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Unpacking the Code: Game modification as a form of queer play.

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No sections of this thesis have been published.

Foreword

Video games have played a huge role in my life, and I can map out my own history tied into that of the development of gaming. Being four years old in 1998 and watching as my dad played *Half Life* on the family PC in the living room of my childhood home. Being shown *The Sims* by a family member in 2000 and begging my parents to buy me the series. Getting my first console in 2001 and playing *Final Fantasy X* until I knew every inch of the map, unlocking every secret, playing the game over and over again to experiment with the character-building aspect. Being gifted *The Sims 2* in 2004, then spending most of my teen years using it as an escape from the difficult reality of high school, posting on fan forums and interacting with other fans, playing legacy challenges and reading the stories people were writing using images from their games. Going to university and using my own money to buy myself a second-hand Xbox 360 in 2013 and picking up *Grand Theft Auto 4* to understand what all the hype for the series was about. Being forced to come back to my hometown, working late night bar shifts in 2016, buying *Saints Row 3* from a second hand shop to play during the day while I waited for my evening shift to start- getting confused by the narrative and why I should care about a character dying, and going back to the very same second hand shop to pick up the rest of the series before joining the fandom and developing my own character through fannish activities. Discovering *Stardew Valley* in 2019 as I finished my master's degree and entered into my PhD. Buying my own gaming PC during the first lockdown in 2020 and beginning to play through my dad's library of games on Steam, joining a *Minecraft* server with some online friends and learning how to play the game, letting them drag me through the environment to show me different aspects of the game as they worked on their megabuilds. To 2022, taking a break from writing this thesis and downloading *Cyberpunk 2077*, thinking that the game won't stick with me the same way *Saints Row* did in 2016, only to find myself spending my spare time in 2023 participating in the fandom.

Not only have video games played a crucial role in my life, but I can also trace the role modding has had within my own play practices. *The Sims 2* was my first exposure to modding, with the game including a custom content (CC) installer and an editing

program. My Sims were like dress-up dolls, little virtual avatars that I could try new clothing and hairs on, while I put them in new custom houses that used custom items. I found these things through fandom, with other players pointing me in the direction of their favourite CC. Many of the mods I am drawn to now as an adult I still find through fans and fannish content- with the source shifting from online forums to Discord and YouTube, as well as the dedicated mod platforms such as NexusMods and CurseForge. While I primarily mod for aesthetics and small gameplay tweaks, there is a whole range of different types of modification out there, from the small (such as an individual reskin) to the large (such as mods that add entirely new gameplay).

This thesis, while primarily exploring modification through a more academic lens, is still a love letter to game modification and fandom as a whole. While I have participated in many fandoms over the years, none have ever lasted as long as those that have been connected to video games.

Unpacking the Code: Game modification as a form of queer play.

With the fast development of new technologies around gaming and computing in the last 20 years, modding – traditionally considered part of hacker culture – has become a more accessible and widespread part of gaming culture than ever before. As game fandoms begin to adopt modders and create dedicated spaces for them within their communities, this thesis explores various case studies to conceptualise modding as a form of queer play. This research aims to explore three case studies of what modifications can do within the affordances of each game (*The Sims 4*, *Fallout 4* and *Minecraft*), to analyse them as media texts through the enacting of a method I refer to as a playthrough method, alongside the use of queer theory, representation theory, identity and participatory culture. It aims to answer questions around play, identity and fannish activities that extend beyond the confines of the game world by looking at three specific examples of modding. This project aims to try and conceptualise "play" in activities that go beyond just what the developers produce in an un-modded game to think about how play and modding may be a more flexible and therefore queer when users move beyond and challenge the developer's intentions for a game. I argue that the three case studies show us three primary functions of queer play: queer play as addition, queer play as disruption, and queer play as transmedia community.

To further explore how modding can be considered a form of fan production, this research explores how community can affect play and fan practices. Practices of mod feedback, for example, illustrates modders implementing desired changes into future versions of a mod. Videos about gaming hosted on the online social media platform YouTube also show the shifting landscape of fandom and queer play, and how transmedia play or remixing content consumption has also shifted our attitudes towards modding. This research hopes to also broaden understandings of what modification is, arguing that it should be understood outside of technical and hacker culture into a wider cultural phenomenon surrounding consumption and co-creation by looking at how fandoms engage with modification to extend play.

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And to the teacher who told me I’d fail all my A-Levels back when I was 17 and dealing with my newly diagnosed autism. Look at me now ☺

Post Viva Addition: In August 2024 as I was mid-corrections for this thesis my dad unexpectedly passed away. I mentioned in the foreword to this work that one of my earliest memories was watching him play Half-Life on our family computer, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. For my whole life, my dad played video games. His enjoyment of them was only surpassed by his enjoyment of his other hobbies (fishing, snooker and darts- none of which appeal to me in the slightest!). We had incredibly similar tastes in the games we played and would often recommend games to each other. My dad was the first one of us to complete my favourite game of all-time, and he would patiently teach me how to get through the games I found difficult (even when I was frustrating him by not listening!). He logged thousands of hours in his favourite titles, and I would often find him drawn back to the games he particularly loved; despite always following the same routes- and he would happily take my jokes when I called him boring for choosing to play as a default human warrior in games like Skyrim and Baldur's Gate 3.

So, to you dad, thank you for giving me this passion that has gotten me this far. I'm sorry that I never got a chance to say this to you when you were here.

Chapter One: Introduction

"No matter how dark the night, morning always comes, and our journey begins anew."

Lulu - Final Fantasy X

When we hear the word “play”, we are perhaps reminded of our childhood. A time before adulthood, where life was simpler, and our biggest concern was where we would play, who we would play with and what games we could come up with. As we grew older, our understanding of play moved away from the childish games of our youth, and for some the virtual worlds of video games picked up the missing part of these childhood desires for play. They structured our play practices, giving us worlds to explore, enemies to fight and things to build. We could create communities of our own inside our computers, we could see aliens in space, ride horses in a medieval fantasy, pretend to be gangsters, cast magic spells, be superheroes, drive cars, build rollercoasters… The possibilities became endless.

Video gaming itself is a practice that has developed in the last century, moving very quickly from the arcade games of the 1970s to the take-home consoles of the 1990s and the battle between Nintendo and Sega for dominance in the mainstream market. In the 2000s we saw further developments in graphics, environments and genres which brought gaming further into mainstream culture. Not only that, but with the advent of the internet and the increased accessibility to home computers that the late nineties brought, online gaming saw a boom in popularity, something that eventually led to the rise of streaming platforms like Twitch.tv and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*. This increased visibility also extended to platforms like YouTube, as content creators turned to games as a form of entertainment - something that had been done before through the creation of Machinima and fan videos, but creators such as PewDiePie and Dream began to make a living by playing games and posting the videos online. Video games have become commonplace, with games now even appearing on our mobile phones, complicating our perception of who is a “player” as well as what is “play”. This higher visibility in

popular culture has also opened debates about the content of games, with a clear movement being made in the past few years toward better inclusivity and diversity in game content.

The development of this thesis derives from a concept that Bo Ruberg put forth in their book "Video Games Have Always Been Queer". In it, Ruberg thinks about "Queer Play" as being the act of looking "beyond representation" (Ruberg, 2019 pg14), to see beyond the characters or narratives on screen and instead looking at "a way of designing a game, *interpreting it, or playing it*" (pg15, emphasis mine). As "a game's queerness may lay in its mechanics, or in its imagery, or in its control schema, or in how it creates a platform for emergent and transgressive forms of play" (pg15). One of Ruberg's main arguments is that "Even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly, and all games can be interpreted through queer lenses" (Ruberg, 2019 pg1). As for Ruberg, "play itself can constitute a form of queerness in video games that goes beyond the representation of LGBTQ characters or romances" (Ruberg, 2019 pg135). Without completely severing queer play from LGBTQ content on a representational level, this thesis lays out different forms of queer play and explores the intersections of the representational and nonrepresentational dimensions of queer play by exploring it as a form of addition, disruption, and as transmedia community. If we understand that traditionally mainstream media texts are influenced in their creation by a society that considers non-queer identities to be the "norm" (more on this in chapter two: Literature Review), then queer play is a way of approaching games which pushes the boundaries of the heteronormative structures of society that are reproduced within our media texts.

Often, queer play works by pushing against the 'rules' of a game. Thinking about games by looking at these rules is not a new concept. Game scholars have historically approached games in academia through this lens (as I will expand on more in the second chapter), but here I want to emphasise that video games cannot exist without some form of ruleset, the same way that a game that a child may play could not exist

without some form of rules. What is of interest to this thesis is how players may take action by modding and discover the response from the game, which in turn, allows players the chance to discover these rules through their play. If “The rules of a video game are contained within the game itself, in the game code” (Consalvo, 2009 pg85), these rules make up the game itself and dictate what a player can and cannot do. Even games that are designed to be played in a queer way still must contain a ruleset, as “It is a basic paradox of games that while the rules themselves are generally definite, unambiguous, and easy to use, the enjoyment of a game depends on these easy-to-use rules presenting challenges that cannot be easily overcome” (Juul, 2005 pg5). Modding creates an interesting dichotomy here wherein it navigates these rulesets in a variety of ways which I will explore in this thesis.

This thesis will centrally explore the notion that gameplay may not just be contained within the game itself as designed by the creator, but also how queer practices might extend to new content through modification or “modding”. In relation to gaming, modding refers to the manipulation of game code to a) make the game behave in a way that the designers did not intend and b) redesign the game to customise it to the user’s desires. I will analyse modding as an extension of play and therefore consider modding as a form of queer play due to its destabilisation of the structures that make up the game’s design. I argue that we should be exploring representations of gender and sexuality at the intersection of forms of play that seek to challenge the possibilities and limitations of the game world by means of modding practices that I frame as queer play. This gives us a framework from which to view modding as a fan practice which can produce queer texts and queer interpretations of play. Mods exist as an alternate to the system that is the un-modded (or vanilla) game, and so modding can be considered as ‘queering’ these structures. I also make a case for considering modding as a new form of fan text, exploring how technological advancements have both shifted perceptions of modding beyond a niche activity to something that may be more communal that takes place around fandoms.

To understand how this may be enacted, I draw from Judith Butler's work on "performativity" which shows us how identity is socially constructed. Butler conceptualises gender as a product of a culture in which gender is expressed by the labelling of specific behaviours and actions, leading to the idea that gender itself is a variety of repeated performances made up of 'gendered' behaviours. Ideas that we have about gender are therefore produced and maintained by these repeated performances (Butler, 2006). Amanda Phillips also explores this in their book "Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture", where they think about this through "the act of playing a video game [which] creates similarly troubled circuits of performance and identity formation" (Phillips, 2020 pg12). For Phillips, "These performances also continually destabilize the identity category, such that it is always in flux" (pg12). If we consider this against the idea that queerness goes "beyond representation", we can see that queerness is navigated through play due to the destabilisation that Phillips thinks about in their work. This destabilisation comes from the "troubling" of the ideas around identity and identity performance, rejecting heteronormative structures which say that games must be played in certain ways as it is inscribed within the codes of the game world.

This thesis draws together interdisciplinary theoretical backgrounds from games scholarship, queer theory and fan theory to analyse video games. I use queer theory here to propose that we can view game modification as a form of fan production and how identity can be represented, performed, or enacted in a variety of forms in the use of modification that both works with, around and against the in-game systems. I will also explore queerness more broadly by looking at different ways it can be enacted, such as time and temporality. This thesis will also aim to discover to what extent and in what ways representational and operational limitations of games and their affordances can be negotiated using affordance theory. Queer play is about negotiating limitations and forging other possibilities beyond dominant norms, systems, and meanings. I will also be exploring the concept of "play", questioning what "play" means when we think about the role that fandom can take in play practices, drawing on Ruberg's concept of "queer play" to extend our understanding of "play" beyond just that of what is inside

the game given to us by the game designers.

This thesis contributes to a variety of different research areas due to its interdisciplinary nature. It contributes to the study of games by exploring how queerness and play intersect through using games and modifications as its primary example. This also means that this project contributes to queer studies by confidently linking queer theory to the study of game texts. I also contribute to fan studies by linking game modification to participatory fan practices, arguing that fandom researchers interested in games should also consider modification not as a form of hacking, but as a fully formed fan text that has been informed by the context in which it was made, as well as the audience that it was made for. However, this research does not have the scope to fully explore issues around political economy and labour in fannish spaces due to its focus on modifications as a text, nor will it perform a digital ethnography of the *users* of these fan texts, as the primary interest is within what the texts can reveal about the issues outlined in this introduction.

Research questions

My research questions are:

How can we understand fan practices of modding as forms of queer play that negotiate representative and operational limitations of games and thereby the ideologically defined possibilities of games as fictional worlds?

What roles and relations does queer play enact with regard to original game worlds and game settings?

Sub questions:

How in the case of *The Sims 4* can players resist dominant heteronormative ideology by 'adding' our own representations? How successful is this additive model in facilitating queer forms of play?

How in the case of *Fallout 4* can players use mods to either disrupt a narrative or open up possibilities for the player?

How in the case of *Minecraft* could players see modding as a form of queer play that develops through and animates transmedia communities in online spaces?

What is Modding?

Modding is a practice that has existed since before its popularity increased in the late 1990s, and it is a process in which players become both creator of new media texts and curator of their individual gaming experience. It has now become a staple part of gaming for a large proportion of players, as it doesn't necessarily have involve a big change within the game. Players can mod their games for a variety of different reasons, ranging from small aesthetic edits to the character they play as (such as changing their hairstyle), to complete rewrites of the game content that changes the very fabric of the game into something almost unrecognisable. In 2005, Tero Laukkanen stated that modding is "arguably one of the most distinctive features in current computer gaming culture" (Laukkanen, 2005 pg5). I would argue this still true in the present day. It is also worth noting here that Laukkanen reminds the reader that "the practice of modifying games has probably been around just as long as games themselves have" (pg7), using the example of the different Chess variations that have appeared over time. Modifying games is not necessarily an unusual practice - it is that people do not always view it as a conscious way of interacting with a platform or text, nor do they associate it with other forms of fan production such as writing and art because it contains a different skillset to what we would usually explore in fan studies.[1] One of the key interventions of this thesis is to argue that modding is, at its very core, a form of fan production.

It is difficult to define how the modification of video games began, due to a lack of written history around this subject, alongside the early perceptions of modding and the debates around what "mods" are. Early modders considered themselves "hackers",

[1] Such as: the use of 3D modelling software, coding languages and the learning of modding tools versus more traditional fandom skills such as writing and drawing.

existing on the fringes of legality and pushing the boundaries on acceptable uses of media texts, as “Hackers were driven by their passion to examine, understand and ultimately improve on someone else's code” (Laukkanen, 2005 pg8). Debates still exist today around the legalities of fan production such as the complexity of social media’s effect on creator-fan relationships (Zwart, 2017) or the positioning of fans as “precarious” due to the potential for their work to be removed without warning by media companies (Taylor, 2009). This is not the focus of this thesis, but it is something that fan researchers must be aware of when thinking about fandom and their production practices, especially in a historic context. The four reasons put forth by Laukkanen for hacking early video game texts are ones that we still see reflected within modern-day modifications. Modding is, by my own definition, a manipulation of game code because the player believes that they have something to contribute, whether that be driven by their own desires, or the desires of a community around them that influences their creation process. Laukkanen also referred to what were known as “crackers” during the 70s and 80s- which was a pre-personal computer or console era of gaming, or “hardcore computer hobbyists who used their programming skills to enable gameplay cheats (such as infinite lives) and to remove the copy protection schemes of commercial games” (pg8). This shows that in this era modding hadn’t quite become an extension of the game in the way we might view it today, it was more about learning how to “cheat” (the importance of cheating to this discussion about modding as a whole will be returned to in a later chapter).

It wasn’t until the 1990s that modification became something that developed as its own form of production. While the crackers of the 1980s were editing games to display their mastery of programming- leading to the infamous “Castle Smurfenstein” Smurf parody version of the 1981 Apple II game *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse Software, 1981)- this was still a world away from the modding that we see today. Julian Kücklich emphasised in his piece about the digital games industry that modification as we have come to know it has existed since the 1990s and the release of one of the most influential games of all-time: *Doom* (id Software, 1993). Regarding these beginnings, he stated: “While Castle Smurfenstein (1983), a modification of the classic Castle

Wolfenstein, is commonly seen as the first mod, modding did not rise in prominence until after id Software's publication of the Doom source code in 1997" (Kücklich, 2005). What makes *Doom* such an interesting example of modern modding is that it is a game that is *still* played and modified, even thirty years after its original release. *Doom* has a dedicated community of modders who are maintaining a modification known as "GZDoom" which they describe as "a family of enhanced ports of the Doom engine for running on modern operating systems" (ZDoom, 2023). GZDoom is a successor to the 1998 version of this mod named "ZDoom", which allowed players to install new custom levels and make small changes to the gameplay. What makes this example interesting is the sheer length of time that these modders have been working on this project for, as this mod has become so important and integral to a specific community that people have continued to work on this for fifteen years. This is despite the rapid technological developments in the gaming industry, computers, and the move away from the style of gaming we saw in the early nineties. To not consider modding a form of love from the fans would be to discredit much of the time, energy and labour that has gone into this case. If, as Henry Jenkins argues, "Fan culture is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement" (Jenkins, 1992 pg2), we can see that modding fits into these "forms of participation" and "levels of engagement" due to the act of creating a mod as being an involved, highly technical creative process, which needs a certain level of skill and prior knowledge in order to know how to create. The modders may come and go from this project as they please, but it still exists today.

As we can see in that example, early modding culture focused heavily on extending games primarily through creating and sharing new levels- something that is reflective of the style of games that we saw in the nineties as being very heavily based on level progression (or: the inability to move to the next part of the game without first completing a task in a set area). Jenkins' work on fan creation and sitting too close to the text (Jenkins, 1992) demonstrates that fans here are reappropriating the game and reshaping it to something that they want to see, building from the content that already exists. We also saw this in the late nineties after the release of the first-person sci-fi

shooter *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998). Like *Doom*, *Half-Life* is considered one of the most influential games of all time due to its effects on game design (through the immersive world it creates by using scripted sequences and the level of control given to the player) and the influence it had on modification. This is because of Valve's decision to also release the games software code alongside the game. For the first time in gaming history, players were given direct access to source code when the game was released to the public, giving them the tools they would need to develop their own modifications. *Half-Life'*s popularity within modding communities led to the creation of a modification known as *Counter-Strike*.

Counter-Strike was developed by college students Minh "Gooseman" Le and a friend in 1999, and later bought by Valve themselves, leading to Gooseman being employed by Valve to continue to develop the mod into a full game. This meant that "Counter-Strike is now a well-established Valve brand, with over a million copies sold, and a single-player version (Counter-Strike: Condition Zero) an instant success" (Kücklich, 2005). In a way, Le took ownership over a text to which he had no claim to and reformulated it to how he saw fit without the limitations that a game development studio would place on him, and this translated into one of the best performing game series of all time, with an estimated $1billion in profits as of 2018 (statista, 2020).

After this point in time, modding dispersed as games began to rapidly change and develop. I have given an overview here of the development of modding in the first-person shooter genre in the 1990s and the way it can also permeate game developers and mainstream gaming. However, there could not be discussion of the history of modding without mentioning the influence that the life simulation game series *The Sims* has had on modification. The first game in the franchise released in 2000 and was an immediate commercial success. By the launch of *The Sims 2* in 2004: "The Sims franchise has shipped over 52 million units worldwide, including more than 16 million units of the original product, The Sims" (Anon, February 7th 2005) and *The Sims* became recognised as one of the most influential games of all time, cementing it a

place in the Museum of Modern Art's collection of iconic video games (Antonelli, P and Galloway, P November 3rd 2022). The revolutionary concept surrounded "life simulation"- a genre within which the creator of *The Sims* had been experimenting in throughout the 1990s with little success, until the release of this game. In *The Sims*, players created neighbourhoods built up of playable households wherein they could direct families or groups of people and their daily activities. *The Sims* as a franchise has only ever grown in popularity, with the entire franchise having sold more than 200 million copies around the world (Rhinewald, S and McElrath-Hart, N, May 5th, 2016). As of 2024, the latest base game (*The Sims 4)* is free-to-play, meaning that the modding culture surrounding the game also grew, creating and distributing various mods (in this context named 'custom content'). Modding here is still an expansion of the world, going beyond the limits of what the developers have left in the game for the players to use. As "with few mouse clicks players can upload the sim characters, the houses/lots and the Family Albums they have created to the site for other fans to download" (Lakkanen, 2005 pg68), players could easily access mods without the need for external software or any prior knowledge of modding itself. This decision revolutionised modding and the perception of modding in the wider gaming community, opening a niche practice to a wider group of people.

I look here to the history of modding to situate it as the practice that we see today. We can argue that modding operates in a space that straddles new technologies, online communities, fandom, and gaming as a whole. As fan communities have become more mainstream due to the huge shift in the way that we use technology and social media during the 21st century, it is important to also consider the role of the fan-users in the creation and use of video game modifications.

Play

I began this thesis by musing on the play that we engaged in as children and how this relates to the gaming practices we undertake as adults as one of the primary arguments that relates to this concept. Johan Huizinga was one of the first writers to

try and explore play as a part of culture, arguing that play is something that we all engage in, as play is an important factor in the shaping of culture (Huizinga, 1949). Huizinga argued that there are three main characteristics of "play" itself: first, "that it is free, is in fact freedom" (pg8), second: "that play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (pg8), third: "Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration" (pg9). Not only that, but that we understand "play" as being separate due to the structuring of rules around play, as "The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt" (pg11). This is his theorised "magic circle"- the realm that players enter when they agree to the rules of the game. This was later adapted and expanded in Salen and Zimmerman's "Rules of Play", where they argue that the magic circle "can define a powerful space, investing its authority in the actions of players and creating new and complex meanings that are only possible in the space of play" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003 pg98). They, like Huizinga, argue that play is contained within a specific space and time wherein the person knows that they are playing a game. Interestingly, Salen and Zimmerman *do* refer to modding as a type of "transformative play", wherein "the free movement of play alters the more rigid structures in which it takes shape" (pg305).

This does not mean that a more rigid concept of "Play" is without its faults, as trying to pin down a definition of where play occurs runs the risk of creating strict boundaries in which play must only occur within specific times and spaces. As T. L Taylor argues: "it often sounds as if for play to have any authenticity, meaning, freedom, or pleasure, it must be cordoned off from "real life"" (Taylor, 2009 pg152). Taylor's emphasis on the flexibility of play is something that this thesis also tries to grapple with- as in chapter six, where I look at fan texts and how the creation of them can be a form of play that uses the game to create a new space for these playful activities. Not only that, but a definition of play that is too rigid may also limit us in terms of exploring queerness, as the complexity of queerness means that it is also something that is hard to pin down and define. If Huizinga is emphasising that there is a separation between play and *not* play, queer play must underscore how

heteronormative realities and structures inform play and fantasy, even as they try to resist them. However, these definitions of play *can* help us to further understand what *queering* play may look like in a way that goes beyond representation. By identifying the rules and boundaries of a game as well as the content and context that exists that fans are working with when they engage in their creation practices, we can understand the structures that modding works within and around these to extend the text.

For this thesis, I argue that play becomes something bigger than what is *just* contained within the game; those activities related to a game, but beyond the deliberately designated spaces of the game, can also be forms of play. I do this by engaging with queer theory to better understand the importance of structures and rules to the way that we play, and to understand how resisting boundaries is key to both queer play and the creation of modifications.

Representation and Video Games

Representation, while not being the sole focus of this thesis, is still an important site in which I situate the context for much of my work. To do this I look to Stuart Hall's seminal work on representation from 1997, wherein he defines it as the way that meaning is reproduced throughout a culture's language and systems, and how it is then used to order and interpret the world around us (Hall, 1997). For Hall, "difference" to dominant ideology or the expectations laid out to us by the society we live in becomes hard to categorise or order, which "others" the things that we do not understand. This creates quite binary categories of "them" and "us" when social categories are defined by the perceptions that are assigned to them by the dominant ideology. In the western world, the dominant ideology is generally straight, white, cisgender and male-focused, meaning that those who do not align perfectly with this "norm" (or definition of what we expect the norm to be) are positioned as "other", and treated as such by society. Hall draws from Richard Dyer's work on stereotyping, where he argues that stereotypes are used by society to order and make sense of the world around us (Dyer, 1993. Dominant understandings of who players might be have permeated debates

around video games in popular culture, and I can look again to Henry Jenkins to think about the possible perception of those who adopt new technologies and what he refers to as the "participation gap". He states that those that adopt new technologies "are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated" (Jenkins, 2006 pg23)- but I would argue we can also add heterosexual and cisgender to that definition. It is important to identify this now, as "these elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention" (pg23). Recognising that the expected consumer of media aligns with dominant ideologies about who holds power in a society helps us to understand why identifying representation is important in gaming- and potentially helps us understand how the historic way that "the other" has been represented influences not only the current iteration of a game but also the potential fandom practices related to identity categories and queerness.

With these issues in mind, looking toward video games as a medium means that we can identify issues around representation to better understand *whose* stories are being told and *how*. While it should be apparent that developers can use video games as a medium to tell a wide variety of stories, this is not always the case- nor does this mean that representation is done *well* or that stories that do feature a diverse range of voices are received positively by the general public. With criticisms of diversity-focused games often stating variations of the notion that "it's gone woke" (for example, to describe the inclusion of non-white, non-straight or non-cisgendered characters and complaints being made due to the featuring of *fewer* characters who align with Jenkins' definition of elite media users), it is still a crucial issue that gaming as a whole is facing in the present day. In terms of racial representation, a 2009 study presented this issue through on-screen representation. They found that the higher percentage of Black representation in their sample came from the high number of Black sports players who played a featuring role in sports-based games such as *Madden: Football* and *WWE Wrestling*. Or, that Black men were represented as violent gang members in games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (Williams et al, 2009 pg830). I would argue that these findings still hold mostly true to this day, despite *some* steps being

taken to try and portray more non-white characters on screen. (This however does not account for backlash from player bases, which I will speak more on below).

To also think again how gender and sexuality have been historically presented to players, we can look to early examples of games such as *Leisure Suit Larry 6,* whose title character discovers that a romantic prospect he has been pursuing is a trans woman and responds with unmitigated disgust, exclaiming "No wonder Shablee [*the romantic prospect*] knows what a man likes!" as he throws up while she approaches him and seemingly sexually assaults him as he is bent over in front of her. As there are so *few* trans representations in video gaming, I look back to this example to highlight the history of how issues around trans representations have been handled by gaming companies. In more contemporary titles such as 2017's *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, we are still seeing a struggle to represent identity in a more complex way, with Hainly Adams revealing her deadname and identity as a trans woman to the player without having any kind of relationship to them. This research is therefore situated in this site of struggle for acknowledgement of more complex representations of identities that are other to the expected norm.

From the nineties onward, there was also a distinct lack of representations of non-heterosexuality, as well as a rise in hyper-sexualised female characters such as Lara Croft, Chun Li and Bayonetta. This has changed over time, with more complex representations of women being seen in games like *The Last of Us* and *Life is Strange,* but responses to queer identities can still be strained- a 2015 article by Megan Condis showed that players frame the concept of representation as "political", stating that:

"heteronormative ideology disguises itself as the rational default position of loyal gamers while those who lobby for the inclusion of queerness are rhetorically labelled as ideologically driven political operatives. This labelling functions to disguise the heterosexist ideological constraints that portray straightness as the normal, natural,

default human state in the first place."

(Condis, 2015 pg207)

Queer subjects are therefore positioned as political subjects, with bodies and identities that call attention to themselves through their difference. This is not a new phenomenon, as we have seen in both media responses to games that have queer representations (such as the optional same-sex love scene in *Mass Effect* in 2007[2] to the online GamerGate[3] controversy in 2014). Even as recently as 2020 we have seen a negative response to the inclusion of queer characters after the release of *The Last of Us: Part II* in which audiences assumed the new protagonist character Abby was trans due to her muscular body type (*The Last of Us: Part II* did include a trans character- but this character was in fact, *not* Abby). This led to the voice actor receiving death threats on social media (Khan, A, July 3rd, 2020) and a vocal subsection of players "review bombing" the game (an act where players mobilise and rate the game badly on player-based rating systems such as Steam[4]). While some of the hatred and transphobic rhetoric that surrounded Abby also stemmed from the character's actions in killing off a beloved character from the first game, it is telling that the response to these actions was to mobilise her assumed transness against her. While this thesis isn't *only* focused on representation, I feel like it is important to outline how representations of "other" to the dominant ideology of straight, white and cisgender males across the history of video games have influenced my interest in this area of research.

Reflecting queerness has generally come from character level representation. However, we saw a movement in the early noughties where inclusion came from unintentional design decisions. 2004's tongue in cheek RPG *Fable* is an example of issues around design where coding the game in a way that overtly excluded queer

[2] To see more on this, the FOX News report has been archived here: https://youtu.be/e6NF6btXCGM?si=yVBMznSlc9cPmCzI

[3] An online harassment campaign which targeted prominent feminist game writers where they were doxed and sent rape and death threats by anonymous online users.

[4] A video game distribution platform

identities would potentially be more work for the developers. As *Fable*'s creative director Dene Carter stated in a 2006 interview with "Gamasutra":

"It was not so much a question of overt inclusion as a reluctance to remove something that occurred naturally in the course of creating our villagers' artificial intelligence. [...] Our villagers each had a simple concept of 'attraction to the hero.' We'd have had to write extra code to remove that in the case of same-sex interactions. This seemed like a ridiculous waste of time."

(Carter, cited from Greer, 2013 pg9)

While inclusion was not the developer's main intention, it was indicative of a movement toward the reflection of queer identities through characters, and over time we began to see a slow movement into including more characters who explicitly expressed their queer identities to the player character, or we saw a player character who *had* a queer identity. Games such as *Bully* (Rockstar Games, 2006), *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, 2007) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts, 2009) all allowed the player character to express a queer sexuality through romance. Games like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (LucasArts, 2003), *Bioshock* (2K, 2007) and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) featured gay or bisexual non-playable characters. However, at this point in time, non-player character sexuality was usually heavily implied or referenced in small actions or moments that were able to be missed by the player. An example is *Assassin's Creed's* character Abu'l Nuquod. His speech in Damascus as the game's protagonist approaches his balcony to assassinate him subtly refers to his identity as a gay man, with him placing a hand on the shoulder of one of his attendants while saying: "It bothers you that they are different, just as it bothers *you* that *I* am different… I pledge myself to another cause, one that will bring about a new world- in which all people might live side by side, in peace" (*Assassin's Creed*, 2007). These kinds of subtle nods were indicative of a quieter form of representation. This was of an era where players began to create their own representations within romance systems (as in *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*) instead of developers telling queer stories through the

narrative included in the game outside of romance. At the same time, indie creators such as Anna Anthropy were working on games such as *Mighty Jill Off* (Anna Anthropy, 2008) and *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012) to reflect other forms of queerness within a video game narrative and world. *Mighty Jill Off* dealt with identity by engaging with the concept of lesbian BDSM practitioners. However, it was her game *Dys4ia* that showed that queer stories could be told through a video game, as it focused on the frustrations she felt as a trans woman and explored how to reflect that within a video game to create an experience for the player wherein they would feel the frustration that she was feeling during her transition. While Anthropy also emphasises that we should be "challenging the notion that her game, or any game, could actually allow players to feel what she has felt" (Ruberg, 2019 pg179), we can see that her experiences have driven the way that she designs games and how games have the potential to tell stories beyond just that of queer romance.

I argue within this thesis that both aspects are important to our understanding of queerness within gaming. I speak to the history of queerness appearing in gaming not just to define the way that we have historically seen identity reflected within the mainstream, but also to question how these identities are enacted within the game itself. Are they, like gaming itself, an active process in which players must seek them out? Or like in the case of Anthropy's indie games, being thrust upon the player, with the player having no choice but to experience the queer story being told through the medium?

Fan Production

Having spoken about play, queerness, and gaming, it is also vital to outline the importance of fan production to the arguments made in this thesis. While it may appear that fandom and its associated research is a relatively new area due to its increased accessibility and visibility since the popularisation and globalisation of the internet and social media, this is not actually the case. We can see the desire for fan fiction all the way back into the early 20th Century where fans of stories would take up

where they left off and write “unofficial sequels” to novels that we would now consider classics, publishing them to further expand the worlds they loved. An example of this can be seen in *The Wizard of Oz*’s extended universe, which after L. Frank Braum’s death in 1919 were taken up by a variety of other writers, eventually leading to a highly successful Broadway musical based on the 1995 revisionist parallel novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West.* However, what is interesting about considering this as a form of fan production is that many of these novels were ‘legitimised’ using professional publishing, so solely noting that they are fan fiction would not be an accurate descriptor. What *is* of the essence of fan production is that these writers took an already established world and the characters from that world, reformulating them with a new narrative, carrying on the story and extending it beyond what had been told by the previous author. This is the basis of which fan production exists- the desire to extend, asking the question “what if?”.

While fans were active during the 20th century, it is arguably not until the early nineties that scholars began to highlight the importance of creation and production to communities of fans. Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins both published texts in 1992 which explored the classic sci-fi series *Star Trek* and its associated fandom, alongside the practices they engaged in in the later part of the 20th century (Bacon-Smith, 1992 and Jenkins, 1992). They both emphasised the importance of “fanzines” (fan designed and distributed magazines) and in-person conventions around their loved media text to fans during this pre-personal computer era of fandom, as well as the potential for creation that they saw during their times at conventions and through speaking to fans. As Bacon-Smith and Jenkins were writing in a time just before the public release of the internet, many of the fan activities were based around a slower form of interaction, such as the distribution of fanzines and email chains. Personal computers rising in popularity as well as the release of the Internet to the general public in 1991 began to mark a shift in the way that fans would consume and create fan texts, as “the Internet ceased to be a network usable only by government, university, and research lab employees, and became a network with which millions of people engaged on a daily basis” (de Kosnik, 2016 pg2). As social media and other forms of

online community spaces developed, accessibility to the *knowledge* that one must possess in order to use mods in their game became easier to access.

