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Queering Player Agency and Paratexts: An Analysis and Expansion of Queerbaiting in Video Games

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Abstract

Queerbaiting refers to the way that consumers are lured in with a queer storyline only to have it taken away, collapse into tragic cliché, or fail to offer affirmative representation. Recent queerbaiting research has focused almost exclusively on television, leaving gaps in the ways queer representation is negotiated in other media forms. Using video games as a starting point, this Major Research Project seeks to fill in these research gaps by applying Eve Ng's queerbaiting theory that situates queerbaiting at the intersection of contextuality and producer paratexts. *Persona 4* and the *Life is Strange* series have been charged with queerbaiting and were selected for analysis on this ground. Each text was analyzed for queer potential, queer contextuality, and paratexts surrounding negotiated queer readings to make a case for queerbaiting in each text. Ng's queerbaiting definition is then expanded to account for player agency in video games. Ultimately, this Major Research Project seeks to provide new areas of growth for research on queerbaiting, especially during a time of heightened awareness of the trope. It also aims to highlight Ng's definition as an apt tool for the expansion of queerbaiting's definition and application.

Acknowledgements

Jessica Needham

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Introduction

In 2009, I was sixteen years old, trying to look like a boy with unfortunate Justin Bieber hair, and had my first girlfriend. I was lent a copy of the video game *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008) by one of my friends and, upon playing it, I quickly saw myself in one of the characters, Naoto Shirogane. Naoto was an ace detective who struggled with their gender representation and whom, my friend assured me, you could "date" as the male main character (MC) in the game. While there were no homosexual options for dating in the game, I was confident that there would be something undeniably queer about dating Naoto. I spent the better part of a summer killing enemies called "shadows", spending the game's allotted free time with the *Persona 4* gang in rural Japan, ignoring the game's at times jarring homophobia, and waiting for the chance to date Naoto. Before I could date Naoto, I first had to "save" them. Much like the other companions in your party, you must first battle through a dungeon and defeat a boss battle themed around an aspect of the character that they repress. When defeating the final boss, the subject of said dungeon must accept the part of themselves that they have rejected. Naoto's dungeon and final boss both represents a visual and thematic manifestation of issues involving their gender representation. Yet when I completed Naoto's dungeon, they did not come to terms with their issues surrounding gender. Instead, they concluded that their experience of gender dysphoria was false, they were truly a woman, and instead framed the dungeon as issues around perceived gender expectations of detectives. The bitter taste of Naoto backtracking on their ambiguous gender representation and having to defeat and deny it in the process had left a sour taste in my mouth. Why was I

being forced to kill off what made Naoto queer? I wanted to reach into the screen and shake Naoto, insisting they didn't need to change a thing.

I relented that perhaps I could still shape the game, even a little, with dating and dialogue options. During the game's "social link" mechanic, a process where the MC can unlock a progressively intimate friendship (or romance) by spending free time with characters, I picked the options I thought Naoto would appreciate. I supported their detective work, never coddled them, and made sure to encourage them to express their gender identity any way they wanted. I later realized that Naoto and the MC were not yet, in fact, dating.

Had I missed something? I thumbed through the social link guides only to find that the moment I had supported Naoto by saying their gender did not matter, I picked the wrong answer—despite it yielding the maximum amount of social link points. I was supposed to tell Naoto I was glad they were a girl and no longer representing as male. This was one of *the* defining moments of your relationship with Naoto. It was one of two gatekeepers of a romantic relationship with them. As someone struggling with my own conception of gender and sexuality I felt betrayed. To romance Naoto I had to strip away what made them queer. *Persona 4* allowed me to befriend not one, but two "queer" characters in a game built around accepting who you are. I watched as the game provided two incredibly honest and inherently queer stories and characters only to strip not only Naoto but also the other teammate, Kanji, of what made them queer.

I now have the vocabulary for what I had experienced: queerbaiting. Queerbaiting refers to the way that consumers are lured in with a queer storyline

only to have it taken away, collapse into tragic cliché, or fail to offer affirmative

representation. While I was familiar with queerbaiting in television shows like The

CW's *Supernatural* (2005-present) and BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-present), my

experience playing *Persona 4* opened the possibility of other mediums beyond

television having the capacity to queerbait. At first, I struggled with this term in

relation to a video game, due to the way the concept is positioned in academic

conversation. Almost all articles on queerbaiting discuss television. This is a failing

of current scholarship as queerbaiting is evident not only in television; narrowing

critical studies to television alone ignores the intricacies and nuances of its

manifestation in other forms of media. For this reason, and to fill a hole in

scholarship, this Major Research Paper aims to critically explore queerbaiting in

video games with the aim of expanding its definition and opening discussion for

further research into other mediums. In doing so, I will extend Eve Ng's discussion

of queerbaiting and the queer contexts and paratexts that underscore it. I will show

how the common threads of queerbaiting in different media and genres rely mainly

on the space/time or "gaps" (Gray, 2010, p. 42) for a queer audience to interact with

paratexts and the media text. I will also posit the unique challenges of expanded

queerbaiting to other media forms, by using video games as a case study.

This Major Research Project will focus on the video games *Persona 4* (Atlus,

2008) and the *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, Deck Nine, 2015-present)

video game series[1] as examples of queerbaiting that illustrate the particular

challenges of addressing queer representation in this medium. Video games

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[1] As of August 2018.

represent a particularly special case as audiences quite literally interact with the text through a combination of controlling an avatar, making choices in the narrative, and/or customizing the world within the text, thereby forming the text through player choices. My choice of video game texts will also allow me to compare different narrative strategies and levels of player agency and their implications for queerbaiting. While *Persona 4* showcases a more traditional, linear story, *Life is Strange* will be used to conceptualize queerbaiting in a choice-based game. What I want to show is how queerbaiting is a part of a larger media context which allows for there to be both queer contextuality/expectations and potentially queer paratexts between audiences and creators, regardless of medium.

