

# LGBTQ+ Video Games

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## **Introduction**

Video games are a massively popular media type with a booming industry. Gaming is an effective storytelling medium, where players can truly feel transported to another world and feel personally involved in the story. The interaction that people have with video games is unlike any other media - books, TV, and movies do not rely on the consumer to actively participate. Gaming is its own unique form of entertainment, that is enjoyed by people of all ages - and as time goes on, more and more young people are growing up playing games. Through games, players can immerse themselves into new identities and experiences.

Video game culture, however, is typically very male-centric and hetero-centric, with young straight males being the primary target audience. However, as with other forms of media, there is a growing movement to increase representation in games - from both LGBTQ+ gamers and game developers. At the 2018 Game Developers Conference, Matt Baume discussed "the need for authentic queer culture in games" (Wawro, 2018). He spoke about how gaming culture often can feel

completely separate from LGBTQ+ culture. Baume also discussed how representation in gaming has the power to give LGBTQ+ gamers agency in how they express themselves, and validation in their identities. The ways in which video games demonstrate LGBTQ+ content vary. Many games have comprehensive character creation, with no restrictions on combinations players can choose - "male" characters can wear dresses, "female" characters can have beards. More story-based games are starting to include LGBTQ+ plotlines (though they are limited in number and depth). Some characters' identities within games are left open to interpretation, not addressing gender or sexuality directly.

Outside of games with LGBTQ+ content, players can take some actions to "queer" the games themselves. A small survey of LGBTQ+ gamers (Krobová et al., 2015) demonstrated several strategies that are used to synthesize the two "conflicting" identities: gamer and LGBTQ+ gamer. It's unfortunate that at this time, those two labels are not fully compatible, and compromises are made by LGBTQ+ gamers who want to play a good game first, and LGBTQ+ content second.

## Game List

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- **Overwatch (2016)**: Blizzard's popular online first-person-shooter features a diverse cast, including Tracer and Soldier: 76 who are both canonically gay, as revealed in additional comics/short stories. Tracer being the box art character, and Soldier: 76 essentially being the "starter" tutorial character for most players, means that these LGBTQ+ characters are some of the most high-profile in the game. Other characters demonstrate an array of gender expressions.
- **The Last of Us (2013)**: The character of Ellie in this video game (and its extra downloadable content) is openly gay. Ellie will be the main player character in the upcoming *The Last of Us 2*, and Sony opened their high-profile 2018 E3 press conference with a trailer featuring Ellie sharing a kiss with another girl.
- **Night in the Woods (2017)**: This game features a pansexual main character (Mae), a committed same-gender relationship between two other characters (Gregg & Angus), and a transgender woman (Jackie, revealed post-textually). It also features themes that are relatable for LGBTQ+ people: isolation, distance, and depression.
- **Shovel Knight (2014)**: This game features a custom-built "body swap" feature, where players can change the body and pronouns (separately) of many of the main characters. These changes are implemented seamlessly, resulting in no changes to the gameplay. (You can read more details about the process of these designs [here](#))
- **Stardew Valley (2016)**: Characters are very customisable in this peaceful farming game. In addition, the various bachelors/bachelorettes are available to date and marry regardless of the player character's gender.
- **Dragon Age/Mass Effect (2009-2014; 2007-2017)**: Both of these popular series of games, developed by Canadian company BioWare and published by EA Games, feature several LGBTQ+ characters. A clear effort has been made by the team to include more diverse identities throughout the games, with a marked improvement over time through the series' iterations.
- **Undertale/Deltarune (2015; 2018)**: An incredibly popular independently developed game by Toby Fox, *Undertale* features a same-gender relationship, and several gender-neutral (or at least gender-ambiguous) characters. The player character, Frisk, is referred to with "they" pronouns. The series' second entry *Deltarune* also features a gender-ambiguous main character (Kris).
- **The Sims (2000-2016)**: *The Sims* is a life simulation game, which from its first release included support for same-gender relationships. Each update to the series has come with increased support for LGBTQ+ players - same-gender partners can marry and adopt/genetically engineer children, and character customization options such as clothing and voice are no longer restricted by the binary gender choice.

## Other Resources

- **Queerly Represent Me:** <https://queerlyrepresent.me/> This not-for-profit corporation in Australia hosts a highly searchable visual database of LGBTQ+ representation in video games, including a filter to search for identity-specific results.
- **LGBTQ Video Game Archive:** <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/> A project that seeks to describe LGBTQ+ content in video games. Has a fairly comprehensive list, with tags for searching.
- **Queerness and Games Conference:** <https://ggcon.com/> A Canadian gaming conference held in Montreal with a specific focus on LGBTQ issues.
- **Playing with Pride: When Game Culture and LGBTQ Culture Collide:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN5Qe4F-wBQ> Video of Matt Baume's GDC talk.
- **"Gaymer" communities:** The portmanteau "gaymer" has proliferated across the internet to refer to "gay gamers," and communities have built up around this identity (note that some may include 18+ content):
  - <https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers> - International
  - <https://gaymerx.org/> - USA convention
  - <http://gaymersinc.com/> - London, UK

## References

- Krobová, T., Moravec, O., & Švelch, J. (2015). Dressing Commander Shepard in pink: Queer playing in a heteronormative game culture. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 9(3), article 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-3-3>
- Wawro, A. (2018, March 23). LGBTQ devs & players speak up about the need for authentic queer culture in games. *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from <https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/315784/>