This meant that in a time before the Internet, some of the only ways that fans could meet and interact with other fans would be by attending conventions or getting involved in the editing and distribution of fanzines- which were completely fan designed and made up of art, stories, and close analysis of the text (Jenkins, 1992). For these creative fans, fanzines were one of the only places where they could freely publish their work to an audience of interested people to see and consume. This also meant that their creative work would also receive feedback, with fan fiction at this time being shaped and directed by this feedback from the wider community. Some fans would therefore use fanzines as an opportunity to practice their skills for non-fannish work, with writers such as Jean Lorrah and Jacqueline Lichtenberg publishing fan fiction alongside becoming professionally published, with Lorrah's fandom notoriety allowing her the platform to write for the official *Star Trek* canon during the 1970s and 80s (Bacon-Smith, 1992 pg39). In one essay written by Lichtenberg, recounting her participation in *Star Trek* fandom during the 1970s, she remembers her fear that she might miss the content of a fanzine because of the way they were distributed: "I circulated a sign-up sheet by snail mail, asking editors I knew to list zines they knew about that were not listed on the sheet, to mail the sheet to someone who hadn't been on it, and to ask them to add what they knew" (Lichtenberg, 2013).

This short history of fan production situates why the rise of the internet was so important to fan communities, as some of the practices outlined by Bacon-Smith and Jenkins shifted in the late nineties and early noughties, allowing fans for the first time to connect with others on a more immediate, global scale. Fans began to use the internet to create small communities of like-minded people on a worldwide platform. Mailing lists moved online, with fans making use of emails alongside platforms such as Usenet (which was a discussion-based server, which became the precursor to online forums and message boards) to connect with each other (Horbinski, 2018 pg251). The

anonymous nature of these forums as well as their secrecy meant that queer fans could develop fannish connections that potentially allowed them to explore their identities in a 'safe space' away from the general public's perception of queerness. I will return to this line of thinking in my methodology chapter, however it should be noted that researchers like Andrea Horbinski point out that the first online mailing list dedicated to Slash fan fiction[5], which started in the early nineties, had stipulations that "joining the mailing list eventually required passing a verification process, and members were strictly admonished not to mention the existence of the group anywhere online" (Horbinski, 2018 pg251). Queer fans (and even fans who do not necessarily identify as queer but who want to explore aspects of identity through their fan production) therefore have the space to play with identity in a way that is potentially 'taboo' in their non-fannish daily lives. In a 2007 piece on the Slash fandom that existed on LiveJournal at that time by Alexis Lothian et al, one of their interviewees states that: "When you think of the aspect of queerness that is all about challenging borders and heteronormativity in real life then the constant renegotiation of fandom whereby ideas, expressions and groups move from taboo to commonplace is really a queer act" (Lothian et al, 2007 pg108). Online fandom quickly became a place where normative ideas about society were challenged by the consumption of fan fiction and other forms of production, the way that the Slash fans of the 1970s were challenging heteronormative presentations of romantic love through their fanzines.

Outline

Building on some of the discussions in this first chapter, in the second chapter, I will perform a review of the relevant literature around queerness, play, modding (as seen by academia), affordances and fan theory. I identify here the complexities around researching queerness in media by thinking about representational queerness and queer forms of play, and how we can think "beyond representation". In the third chapter I outline my methodology, focusing on the use of case studies as well as the selection process to emphasise which mods are relevant for this kind of study and why

[5] Slash is the pairing of two same sex characters together in fan works, named due to the / used between their names to signify the pairing

that is. I will also discuss the concept of a "playthrough" as a method, referring to academics such as T. L. Taylor and Tom Boellstorff to situate the idea of games being an active media text which needs user intervention to generate data. The subsequent chapters will explore three case studies of *The Sims 4*, *Fallout 4* and *Minecraft* to further understand how modding, queer play and fan production all come together.

In the fourth chapter (Queer Play as Addition), I will be looking to *The Sims 4* and a modification called "the LGBT mod". First, I explore the game mechanics to think about the context in which the modder was working in the mod's development. I outline the development of the in-game systems over time, as well as the game's history of representing queer identities. In my analysis, I chose several identities to think through the complexity of representation and if a modification that works within the system given to them is enough to reflect the full extent of some of the identities it is trying to place into the game. I do this by looking at Drag and the concept of a Drag Queen, taking real life examples of Drag Culture to think about how this can be played on screen, and if players can navigate the fluidity of gender that Drag calls for within *The Sims.* I then continue this exploration of gender by thinking about the "Coming Out" process as it is framed by the modification, considering the mod's use of the emotion system and the new "moodlets" it uses to affect the emotions of the characters in the game. I do this by looking at a character whose gender is contested who was added in one of the expansion packs, again trying to decipher if the modification deals with these emotions in a more complex way. Finally, I introduce an example where the mod actively works against the queer representation within the game due to the game's system not working with the mod. To further think around these issues, I also look at the comment sections for the mod and its various updates to discover the wide array of input from the mod users and what they would like to see reflected in future versions of the mod.

In chapter five (Queer Play as Opening/Closing), I turn my attention to narrative and how that can be a site of interest for players. I do this by introducing the Tabletop

Role-Playing Game (TTRPG) and exploring how genre can affect the potential response to a narrative. I focus on *Fallout 4*, looking back at the series to explore the concept of Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and how the illusion of choice affects the player's decision making and character building throughout the game. I also look again to the game's systems to think about queer representation across the series and the framing of potential non-normative representations of sexuality and gender in the romance and the perk systems, as well as the concept of the player having to "discover" identity through their exploration/relationship building with the NPCs. I then finally turn to the mod, introducing the idea that fans are trying to open up their play by identifying what they would interpret to be "gaps" within the game and narrative, and how the mod engages with a wide variety of systems that have come before it to try and structure the game into something that has the potential to be more subversive, opening up "gaps" for interpretation in the way that the TTRPG genre has traditionally done so. I also explore some of the ideas that the game itself raises around family, humanity, and linear narrative, proposing that the mod itself must work within certain constraints both by the narrative limiting the play to human-only, and by the mod having potential issues when installed with other mods that affect the two default characters.

Chapter six (Queer Play as Lingering) then picks up some of the loose threads from the previous two chapters, weaving together some of the more conceptual threads that have been appearing throughout the project. I use Minecraft as a jumping off point to explore the role of new technology on modding and how "play" can be shaped using new technologies like streaming and YouTube. I open the chapter by thinking about emotion and its role in enabling and players to remain in the game world for longer, in which they expand the text as much as they can by using environmental effects to create sites of queer temporality. By analysing a specific creator who engages in this kind of play I argue that these in-game effects exemplify the way in which players are happy to ignore expected progression in gaming in favour of emotive experiences that can appear across a range of content. This then leads me into thinking about progression more broadly by looking again to level design and the game itself, arguing that we can see trends in creation practices which play with these ideas of

progression and structuring their time, and how players create blocks of time periods wherein they define their own goals, or play with levels designed in a way that *should* force them to progress in a linear fashion and how they navigate queering time. Finally, I look to sociality and fandom itself to think about the use of mods to construct social experiences where player and viewer can both be involved in the play, and how the influence of viewers can shape game worlds that they will never experience for themselves, as well as the different ways that these mods can be used to create these social experiences and how this can be a form of queering play.

I have chosen to structure the chapters in this way as a reflection of the movement through time that we have seen as technology has shifted and changed. Not only this, but we can trace the movement and stretching of Queer Politics over recent history. We begin with *The Sims* to think about "the old", or the way that representation has been a focus of previous research into identity, and how *The Sims* can be an excellent example of queer politics because of this. I then move into thinking about more non-representational issues, demonstrating a shift in fannish gaming cultures in the 2010s, while still examining how the context of queer politics at the time around representation affected the approach that fans may have taken towards modification of *Fallout 4*. This then takes us to the present, exploring how participation in *Minecraft* YouTube spaces has become a wider activity engaged in by fans and mod users, highlighting the role that fandoms have in modification and play.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

"It's dangerous to go alone, take this."

The Old Man - The Legend of Zelda

On your first playthrough, you spend time figuring out the story and the world of the game you're playing. There's lore across the map, and a system of progression that gives you the freedom to try new play styles, to try different things. A character is developing in your mind, who are they? What would their response to the narrative be? How do they approach the world you're playing in? On a second playthrough the vanilla items are starting to feel less and less like this person you're crafting in your mind. It starts small, just a hair to match the picture of the character you're imagining. Then a few clothing items, the vanilla clothing just doesn't feel like them anymore. Then tattoos, scarring, custom features. The possibilities are endless, and you find yourself with a folder full of modifications that make your character who they are. And suddenly the world feels more engaging than it ever did before.

In the introductory chapter I outlined some of the key areas that this research is interested in, focusing on a history of modding, theories of play, going beyond representation and the connection to fan production. In this literature review, I begin by discussing queer representation within gaming, then I will expand on these areas further to demonstrate the importance of modding in relation to queer play. I will also then discuss the concept of affordances in relation to gaming, before turning again to fan theory to think about how identity and participation can be driving factors in the development of modifications. The literature review also allows me to explore how both games and their modifications can be seen as media texts- more specifically, a form of *digital* media text. I will also argue that game modification is a form of fan production, referring to Henry Jenkins' seminal work on fan production (Jenkins, 1992). I will also return to this idea within my methodology, wherein I will discuss the need for user intervention when analysing video games as a media text.

In the introduction I also outlined the importance of this research in terms of representation due to the politicising of the queer subject that has happened due to a move towards a more representational time of media creation. Since beginning this PhD in 2019, there has been a clear push in media toward a more diverse and inclusive landscape that is being met with resistance by some right-wing groups who have labelled it as "woke", referring to examples such as the release of Baldur's Gate 3 in 2023 which included the possibility for same-sex romance. This thesis comes at a critical time in culture due to this backlash against any possibility of media texts that do not solely cater to a straight, white, cis audience. The modding platform Nexus Mods have had to make their stance on this form of opposition clear, speaking out against trolls in a post labelled "Flag Mods and Us (and You)" in August 2022 after a troll account caught attention for replacing pride flags in *Spiderman* with the US flag (Nexusmods, 17th August 2022). This is not necessarily a *new* issue, as we saw even back in 2014 with the release of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* that modders would erase sexuality and white-wash characters due to their own prejudices.

Queerness and Gaming

When we think about queerness and gaming, it is important that we highlight that there are two distinct ways of approaching the way we frame these things in relation to one another. Queerness can mean something more representational- exploring how identities are reflected through narrative and character design in the text (Consalvo, 2003a, Consalvo, 2003b, Greer, 2013, Navarro-Remesal, 2018), who is making the games (Shaw, 2009), what the actual scope of representation looks like (Shaw and Friesem, 2016) and the response from the players themselves- either as a form of community building (Skardzius, 2018) or from players who refute or refuse the potential of non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities being reflected within the game (Condis, 2015). However, we can also think about Queerness as a more abstract concept- something that emerges from the way that we play or interpret the game. In this section I will first discuss how queerness has been explored through the literature viewing it as a more representational practice, before then moving into how we can conceptualise queerness as when we think about mechanics and play.

Much of the work that has come before in talking about explicit forms of queer identity has been in exploring romance and how we can tell a queer romantic story, or how queerness is highlighted in relationships between characters, rather than telling queer stories about identity, or stories about specifically queer experiences that exist outside the realm of romantic relationships. This opens questions about how we define queerness, and if there is an innate assumption that one of the ways we do this through gaming is by centring romantic relationships. Mia Consalvo thinks about this in her 2003 piece on *The Sims* and *Final Fantasy IX* (FFIX) wherein she emphasises that character sexualities can be reinforced by the narrative of the game itself, but also that games can position sexuality as an activity for players to *do,* meaning that some players may not engage at all with non-heterosexual representations (Consalvo, 2003a). For Consalvo, the framing of sexuality becomes important, as "the idealized heterosexual romance is a highly traditional "fairy-tale"—suggesting that heterosexuality is natural and preferred, and romance between men and women (and boys and girls) is expected, desired, and to be sought out" (Consalvo, 2003a pg190). In her FFIX example, there is a reinforcement of "Traditional ideas about men protecting women (who are constantly in need of rescue), and men pursuing women romantically" (pg190), and while there is the potential to read some of the actions of the main character Zidane queerly through player identification and desire throughout the game, the romance itself does not challenge normative ideas around romance and the roles that people stereotypically take within it. Consalvo was writing at a time where romance in games was primarily done during the narrative, with player choice being limited to games such as *The Sims*, which is what she means when she thinks about "activity" in the revealing of sexuality. This "activity" aspect of her work is important to this research, as games are an active process in which the player *must* influence the on-screen outcomes. The systems of games themselves can be quite rigid, with player choice within an un-modded game often still quite limited in terms of the game's outcome (the game still generally has set paths the player can take to the same ending point). Therefore, it is important to think about activity as a concept that can influence not just play, but the modding that surrounds gaming.

Victor Navarro-Remesal also thought about this concept in his work on RPGs, as he argued that: “Video games are cyber-texts with configurative performances, that is, the act of playing is a constant performance that affects not only the creation of meaning, but the resulting text of the game as well. When we play, we shape the discourse by ‘doing’” (Navarro-Remesal, 2018 pg177). For Navarro-Remesal, romance systems are a place where players can represent their own identities through play, however, this active process means that “Diversity is not forced upon us but it becomes something we have to explore: it is possible to role play both as members of our socio-political group and as others, but never mandatory” (pg187). Representation of queer identity within romance can become completely miss able if the player does not perform queerness by performing same-sex desire. For example, when queer identity is represented by a side character or a recruitable character, some players may not discover this identity if they do not speak to, or befriend, the character. We can see this in games such as *The Outer Worlds* (Private Division, 2019), where one of the potential companions Parvati has a side quest wherein the player helps her develop a relationship with a fellow female engineer, as well as reassuring her about her asexuality (without using the word asexual). If the player does not recruit Parvati or does not begin this quest by speaking to her, then no queer story would be told, as her queerness is dependent on the developing same sex romance she has during the quest line. As with the research in this thesis, Navarro-Remesal is interested in RPGs, which is arguably where we see this kind of representation happening (or not happening) most. Stephen Greer also explored this use of romance systems in *Fable* and *Dragon Age* to think about queer representation and the affordances (I will return to this concept below) of each game that allows the player to pursue same-sex relationships. He acknowledges the complexity of what “playing queer” would look like from a game design standpoint and raises an argument that the inclusion of same-sex romance and marriage in Fable was not a political choice, instead one made due to the game’s design as being inclusive by mistake. He also points out that much of the representational queerness that we may see within gaming still aligns with a more heterosexual understanding of what queer representation should look like- by abiding

to heteronormative ideologies surrounding sexuality and desire (Greer, 2013).

While thinking about the more representational types of queerness, it would be amiss not to mention research on the way that players *frame* representation when it appears. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, backlash against queer characters or bringing queerness into the game itself is common, as Megan Condis outlined in her 2015 article on BioWare's *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Dragon Age II* (Condis, 2015). By including the possibility to play as a gay male character, fans framed this as "the introduction of real-world political concerns into the digital world" (pg203), which then "disrupts the barrier that they've tried to erect between their time in SW: TOR and the rest of their day-to-day existence" (pg203). This line of thinking was one which I also found in my own Master's research, where players emphasised that there are lines between reality and fantasy, and that players would sometimes allow real world attitudes and beliefs seep into their games, affecting the way that they play queer characters (Lees, 2019). Drawing in part on an analysis of discussions in online forums, Condis argued that players have "been taught to desire (and to expect) a bodiless, apolitical experience within virtual worlds. In fact, many see that experience as the purpose for the existence of virtual worlds in the first place, the source of their entertainment value and of their potential as a refuge from the real world" (Condis, 2015 pg204), meaning that many players who argue *against* the inclusion of queer characters do so because they believe that game worlds shouldn't be affected by real world politics. However, this is a futile position to take, as- "heteronormative ideology disguises itself as the rational default position of loyal gamers while those who lobby for the inclusion of queerness are rhetorically labelled as ideologically driven political operatives" (pg207), effectively silencing the queer players who wish to see their identities labelled on screen. As "women, queers, racial minorities, and disabled persons have bodies that call attention to themselves through their marked differentness from the supposedly 'normal' bodies of straight white able-bodied males" (pg207), this positioning of queer representation as something that is "political" becomes problematic, as it normalises heteronormative ideology and prioritises fixed, binary views on gender. It is important to think about Condis' work in relation to this

thesis because of this, and how identifying how queerness appears in a more abstract form outside of romance is an important undertaking due to the way that queer identities have been received by players in the past. I argue that it is important to look at the past and how identities have been shaped by the game's world to understand where we are today in how we present identity to the player through both the game and the modifications that users are making to tackle some of these issues.

Research has shown that players have not just accepted the politicisation of their identities and the silencing of their voices. As Condis highlighted this labelling of identity when looking at how it takes place on an online forum, Karen Skardzius took this one step further by exploring how this appears within a game world itself by looking at the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. While the initial spark of the debate that Skardzius analyses is very similar to that of Condis' work, the difference here is that the response from the players as well as the type of game under study meant that communities could be formed *within* the game to resist the way that identity is perceived (Skardius, 2018). Drawing from Judith Butler's 2009 piece on precarity- in which they further expand on the work they put forward in "Gender Trouble" around performativity and the body- Skardius thinks about this in the use of the avatar as a site of the "troubling" of identity, and how players used these avatars to promote "guilds[6]" that were pro-LGBT, as well as an annual pride parade (pg185). Skardius emphasises that "The idea that people who identify as LGBTQ should leave "their" sexuality out of the game reinforces their precarity by encouraging social distancing between themselves and other players, decreasing sociality, and increasing their vulnerability" (pg184), as the game under study is, inherently social. As "Players frequently spend time chatting about topics unrelated to the game as they complete in-game tasks and activities" (pg183), sexuality and the way that one identifies is something that can come up in conversation, even if that person is heterosexual just by the nature of talking about their lives. What Skardius' chapter shows is that it is not necessarily that players are donning rainbow flags and steering every conversation to queer topics-

[6] Groups of players who regularly play together, forming friendships and clearing content as a team

instead that it is normal people, talking about their lives outside of the game world, who are then being denied this social form of play by players who believe that queerness is solely "political". This yet again emphasises the need to understand how identities are shaped by dominant ideology, as this is how identities appear within the game world. If our understandings of identity mean that we silence queer subjects and naturalise heterosexuality and binary gender by rejecting expressing identity, we can see where the tension between queerness and gaming lies.

Therefore, it is also important to look *beyond* identity labelling and a more representational version of gender and sexuality in order to explore queerness in a more thorough way. Queerness is not *just* about representation, but I argue that we can't discuss queer interpretation without situating queer identity and how that has influenced the games that we play and how we interpret them. This is because when we look at what video games and their modifications are doing, the point we are at today has come from what has come previously. In the wake of events like Gamergate and the above examples from Condis and Skardius, labelling identity is also an important way to acknowledge the existence of queer people who play games and who *desire* queer representation by identity labelling. This is therefore not just the idea that we can interpret things through a queer lens. In two of my analysis chapters I do this by identifying the history of representation within the game under analysis and the series as a whole and how then we can then think of modifications to "speak back" to this history.

So then, how do we begin to think *beyond representation*? As stated in my introduction, Bo Ruberg poses this concept in their 2019 book "Video Games Have Always Been Queer", where they argue that we should consider a queerer form of play, in which we look beyond just the characters or narratives on screen to instead discover "a way of designing a game, *interpreting it, or playing it*" (pg15, emphasis mine), as "a game's queerness may lay in its mechanics, or in its imagery, or in its control schema, or in how it creates a platform for emergent and transgressive forms of play" (pg15). If

we understand that dominant ideology dictates the construction and interpretation of media texts as aligning with binary understandings of gender as well as heterosexuality, Queer play for writers like Ruberg becomes a way of approaching games which then push the boundaries of the ideology. Ruberg also thought about Queer Play as something that a player actively does with the game world- their examples included activities like speed running, walking, intentionally losing and playing games that trigger negative emotions, alongside discussion of games that can be read to tell queer stories around such themes as “passing”, “intimacy” and “desire” (Ruberg, 2019). Ruberg’s primary argument in this book is centred around the idea that representative queerness is not enough when we consider how queerness can appear in games, stating that they see ““playing queer” as a mode of nearly infinite possibility, brought to games largely by their players rather than systems structured by (mainstream) developers” (pg17). For Ruberg, “Playing queer is a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players—but which belongs, first and foremost, to those who live the joys and the pains of their queer lives each day in the world beyond games as well as within them” (pg19). I would argue that playing queer can also be seen within fan production, and in this case, modding itself. Modding can work inside constraints, push against them, or reject them completely in order to allow players to approach the content in a different way- an idea I will come back to throughout the thesis (including by thinking of constraints as affordances).

At this point, they move to explore concepts like “time” and “failure” to think about what queerness might look like when interpreting the game in play- how we connect success to a linear narrative and following the ruleset the developers intended when they designed the game (Ruberg, 2019). Time and Failure are both of particular interest to this thesis, as we can use these concepts to question the very structures of the games themselves. Success in games becomes tied to linear progression- the player making conscious choices to go from point A to point B by completing the set tasks to reach the game’s end point (whether that be in a narrative game or a level-based game). However, Ruberg points to queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s theory of failure to think about other forms of play and why we might consider queer play. Halberstam

argues that failure can be a freeing process, tied instead to a way of thinking in which we can “poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam, 2011 pg3). Halberstam also argues that the concept of “success” is tied to the perception of “failure” in a society that emphasises abidance to structures, as “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily with specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (pg2). Failure becomes framed as negative due to the implication that those who are “failing” are not abiding to the heteronormative structures that make up contemporary society. Ruberg extends this thought to games, by asking: what happens when we refuse to move *toward* the ending, and instead across the world at our own pace? Halberstam also emphasises that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (pg2-3), a position that this thesis takes in its approach to games. A key feature of Halberstam’s work is his questioning alternatives, in that he tries to visualise what possibilities are out there when the subject does not abide by ideological structures built up by a heteronormative society. If we repeat Halberstam’s questioning of the alternative, how can we think about modding’s approach to the rules? Is modding a more surprising way of being in the world? Does modding reimagine a more creative ruleset? By rejecting the game’s structure- are we failing to win?

I also need to emphasise that while Halberstam was considering failure through the lens of a capitalist society, as we “live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth” (pg88), a full exploration of the influence of capitalism on fan production in relation to gaming and the potential issues around monetisation of fan activities are outside of the scope of this thesis. The focus is instead on Halberstam’s core concepts around rules, structures, and failure, which I use to discover more about what the games and mods can tell us about identity and play.

Queer play as a concept was also thought about by Edmond Chang who frames the possibilities of what he called "queergaming" as "design, play, remediation and futures" (Chang, 2017). For Chang, "queergaming is heterogeneity of play, imagining different, even radical game narratives, interfaces, avatars, mechanics, soundscapes, programming, platforms, playerships, and communities" (pg15), emphasising that games are not just the system that is placed in front of the player or the narrative it contains, but that they also include the design as well as the audience. He asks: "how might we think about ways to play games and make games that recognise and work around the limitations and flexibilities of digital computers, player expectations and the "playing it straight" cultures at large?" (pg15-16). Culture influences design, and Chang urges the reader to, like Ruberg, think *beyond* the game itself. This piece also draws on Alexander Galloway's theory of "countergaming", which helps to situate "queergaming" as a concept that is oppositional to gaming mainstream cultures, something that can experiment with "form, genre and experience" (pg16). What is also interesting here is that he manages to also highlight some of the things that we saw in Halberstam's work on failure as: "queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure" (pg17). Ruberg themselves also thought about some of these issues in their work wherein they discuss the potential of using glitches for speed running, but also this imagining of "different rules and goals".

As we look again to Chang's themes, we can see how we can potentially break down games to think about their different elements and how we can identify queerness within. For *design* we can look again beyond representation- to the way that queerness can appear in games in a way that goes deeper than romance options or the inclusion of a queer character. This can be how can we think about queerness as existing beyond romance systems and pushing toward the "game play, mechanics, consequences and possibilities…platform, programming and player" (pg19) as well as thinking about how interacting with queer characters looks beyond using them for the

romance mechanics. This begs the question: How can we engage with queerness within gaming? It is not *just* about characters and stories, as we can also look to play itself, as Chang questions design by thinking about how players can go against the game's intended structure- "to repurpose or resist the rules, to play as a collective" (pg19).

This connects to a further theme in Chang's work: remediation, which looks to the "idea of borrowing, appropriating, and repurposing" (pg20) and how this is a direct response to the actual queer representations on screen. When we think about futures, Chang states that "Queergaming expands what it means to create, consume, and play" (pg20). This could potentially refer to many different forms of remediation such as: mods, fanfiction, easter eggs, paratexts, let's plays[7], parodies, machinima and cosplay. He rounds off by thinking of futures where he thinks of the possibilities that the game can open up when being played queerly. In terms of this thesis, Chang explores queerness in a similar way to Ruberg, emphasising that queerness goes beyond the representational nature of inclusive character and narrative design, and that we should look to a range of different ways to interact with a video game as a media text. This ties in well with my own analysis, as I am looking specifically at game modification as one of these "alternate" ways to interact with the game as a text, literally "repurposing the rules" as a form of queer play.

Time, and especially notions of 'Queer Time', plays an important role within these discussions around gaming. One such academic who explores this concept is Elizabeth Freeman, who argues that it is the queer subject's relationship to time which identifies them as queer- as they live alternatively to the more structured time set out for the non-queer figure, meaning that they experience temporality in different ways to the non-queer figure (Freeman, 2010). Freeman refers to this as "time binds", arguing that queer subjects are bound through the dominant ideology- in that they are having to abide to structures that make up a wider society, rather than pushing against them.

[7] Videos of game play recorded and distributed for an audience on platforms such as YouTube

She draws concepts from the work of theorists such as Zerubavel (hidden rhythms), Butler (performativity) and Bourdieu (habitus) to try and conceptualise these "binds", stating that "repetition engenders identity, situating the body's supposed truth in what Nietzsche calls ''monumental time,'' or static existence outside of historical movement" (pg4). Like Butler's work, Freeman is interested in the ways that this plays out on the body, as, bodies that go 'against' the "larger temporal schemae" (pg4) are bodies that become obviously queer due to this resistance to the "teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (pg4). Like Halberstam, Freeman emphasises the root cause of these issues being the structure of society being so heavily influenced by capitalist desires. She calls this the "teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (pg4). As abiding to this kind of timeline "tends to serve a nation's economic interests" (pg4), she uses the example of the US to highlight that there is a "sequence of socioeconomically ''productive'' moments" (pg4), which define what we conceptualise as life, or chrononormative life. Society therefore begins to define itself in the concept of "time", regulating themselves to abide by the structure set out by dominant culture. Both Freeman and Halberstam also think about "lingering" as something that happens because of these issues around time, failure, and a wider culture, with Freeman referring to it as a kind of "arrested development", citing Heather Love's work on the queer child. This is something that I will return to later in this thesis (specifically, chapters five and six). Interestingly, Freeman's work takes a slightly more negative approach than Halberstam's, as Freeman refers to this process as "the agony of being socially reduced to a misreading of one's own body, may inform queer social contours, a wounded morphology of the social following a wounded morphology of the individual" (pg12). This form of identity becomes inherently linked to negative framings of queerness because of the refusal to follow the teleological schemes of events Freeman laid out, which then filters through into dominant society, positioning queerness as something that "goes against" the "common sense" (as in to say, the belief that this is common sense) that is abiding to chrononormativity.

How then, does Freeman's work relate to the arguments posed in this thesis? Both Freeman and Halberstam identify queerness as something which does not align with structure, that queer subjects work against "acceptable" ways of approaching life or walking *through* life. Applying this to video games means that we must first identify the limitations or the rules of the game under study before we can begin to think about how we can approach them in different ways. In my introduction, I echoed Halberstam's opening question regarding what the alternatives are, something that I once again refer to here to emphasise that to understand the alternative, we must first understand what it is that we are looking at and how it aligns to dominant ideology which prioritises a capitalist, chrononormative way of living. This applies directly to video games, as the very act of modding itself is a way to discover these boundaries and what the possibilities of the game are. As I will discuss later in this thesis, I will explore how modding can work within game structures to bring representational queerness into them. I will also discuss how players are working against this structure to reject the text's boundaries and then theorise why this may be aligning with a particular type of queer play which explores the alternatives to the game.

Play

As one of the primary arguments this thesis poses is around "Play" and what constitutes "Play", we can look to a practice that destabilises normative ideas around *how* we should play. Cheating, as Mia Consalvo writes in 2009, becomes about something that she calls "gaming capital" (Consalvo, 2009 pg18), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. I would argue that this concept can be used to think *beyond* just the game's content, as "player interest in games that extend beyond the simple playing of a game to activities such as creating walkthroughs of games, writing fan fiction, or developing character skins" (pg7), shows that video games themselves are a text which invites a certain level of "tinkering" or interpretation.

While Consalvo thought about this by conceptualising cheating, and how players themselves defined cheating as a practice, I think we can take this idea of play being

more than just playing the game and apply it to modding. Modding, it could be argued, is *also* a form of "cheating", in that it allows the player to do things that potentially go against the rules of the game. Consalvo argues that "rules… are a central component of games" (pg7) as "players then have the options of following the rules, refusing to abide by the rules overly, or secretly not abiding by the rules (although appearing to do so) and thus, cheating" (pg7). I wish to push this further by raising this concept of "refusing to abide by the rules" as something that is done as a form of *play*. Consalvo even questions "where are the rules?" (pg84) when thinking about what "cheating" *means*. How do we know what the rules of the game are? Is it as simple as looking at the game's description, or must we explore further, into the game's very code? Do these rules constrain modders and limit their possibilities? Or do they give them a framework to work within and push against? Is total rejection possible, redesigning the game from the inside? Or must the modders retain something inherent to the very core of the game itself? For Consalvo, "this rule of law is not a hidden construction, and is also, for some, open to question and even alteration" (pg85).

While cheating is one way to view this form of play, we can also think to the intersecting identities which may affect the way play can take place. A player's relationship to their gender may affect their approach to the game itself- as Williams et al discovered in their survey research of *Everquest II.* Male players who self-reported their motivations for playing focused on competition and achievement, whereas female players preferred the sociality of the MMO. However, the female players from their dataset were found to be more frequent players who dedicated more time into the game (Williams et al, 2009). This is not the only study done on the structuring of play as something queerer, as Krobová et al's interviews of *Mass Effect* players found that players preferred what they called "imaginative play", where the player creates the representation for themselves within their own play or enacts queer stereotypes for themselves (Krobová et al, 2015). In all three of these examples, we can see alternate ways to play beginning to form as a response to the text, either due to cheating, interpretation or even the motivation for in-game activities.

Case Studies

In this section, I outline several different areas in which my chosen case studies have been researched previously. *The Sims* is arguably the most popular of my three cases, and I have already cited literature on sexuality in this chapter, but there are two more pieces of literature that I feel are important to mention here, in advance of my discussion of the game in chapter 4. Mia Consalvo's second piece on *The Sims* written in 2003 called "It's a Queer World After All: Studying The Sims and Sexuality" shaped the development of this thesis- as in this piece she demonstrated how she played the game to discover queer possibilities that may have laid within *The Sims* and three of its expansion packs (Consalvo, 2003b). She argued that while the advertising of the game emphasised a more heterosexual play experience, that was not necessarily the case due to the freedom and openness that the genre allows the player. The way that games are designed, which I will later refer to as their affordances, are an important concept for this thesis. This is because types of contained freedom and openness is something that links all three of my cases together, as each game has a high level of freedom in slightly different ways.

Work specifically on modding in *The Sims* has also been done by Tanja Sihovnen in their 2010 book "Players Unleashed!: Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming" wherein they explore the way that players use modding as a way to exercise "the creative powers allocated to them in the context of this computer game" (Sihovnen, 2010 pg185). Sihovnen also agrees with the necessity of openness and freedom to the players, arguing that "The Sims in this respect has always been more like a toolset and a launching pad for its players' creative aspirations than a fixed system of rules, means and objectives" (pg185). A part of Sihovnen's argument that is particularly influential on this thesis is when they state: "The prevalence of mods throughout game history is also a reminder of the fact that computer games cannot be studied without taking into account the multiplicity and the complexity of player practices around them" (pg189). As I have already argued in this thesis, modding is therefore a practice that developed alongside gaming, but it has not been subjected to the same kind of academic attention as gaming. Modding can tell us a wide array of things about games and their

players, as well as fan cultures and production, and therefore should be studied more widely by academics who conduct research on gaming.

Fallout has also had academic attention paid to it in relation to modding- with a conference paper by Kenton Taylor Howard outlining the heteronormative romance that has appeared in *Fallout 4* and the response from fans and journalists, leading to an analysis of queer mods that also affect the introductory section of the game (Howard, 2019). Howard's paper focuses on representation and romance; however, I would like to push this further and think about how mods can also enable queer play by diving deeper into the modification that they mention. This is a discussion that I will return to in chapter five. Other work on Fallout focuses on its use of the in-game radio and the shift in voice post side quest to align with "gendered, nationalistic and capitalistic discourses" around the presentation of self (Inscoe, 2021), the use of food as a source of satire of modern society, reinforcing cultural anxieties (Stang, 2022), alongside the performance engaged in by "Let's Play" video creators when narrating their morality throughout their play (Piittinen, 2018).