The commodification of queerness is important as it acknowledges queer people as consumers, a key to securing economic equality. However, it also problematic when looked at in the historical context that includes marketing strategies of gay window dressing and multicasting. These strategies show the lengths that marketers and media producers have gone to access the queer market. These forms of queer commodification skirt the politics of queer representation and visibility to the detriment of the queer community. As studies have shown, queer representations in media have a long history of drawing on tropes that have been dangerous for queer people. Queerbaiting is an extension of this dangerous history. It is situated within a contemporary social climate of growing acceptance of queer identity and representation, and the critique of queer-coded, subtextual representation "at all costs." Instead, the term queerbaiting, true to its negative connotations, attempts to hold creators, marketers, and others in the media

industries accountable for failing to provide a realistic representation for queer audiences. It also criticizes the ways that queer markets are exploited, thrown a few representational crumbs that are hidden or withdrawn so as to appease heterosexual audiences. To date, queerbaiting has been predominantly addressed in television. It is the aim of this study to expand the concept to address different media forms where the manipulative practice of queerbaiting also takes place. Doing so not only shows how extensive and far reaching the practice is, but also reflects on its stakes for queer representation in popular culture.

Before engaging in these issues, there are some caveats to work through. Any academic work positioned within queer studies requires a fair amount of defining and negotiating in order to position itself within the discourse. Queer studies is complex as its core concept is a contested battleground of definitions and disagreements. When examining queerbaiting, it is therefore imperative to define terms such as "queerness" and "text". David Halperin's (1999) definition is a good place to start, not because it reflects my final position on the topic, but because it provides a base definition that this Major Research Paper will build from. To Halperin,

> 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some
>
> determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional
>
> relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds
>
> with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in
>
> particular to which it necessarily refers. (1999, p. 62)

Halperin goes on to identify queer as encompassing "everyone who is or feels

marginalized because of her or his sexual practices," citing married couples without children as an example of expanding beyond gay and lesbian practices and identities to include other non-normative positions (1999, p. 62). The fluid, broad definition that Halperin (1999) utilizes is one that is supported by many queer theorists, including Judith Butler (2004) and Rosemary Hennessy (1994-1995). Hennessy in particular sees queer as a movement away from a straight versus gay dichotomy into something less fixed and more fluid (p. 35). This fluidity is valuable in queer theory as it allows for experience that exists outside of a societally-enforced binary of, for example, homo/hetero or male/female. By extension, this definition is useful for looking at norm-defying aspects of experience, or, with reference to queerbaiting, for looking at media that defy norms surrounding gender and sexuality and embraces fluidity in a more general way.

Using queerness as a more vague term for fluidity and opposition to norms is incredibly useful, but it is perhaps difficult to embrace when placed in the context of queerbaiting as a strategy that capitalizes on this ambiguity for financial and marketing gain. Not naming something by leaving it fluid is often the crux of queerbaiting. On the one hand, by seeking explicit, named queer representation instead of embracing queer fluidity, I am indeed "bird-watching for queer characters," a practice that theorists like Edmond Y. Chang and Judith/Jack Halberstam encourage moving away from (Chang, 2017a, p. 232; Halberstam, 2017, p. 188). On the other hand, as I will argue in what follows, queerbaiting also operates as a quasi-financial exchange in which audiences are drawn to promised identity-based representation only to be provided with a potential fluidity that

never names itself. Fluidity then, while queer, harms rather than inspires with queerbaiting.

My working definition of queerness is also contingent on my own identity position. I am what Heather Love calls a "latecomer to queer theory" (Love, 2010, p. 236) and as such I bring my own baggage to the term. Coming from a generation that uses "queer" as an identity, I lean towards the reclamation of queer as an identifier that opens space for queer identities beyond "gay" or "lesbian." I use the word queer both to describe the more fluid queerness inherent in some game mechanics or forms of media, but I will also use queer as an umbrella term for LGBT folks of many sorts. It is an identity card, regardless of how reductivist it is, that also leaves room for the inclusion of wider definitions of non-straight and non-cisgender identity positions. Queer, then, will be used as both as the verb "to queer" that reflects Halperin's definition of "oppositional relation to the norm" (1999, p. 62) and the noun "queer" as an identifier to demark queer identities under the LGBT+ umbrella.

While I also use the word "text" liberally in this Major Research Project, I do so with the distinction between a core text (or Urtext) and the paratexts that emerge from it. Together the core text and paratexts form a cohesive unit for the purposes of media analysis. I agree with both Cornell Sandvoss (2014) and Jonathan Gray (2010) that intertextuality and paratexts, including fan objects, create intertextuality that is "the essence of all texts" (Sandvoss, 2014, p. 66). In this study, my concern will be with queer contextuality built through intertextuality and the queer paratexts that surround a core piece of media. While I will use the word "text"

to refer colloquially to the core text, or the main object in what can be seen as a larger media experience, I do so with the understanding that the core text does not exist in isolation, but must be extended to include the interactions with audiences and the broader culture in which it emerges that works to give it meaning. I do not wish to discount the importance of fan objects or fan meta-texts, the blurring of boundaries between distinctive texts, or even the deep battle of hermeneutics, or "fan-tagonisms" (Johnson, 2007, p. 287) that between readers and producers create meaning. This is especially important in queerbaiting and has been addressed by scholars like Emma Nordin (2015) and Cassandra Collier (2015).

My goal in this Major Research Project is not to align myself with of one faction of critical scholarship on queerbaiting. The attempt to fix the meaning of queerbaiting is, curiously, the paradoxical outcome of much queer theory on fluidity. Instead, I will engage queerbaiting by means of various methodologies in order, not to fix the concept, but to expand queerbaiting as a critical concept and tool that opens up, rather than limits, queer possibilities. In this Major Research paper, queerbaiting will rub shoulders with social semiotics, queer commodification and visibility studies, queer media studies, paratext studies, and fan studies. Much like Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading (Sedgwick, 2003) that embraces Deborah Britzman's (2002) "theory kindergarten" (as cited in in Love, 2010, p. 235) that champions pleasure and confusion by denying scholarly outsmarting and paranoid tactics, I too will allow this Major Research Project the space to explore and experiment with various concepts without chaining it to one aspect of academia.

This Major Research Paper comes up against inevitable limitations because of page constraints, meaning it cannot juggle every possible theory or thread of investigation. It will *not* seek to prove that queerbaiting exists, nor will it try to negotiate who has the power to make meaning between audience and creator as hermeneutics studies does (Nordin, 2015). Both these topics have been covered in depth in the current queerbaiting scholarship. In what follows, I will explain how queerbaiting works, why it is profitable, and how it fits with queer commodification theories through a survey of existing literature on the topic.

