Bonnie Ruberg

THE QUEER GAMES AVANT-GARDE

How LGBTQ
Game Makers Are
Reimagining
the Medium
of Video Games

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Avant-Garde

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who makes me think in new, queer ways about love, intimacy, bodies, and the future.

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INTRODUCTION   Reimagining the Medium of Video Games

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bathroom signs: the bane of my existence. Which one's supposed to be me?
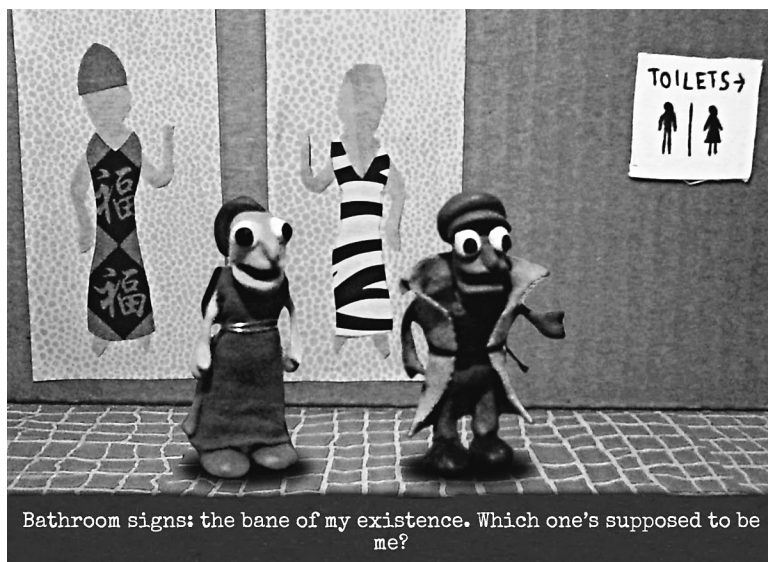
Fig I.2 :::: *Dominique Pamplemousse in "It's All Over When the Fat Lady Sings!"* (2013) by Dietrich Squinkifer, an example of a video game that includes LGBTQ characters

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

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

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

LGBTQ ISSUES AND VIDEO GAMES:
IMAGINING OTHERWISE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fig I.3 :::: *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017), a widely popular queer video game developed by the studio Game Grumps
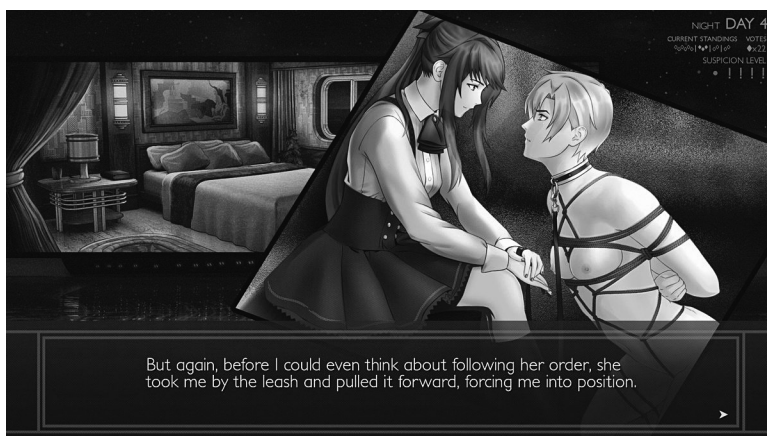
Fig I.4 :::: Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016), which has earned recognitions like the 2017 Excellence in Narrative Award from the Independent Games Festival
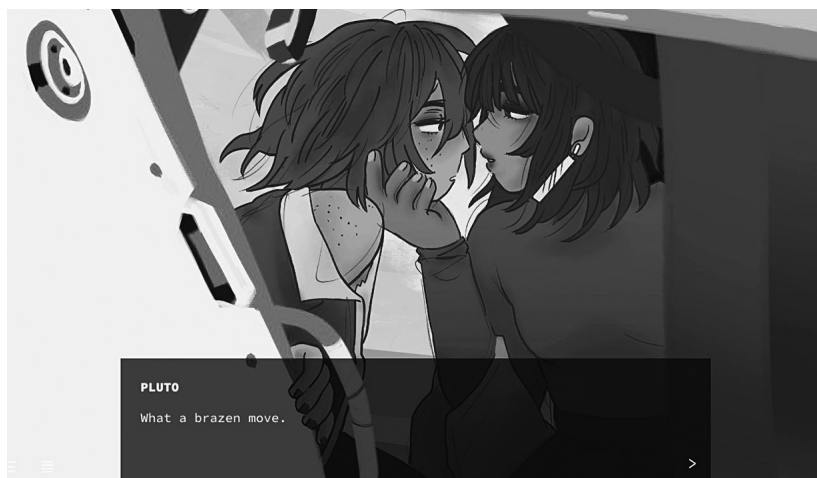
Fig I.5 :::: The 2018 queer visual novel from Aevee Bee and Mia Schwartz,
Heaven Will Be Mine

