *Dragon Age*: persecution has led them to losing knowledge of their ways and history. Picking an elf means that the player is faced with insults and prejudice at several junctures, even as

Elvish history grows increasingly important to the plot. Likewise, picking the Qunari, who are seen as hostile would-be conquerors, also leaves the player to face prejudice. Interestingly enough, there is some back and forth from several writers about whether or not in-game minorities have real world cultural analogies (Gaider). Like any assemblage, what is important is how objects influence each other here. Gaider claims he regrets “explaining the cultures with quick analogies”: evidently the assemblage of *Dragon Age*’s world was influenced by our own. Here we can glimpse how the relation between writer and the larger cultural world affects the assemblage: Gaider using real world cultures as in-game analogies has led to writing decisions that influence the franchise at large.



Figure 1: Screenshot of a romance scene taken by the author from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, BioWare, 2013.

Certain choices will also offer the players different dialogue options. When the player has to make a dialogue choice, they are faced with a mosaic circle that shows what kind of interaction each option is intended to be. Elf-specific dialogue options are marked by the symbol for elves: romance dialogue options are marked with a heart. Especially the latter

plays a big part in *Dragon Age*. A romance can be started when a player has the appropriate amount of approval from a character. The player has to keep track of approval themselves: while the game will indicate whether a character (dis)approves ‘a little’ or ‘greatly’ after they have made a choice, there is no overall indicator of approval. It has to be gauged by interacting with the NPC and seeing if they respond favorably. While a player can play the entire game without starting a single romance, the continual inclusion of romances implies that there are many players who enjoy them.

The franchise has always had queer romances. In *Inquisition*, it is not only gender but also race that have implications for interactions with several NPCs: depending on choices made in the character creation, players can be locked out of several romances from the get-go. At the same time, there is no option in the character creation screen to select the character’s sexuality, and it is up to the player to (informally) establish it through romance. For most characters, their sexual orientation is not a part of their characterization. There is one exception: the gay foreign noble Dorian Pavus. Dorian hails from an enemy faction where continuing one’s bloodline is more important than happiness. After facing conversion therapy from his own family, he fled and joined the player character. A part of his romance storyline includes facing his father and coming to terms with having more than a purely sexual relationship with a man. Dorian’s romance is the only romance that deals with inherent queer themes such as this. Neither the lesbian romance nor the bisexual romances deal with such themes. Yet because of the fantasy world’s supposed acceptance, there are no options to commiserate with the characters for example, nor are there other ways to express one’s identity. A lesbian player character can find out about the horrid treatment Dorian has undergone, but dialogue options can only ever sympathize, and never commiserate.

The player’s choices are therefore largely limited by the preprogrammed options. Yet there are ways to expand the set of choices. This is done by adding a new factor to the

assemblage: mods on the game's PC version. Some of these are cosmetic, such as improved and diverse hair, skin tones and different outfits. One such type of cosmetic mods are those that change NPCs to look like their concept art counterparts, which feature a more diverse array of characters than implemented in the final game. Other mods are quality of life improvements, such as unlimited inventory slots. But perhaps the most interesting example is the romance mods. There are mods that open up certain locked romances, including the few heterosexual romances. This is widely regarded as adding more representation. But there is also a mod that opens Dorian's romance, tied to his identity as gay man, up for female Inquisitors. There is a similar mod that turns the franchise's sole lesbian romance bisexual. This is potentially an erasure of the homophobia and struggle queer people still face in reality. For many queer players this is upsetting, as it further erases already marginalized identities (Hart). There is a similar issue with characters of color: there are mods that add more diverse options, but also mods that turn characters of color white (Hart). Mods thus show where there might be a tension between player's desires to see themselves in game, and the developers' decisions, but also between one player's desires and the next as in the case. One such example of developers-player tension is Solas, a companion NPC who turns out to be a secret antagonist. He only starts relationships with female elves but was originally intended to be bisexual (Weekes). The developers decided against it, fearing that with Solas' status as antagonist would make him fall into a trope that paints all bisexual people as depraved and evil. While the developers were well-intentioned, there was still enough desire to warrant the "Equal Opportunity Solas" mod, which has 13.000 downloads on NexusMods per May 2021.