Literature Review

Dual coding and gay window dressing

In previous scholarship on queerbaiting there has been a focus "on the what rather than the why" (Nordin, 2015, p. 14). The "what" concerns queerbaiting's definition and the message that producers are or are not including in their works—intentionally or unintentionally. The "why", in comparison, examines the underlying motivations behind queerbaiting. While this Major Research Paper will engage heavily with the "what", it is worth briefly investigating the "why." It is especially important to look at the why because, to expand critical analysis of queerbaiting to other media forms, it follows that understanding "why" it takes place can help to illuminate *why* queerbaiting appears in multiple media forms in our contemporary moment. As we will see, factors such as the profit imperative, dependence on expanding media audiences, and reliance on successful formulas for the production of new media products are relevant when considering queerbaiting as a media strategy.

Queerbaiting often relies on practices of ambiguous or dual coding that enables queer audiences to see themselves reflected in the text while, at the same time, appealing to heterosexual audiences. Ambiguous and dual or polysemic queer-coding originates because of the intertwined private/public nature of queerness. Sedgwick (1990), one of the foundational theorists of queer theory, summarizes this as "the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition" (p. 3). The metaphor of the closet has come to dominate discussions of queerness, gracing the covers of queer theory texts (*Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 1990)*, The Celluloid Closet* (Russo, 1981)) as a way of navigating the liminal space of queerness as something to be both seen and hidden, or "*the* open secret" (Sedgwick, 2010, p. 22). One of the ways queerness has mediated this tension was to create coded ways to be seen by those amongst the community and hidden from those outside of it. This dual coding is central to the textual operation of queerbaiting.

In his look at homosexuality as metaphor, Jamake Highwater (2001) states that it is "necessity for homosexuals to invent themselves and in the process to invent a cultural context of their own" (p. 186). The codes of queerness have been interrogated by many scholars (Doty [1993] and Russo [1995], to reference a few), while others have looked to the ways queerness can be understood in the larger socioeconomic world (Hennessy, 1994-1995; Sender, 1999, 2003; D. Clark, 1991; D'Emilio, 1983). This cultural context formed a way of understanding and seeing the world and the messages it created. The way queer people see and decode messages can be easily mapped onto Stanley Fish's (1980) "interpretive communities" where

communities share collective meaning that primes them to gain certain readings from texts (p. 171), in this case queer people are primed to see queer codes and to decode them from texts. This is especially apparent when viewing queerness through the lens of media.

Media consumers, as Roger Silverstone (1999) notes, "are drawn to these otherwise mundane and trivial texts and performances by a transcendent hope, a hope and a desire that something will touch us"" (as cited in Gray, 2010, p. 24). Like other consumers, queer people have been drawn to media as a place to find hope (Russo, 1995). This hope has, as Alexander Doty (1993) described in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, largely been relegated to the "shadowy realms of connotation" (p. xi). Connotation, or the hidden, is often the only place where queer hope may exist in popular media. The importance of connotation, according to Stuart Hall (2006), "is because signs appear to acquire their full ideological value—appear to be open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings—at the level of their "associative" meanings (that is, at the connotative level). . . So it is at the connotative *level* of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification" (p. 207). Signs and codes are able to interact with larger social meaning then through these associative meanings. Lingering looks, queer-coded clothing, or other subtextual codes have historically been the bearers of this connotation. In *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes (1957) points to the signifier/signified as units of analysis used in semiotics where "a whole book may be the signifier of a single concept; and conversely, a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as a signifier to a concept

filled with a very rich history" (p. 119). These codes, whether physical, social, or verbal, stood to connote larger meaning than what was presented at face value. For queer people, the connotative is a place where only people with knowledge of codes may dissect and understand the message while the general heterosexual, and, likely, predominantly homophobic audience will not see it. By extension, using this knowledge, queer people created a long history of oppositional readings (Hall, 2006) that decode traditionally heterosexual texts to create subtextual readings (Doty, 1993) against the monolithic heterosexual grain. This plurality of readings that queer readings help produce has helped to create a larger queer meta-textual intertextuality in which queer readings have built an audience or fan roadmap to "queer" any form of media. Queering a text refers to the ability to take an otherwise heterosexual or non-queer text and to consume, recreate, or share it in a way that repurposes the text in a queer way. This can be done through a multitude of ways but often manifests as queering characters, queering narratives, or queering the cultural purpose of the text itself in a way that benefits queer people or communities.

Queer people are known for consuming content that indulges in these readings or hosts queer potential. We financially support content we *hope* will represent us (Sender, 1999, p. 190). This is a fact not lost on marketers. In exchange for being visible, media and other industries began to understand these subcultural codes, and in turn it was used as a way to generate profit by way of capturing the pink dollar of the queer market (Phelan, 1993, p. 97). Capitalism has long been able to exploit social differences in the short term and to erode them in the long run

(Brown, 2003, p. 9), and queer dual coding is no exception. There is a long history of the commodification of queer people by means of the promise of visibility. This has been achieved by signaling to queerness without fully acknowledging or naming it, or by only targeting the class-specific, heteronormative, "good gay" who operates within the charmed circle of acceptable sex (Sender, 2003, p. 333). In advertising and in media, dual and ambiguous coding was exploited for profit.

In "Commodity Lesbianism" Danae Clark (1991) discusses the proliferation of "gay window dressing" in the 1990s. This concepts refers to the ways that an advertisement is marketed simultaneously to heterosexual and homosexual people by avoiding "explicit references to heterosexuality by depicting only one individual or same-sexed individuals within the representational frame" signified with sexual ambiguity (p. 374). Gay window dressing is proven to work. In Stefano Puntoni, Joelle Vanhamme, and Ruben Visscher's (2011) study on "Purposeful Polysemy in Minority Targeting and Advertising Evaluations," they show how gay window dressing produced "significantly positive target market effects of covert minority targeting" using ambiguous cues (p. 25). The study also pointed to the dangers of "negative nontarget market effects" in heterosexual or homophobic markets if gay window dressing is acknowledged by them (p. 25). Purposefully ambiguous coded advertising images allowed for polysemy, inviting both the minority and majority audiences to ascribe their own preferred meaning (p. 26). The aim of gay window dressing is to perform this dual appeal "without ever revealing their aim" (D. Clark, 1991, p. 374).