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

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

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

WHAT IS THE QUEER GAMES AVANT-GARDE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who are these game makers? More so than in any other area of video game development today, the queer games avant-garde has an overwhelming representation of women, nonbinary people, and transgender people—with a notable presence of trans women. The majority of contributors to the queer games avant-garde are white, but there are also many artists of color working in this field, including eight of the game makers interviewed here. Most of these artists are based in America or Canada, but queer indie game-making is also taking root internationally. In the early days of the queer games avant-garde, roughly between 2012 and 2014, an important "scene" existed in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it later disbanded, and today New York, Montréal, and Toronto are all important hubs for the work of the queer games avant-garde.[30] With a few important exceptions, the artists contributing to the queer games avant-garde are in their twenties and thirties. Though each queer game maker brings a unique background to their work, a number of those interviewed for this project grew up in geographically or socially isolated environments; they found connection to the "outside world" and to queer community through games. The relationship between the queer games avant-garde and aca-
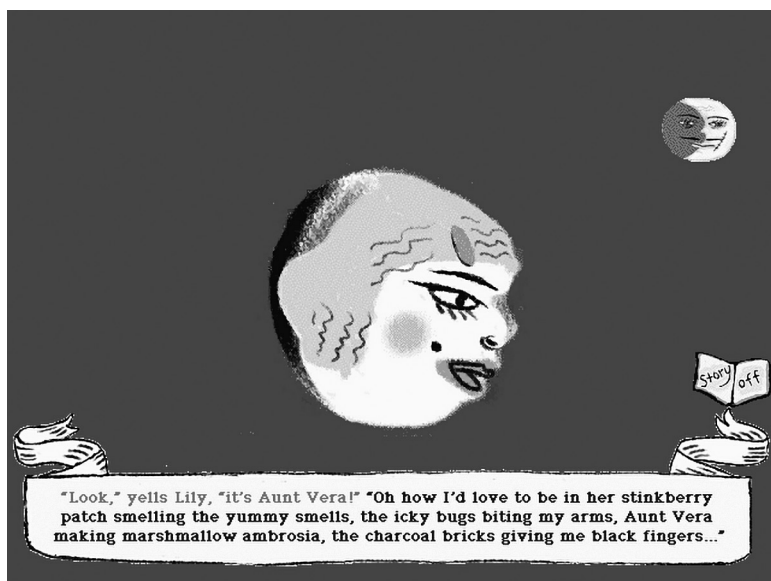
Fig I.7 :::: Theresa Duncan's 1995 *Chop Suey*, predecessor to the handcrafted aesthetics found in the queer games avant-garde

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

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

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

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

WHY QUEER INDIE VIDEO GAMES AS AN AVANT-GARDE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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