This mod provides an interesting case, as it shows how even within a single assemblage there might be multiple instances of friction and conflict. By adding mods, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* thus becomes a part of a larger assemblage that is made up out of far

more than the game itself. It includes the developers, the modders and their mods, the player and their desires, but also cultural tensions such as a call for more diverse characters and (fear of) biphobic tropes. The developers made certain decisions that influence the player's enjoyment. The players in turn exercised what direct influence they have on their individual copy of the game and turned to modders, installing their wares in order to make the game more compatible with their desires. By examining *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in an assemblage, we can see how disparate parts have and will continue to influence each other depending on each player's individual engagement with the game. And while *Inquisition* is a single player game, nonetheless group practices around collective software use have sprung up, as with the "Equal Opportunity Solas" mod where over 10.000 people have used it. With the opportunity to expand and alter the assemblage, it becomes clear why tension between video games and the desire for them to have more diverse options might not actually be a deterrent. This is not uncommon in video games: as the next chapter shall demonstrate, *The Sims 4* also deals with a similar tension between creator and consumer. But as it turns out, *The Sims 4* has its own issues: paywalls.

The Sims 4 (2014-Present), Victories And Flops

Compared to *Dragon Age*, *the Sims 4* has almost no story other than one that the player makes up. Instead, the game focuses on creating a character and manipulating their environment. This chapter will therefore examine how the options presented to the player by the developer can be both progressive and lacking—and how mods once again diversify this assemblage. Life-simulation game *the Sims 4* itself was released in 2014 by EA-Maxis, and continually updated with expansions. A potentially infinite game, *the Sims* does not have one true objective. In the game the players take care of Sims by ordering them to complete tasks that will help them fulfill their needs, earn money and buy new objects. While the game frequently has humorous or fantastical encounters, such as the ability to become a backyard astronaut, ghosts stirring up trouble in one's house or skeleton maids, *the Sims* is far more grounded in reality than *Dragon Age* or *Final Fantasy XIV*. Like *Dragon Age*, *the Sims* is also part of a franchise, but unlike the former, *the Sims 4* has no story to connect it to the other installments.

In *the Sims 4*, players can either select one of the game's pre-existing Sims families to play with or make their own. If they decide to create their own, they are shown the Create-A-Sim (CAS) screen. Here the players can change the entirety of a Sim's appearance. While some career-specific clothes have to be unlocked through career achievements, the majority requires no in-game currency to obtain. That being said, *the Sims 4* is part of a larger assemblage that involves over thirty pieces of extra downloadable content (DLC). In order to access these, the player has to buy them using real money. As of June 1, a complete set costs over 800 euros. These DLC packs will increase the amount of CAS items, furniture, game mechanics and fictional neighborhoods to play in. Some of this DLC brought diverse, ethnic hairstyles and fashion options to the game's collection. While on the one hand the diversity

was sorely needed, on the other hand it is problematic that players of color have to pay extra in order to see themselves represented by the game's developers. Here we can see how *the Sims 4* is part of three different assemblages: *the Sims 4* assemblage with all its DLC; an economic assemblage where EA-Maxis pushes the players to spend as much money as possible; and finally a societal assemblage, where there is a tension between a player, their desire for representation and the aforementioned economic assemblage.