Sender's (1999) work on the subject also point to the ways in which texts, or

advertisements, that use this form of polysemy might limit resistive readings as they

are instead already articulated and purposefully aimed at subcultural knowledge (p.

189). Sender prefers David Morley's (1993) concept of "structured polysemy" that

refers to readings that are already coded into a text (as cited in Sender, 1999, p.

190). This is a purposeful appeal to multiple markets, not a mere happy coincidence

or a resistive act by the audience. There is precedence for this strategy in the form of

"multicasting" (expanded from Sender's dualcasting) that targets multiple

demographics in one media text (Himberg, 2014, p. 290). Although Julia Himberg

discusses "post-gay" queer-friendly content, it is important to note that these

representational practices are not just friendly nods of inclusion. The example of

queerbaiting shows how these representational practices can take on a decidedly

antagonistic approach.

        Danae Clark (1991) worries that "gay window advertising is a logical

outgrowth of capitalist development, one which presumably will lead to more direct

forms of marketing in the future" (p. 379). For her, this strategy works to

incorporate queer folks into existing capitalist structures in a way that flattens out

the political possibilities of the identity position by means of its commodification. If

structured polysemy is an apt way of looking at gay window dressing, and if

commodification is a feared outcome, then queerbaiting in media is a current

example of its potential pitfalls. In queerbaiting, queerness is structured in the text

for queer fans to find but for homophobic fans to miss or deny. The consequences of

this are not liberatory, however. Instead they present an economical means to

satisfy the mass market while simultaneously profiting from an underrepresented

population through a polysemic representation that is built in, controlled, yet

intended to remain unacknowledged.

The historical use of ambiguity for profit is both an appropriation and denial

of queer representation. To move beyond the "shadowy realms of connotation"

(Doty, 1993, p. xi), there must be visible, unambiguous representation. While some

theorists are critical of the idea of commodified visibility for queer people

(Hennessy (1994-1995), for instance), I agree with Adrienne Shaw. She argues, with

reference to the structuralist model proposed by Althusser, that "not being 'hailed'

is a form of 'symbolic annihilation'" (Shaw, 2009, p. 231). To be invisible, especially

while being commodified, is not only an annihilation, but also functions as a broken

economic transaction—queer codes are used to lure in a queer audience willing to

'do business' in exchange for canonical queer content, often only to be given scraps

in return. Where historically this broken transaction was the only available option, it

does not operate without scrutiny in the current media landscape. The current

generation of North American "millennials" have not known a time without *some*

queer representation, and therefore it has been argued that "limited visibility and

queer subtext are no longer enough to hold their interest" (Peeples, 2014, para. 12).

It is for this reason that queerbaiting has become a focus of concern in discussion of

queer media representation.

Queerbaiting
Judith Fathallah (2014) provided the first academic definition of

queerbaiting in her analysis of the BBC's *Sherlock* as a queer "hauntology" of its

villain Moriarty. Fathallah (2014) defines queerbaiting as:

> a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of
>
> queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer
>
> relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and
>
> laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative
>
> narrative that poses no danger of offending main stream viewers at the
>
> expense of queer eyes (p. 491).

Fathallah's focus on BBC's *Sherlock* is not rare as the program has often been

accused of queerbaiting. It has been the basis many proto-queerbaiting studies.

Stephen Greer's (2014) "(Mis)recognition in BBC's *Sherlock,*" for example, examines

in-textual queering of *Sherlock* that run contrary to the producers, creators,

directors and writers' denial of queer readings. This study can be seen as a proto-

queerbaiting study that attempts to find queer examples and acknowledgement

within the text itself and separate from creator intentionality.

While Fathallah's (2014) definition might have served as the earliest

academic definition, queerbaiting has been defined on the Internet in social hubs

like Tumblr since the early 2010s. Aja Romano (2010), a web culture reporter at *Vox*

and past reporter at *The Daily Dot* who focused largely on fan studies articles,

helped jumpstart the debate by writing "i know you care for him as much as i do" on

her livejournal, *bookshop*. Romano discussed the growing trend of homoerotic

tension and fanservice within television and its failure to provide unambiguous

queer representation. Romano says "But we can have all the *hints* that the characters are gay that we want! Look how progressive we are! Look how many gay-friendly words we use: 'metrosexual!' 'bromance!' 'subtext!'," before poignantly reaching an all-caps crescendo stating, "And I AM SICK OF IT. I WANT THE REAL DEAL" (para. 8). Romano identifies practices of queerbaiting as problematic because it removes the confrontation queer media creates, forcing people to identify their own queerness or at least acknowledge that it is real and visible.

One of the more popular definitions of queerbaiting includes atlanxic's (then actualanimevillain) who posted on the popular blogging website Tumblr with over 8,000 reblogs and likes. It describes queerbaiting as a series attracting queer audiences by coding a character as queer but not letting them "come out" (atlanxic, 2012). Unlike academic definitions of queerbaiting, atlanxic does what many other academic queerbaiting sources do not; they describe the painful experience underlying queerbaiting by discussing how queerbaiting "dangles fair and equal representation in front of your eyes, snatches it away, and then tells you that the whole thing was in your imagination all along" (atlanxic, 2012).

Since 2014, other scholars have discussed queerbaiting, including Cassandra Collier's (2015) analysis of queerbaiting and the resistant fan cultures surrounding queerbaiting media texts. "Fascination/Frustration: Slash Fandom, Genre, and Queer Uptake" by Taylor Boulware (2017) looks at queerbaiting in both the *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-2017) and *Supernatural* television shows and explores how the differentiating responses by producers towards queer subversion shapes the

positive or negative fan interaction and fan text creation that surrounds each text. Shannon A. Suddeth (2017) examines ABC's *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) television show fandom partially in relation to queerbaiting, meanwhile, Emma Nordin (2015) has written on polysemic readings of queerbaiting, how queerbaiting is defined, and how it functions in relation to hermeneutics. The definition proposed by Nordin offers similar sentiments as earlier definitions I have discussed. She writes that "[q]ueerbaiting is about an audience claiming to know the producers' preferred meaning and accusing them of lying about it or not standing for it" and also deals with "the grey area between the visible and the invisible, what is and what is not in the text" (Nordin, 2015, p. 1). Nordin's definition begins to deviate away from earlier definitions by honing in on issues of visibility, a mantle that I will take up in this Major Research Paper, and looks at issues of preferred meaning, a harkening back to Stuart Hall's discussion of dominant-hegemonic readings of televisual texts. Many queerbaiting scholars, including Eve Ng (2017) and Joseph Brennan (2016), tend to discuss issues of semiotics and social semiotics only in passing. This illustrates one place where there is a gap in the current research.