To think more about the "Let's Play" video format, I turn to Josef Nguyen's 2016 piece which argued that "Let's Plays provide opportunities to see players engaging in different modes of reading and playing as they riff on the video games that they encounter" (Nguyen, 2016 5.1), meaning that creating content about games on platforms such as YouTube allows for a certain freedom wherein players can shape personalities, which I would argue doesn't just become a site of game play, but also another site of fandom inside that of the original text. Nguyen briefly touches upon modding, stating that "mods—for example, open up video games to alternate ways to play but do so by directly changing and augmenting the video game platform" signalling that there was an awareness at the time of writing that modifications can supplement the Let's Play, giving the example of mods for *Minecraft* to do so (2.8). Pellicone et al also thought about *Minecraft* and the online world during their ethnographic work on affinity spaces where they followed a participant as he took on

the role of a server administrator alongside making his own content on YouTube (Pellicone et al, 2015). One of the things they stated that is of interest to this research is that play in *Minecraft* is supplemented by both the social aspect and the "variety of spaces that make up the meta-game" (pg444). For their participant, his play was built up of managing things inside *and* outside of the game, something that I will explore more in chapter six.

To further complicate the concept of modding itself, we can look toward an example of a mod which garnered mass public attention due to the tension it created between developer and modders. However, this infamous case nicely highlights that modification can show a mastery of the game code to manipulate it in ways that aren't afforded to players by the game's rules (a concept I expand on more below). The "Hot Coffee" mod was a modification for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) which unlocked a sexually explicit mini game that was scrapped sometime during the game's development. In the mini game, the player is invited back into their date's apartment, having to press buttons to please their partner for rewards such as weapons and new vehicles, directly rewarding the player for romancing their partner[8]. What is also interesting about this case is that Rockstar themselves were blamed for this content, with the attention taken from the modder and the fault being placed on the developer, with Rockstar then actively releasing patches that blocked the mod from running. This also opens up a wider discussion about adult content and game ratings that this thesis does not have the scope for, but it is worth mentioning that there is a tension between modders and game developers when it comes to creating mods which potentially go against their End User Licence Agreements (EULAs), as they cannot be seen to be promoting content which goes against the age rating of the game. This is most prevalent within *The Sims 4*'s Wicked Whims, Basement Drugs and Extreme Violence mods, which are all modifications which add in adult content which does not align with the game's original PG-13 rating (PEGI 12). If the developer is to be seen to be supportive of mods which go against age range of the content in the game itself, this

[8] A concept that I will return to in Chapter 5: Queer Play as Addition

could mean repercussions for both modder and developer. Matthew Wysocki described this potential conflict as “not revolutionary, but rebellious” (Wysocki, 2015 pg208) in his chapter on this very topic. For him, “Modders are dedicated audiences interested in using their energy to alter their objects of consumption and even create additional content for their own and others’ utilisation” (pg199), meaning that while these types of mods deal with content that we may view as “taboo”, the fact that these mods exist in the first place show a desire for games to deal with more complex themes than they may already contain- a desire that could extend to include queerness.

Defining Affordances

To explore video games and their boundaries in greater depth, I turn to Affordance theory to examine the constraints and freedoms players are allowed. Affordance theory was put forward by psychologist James. J. Gibson in 1979 to explain how animals use the environment around them and how that can be applied to human behaviours (Gibson, 1979). For Gibson, we perceive what our environment affords to us over what it actually is (i.e. fire can be warmth, but it can also mean danger). Butcher and Helmond emphasise this point in their 2017 piece, stating that this means “we do not perceive the environment as such, but rather perceive it through its affordances, the possibilities for action it may provide” (Butcher and Helmond, 2017). For this project, this means that we can look to the game itself to discover the affordances it gives to its users. I argue throughout this thesis that this is an important way to situate modding itself due to the ability to demonstrate where the possibilities and limitations within the game lies.

This theory has been co-opted many times since his original work, most notably through the work of William Gaver, who argued that affordances are a complex active process wherein the affordances of a particular object or artefact can be both perceivable *and* hidden (Gaver, 1991). He argues that users must experiment to discover the possibilities and make hidden affordances visible, meaning that the

affordances must be actualised by the user. This links us back to the idea of queerness- as if we are asking "what is the alternative?" (Halberstam, 2011 pg2), users of games and their associated mods are exploring these alternatives through experimentation, pushing the game, and making choices based on their desires and informed knowledge of the game to discover what the game allows them to do, as well as what the modification therefore makes possible. Gaver's theory is also of interest here, as he emphasises that replicating everyday affordances can be unsuccessful due to the platform specific affordances needed by new technologies (Gaver, 1991). Concluding that "good design seems to demand a balance between providing the sorts of affordances originally suggested by the everyday world with those more inherent to given technologies" (pg126), we can see that Gaver was trying to move this theory from just a psychological design standpoint into considering new technology. While Gaver was thinking about this within design, we can apply this idea to video games- as they are their own unique form of media text with their own unique way of being used by players, and so therefore cannot be studied *just* as a media text like a film or television programme, instead consideration being given to the way that they are *used* and how identifying their uses means that we can then consider how queerness can be discovered through the alternatives or possibilities opened up by these affordances.

To further expand on how I am using affordances here, I also look to the way that affordances have been used to explore social media platforms. Benjamin Hanckel et al's work in which they interviewed young queer users of social media platforms to explore how they "curated" their online experiences revealed that doing this form of identity work produced affective emotions such as "comfort, security and, importantly, support" (Hanckel, 2019 pg1275). While I also think about affect within this thesis, what is of interest here is that they do this by looking to Jenny Davis and James Chouinard's definition of affordances. They define affordances as "the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects" (Davis and Chouinard, 2017). This is a more technical lens through which to view affordances, which I would argue is closer to Gibson's original definition. To draw from Hanckel's use of affordances, it is important to identify the "functions

and constraints" that we are working with when we look at video games as media texts. This then opens a discussion about modification and how we can situate it as a text in relation to video games. If we know from an analysis of the game where the limitations are, how can modification address these constraints or work within the functions provided to the player?

Affordances and Fan Texts

Adrienne Shaw's work on affordances draws from Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory to build a theory of affordances that may work with gaming (Shaw, 2017). Hall's theory proposed that there are different ways to read a media text- dominant, negotiated, and oppositional (Hall, 1973). Shaw takes these to instead conceptualise affordances as "All interactive media technologies can be looked at in terms of what they allow users/audiences to do. What types of uses do they lend themselves to? What types of interaction do they encourage?" (pg597). Therefore; "We can look at what uses (and users) are encoded into the design of interactive objects/texts" (pg597). Dominant uses here mean that "the designers' and users' imagined affordances align" (pg598), while oppositional uses "might take advantage of hidden affordances or even attempt to turn false affordances into actual affordances" (pg598), or users discover other ways of reading the text, something that links again to Halberstam's question: "what is the alternative?". False affordances for Shaw are the idea that "users might imagine very different affordances than the designers" (pg598), aligning with the above argument that we should look to both the affordances contained by the environment as well as the design and practice of modding as it will demonstrate the boundaries of capabilities of modification and help us discover how mods interact with the text. However, oppositional uses aren't the only potential site of queerness, as Shaw also outlines "negotiated" uses wherein users sit in between the dominant and oppositional. Using cheating and modding as her examples, Shaw argues that the act of cheating in a video game (through the use of codes or glitches), could be perceived solely as oppositional due to the game not allowing for this kind of play without that user interference, *however*, cheats are intentionally built to be used by developers during testing or purposefully left in the game text for players to find.

Modding works in a similar way, with players using game code and shaping it to fit their own desires, therefore negotiating their own way of using the text.

One of the unique aspects of video games in that they are an active media text which they cannot be experienced in a detached way- as the player must always be actively doing *something* within the game to experience the system. Shaw points this out when she argues that:

"A video game, for example, simply cannot function without a measure of activity and involvement beyond that which is required in other media. This makes video games activities as much as they are texts. The interactive properties of the texts, however, do not define the experience of game play. Understanding their reception, thus, must interrogate what actions these texts invite and how players actually use them" (pg597).

To fully understand how we can see different forms of queerness within video games, we have to explore the way we can *use* video games and how that can affect the way that we interpret them by both playing the media text as it is, and then the possibilities opened up to the player through the use of systems such as cheating or modding. This research is interested in these kinds of possibilities, and to reveal them it is important that we also consider the affordances of the video games themselves. What do games allow a player to do, and how can this player adjust the way that they play to reveal these possibilities? How can they play games in a way that helps them to discover potential gaps in representation? In narrative? In content? And how do fans then construct modifications that address both the possibilities and gaps? All these questions also link again to the overarching question this thesis poses- what *is* play and what *makes* a player? Are these potential alternatives to the expected use of a video game as a media text a form of play and what does that mean in terms of identity? I argue that using affordances allows us to understand how the way that people play exists in interaction with the environments of the game and therefore the game as a

media text.

Identity

A theme that appears throughout this thesis is the idea that identity is something that can be experimented with, placed into, and used by fan texts. One such way we have seen this kind of "play" with identity is within the concept of "localisation" which Hanna Wirman applied to cultural contexts in her 2013 article on modding *The Sims 2* (Wirman, 2013). During interviews with Finnish players, she found that her interviewees "sometimes make vague references to actual play and to skinning as an extra-gaming activity" (pg61)- meaning that the process of creating these modifications was part of their play practices, as "for many of them, playing was limited to skinning" (pg61). However, "the type of cocreativity explored here did not appear to compete with or challenge the original game but complimented it instead" (pg63)- the items created by the players here were polished, and in the style of the game itself, or didn't push against the boundaries of what was possible within the game. This is understandable as in the case of Wirman's interviewees, they strove to put *themselves* into the game, identifying with their cultural identity of being Finnish, as "Finnish skins represented a form of lived Finnishness that allowed the player to relive situations and stage such moments. These built on domestic settings that highlighted the importance of the player's own everyday items and symbolism" (pg63). While cultural identity can be quite different to queer identity, this thesis hopes to build on this idea that players are using modding as a way to explore identity and put it into the game, as well as the concept of "play" being something much more complex than just the act of sitting and playing a game from start to finish and being done with it when you turn it off and walk away. In the case of Wirman's participants, the localisation *had* to come from the players themselves, their own cultural identity finding its way into the text through their modding practices. Modding, as a form of fan production, does not always take place inside a vacuum- that is to say, modding *can* be highly individual, that modders can create something for themselves and themselves alone- but that is not the case. Mods themselves are influenced not only by the person creating them, but by the people they interact with and the feedback they receive on the mods themselves. This

can be simple feedback such as identifying bugs, to suggestions for further development- as we will see later in this thesis. Wirman also thought about this specifically in *women* who mod, as "cocreative play may offer women a way to avoid the negative connotations of playing computer games, by instead emphasizing one's cultural capital in a community of users" (pg64)- turning play into something that is much more productive, something that goes beyond the confines of the game and influenced by the users themselves.

Participation

Henry Jenkins defined Participatory Culture as one where the emphasis of consumption is placed on the reception of a media text, with a particular set of critical and interpretive practices, a base for consumer activism, cultural production, aesthetic traditions, and practices, as well as functioning as an alternative social community (Jenkins, 1992 pg227-280). Importantly for this piece of work, Jenkins also emphasised that "the relatively low barriers of entry into fan publishing" (pg161) are an important factor in the development of fan texts, as low barriers mean that *anyone* can try to create something, no matter their skill level. Jenkins refers to this kind of manipulation of text as a form of "remixing"- taking the tangible media text given to the consumer and reshaping it how they see fit. Paul Booth echoes this in his work on Digital Fandom, wherein he defines community as "the social grouping of individuals with shared interests, joined together through some form of mechanism of membership—the self-selected organization of a group of fans who both enjoy an extant media object, and who create additional content about that extant media object" (Booth, 2016 pg25). We can see a common theme in both definitions- that there is a high level of *participation* involved in fan communities, whether they be off or online. As I talked about in the introduction, historically fan production has been focused on the production of fan fiction or art, but as we move into a more digitally focused age, we have to begin to look at other forms of fan production in the same kinds of lenses. The shift towards consuming content across online spaces such as Tumblr, YouTube and Twitch means that we are beginning to see alternate forms of fan production. Built with some of the same ethos that Jenkins found in this exploration of fanfiction back in the 90s, new

technologies are making it easier than ever before to begin making content around your favourite media text. Axel Bruns' 2008 work on produsage is relevant here, where he speaks about the sharing of knowledge as an important factor in participatory forms of culture (Bruns, 2008). For him, "User-led content 'production' is instead built on iterative, evolutionary development models in which often very large communities of participants make a number of usually very small, incremental changes to the established knowledge base" (pg1), meaning that knowledge is sourced from the community themselves, relying on feedback and experimentation in order to enable "a gradual improvement in quality which— under the right conditions—can nonetheless outpace the speed of product development in the conventional, industrial model" (pg1). We can see similar dynamics in modding itself, as modding is something that takes place outside of the realm of industry, meaning that creators can develop at a pace that far surpasses that of traditional game development due to this shared knowledge and more immediate forms of feedback. Users also work together to create and share guides for mod creation within these communities, using the sourced knowledge to build up a shared knowledge base for development.

For some academics, these ideas on the role of participation fan production are further complicated by the concept of political economies that ties the labour of creation into exploitative practices due to the difference between fan creator and media text creator. Mel Stanfill introduced this idea in 2019 due to the concern that "The idea that fan production is now normative and encouraged is often explained as collapsing distinctions between producers and consumers" (Stanfill, 2019 pg94), as academics such as Jenkins have had an optimistic perspective of the role of fan production and participation. More importantly, she argues that "a labor framework lets us ask who benefits from these fan activities, and in what ways" (pg94). However, we can also view fan labour as a "gift economy", as Bethan Jones stated in her 2014 article on fan labour and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Jones, 2014). For both Jones and Stanfill, exploitation lies in the hands of the *industry* and how they respond to the labour of fans. While these two examples are not the primary focus of this thesis, I will explore this issue in more depth in chapter four when I look at the way the community is

mobilised to develop modifications and the industry's responses during on-going game development and how they tackle adding in content that is covered by the modification under study.

In my introduction, I briefly mentioned that the decline in popularity of the fanzine meant that fans shifted to posting their work in online spaces - however, not all participation is online: conventions remained a popular and integral part to the lives of many fans for them to meet other fans in person, with academics such as Nicolle Lamerichs exploring conventions and cosplay's importance to modern fandom (Lamerichs, 2018). Horbinski also notes this importance and how the popularity of conventions did not waver as more fans began to create online spaces, as "their function as social gatherings became even more important, since they now served to unite fans who were friends online but who had never met in person" (Horbinski, 2018 pg254). As conventions also allow for the in-person socialisation that online spaces lack, they also act "as opportunities for far-flung internet friends to see each other face to face at least once a year in the company of like-minded people" (Horbinski, 2018 pg254).

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this chapter I have outlined the different ways that modding, gaming, queerness and affordances can intersect. I have argued that representation is an important lens with which to view games due to the context modders and game developers are working within in terms of what has come before. We also must be aware of the politicisation of queer subjects due to the positioning of difference as "other" to the straight, white norm, especially in more representational forms of queerness. This also means that historically, players have to actively *play* in order to discover the possibilities for representation or queer forms of play. I have also argued that looking beyond representation means looking beyond rules, laying down the foundation for an argument that carries throughout this thesis: that queer play can open possibilities in modification.

In the chapter that follows, I will explore further the concept of play- thinking about play as a form of research within digital ethnography drawing on some of the ideas that I have discussed in this chapter around play. I also debate the difficulties of my own positionality as a gamer, researcher and modder in ethnographic work, looking to fan and game theory to situate this project.

Chapter Three: Methodology

"The universe is a vast and complex thing. Sometimes, answering a question only leads to more questions."

Liara T'Soni, Mass Effect 3

On your second test of this particular mod, you're feeling good about it as the game loads. You have a plan in your head of what you want to see, what you want to test, and you know how you're going to achieve this. You send your character to a different area in the game, prepared to begin a Drag show when you notice that something isn't quite working. It takes you by surprise, as up until this point everything had been working exactly how it should have. You pause a moment, trying to figure out what might be stopping the mod from doing what it is supposed to do. However, you've left the game unpaused- leading to a disaster as a character chooses that moment as the event timer is ticking down to die in the middle of the game's environment. You can do nothing but stare in horror as the characters in the game mourn this death instead of being entertained by the modded Drag Queen you worked so hard to get right, sighing as you write down this failure in your notes.

Play as Research

To address my research questions, I performed a digital ethnography of my case study games *The Sims 4, Fallout 4* and *Minecraft* and associated supplementary sites to fully explore the possibilities that arose from my research. I looked at three different games as a starting point for my case studies, branching out accordingly to also include the comment section of a mod's download page as well as relevant YouTube content creators and their videos. I used each game to discover the themes that arose from my data and analysed these in relation to my bigger questions around queerness, play and fandom. In this chapter I will discuss the methodology underpinning my analysis and the ethical implications surrounding online research in relation to the site of the comment section and YouTube content creation.

Gaming Research

First, I want to situate this project by demonstrating some of the complex issues around researching games by looking toward technology to give context as to *why* I chose a digital ethnography to explore my chosen cases. T.L Taylor sums up the complexities of studying video games in her 2009 piece on play in which she states:

"Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes"

(Taylor, 2009 pg332).

I begin by citing Taylor to highlight that video games are a complicated series of systems which can be approached through a variety of different methodologies. Game studies began with the ludology/narratology debate in the late 1990s that centred around the use of literary theory and the storytelling potential of gaming versus the view that games are built up of technological systems and should be studied as systems instead of by narratives. On the one hand, theorists like Janet Murray argued that the shift into the digital opened endless possibilities for narrative development. More specifically, for "participatory stories that offer more complete immersion, more satisfying agency, and a more sustained involvement with a kaleidoscopic world" (Murray, 1997 pg275). Murray's prediction was that new technologies would take up these opportunities to engage with narrative in new ways- which is something that we see in video games today through branching narratives, environmental storytelling[9] and social worlds. On the other hand, ludologists like Jesper Juul are more interested in: "(1) the system set up by the rules of a game, (2) the relation between the game

[9] The use of the landscape to reveal contextual information to the player that adds to the narrative.

and the player of the game, and (3) the relation between the playing of the game and the rest of the world" (Juul, 2005 pg6).To them, it is *just* the rules of the system that are of interest to games researchers. However, I would argue that reducing these approaches into an "either/or" may mean that parts of the game under study are overlooked, when instead they can be considered in tandem with the other half of this argument. Rules may exist that align with the narrative (such as: a player being unable to move into areas within the game world unless certain conditions are met) or the narrative may influence rules (for example: romancing a character and following a storyline may "lock" the player from romancing other NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) and following their storylines). Identifying the rules *and* the narrative or story that the game follows also allows us to see where the modification practices can fit into the original text. If modification is a form of fan text which demonstrates the same kind of mastery of knowledge that other forms of fan text do over the object of a fan's affection, the influence of the game's story-based content should not be ignored in favour of *just* the rules that the modification works around.

While we have moved on from this point of defining games research solely through the lens of ludology and narratology, it is important to mention it to situate the current methodological landscape around games research to understand the approach that this thesis takes. Taylor's work is also a good starting point to begin to think about ethnography and gaming, which is something that I will discuss in this section in relation to the games that I have studied.

Firstly, we must understand that video games themselves are not a static media text. Unlike the study of television or film, the content that is found within games cannot exist without user intervention. As I mentioned in my literature review, a video game cannot just be "played" the same way that a researcher can play a film and watch from a distance but must be "played" in that the researcher *must* direct the avatar to move across the virtual environments. While this project is an analysis of a selection of video

games, their associated modifications and one comment section, I must outline here that there are elements that are more ethnographical in nature due to the way that video games must be enacted by the player which is something that I will expand on more later in this chapter. As “even within a single game, there are innumerable ways to delineate its play” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004 pg310), *experiencing* and *watching* are two separate ways to gather data- and I argue that *experiencing* what a mod can do within a game environment I am familiar with is the best way to analyse these cases. I also cite Taylor’s work in this section to emphasise the complexity a researcher must face when they decide to approach video games, but also because Taylor has done ethnographic work within a video game itself. Like others researching MMOs, Taylor emphasises that she is also a player who must participate in the game to research it. We can also see this in Tom Boellstorff’s work on *Second Life,* wherein he uses ethnographic and anthropological terminology to try and define his work on in-game cultures (Boellstorff, 2008). We can look to these ideas around *using* the game under study to better understand the relationship I as a researcher had to the texts under study. However, this is not to say that this thesis is an ethnographic study in the same vein as Boellstorff and Taylor’s work, as my research questions are not interested in social cultures enacted within multiplayer games. It is instead more around discovering the affordances that lie within the games under study so that I can analyse where modifications can fit into and around these affordances and what that means in terms of queer play. Playing the game is therefore central for me to be able to examine the mods and their impact, but it is not *my play itself* that is under study.

Secondly, as stated above by looking at Taylor’s theory of assemblage, games are a complicated series of systems which Taylor conceives as being made up of “material artefacts (computers, monitors, desks, chairs), sites (forums, webpages, communication platforms, in-person gaming groups), networks (of technology, of people, of organisations), policies, governance, and law” (Taylor, 2022 pg40). This means that branching out by exploring more than just the game itself becomes a way to also analyse the game under study. I have already discussed the concept of affordances in my literature review, but we can see how these complex systems align

with the ideas posed there. To fully understand the affordances of the game and the modifications, it is vital to explore a variety of aspects that make them up. Taylor describes this as the sites having “porous borders” (pg40), that a part of ethnography around games is to encompass these systems because this is where the data can be found. For this research, this meant using the game as a starting point and heading outwards to the mods and supplementary online data such as the comment section and mod descriptions to help add to the wider picture that the data gave.

Sites of Investigation

As this research concerns a very specific phenomenon, I decided to focus my attention on studying it using case studies. As, “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (“the case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014 pg16. This also means that this project also “benefits from the prior development of theoretical prepositions to guide data collection and analysis” (pg17). For this research, starting with a game as the case study and moving outwards to encompass the “variables of interest” meant that I could account for the different ways the mods under study appear in online spaces and what that then might mean in the wider picture of answering my research questions around queer play. While John Gerring stated that a Case Study “is best defined as an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units” (Gerring, 2004 pg341), I would argue that my intention here is not to generalise across the entirety of modding, as that would be unfeasible for one project to do, purely due to the sheer scale of video game modding as a practice that fans engage in. But instead, I will explore the potential that modding has, to bring a new perspective to what it can be for researchers in the social sciences.

This then meant that work had to be done before selecting my cases to develop my own definition of modding by categorising them to be able to choose a starting point for selecting my cases. As game scholars have previously also done this work of

conceptualising modding by trying to categorise the different forms that modding takes, I first looked to what has been written before around this issue to help narrow down my case selection. Tanja Sihovnen mapped out the types of modding by using the categories: 'Interpretation, Configuration, Reworking and Redirection' in their 2011 work on modding and The Sims (Sihovnen, 2011 pg88). For Sihovnen, 'reworking' is what can be referred to as "modding proper" (pg89) as it "usually entails both altering the game's aesthetics and mechanics, usually by adding new gameplay elements" (pg89). I would argue that from Sihovnen's definition that reworking is the closest of this typology to Jenkins' conceptualisation of fan production (Jenkins, 1992) in that it is about taking the original text and using the desires of the fan to remodel it into something new. The other types are similarly drawn from previous work done on modding and how the mod can be used. Redirection refers to the creation of external texts such as machinima (the use of a game's visuals in video production). Configuration is the reworking of "readily available code and its functions within the parameters and affordances of the developers' intentions" (pg89), while Interpretation is the way that players respond to the text. However, Tero Laukkanen split the types by thinking about what they effect- by categorising them into "Audio-Visual" (custom content, skins, items/weapons etc) and "Mechanical" (total game conversions, hacked objects, new maps etc) (Laukkanen, 2005 pg140). Doing this work speaks back to Yin's definition of case study research in which he argued the need for a guide to the data collection- looking to how academics had tried to categorise mods in the past helped me to develop my own typology wherein I was able to narrow my focus on what specific mods I wanted to research alongside the review of my literature.

The aim of this research is not to create a general framework with which to view *all* forms of modding, nor is it able to encompass the entire practice, but rather to explore the possibilities of modding through looking at three different games and mods that can be applied to them to expand their content in the same way that a fanfiction writer would expand on the world of their favourite tv show. Modding is a particular type of cultural production tied to video games that needs a unique, adaptive methodology to account for the difference in games and their worlds and meanings, as it would be

difficult to apply *one* method or methodology to gaming research. As stated, initially I laid out categories of different mods that I believed were important to modern modding scenes as a starting point to narrow my focus. This meant I could rule out more technical forms of modding (such as bug fixes or player made game patches) as being too niche for this project to focus on. Initially, I wanted to focus on the function of mods as the primary data in this thesis, thinking about how mods can add things into the game, overhaul existing systems, or mix those systems up until they are unrecognisable but still familiar to the player. I spent time performing searches for mods labelled as LGBT or Queer, noting down mods that I thought may be of interest. This led to a list full of "pride" modifications which added in reskinned items decorated with flags or in pride colours, which I decided would not answer my research questions around queer forms of play, as I argue that this is more complex and nuanced than just 'adding pride colours' to a game. However, this initial searching did lead me to the LGBT mod for *The Sims 4*. As I stated in my own MA thesis, *The Sims 4* is an interesting case to study due to the open-ended form of play that allows for high levels of player interaction and creativity (Lees, 2019), which is a theme that appears throughout all three of my cases in a variety of ways. Initially, I had planned on trying to organise my cases through the typology I had made alongside this desire to study games with high levels of player freedom. However, it became vital to study the game alongside the modification, as the modification does not exist within a vacuum and has been influenced by the game or the game's history in some way- meaning I had to account for the context in which the modder was working with during the mod's development. Working with mods that are still being developed also posed its own challenges. The Alternate Start modification (which alters the introduction of *Fallout 4*), for example, was dropped and picked up by a completely different modder in 2022, meaning I also had to account for the new modder's positioning of the mod in their description. Another challenge came in 2023, wherein Electronic Arts (EA) added *some* labelling options to *The Sims 4,* a decision that has almost made the modification under study obsolete, but at the same time demonstrated that there was a need for the mod in the first place, without taking the place of what the mod itself does.

Each of my case studies share a common theme of openness, and this seems to exemplify a wider trend in modding wherein games that allow for high levels of player freedom are also the games that are most widely modified. The top 10 games on the most popular modification website Nexus Mods as of the Spring of 2024 are three iterations of *Elder Scrolls* games, three iterations of *Fallout* games, two games that belong to CDPR[10] (*The Witcher 3* and *Cyberpunk 2077*), *Stardew Valley*[11] and the 2023 Game of the Year *Baldur's Gate 3*. While all these games and franchises are different, there is a clear trend here of player customisation, role-play, and openness. I took this logic into the selection of *Fallout 4* as the second case. Having played the game before and being incredibly familiar with the RPG genre, I knew that there was a narrative that surrounded a family that drives the player through the game, but I also remembered the many, many hours I had spent avoiding the main story- whether that was to build my character to be as powerful as she could be or to explore every inch of the map because I could. This kind of play reminded me of Ruberg's discussion of slow strolls in their book, wherein they argue that walking simulators[12] challenge the expectation of regular play, that they are already associated with women and minorities because of the assumption that playing in an unexpected way is not the "correct" way to play (Ruberg, 2019 pg204). The big questions surrounding this choice became about how players could use their knowledge of not just the game, but the *genre* to dictate their play, looking for the possibilities opened up by the rejection of the expected structure of play.

Finally, in doing my initial online research into mods, I also found myself watching Let's Play videos that featured modifications to see how they worked without spending the time it would take to purchase, download, and install games for myself. Let's Play videos are a form of content hosted on video platforming sites such as YouTube which

[10] CDPR - CD Project Red

[11] Which was another game considered for this thesis due to the potential it had for telling queer stories

[12] An adventure style game that centres around environmental investigation through movement and interaction with the world around the player

allow creators to film their gameplay for an audience. This led me to a number of different creators who were making content using mods to play games in alternate ways, such as CallMeKevin's *Grand Theft Auto 5* randomiser series ("I've ruined GTA V with the chaos mod"), alongside his infamous "Jim Pickens" *Sims 4* series ("Sims 4 but a drug mod was a bad idea" and "This Mod Completely Changes The Sims"). As YouTube uses an algorithm that learns what users will click on and recommends based on viewing history, I noticed a rise in gaming content being recommended to me outside of viewing videos to assess mods for research. Throughout this process, I discovered that these creators would also turn to their audiences during livestreams and within their comment sections, opening possibilities for transmedia forms of play wherein the creator could actively respond to their audiences and adapt their play to align with what the audience is asking of them. While traditional forms of fandom surround the dissection of the original text to enable the reappropriating of characters, stories and worlds into their own work, there is also an element of co-creativity involved wherein fans receive feedback from other fans which helps them further develop their work.

Axel Bruns (2008) primarily focuses on sites such as the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia in his work, but this concept of changes to established knowledge can also apply to the production and consumption of fan texts. As "The communities of fan fiction will provide direct feedback to their contributors, thereby communally evaluating both the inherent qualities of a story itself (from expression and style to characterisation and plot), as well as the plausibility within the overall fictional universe)" (Bruns, 2008 pg232-233), fans use community as a space to not just discuss the text, universe and characters, but to also improve on their skills as creators, which is what I was seeing happen with these content creators on YouTube. As before, I was led down a variety of different styles of content that featured mods and play styles that covered a wide range of different approaches to games like *Fallout 4* and *Skyrim*, but also *Minecraft*. This was an expansive world of different play styles and content, which led to my own exploration of different mods and play to focus in on specific areas of interest. I experimented with different mods and downloaded a "One-Block" world to emulate the trends I was seeing when watching Minecraft centred content. I took ideas

from the videos I was watching and replicated them in my own world, taking on huge projects that took hundreds of in-game days and required even more specialised knowledge of the game's mechanics (such as building machines that could fly in order to clear out a large area) or to build a machine that used the game's portal system to duplicate hard to collect blocks like sand. The game became a place I could linger, and the content I found online also emphasised this exploratory play, leading to my focus being more about communities and co-creativity and the increased accessibility to fandom that YouTube allows for, echoing Jenkins' original emphasis on fandom having low barriers of entry (Jenkins, 1992). This was interesting as it directly opposes the longstanding ways of considering modding as part of 'hacker culture', which needs advanced technical skill to engage with. To consider modding as a fan practice is to consider how digital media has transformed the accessibility of modding, and how this in turn leads to new formulations of queer play.

Walkthrough/Playthrough

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the concept of "play as research", drawing on TL Taylor's work on ethnography to situate the complexity of games as sites of research due to their nature as being malleable networks that are made up of a variety of different artefacts. As "we not only play the game but play *with* the game, testing and developing our knowledge about how it works" (Taylor, 2022 pg41), I had to consider *how* to find the content from the game that I wished to study. Not only that, but when also considering the use of mods in my analysis I had to consider how to access the data that I needed and the complications I may face in doing so.

I once again refer to T.L Taylor's work on MMOs as she puts an emphasis on *play* as a form of research. She states, "trying out different strategies, pushing at the bounds of the game world, tweaking instrumental action, and replaying a different way for a different experience are all common in gaming" (pg42), all of which are things I engaged in during my data collection period. For this project, this involved a period of questioning before playing each game to think around directions of play, based on both

my knowledge of the game and the knowledge I had about the mods I was looking at. As the games under study needed to be played to experience the modifications, I had to decide on these kinds of strategies for myself to enact the mods. This means that, collecting data for me involved a period where I had to play each game under study, experimenting with them to discover their content and how that would relate to the modifications I chose. Unlike writers such as Tom Boellstorff and Bonnie Nardi, this is not an ethnography in the same sense as an anthropologist would approach a game, as ethnography in games has looked more traditionally anthropological in nature- giving the researcher time and space to interview and observe their participants (Boellstorff, 2008 and Nardi, 2010). As Boellstorff states: "The term "participant observation" is intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that ethnographers conduct their best work" (Boellstorff, 2008 pg71). However- this raises the question, what if *you* are the participant? I would argue that it is impossible to study games in a way that detaches the researcher from influencing the game's content in *some* way, as games need direction to exist.

While these writers focused on MMOs and a wider community driving the game's content, the same idea applies to a researcher studying a single player game. This meant adapting this research as I went, using my previous experiences during play to drive the next play session and so on. Unlike more structured forms of data gathering such as interviewing, any form of ethnographic study has to be open to change and adaptation as time goes on. Almost like Light, Burgess and Duguay's "Walkthrough method", I had to plan and adapt my playthroughs to discover my data (Light et al, 2018). For Light et al, the walkthrough method would "systematically and forensically step through the various stages" (pg881), however I would put forth an alternative to this, a "playthrough method", in which the researcher *plays* through the various aspects of the game to uncover the data they need. As "the walkthrough method is a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences" (pg882), we can see how we can adapt this kind of approach to games. Each step I took became purposeful, to uncover the affordances of the game

and the mod and how they interact with each other. Using the notes I made from each play session, I asked myself questions before the next, such as "what might happen if I do this?" or "Is it possible to use the mod in this way?" to help drive my focus instead of meandering through the game and not engaging with the modifications at all. As the nature of modding games means that I am adding in content that does not normally exist within the game, I had to direct my play quite specifically to come across or engage with this content, or I would not have been able to study it, adding an additional form of challenge to researching this area. Not only must the game be played to discover the data, but so too must the mod be played to see how it will affect the game.