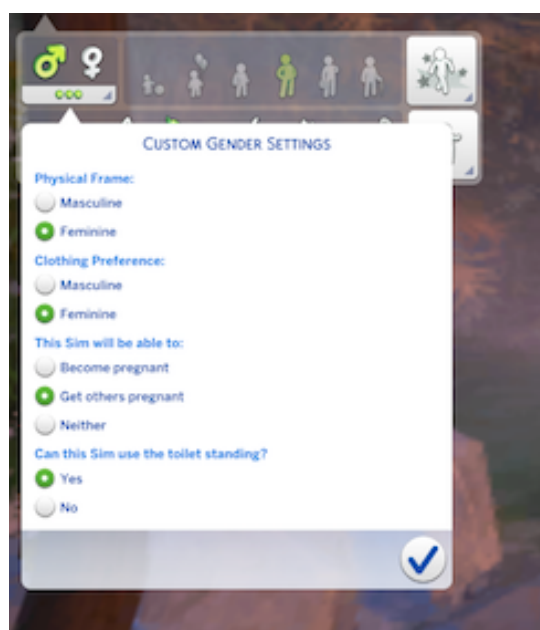


Figure 2: Screenshot of CAS' gender option taken by the author from *The Sims 4*, EA, 2021.

That being said, CAS received two large updates. In 2016, the game was updated in order to be more inclusive of genderqueer people. Whereas prior people had to select whether their Sim was a man or a woman, they now could select from a variety of options such as masculine or feminine frame and clothing style, whether they could pee sitting down or standing up and whether they were capable of becoming or getting someone else pregnant. In a statement, the studio claimed they wanted players to be able to represent themselves in the game (EA). Even in 2021, *the Sims 4*'s character creation tools are some of the most robust when it comes to gender. Unfortunately, despite the fact that *the Sims 4* team wanted people to be able to represent themselves, they appear not to have fared as well with ethnicity as they

have with gender. As mentioned earlier, ethnic fashion and hairstyles were largely behind a paywall. Fans spent years requesting better skin tones, pointing out the base game options were ashen, and makeup looked washed out. In December 2020, *the Sims 4* team released an update that implemented 100 skin tones, better makeup and three new hairstyles to the game. Thus, player demand influenced the assemblage, likely in the hopes that they would not affect the economic assemblage.

Once the player finishes designing their Sim, the interface changes to show the larger world. Now they can place their Sim and design them a home with a separate interface or buy one of the pre-designed ones. Finally, the player is tasked with fulfilling their needs as shown in one of the many tabs, which also include careers and relationships. *The Sims* franchise has always been progressive: even in the original game, Sims could have queer relationships though none of them include a storyline like in *Dragon Age*. In *the Sims* interface, there is no difference between a heterosexual or queer romantic relationship. There are no settings that need to be changed in order to unlock queer relationships. While Sims might reject romantic advances from others, it is never due to gender. The only requirements are that Sims are of the appropriate age: the game does not allow for nonconsensual relationships. Sims can adopt children together regardless of gender, or try for a baby should they have the appropriate settings selected. All of this so far falls under the category of gameplay log, but even in examining the object inventory of the game, it becomes clear that bigotry is simply not present in the game. Items can be bought with in-game currency from the Build-and-Buy screen. In-game currency can be acquired through a career or by entering cheat codes. Salary is not decided by gender or sexuality. Sims can use beds for sexual or romantic interactions regardless of their partner's gender. *The Sims* makes no distinction between the gender identity of a Sim when using an object, and merely looks for example and their bathroom settings. When it comes to the interaction map, Sims will similarly face no homophobia,

racism or misogyny. In theory, every player character can become a NPC if the player changes households to play with, and vice versa. Examining the gameplay and interaction therefore shows that queer relationships and gender have been normalized: they are simply unremarkable in the world of *the Sims*. For some, a world where they don't have to think about persecution, worry about rejection or identity-based violence is ideal. Some players want more realism though, and this is where the modding community comes in.