These solid working definitions of queerbaiting when it was still in its infancy focused on the agency of creators to give or deny queer representation. These definitions also had a uniting theme of creators pushing homoerotic content to a subtextual level in favour of pleasing the dominant heterosexual audience. The definition has slowly begun to expand as creators have become more aware of queerbaiting, allowing more complex issues surrounding queerbaiting such as the inclusion of canonical queer content and the quality of representation provided.

This issue has become more pertinent as media becomes more inclusive of queer people. Issues of queerbaiting in terms of poor representation is discussed by Erin B. Waggoner (2015) in "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response." Waggoner examines fan reactions to the death of Lexa in *The 100* (The CW, 2014-present) and the resulting fan activity on social media, although queerbaiting is mentioned only in passing since the article's focus is on the "Bury Your Gays" trope that is often discussed in tandem with queerbaiting. Bury Your Gays refers to when queer, usually female, characters are murdered, sometimes immediately following positive representation, thus connecting their sexual orientation to death (LGBT Fans Deserve Better, n.d.). Waggoner (2015) recognizes the act of baiting through the promise and eventual failure to provide positive queer representation. She acknowledges that, "there needs to be a change in how television showrunners and creators address their LGBTQ characters. When a niche audience is "baited" into watching a show because of a promise of positive representation, perhaps more conversation should be had regarding falling into clichéd tropes that have shown harm and discord in the past" (p. 13). Eve Ng (2017) likewise discusses poor forms of queer representation in her study "Between text, paratext, and context: Queerbaiting and the contemporary media landscape" by looking at both *The 100* and *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-2016). In this article, Ng extends previous studies of queerbaiting to more concretely include both canonical (content authorized by producers and creators and/or included in the text itself) and noncanonical (unauthorized content that is not included in the text) queerness by framing queerbaiting as a conversation between queer contextuality and paratexts. Her

definition of queerbaiting is remarkably different from earlier definitions. Ng (2017) states: "I identify queerbaiting as a phenomenon emerging from the increased significance of media paratexts (Gray, 2010), especially promotional content and producer commentary, and what I call queer contextuality, referring to how both the current and previous landscapes of LGBT media narratives inform evaluations of particular texts" (para. 2). By divorcing queerbaiting from the denial of queer readings and the push to keep queerness in the realms of subtext, Ng's work creates possibilities for queerbaiting as a critical concept to be expanded. Her use of the concepts of paratexts and her creation of queer contextuality addresses meaning-making outside of the media text and sees queerbaiting as a result of expectations formulated in relation to actual delivery and audience reception. This definition informs my own approach to queerbaiting as it allows for more complex examples of queerbaiting. The concept of "queer contextuality" is especially important in that it helps to apply queerbaiting to media texts where paratexts are utilized less often but there is still an external queer expectation on behalf of audience members.

Of course, not all academics agree with the current definitions or motivations of queerbaiting, whether this is in terms of traditional or expanded definitions of the term. Often, queerbaiting walks a delicate line between purposeful subtext and fan service. This line is addressed by Brennan's (2016) article "Queerbaiting: The playful possibilities of homoeroticism." In the article, Brennan approaches queerbaiting from a more positive angle, tying it with "ho yay" (short for "homoeroticism, ya") and fanservice instead of focusing on it as the cruel marketing trick many other theorists like Nordin and Fathallah position it as. Brennan

examines BBC's *Merlin* (2008-2012) as the core media text and discusses its "slash shippers", predominantly female fans who enjoy creating fan objects like fanfiction and photo manipulations to position the relationship between the two main male characters Arthur and Merlin as romantic. Brennan takes a decidedly playful approach to queerbaiting, preferring "hoyay", a fan term that celebrates homoeroticism as fun wishful thinking rather than true queer subtext[2].

How queerness is defined in relationship to queerbaiting is also an issue in the literature. Since much of queerbaiting comes from fan culture, as is shown in Collier's (2015) work, often the male/male relationships or "slash shippers" tend to be the focus of much queerbaiting discussion. This leaves large gaps in the scholarship that has only recently been taken up, including a focus on women and expansion to include canonical queer characters. Writers like Waggoner and Ng show that queerbaiting can also be a queer female experience. Additionally, in "Toward a broader recognition of the queer in the BBC's *Sherlock,*" Amandelin A. Valentine (2016) disagrees with many queerbaiting discussions, arguing that placing too much importance on relationships denies other queer readings that are more fluid. To Valentine, whether Sherlock and John are queer together is less

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[2] I disagree with Brennan's insistence to let go of queerbaiting's representational harm, despite his agreement that it exists, and re-embracing hoyay as an exercise of freedom "to make 'actual' or obvious what is a mere suggestion in a mainstream text" (p. 14), or to celebrate the homosocial ambiguity queerbaiting texts generate. His insistence that creating sexual possibilities in fan texts are "how fun, how playful" (p. 14) goes against the feeling atlanxic describes. Fan created texts are surely fun, but when fan texts are created in moments of queer death, or paratextual baiting as observed in Waggoner's work on fan interaction after Lexa's death in *The 100* (Waggoner, 2015), it is far less playful. Hoyay might be better placed within Ng's queerbaiting chart under "queer subtext" than queerbaiting, thus being two similar yet very different things (see Appendix C). Queer people have generated queer subtext for decades and it does not require queerbaiting texts to do so.

important than Sherlock existing as a queer figure *regardless* of his relationship

status (Valentine, 2016).

With previous literature on queerbaiting, or the negotiation of the "what" of

queerbaiting, established, and possible historical and contemporary motivations of

queer visibility commodification, or the "why" of queerbaiting, explored it is

imperative to turn to the further expansion of queerbaiting that this Major Research

Project aims to explore. This will include setting the standard in television, followed

by examining the cultural and economic motivations for the inclusion and exclusion

of queer content in video games.