In the beginning of this thesis, I looked back at my own gaming practices across the years as a mod *consumer* to situate myself and my own relation to gaming. This is a pattern that repeats across the thesis, with small vignettes heading each chapter to indicate some of my own play sessions (which are both personal and research based). Ethnography itself derives from the work of anthropologists of the 19th and 20th century wherein researchers would immerse themselves into an "unknown" culture to study social worlds outside of their own.[13] As Hammersley and Atkinson state: "Its complex history is one of the reasons why 'ethnography' does not have a standard, well-defined meaning. Over the course of time, and in each of the various disciplinary contexts mentioned, its sense has been re-interpreted in various ways, in order to adapt to new circumstances" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019 pg2). Defining this work as an ethnography has meant grappling with my own positionality as a gamer, and eventually- a new modder. Have I stood on the edges of an online culture and observed in the ways of the early anthropologists, or have I immersed myself within the field the way that Boellstorf and Taylor have? How then do I define gameplay as a form of research due to the active role I have had in creating my own data? All these questions demonstrate one of the difficulties of researching gaming and emphasise why I have

[13] It is also important to mention here that the nature of this early anthropology was colonial- with the researcher's positioning of themselves as the norm, and the culture as "other"

argued that trying to research modding has needed an adaptive method which can account for these intricacies. Outside of academia, I am familiar with all the cases that I chose from playing them casually- with each of these games having hundreds of hours logged for me. Of the three games I chose as my cases, only one out of the three was a case I had never used mods on previously (*Fallout 4*)- primarily due to my access to it being limited to the use of a console until 2020. Since the end of my fieldwork, I have also now developed my own skills as a modder- and while I have not modded any of the games that my cases focus on,[14] I have shifted from being "just" a gamer and mod consumer to someone who straddles the line between all three- creator, gamer, and consumer. The scope of this research would have been vastly different if I did not have these previous experiences of the game, or the experience in using mods that I have gained over the years. However, this is not a project about experiencing games for the first time, so having that knowledge not only aligns with the arguments I make throughout the thesis about fandom (and the concept of sharing knowledge or using that knowledge to engage with a community (Bruns, 2008 Jenkins, 1992, 2006)). This also helped me as a researcher to have specific goals in mind for play sessions, so as not to get lost in a huge amount of irrelevant data.

Ethical Implications

As each of my empirical chapters do refer to data that was generated by online users, there are ethical implications around this kind of data that I will discuss here. Firstly, it is important to note that "Internet-based communications are between public and private, published and unpublished, identified and anonymous" (Bruckman, 2004 pg101), meaning that this puts researchers in a difficult ethical balance of having to judge the content of the data they wish to use and the challenges of using it in their research. Specifically for this project, issues around anonymity, what is public and private as well as how to gain consent because of these issues around public internet sites that I will outline below. The Association of Internet Researchers have also

[14] I have downloaded the tools for developing Minecraft mods, however the information on how to use them is hard to access

published guidance on these issues in 2020, as there are debates around consent and public/private, but they do still emphasise the consent being based around personal information, not data produced by the user (franzke et al, 2020). This is a developing area of research that is constantly shifting and changing, and this research situates itself within the notion that the internet is almost archival in nature, as I will outline more in this section.

Firstly, as "most internet-based communications are pseudonymous" (Bruckman, 2004 pg102), anonymity becomes a site of contention when researching online content. On the one hand, users post under pseudonyms to maintain a level of anonymity in their online spaces, however this does not mean that anonymity is necessarily achieved. Users "may use the same pseudonym over an extended period of time and ultimately care about the reputation of that pseudonym" (pg102-103), but also that "they may use that pseudonym on multiple sites" (pg103). As users post and interact more in these spaces, it is also common for small titbits of information about themselves to be revealed, something that I saw in my chapter on *The Sims* wherein the modder spoke about how things going on in their personal life were making it hard to keep the mod updated in line with the game updates, but also in looking at YouTube creators where their pseudonyms become their signifiers. Some YouTubers never operate under their real names but will happily share other kinds of information about themselves publicly, making that public/private distinction a complex issue, wherein they become public figures due to the nature of their career as content creators, however they are not *known* by their actual legal names. To tackle this complex issue, this meant that I had to anonymise any comments made on the mods by omitting usernames in discussion around what mod users had to say in terms of feedback to the mod creator. I chose not to omit the usernames of the mod creators or the YouTubers whose content I explored however, as crediting users for their work is important, especially in academia wherein we must balance the power relations that we have with our data or our participants. It is also uncommon to *not* credit creators for their work in fan research (Examples of which can be seen in Herzog, 2012, Day and Aymar, 2017 Freund, 2018 Lamerichs, 2018, Seymour, 2018 Taylor, 2019, Woodcock and Johnson,

2019 Fathallah, 2020).

Another issue around using online data is the issue of informed consent. In terms of using YouTube content, accessing the creator themselves is difficult due to them being a public figure- and I defined this as someone who has more than 10,000 subscribers who is actively making content at the time of writing this thesis. However, this also ties into my overarching issue around the public/private- when someone posts under a pseudonym, how do you then contact them to gain informed consent in the way that you would if you were doing face-to-face research? I argue that there is not a good answer to this question due to the nature of online spaces as being archival- the mods I studied were posted multiple years ago, meaning that contacting each person who contributed to the discussion on Patreon or the mod creators themselves would be *incredibly* difficult, or almost impossible. However, as one of the arguments of this research is that we should consider modding as a form of fan production, defining the mods themselves as fan texts helps us to circumvent this issue, as we are looking at them as a media text that is situated on an already existing field, rather than as a piece of generated data by a participant. As "social media data has not been created specifically for the purpose of research upon intervention of the researchers, but rather were the result of the authorship of various social media platform users who created data for a variety of reasons in the course of everyday actions" (Weller and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017 pg121), we can think of these sites of investigation as being archival in nature- a demonstration of a specific moment in time wherein a discussion has taken place around a fan text.

Approaching an ethics board with these conundrums proved to be difficult, especially due to the new-ness of internet research meaning that at times there was misunderstanding as to the bounds of this research. Not only did I have to clearly state boundaries on what I considered public vs private (as indicated above in talking about public figures on YouTube) it also meant having to also account for the user agreements on the aforementioned websites to ensure that I could use the platforms as a basis for research. After negotiating this, ethics approval was granted.

In this chapter I have outlined how this project is a form of digital ethnography in which I was well-acquainted with each of my cases due to the nature of gaming as being a form of media that needs to be played through in order to gather data-meaning that my data would not exist without my intervention. I referred to this as a "playthrough method" in which I spend time systematically discovering the affordances of the game and mod by spending time playing with them. I have also discussed the complexity of gaming, as well as the ethical issues around doing online research. In the next three chapters I will be analysing each of my case studies, beginning with *The Sims 4*.

Chapter Four: The Sims: Queer Play as Addition

"You gave them the one thing that was stolen from them. A chance. A chance to learn. To find love. To live. And in the end what was your reward? You never said. But I think I know: a family."

Brigid Tenenbaum - Bioshock

To set up for your rotations, you have to be meticulous in your planning. You know from watching videos and reading the fanwiki that Pleasantview was designed to be played in a specific order to maximise the town-wide story, playing one in-game week at a time to allow the whole town to grow simultaneously. You've already set up your mods, the game now unplayable to you without specific files that have existed online since 2009. You start with Don Lothario, working your way to the Goths to the Brokes and Pleasants, and eventually placing down the Burbs to incorporate them into the town. You scroll through your pages and pages worth of custom content, reskinning each pre-made character to alter the way they look to better reflect both your tastes in mods but also their personalities. Once each household has been set up to your liking, positioning them at the end of the pre-designed storylines that you are prompted into following as you open up the game- the rotations can begin.

The life simulation franchise *The Sims* has cemented itself as a cultural phenomenon since the release of the first game in February 2000. With 4 different variations of the game and hundreds of expansion packs released to date, *The Sims 4* is a life simulation game based on the maintenance of households within a capitalist landscape with a distinctly North American feel to it. The first game in the series, *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), was originally developed after Maxis founder Will Wright lost his home and possessions in the Oakland firestorm of 1991. This natural disaster, he claimed; helped him to explore how his material possessions affected his "inventory of needs" (Taylor, T, 2011). These needs later translated into the game world's onscreen functions, such as hunger, comfort, and energy. *The Sims* was simple in design, with the

player tasked with constructing a household (from one to eight characters), moving them into an empty plot of land or a pre-made house, and then simulating their daily life tasks such as going to work, feeding themselves and socialising with the other characters in the world. While the player navigates these tasks, they must also attend to their characters inventory of needs, which in turn, affects the way the characters deal with their daily tasks and the world around them (such as: a Sim with low fun needs bar will object to or refuse to do tasks which are demanding, like studying from a book or going to work.)

This chapter will explore how modders can play with the tools that have been given to them by the developers to work within the limited affordances of the game in ways that allows for more representational play. I will do this by looking back at Mia Consalvo's work on positioning Queerness within *The Sims,* which explored the potential for playing same-sex couples in the first instalment of the franchise (Consalvo, 2003b). I will also refer to Hanna Wirman's work on identity presentation within *The Sims 2* (Electronic Arts, 2004) and the practice of "skinning", which is when fans design custom content, to think about how identities are presented to the player and if that has changed now that the franchise is into the fourth iteration of the game. Throughout this chapter I will also debate the complexity of identity, trying to explore if modification is an avenue that can accurately depict forms of identity in a way that can encompass queer lived experiences.

I argue that to understand looking "beyond representation" in games we must first understand the boundaries with which we are working within. *The Sims* then, becomes an interesting point of study due to these kinds of boundaries. The very nature of the game is a capitalist simulator, in which players simulate familial life, accumulate wealth, and play characters from birth to death. *The Sims* reflects a chrononormative approach to human life, wherein the expectation is that players organise their in-game time in a way that also reflects the productive time they experience in their daily lives (Freeman, 2010). This then begs the question: what would using identities that resist the wider

societal expectations of productive time (or Freeman's theorised "teleological schemes") look like within the game world, and would this align with queering play? First, I will identify the systems in place within the game itself to highlight the boundaries the mod is being used within, as there are limitations to what modification can achieve. Highlighting these boundaries means that the analysis of what the mod does can be driven by aspects of identity, rather than more general representation. Moving into discussion on the modification, I then highlight three areas of interest that developed from my use of the modification: 1. "Coming Out" as it is framed by the modification's use of the moodlet system; 2. Gender performance through Drag, thinking about the complexities of being both a Drag artist and a performer in a game not designed with systems that allow for fluidity; and 3. The potential limitations of using a modification that only affects the personality system to label characters. Finally, I also wish to highlight the importance of the community to the development of this modification by looking at the platform and the user responses to the modder and how that affects the different identities that may or may not be reflected within the modification. If this chapter is interested in the queer play potential of simply 'adding' different identities to the game, exploring what identities the modification community are asking for is an important way to highlight the work being done by the modder and their community in potentially developing something beyond the scope of the game itself.

To do these things, I will be using a modification called the "LGBT Mod" by PimpMySims4. This mod is explicit in its intention to add in specific categories of identity into a game which does not use identity labelling such as "Gay" or "Lesbian", but instead allows the player to assign preferences within a menu. As this mod was chosen due to the deliberate signalling of queer identity in this labelling, this also speaks to a wider representational practice of playing customising their game experience by modding specific cultural signifiers into a game which might not necessarily represent their social group (Wirman, 2014).

In the introduction to this chapter, I gave a brief description of the gameplay in the original version of *The Sims,* highlighting the important features that made it stand out within the life simulation genre of games. As time and game development moved on, gameplay was further complicated in the addition of new features such as "aspirations" and "wants" to drive the player into following the desires of their characters, not just their daily tasks. Not only this, but the game incorporates a system in which the characters on screen have their own artificial intelligence (AI) which drives them to act outside of the player's interventions. In *The Sims 2* (Electronic Arts, 2004) the play was primarily directed through the personality system, where players assigned their characters specific personality traits such as "Romance" and "Fortune" which dictated how Sims would respond to actions and direction from the player as well as individualising each character that they could create. For example, a fortune sim would desire to earn money and buy items, rewarding the player with "aspiration points" for fulfilling these wishes. As the main goals in the game are still entirely player directed, it is also up to the player whether or not they want to follow these goals. The main selling point of this instalment of the game was the generational play, meaning that goals became more focused on achievements across the lifetime of a Sim- with the game calling these achievements "Lifetime Aspirations" (which are a slightly more challenging goal to strive towards for the player). These are also dictated by a Sim's personality choice- Family (or marrying and having children), Fortune (careers and money), Knowledge (learning new things), Pleasure[15] (having fun or spending time pursuing leisure activities), Popularity (building friendships), Romance (dating and relationships) and Grilled Cheese[16] (eating or making grilled cheese sandwiches). All but "Pleasure" exist in the current version of the game (*The Sims 4)*, with Romance being changed to "Love" which appears to account for different approaches to romance and love. In this, we can see this reinforcement of particular goals which align with the capitalist society *The Sims* creates- goals around Family emphasised producing

[15] Added in *The Sims 2: Nightlife* expansion.

[16] Hidden aspiration added in *The Sims 2: Nightlife*. Only selectable through cheats or the failed use of a reward object which allows the Sim to change aspiration.

children and grandchildren, Fortune Sims desire the accumulation of wealth, and their day-to-day wants focus on earning and spending money. These contrast with Romance and Pleasure, as their focus is on not abiding to societal structures that dictate that monogamy and an emphasis on careers and family are the most important things to desire, with Romance Sims regularly rolling fears of getting married and having children. Players could therefore engage in Queer play within this mechanic- with Sims who refused to abide by the standards Western society sets for the trajectory of a heteronormative cis-gendered relationship.

It Is important to look back at the introduction of this mechanic to assess how it appears now in *The Sims 4*. In *The Sims 4,* while Family and Fortune remain relatively the same in terms of the emphasis on reproduction and labour, Romance has been split into two pathways and renamed “Love”. This could be argued to be more reflective of the players, as not all players who select the Romance aspiration have the desire to be non-monogamous or to not have family in a heteronormative style. We associate family structures and monogamy within relationships with ideas around success (Halberstam, 2011). As the game rewards players who take on careers and who create families through the selection of the related aspirations, it is no wonder that the developers split the aspiration that did not quite conform with these structures. This gave players the option to either conform by searching for “true love” with one romantic partner or to reject this lifestyle through becoming a “Serial Romantic”. Meaning they received the reward trait “Player” which switches off jealousy if the Sim is caught being romantic with another Sim.

Traits and Personalities

As Aspirations are not the only thing that dictates a Sim’s personality, we can also look to the trait system to direct gameplay. Traits replaced the personality point system in *The Sims 2*, with *The Sims 3* becoming less focused on sliding scales between personality types such as “Outgoing” vs “Shy” or “Serious” vs “Playful” and instead were split into four different types- Mental, Physical, Social and Lifestyle- with

something like “Serious” potentially becoming “Perfectionist” or “Disciplined”. Traits dictate how a Sim navigates their world, allowing them to be affected by both their actions and the actions of other characters around them. In *The Sims 4* for example, a “Gloomy” Sim will regularly become “Sad”, and respond to action by triggering this emotion, expressing melancholic thoughts to other Sims and other actions which unlock while Sims are in this emotional state. As the gameplay can be influenced by both these traits and the emotions the Sim feels, this became the ideal place for a mod which adds in new traits to align more with Queer identities.

Traits are now not only for the characters, but there are also traits which can affect the space or “lot” the Sim lives on or visits. Some of these traits are locked to certain types of lot (such as the “University Student Hang Out” lot trait being locked to community lots in the University area). Lot traits are designed to affect gameplay, with traits affecting skill building, visitor levels (ie. encouraging specific groups of Sims onto the lot such as Vampires or Teenagers) and random events (such as earthquakes or Ghosts). The mod that this research explores utilises these lot traits by encouraging Sims with Queer identities onto the lot- as the game would do if the player selected “Vampire Nexus” in an un-modded game. It splits Queer identities three ways, which is also potentially a reflection of the type of categorisations that we see in Queer community spaces in the real world. There is the more general “LGBT Hot Spot”, which spawns Sims who have been given personality traits from the mod onto the lot. The player can also select “Gay Hotspot” or “Lesbian Hotspot” to further specify exactly who the community lot is meant for. Interestingly, there are no options for other identities such as a “Bisexual Hotspot” or a “Trans Hotspot” despite the mod acknowledging that other identities exist through its main labels.

Playing Queer

The Sims is a game that has always been open to non-heterosexual identity representation. “Playing queer” has mostly depended on representations that align nicely with identity categories that fall under the queer umbrella. As *The Sims* is a life

simulation based in American heteronormative ideology, this is probably the most logical way that they can approach queer identity, by tying it to romance and relationships. This kind of representation dates back to the original game, as Mia Consalvo pointed out in her 2003 article on romance in games- *The Sims'* game manual even engaged with gender neutral language when referring to "The Sims" themselves as characters ("romance between Sims can occur if they're feeling well disposed toward one another as well" (pg183))- which potentially signalled to queer players that the game had the potential for them to reflect their own identities through the construction of households with same-sex couples (Consalvo, 2003a). However, Consalvo also found that depictions of *romance* within this manual were always between male-female couples, which enforced heterosexuality as the norm, positioning queerness or queer romance as other to that norm (Consalvo, 2003a pg183) due to the exclusion of explicit representation. While the potential was there for this kind of queer representation in play, there were also some areas where this "otherness" was emphasised, such as in the fact that same-sex couples would have to wait longer for the option for adoption to be given to them by the game. This was offered to Sims during a phone call, rather than a pop-up dialogue box triggered by romantic interactions asking them if they wanted to have a baby (as pregnancy did not exist in this version of the game) (Consalvo, 2003a). Not only that, but the language used in this case is interesting, as Sims in same-sex couples could not "marry" in the same way that opposite sex couples could, as same-sex couples would *always* be labelled as "living together" when viewed in their relationship tab rather than being labelled as romantic partners (pg183). The changes that *The Sims* has undergone over the years to increase this kind of representational play are too many to name here, but most notably we have seen "Patch 34" (which removed gender locking on all customisation options alongside the ability to define the character's frame, ability to get pregnant and the way they use the bathroom) and "Patch 129" (which added customisable pronouns alongside the release of the expansion *High School Years* in May 2022).

It is important to also note that the game's structure is inherently chrononormative

in design with its emphasis on "generations" as well as the potential ways to "lose" the game. We first saw this in *The Sims 2*, as it was the entry into the franchise that introduced generational play. There is a real focus here on lifetime achievements, on building families and play through the generations. This was first shown in the adverts for the game, following a young man as he tries to find love, until he gets married, has children, raises the children, watches as his children leave as adults and then as him and his wife become grandparents, all set to a song that repeats over and over the words "new generation" as we watch these images- reinforcing that this game is about chrononormativity followed by a graphic that outlines the growth of a family tree. All these images work together to emphasise that *The Sims 2* follows this kind of chronormative logic- one that remains throughout the rest of the series but was first seen here. The game itself does not give the player an alternate way to play- to "win" *The Sims* you must find a way for a household to continue or, to cheat death. These structures are interesting to think about here, as players have developed their own play styles and challenges with their own goals separate to the ones in the game which are distributed across fan spaces such as online forums and YouTube. In this part, I have summarised a variety of features of the game which the mod can affect as well as how queerness has been explored previously. Next, I will look at how the game series itself has handled queer characters and how the game's affordances complicate the use of the modification.

Affordances of the Game

When outlining the approach that *The Sims* has taken toward queer representation over time, I argued that the franchise has always been open to non-heterosexual representations. However, what is interesting about this is that this position wasn't always reflected in the households that were created by EA themselves. So, to begin my exploration of the modification I began by using it in conjunction with the first gay male couple that appeared in the game. Brant and Brent Hecking were introduced in the Expansion pack *The Sims 4: Cats and Dogs* (Electronic Arts, 2017), living in the new neighbourhood Brindleton Bay. First appearing in the trailer for this game, this was not only the first time that *The Sims* used queer representation within their advertising,

but they also depicted a same-sex wedding. Brant and Brent made history by being the first queer couple put into a main game expansion pack, as while there had previously been a lesbian couple in *The Sims 3: Roaring Heights* (Electronic Arts, 2013), this couple were not a part of the main series, instead they were from a themed downloadable world map from The Sims 3 Online Store.

Brant and Brent have been important in shaping EA's approach to representing marginalised communities and opened up a pathway for a more inclusive version of the game, as we are now seeing more options for gender identity as well as sexuality appearing in Create-A-Sim, but also different identities within the game's advertising itself. This shows that the game is beginning to afford players the possibility of specific identity labelling. If we understand that representation is a way of making sense of the world around us through language and systems of meaning which are produced by the culture that they exist within (Hall, 1997), we can look to *The Sims* as a way of expressing identity in the very specific lens of the culture that it is produced within. Importantly for this research, we can think about this by the rendering of queer identities or queerness as "invisible" due to a lack of explicit representation throughout the series up until Brant and Brent's introduction in 2017. If we think again to Consalvo's piece around the queer potential of the game to allow for queer representations (Consalvo, 2003a), we can also consider that queerness during the history of the franchise has been rendered "invisible". Examples of this invisibility can be seen in earlier iterations of the game, such as Kent Capp (*The Sims 2 Base Game*, 2004- he has a preference for males built into his AI which can only be viewed by using modifications) and Gobias Koffi (*The Sims 3 Base Game*, 2009- his bio states "*Gobias Koffi is a well-meaning single Sim who just hasn't met the right women. Is this because he actually prefers the company of his male friends?*"). Neither of these two men are explicitly labelled as queer though the information provided in an un-modded game nor their relationships before the player has control of them, instead leaving these subtle indicators for players to pick up on to follow stories about their queerness. Here, "Silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and

as multiple a thing there as is knowledge" (Sedgwick, 1990 pg4). For theorists like Eve Sedgwick, even the act of using subtle indicators that aren't always picked up by a non-queer audience has a kind of power to position heterosexuality as the dominant ideology in a homophobic society. While Gobias' biography might state that he prefers the company of men, it has to be asked if this something that a player would pick up on when playing his household? Or if this is something that his AI would direct him to perform outside of the player's control. Is this explicitly written into the game in a way that means he will autonomously pursue relationships with the same sex? These are subtle ways in which *The Sims* has rendered queerness invisible, and why the Hecking family is a step toward representing marginalised communities. However, is it enough to add-in explicit forms of representation, or is queerness something that is more complex than trying to emulate reality within a video game?

What Brant and Brent *have* done however, is to reject this subtlety- with it being made explicitly clear that they are a newly married couple in a romantic relationship with each other. This is both emphasised in their household bio- "Life in their new home seems to agree with newlyweds Brent and Brant"- and in their appearance in the trailer for this expansion. As I mentioned before, their wedding was shown in the advertising for *Cats and Dogs,* the two men embracing in formalwear under a wedding arch in front of a crowd of people who are also dressed in formal clothing. The visuals here are not just a subtle emphasis on the event of the wedding itself, but also an explicit display of their relationship- engaging with widely agreed upon visual cues and messaging around weddings such as the formalwear in the background as something that signals weddings in Western culture. Unlike the characters of the past like Kent and Gobias, players *cannot* ignore the identity of this couple. Interestingly, this snippet of their marriage ends in a hug, rather than the traditional "sealing it with a kiss" that we see represented in media texts that depict traditional heterosexual weddings- a stark contrast to the release of *My Wedding Stories* in February 2022, which flips the traditional heterosexual narrative by having the bride run off with her female best friend instead of going through with her wedding.

With this weighted history behind them as their role as the first gay male couple made by EA and shipped with the game itself, I asked myself if the modification would be able to recognise their assumed pre-existing identity as gay or bisexual men and correctly label them due to the game tagging them as “husbands” in their relationship panel and family tree, which is one of the ways the game affords players clear identity labelling. Rather than labelling them myself, I chose to have them both ponder their sexualities, wondering if the mod would be able to decode their histories of being in a relationship with another man and correctly assigning them labels that would make sense. However, this action became a transitional stage, assigning both Sims the “Questioning” trait. This allows them the time and space to come to a decision about their identities, but once they have left this stage and decided on a label from the modification, the Sims are immediately also assigned the “In the Closet” trait alongside their new labels. Doing this in my game assigned Brent “Gay” and Brant “Asexual”, meaning that they moved from questioning their sexualities, to both being “in the closet”. This highlights a major limitation of play through this modification. Brant and Brent are a married couple, something which would generally mean that they are both already “out” of the closet, especially considering the depiction of their public wedding in the trailer for the game. “Coming Out” itself as an event that queer people experience is not a “one time” thing, something that is a common reminder within queer communities and has been repeated over and over as coming out narratives have begun to permeate queer media texts. Coming out has also become a staple signature of a wider genre that tackles queer themes, and one of the primary narratives that writers engage with when trying to tell stories about queer characters. From the first big TV “outing” of the character Ellen on the self-titled American sitcom of the 1990s (Reed, 2007), to *Glee*’s prolific fan community and their writing during the early 2010s (Lamerichs, 2018). Even now in 2024 with films like *Love, Simon* (Love, Simon, 2018) and the Netflix TV Series *Heartstopper* (Heartstopper, 2022) broadcasting “coming out” stories, with commentary focused on “coming out” as a process, highlighting this issue of it being a constant process, and that non-queer people do not have to “come out”. Throughout this section I have demonstrated that there is a site of tension between the affordances of the game and the mod’s intended effects, complicating the possibilities that the mod is trying to open up to the player due to

technological shortcomings. In the next part, I will explore the coming out process as afforded by the modification.

Coming out and Limitations

As stated, coming out is a constant process- one that queer people must constantly decide if they wish to engage with, and this means that we can look to it as a site of investigation. In the aforementioned media texts (like *Heartstopper* and *Love, Simon*) "Coming Out" is framed as a big event that is done once- that posting on Instagram will mean that everyone knows that you're bisexual (*Heartstopper*) or someone tells the whole school on an anonymous confession site that you're gay, so you have to come out to your parents (*Love, Simon*). This is not the reality for many people, especially those who are not "visibly" queer. People must decide whether or not they wish to disclose (or decide that it is *safe* to disclose) aspects of their identity in everyday conversations. If we think again to Karen Skardzius' piece on community building in World of Warcraft (Skardzius, 2018)- it is within these "everyday conversations" that information about one's identity can appear, whether it is just mentioning a partner of the same gender as the one you identify as or by making a small comment or joke about your own identity. We can conceptualise "Coming Out" through queer politics, as we can think about there being a distinct positioning of characters within media texts and how that relates to the "stages" of coming out as imagined by a wider society and how that can be enacted (or role-played) by the game and the mod.

Darling Walsh is a pre-made teenage Sim living with two adult roommates in the city map of San Myshuno (*The Sims 4: City Living*). Unusually for a teenager in *The Sims 4*, Darling does not live with their parents, nor do they have any family relations on their family tree. As I found in my own master's thesis, Darling Walsh is a character whose concrete identity has been debated and interpreted in different ways by the players (Lees, 2019), with players never really sure what to do with them in terms of their gender presentation. Darling is labelled by the game as a "female" sim, despite their more masculine presentation in terms of the way that they dress, as the clothing

they wear (or at least their primary casual outfit at the time of their creation) was gender-locked to “male” Sims, something that the player could not do without cheats or modifications. This is now not the case, as Patch 34 (mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) removed this limitation and opened up all customisation options for all genders. Darling’s gender is also further complicated by the game not yet having the options for the use of different pronouns, with the game reinforcing that their gender is female as the pop-up system reminds the player that Darling is set to female by default. In my previous research, I found that some players preferred to ignore the complexities tied to Darling, creating a more feminine version of this character. Other players leaned into the use of the feminine pronoun and the more masculine presentation by interpreting Darling as being a Butch lesbian, or even as a Trans man (Lees, 2019). For this analysis, I decided that Darling’s presentation of a more masculine “look” combined with the game’s use of female pronouns meant that we could think about Darling as a way to reject gender norms by identifying them as non-binary, and so I will be using gender neutral pronouns to refer to them. This does not mean that I think that this character should *only* be interpreted as non-binary, as that would not align with my argument that fans use “missing” or the “silent” moments as a way to build up their own interpretations of the meanings behind the design of the media text, but rather that this is one way in which Darling *could* be interpreted, and how this modification can perhaps help facilitate both a rejection of gender *and* the process of coming out.

To think about Darling’s identity, I look to Jennifer Reed’s work on the “stages” of coming out to think how identity can be “played with” through this medium, and how that relates to my wider argument about representing identities in play. She defines these stages as three separate perspectives- the flirting with coming out, the coming out, and the “post-gay” character (Reed, 2007). For Reed, the media text allows some space for a character to hint at an incoming queerness, describing the experience of waiting for the confirmation as: “It was based mostly on the open secret, the wink, the anticipation” (Reed, 2007 pg12). For Darling, this “open secret” could potentially be the way that they present. If, as I have previously mentioned, queerness can be

identified within signs and symbols that are afforded to the player through the game- perhaps there are elements of Darling's appearance in the un-modded game that signal to players the potential for a queer story to unfold. Not only this, but through the modification players are afforded the specific language to describe Darling's potential identity. It is not only Darling's outward appearance that may signal some form of queer story here, as Darling's lack of a biological family and living situation may also be read queerly. With this in mind, how then might the LGBT modification affect Darling?

As this mod works with the systems that are inside the game, it has to be noted how simplistic the "coming out" process is. Once Darling had been assigned their LGBT traits (which in my game, I chose to be: Non-binary and Lesbian) they received the same trait as Brent and Brant Hecking- "In The Closet". Like in their case, this is interesting when considering how the mod might be used- some players might not wish to have their characters "come out", meaning they must then manually assign the "Out of the Closet" trait onto the Sim. The "In The Closet" trait affects a Sim's emotions, with them regularly receiving "Worried" moodlets which state the Sims fear of being outed. This all ties into a wider argument that this chapter is making about reflecting the complexities of identity within both media texts and their associated fan texts- as not every queer person may experience "Coming Out" in this way. For some, "Coming Out" isn't a long, drawn-out process where they have to individually inform those around them- some queer people present in ways which make it obvious that they are queer (be that in gender presentation, clothing choices or wider perceptions about certain actions they may take). Darling was chosen to explore this topic for this reason, as the way that some queer people perform aspects of gender don't align with common understandings of masculinity or femininity, and so signal a form of "otherness", immediately highlighting that this person is not abiding to the norm (Butler, 2006). The framing of "being in the closet" here is also interesting- as it triggers negative emotions for the played Sim. If Reed describes characters being closeted as "anticipation" where she could negotiate the meanings of the presented character (Reed, 2007), the LGBT mod frames it as an anxiety, that something negative may

happen if the secret is revealed. While anxieties around expressing identities are a fair representation of a common queer experience- especially for more precarious members of the queer community, such as Trans women due to the potential for further oppression (Butler, 2009), we also must remember that this is an aspect of the queer experience that does not exist within the vanilla game's Artificial Intelligence (AI). Sims will not be punished for expressing queerness, unless directed to do so by the player. Not only that, but if we think again to Elizabeth Freeman's work, we can see parallels here of visible queerness and negative emotions- as Freeman argued that markers of queerness positions subjects against the "common sense" understanding of the "sequence of socioeconomically ''productive'' moments" (Freeman, 2010 pg4), Darling Walsh's identity is literally worn on their body in such a way that the player cannot pretend like they aren't some form of alternative to the normative social order. If *The Sims* itself is a capitalist simulation game by the emphasis on families and the accumulation of wealth, Darling's lack of a family and their queerness aligns well with these negative emotions that the mod is raising in them around their identity.

To play out this "coming out" in my game, I allowed the household to interact in a more hands-off way. I allowed the Sims high free will to engage with each other, watching who Darling would grow closest to out of their two roommates after a few days of play. Once within a conversation with their housemate Akira, with whom they had built a friendship, they both came out to each other. For some, this would be a touching moment where two people trust each other enough to discuss their identities openly and honestly. However, as this conversation began, the third housemate Miko sat down to join the discussion. Miko at this point during the play session had almost no relationship with Darling, and only registered as Akira's acquaintance. This is an added layer of complexity to trying to represent an event like this within a mod which only aims to add new traits and events to the game. Without editing the AI so that these kinds of conversations are unable to be interrupted, the way that social interactions are currently structured in the vanilla game allow for Sims to enter and leave conversations at will. Therefore, having a conversation meant to reflect what is potentially an emotional moment for the characters who are coming out may become

a group discussion, diluting the complexity and importance of this moment for both players and characters. This demonstrates the limitations of both the mod and the affordances of the game itself- by trying to represent identity in this way, the modder is unable to capture the fluidity of queerness and the complexities surrounding the coming out process. It is because the modder must work within the boundaries of the systems within the game that identity becomes a more fixed state of being, and therefore harder to explore the intricacies of queerness within the game.

Finally for this example, we must also remember that queerness and "coming out" cannot be a "fixed" category of identification- as indicated through the continuous process of coming out itself- and that theorists like Alexander Doty would emphasise that queerness itself is flexible and represents all things "not heterosexual" (Doty, 1995), which further complicates ideas around identity and how it can be expressed in media texts. While the modification attempts to add in these layers of complexity, I have to question its ability to truly reflect the experiences had by queer people outside of the game and how it is translated to the game world when engaging with the systems already in place. In trying to make identity explicit, the modification occasionally falls into the trap of conflating *all* experiences as going one particular way (such as the negative emotions around being closeted).

Identity as Play

My final gameplay example looks now to this complexity, further exploring how an identity can be reflected by this modification as both an identity label and an event attached to that identity. To do this, I selected a Sim named Johnny Zest. Johnny is a pre-made Sim living alone in a small trailer in the base game world of Oasis Springs. His biography states that he is a disowned member of the powerful Landgraab family (a wealthy family dynasty which first appeared in *The Sims 2: Open for Business*) due to his wish to become an entertainer. As Johnny's aspiration and career is pre-set to follow the entertainer pathway, I decided that this would also be a good place to investigate the Drag options the mod gives the player. Johnny also aligns with some of

the ideas around storytelling that players enjoy engaging with when playing *The Sims.* Johnny's removal from the Landgraab family tied into the LGBT mod reflects a queer experience perhaps known to players- rejection for being open about their identity and wanting to publicly express that identity. This could be a place where the players may want to use the optional "homophobia" and "transphobia" mod files- to further explore a story around the expression of identity and the response from those close to the Sim.