Like with *Dragon Age*, mods expand the assemblage of *the Sims 4*. The game has a highly prolific modding community with its own dedicated sites such as ModTheSims and TheSimsResource. Some modders make individual items: others release item packs that are on par with *the Sims 4*'s official releases. While mods for some games largely replace existing files with new files, *the Sims 4* allows the implementation of completely new items. It is even so mod-friendly that there is a special button enables or disables them. Mods have long since been the community's solution to what they see as the flaws or lacks of the game. Examples are custom skintones, ethnic hair and clothing mods long before these options were officially implemented in the game; queer pride items such as flags, clothing options or other objects; feature presets that allow for more diverse faces and mods that allow a player to set their Sim's sexual orientation. Other mods are script mods, capable of changing the gameplay itself. One example is WickedWhims, a highly popular script mod which adds an expansive sex functionality to the game that the child-friendly developers have no interest in adding. Ironically, it is also the modding community where players might face more close-mindedness. While official CAS options are available regardless of gender, some modders limit their CAS mods to a specific gender. While one mod allows a player to set their Sim's sexuality, it also introduces a "homophobia" personality trait to the game that randomly generated Sims may have. As modders are not part of any company or formal institution, they are therefore less

beholden to the principles of a company such as EA, and less likely to face widespread backlash.

The assemblage surrounding *the Sims 4* is more push-and-pull than for example *Dragon Age*. Part of this has to do with the fact that *the Sims 4* is continuously updating still, with new DLC being released periodically. Especially in this case it is easy to see how objects in an assemblage may influence each other. Because of the game's model, the fans' demands influence the developers' decisions, which in turn influences future demands and sales. In the meantime, mods further expand the assemblage with features that the game's developers would never add, such as sexual intercourse. This is also where individual player's desires shine through: some want the sexual component. Others want to express their queer identity through pride items, or prefer to take a more realistic approach and install scripts that allow one to select their sexuality. As shown before, assemblages overlap and are part of other assemblages. Here, we can see that the player is part of a larger community assemblage and an individual assemblage, that is established when they play and select which mods to install that fellow community members do not. Like the game and the developers, the players are also part of multiple assemblages. But mods are not the only way to express and explore one's identity in video games, as we will see in the final case study: *Final Fantasy XIV*.

Final Fantasy XIV (2013-Present) And Queer Communities

Final Fantasy XIV, also often styled *FFXIV*, is Square Enix' massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that was relaunched in 2013. As the name implies, *FFXIV* is part of a larger franchise. Like *Dragon Age*, the *Final Fantasy* assemblage involves multimedia objects, but unlike *Dragon Age* there is no overarching story that connects the installments. That is not to say that they are not at all connected: installment of the game's franchise has recurring motifs, themes and creatures that link each other. Like many MMORPGs, it is continually improving and updating, with a fourth major expansion titled *Endwalker* expected to launch in November 2021. And as the words "massive multiplayer" imply, *FFXIV* is an online game where the community is key. While the previous chapters have focused on mods, this chapter will focus on how in-game community and interaction allow players to explore and express their identities.

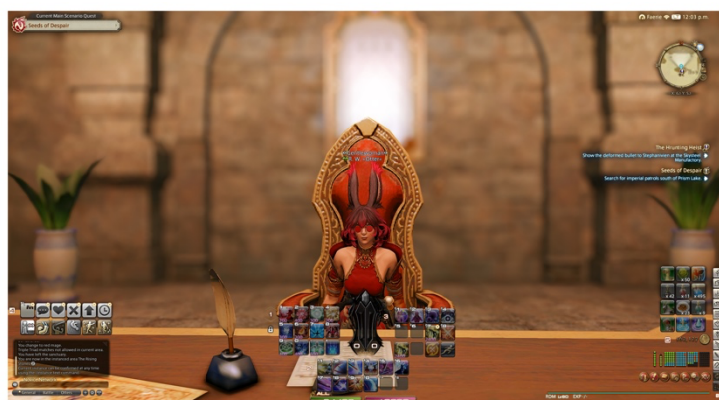
Much *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *FFXIV* takes place in a fictional realm where the player takes control of a customizable player character who plays a vital role in the game's story. Like the other two games, *FFXIV* starts off with an interface that allows the player to customize their character. While the gameplay does not treat you any differently based on race and gender, it should be noted that visually, race and gender do influence each other more than in the other games: some of the races only have one gender option available, while several of the races have a strong sexual dimorphism. *FFXIV's* customization also differs in two important ways: players cannot adjust sliders, but only pick features from a predetermined set, and it is far more difficult to change a character's appearance after creation. While it is possible to change hairstyle and color, race, gender or skin tone changes can only be adjusted after procuring the means through real life money. After designing their appearance, the player then picks a class to start with, though the system is designed in such a way that a player can pick up every class on a single character. It is important to note that