Queerbaiting on television

In order to contextualize queerbaiting, it is useful to start at the first place it

was identified by scholars—television. Nordin (2015) describes queerbaiting as a

"widespread phenomenon in western mainstream TV shows" (p. 11). In her

discussion, she ignores all other forms of media. Why has television presented itself

as the focus of academic discussions of queerbaiting? It is not without reason. First,

television as a media form is ripe as a location for fan queer readings and

queerbaiting due to its format. In novels for instance, what Wolfgang Iser (1980)

discusses as "gaps" between sentences form a space for readers to produce meaning

and make modifications to the text (p. 56). Gray expands upon Iser's "gaps" by

applying it to television. As a medium, television as a genre has larger gaps between

episodes and seasons than a book would have between sentences. It is within these

gaps that paratexts bloom (Gray, 2010, p. 42). By having long gaps for audiences to

engage with paratexts, there is ample space for audiences to modify their

understanding of a text, even when re-entering it after weeks or even year-long delays (Gray, 2010, p. 42). During this period of modification and consumption of paratexts, fans are able to construct queer readings, access them, and, thanks to social media, also interact with producers regarding them. This cycle of consuming and modifying makes television and queerbaiting natural bedfellows.

A second reason for the prioritization of television lies with fan research. Discussion of queer readings within fandom also come largely out of television studies. The *Star Trek* fandom and their readings of a Spock and Kirk romance (Russ, 2014, p. 82; Lamb & Veith, 2014, p. 98-99; Bacon-Smith, 1992) helped lay the ground work for an entire subsection of research into queered fan readings or queer slash fiction that still reverberates across both queer and fan research, much of which is useful for examining queerbaiting.

A third reason for the prioritization of television in discussions of queerbaiting is that that television has a history of queerness —a queer context of its own as a medium. Stephen Tropiano's (2002) book *The Prime Time Closet* tracks queerness in the early history of television starting in 1954 with the tabloid talk show *Confidential File*'s (KTTV Los Angeles, 1953-1959) discussion of homosexuals to the early 2000s when *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000-2005) first aired and Rosie O'Donnell came out on *Prime Time Live* (ABC, 1989-2012) (p. ix-xi). Of course, since Tropiano's timeline's 2002 end date there have been countless additions to televised queerness. Some notable examples include *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s (Fox, 2013-2018, NBC, 2018) Raymond Holt, a gay black police captain, Yorkie and Kelly from *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-2014, Netflix 2016-present), and both Sophia

Burset in *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present) and Nomi Marks in *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018) providing representation for transwomen in television.

While television as a medium might have a queer context and history, it also has a darker side. Representations of queer people are usually only aired after compromises and concessions are made to create narratives that are still palatable to mainstream audiences (Keller & Stratyner, 2005, p. 4). Historically, this has taken many forms. Tropiano's (2002) chronological catalogue is filled with televised representations of AIDs and homosexuality as illness (p. ix-xi), a trend that helped to form the trope of the "miserable gay" from the 1980s until the early 2000s that permitted queer narratives so long as they coincided with representations of an unhappy life (Goltz, 2010, p. 50). Television has more recently been a home to the inoffensive, de-sexed, and marketable "good gays" like the homodomestic Cam and Mitchell in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-present) (Doran, 2013). Nonetheless, killing off queer characters, especially queer women, has been a recurring theme in the history of television, as is demonstrated by Autostraddle's growing list of 198 dead queer women in television (Berbard, 2016).

This mix of cautious and sanitized representation and queer recuperation through heteronormativity, death, and misery in television makes it a fertile ground for queerbaiting to emerge. This is because television's tactics are similarly cautious ways to entice queer fans into representation while still offering either a veneer of heteronormativity or offering misery and death in exchange. When combined with the generic realities of the extended gaps where fan readings can be exchanged and

paratexts can be consumed (Gray, 2010, p. 42), this may provide insight into why

queerbaiting is so prevalent in television.

There are a number of television shows that have been connected to

queerbaiting. In academic work, Collier (2015), Brennan (2016), and Boulware

(2017) have discussed The CW's *Supernatural* as an example of queerbaiting,

drawing primarily on moments of queer-coded language between main characters

Dean and Castiel and their relationship, which mimics a romantic arc. Some

prominent examples of queer-coded language in the show include Dean saying, "Cas,

not for nothing, but the last time someone looked at me like that...I got laid" (Carver,

2010), and a minor character, Balthazar, telling Dean, "Sorry, you have me confused

with the other angel. You know, the one in the dirty trench coat who's in love with

you" (Charmelo & Snyder, 2011). Multiple writers outside of the academic field have

done the same with *Supernatural*, including Gennis (2014), Cruz (2014), Roach

(2017), Campbell (2016), and Baker-Whitelaw (2014). Eve Ng's (2017) analysis of

queer female couples in *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-2016) (also briefly discussed by Rose

[2013]) and Ng and Waggoner's (2015) attention to representation in *The 100*

provide other examples of televised female queerbaiting. Boulware and other

journalists (Mallikarjuna, 2017; Peeples, 2014) have also pointed to *Teen Wolf* as

aggressively queerbaiting by utilizing marketing campaigns. In 2012, a video was

created to encourage fans to vote for *Teen Wolf* in the Teen Choice Awards by

intimately posing Dylan O'Brien and Tyler Hoechlin, the actors of the popular "ship"

between characters Derek and Stiles, on a sponsored boat. O'Brien even

acknowledges the video's pandering when he says, "We're on a ship, pun intended"

(the-twisting-winding-road, 2012). *Riverdale*'s (The CW, 2017-present) well-advertised kiss between Betty and Veronica and the removal of Jughead's canonical asexuality in the *Archie* comics are other examples of queerbaiting in popular television (McGrath, 2017; Elizabeth, 2017; Baker-Whitelaw, 2017). Both Nordin (2015) and Suddeth (2017) address *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-2018) in relation to the large fan following surrounding the fictional relationship between Emma Swan and Regina Mills*,* while Nordin also examines *Vikings* (History, 2013-present) in relation to its queerbaiting potential since it includes a queer death shortly after a love confession (Nordin, 2015, p. 34-35)*.* Notoriously, BBC's *Sherlock* has been studied by Fathallah (2014), Colliers (2015), Sheehan (2015), and many other bloggers and critics like Romano (2014) Rose (2013), and Myers, 2016 as a cornerstone in the queerbaiting narrative. *Sherlock* has garnered this attention due to the acknowledgement and simultaneous denial of queer readings by creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. Despite numerous moments of queer-coded dialogue between John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, including the running joke that they are often mistaken as a gay couple in the text itself, Moffatt and Gatiss have downplayed queer connections that might be made. Other works have also more generally analyzed the queer misrecognition in *Sherlock* (Greer, 2014).