Drag in the LGBT mod comes in two forms: in an identity category and an event with goals to fulfil in order to earn money. Throwing a Drag show which reaches "gold" level (or completing a number of goals) earns the Sim §1000. In order to begin the event itself, the player must also invite a minimum of five Sims- which means that even before throwing the event, the player must engage in some form of networking to build enough relationships to invite Sims who will actually turn up to the event. During this process, the Sim can also "invite to upcoming Drag show", which reflects a kind of real-word labour that performers must sometimes engage in to encourage people to come to their shows. The mod also ties into the expansion pack *Get Famous*, which rewards the Sim for this networking with "Fame Points" for not just inviting other Sims to their Drag shows, but from also "Spilling Tea about Famous Drag Queen"[17] and "Talk about Drag Persona". This again is reflective of a real world perception of Drag as an art form, as the increased visibility of Drag in the public realm in the world-wide success of reality shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RuPaul's Drag Race, 2009-present) have turned Drag performers into celebrities of their own, building up brands on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, with Drag Queens even mobilising this online success to land acting roles in Oscar winning films (*A Star is Born*, 2018). Reflecting this within The Sims also explores "A definitive aspect of the drag entrepreneur as self-brand that characterises successful contestants of RuPaul's Drag Race is the embrace of the imperative to 'work'" (Feldman and Hakim, 2020 pg395). The player uses these options to build the brand image of their Sim, transforming them into a celebrity the way that

[17] "Spilling Tea" refers to the practice of sharing gossip.

Drag Race helps Drag Queens begin the kinds of labour that will push them into mainstream celebrity. As “in achieving celebrity and mainstream success through professionalised, commercialised forms of social media, drag queens are increasingly becoming willing agents of the hegemonic power that was previously denied them” (Feldman and Hakim, 2020 pg398). This is expressed within *The Sims* as this modification is reflective of a change in Drag Culture, from a more progressive and anti-capitalist positioning to seeing more “polished, professional, multi-platform queen(s)” (pg397) at the forefront of Drag visibility. This conversation about Drag and how it is reflected is also interesting when considering that “US drag cultures existed either in opposition to, or were side-lined by, American capitalism” (pg937), as *The Sims* is a reflection of a US-Based capitalist ideology in which the design of the game surrounds a labour based economy where players are rewarded with promotions and more money by engaging in these labour practices. This aligns with the idea that “the drag culture that most people consume now, both inside and outside LGBTQ+ communities, is thoroughly imbued with the logic and mechanics of capitalism” (pg397). Can Drag be a transformative practice when the mod itself even emphasises these types of labour that the Sim must engage in to build their own celebrity image?

Going beyond the concept of a Drag Queen celebrity, we can also think about the limitations of the mod itself and how that does not reflect a well-rounded picture of an identity which is linked to artistic practices. While using Johnny to explore the modification, I found that the goals themselves don’t always align with the skills of the Sim. As Johnny worked as an entertainer, I focused on building his comedy skill, having him write various comedy routines to perform as part of his Drag act. Reflecting upon this choice means that I realised later that this was my perception of Drag that comes from my own experiences of it as being something more comedic, or a more UK focused version of Drag. This choice was not always reflected in the goaled events, with “Dance” appearing most commonly. While “Dance” is a skill that Sims can build, it is also not the only type of performance that Drag performers can engage in, for example: the Lesbian Drag King tribute act to the boyband “One Direction” named “Every Direction”- where members emulated a member of the original group in their

styling and their actions within their musical performances (Pruett, 2020) in order to explore their own identities through both Drag and the community that formed around their expression of Lesbian and Bisexual Culture. This also ties into the real-life practice of impersonating celebrities as part of a Drag act- something that has been again popularised in the depiction of it on Ru Paul's Drag Race and the "Snatch Game[18]". Hannah Andrews argues that the key features of this game involve "the distortion of known character traits to aid viewer recognition of the subject; the use of these exaggerations as a means of satirising the celebrity figure; camp irony and comedy as the result of these absurd portrayals; and the queering of persona performing 'in-character' as a celebrity" (Andrews, 2020 pg427). While dancing *may* be a part of this impersonation, the mod currently does not have the scope to depict this on its own- as the player would also have to edit their Sim in other ways beyond the modification to depict this side of Drag. As *The Sims* also does not depict celebrities in the same way that we do in real life, would this also mean that the players trying to depict this draw from reality or the famous Sims from inside their game, and how would they then be able to create a caricature of these Sims in their performances? There is no option when setting up a Drag Show within the mod to label it as an impersonation, or even as a "Comedy Show" to allow for some freedom of the type of Drag the player wishes to portray. This may be due to the mod creator's limited knowledge of Drag as a practice or their positioning in terms of Drag in their own cultural location, but the game itself can be quite structured in the actions for each type of social event. As the Drag Show operates within this part of the game, it could be that the mod creator was limited in what they could add to the event, and "Dance" is already within many of the "Party" options for events.

While using the mod, I also found that holding the event on a community lot also had its own set of problems due to the game's limitations on actions a Sim can take in those community spaces, as well as the autonomy of *other* Sims who had been both

[18] A challenge in which the participants must perform "in-character" as a celebrity of their choosing, to test their improvisation and comedy skills.

invited to the event and generated on the lot. One of the major goals for the Drag Show event is “Dress in Drag”, which is achieved by selecting the “Try on Clothes” option on a dresser or wardrobe. This is not achievable on a community lot, as the option is not available to the playable character. I also found that holding events at a lot designed for performance (“The Solar Flare” in Oasis Springs) meant that other, non-playable characters would pick up the musical instruments and play while my Sim was trying to perform a comedy routine on the microphone. The game does not appear to differentiate between the skill level of the two performers, meaning that the invited Sims tended to pay attention to the Sim playing the instrument over the Sim performing at a microphone. These things are not necessarily issues with the mod itself, rather issues with the actions of the Sims as directed by the game. This shows the limitations of an LGBT mod which merely ‘adds’ signifiers of queer culture, rather than altering the game structure itself.

Community Co-Creation

As this modification is so heavily focused around translating experiences into the game, I also looked to the source of the modification to think about the responses from both the creator and the people using it to try and think about some of these experiences and how they might appear in updates of this modification. While not the primary focus of this thesis, it is something that must be mentioned to understand the context a mod is developed in the wider social setting of fandom. This also ties into one of the wider arguments that this thesis is making about modifications as being a form of fan text, as this section demonstrates how the text has been shaped by a fan community.

The LGBT mod is hosted on Patreon, a digital platform that allows creators to receive a monetary donation from a dedicated subscribed community in exchange for a variety of benefits or for exclusive access to a creator’s work. This monetary donation starts at £1 a month and can be anything above this. As Patron takes a percentage of these donations (3.4%+£0.35 for payments over £3 and 5%+£0.15 for payments below £3), creators must price their Patreons in such a way that will benefit both them and

those who are donating. The creator of the mod under study (PimpMySims4) has two tiers of membership, £1 and £3.50. Each tier gives access to discussion posts and polls, but the higher tier gives early access to mod releases. In this case, the modification I looked at is not charged for, and for the purposes of this research, I will only be looking at the free posts and related discussion about the modification from the creator under study, as they release all their mods publicly using public posts on their Patreon site.

This first raises an important issue around the labour of the creator and how that means that we can consider this to be a form of fan production. As this mod was last updated in September 2021, looking to both the free posts and the comments on the mod's last update give an insight into the kind of labour it takes to update modifications and the time the creator puts into their work. Two public posts from July[19] and September[20] 2021 thank their Patrons for their patience, stating that they have been too busy to work on updating their mods to align with the new game updates. The July post is referring to Patch 113, which added "Likes" and "Dislikes" to the vanilla game, with the September post referring to Patch 118 which added three new Aspirations and a new Trait for players who own a specific pack. As the mods from this creator work within the trait and aspiration system this is the kind of "fix" from the game developers which may disrupt part of the code which makes up the modification. The modder also refers to their lack of updates, noting that they have dealt with multiple family emergencies that has taken their time and energy away from modding. This echoes back to the way that fan fiction writers leave notes on their updates, as in Alexandra Herzog's article on the use of "author's notes" to lay claim to a text through their own words, stating that author's notes "provide to fans a designated space where they can overtly lay claim to their power as producers" (Herzog, 2012). For fan creators, these spaces gave them the chance to "negotiate between their text and communal expectations" as they "prepare the ground for interpreting and reading the stories by guiding the focus of the audience, while giving space to fan writers to

[19] https://www.patreon.com/posts/updates-are-53952472

[20] https://www.patreon.com/posts/patch-day-55892079

elaborate on their own conception of “poaching” (Jenkins 1992) from the metatext” (Herzog, 2012). While modifications aren’t fanfiction, we can still see this kind of negotiation happening here with the way the modder is addressing the changes the game made, alongside their own life events that have prevented them from giving them the time to work on their creation.

This also means that it is important not just to conflate this labour with exploitation, as the reality of this kind of production is more complex than viewing it as an industry taking advantage of modders in order to keep interest in their media text. As Mel Stanfill argues: “Fans also normatively do promotional labor. Content labor helps produce media objects themselves, whether paratextually or directly through adding more content so industry does not have to” (Stanfill, 2019 pg111), this means we could potentially view the creation and distribution of modifications through this lens. Mods *do* promote the game by creating more content to keep players engaged for longer, however, this does *not* mean that the content from the mods themselves end up in the game[21]. This also makes this example interesting as *some* of the content has now appeared in the game within the create-a-sim (CAS) menu, where players can now select romantic/sexual attraction alongside gender options such as if the sim carries a child or uses the toilet standing up. However, EA do not generally use actual labels in the way that this mod does- focusing more on actions the player can take than trying to manipulate the trait and emotion system. This shows that the developers view queerness as something that can be enacted in actions taken during play, rather than something on a more personal, individual level. The other issue with the way that the developers have implemented these changes is that they are done within CAS, meaning that without the use of cheats or mods, the player cannot edit pre-existing sims or sims born during play, only ones they are creating themselves. Because of this almost lack of engagement with specific identity labels, comments on the mod stated that “the mod is pretty much perfect” or that it is “one of their favourites” (LGBT Mod Discussion) which is indicative of the lack of explicit queer content within the game

[21] As previously mentioned with High School Years in May 2022

itself. This does not mean that EA are not attempting to add in these missing pieces of queerness, as they have added pronoun selection alongside top surgery scars and binders. Not only that but in the *High School Years* pack (2022) some of the teenagers included in the pack use they/them pronouns as default or have pride flags up in their bedrooms to indicate their identity (like Ash Harajo who has a base of female gender but a masculine frame, cannot get or get others pregnant and can use the toilet standing up- they have a trans flag up in their bedroom, all things that are an indication that they are trans). To return to Stanfill's argument then, we can also think about how these issues around content labour are further complicated by Patreon as a platform. This modder *is* receiving both monetary rewards *and* creating a community of their own by creating a Patreon and a Discord server[22] they direct people to in the comments of the July update post. While the creation of fan texts may be seen as exploitative due to the industry relying on these fan creators as "fan content labor around the original or official media object creates value" (Stanfill, 2019 pg106) which keeps other fans consuming media texts produced by industries- fans knowingly undertake these activities for reasons other than just being paid.

We can think about these other kinds of reasons due to conceptualising fan production as a form of "gift economy" in which "gifts such as fan fiction and fan art have value in the fannish community because they are designed to create and cement its social structure" (Jones, 2014 0.1). For Jones, fan production falls into this concept of a "fannish gift economy" where "fandom can function in opposition to a capitalist economy" (Jones, 2014 2.1). Unlike Stanfill's focus on production as having the potential to exploit fans through the work of Karl Marx, Jones emphasises that exploitation does not occur until the industry involves itself with forms of fan production. While EA *has* included options to try and account for different identities, the modification is a living text that can exist in a different way to the game itself as it is influenced by the community and their suggestions. This can be seen in the comment sections of the mod itself and some of the community posts on the site the mod is

[22] An online chat platform

hosted, with suggestions ranging from the trait system itself, “is it possible to add more buffs to the traits” to suggestions around extending content within the mod, “Maybe add more stuff around being trans? As a trans guy myself i think it would be cool to see more stuff around my part of the communities” (LGBT Mod Discussion). This doesn’t necessarily mean that the creator will engage with these suggestions, but this closeness to their consumers is something that is not reflected in the creation of the source text, reflecting an economy that does not always engage with capitalist production methods. Patreon also complicates this notion of being paid for one’s *labour*, as PimpMySims4 is continuously being paid despite not releasing new modifications or public updates regarding existing mods. While this amount is unknown due to Patreon not revealing the amount each patron pays, they are still being compensated in some way for this labour.

One of the most interesting things about the posts under study is the responses of those fans who continuously return to show their support to the mod creator. Not only do we see new users entering, generally asking more technical questions such as “is this still compatible?” and “Anybody still using the mod after the Oct. patch and its still working?” Indicating interest in the modification but perhaps a lack of knowledge about Patreon as a platform, we also see people returning over and over, noting bugs and fixes that need to be made: “When you have the time, would you mind double checking the fix on those frequent buffs. Recently, I’ve noticed the “feeling free” buff coming up fairly often”. Not only is this interesting from a community building perspective, as these people identifying issues within the mod that need addressing are doing so through their love of the fan text. As; “There is nothing timeless and unchanging about this culture; fandom originates in response to specific historical conditions… and remains constantly in flux” (Jenkins, 1992 pg3), we can see that there is a constantly changing nature of fandom. This speaks to perhaps a new form of fandom, where fans are almost cultivating sub-fandoms of their own that surround their fannish creations- as mentioned above, this creator also has a space on Discord which they direct people to for technical help.

Community support then, becomes an important factor in the creation and maintenance of modifications. Not only can we see this by the suggestions that fans make around what content should be put into the modification next ("I think you should include a "explain being pan vs. being bi" option, like for the ace vs. aro"), but also within the responses to the creator's disclosure of personal issues. Messages of support welcoming them back, expressing that they missed the creator were posted on each of the posts under study, as well as messages which thanked the creator for their hard work. This kind of feedback isn't a new phenomenon, as we can see this happening alongside fan fiction- "The communities of fan fiction will provide direct feedback to their contributors, thereby communally evaluating both the inherent qualities of a story itself (from expression and style to characterisation and plot), as well as the plausibility within the overall fictional universe)" (Bruns, 2008 pg232-233). While in this case the fans aren't commenting on the plausibility of queerness, but they are making suggestions about what *kinds* of queerness are and aren't covered by this modification. In my look at the mod, I agreed with the comments that these users made about aspects of queerness that could be reflected in future versions of this modification, that there is potential here to reflect more types of queer experiences. However, the mod creator themselves note in a response to a suggestion that they should override the game-given preferences that "that would require skills that I have not yet learned", indicating that perhaps some of the suggestions are currently out of the realm of possibility for this specific creator. On this thread of replies, users eventually suggested other ways the original poster could achieve this action, again showing the type of support that the original creator has developed on their Patreon.

With users of the mod discussing aspects of queerness they want to see reflected, we can ask ourselves: How might we represent such a wide population of people within one mod? Even within the discussion post dedicated to suggestions for the mod's future we can see a wide array of users of different backgrounds and identities suggesting changes based on their own experiences. Some users put forward the possibility of creating more "actions" for their characters to do such as "Talk about Surgeries" or "Ask for Pronouns" as well as the aforementioned "Explain being Pan vs

being Bi". These kinds of actions would work in a similar way to aspects of the mod that already exist (such as "Explain being Ace vs Aro") and would not involve any form of modification to the behaviour of a Sim beyond adding in icons. What becomes more difficult is when dealing with aspects of identity which involve a shift in gender (either between or from one point to another). Users queried the possibility of animating aspects of transitioning- such as taking hormone injections or seeing bodily changes such as a change in shape, using binding for Trans men or adding padding for Drag performers. While the original creator did not respond to these suggestions, this does also link back to their previous comment about their skillset. The level of modification needed for this kind of animation goes far beyond the actual content of the mod as it currently stands and would potentially move it into a position which overhauls aspects of the game, rather than adding to the already existing systems. *The Sims 4* does have a system in place which allows for gradual bodily changes over time, however it is currently used to depict weight gain and loss when driven by player actions such as exercise or eating unhealthy food.

Not only did users recommend these kind of body changes in relation to Drag performances, but they also brought up the potential for "Drag Mothers" to be added to the "Drag" category. "Drag Mother" refers to a Drag performer who takes on a younger performer in order to mentor them, offering them support and guidance as a "mother" figure. In reality, Drag Mothers can be a part of a constructed family- families that have no blood relation. Not only does this go against the types of families we most commonly see within the game, but it also rejects dominant ideas about how families should be created, as the act of Drag itself subverts ideas we might have about gender expression, turning it into a performance of a gender that doesn't quite fit with understandings of how masculine and feminine should be "correctly" performed. Not only do Drag performers reject these understandings, but they turn them into a performance for an audience, subverting the notion that they may be excluded due to our perception of gender (Butler, 2006). These kinds of families also reject normative ideas around parents and children- Drag Mothers do not "birth" or "adopt" their children in a traditional sense, but their relationship is still one which allows for a form

of parental teaching. This all makes identifying with “Drag” or as a “Drag Mother” complex to reflect in a game which relies on more static understandings of gender and family- and trying to interpret the nuances of this relationship between a Drag Mother and her adopted child would be difficult within one modification.

All the aspects mentioned in this section indicate a wider difficulty that mod creators may have in representing the complexity of queer experiences within *one* modification, which is both tied to the affordances of the game itself and the limitations placed upon the modder, alongside the modder’s own skills, knowledge and time. However, I have also demonstrated that due to the community co-creation, we can see how modifications can develop due to the suggestions of the ones who are using it within their games.

Conclusion: Queer Play as Addition

The Sims as a franchise is one that has allowed for queer forms of sexuality representation through play for as long as it has existed. While these representations have not always been visible, there has never been any limitations for pursuing same-sex relationships beyond the way that the game labelled couples in *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*. Gender, however, has been something harder to play in a way that goes against a binary, with gender locking in CAS not being taken out of the game until 2016. Modding has become a way to try and inject parts of the self into the game, to try and represent aspects of identity by personalising the player’s experience. However, modding also risks being reductive regarding these kinds of experiences. As mentioned, the difficulty of reflecting aspects of identities beyond simply labelling within the trait system may be beyond this modder’s capabilities. As I covered in relation to Darling Walsh, there are times when using this modification where the mod will negatively affect the Sims’ mood and emotions. Highlighted in the feedback for this mod was the moodlet “Uncomfortable” which appears when Sims with the “Trans” trait goes to places like swimming pools. Framing aspects of queerness by using negative emotions also becomes an interesting way to position queer identity when doing

representational work with the fan text. It aligns with conceptualisations of queerness with negative emotion such as in Freeman's emphasis on the queer subject as being caught in a stage of "arrested development" that goes against the structure of life that is laid out by chrononormative ideology (Freeman, 2010). Not all experiences of every identity are the same, however the choice made here to frame parts of the experiences covered by the mod in negative ways is an interesting generalisation when compared to the structure of the game itself. *The Sims,* while being open to queer representations, is still a reflection of the capitalist reality of the Western world and is still beholden to the ideology that underpins this capitalism "such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (Freeman, 2010 pg4).

Therefore, modding may have to work within the affordances of the game if it is helping players engage in representational practices, and while there is space for the users of the modification to suggest things that they would like to see included in the mod itself, this doesn't always mean that it can always reflect aspects of queer identities. This is due to the highly individual ways that people can experience their identity, however there is continuing energy and labour that goes into modding and supporting the mod by commenting and using it. Play does not end with the use of the mod, but instead resides in the imagining of alternatives that the users engage in in the comment sections where these mods are hosted.

Chapter Five: Fallout: Queer Play as Opening/Closing

"The ending isn't any more important than any of the moments leading to it."

Dr Rosalene - To The Moon

October 23rd, 2077- the autumnal weekend begins like any other, with a cup of hot coffee and the morning news report over breakfast before you and your partner take your child to the park. At 9:42am, your Mister Handy calls you into the living room to watch as the first atomic bombs of the Great War drop on Pennsylvania and New York, only a few hours away from your location. In the chaos that ensues as more bombs are dropped across America, you are directed to the nearby Vault 111, where you, your partner and your child have been granted safe shelter due to your family's status as containing a decorated veteran. As you are all lowered into the safety of the vault you watch helplessly as a bomb drops near the city of Boston, wiping out your home and the life you had made for your family. In the shock and confusion, you and your neighbours are feeling about the ensuing apocalypse, you don't realise that the pods you are told to enter when you walk into the vault aren't in fact decontamination pods as the Vault-tech employees are telling you. It isn't until you wake up years later to helplessly see the murder of your partner and the kidnapping of your child, unable to leave your pod to help them until you realise that something is horribly wrong…

Developed by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2015, *Fallout 4* is an open world, action role-playing game (RPG) that tells the story of a character who is a "Sole Survivor" of a nuclear apocalypse, only saved due to their unknowing cooperation with a secret experiment into cryogenic stasis. The opening of the game depicts for the first time the events of the war that devastated the US within the *Fallout* game lore, with the characters experiencing the first nuclear blast that shaped the landscape of the US into the recognisable Wasteland of the previous games in the series. Although the game takes place ten years after the events of *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), the game is not a direct sequel and can be played without knowledge of the previous

games and the world they have built. However, to understand the intricacies of some of the references (such as the Vault the Sole Survivor enters during the apocalypse belonging to Vault-Tech and the robot handyman the character has in their home) then the player could return to previous titles to better understand the world that Bethesda has created here. With $750 million made at launch (Villapaz, 13th November 2015), the game was an immediate commercial success, receiving "Game of the Year" from the BAFTA Game Awards in 2016. *Fallout 4* also marked the first time in the history of the franchise in which the player character was fully voice acted, as previous protagonists had been silent- a choice made by the developers which potentially changed the player's relationship to the characters they created and the roleplaying element of the game's progression structure, as the speech system was also changed in this instalment to direct the player in more obvious "positive" and "negative" responses during conversations. This title was also the first in the series to allow players access to modifications from within the game itself, with an option in the title menu allowing players to download modifications inside the game without the need for outside software. However, this does not cover the entire breadth of modifications available for the game due to Bethesda's terms of service stipulating that modifications must be made using their software and not to be explicit in nature. It is important for us to note here that it is unusual for a developer to engage with fan creators in this way due to the precarious nature of fan texts existing in a legal space that is not clearly defined, as mentioned in the literature review. I opened this chapter by describing the introductory section of the game to highlight the potential for the work of fan authors and the remixing practices they engage in when interpreting media texts (Jenkins, 1992). The introduction to *Fallout 4* not only lays the groundwork for the potential story that is yet to come, but also gives the player important information about the world they are about to inhabit through their character.

Similarly to the previous two titles in the franchise: *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda Softworks, 2010), *Fallout 4* is set in an open world environment which allows the player relative freedom in the direction of their play, with very few restrictions as to where you can go after the game fully begins and opens up into the

Wasteland. Unlike other open world games such as *Grand Theft Auto 4* and fellow RPG title *Cyberpunk 2077*- wherein the player is limited to one small part of the map for the introductory section of the game- the entire outside world map is opened up after the time jump from 2077 to 2287. The introductory section of *Fallout 4* is of a more linear design, introducing the player to combat by facing them with low-level enemies and providing them with their initial weapons in a lower stakes environment. As, similarly to games such as 2022's *Elden Ring*, the openness of the map invites the player to accidentally walk into potentially dangerous areas with more difficult foes. An example of this comes quite early on in the story mission as the player makes their way into the city of Boston, as this area is populated with the tough to kill Super Mutant enemies, or the Glowing Sea's super high level of radiation (which is potentially deadly to a lower levelled player) and the scaled monsters that it contains- with multiple Deathclaws spawning across this area of the map. The game's primary plot revolves around the protagonist character searching for their son who has been stolen from them during their time in cryogenic stasis. Like in every entry into the franchise, *Fallout 4* allows play as "male" or "female"- however the decision made by the player does slightly impact the background of the character. Nate (the default male) is a war veteran, and Nora (the default female) is a lawyer. This choice at the beginning of the game does not massively impact the overall story beyond the changing of gendered pronouns and references to the player being the "mother" or "father" of Shaun (the child) during dialogue.

This chapter will focus on three primary areas in which we can conceptualise modification and queerness. The first way is within the role-playing genre that *Fallout 4* conveys through its gameplay and internal structures. I outline the importance of the illusion of choice within this genre of video games and what video games take from tabletop games, discussing the *Fallout 4*'s design as being a driving factor behind the generation of the modification under study. I will do this by looking at Gary Fine's ethnographic work on tabletop game communities (Fine, 1983), proposing that character and narrative development comes within fan texts due to the game's design. Secondly, I explore the historic representation within the series as tied to ideas of

choice and how the game's design has navigated expressing queer identity over time, which in turn further contextualises the development of mods which rewrite sections of narrative as a response to choices the game designers have made. I do this by exploring how both sex and sexuality are framed as a form of reward due to the RPG design of the game, using the work of Nicholas Ware (Ware, 2015) and Victor Navarro-Remesal (Navarro-Remesal, 2018) to discuss the active process of *doing* representation within the game world. Finally, I introduce the modification under study by thinking about the kinds of remixing processes that fans engage in and how interested fans are in the "middle" space of a narrative. To do this, I engage with Nicole Lamerichs and Shira Chess' concepts of closure (Lamerichs, 2018) and queer narrative (Chess, 2016), using moments from my own play to think about how everything that I have outlined in this chapter works together to create moments of opportunity within the game for fannish interpretation, as well as the limitations placed upon the player by both the mod and the game.

Role-Play Games

Within the role-play genre, there is an element of character building that is expected from the player. Character building refers not only to the character's specific personality and background, but also their skillset and potential moral alignment. This kind of design echoes back to tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs), giving the player relative freedom in developing their own, personalised character beyond the backstory laid out for them in the introduction. There is an openness for creativity here, existing alongside the more structured narrative of "finding Shaun" provided by the game. Players can attune their character to the way that they want to play the game. We can think here to Gary Fine's work on tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) as a way to conceptualise this kind of customisation. Players must imagine the world and their character within it beyond just what is given to them by the game itself, interpreting their character's personality through actions, skills, and dialogue, as well as how they look and are styled, and who they choose to bring along with them during their adventure (Fine, 1983). While Fine was thinking about these things within a community who develop a world over an extended period of time by playing D&D

together in person, many of the processes and ideas found in TTRPGs have influenced the design choices made by video game developers working within this genre.

For games like *Fallout 4*, the construction of this world around the player is steeped in fantasy built by dominant understandings we have of the real world, as Fine discovered that "Fantasy is constrained by the social expectations of the players and their world. The game fantasy, then, is an integration of twentieth-century American reality and the players' understanding of the medieval or futuristic setting in which their characters are placed" (Fine, 1983 pg3). This means that not only are the interpretations of apocalypse and technology influenced by twenty first century realities such as the tense relationship between the US and China as well as the remains of neoliberal capitalist corporations such as the aforementioned "Vault-Tech" and the use of a currency system as an echo of this neoliberal capitalism. Not only do we see this social influence here, but we also see it within the backgrounds of the characters and the binary concepts of gender the player is given when they customise their character. In a world which has been ravaged by nuclear war, we are still seeing current ideas around binary gender being "male/female" being reflected- a design choice that echoes Fine's ideas around Fantasy settings being based on current societal understandings of concepts. The choice by the developers to give the character a more static background as to who they were before the player is introduced to them is an interesting one when we also consider the fact that the background is gender locked to the "appropriate" gender. As the general, heteronormative perception of the two professions the characters have (Army Veteran vs Office Job) mean that the male character *must* be the one with the military background, while the female character is the one with the job based in an office, away from potential danger or the front lines of the war. This goes against other games in the genre such as *Mass Effect* or *The Outer Worlds* who allow the player to choose from a range of backgrounds, with the options potentially impacting the story through the addition of different characters or quests. The backgrounds given in *Fallout 4* potentially align with the role-play aspect of the game, as they may influence the players decision as to who they would prefer to take out into the Commonwealth Wasteland once the game begins. The interpretation here

being that a character who is a veteran with a background in the military who has seen active duty would be better equipped to survive in the apocalyptic environment than one whose background is in law. We are beginning to see a response to these more heteronormative understandings of gender in character design in customisation options, as seen in the 2022 reboot of the *Saints Row* franchise. The player is instead given "Chest" (which increases or decreases chest size), "Groin" (which increases or decreases groin size) and "Figure"/"Body" (which changes overall body shape), allowing them to customise a character which can depict more of sliding scale of gender, not completing fitting at either end of "masculine" or "feminine". This demonstrates that there are limitations to the building of characters in terms of giving players the ability to dictate where they fit on a spectrum of options relating to gender, but that we are moving into an era where more developers are beginning to think beyond static choices in character creators. As we can see from Fine's work, fantasy may appear to enable the creator to do anything- however the reality is that our imaginations are closed by the limits of what we can visualise. This does not mean that there are not attempts at opening up to alternate imaginations- as gender in gaming was seen as closed (or, seen to only exist on a binary) but has the potential to be opened up to be more of a spectrum through character creation.

Reflecting TTRPG games, this idea of character creation becomes an important site in which players can reflect the personality of the character they are building, working within the limitations of the game design to craft a specific build. In D&D, this appears when "players roll for six personal characteristics (or prime requisites): strength, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, intelligence and charisma" (Fine, 1983 pg16). This is edited within *Fallout 4* as players put a set number of points into what is known as the "SPECIAL" skills (Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility and Luck). *Fallout 4* however gives players 28 points to spread across these skills, 12 points fewer than the two previous titles. As this is the development of the player's style and their characters personality, the backgrounds given to them by the game may influence their choices when they select their skillset. Perhaps the male character's SPECIAL skills emphasise Strength and Agility due to his army background (therefore building a

character who specialises in combat), and perhaps the female characters would focus more on Charisma and Intelligence, to create a character who can talk their way out of situations instead of fighting. This also affects another mechanic borrowed from tabletop RPGs, wherein the game performs a "dice roll" against the skills- for example: to pass what is known as a "speech check" during dialogue, the game uses random number generators alongside the number assigned to the Charisma skill to decide if the player is successful or not. However, unlike the freedom of the tabletop variants, video games have limitations within the character construction due to the more structured narrative that the game contains. *Fallout 4* also does not allow the player to select an occupation or fantasy race (like D&D's orcs, elves, and dwarves) despite featuring a large array of non-human character types (such as ghouls and super mutants). The player must play as human with the story and motivation to find their son that is given to them at the beginning of the game. This is not uncommon for the series, as most *Fallout* games have the player begin as what is known as a "vault dweller" (someone who lives in one of the nuclear fallout 'vaults'). The exceptions to this are *Fallout 2* (Interplay Productions, 1998) (where you play as the direct descendant of the protagonist from *Fallout* (Interplay Productions, 1997)) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (whose primary plot is that you are a courier caught up in a battle between factions occupying Nevada and the remnants of Las Vegas). This is primarily due to the inclusion of the "Pip Boy"- an in-game piece of technology which acts as the inventory and quest log, and as these pieces of technology were given to vault dwellers, it makes sense that the players generally begin the game with the same background. These are early indicators that there are limitations within the game itself as to the ways you can interpret your character, something that is at odds with both the role-play genre and the kinds of practices that fans engage in. Here, we can see the way the game constructs its affordances by borrowing from tabletop games to negotiate how players must create their characters and what systems they must work within.

Players also construct narratives for their characters within the dialogue system and morality through the choices they can make. As mentioned previously, *Fallout 4*'s dialogue system was reworked to make responses more obviously positive and

negative, with the players also being given the option to choose a neutral or a "more information" option (The dialogue system is also where most of the speech checks take place). These rather binary choices act to construct a character's "alignment"- which is dependent on whether the player wishes to make morally "good" choices or morally "evil" choices, or to experiment with the in-between space of not being good *or* evil dependent on their own sense of character. This is another way the tabletop systems have been appropriated into video gaming, as alignment becomes a key part of the decision-making process within games like D&D, as:

"Alignments vary on two dimensions: orientation to legitimate authority (one can be lawful, neutral or chaotic) and morality (good, neutral, evil). Thus, one can be lawful evil- obedient to the forces of darkness- or, alternatively, chaotic good- doing what one sees as morally right regardless of the law or the opinions of others".

(Fine, 1983 g17).

While this is potentially easier for players to reflect within TTRPGs because the games span a period of months (or even years), *Fallout* is a series which consistently asks the player to make moral judgements based on how they believe their character would act within particular situations. This system has the potential to cause entire factions within the game to become hostile (when you make morally evil choices such as selling people into slavery or not curing a child of a deadly disease)[23] or to idolise you (by saving them from attacks, killing a character tagged as "Very Evil"[24] or freeing prisoners). This is still reflective of the more binary design of the video game in which players are only given the choice between binary oppositions rather than a more complex structure, one that players of tabletop games can experiment with the in-between space due to the ability to vocally negotiate outcomes with the Dungeon Master (DM) about how the situation may play out based on their interpretation of

[23] Fallout 4: Side Quest "Hole in the Wall"

[24] Fallout 3: Allistair Tenpenny and Mister Burke during the quest "The Power of the Atom".

their character's response to the dice rolls.

Having spoken about various elements of TTRPGs, we can see how all these things come together within video games to construct a character's identity, as "Players working from scant, sometimes contradictory information attempt to construct a meaningful identity. Family, background, and personal experience are crucial for building self and many players create a personal history for their characters" (Fine, 1983 pg216). Players are therefore making choices about the way their character is designed and acts within the narrative based on the structures that have been borrowed and reappropriated from tabletop gaming, however there is a lack of freedom of choice as they must abide by the more rigid structures of the video game's design. This is where we can begin to conceptualise fan production as a response to the structures, with fans responding to the creation process by remixing the text to expand on the choices that the game has given them. This kind of remixing practice does not always align with traditional understandings of fan text construction as modding has not commonly been associated with the definitions given of "fan texts". However, they do have elements of how Jenkins has conceptualised the way fans interact with texts, as "open to intervention and active appropriation" (Jenkins, 1992 pg155). Players here, are actively creating narrative in the choices that they make throughout the character creation process and the dialogue system within the narrative of the games quests. Players are building their own narrative by focusing "on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within the fans' own conceptions of the series" (pg155). The player may not have a choice as to the primary plot and their character's relation to their son in an un-modded playthrough of the main story, but they are making choices as to *who* their character is in relation to the way that they are building them from the RPG mechanics. This means that they are taking advantage of modding to open up the possibilities of gaming.