while occasionally being offered dialogue choices, the players cannot meaningfully influence the more-linear story.

Studying the interface shows that *FFXIV* allows a huge amount of customization: every single piece of user interface can be moved around, scaled or even be removed from view. What info is privileged is entirely up to the player. It is interesting to note that while the game has a large social community, most of that is not influenced by the game's interface. While the game allows players to chat, group up in various forms, or to have their character perform emotes, the social structure focuses more on spending time together and being fashionable. A frequent joke is that "fashion is endgame", meaning that once the player has finished the story, what is left is to be the most fashionable. This ties into the object inventory. Objects can broadly be divided into consumable items, crafting materials, furniture and wearable items. This last category can be divided into actual usable armor and items that can be used for fashion. Fashion can be expensive: players can either buy pieces with real life money or with large amounts of in-game cash. Pieces can be obtained on the marketboard, where the price is informally determined by novelty, scarcity and attractiveness. Fashion is one of the major ways players can express themselves, and it is not uncommon to see male characters walk around in skimpy outfits reminiscent of gay culture.

Fashion is entirely a social and communal reward, and community is therefore perhaps far the most interesting part of the *FFXIV* assemblage. In the other case studies, communities sprung up outside of the single player games. In *FFXIV*, community takes place *within* the game and, much like real life, has socially established in and out groups. This aspect in turn influences the game's marketboard, but also social etiquette such as what is and is not acceptable when playing together. With the focus on a character's appearance and the ability to defy gender norms, it is not surprising *FFXIV* has several well-established queer communities spread throughout its many servers. One example is the Faerie server, where

several communities such as PRIDE and ACE thrive, and where many players make express themselves as queer through chat, fashion and references. The game itself does somewhat offer fertile ground for queer community: NPCs will flirt with the player regardless of gender, and player characters can “pledge their everlasting devotion to their significant others in a Ceremony of Eternal Bonding” (Square Enix). These ceremonies, introduced in Patch 2.45 in December 2014, are offered in three different tiers. One of the tiers is free, but all of them do the same thing: allow players to get married to other players, regardless of the player character’s sex. The more expensive tiers simply offer the players more options when planning the ceremony, but all give the characters a choice in attire. They can either pick a gown or tuxedo, which can be worn regardless of gender. These in-game marriages therefore do not seem to make any distinction to straight and gay marriages. The game’s story will never remark on the player’s ceremony but does offer certain gameplay perks. In addition to a variety of exclusive items and hairstyles it also comes with in-game perks such as instant teleportation to the others’ side. At the same time, the promotion of the Ceremony shows only a male and a female character, and there are no prominent queer NPC couples. While some characters can be considered as queer due to flirting with the Warrior of Light regardless of gender, there is overall very little representation that is not player based.



Figures 3 & 4: Screenshots of the interface, both modded (left) and unmodded (right) taken by author from *Final Fantasy XIV*, Square Enix, 2021.