Consider: queer video games

At their core, video games are both similar to and also quite different from other media texts. Like other forms of media, video games hold cultural and semiotic meanings with messages that require decoding and cultural knowledge to understand them (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 19). These meanings exist within a semiotic shell

of a game that includes sounds and images from which consumers derive meaning through sign systems. At this level, video games are quite similar to television. What makes video games different from television is the internal gameplay itself hidden underneath the narrative and interface, including the rules, player participation, and norms of play (p. 17). Through gameplay, video games may be differentiated from other media forms because of their ability to create meaning through playful actions (*ludosis*) (p. 19). Together these two levels of a game—the semiotic shell and gameplay—are intertwined and create a holistic system of experience. To look at either the semiotic shell or the internal gameplay in isolation would be to neglect the multidisciplinary approach of game studies that stem from the experience players have of games at both "levels" (Mäyrä , 2009, p. 319).

When queerness is placed within video games there are then two different entry points for it: 1) on a representational, narrative, or visible level (in the semiotic shell), or, 2) within the core of the game itself, hidden in the video game's codes and ludic system. It is within these systems that queerness can be broadcasted through semiotic coding or produced and performed by players as an articulation of inner game mechanics. It is within these spaces that the salience of debate around queerness in visual representation and queering gameplay take place.

Much like television, the queerness within video games both represented on the social semiotic shell and within the ludic system must be analyzed from a cultural context to be fully understood. Shaw points to King and Krzywinska's (2006) push to view video games within an industrial, economic, and cultural

context (p. 217) as a way of understanding what content, including queer content, is included (Shaw, 2009, p. 232). If the social context around video games is heteronormative and if, like other forms of media, there is a significant aversion to economic failure by alienating main audiences with queer content, then it is understandable that video games have not been a place where queer narratives have traditionally flourished and where queerbaiting might take root. Games, largely, cater to a perceived straight, homophobic, young, white audience who, it is feared, would not relate to queer characters[3]. This catering to a perceived homogenous and potentially hostile audience means that games have functioned, according to Fullerton and Pearce (2007), largely as a "hegemony of play" that conforms video games to the expectations, mindset, and narrative wants of the main audience (as quoted in Bragança, Fantini, & Mota, 2016, p. 937). By their adherence to the main audience, queer games and queer representation have struggled to find a place, especially within mainstream video games. Anna Anthropy's (2012) struggle as a queer trans woman to find video games about queer women that resemble her own experience is one such example (p. 2). Anthropy points out the prevalence of "dykes" in film and novels only to ask, "Why are there no dykes in video games?" (p. 4).

That is not to say there has been no queer representation in video games. Both Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive (n.d.) and Jack Flanagan's (2014) article on the *Daily Dot*, "The complete history of LGBT video game characters", help archive

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[3] Though this is a perception that Shaw later dismantles in *Gaming at the Edge* (2015) through unpacking the way gamers identify with characters or avatars.

queer representation from the early days of video games, starting from *Moonmist*'s

(Infocom, 1986) lesbian character and the trans character Birdo in *Super Mario Bros.*

2 (Nintendo, 1988)[4]. Since these first steps, queer representation in video games has

expanded to the point that Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive now contains over

700 games (Ruberg, 2017, p. 165). These games have begun to include more than

passing side characters and implicit nods to queerness, instead moving towards

LGBTQ romances in *Bioware* games and the surprising *Grand Theft Auto IV*

(Rockstar Games, 2008) downloadable content, *The Ballad of Gay Tony* (Rockstar

Games, 2009). Despite the increase in queer representation, video games have had a

difficult journey toward LGBTQ inclusion. Shaw (2015), one of the foremost

researchers on multi-faceted gendered and queered representation in video games,

has stated: "digital games seem to be the least progressive form of media

representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms" (p. 6). Beyond the

neglect that academia has shown to representation in game studies historically

(Everett, 2017), it is not hard to imagine why video games as a media form have

lacked representation, especially queer representation.

      Anna Anthropy's book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters'* existence as a how-to

manual to create indie games hints to one of the largest reasons that queer

experiences and queer video games have, until recently, been unrepresented. It is a

discussion that Anthropy and other scholars like Shaw have taken up: gatekeeping

and issues of production. When Shaw dissected the cultural production of video

games in 2009, she utilized raw data from the International Game Developers

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[4] Birdo's trans identity was later made ambiguous.

Association's (IGDA) 2005 developer satisfaction survey. The survey stated, "91.6%

of respondents identify as heterosexual, 5.1% as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 3.2%

declined to answer (Shaw, 2009, p. 234). In this survey, "Males accounted for 89.1%

of those surveyed and 1.5% of all respondents identify as transgendered" (Shaw,

2009, p. 234). Over a decade has passed since this study and in the most recent

report for 2017 the numbers are still disappointing. 74% of respondents of the IGDA

survey were male, 21% were female, 2% male to female transgender, 1% as female

to male transgender, and 2% identified as other (IGDA, 2018, p. 11). In the same

survey, "81% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 5% as homosexual, 11% as

bisexual and 3% as other" (p. 12). The dominance of heterosexual men in video

game production (Anthropy, 2012, p. 13) suggests that a lack of diversity may not

permit queer experience to be fully articulated in the medium (N. Clark, 2017, p. 5).

Nonetheless, the IGDA (2018) survey also shows that an optimistic 81% of

respondents said that workplace diversity was important (p. 12). What is more,

85% of respondents felt that diversity was important in the games themselves (p.

13) Despite this, only 42% responded that the game industry had actually increased

diversity, a dip from 47% in the 2016 study (p. 12).