One thing that we must understand here before I move on to discuss representation and the mod itself is this idea of "fan narrative" and how this has

developed over time to refer to more than just written fan fiction. An example of this is the development of Machinima- a form of video storytelling using modifications to create short films and music videos. Robert Jones thinks about this by referring to it as a "mastery of machines" by comparing Machinima to "hacker culture" (Jones, 2006 pg263). However, I argue that we have moved beyond this understanding of Machinima into a more fan-driven period, wherein players now can craft these narratives for themselves within the games using modifications. Narrative does not just exist within the written word, as we also see with Abigail de Kosnik's work on fannish embodiment within performance. She argues that "fans translate mediated bodies into written texts, or reenact them through their own bodies, or imagine bodies for nonembodied characters" (de Kosnik, 2016 pg263). Narrative here does not just exist within the written word, instead across a variety of different forms of fan production- including cosplay, role-play, audio acting and fan casting. If our understanding of the world around us comes from the stories we tell both in our media texts and to each other in our everyday lives, it is understandable that stories permeate other parts of our fan activity. It is important then to view both the RPG structures found within *Fallout 4* as well as game modification through this lens to explore the different ways in which fan fiction can appear within fan products.

Fallout's Queer Representation

If constructing a character includes the construction of their identity using game mechanics, we can also look to the literal forms of queer representations within the series as a wider problem to begin thinking about the development of mods which "speak to" the content within the game itself. If fandom and forms of fan production display an almost mastery of the world with which the fan is using to create their new fan texts, looking deeper into the source text can help contextualise by outlining the parameters with which the fans are working with. In this case, looking at the way that *Fallout* as a series has presented queer sexualities alongside representations of sex and the male-female binary will bring some understanding to *Fallout 4*'s design choices. Nicholas Ware thinks about this through the concept of "iterative romance"- or romance design which a structured pathway that rewards the player by "correct"

design pathways (Ware, 2015). I will use this idea to explore sex as transaction, before discussing the concept of "doing" representation that Victor Navarro-Remesal discusses when exploring other games with romance systems within them, and how identity becomes an active process that the player must perform markers of that identity, rather than it becoming a thing that exists outside of the player's control (Navarro-Remesal, 2018).

Queerness in *Fallout* (1997) was very limited in scope, with no real reflection of a range of identities or depth to the representation of potential queer identities. The player is limited here to only being able to pursue sexual relationships in the hiring of female sex workers, with only one of these options being available for a female player character. There are no male NPCs available for either the female or male player character to pursue within this "romance" system. To trigger this "romance" for a female character, the player must first complete a quest where they must rescue her, before passing a difficult speech check (which is not necessary if playing as male). In this example, the female character steps into a more stereotypically masculine role to rescue the woman, a role we have seen throughout gaming, almost a trope of the medium. As game critic Anita Sarkeesian describes it as "a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing the core incentive or motivation for the protagonist's quest" (Sarkeesian, 2013 3:23). Motivation comes from this prospect of romance, that performing these actions in the correct order will reward the player with "romance" or a sexual encounter designed to feel like the player is "romancing" the NPC. While there is a subversion of gender here as the female character takes on the male role of the rescuer, the level of effort to access this "reward" is also notable, as the female player character must complete more tasks to access her own queerness during the portrayal of female/female "romance". In contrast, the male character can access expressions of his own heterosexuality in an easier way. This is not a phenomenon limited to *Fallout*, as Ware notes that "players are rewarded for attention and "correct answers" (Ware, 2015, pg233)- sex is used in games as a tool to identify that the player has done something "correctly". This kind of

perception of sex-as-reward within gaming means that the game frames these aspects through a heteronormative, goal-focused lens, where "it is easy to overlook the alternative possibilities that reach beyond the heterosexual, reproductive climax" (Chess, 2016 pg92). Sex becomes part of the narrative, reduced to a mechanic that does not allow for exploration outside of "quests", with the focus of the game's design forcing the player to continue to complete quests if they want to explore sexuality. The game is *designed* to drive players towards closure, using sex to signify a "job well done".

Fallout 2 again limited much of the relationship building to sex workers and other sexual conquests, reducing "relationships" down to the "goal" of obtaining sex from NPCs. However, *Fallout 2* also included an early representation of same-sex marriage in the characters of "Davin" and "Miria", the children of a Butcher the player can perform a quest for when they enter the town of Modoc. If the player is caught having sex with one of these NPCs, and cannot pass a high intelligence check, their father forces you to marry them, regardless of gender. The NPC becomes a permanent companion to the player. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily viewed positively, with the Fallout Fan Wikipedia even describing this relationship as "the NPC will ceaselessly follow the Chosen One around as a companion, *devoid of any useful skills*" (Grisham- Fallout Wiki, nd, emphasis mine). Neither Davin or Miria's skills, health points or attack points improve when they join your party, framing this relationship, and marriage, as burdensome and irksome for the player. If the player chooses to enter this marriage by having sex with the opposite gender to the one they are playing as, this also frames *heterosexual* marriage as burdensome. This then reproduces some gendered norms around heterosexual marriage, such as a husband who does not pull his weight in the relationship or home (which can be seen due to the lack of improvement or levelling of skills to aid the player) and the "nagging wife" (which could also been found in the wiki's framing of the marriage as having the NPC "ceaselessly" follow the Chosen One around). Early *Fallout* games, while allowing for some representation of sexuality, fall short of a well-rounded representation, as "complicated, dynamic and context-driven feelings and interactions don't translate well into algorithmic gameplay" (Ware, 2015

pg235). In this example, we see that any kind of rejection of the gameplay narrative is punished, and any possibility for experiment closed.

As we move away from the isometric games into the 3D games, there was also a restructuring of this concept of "reward" in sexual and gendered identities. Sexual relationships became relegated to the hiring of a few specific named sex workers within fixed locations within the world. However, despite these sex workers now being named, they are all still recognisably feminine and use female pronouns, with no male or non-binary sex workers available to the player. Most of the sex workers in the game only act as background characters to populate the bars and saloons the player can take shelter in as they discover more populated areas during play. While this is still aligning more with Ware's concept that romance becomes about algorithmic choices in game design rather than something more complex, we can see a move from sex as something the player is rewarded with for completing quests, instead as something they must actively seek out. In terms of game mechanics, "romance" (or our understanding of romance in games as being the development of a relationship with another character through player choice) was not yet appearing in the series, yet this is a turning point for "romance" as a more complex concept. Other games of this era such as *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) explored romance in the companion system, influencing design choices for romance in RPG games as they moved into the 2010's and beyond. Thinking still about specific design choices, *Fallout 3* also introduced a gender specific perk named "Lady Killer"/"Black Widow". This perk allowed the player to flirt with the opposite gender during dialogue, with the assignment of each version of the perk being gender locked, meaning that the male player cannot take the Black Widow perk, and the female player cannot take the Lady Killer perk. There is a reinforcement here then of heterosexuality due to the exclusion of "other" forms of relationships beyond the male-female binary, with no consideration given to non-binary identities, which is interestingly a step back from *Fallout 2*'s gender blind approach to the marriage between the player and Davin or Miria. Kenton Taylor Howard also pointed this out in his conference paper on Fallout and queer modding, stating that this perk system was "replicating many of the

problems of the first two games" (Howard, 2019 pg3). One thing which Howard does not cover however is that these perks are also interesting outside of forming relationships with NPCs- as the perk both here and in *Fallout: New Vegas* grants the player +10% damage against the opposite gender. If we think again to the origins of RPGs, perhaps we can view this through a queerer lens, as players taking this perk potentially do so for the damage increase against foes rather than the flirtation options- meaning these perks also have the queer potential to reflect queerness in a (rather violent) rejection of the opposite sex through the combat system rather than amongst the romance system.

While we had seen queer sex and the potential for a same-sex marriage in the previous games, it was not until *Fallout: New Vegas* that we were introduced to characters who had specific queer identities who explicitly speak about their previous relationships with the same sex. Both Arcade Gannon and Veronica Santangelo speak about previous same sex partners, and Rose of Sharon Cassidy (Cass) refers to "not caring who she shares a bed with" when a female player takes the Cherchez La Femme perk. As the revelation of these NPCs' same-sex attraction comes from specifically *asking* the characters about themselves and their backstories, for some players, these companions might not even be ones they find or want to recruit during their time within the game (as both Arcade and Veronica belong to factions that the player can position themselves against). Navarro-Remesal notes that these are issues around representations within gaming where representations are based on player interactivity, as "Gender and LGBT representation in games is not only a matter of aesthetics and narrative, it is based on 'doing'" (Navarro-Remesal, 2018 pg187). This is a hidden affordance as unless the player takes action to reveal the queerness of the characters around them, they would not know. Therefore; "Diversity is not forced upon us but it becomes something we have to explore: it is possible to role play both as members of our socio-political group and as others, but never mandatory" (pg187). However, unlike *Fallout 3,* while we still saw Lady Killer/Black Widow, the player is now also given the

option of Cherchez La Femme[25] or Confirmed Bachelor- both of which open up flirtatious options as well as the +10% damage bonus for the same sex as the player. As Evan Lauteria points out: "these mechanics position sexuality as a "perk," as a skill or attribute for getting ahead, operationalizing sexuality in a competitive and capitalist paradigm" (Lauteria, 2011 pg6). Sex and sexuality here have moved beyond a reward for completing a task or a skill check, but instead engage with representations of sexuality in order to benefit the player through the perk system. Lauteria even points out that these perks "operationalize sexuality for survivability in the form of "survival sex" – the practice of seeking shelter or other life necessities like food in exchange for sexual intercourse" (pg6)- reflecting the lived reality of some queer people who do engage in this practice. While on the surface, including these perks may seem to be step forward in terms of representing specific sexual identities, it is still reminiscent of the sex-as-reward nature of *Fallout*, which becomes potentially problematic representation due to its framing of sex as transactional rather than as a feature of a healthy relationship or for pleasure. However, this is still an optional perk, and therefore can be ignored by players who don't particularly want to engage with this aspect of the game. *New Vegas* is also an interesting case due to it being considered a "spin off" game developed by a team of former Interplay Entertainment and Black Isle Studios developers now working as Obsidian Entertainment who had worked on *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*. This means we can see influences from both the 1990s Fallout games and 2008's *Fallout 3* within the systems that players can engage with during their time in the game world, such as the reputation mechanic as well as crafting and a diverse (in terms of faction affinity and status as human/non-human) companions, which is why it became an important bridge between *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4* in terms of what we see retained within *Fallout 4*.

As we can see, historically, queerness being explicitly represented as identities on screen within the *Fallout* series has had promising areas where queerness can appear

[25] Translation: "Look for the Woman"- a reference to the femme fatale figure from the pulp fiction genre.

and be explored by the player, but this is also at odds with some of the heterosexual messaging within the game. We can see this within the perk system and the heavy focus on female sex workers and their accessibility for a male player character rather than a female player character. *Fallout* as a series has always allowed to play as either "male" or "female" and used the perk system to benefit both sexes in the combat system. However, much of the queer representation in the series is hidden behind skill checks or narrative exploration, and as this series is heavily focused on character building, narrative, and morality, for some players some of these quests or characters may never be fully explored. With the progress being made by previous iterations of the game being slow and mainly limited to the perk system, *Fallout 4*'s approach to queer identities spoke to what has come before, but also to the trends within games of the time. Using the companion system to represent romantic relationships during the building of "affinity" with companions meant that all companions in Fallout 4 are what is known as "playersexual"- with player action driving the representations of identities out. This raises the same issue as *Fallout: New Vegas*, and another issue which Navarro-Remesal identified, as "since games are based on 'doing' – button presses – and are expected to provide players with clear feed-back on their progress" (Navarro-Remesal, 2018 pg186). The affinity system here is the "feedback" Navarro-Remesal mentions, with your companions slowly revealing more information about themselves as you perform actions within the game that they like, culminating in the player being able to "romance" them. Each character has different likes and dislikes based on the game's morality system- as we saw with *Fallout 3*'s companions and *Fallout: New Vegas'* location specific morality. However, for some companions, their backstories also reinforce a possible heterosexuality (Deacon and MacCready's mentioning wives/female partners). When we think about this in relation to the genre of the game itself, and how that is built through our ideas around society (Fine, 1983), it is interesting that the game's developers have chosen to *only* reflect heterosexual couples in their NPC backstories- even within parts of the game outside of the players control, the possibility of queerness is still closed. In a chapter on *Dragon Age 2*'s (DA2) romance system, Peter Kelly questioned "why should the world of Thedas [the world of DA2] have any sexuality biases baked into the sociopolitical climate?" (Kelly, 2014 pg48)- this is something I also want to question here. In a world ravaged by nuclear

war, why would characters cling onto heterosexual and gendered biases, and why would we not see *more* subversions of both gender *and* sexuality here? Kelly theorises that "The impetus to see real-world anxieties reflected in a fictional, digital context may very well be from years of repeated videogame conditioning. As an artifact of manmade media, real-world cultural contexts are virtually impossible to leave behind when building a fictional universe" (Kelly, 2014 pg48), and I would argue that *Fallout 4* is a good example of real-world attitudes around sexuality, gender and even the family unit making its way into a world in which they don't make sense. While subversion of these norms is possible, it is only within (optional) gameplay and perks, rather than being embedded into the initial design of the game.

With this in mind, the romance within *Fallout 4* is again reduced to perk collection, with "Lovers Embrace" (an experience boost) being given after sharing a bed with a romanced companion, and companions at max affinity giving the player special perks themed around them and their skills. Unlike *Fallout: New Vegas* there is no difference when romancing the same sex. Rejecting this and not romancing a companion means that the player may not receive the perks for romancing them, so not abiding to the rigid romance system almost punishes the player by not allowing them the same benefits. However, a player is also punished for romancing *all* companions as they experience jealousy if the player tries to flirt with a different companion while they are near. This system is also made more complex due to the specific perks the characters can give- if we think again to the ideas around constructing characters based on their skills and abilities, some companions may be more suited to the player character than others, which drives the potential romance through acquisition of a perk that will reward them for the romance they have engaged in. For example, players who use VATS during combat (a targeting system which uses the player's action points), romancing (or achieving max affinity with) a character like MacCready would be more preferable as he grants the player a 20% increased chance on headshots while using the VATS system, whereas trying to get max affinity with Piper in this case would be less useful, as she gives bonus experience points for successful speech checks and location discovery. As Kelly states: "The implication here is that the experience of love

(albeit in a digital context), even if played for its own merits and emotional rewards, is capped off with a reward for your time well spent" (Kelly, 2014 pg60). Sexuality is still used as a tool to reward players using the perk system, rather than being a used to depict more well-rounded representations of identity.

In this section, I have argued that across the series *Fallout* has engaged with sexual and gender identity through the perk system, romance, and companions and within player choice within the quest lines. I have identified where queerness has been able to appear within the series and areas in which gender aligns with wider societal expectations of gendered roles. It is important to identify and consider these historic representations across the game series and how they are engaged with, as "recognition is not the same as the redistribution of resources, and this difference requires that we critically address when and how marginalized groups are included in game texts" (Shaw, 2015 pg148). This begins to shine light on the contexts fan modders are working when they rework the game to build their own modifications. If the act of representation itself in gaming is the act of "doing" representation to uncover identities, then the work of these representations does not end at the explicit representation of non-heterosexuality on screen in characters like Arcade and Veronica, (or the potential heterosexuality of Deacon and MacCready). This may be a starting point for further development of how we can represent queer identity within video game texts- during the experimentation the player can do while experiencing queer stories and characters that align with these identities. I have also highlighted here that there is a lack of diversity across the franchise where specific choices by the game designers are made to hide sexuality behind speech checks and potential lack of engagement with the queer characters due to their affiliations to certain faculties the player can position themselves against by playing through the narrative. This then becomes a "misrepresentation, an attempt by producers to present an alternate and unrealistic version of reality" (Shaw, 2015 pg155), wherein the real-world cultural contexts of placing importance on heterosexuality seep into the fantasy/sci-fi genre, closing queer possibilities and reflecting 21st century social ideas about gendered and sexual identities as being "other" to heterosexuality or the abidance of binary gender.

Specifically choosing *not* to represent identities in a more explicit way is a choice made by developers to only represent the identities that they see fit to represent. However, the navigation of queer representation becomes tricky when considering the response game developers have faced when trying to implement non-heterosexual representations. Such as the media's branding of *Mass Effect* (2007) as "pornographic" due to its inclusion of a same-sex love scene, and the negative response by the players to the inclusion of a gay character in the 2009 game *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, which Megan Condis explored in her 2015 article on the politicisation of queer identities by "white male gamers" (Condis, 2015). These examples highlight the context of the period that *Fallout 4* was developed in (as *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* were released in 2008 and 2010, during these debates around inclusion). *Fallout 4*'s release also coincided with the aftermath of Gamergate, an online harassment campaign that targeted women in the gaming industry who had been arguing for more inclusive design, or who were critical of video game representations of women and other minorities. These issues could also be why *Fallout 4* is more subtle in representing explicit queer identities, and why heterosexuality was emphasised over non-heterosexuality. To further complicate the queerness across the franchise, more research should also be done on the representations of race, class, and disability within gaming *alongside* representations of queerness, to explore the impact of further marginalisation on the representations of these identities.

Remixing Queerness

As I have touched upon already in this chapter, fan interventions appear when players begin to explore the ways they can adapt media texts to suit their own needs. One such way they do this and will be the focus on the final part of this chapter, is that fans engage with fan production as a way to find the gaps left by the original text, negotiate their meanings, or to open up possibilities for play that the original game does not allow. If, as I have argued, the game has historically had some areas queerness can appear, fans can take hold of these moments or the queer potential of the world and characters within it, and begin to shape something new, based on their mastery of the text. Eve Sedgwick argues that queer people look for "sites where the

meanings don't line up tidily with each other" (Sedgwick, 1993 pg3), meaning that we can think about the text itself as a space in which narratives can be remixed, with the medium of video games providing a unique space wherein this kind of interactivity is possible. It is important here to also think about what Nicolle Lamerichs refers to as "narrative closure"- a process of meaning-making through which fans can explore the gaps they find during their close readings of the text and attempt to write them in such a way that satisfies their desire for a comprehensive narrative which engages with their interpretation of the text (Lamerichs, 2018). Fans search for and fill these narrative gaps "as a desire for narrative closure by the audience that is the result of the unfinished, episodic television text" (Lamerichs, 2018 pg112). However, what may be closure for one fan is not closure for another, meaning that fan production affords fans the opportunity to negotiate what these gaps mean through their productive practices. While Lamerichs is thinking about this using television narratives where stories are told across an extended period of time in an episodic way, we can also apply this thinking to video games and play. As the interpretation of these "missing" moments is incredibly important in all forms of fan production, including the way that fans interact with characters (both their created characters and pre-existing characters) from video games and the narratives they create around them. For Lamerichs, "Closure means that all of the macro-questions that are posed in the narrative are answered" (pg118)- but what complicates this idea of a "macro question" to round up storylines for individual characters is that this might not be of the same importance to every fan who interacts with a media text. For example, some fans may not care about the answer to the question "Will she succeed in her dream job?" (pg118) but would rather watch how the text pairs her with her love interest. This is the place fan fiction narratives negotiate the possibilities afforded to them by the text as they begin to answer both the larger and smaller questions that pique the fan's interests- they might want to see a character fall in love, but perhaps they also want to see them coming to terms with their sexuality or gender identity. In this way, this concept of "narrative gaps" demonstrates how fan production may both answer *and* unsettle possibilities.

As many mainstream media texts rely on open narratives to create more texts, we

can see that closure is not the only factor in its success- for example: the ending of the open world game *Saints Row 2*, a moment where the player character is asked "What do we do now?" To which they respond: "This is our city, we do whatever the fuck we wanna do". With the main characters riding off into the sunset, it is up to the player to imagine the kind of life they will lead once the main story is over. At first glance, this may appear closed, with all the missions completed and the "boss battle" over, but the player arrives back on the map, with the option to carry on playing. In this example, some of the macro-questions have been answered (Will the Boss beat the other gangs?) but they have led to other, new macro-questions (What happens to them now?). As the story continues in *Saints Row the Third*, it becomes up to the player to imagine the period of time between the games, filling in the gaps left open by the developers. This is not always the case, especially in fandoms for television programmes, as "narrative closure is not, as we have seen, a necessary condition of all narratives. Some narratives just stop or come to rest, rather than ending or concluding. Not all narratives have closure" (Carroll, 2007 pg2). Many narratives instead conclude due to cancellations or the refusal of mainstream media creators to create more media texts set in worlds that fans engage in- examples of this happening with shows beloved by fan communities are the Netflix Sci-fi show *Sense8* or the NBC horror *Hannibal*. However, this does not necessarily stop fannish interventions from taking place with the media text.

Shira Chess' work on queer narrative show that the possibilities that are opened up to the player during this kind of play with narrative enables them to be "constantly submerged in the story's middle", as it "revels in queer process: it allows for a space that is not defined by a singular, ultimate climax but a multitude of climaxes that are not intent on necessarily finding an end" (Chess, 2016 pg88). While Chess described video games themselves as this middle space, we can also look to modifications and how that may allow players to be submerged in the middle of a narrative. If fans are exploring these ideas of the middle and closure are experimenting with the space within the middle of the game (or the space that is *not* the introduction and conclusion), then we can conceptualise their meaning-making practices as a form of

fan fiction, of mastering the text and experimenting with their own narratives and character builds.

Start Me Up

The RPG genre heavily focused on character and narrative building and can act as a form of fanfiction using the game as a tool to tell stories, and the *Fallout* series has not historically been open to a well-rounded representation of queer identities beyond a handful of queer characters. For queer players, narrative then becomes a site they can explore aspects of identity within the practice of opening possibilities that they see as they work their way through the game. This means that the introductory section of the game becomes a problematic area for these players, as they must then somehow navigate how to represent this story as part of their wider narrative and character building if they are trying to construct a form of queer identity within the game. To explore how fans may remix the game to achieve this, I have looked at the modification "Start Me Up: Alternate Start and Dialogue Overhaul" and its 2022 update "Start Me Up Redux - Fixes and Update for Alternate Start and Dialogue Overhaul". With the 2022 update describing the modification as "freeing you from the role of a concerned parent through dialogue changes and alternative start" (Dashboarderian, 2022). If we think again to Howard, who explored the original version of this modification, he points out; "Queering the game does not seem to be the creator's intent in this case, as the mod simply offers players the freedom to decide upon a different backstory for their characters" (Howard, 2019 pg10). However, this mod highlights the *queer potential* of altering the story of a game to better fit the story the fan wishes to tell.

In thinking about explicit forms of representation, the romance and affinity systems were not the only way heterosexual structures are reflected within the game. Heterosexuality is reinforced throughout the main narrative of *Fallout 4*, due to the backstory given to the player character at the beginning of the game. Opening in the bathroom of a married couple in a distinctly pre-apocalypse environment, the player can design the couple as they see fit as they speak to each other, calling each other

"hon" and affectionately complimenting each other as the player crafts their character. This moment would be difficult to read as them having any other relationship to one another than a romantic one due to their interactions. There is no choice to engage with an almost idyllic representation of a heterosexual couple, with distinctly 1950's style music overlaying this couple's morning routine, signalling a kind of heterosexual domestic bliss to the player. As the player can only be male or female (rather than play as both of them or rejecting gender completely), they must select which of the two they wish to play as. However, the game opens with the male character (Nate)[26] speaking about his role as a general within the war and the life they have led up to that point, with the emphasis of this speech being about his wife and child (Shaun). If the player chooses to play as male, the female (Nora[27]) holds the baby throughout the introductory sequence. This is another subtle reinforcement of both heterosexuality and gender roles, as while the game uses this moment as a tool to trap the player in a space away from their child so that the child can be taken from them, Nora holding and caring for the child during this sequence reinforces the association of "female" with "motherhood" because of her role as a caretaker for the baby. Interestingly, the subversion of this is playing *as* Nora, as Nate is then the one taking on that caring role during this sequence. However, within an un-modded game there is no way to remove the other character, nor the child from the narrative- and so the player *must* engage with this heterosexual relationship in order to progress to the game itself, as this section is the introduction to both the game mechanics, the plot and the world the narrative is set in. The modification itself *has* to engage with at least the character creation part of the introduction, meaning that all character creation *must* be within this bathroom space, with both Nate and Nora present. For players who are bisexual, or who perhaps want to explore bisexuality a little later in the narrative by using the romance system, this may be less of an issue, however the aspects of the heterosexual coding are still present (such as the 50s music and Nate's speech). What the modification does is that it rewrites this small part of the game by reframing this bathroom scene when asking the player to make a decision about what they believe

[26] Default name.

[27] Default name.

this scene is in relation to their character. Players who want to engage with the narrative from the vanilla game can use this modification to skip the introduction (something which could also be viewed as a useful tool for repeat players due to the length of this section of the game) by framing this as “a memory” that the character does not want to relive. Moving from living through the section to *remembering* the section keeps the connection to the heterosexual narrative and structure of the game due to the familial connection to one of the potential primary antagonists in the later game.

For players who want to reject the primary narrative, the modification rewrites this section as “a dream”- stating “I need to wake up” in relation to the introduction. Selecting this affords the player a wide array of options to choose from, opening up a huge range of possibilities for their own rewriting practices. An interesting thing about this selection process is that it also thinks back to earlier games in the series using “traits” (personalisation of characters through attributes in certain skill areas, however each trait also carries a potential penalty, such as a boost to SPECIAL stats at certain times of day but a reduction in them outside of that time period). To rewrite here, the modders (and in turn, the players) are *looking back* at what has come before this point to build up a narrative by using their character builds. This is emphasised in Bruns’ work on knowledge gathering when engaging with fan activities (Bruns, 2008), as fans here are thinking back to knowledge from earlier in the series to build characters in a completely different game- with each trait aligning to a plausible option within the world and lore of the series. If fans evaluate the plausibility of a story within the world (Bruns, 2008), we can see modders engaging with these ideas around world building to create a mod which will fit with the players ideas around what the game should contain.

Traits are not the only way players can customise the modification, as it also adds 38 different character types for the player to choose from. Not all these types are available for all players (as two need separate mods, and five need the game’s

downloadable extra content). Unlike a vanilla game, this decision to give the players choice as to what type of character they wish to be again looks to tabletop RPGs and the more structured way in which characters are constructed *before* the game begins. Here, the player can choose their character class and alignment, for example: a player choosing to begin as a Doctor may spend most of their time doing quests to help other characters, with a high intelligence and charisma build to talk their way out of problems rather than fighting, or they could choose to play as a Raider, with high aggression and leaning toward the evil side of alignment. Here, "the direction of the game results from players acting through their characters" (Fine, 1983 pg84)- however there are still limitations to modding the game in such a way. Tabletop RPGs build worlds and narratives by decision making from players, as "game content is generated from a series of decisions by the players about how their characters will respond to the fantasy environment" (pg86), video games have a more structured outlook on narrative- so while players CAN role-play as these character types, there are still issues to be found with the dialogue and quests within the game. An example of this is arriving at Diamond City, a location at the centre of the map where the player in a vanilla game goes to try and find their son. Arriving here in an un-modded game, the player can tell the mayor at the city gates about their missing son, with the conversation turning to the epidemic of people going missing across the game's world. While the mod removes the lines of dialogue that refer to Shaun, if the player passes a speech check with Mayor McDonough about asking who could help them when they go into the city, he will inform them of a detective "who specialises in tracking people down". This is a jarring moment for a player who has chosen to ignore the main narrative of the missing child, and a reminder to queer players of the primary heterosexual story they are trying to avoid. This does not necessarily mean that this works against players, as "narrative techniques allow the fanfiction to develop an interpretation of character both wholly within its own text and in dialogue with the extra-textual knowledge of the source text and the cannon accessible to the reader" (Kaplan, 2006 pg151). Moments like this could act as prompts for the player to further develop their character through an imagined story- if they are not searching for their missing son, who are they searching for? In this instance, while the gaps the players find don't line up with each other- as we saw in Sedgwick's concept- they can still use

them as part of their fan fiction practices by developing narratives to ground the actions of the character they are playing. However, this could also be viewed as a demonstration of the limitations of both the modification and the video game itself. While *Fallout 4* contains a large amount of player directed customisation and choice (utilising character customisation, the settlement building mechanic and the decisions the player makes across the game), as while they can be shaped and formed by the player's direction, they are still designed in such a way that only certain outcomes may be possible. Modifications such as Start Me Up can direct players to explore the world differently, but there are still limitations on the level of openness within the system. This is at odds with traditional RPGs, as their malleability and customisability mean that players are the ones who decide the direction of their play, but this is not possible within video games operating in this genre. While the modification affords the players a new beginning, the ending is still the same.

Looking again to the description of the original version of the mod, the creator states that: "If you want the alt-start story that makes the most sense, you should start in the vault. So basically, you are released by mistake (instead of Nate/Nora, who are dead in their pods), as a pre-war vault-dweller" (TinyManticore, 2018). The creator identified the use of the Nate/Nora characters as a place of fannish interpretation by erasing their connection to the overall narrative of the game. They also state that the mod "solves a major problem with the original plot, which is "If my son is so important, why is the game constantly distracting me with side quests? Shouldn't this be solved immediately?". And of course, it's not YOUR son, just some kid, and all of the dialogue reflects that according" (TinyManticore, 2018). The intention here was not to create a radically queer modification, but instead to align more with the openness of the RPG genre by creating more choices for the player. TinyManticore even emphasised that "This is my personal favorite way to start the game, as it makes the most sense and melds most seamlessly with the original game's plot", showing that for them, the intention was to align with the narrative in some way, rewriting it rather than outrightly rejecting it. This does not mean that a player who uses this mod also has to view it as a way to rewrite the game to make sense of the open world's design flaw of "distracting"

the player with side quests, as this mod can be used to reject the narrative altogether. However, considering the initial intent of the creator is important when thinking about how this connects to the genre the game operates in and the openness of the game's design in terms of character customisation and identity expression. Players must take an active role in rejecting the game's narrative if they do not want to engage with it.

In thinking about narrative and the player's engagement with it, we can think again to Chess' work on queer narrative as upon starting the game through the mod, if the player has not chosen to begin the game in the vault, they receive the mission "Rumour of a Vault". Ignoring this mission actively delays the main story, as the player cannot trigger the events of the main narrative without going into the vault. The mod gives the player the *option* of following the narrative in a linear fashion, but the player can reject this and instead not play the narrative at all- delaying the closure of the "Rumour of a Vault" quest. However, the mod does not allow the player to play the main narrative out of order, as quests in games are generally designed to have specific trigger requirements, as noted by the creator of the original mod in the description when asked why the player could not trigger the second part of the first act- "Follow the quest Rumour of a Vault in your Pip-Boy to start the main quest. (If your character doesn't know about the kidnapping, how can they report it to Nick Valentine?)"- the limitations of the game are designed so that the player *has* to complete certain parts before accessing further quests. We also see this in the area of Goodneighbour, a settlement in the centre of the city area of Boston- without killing the character of Kellogg at the end of Act 1, the player cannot enter the "Memory Den" to trigger the events which will take them into the Institute to find Shaun. This limitation is also reflected within the mod's starting positions, as the mod does not allow the player to start inside the Institute itself.

The middle space becomes a point of contention for ideas around traditional fan production. If Lamerichs argues that fans find closure when filling the narrative gaps, they discover upon close readings of the media text, what does that mean for a

modification that enables the player to discover the possibilities within the middle of the text? On the one hand, this could facilitate the close reading of the text due to the lack of encouragement to complete the main story quests, allowing players to experiment with the possibilities that these "less important" spaces afford them, building up their knowledge of world, rather than the narrative. But on the other hand, fan production is not just linked to the world itself, but also the characters and narratives that exist within that world. The modification allows for exploration of this 'middle space' that Chess theorised to discover the gaps in which they can interpret their characters and narratives. This then becomes how queerness can be found within the modification beyond looking for explicit forms of representation within the game and the modifications players can use to highlight identities. As "the authors work within certain limits instead of stretching the characters too far" (Lamerichs, 2018 pg142), players engaging with these interpretive practices must linger in the middle space to not only discover the gaps fan texts fit, but also *how* the characters would respond to situations which are true to the game's world. An example of this is within the affinity system the game itself has, as each companion responds differently to player actions. Companions like Codsworth, Danse and Valentine enjoy the player character expressing "nice" behaviours, such as giving items away (like in the quest "Nuka Cola Needs"), and companions such as Cait, MacCready and Strong enjoy violence (with Strong 'loving' the act of murder against an innocent NPC). This again builds on the RPG elements of the character design, with the player spending this 'lingering' time customising their character, something that is at odds with the affordances of the game's linear narrative. As the game is designed to push the player forward in the story, queer play comes from ignoring this in favour of developing characters based on their responses to the possibilities afforded to them by the game and the modification.