Like in the previous games, *FFXIV* can use mods—but they are far more of a grey area. They are tolerated as long as they are not mentioned. Mods can be divided into gameplay mods, that keep track of the player's performance, and visual mods. Some mods merely add a filter to the game to adjust the visual settings: others are texture overlays or simply change hairs or outfits. Unlike *the Sims 4* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* mods, there are no options to add more queerness to the game on a gameplay level. While *The Sims 4* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* largely rely on mods for a queer exploration of the games, *FFXIV*'s queer identity exploration mostly comes from the community aspect. While of course players can explore their gender identity in the other case studies as well, vital here is the interaction with real people in real time. It is interesting to note that transgender gamers exploring their gender identity through MMOs is a known phenomenon, such as in Katherine Angel Cross' account. After coming out as trans, she connected with various other players who had explored their identity through MMOs, as roleplaying offered them a way to “safely and comprehensively explor[e] a subjectivity from which they were otherwise restricted” (75). The *FFXIV* assemblage involves people and social interaction more than it does mods. The community has developed its own practices around the software use, and flourishes in the space between what Taylor calls “emergent play and developer revisions” (332). Perhaps we can even see each server as its own assemblage of game, community and individual players: community practices common on Western servers do not necessarily flourish in the same way on for example Japanese servers. Here, we see that assemblages are also influenced by the norms of the cultures in which they exist. Assemblages are therefore dynamic, ever changing and hard to grasp, but nonetheless show us glimpses of how they influence the objects in them.

Conclusion

Evershifting and overlapping, Taylor was right when he implied assemblages are elusive. Nonetheless, using the three case studies we can start to make sense of the shapes they take, even if at times it might seem that these assemblages are largely similar. In essence, all of them take on a basic shape: all of the three case studies involve games made by developers, published by publishers, played by players. All of them involve a game console, peripherals like keyboards, mice or controllers. Each of these games can be modded. All of them need to be bought to be played, and so all three games are part of an economic assemblage. Yet while at the base level, each assemblage is similar, there are also large differences. Part of this has to do with genre: *Dragon Age* is a choice based roleplaying game with romance narrative, which the other two case studies do not. *The Sims 4* offers the players a seemingly unlimited freedom with no stigmatization, but in turn lacks the in-game communities of *FFXIV*. These are different types of games and thus will be interacted with differently.

So what can we learn from these similar-but-different assemblages when it comes to the way medium specificity allows marginalized players to explore and express their identities? Video game agency is not clear cut. As mentioned before, some consider the player hostage to the game, while others point out games come only into being as the player plays them. While in some games it might seem like the possibilities are endless, eventually the player will still hit a pre-programmed wall that stops them having truly unlimited agency. Yet even within these limits, there are options for players: queercoding their character through visual appearance or romance choices for example. But while in other media the consumer might need to look for subtext or expand the assemblage through fanfiction or fan art that exist outside of the work in order to find a mirror of their own identity, for video games there are mods. By considering mods as one part of the assemblage, the player

enhances the medium *as* they are consuming it. This way, the player *directly* influences the assemblage.

Of course, not every mod serves the purposes and needs of marginalized people—and not every person will be in agreement about what these needs are. While mods such as “Equal Opportunity Solas” can be considered Spivak’s necessary affective labor for some, others might find it disagreeable for the same reason as the developers. Then there are the mods that whitewash characters, straightwash romances or limit the expansive gender freedom of *the Sims 4* by offering clothing options that only works for those who adhere to cisnormative standards. This also demonstrates a single assemblage might be rife with tensions not only between players and developers, but also players and their peers. At the same time, a community might be a place in of itself where marginalized players can express their identity, as shown by *FFXIV*. The medium specificity here of video games, namely the ability to make certain choices about a character’s appearance, allows for a possibly gender-affirming experience for trans players.

Like assemblages, identities are complicated, overlapping and evershifting. For example there is no one way to be queer; there is no one true Black identity. Different people need different things—and the same person that might need one thing today, can need or want something else entirely the next. It is perhaps for that reason that video games make for an ideal venue for identity exploration and expression. It is that unidirectional quality, that ability to directly influence the assemblage, that allows players to do the affective labor to create a space that suits them. While games have become a lot more open and diverse since that hateful era of GamerGate, there are still those who rail against any sign of video games becoming a welcoming, open space. It is in these moments that it is important to remember: diverse players have always been carving out their own spaces in games, and they are not about to stop.

Works cited

- Consalvo, Mia and Nathan Dutton. "Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games." *Game Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, December 2006, http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/consalvo_dutton. Accessed 8 April 2021.
- Cross, Katherine Angel. "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40 no. 2/3, 2012. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333474>. Accessed 27 May 2021.
- DeLanda, Manuel. "Introduction." *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/lib/ubnru-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5011739>. Pp. 1-8
- Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Windows PC Version, BioWare, 2014.
- Final Fantasy XIV*, Windows PC Version, Square Enix, 2021.
- Gaider, David [@davidgaider]. "I don't feel differently. If there's anything I regret about early DA, it's trying to explain the cultures with quick analogies." *Twitter*, 25 June 2018. <https://twitter.com/davidgaider/status/1011030591297355776>. Accessed 31 May 2021.
- God of War (2018) Reviews*. MetaCritic, 20 April 2018. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/god-of-war>. Accessed 5 April 2021.
- Hart, Aimee. "Video Game Mods: The Good, The Bad The Downright Homophobic." *Gaymingmag*, 3 August 2020. <https://gaymingmag.com/2020/08/video-game-mods-homophobic/> Accessed 14 May 2021.
- Lees, Matthew. "What GamerGate Should Have Taught Us About The 'Alt-Right'", *The Guardian*, 1 December 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>. Accessed 2 June 2021.

Mukherjee, Souvik. *Video games and storytelling*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2, Mar. 2020, pp. 138–157, doi:10.1177/1555412017750448.

Murray, Janet. "When Stories Come Alive: Janet H. Murray Sees an Exciting Future for Electronic Creativity." *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2001, pp. 11–12. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4023601. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

Parrish, Ash. "New to *Dragon Age*? Start With the Third Game, *Inquisition*." *Kotaku*, 12 April 2020. <https://kotaku.com/new-to-dragon-age-start-with-the-third-game-inquisition-1845813817>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

siekesroe "Equal Opportunity Solas", *NexusMods*, <https://www.nexusmods.com/dragonageinquisition/mods/381>. Accessed 14 May 2021.

Square Enix. "Patch Notes 2.45." *Final Fantasy XIV Lodestone*, 9 December 2014. <https://na.finalfantasyxiv.com/lodestone/topics/detail/e131753e64b2980c646e605b11cf56b933b99601>. Accessed 27 May 2021

Taylor, T. L. "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Oct. 2009, pp. 331–339, doi:10.1177/1555412009343576. Accessed 5 April 2021.

The Sims 4. Windows PC Version, EA, 2021.

Weekes, Patrick [@PatrickWeekes] "@spazmogonzales Actually, no. We knew how some people would think of him, and we wanted to avoid this trope: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DepravedBisexual>" *Twitter*, 24 September 2015. <https://twitter.com/PatrickWeekes/status/646891965045448708>. Accessed 31 May 2021.

Welch, Tom. "The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods." *Game Studies*, vol. 18 no. 3, December 2018, <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch>. Accessed 8 April 2021.

Bibliography

- Consalvo, Mia and Nathan Dutton. "Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games." *Game Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, December 2006, http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/consalvo_dutton. Accessed 8 April 2021.
- Cross, Katherine Angel. "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40 no. 2/3, 2012. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333474>. Accessed 27 May 2021.
- DeLanda, Manuel. "Introduction." *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/lib/ubnru-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5011739>. Pp. 1-8
- Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Windows PC Version, BioWare, 2014.
- Final Fantasy XIV*, Windows PC Version, Square Enix, 2021.
- Gaider, David [@davidgaider]. "I don't feel differently. If there's anything I regret about early DA, it's trying to explain the cultures with quick analogies." *Twitter*, 25 June 2018. <https://twitter.com/davidgaider/status/1011030591297355776>. Accessed 31 May 2021.
- God of War (2018) Reviews*. MetaCritic, 20 April 2018. <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/god-of-war>. Accessed 5 April 2021.
- Gray, Kishonna L., and David J. Leonard. *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*. University of Washington Press, 2018. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvd7w7f6. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.
- Hart, Aimee. "Video Game Mods: The Good, The Bad The Downright Homophobic." *Gaymingmag*, 3 August 2020. <https://gaymingmag.com/2020/08/video-game-mods-homophobic/> Accessed 14 May 2021.