While I have argued that the content of the mod itself is queer due to the rejection of the heteronormative narrative and relationship the character of Nate/Nora are placed in at the beginning of the game, we can also think about how the modification actively prevents explicit depictions of queer sexualities which can be found in other

modifications. In the mod "Same Sex Couples and LGBT families" by Sensia, the player can customise the couple to be male/male or female/female[28], allowing for explicit representation of a queer family unit. While all the indications of the heteronormative family are still there within the introduction of the game, this is an area where queer players can reflect their own ideas about family construction. As for some queer people family becomes a point of contention due to the complex relationship queer people have with the concept of "marriage", as within contemporary media texts "representations of gay domesticities [within popular culture] are often portrayed with the same heteronormative norms and values" (Dhaenens, 2012 pg228). Representations of queer sexualities and families on screen often becomes a reflection of dominant understandings of heterosexual relationships, with same-sex couples engaging with domesticity, marriage and reproductivity without consideration given to the history behind queer people's desire for these aspects of heteronormative relationships. With this in mind, we can also ask if using this modification in conjunction with Start Me Up is a way to represent queer identities, as Start Me Up is specifically designed to ignore the familial ties the player has with Shaun and their spouse, whereas Same Sex Couples changes the spouse's gender to the same as the player's. The authors of both mods have also identified that these mods can have some compatibility issues, meaning that outside software must be used in order to load them in a specific order upon starting the game. Same Sex Couples reflects a desire to see families who engage *with* heteronormative structures, however, Start Me Up exists almost at the anthesis of this- rejecting the family life that Same Sex Couples tries to engage with. When testing these two mods together to see this potential incompatibility for myself, I found that choosing "this is a dream" within the Start Me Up options meant that the potential for a queer family was overwritten by this mod's changes to the introductory section. To run the "Rumour of a Vault" quest, the mod author left Nate in his pod and placed a copy of the default Nora in a room with an electrical malfunction, holding a holotape which plays a recording of the section of the introduction in which Shaun is taken, implying that Nora had begun her escape of the vault but perished before she could find her way out. The placing of the default

[28] At this time, no gender-neutral pronouns or language is facilitated by this modification.

character models here also ignores the selections I made during the character creation, and while it does align with my selection of the introduction being a dream it erases the queer couple I had designed. This was then complicated further by speaking to Codsworth in Sanctuary, whose dialogue shifted between the original, un-modded dialogue with the pronouns changed to reflect the queerness of Nora and "Natalie" (the mods name for the partner figure) and my 'other' character telling him that she didn't know who he was. This is a limitation of Start Me Up, as while the mods *can* work together, the option of removing the player's connection to their spouse and child means that the use of *both* modifications during one playthrough to reflect queer identities may become redundant, as the player can reject the same-sex coupling by choosing to begin in a location that has no connection to the vault, which then overrules the Same Sex Couples mod.

While this is a minor conflicting issue, it is important to note that conflict is generally something which comes from the use of more than one modification which can affect the same aspect of a game. In the case of Start Me Up, conflict comes from using multiple mods which change the introductory section of the game. Conflict here also highlights another limitation of the mod itself- if Start Me Up allows for play within the narrative, allowing the player to design their own story, what happens if the player wished to keep Nate and Nora alive and instead role-play as an outsider coming to help them find their son? Two modifications were designed to bypass the murder of the player's spouse inside the vault, and this change to the narrative at the beginning of the game does not work with the way that Start Me Up alters the narrative. As "the source text functions as a template through which fan authors convey new ideas" (Lamerichs, 2018 pg141), all three of these modifications are an example of "playing with" the narrative in ways that remix the original version of the text. This is something which also highlights the fragility of game code in the production of modifications- as while modding is an activity wherein players can use multiple mods at once, this is an example of both exploration of narrative and the conflict that playing with narrative and game code can create. While using modifications creates an openness in that players can experiment with many different approaches to the game, world,

characters, and narrative from the original text allowing them to bring their own interpretations into their play, it can also highlight that the choices that they make aren't quite as open as they might have originally thought. The conflict between these three modifications means that the player must choose to play without Nate and Nora, erasing them from the main quest completely or to play *as* Nate and/or Nora, retaining the connection to the Shaun storyline. You cannot play *alongside* Nate and/or Nora. This also highlights another way that Start Me Up is not as open to the possibility of playing *with* narrative in ways between removing or keeping the connection to Shaun. If the player wished to keep their connection to Shaun but begin in a different location (as if they had already completed the first few storyline quests), this mod does not facilitate the possibility of playing *with* narrative that involves Shaun still being the son of the player character in ways that extend beyond the initial characterisation of the player character- for example, if the player wished to remove their vault dweller status but keep the kidnapped son part of their characterisation. The player *must* engage with the backstory given to them if they wish to acknowledge Shaun as their own child.

The last main limitation I found upon testing this mod was one which I drew from my own experience of the game and the world of *Fallout 4*. While Start Me Up allows you to begin the game as an "escaped synth", nothing about this start signals to the player that they are playing as anything *but* human. While not a primary focus of this thesis, this is an area that has been covered by queer theorists such as Myra Hird and Noreen Giffney (Hird and Giffney, 2012) to try and conceptualise what "human" and "the natural" means in the context of queer theory. This could be read as aligning with the narrative around synthetic humans in the game, that sometimes they don't even know that they aren't human due to the interference of the Institute. However, if we consider how we can navigate the possibilities and limitations that the narrative affords to the player, this doesn't quite align with the concept of an "escaped" synth. The player can select the gear and clothing of someone who has exited the Institute, but they cannot begin the game *inside* this location. As I have mentioned, the Institute is locked until the final act of the game's narrative- which is potentially difficult for a modder to unlock to *begin* the game at, and due to the structure of the location, the

modder would have to create a new quest for the player to leave the Institute, as upon first entry all exits are locked to the player unless they complete a task given to them by the character of Father or if they enter a specific item into a computer terminal. Thinking again to tabletop RPGs, an important aspect of character creation is the ability to choose between different fantasy races, something which *Fallout 4* does not allow for in an un-modded game. Interestingly, other role-play video games with similar structures to *Fallout 4* do allow for non-human play (Such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *Dragon Age*), and *Fallout 4* itself has some nods to the potential for non-human play with the perk "Ghoulish", which grants the player health when exposed to radiation, and upon levelling up this perk, gives a random chance for the feral ghouls they encounter to turn friendly as if the player is "one of them". Both the game and the modification are therefore resistant to the potential of non-human play. However, in my testing of the "escaped synth", there were moments where I could identify potential gaps which may have allowed for the role-play of this non-human character. Upon my first arrival at Diamond City, the conversation played out as previously outlined, but using my knowledge of the game, I was interested in what was happening *behind* Mayor Mcdonough. The mayor confronts the player in the entrance to the baseball stadium, with Diamond City security placed in what appears to be pre-war food stands. In one of these food stands, the player can find the future potential companion Deacon in disguise as a member of the security team. This is something that the player can find Deacon doing in multiple locations until he is recruited as a companion after discovering the Railroad (if the player chooses to find this faction). Seeing him in this location on a playthrough in which I was an escaped synth created a gap in the narrative for me due to the kind of roleplaying I was attempting to do because of my own interpretations of the possibilities afforded to me by these gaps. If Deacon was following me, maybe he knows that I am one of the escaped synths he has been working to help? While the mod has changed nothing about the character I am playing as within the game itself, it has helped me to begin to craft my own narrative around the character I have created, again working within the 'rules' of RPGs and character building. Here, we can see the way that my own interpretation has opened up possibilities due to my knowledge of the modification as well as the game, helping me to navigate my own play in relation to the mod's affordances and how it explores a

transformed relation to the non-human as a site of queerness.

Conclusion: Queer Play as Opening/Closing

I have argued here that the changing representations across the franchise have opened possibilities and revealed gaps for players to interpret things more queerly. These gaps also align with the role-playing genre and the openness that we see in traditional forms of tabletop gaming; however, players have to navigate this carefully due to the nature of video game texts as being a little more structured in how they expect players to play the game. This also means that players may struggle to find these gaps, or that the players may feel like the game itself resists any alternate interpretations they may have of the narrative, world or how they should approach the game. I have also argued that it is a combination of these things alongside fandom and lore knowledge may have driven this mod's creation. On top of this, for queer players there is the added layer of representation of identity and how buried or suppressed it may be- especially in the case of this example where the player must experience the very heterosexual opening of the game to access the main map. Not only that, but the sex-as-reward system that plagues gaming that engages with romance systems frames representative queerness as a "perk collecting" exercise, rather than a discursive queer act. Players then push the boundaries and experiment by responding to the text and queering their play. In this case, all these things work together to highlight how this mod can be used to either: reframe heterosexuality as a dream or to conduct more in-depth role-play through the demonstration of fannish knowledge. However, as the game itself has limitations, so does the mod. Role-play can only be stretched so far with this example, and the mod itself also clashes with other mods that may affect Nate/Nora. As much as the mod potentially adds or changes- there are still some limitations they must work within or did not have the scope to be able to properly address. This means that the mod both opens and closes the possibilities to the player- it does what it can by working within the game's design constraints, but it does have to acknowledge its limitations due to this design.

Chapter Six: Minecraft: Queer Play as Lingering

"*Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.*"

Various - Assassin's Creed

With the last block placed on your latest project, you look up at it as the machine works. It filters logs and wood through a mechanical system that you have built based on a design that you saw online. With that, your mind starts to think through what the next thing will be, turning again to videos made by other players to see what the latest trends are within the game's community. Videos are after all, where you have found most of your inspiration and instruction to get better at the game as you've now progressed beyond 500 days in the world you have been working on. One such video catches your eye- a transformation project which would mean excavating a 100x100 block area around a portal to build a new design for it, one which brings together all the different types of biomes from the game in a square that tiers every few levels down to level 0. This is something with skills you've never done before, and so, you begin gathering the materials you will need to get started.

Video hosting sites such as YouTube are an interesting place to look to consider how games can be shaped using modifications in order to structure play. Modifications can act as a supplement to the game itself in a variety of ways, which I will highlight throughout this chapter. To do this, I once again use the example of an open world game to think about how we can play to remain entrenched in the middle of the game. If fans enjoy this middle space of the media text and actively delay the closure (or, the completion of the game) when extending their time in the game world, what does that mean in the context of a game with no clear ending or story to drive them across the game? Does modification therefore allow for this kind of lingering, in what forms and to what ends? Can we then consider these alternate interpretations on *how* a game or modification should be used to be queer? This chapter explores these questions by thinking about how conceptualising queer forms of play reveals how players can challenge goal driven game structures so that they can use games to

discover other outcomes of play.

Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) is one of the most popular games of all time, with over 300 million copies sold (Statistica, 2024) and around 140 million active users as of 2021 (Statistica, 2021), which also makes it the most successful indie game of all time. As an infinite sandbox game, *Minecraft* is open-ended, with no clear direction given to the player beyond the advancement system (as the "Minecraft" branch of this system potentially acting as a form of tutorial or guide for the early game play by directing the player on where to find resources and other useful game mechanics such as crafting). The world is procedurally generated horizontally as the player travels through the landscape, with a variety of biomes for the player to explore. With how popular the game is, this also means that it is a place in which players can generate content to post online for the entertainment of other players. YouTube creators such as Mr Beast (who has around 30 million subscribers on his gaming channel) and CallMeKevin (who has over 3 million subscribers) regularly use *Minecraft* as a form of video content alongside their other gaming videos, with both of these creators engaging with different modifications as a way to both label their content and play the game in alternate ways (such as CallMeKevin's videos "I ruined Minecraft With a Zombie Apocalypse Mod" and "I made Minecraft so realistic it's a different game" and MrBeast's "Minecraft, But Every Minute There's Random Chaos"). Modding here becomes a way for creators to generate their own gaming communities by performing entertaining videos, with viewers being both fans of the game itself and of the creator they are watching. There is an interesting dynamic between a variety of fan-driven texts, with YouTube creators using fan texts to create their own content, yet again disrupting goals that generally make up the gameplay.

This also makes *Minecraft* an excellent choice for this analysis as the game is composed of play that encourages exploration and lingering, giving players the freedom to design their own experiences. Chang's concept of queergaming is useful here to consider different ways to play the game, as it is not *just* about the game that is

in front of us, instead it can also be about wider gaming cultures (Chang, 2017). In his work, Chang attempts to reimagine the way that we can use games that go beyond just the narratives. He emphasises the need to include the influence of culture on the way we interpret games, and the need to include the audience in our analysis. This chapter takes Chang's work on queergaming as a starting point to visualise *beyond* the game itself to account for the community's role in playing the game in alternate ways. In the examples laid out by this chapter, wider gaming cultures constitutes modding and creating videos using both community feedback *and* modding. If we also think again to Ruberg's interpretations of games through a queer lens, failure (both toward and against game systems), affect (games that are designed to cause negative emotions) and movement (speeding along the game world or slowing movement down) (Ruberg, 2019) we can begin to look toward modification as well as video making as different types of play beyond the styles that they put forward as they are going beyond the game itself and extending out into fan spaces. If, as I have mentioned, *Minecraft* appears across a whole range of types of video content- we can look to videos to see how modification can structure different forms of play, and how this is adopted by fans as a form of fan content to consume for their own entertainment. But we can also think about play as something that is negotiated between both the content creator and their viewers. This is a theme that appears within each of my examples of types of play within *Minecraft* and is indicative of the participatory nature of YouTube as a platform for viewing content around gaming. This also poses the question- if you are not playing the game yourself, are you still considered a gamer? In terms of fan activity- are video making and the development of game modifications forms of play in the same way we would conceptualise using a video game as a media text? If so, how does this fit in with these debates about extending the text, filling the gaps, and lingering in the middle?

Minecraft has seen incredible growth since its release, especially due to the wide accessibility of the game across multiple platforms. For the purposes of this research, I will be looking at the "Java" Edition on PC, as the main difference between Bedrock and Java that I am interested in is the accessibility of modification. Due to Bedrock being optimised for console play, modification is limited to an online store called "The

Marketplace", prompting users to spend real money on in-game currency to Microsoft for skins for their avatars or add-ons. Console play also means that the graphics and performance of the game itself is lower in Bedrock than in Java, due to the range of consoles that it must run on, but as it is accessible to all consoles, it allows players to "cross play" (meaning they can play multiplayer games across different types of consoles- ie. Nintendo Switch, PS4 and PC players can all play on one server together with no issue). *Minecraft* also has several different difficulty levels to choose from in an un-modded game, that different content creators deal with in a variety of ways. These are: Peaceful, Easy, Normal and Hard. Java Edition also includes "Hardcore" mode, which locks the difficulty level to hard and does not allow the enabling of cheats through console commands. Survival mode, which is where the first four difficulty levels can be found, allows players to collect resources, explore the world, build structures, and battle hostile mobs (such as zombies, skeletons, and creepers). Difficulty here is related to mechanics within the game such as damage, mob behaviour and spawning rules (such as spiders spawning with positive effects given to them- speed, strength, regeneration, and invisibility). Unlike the other three difficulty levels, Peaceful removes all hostile mobs and hunger and health regenerates at a rapid pace if the player takes damage. Switching to Peaceful from one of the other difficulties also removes all hostile mobs from the game, and End Portals cannot be activated to go to the Ender Dragon fight as the mobs that drop the item needed to unlock this do not spawn in this mode. There is also Creative mode, which grants the player the ability to instantly break blocks and fly across the game world. This mode is primarily used for building, as it also gives them access to almost every block in the game.

Since YouTube's founding, it has also gone through a period of rapid growth and success with different genres of content began to develop across the platform as people who were creating content became overnight "celebrities". Gaming content became a place for people to share their own styles of play for the entertainment of others, lucrative to those who found success in doing so- for example, Swedish gamer Felix Kjellberg (also known as PewDiePie) became the most subscribed channel on the platform during the years 2013 to 2019 due to his gameplay videos. While he is

currently the 5th most subscribed person on the platform with over 110 million subscribers and has expanded his content over the years to include lifestyle videos alongside his gaming videos, this huge popularity shows the cultural impact that YouTube gaming videos have had on popular culture. In terms of *Minecraft*, PewDiePie is one of many creators who have used *Minecraft* as an extended series, spanning multiple years of content (such as "Minecraft Part 1", released June 21st, 2019, and "Minecraft But I regret Everything.. - Minecraft Hardcore #1", released on December 7th, 2020). While PewDiePie uses *Minecraft* as a supplement to other forms of content, (like the Mr Beast and CallMeKevin videos previously mentioned), there are also creators who *solely* post videos about *Minecraft*, some of which I will go into more detail on in this chapter. These include names such as SB737 and GeminiTay, but also redstoners[29] MumboJumbo (9.36 million subscribers) and EthosLab (2.54 million subscribers), hardcore creators aCookieGod (5.34 million subscribers) and WadZee (4.74 million subscribers), as well as builders like BdoubleO100 (1.93 million subscribers) and Grian (8.52 million subscribers). Even from this small overview of different content types (which does not and could not span the entire breadth of *Minecraft* content on YouTube at the time of writing), we can see that from number of subscribers alone that this is an incredibly popular form of entertainment, lucrative for those who find success in sharing their game and play style with the platform.

What we see here is that in both fan cultures and in popular culture there was a shift in creation practices around fan driven media texts to a model that involves a higher level of participation due to its accessibility and popularity. Not only did we see fan fiction and other forms of fan work begin to move onto more public, accessible platforms like YouTube, but we also saw the rise of the "YouTube Gamer"- people who made content from a media text, reworking the text to build videos for the entertainment of others through the medium of video games. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue in their book on the participatory nature of YouTube: "some gamers engage in co-creative activities out of a passion for the game itself, others for

[29] People whose content revolves around making machinery in-game

the pleasures of achievement, others for social status within the game community, and still others in pursuit of commercial opportunities" (Burgess and Green, 2018 pg98). I would argue that this also aligns with traditional conceptualisations of why fans create *fan* content- if we think again to Henry Jenkins' seminal text on participatory culture, social connection and the sharing of content were vital in defining the way that fans approach media texts in the age of the internet (Jenkins, 2006). Due to this, I argue that YouTube is a site that hosts fans and their created texts, allowing both players and fans to discuss, remix and display video games in ways that should be interesting for researchers who wish to explore issues around play and fandom. I am using YouTube here to highlight different types of play that can emerge in a game that allows for a large level of creative freedom. The videos from these creators help to demonstrate that modification can exist as a wider cultural phenomenon in which fans are beginning to embrace fan texts more publicly, rather than previous understandings of game modification as being a part of a "hacker culture", meaning difficult to access and understand beyond the process of 'skinning'. Again, I refer to Chang's emphasis on play not just being contained within the game itself as a part of queergaming (Chang, 2017), bringing together different aspects of Minecraft play to argue that modding can aid players in queer forms of play.

Emotion and Affect

To begin this exploration of modding, *Minecraft* and YouTube, I return to ideas posed in the previous chapter around extending play and "lingering" in the game world. Players can use mods to spend extended periods of time within the game world, with the mods then shaping the environment around them and creating their own designed world by playing with aesthetics. Modification surrounding aesthetics has been one of the most visual and popular forms of game modification due to the popularity of franchises like *The Sims* and even *Minecraft* itself, with *The Sims'* ease of access to mods being provided due to the labelling of it as "Custom Content" on the official websites of each game in the franchise, dating all the way back to the original game. However, aesthetic mods are not just limited to the "skinning" of characters (if we think back to Hanna Wirman's interviews about skinning identity), but they can also

affect the world and game environments around the player. For *Minecraft* specifically, this means the use of what is known in the community as 'shaders'- a toggleable effect which primarily changes the look of the game world. These range from making the world look and feel more realistic, to brightening the biomes, and to ones with a more cartoonish feel to them. For this research, I am mostly interested in shader packs such as 'BSL Shaders' and 'Complimentary Shaders' due to their effects on the world being primarily designed to make the game feel more pleasant in terms of the aesthetic, using lighting effects to bring the pleasing emotions around aesthetic to the player. Lingering here, becomes a way to evoke emotion and pleasant feelings, with YouTube content reflecting this in the way that videos that engage with these mods use language and imagery to draw in viewers. Play here, becomes a sensory experience beyond the emotions that an un-modded game can bring out in players.

The experience of using shaders is one that can completely change the way that the world around you look, conveying specific emotions and feelings when they are turned on. Water becomes clearer, crafted light sources glow with a warm orange light, the night sky changes colours as the sun sets over the horizon, stars beginning to light up as the world around you goes dark. Flowers and trees move in non-existent wind, and plants look so much lusher and greener, with some plants even glowing brighter than normal once shaders have been selected. Agata Waszkiewicz and Martina Bakun argue in their 2020 article on the aesthetics of cosy games that one of the aspects that signals this "safe environment" developed by the cosy genre is "a warm and gentle colour palette that does not use high contrasts" as well as "the use of natural materials… which are meant to emphasise and strengthen the sense of safety by evoking the contrast between natural as welcoming and technological as sterile and uncomfortable" (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020 pg227). As I have argued in the previous chapter, wishing to remain in the middle space of a video game is an important factor into the modding that we can see around gaming, and we can conceptualise this by exploring what these shaders do to create pleasant emotions due to the aesthetics that I have described here. If we then look to YouTube for examples of this, there is a clear genre of content being formed around their use that I would argue

also ties into the popularity of the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (commonly known as ASMR) genre. ASMR uses a variety of sounds and imagery to evoke response from the consumer of the video, as Joceline Anderson argues that "In the case of ASMR, affect and emotion exist hand in hand, tethered by intentionality, memory, and nostalgia" (Anderson, 2015 pg685). This style of video is designed to purposefully trigger those pleasing emotions using sound, imagery, and a general *emotion* that they evoke in the viewer as they watch the player moves within the shader-effected landscape, slowly gathering materials as they prepare to build something or explore further. In Anderson's article, the focus was purely on the "whisper community", but I would argue here that the genre has developed from the sole focus on "the whispered voice, rustling paper, the tapping of fingers, crinkling plastic, and combinations of all of these in role-play videos that recreate the performance of ordinary tasks" (pg686), to also encompass other pleasing sounds such as rainfall, ambient nature noises and slow, melodic music to encompass for different tastes in what people find pleasing to the ear. Shaders are used on top of all these other items to edit the look of the game world to fit with the emotion the creator is trying to convey- as the videos that use *Minecraft* in this way also repeatedly use language which emphasises the emotion, such as "cosy", "peaceful" and "relaxing" in the titles of the videos. Rain also becomes another way to convey these emotions, with "rain" or "rainy" appearing to signify this kind of ASMR content to the viewer. Not only are the descriptor words a signifier of emotion, but the subject matter of the videos also becomes a point to signal to the viewer that they are getting this "cosy" or "relaxing" style of content. Many of the projects this genre encompasses involve relatively simple subject matter, with creators using these videos to work through small-scale projects such as cabins, cottages, or barns. This also means that due to the length of these videos (around 2-4 hours, but can even go up to 10-11 hours), creators have space to linger over decisions that they are making during the building process, as they place and replace blocks until they are satisfied, moving around and away from their work to look at the way their project is taking shape. This real-time editing is also rather different from the sleek timelapses (in which hours of content is condensed to a few seconds) or detailed tutorials that make up other types of *Minecraft* fan content. This emphasises the way aesthetics can influence the enjoyment of this middle space-

there is no rush for players to complete what they are working on, instead they can linger in the middle as they slowly build up the world around them and create a cosy atmosphere.

Thinking about the form that these kinds of videos can take is also interesting- as just because a creator uses shaders does not necessarily mean that their video is designed in this affective way, even if that triggers those kinds of emotions in their viewers from seeing them being used. However, I think it is interesting to note that there are creators out there who use these kinds of mods throughout their content, making content that mirrors the way that other people are structuring their videos, but with this affective twist. Creators such as WaxFraud (326k subscribers) combines three different types of videos under one "relaxing" umbrella in his channel where he describes himself as making "relaxing Minecraft Longplays, Minecraft Let's Plays, and Minecraft Tutorials". His channel is littered with the same softly lit, foliage-based aesthetics that seem to signal this form of content, his videos making use of both regular playthroughs (where he speaks and talks about his builds and projects), long plays that have no commentary (that generally last 2-3 hours) and livestreams. This is interesting when we think about "relaxing" as an affective concept here- as this may mean different things for different viewers. Perhaps the viewers who enjoy no commentary would never watch a single video where this creator speaks, and perhaps viewers who enjoy listening to someone talk and explain what they're doing would never watch one of the longplay videos. But tying these different types of videos together is still the use of the shaders and the cosy aesthetics that come with them across his entire channel. I keep returning to "cosy" and "relaxing" as descriptors here, which arguably indicates a wider trend in gaming itself wherein players are looking for these affective experiences in the games they play, and this here can be achieved by modding a game which doesn't appear on the surface to be connected to issues around cosiness due to the affordances of the game itself as being so tied to linear progression. This creator is using these mods to emphasise these aspects of the natural world depicted in *Minecraft* to create that safe environment that Waszkiewicz and Bakun argued is a staple of "cosiness". They also argue that this can be achieved in a

similar way to what I have argued above- that the use of “unobtrusive, ambient and natural sounds” (pg227) are used to help create this affective space. In this case this is done using the same kinds of sounds that I have already highlighted, but WaxFraud also puts emphasis on the game sounds in terms of the noises that the blocks make- as the music playing is generally low enough in volume that the viewer can hear the different sounds that he is making as he works through his projects. The lack of commentary and style of music really emphasise the different block sounds, as the game itself uses slightly different sounds for the different blocks- for example mining stone sounds different to mining deepslate, and the way that WaxFraud’s longplay videos are edited mean that the viewer can very clearly hear the difference. There is also an interesting dichotomy here, as these videos are created in a world that is set to Hardcore mode, meaning that if he dies while playing- he will be locked out of the world. This could further cement that kind of emotive experience for the viewer, adding in a layer of knowledge that the world could end at any moment, so to enjoy the pleasing emotions while they can, lingering in that world for a while longer.

Audrey Anable argues that “Video games have always had a tremendous capacity to affect our emotions, but they do so in ways that have important differences from the ways films or novels affect us” (Anable, 2018 pgviii). As this is a curated experience by the players and fans to construct a world of their own within the game, we can clearly see the difference to other forms of media texts here as the players are modifying their own games to achieve that emotional affect. If video games “engage and entangle us in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh” (pgxii), we can argue that it is their nature as an active form of media text that is always influenced by the consumer because of their actions and choices during play. This cannot happen without some form of emotional connection or response from the player, as choices are not made within a vacuum. What I am arguing here is that shaders are a way to trigger these calming, cosy emotions that come from both aesthetic choices and the ASMR genre conventions. The mod therefore becomes a site for fans to express this, with the videos helping to expose this way of play to more fans and players. Another

thing of note with this kind of modification is that traditional understandings of gaming align with a definition put forth by Jesper Juul in their 2010 book "A Casual Revolution" in which they define a "hardcore" gamer as someone "who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games" (Juul, 2010 pg8). There is an assumption here of *who* plays games and what it is that they are getting out of them that this particular style of content does not align with. This content slows things down, rejecting notions of progress to linger in a stage that isn't as productive as they could be, purely to *enjoy* how they spend their time. However, Ruberg has argued that "Queer experience… is marked by negative and difficult feeling" (Ruberg, 2019 pg158) and that queer play can be found by playing games that create negative emotions, as they are "arguing here against the dominant assumption that video games should be first and foremost 'fun'" (pg159), and that affective experiences that trigger negative emotions are a form of queer play. I disagree that it is solely negative emotions that can be a form of queer play- as the types of positive, cosy emotions I have described above link back to my arguments about lingering within game worlds for longer than expected with no expected progression moving the player to an "end point". In worlds such as those created by WaxFraud, there is no end in sight that can be planned for- unless the creator purposefully chooses to put an end to his series. While it may be the case that for some games negative emotions drive fan creativity, mods here help craft that middle space by creating pleasing emotions. This is also where we can identify that this kind of rejection of "expected" progression aligns nicely with Halberstam and Freeman's arguments that queerness is identified through the refusal to abide to progression or linear time. Perhaps doing things in the "correct" way by attaining better gear and working toward "beating" the game would be a more "productive" use of the player's time, but these videos reject this, making it clear that their focus is *not* on always trying to do things in a more productive way, that instead they want to take things slowly, to linger, to remain in that cosy space for as long as they can.

Time and Linear Progression

Exploring *Minecraft* and its modifications through the lens of "time" can also be an interesting site of investigation due to the different ways that "time" can be approached in both gameplay and content generated by gameplay. The videos in this style of content are long, slow-paced, and driven by player set goals, so how can we also think about other forms of content in this way? What does "progression" mean in relation to *Minecraft* and how does it relate to play and modding? To do this, I look to two different ways of playing or structuring fan content to explore how we can view time and progression within both the vanilla game and a modded game. In both examples, play is directed by the person creating the content, driven by their own limitations that they place upon themselves.

The first example of this theme surrounds game time itself and how that can be used to mark progress. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, *Minecraft* has four different difficulty levels open to the player, with one of these standing out as one of the primary focuses of Let's Play content on YouTube. We can see the success of this kind of content in creators like SB737, whose Hardcore series is released to coincide with him spending another 100 days in game. As of May 2024, he has filmed and uploaded over 8000 days of his in-game world to YouTube for his 4.24 million followers, regularly attaining over a million views on this series. This genre of content and way of structuring play is clearly popular with those who consume *Minecraft* content, with many other creators also using this 100-day structure as a measurable block of time they can film for video content. One interesting aspect of structuring his game in this way is that viewers can see how decisions he has made in previous 100 days have affected the way he must approach things as he moves forward. As his series began in January 2021, his decision to remain close to the world spawn and make use of the village he found in that area is still causing issues in videos he released in October 2022, with the cold biome he settled in covering his builds and farms in snow every time the weather changes to rain. We see this in his "2,500 day" video, as due to the November 2021 update (known as "Caves and Cliffs Part 2"), he had to adapt some of his farms due to the actual structure of the world changing, adding an extra 60 levels of

blocks below the world. We also see this in “4,100 days”, where he gets access to the June 2022 “The Wild” update and spends his time exploring the new “Deep Dark” biome, collecting the new items and musing on how they can be used in farms and builds. Each video in this series involves him choosing a project to focus on and spending his time in the 100 days to develop and build it, which also demonstrates a part of the game that clearly shows this tension between progression and play that I indicated in the introductory paragraph to this chapter where I described a play session of my own.

To achieve things and to expand the world in *Minecraft* is to gather and craft items. To gather and craft items, the player must either explore or develop a way of getting a renewable source of these items. One big project taken on by this creator in the 100-day time period suddenly becomes 5 smaller projects just to acquire enough resources to tackle the large-scale project. For example: In “I Transformed the ENTIRE END in Minecraft Hardcore”, SB737 opens by reminding the viewer that he has completely removed part of the map so that he can build his own “hub”, the entire episode focusing on the things he must do to be able to bring his vision to life. To attain the 44,000 gold blocks he needs, he first must fix the farm he’s designed to obtain the gold ingots before crafting them by hand into gold blocks. Then, he must search for a particular biome so he can obtain a certain block type, spending time mining it out and sorting it into boxes. To get green dye he then must return to an area he built for a different project, explaining how his build works and how to adapt it so that he can now pick up the drops he’s looking for. These are just *some* of the examples from this video, building a picture of how long it can take to just accumulate the resources needed to build something of a large scale in *Minecraft*. The goals set in these kinds of videos do not always align with the concept of progression in the way that we might traditionally view progression in video games, instead this video concept is player-driven, and player designed to be shared with an audience, using the game as a platform for fan content. This kind of long-form gaming content speaks to the idea of lingering, where the player is not progressing to any set conclusion point in the game, but rather spending many hours creating something of their own design as a form of

(queer) play.

In the literature review, I referred to Mia Consalvo's work on cheating and her concept of pushing against the rules (Consalvo, 2009) as well as Halberstam's concept of Queer Time. In this example, we can see how Minecraft works in a way that allows for alternative methods of play, opening up possibilities due to SBS37's different goals. As I have illustrated earlier in this thesis, we must look at the affordances of the game, how they are used and then how modding is incorporated into play practices. For this creator, while he's abiding by the rules of the game by *not* engaging with modding, he is showing how the game can be played in a way that is directed by an audience, not by the game itself. While not about modding itself, SB737 is demonstrating how the game can be played in different ways. Chang's concept of Countergaming applies here also- as we are seeing how play extends beyond the game itself and into the audience-creator relationship as SBS37 explores the game in a way that sometimes pushes it to its limits. This, I argue is where queer play can lie, as while SB737 is being *productive* with his time, breaking it down into chunks and becoming lost in other projects *before* getting to the big goal of the video is the focus here- it's this middle part of the collection, that he retains in his videos that shows the lingering around the world, the gathering in a similar- but different- way to the videos created by the people who are making content with shaders.

Another thing which we must consider here is that the real lifetime commitment these players are putting into the game to film 100 days. If one in-game day is equal to 20 real life minutes, 100 days equates to just over 33 hours of play time- which does not account for the time the creator puts into editing, uploading, and promoting this content to their viewers. Unlike the slow pace of the longplay videos that use modifications to create a pleasing environment, these "100 day" videos actively use time to drive their projects and game progress, with gameplay becoming more about "what project can I complete in this timeframe" than "how can I create an aesthetic experience". Both approaches can help us conceptualise how time can be engaged with

by players both inside and outside of the game world. The projects that creators like SB737 take on during his 100 day videos are on a larger scale, as we see him building a "world eater" in "2,800 days" (a machine that uses an item duplication glitch to duplicate TNT, used to dig out large areas) and spawning in 100 Ender Dragons ('4,600 days")- with his videos also beginning to reach up to an hour in length, becomes comparable to the long form content of the videos which use shaders. As his content is about the vanilla game, with his projects making use of vanilla features or glitches that are contained to an un-modded game, we can't hold this content up as an example of how fans engage with modification, but we can use it to compare different types of longform content and how players can quantify and measure the time spent in the game world- within both extended play sessions and tracking in-game time as a measure of progress, something that still appeals to my questioning of what we believe play to be.

How can we think about these aspects of *Minecraft* and its associated content creation in relation to a *modded* game? If *Minecraft* is open-ended, left for the players to dictate their goals and play, what happens when we begin to add mods? As I have mentioned in the introduction, most early modding communities were formed around the development of new edited levels, something which has slightly reduced in popularity since the growth of PC gaming and change in direction of video games from first person shooter games that had the player progress in pre-set designed levels to an increase in the visibility and popularity of the "Sandbox" and the "Open World" genres. While these are genres that existed before this period of time- were pioneered in games such as *The Sims* (EA, 2000) and *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar Games, 2001), a genre that *Minecraft* falls into. Alongside this, the development of the FPS genre moving into a more online context meant that many titles banned the use of modifications due to the potential for unfair advantage or cheating. Despite these changes in modding culture, we can still see evidence of the level development style of modification within *Minecraft* modding today.