- Lees, Matthew. "What GamerGate Should Have Taught Us About The 'Alt-Right'", *The Guardian*, 1 December 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>. Accessed 2 June 2021.
- Mukherjee, Souvik. *Video games and storytelling*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2, Mar. 2020, pp. 138–157, doi:10.1177/1555412017750448.
- Murray, Janet. "When Stories Come Alive: Janet H. Murray Sees an Exciting Future for Electronic Creativity." *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2001, pp. 11–12. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4023601. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.
- Parrish, Ash. "New to *Dragon Age*? Start With the Third Game, *Inquisition*." *Kotaku*, 12 April 2020. <https://kotaku.com/new-to-dragon-age-start-with-the-third-game-inquisition-1845813817>. Accessed 7 May 2021.
- Payne, Matthew Thomas, and Nina B. Huntemann. *How to Play Video Games*. Vol. 1, NYU Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv12fw8tn. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021
- Postigo, Hector. "Video Game Appropriation through Modifications: Attitudes Concerning Intellectual Property among Modders and Fans." *Convergence*, vol. 14, no. 1, Feb. 2008, pp. 59–74, doi:10.1177/1354856507084419.
- Pugh, Tison. *Chaucer's Losers, Nintendo's Children, and Other Forays in Queer Ludonarratology*. University of Nebraska Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvr43mbg. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021
- Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw, editors. *Queer Game Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

- Sherman, Sharon R. "Perils of the Princess: Gender and Genre in Video Games." *Western Folklore*, vol. 56, no. 3/4, 1997, pp. 243–258. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1500277. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.
- sieksroe "Equal Opportunity Solas", *NexusMods*,
<https://www.nexusmods.com/dragonageinquisition/mods/381>. Accessed 14 May 2021.
- Square Enix. "Patch Notes 2.45." *Final Fantasy XIV Lodestone*, 9 December 2014.
<https://na.finalfantasyxiv.com/lodestone/topics/detail/e131753e64b2980c646e605b11cf56b933b99601>. Accessed 27 May 2021
- Taylor, T. L. "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Oct. 2009, pp. 331–339, doi:10.1177/1555412009343576.
- Taylor, T. L. "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, Oct. 2009, pp. 331–339, doi:10.1177/1555412009343576. Accessed 5 April 2021.
- The Sims 4*. Windows PC Version, EA, 2021.
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah and Pat Harrigan. *First person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. The MIT Press, 2004.
- Weekes, Patrick [@PatrickWeekes] "@spazmogonzales Actually, no. We knew how some people would think of him, and we wanted to avoid this trope:
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DepravedBisexual>" *Twitter*, 24 September 2015. <https://twitter.com/PatrickWeekes/status/646891965045448708>. Accessed 31 May 2021.
- Welch, Tom. "The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods." *Game Studies*, vol. 18 no. 3, December 2018, <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch>. Accessed 8 April 2021.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot of a romance scene taken by the author from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, BioWare, 2013.

Figure 2: Screenshot of CAS' gender option taken by the author from *The Sims 4*, EA, 2021.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the author's customized interface taken from *Final Fantasy XIV*, Square Enix, 2021.

Figure 4: Screenshot of the author's customized interface (unmodded) taken from *Final Fantasy XIV*, Square Enix, 2021.