“Skyblock” or “One Block” is a form of level design in which players are limited to one block that they must break to receive items and progress the game. The block itself goes through 10 “phases” (excluding the Tutorial and “Afterphase”), all connected to different Biomes from the vanilla world. The mod creator estimates that from beginning to the appearance of the End Portal at the end of phase 10 that the player will collect around 6500 blocks from the block itself, with each phase lasting around 6-700 of those blocks. Placing these kinds of limitations on the players adapts the game into almost a new puzzle for them to solve, as typical forms of progress such as crafting tools and armour cannot be achieved unless the player acquires them by breaking the block itself- as in a regular world a player would use the world around them to begin crafting tools and items. Instead of this exploration across a limitless world, play becomes static, branching out from one location, with the *player* becoming the one to generate the world around them. Queerness here is connected to this clear lack of easy progression, in this expansion and problem solving due to the limited nature of this level design forcing players to adapt their play style to experiment with different ways of surviving.

In the early stages of the phases the block must be taken through, it becomes important for the player to extend the platform they are on, expanding out from the block they must mine. The map provides these blocks to the player as they mine the block, collecting both the item that drops and the random chests that contain various other items they may need. This early stage of the game is vital in terms of player survival, as sourcing food, dirt, water, and saplings from the blocks becomes important if they wish to remain in the game. While this map can be played in regular survival mode, there is also an option to play it in Hardcore, which only allows the player one life- meaning that this work becomes imperative if they wish to thrive in this environment. Mobs from the regular game such as pigs, sheep, cows and chickens can spawn from the block, which also means the player has to account for mob pathfinding and figure out how to fence them into an area, so they do not walk off the edge of the platform and into the void. Passive mobs like the farm animals are also not the only mobs that spawn, as the block can also spawn hostile mobs like Creepers and Zombies

which attack players upon spawning. This is another reason why expanding the world becomes important, as players also need the room to manoeuvre around these potentially dangerous mobs.

As I have referred to across this chapter there is a suggested progression system within the game itself, and this is still apparent in One Block. With this in mind, we must ask the question of how we might measure success in this redesigned level of *Minecraft*. Do we consider success to be solely linked to the progression through each phase until the player reaches the so-called "Afterphase" after defeating the Ender Dragon, or is it more linked to the time spent lingering in the middle space of the game? If we take Halberstam's view of queer time, we can clearly see how players are trying to navigate alternatives in both their modding and creation practices. As many creators who engage in this map design are spending time carefully building structures around them to expand on their worlds- lingering in their own creations rather than hurtling toward the finish line, like they have forgotten about the block itself and are more focused on driving their own experience due to their choices outside of the thing that will take them to the end of the experience. It could also be argued that by using this modification for content players are lingering in the game world for longer because of their audience, that by platforming modifications like these players may spend more time within the game world because people are watching as they try and figure out how to play the game in a new way. For this kind of modding, I would argue that queer play is this exploratory way of play, where players are challenged by the mod to attempt to survive in ways that are alternative to what they are used to, that they are still beholden to the game's structures of needing to heal, of needing to sleep and storing the items they're gathering, but they have to figure out how to do this in a way that is so inherently *different* to the world generated in regular play.

Community, Social Play, and the Future of Play

Throughout this chapter I have brought up YouTube as a platform for creators and their audiences to highlight the shifting dynamics of fan production in an online setting.

As time has gone on, I would argue that fan texts have changed alongside the huge technological changes that we have seen in the last twenty years. One of these such changes is the community aspect of gaming, something that has appeared on YouTube within collaborations, and in the *Minecraft* community- private servers for groups of creators to collaborate. Multiplayer is not a new format, as the ability to play with friends or on a multiplayer world is widely well known and popular, with recognisable titles such as *World of Warcraft* (a massively multiplayer online role-playing game or MMORPG totalling over 100 million accounts registered in 2014 (Sarkar, January 28th 2014)) and *Call of Duty: Warzone* (a free to play battle royale also reaching 100 million players in 2021 (Mattone, April 21st 2021)) highlighting the popularity of multiplayer or collaborative play. MMORPGs have been widely covered in academia, with particular research emphasis placed on community building, role-play and socialisation (Poor and Skoric 2014, Skardzius, 2018, Sundén, 2012, Taylor, 2006 and Williams, Kennedy and Moore, 2010), with some of the focus within these works being on the negotiations of player representations of gender and sexuality inside these online spaces (Skardzius, 2018, Sundén, 2012 and Taylor, 2006). I open here by stating the popularity of online multiplayer games as well as YouTube to contextualise how they can be used to form a community of people who regularly play collaboratively to both build their online community within the game itself, but also to make content out of this process. My examples here highlight the role of modding as a supplement for the community and the way it can be used as a tool for content creation play, both explicitly through the aesthetics of the game but also within the kinds of tools that creators can use to stage videos.

Hermitcraft is known as a "Vanilla" server, meaning that gameplay generally appears to be comprised of un-modded content, with some exceptions to this rule that I will be discussing in this chapter[30]. The series dates back to its origins in 2012 in which "Hermits" (the name for the members of the server) are given relatively free reign

[30] Or, that mods are used in ways that are unobtrusive, or are used in a way that does not apparently affect gameplay to the audience's eye- or using mods that make content creation easier such as camera tools.

within a server to create builds, begin shops or entertain themselves in order to film videos for YouTube. Several current members of the community have been instrumental in the development of popular processes that are used within the game by players across the world after creating videos featuring machinery that they have built using the game's tools. (Such as an "Etho Hopper Clock" (a piece of machinery that acts as a timer, made use of within many farms which players can build) and an "item sorter" storage room design created by ImpulseSV (which automatically sorts items into separate chests)). While the Hermits have the freedom to do whatever they wish, generally they progress through each "season" by building a starter base, creating shops or trade opportunities, set up mini games and eventually building a "mega base". GeminiTay (Gem) joined the server at the beginning of Season 8 in 2021, grouping with fellow members StressMonster101 (Stress) and FalseSymmetry (False) within an area they dubbed "The Swamp Lump". Unlike my previous examples throughout this chapter, this is a collaborative server, so has the added complexity of community both inside and outside of the game- the community of creators who collaborate to develop content as well as the community of viewers who consume said content.

In "Hermitcraft 8: A New Hermit has Arrived! Episode 1", we are immediately faced with GeminiTay's signature style in the appearance of her avatar. Dressed in pastel overalls, Gem introduces herself and the concept of the entire series before the video flashes back to her introduction to the other members as they all make their start in the new world. Here, we can see a mod the server is using- "Simple Voice Chat". The integration of this mod within both the game and the content created by those using it helps the viewer actively forget that this is not something accessible within an un-modded game. The mod allows a proximity chat feature, meaning players can communicate with each other inside the game rather than relying on outside software such as Discord, so that much of the content made using this mod sounds more natural to the viewer- as players do not have to edit around asking other players to join a voice call outside of the game before going back to their conversation inside the game. This also creates an interesting dynamic as we can hear both the member of the community

who is trying to introduce the season, the laughs and background chatter of the other members as they are gathered around the hole Gem and another newcomer PearlescentMoon (Pearl) are stood in, *and* Gem's responses as her and Pearl are introduced to the group. For a mod which appears simple on the surface, we can see already a community dynamic forming from the outset of the season- as while many of these people have been playing together in this manner for a number of years, the addition of a mod like this emphasises the collaborative community that have come together to create this content simply within the background chatter and unplanned socialisation happening around Gem as she is introduced to the group. Further into this episode, we see this working again as the players begin killing each other instead of engaging in "early game" activities"- this was driven by their desire to claim each other's player heads, which is another mod that the server uses as a part of the "Vanilla Tweaks" mod pack that they use on the server, collated by server admin Xisumavoid. The positioning of this style of modding is interesting, as the server and the players on it emphasise that it is "Vanilla", these mods are described as "subtle improvements" to the vanilla experience. The changes they make are designed to be unobtrusive to many of the systems within the game but work with them to adjust parts of the game that players dislike, such as block textures, brightness, and the aforementioned player heads. This mod works with the proximity chat, as we hear one player approaching Gem's group, noting as he comes closer that "you're all wearing the same head" and then slowly backing away, almost in feigned disgust or fear that the same fate would await him if he got too close to them.

Katherine Ibister looks at this concept of social play in three different typifications- coordinated action, role-play, and social situations (Ibister, 2016 pg45). Coordinated action refers to players coming together within the game world to work as a team or in pairs to solve puzzles or progress through the game levels (Games such as: *Overcooked*, *Among Us* and *Don't Starve Together*). Role-play, like I define it in my discussion on Fallout 4, is game design that revolves around players embodying different characters by the selection of a variety of customisable traits such as race, class, gender, and backstory (Games such as: *World of Warcraft*, *EVE Online*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*).

But what I am interested in for the purposes of this research is Ibister's concept of "social situations" and how that can apply to Minecraft servers. Ibister refers to game designers as "social engineers" (pg63), who "create social situations that are interesting and compelling, scenarios where players have fun *together*" (pg63-64). These servers become a space which affords the players the opportunity to become the designers of the game due to the level of freedom the game allows in the development of each world, creating a new kind of affordance for the game in which we see the development of play due to audience direction. In the case of Hermitcraft and other servers like it, small communities of players are formed as the primary content creators, with each creator also amassing their own dedicated communities of viewers. Again, this is another example of Chang's queergaming- play extends beyond the confines of the game world, as the audience is "playing" with the ideas generated by the content creator and responding to them.

Mods here, also become another way to interact within these groups, as changes such as texture packs begin to appear across the whole community, with recolours and reskins of objects becoming a popular way to express a creative vision within the in-game world. An example of this comes from the creator GoodTimesWithScar (Scar), who uses reskinned items within his world-building as he develops his creative ideas for his Hermitcraft Season 9 project, where he is constructing a Disneyland style theme park, he has named "Scarland" (after his own username). In this, he is selling "merchandise" that he has designed in the style of fast food (milkshakes and popcorn- consumable items) and wearable pieces of clothing (hats and ears). These items regularly appear in other creator's videos, not just indicating that Scar has developed a compelling story for his project, but also that these players in this community are actively going and interacting with the structure he is building and having fun *with* him as he works on the project. What also makes this kind of social interaction interesting is that this kind of play can also be embodied through the avatars of these communities, with the groups adjusting their avatars (or: Skins) as they see fit to tell stories and interact socially. Scar uses this to distinguish different "personalities" or play styles- with him beginning Hermitcraft Season 9 by almost roleplaying as an elf, wearing a

green skin and custom pointed Tolkienesque elf ears to build a large treehouse. He then moved into his "Imagineering" persona as he began work on his main project- a smarter looking skin with a high visibility jacket and a custom hard hat. This was a more serious persona that he uses as he walks the viewer through his design choices and process during the development of the project. Finally, "Hot Guy"- his player vs player (PVP) skin that he wore to differentiate his avatar's actions during a plot that revolved around the server electing a King (with Scar acting as the king's royal assassin). Scar spent his time here gathering player heads to appease the members of the community who were roleplaying as a royal council. As we can see, all Ibister's typifications of social play help to construct these game worlds on a Minecraft server, as the creators also work together with both the game and modification to film these social situations for both them and their audiences' enjoyment. As argued in chapter five, role playing opens possibilities for alternative modes of play- meaning that we can see how queer alternatives can develop because of experimentation, comedy, and transmedia communities.

As social play can also take place *outside* the game world, we can see the complexity of Hermitcraft and how interesting that is as an example of alternative forms of play. Play takes place across a range of platforms- as also seen in Anthony Pellicone and June Ahn's 2018 article in which an ethnography of *Minecraft*, which revealed that play took place across a range of platforms, bound together using Skype as a communication platform (Pellicone and Ahn, 2015). Not only does this mean that this group of creators have the game world (the server they play on), but they also record their content within this environment (their YouTube channels or Twitch streams), as well as organising themselves due to the online chat platform Discord. Then on top of this, we also have the relationship between creator and viewers and the potential here for co-creation because of viewer suggestions and comments on the videos themselves, giving viewers an active role in shaping their in-game decisions. In "Hermitcraft 9 Episode 10: I Built This For You!", Scar writes in the video description that "The building a project for the video is something you have pushed me to do since day one". He then clarifies: "Since day one, people been calling me a particular thing,

they've been misrepresenting my beautiful, luscious wood elf character and today I am going to lean into this and play off that joke to satisfy you all in the comments who have been requesting this build since day one". After noting that Scar's wood elf persona had similarities to a "matador" style outfit, other players on the Hermitcraft server began referring to him as a matador, with viewers hearing a similarity to "mattress store" when spoken in Scar's accent. Viewers took to the comments of Scar's videos to encourage him to create a "mattress store", which is what he refers to here as "leaning into" the joke for the audience's pleasure. This small example highlights the importance of the audience's engagement and input to the creative process for these players, and how play can go from inside the game to the real world and back again. Scar's form of entertainment exemplifies how creators can remain entrenched in the middle space because of their audience, and how using modifications can aid in creating these middle spaces an entertaining space for both him and his viewers. In this, the mods afford him the ability to experiment with this persona, developing it in tandem with the responses to his videos, and using mods to aid in this performance, as a form of queer play.

Conclusion: Queer Play as Lingering

This chapter has explored how a shift in consumption tastes within popular culture has changed the landscape of the practices that fans engage in when they are inhabiting online spaces. Minecraft itself offers the queer potential for play that engages with the act of lingering, as well as exploration and opening new forms of "play" that extend beyond perhaps more stereotypical views of what play is that we have seen in gaming thus far into something far more queer. Modding here, becomes a tool that enables play and creativity that extends beyond the boundaries of the game world and into fannish practices that take place in online spaces such as YouTube. As gaming videos shifted from machinima and using mods to shoot videos that told stories into the content creator focused environments we have today, a co-creative mode of fan production has developed wherein modding, fan production and play have all been tied together, again extending the boundaries of what we might consider to be "play", aligning with Chang's concept of queergaming. Throughout this section I have

tried to look at the variety of content and outline examples in three key areas that exemplify what this might look like. First, I explored emotion, thinking again about how players can use mods to linger inside the game world- but also how they can share this affective experience with others using ASMR style videos. Second, I looked to ideas around “progression”- thinking about how modding and fan production can complicate ideas we may have around what progression in-game may look like, questioning what we view as “success” and if that is solely tied to linear time- especially when mods can be used to create levels to facilitate what can be viewed as a more linear form of play. Finally, I then examined the community, thinking about the shifting dynamics of play and how creators can use mods in the creation of their content alongside their involvement of communities and role-playing to produce videos.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

"Everything You Did, Everything You Sacrificed - It Was Worth It, For This"

The Narrator - Baldur's Gate 3

To conclude this thesis, I would like to break away from the second person pattern I have created in opening the previous chapters and take ownership of my own play by talking briefly about my experiences as a *modder,* not just a player.

Prior to 2023, I had no experience whatsoever in the creation of mods. As I wrote in the foreword, the first time I used mods was around 2005, and I have been actively adding mods into my games since then. It wasn't until 2023 post the completion of most of this thesis when I decided to try and learn some of the techniques that modders use to develop mods for myself. My first project was one of the hardest projects I could have taken on for the particular game I was modding, involving a range of techniques and skills I did not have when I began, but throwing myself in the deep end meant that I very quickly learnt what I would need for other projects in that game. It took hours of work, forcing my old PC with an ancient graphics card and no memory to open programs like Blender which slowed it down with how much processing power needed to run software like this. It involved unpacking the game files of *Cyberpunk 2077* and having almost 100MB of game assets saved to comb through, using another piece of software to remove them to add to my project. It involved opening up files and editing the code with a hex and text editor to custom path everything to the project file I was working in. The project I made is not perfect and was never something that I would publicly share because I made my own player character into an NPC. But it was mine- and I'm glad I went through that experience to really learn what it takes to create a mod for a game I love. Since then, I've experimented more, learning basic C# to develop another NPC for *Stardew Valley* and spending an evening on a Discord call with friends as we fumbled around trying to make custom outfits for our characters not long after the release of *Baldur's Gate 3*. All of these experiences, while being

development, have still been a form of play for me- spawning in my NPC in Cyberpunk 2077 to take pictures of her or speed running Stardew Valley's seasons to make sure that my NPC appears wherever I have coded him to appear, making sure to chat to him whenever I see him so I can see the lines that I have written for him appear in-game.

As this thesis is an interdisciplinary project, we can look again toward fan studies, queer theory and game studies to conclude this research. Fans have engaged in different forms of production methods for as long as they have had access to media texts. While this has not always been easily accessible, technological shifts at the end of the 20th Century made fandoms and other fans easier to access than ever before (de Kosnik, 2016). Modding has previously been theorised as a form of computer hacking (Flowers, 2008) and as a supplement in the creation of machinima (Jones, 2006 and Lowood, 2006), however I argue that we must now consider modding as a form of fan production due to the shifting landscape of *how* mods are used in fan consumption practices. While modding has been framed as "hacking", I argue that this is not the correct way to entirely conceptualise modding, as "hacking" is arguably its own unique sub-culture with its own set of rules, as Douglas Thomas lays out in his 2002 work "Hacker Culture" (Thomas, 2002). Modding in these examples has been used to play games in alternate ways: to explore, to slow down, to speed up, to add identities, to disrupt the temporality of play, to label and to build communities, as I did on Discord. Modding arguably operates between new technologies, online communities, fandom, and gaming as a whole, meaning that it has perhaps been overlooked by those working in the areas of fan studies and queer theory due to its range of definitions. More work needs to be done to explore modding across a range of disciplines in media and sociology, to understand its place in contemporary gaming communities.

Throughout this thesis I have returned to "Play" as a concept, constantly questioning how modding can help us understand different play practices and how these can be considered as queering forms of "expected" play using the affordances we find within gaming. I have done this by exploring different kinds of mods and the

affordances given to the players by the game to discover opportunities for representative queerness as well as queer forms of play. In my introduction, I posed Jack Halberstam's question of "what is the alternative?" when trying to think beyond representation and beyond rules. Modding exists in an interesting space wherein it purposefully breaks rules *and* abides by other rules to achieve different goals. What is interesting about thinking about it in terms of rules is that we also must consider "cheating" or "correct" forms of play here- does the concept of a rule limit modders? Or does it give them something to resist and push back against? In this thesis, I have explored mods that allow for both outcomes to try and give a better picture of how mod creators can do this and what *kinds* of rules they are engaging with. If, as Mia Consalvo writes, players are given the option to abide by the rules or not, does this mean that modding also must abide by them, therefore potentially constraining the mod creator (Consalvo, 2009)? This is a complex question that can potentially not be answered within one piece of work due to the huge range of mods that are available for games across a whole spectrum of genres and audiences. This thesis hopefully lays out groundwork for further exploration of modding as a participatory practice in a way that allows for the analysis of mods under a queerer lens of addition, opening, closing and transmedia community as well as intersectionality and inequalities around play. In this, we can now understand modding to be a fan practice that can enable queer forms of play, one which negotiates the limitations and affordances of the game as a fictional world. Modification can help players to resist dominant heteronormative ideology, open up possibilities and extend to transmedia communities outside of the game world. I argue that this form of "tinkering" with the text to discover the limitations also makes video games and their modification a fantastic site of study for fan researchers, which can broaden their understandings of fan cultural practices as well as fan texts as we move from understanding modding as a niche practice to something more participatory and community based.

Modding as Queer Play

I have proposed that fan and media theory must pay more attention to modding as a distinct fan practice as it demonstrates the possibilities opened to the player by

navigating the affordances of the game. Modding is a form of gaming culture that has not always been considered alongside gaming due to its association with hacker culture and more technical points of view- as we saw in Laukkanen's piece wherein they discussed how early modding was focused on the code contained within the game itself, and that modders believed they were improving on the code within their examining and understanding of it (Laukkanen, 2005). This aligns with Henry Jenkins' argument about how remixing texts to create new media texts is a core component of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992). While the barriers of entry to modding are higher, modding can still be accessible by beginners- as I outlined in the introduction to this chapter where I described my own experiences in learning how to create modifications. All the mods I have studied throughout this work show a desire to change or improve on something that is contained within the world for differing reasons. *The Sims*' LGBT mod exposes a wish to have specific identities labelled within the game so that players can represent minority identities in their play- something that has been heard by EA and implemented into the game since the writing of chapter four. I argued that this evidences queer play as addition, where players actively interact with mod creators to insert representation into their games. In *Fallout 4*, both versions of the alternate start mod show that role-play can be taken beyond what the game gives the player to work with, changing the very narrative that drives the player and giving them the option to have better control over the character they create and the story that they tell. This was queer play as opening/closing, as players reject the game's design to dictate their own play. In *Minecraft*, mods are used in a variety of interesting ways that are displayed *outside* of the game- from creating a specific atmosphere with visual mods to using mods to enable creators to make content. This is queer play as transmedia community, where we see play expanding out from the game itself and becoming a communal process, partly designed by the consumers of content to approach games in alternative ways.

As I stated previously, this thesis *cannot* explore the entire breadth of modding, but it hopes to give a snapshot into the possibilities opened using mods by players to demonstrate that games can be played in alternate, or queer ways. Modding is no

longer *just* level design, it is a deep and complex practice which differs for every game and alters the very meaning of 'play', but at the same time is something that has become more accessible than ever before. It has even been embraced by developers themselves, as Bethesda, EA and Mojang have been open to hosting mods *inside* their games.

Representation

To situate my findings throughout this thesis, I have returned to representation as a concept to try and contextualise the culture modders and other fan producers are working within when dealing with issues around queerness in a more general way and the affordances that this representation gives to the player. For chapters four and five, this meant looking toward *The Sims* and *Fallout* as franchises to think about the way queerness has appeared throughout their history. For as long as *The Sims* has existed, there has been an openness in terms of gameplay in allowing players to perform a representational form of queerness- and I have even found in my previous research on this subject that players do try and translate queer storylines and narratives into their play (Lees, 2019). However, in *Fallout 4* we saw a more stereotypical representation happening in the introductory section that the fans "spoke back" to in their modding creation, as this led nicely into a discussion about "gaps", looking at writers such as Lamerichs to try and explain why gaps and missing moments are so important to the player and how modding can be a way to try and address issues raised by roleplaying and the games narrative. The case I looked at here is arguably one which exemplifies this point in a way that's hard to ignore due to the heterosexual coding of both the introduction and the overall narrative goal which is hard for the player to ignore. I also explored gender within both examples, as gender has been something within *The Sims* that has been harder to play in ways that reject any kind of masculine/feminine binary. As the game specifically locked items to either playable gender until 2016, a wider range of trans options and different pronouns did not appear until 2023, meaning that players weren't afforded these options for almost a decade. Modding became a way to try and circumnavigate these roadblocks, trying to represent aspects of identity in a way that could potentially personalise the experience of each player by working inside

the game's affordances instead of rejecting them. What I found in my research of a mod that does this is that modding may also potentially become reductive of these experiences and reduce them down to easily translatable game assets that do not challenge the system beyond identity labelling. In *Fallout 4* however, gender was also used as a way to give the player a background to work within during their character's development, with no opportunity for playing as anything but male/female- something that has never really been challenged throughout the franchise. I noted that observations from Gary Fine's 1983 text on tabletop gaming were still apparent today- as fantasy is very clearly constructed within the confines of dominant ideological understandings of binary gender, something that also extends to the way the *game* understands gender, meaning that pushing back and trying to reject these ideologies becomes difficult when both working with just the game, and also when working with the mod itself. The mod allows the player to reframe the game's content as "just a dream", but must still work within some of the rules, which unfortunately does mean that gender is still quite static and binary in nature. We have seen these kinds of mods in other role-play games, most notably in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, but *Fallout 4* mixed all the different elements together to really highlight the potential that these mods have for resisting the affordances of the game. This concept of "gaps" also came up within discussion on *The Sims,* as representation, has not always been a visible or highlighted part of the game. As has been argued both here and in the work of other academics looking at romance systems like Navarro-Remesal- if you do not look for or actively engage in these representation performances, you may miss them altogether, as they are a form of hidden affordance. The player has never been truly punished for trying to engage in romantic relationships between same-sex couples, and across the franchise the default state for all Sims is "bisexual". As I mentioned in the literature review, this is potentially a contentious point for representation as, like in Greer's analysis of *Fable* (Greer, 2013)- this was perhaps not a political statement and instead a choice by designers not to spend more time coding the game to exclude non-heterosexual relationships or characters from the game world. For *Fallout 4'*s representational history, we can also look to the genre of the game as an area of interest, as while role-playing video games take much inspiration from tabletop gaming, there are still limitations to the apparent freedom or openness of the genre,

and players may feel resistance to any alternate forms of play or interpretations because of the medium. For queer players, or players who are searching out identity, there is also the added complication of the potentially hidden forms of representation, or to further expand on this, the "sex-as-reward" system which reduces relationships and romance to a form of perk-collecting. While this rewards the players with buffs and perks, they can use to create a stronger character and progress linearly in terms of the levelling system, this means that it's hard to consider how queer representations can appear within the game in a meaningful way. This means that the mod was pushing the boundaries and experimenting with possibilities in the gaps that the players discover during their play.

Queering

To create a mod, the modder must remix the game's content in a way that echoes other forms of fan production we have seen in the past. In the introduction of this thesis, I emphasised that the rapid development of technologies since Henry Jenkins' seminal text on participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992) has influenced the shifting consumption habits of fans, and I would argue that we can still see the tenets of a participatory model here in mod development. I emphasised in chapter five the importance of role-play to alternate interpretations of *Fallout 4* which demonstrates the possibilities that are afforded to the player because of the boundaries of the vanilla game. I also used ideas around lingering in chapter six to think about *Minecraft*'s environment and affect and how modding remixes the game for the entertainment of others and the different affordances that enable them to do this. For my *Fallout* example, the mod itself can reframe the heteronormative introduction as "just a dream" in order to help the player decide on who *they* want to be, rather than who the *game* wants them to be. In my initial testing of the mod, I even used it as a walking simulator, skipping the introduction and ignoring the main quest to see how far I could push my own interpretations of the character I was creating. This kind of modding pushes the game in terms of the narrative, raising questions about what the game might look like if the player ignored the primary narrative that is meant to drive them through the game. I argue that this is the kind of place that queer interpretation lies- in

the rejection of what is given to them by the developers, instead using their own knowledge and creativity to decide the shape of their own gaming experience using modification. In the chapter itself I highlighted different examples of interpretation that show both the possibilities but also the limitations of this kind of play. There is only so far that role-play can carry the player, with the game sometimes fighting back rejections of the primary storyline by reminding the player about what they *should* be doing (or what the developers believe they should be doing). References to your child or a missing person that you are searching for still appear in conversations with NPCs, certain locations may be inaccessible, or starting the game in certain areas may mean it is harder for the player to actually *play* the game. Despite this, I have shown that interpretation of gaps in a media text can lead to different forms of play that reject the expectation that play should *just* be about following the pathway set out by the game's design, and instead can be more about defining what play may mean to the player themselves, which is where queerness lies. I also looked at how affect can be mobilised to keep a player in this middle space of the game, rejecting the possibility of linear progression to linger in the game world- comparing this to the ASMR style that we have seen popularised on YouTube. Players fill videos full of pleasing sounds and sights to create an affective experience for the viewer to engage them with their play, turning *Minecraft* into a source of entertainment using modding to create these affective spaces that are being shared online. This is done with modifications that change the game's environment to achieve this kind of look- focusing on nature as a source of comfort and safety. In both examples, play becomes less about the expectation of progress, and instead about how the world feels when engaging with modding. *Minecraft* also became an interesting example in terms of *how* play is organised- as I explored how players can structure their own time in order to linger in these worlds, blocking off 100 days as a form of self-imposed time limit on their projects or videos, to define when they will show off their progress to their viewers. I also looked at level design as another example of this, where progress is dictated by what the modder has programmed the mod to do rather than what the *game* does, and how this limits progress in a different kind of way, meaning that the player must figure out what they want to do with the small amount of world that they are inhabiting. Play becomes an area wherein players are shaping and reshaping, experimenting, and lingering,

dictating exactly what *they* want from the game by remixing content to a way that means that they may personalise their play experience.

Transmedia

Another important aspect of modding is highlighted by the community side that we can see emerging in my examples from *The Sims* and *Minecraft*. In the last section I touched upon the importance of fan theory to this research by highlighting the participatory model that modding should be considered under. When looking at both *The Sims* and *Minecraft* we can see that community becomes an important site for feedback, sociality and mod development and the new platforms such as YouTube and Patreon have afforded modders this sociality and community. With the LGBT mod for *The Sims 4,* we can see desire within the feedback for the mod for more complex versions of representation. As I outlined in my analysis of the public Patreon the mod is hosted on we can see the suggestions of the users trying to engage with deeper representations that also move beyond romantic queer representation and into more serious queer issues. These are actions such as talking or educating others about lesser-known identities, or even more options for trans sims that reference gender affirming surgeries (which do not exist within the vanilla game, nor is it an option that is accessible without using game cheats but scarring and gender options can allow for play as a trans sim). The mod developer themselves has acknowledged these limitations that they face with this mod, as they have stated that some of the suggestions are currently out of their skillset, which is a site that further research can be done to engage further with modders around modding as a practice. Modding is something that can be individual to each game, and many modders spend much of their free time within the game files and using the modding tools in ways that develop their skills, sharing these findings with others in community spaces. This is done without clear instruction from game developers (as even with official modding tools modders must work things out for themselves and develop strategies for mod creation). This particular modder has also apologised on multiple occasions for real life things that take them away from the further development and upkeep of this mod-indicating again how this is a fan practice that is done in their spare time. To create a

mod that pushes beyond the games affordances in a way that reflects a more complex or nuanced representation of queerness may involve a far more intricate modding process than this modder can dedicate themselves to undertaking at this moment in time. Unfortunately, this means that the mod does sometimes frame aspects of queerness in a more negative light, something again that has been noted in the user feedback- with the "Uncomfortable" moodlet being singled out as something that appears on Sims with the Trans label when they go to places like Swimming Pools, which negatively affects their mood. Positioning queer identity by engaging with negative emotions aligns with theorists like Freeman but doesn't potentially line up with the real-life experiences of queer people, as not every person experiences negative emotions in the situations laid out in this chapter. Nor is it helpful for LGBTQIA+ culture for their representation to trigger negativity. This mod is an excellent resource for identity labelling, but the limitations of it due to the affordances of the game that it is working within mean that it is difficult to represent everything that it tries to cover in a meaningful way. Modding is not without boundaries, but instead it negotiates them to develop a new media text with the help of an audience.

However, community and sociality can also be a site of play due to the collaborative nature of content creation that is supplemented by modding. I also looked at how play extends beyond the confines of the affordances of the game and into social spaces where a creator engages with mods and their audience for entertainment and social play. I used examples where creators engage in cocreation with their audiences to design storylines, role-play and engage in humorous activities, as well as how mods can be used in video creation to bring these experiences to a viewer, such as using voice chat mods or overhauling the game and adding in aesthetic mods or mods that give the player different abilities in order to engage the viewer and create almost a fandom within a fandom. All my examples in chapter six point to a widening of what we can consider "play" to be, arguing that queer play encompasses alternate forms of play such as the ones mentioned here. I want to return to Chang and Halberstam here for a moment, when Chang stated that: "Queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and

inefficiency of glitches, exploits and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure" (pg17). While at first it might not appear that my examples in this chapter align with this kind of thought process, when we dive deeper into what they are doing we can see this kind of queergaming coming out. Whether it be the affective emotion that the cosiness of nature can bring when a player is lingering in a game world, the alternative ruleset that 100-day video creators are creating for themselves or even in the noncompetitive nature of the multiplayer servers I highlighted- we can see alternatives appearing in the kind of content that is being consumed on platforms such as YouTube.

Future Possibilities

As this thesis is an interdisciplinary project, I have contributed to a variety of different research areas in my answering of my research questions. I have contributed to game studies and queer studies by looking at how queerness and play intersect through using three games to highlight how these themes can appear in slightly different ways, all informed by the context in which they have been created in. I have also contributed to fan studies by showing how game modification is linked to participatory fan practices. I have argued throughout this thesis that modding is not a form of hacking but is instead a form of fan text. This means that future work can be done to approach modifications the same way that other researchers from both game and fan studies might approach forms of fan production.

This research acknowledges that it cannot encompass the entire breadth of modding as a practice due to the sheer scale of modification across both history and the number of games that have active modding communities. I did not have the scope to fully explore issues around political economy and labour in fannish spaces, nor was this project a digital ethnography of the *users* of a fan text. The focus of this research was always to present the modifications as a text, and analysing them under that lens. Further research into users, political economy and labour should be done to better

highlight other issues that arise from fannish production.

Going forward, it is also vital that modders are invited to participate in research that explores *why* they mod, which would further add to my argument that modding is a form of fan practice that should be considered when both fan researchers and games researchers are exploring video games as a media text. This research hopes to demonstrate an argument for studying modding through a more fan-centred lens, trying to emphasise that there has been a technological shift which has allowed for a change in fan consumption and creation practices. I have argued that the influence of the game itself and the context surrounding the series influence both the in-game content and the development of modification. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, modding is a complex practice that differs for each game, and this project shines a light on its potential as a tool to enact queer forms of play.

Glossary

AI – Artificial Intelligence

Avatar – The on-screen graphical representation of a player/user of the game

CC – Custom Content, the name used within Sims communities toward their mods.

Gamergate – A targeted online harassment campaign designed to dox prominent feminist game writers.

Let's Play – A video format in which a creator plays a game for an audience.

Machinima – Fan videos recorded inside the game due to the use of mods.

MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

NPC – Non-Playable Character

RPG – Role Play/Playing Game

TTRPG – Tabletop Role Play Game

Vanilla – An un-modded game

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