      While diversity might be important, there is still an underlying hesitancy by

the industry to increase diversity in the actual products and industry as a whole

(Shaw, 2009, p. 239-240). This hesitancy is largely driven by the same financial

motivations that guide other industries (Sender, 2003; D. Clark, 1991). Financial

concerns are even more significant in video games (and film) as production costs

are high in comparison to a single episode of television. This leads to aversion

towards experimental content and a reliance on formulaic content (Anthropy, 2012, p. 6). By extension, game publishers push what is most economically viable for games by creating more conservative content aimed at the dominant market of white, male, heterosexual consumers (p. 34-35). A 2007 interview with video game journalist Clive Thomson described the issues succinctly: "if it's an explicitly GLBT game, Walmart probably won't carry it, and that is the kiss of death for mass sales" (as quoted in Shaw, 2009, p. 238). Without access to the distribution possibilities of companies like Walmart, games with queer content are not going to sell. The perception that queer content will not be economically viable is an important underlying context for strategies of queerbaiting. It is important to understand the economic and social motivations behind the inclusion or exclusion of queer content in games as it informs what games look like and who and how audiences are targeted. As Toby Miller said in *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media* (2006), to understand you must "Follow the money. Follow the labour" of video games (as quoted in Burrill, 2017, p. 31). As the "pink dollar," a term to describe the rise of the queer consumer, has become more sought after, following the money has become even more complicated. Commercial video games are driven by these capitalistic imperatives, even when they suggest they are not. This quest for capitalistic profit by proxy influences LGBTQ inclusion in video games (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. xi), as research into gay window dressing (as expanded on in the previous literature review) has discussed (D. Clark, 1991; Puntoni, Vanhamme, & Visscher, 2011). Tapping into queer markets is geared by increasing profit. Video games, like all other media, are shaped by what audiences are comfortable with

(Shaw, 2009, p. 239). As mainstream audiences become accepting of queer content generally, it follows that video game producers will begin to include it.

It is no surprise that video games have employed the same tactics in queerbaiting of appealing to multiple audiences through ambiguity to satisfy both the hesitancy to include financially risky queer content and the capitalistic gains of accessing the queer community. Edmond Chang (2017a) uses the example of *Bioshock*'s (2k Games, 2007-2013) queer-coded artist and mad man Sander Cohen, providing textual examples of his queerness but also discussing his ambiguity within the game itself, as it refuses to concretely label him as queer. To Chang (2017a), "What is important is that Cohen allows for a game space and body open to queerness where 'artists would not fear the censor'" (p. 236). On the one hand, monetary decisions are tied to a censorship that leads game designers, much like film and TV producers, to relegate queerness "to shadow and stereotypical shorthand" (Chang, 2017 a, p. 235). On the other hand, video games are opening up to positive, fluid representations such as Aveline de Grandpre from *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012), another video game character whose orientation, according to Jagger Gravning (2014), "is there for the keen-eyed and open-minded to interpret" (para. 9). Aveline, like Cohen, represents characters the video game industry is producing who are implicitly queer, and who may be read through due to their gender-blurring character design and insinuated attracted to the same sex, but whose sexual orientation or gender identity are not loudly proclaimed. While Gravning (2014) sees this as indicative of a more nuanced example of game writing (para. 24), I frame it as an attempt to balance the opposing financial interests of

satisfying mainstream gamers while opening up video games to new targeted

markets using the same shadowy subtext that critics like Doty feel regulate

queerness (Doty, 1993, p. xi). For Doty, shadowy subtexts and connotations are the

product of the closet of mass culture that, much like queerbaiting, allow straight

cultures to "use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting

to it" (1993, p. xii). Financial and social motivations surrounding the inclusion or

exclusion of queer content is central to the discussion of queerbaiting. Since it is

concerned with financial gain and appeasing perceived hegemonic audiences it is, I

argue, similar to the historical precedence of "gay window dressing." Thus, looking

at how these issues of financial risk/reward of LGBTQ inclusion and how queer

representation has manifested in the past and present in video games is key.

Methodology

Social semiotics and queer-coding
While the previous literature review mapped where queerbaiting has come

from and the underlying motivations behind it, it is necessary to unpack how

queerness is coded in texts. A text does not simply become queer or utilize

queerbaiting at random. Intentionally or not, texts signal queerness by means of

queer-coding. The broader concept of coding comes from the long tradition of

semiology. Ferdinand de Saussure (1915), the father of semiology, describes it as "A

science that studies the life of signs within society" (as quoted in Hawkes, 1977, p.

100). These signs, composed of the signifier and signified, shape our social world

through meaning making. Semiology is key to understanding how queerbaiting

works since it grapples with the ways in which these signs and the codes into which

they are organized are used to seduce audiences with promised and then denied queer representation. As a method, semiology alone cannot capture all the characteristics of queerbaiting since it focuses more on the *langue*, or the rules and structures underlying communication, and not on *parole*, the way signs and structures of meaning making are actually used in instances of communication. Queerbaiting illustrates how there is murkiness to the social knowability of queer codes. Queer readings rely not simply on decoding the individual elements of communication, but also on analysis of social contexts in which signs become meaningful. Queer readings therefore look to the social implications of messages. It is for this reason that a social semiotic methodology is appropriate to the analysis of queerbaiting since it enables me to not only to locate queer potential and queer-coding within texts regardless of medium, but also allows me to look at the ways these moments of queerness intersect with a social context or queer contextuality that help structure a text's queerbaiting reading.

According to Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988), social semiotics is, at its core, about "culture, society and politics as intrinsic to semiotics" (p. 18). Social semiotics looks to the ways that meanings are negotiated in speech, writing, and images. It also looks to how a code operates within a structure to yield a message that, at the moment of communication, then interacts with the structure of social practices through its decodings (Hall, 2006, 204). Social semiotics as a method therefore allows for the analysis of both the message and its relationship to social practices. In my analysis of queerbaiting, the relationship between messages and social practices will be central.

Hodge and Kress (1988) developed social semiotics from the work of Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov's writing. They build on Voloshinov's assertion that "the rejection of the parole as too individual to be an object of theory, [is] the decisive error in Saussure's thought" (as quoted in Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 18). Hodge and Kress (1988) extend semiotic theory to theorize more complex messages than Voloshinov worked with, including films, where relationships are more abstract than simple conversations (p. 19). Hodge and Kress' (1988) blueprint in *Social Semiotics* offers a baseline for study (see Appendix A). Social semiotics incorporates *parole*, is culture-focused, and looks beyond language to also encompass media and the visual. (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 19).

Hodge and Kress' (1988) expansion of Voloshinov's work creates a subsection of the semiotics methodology that is a good theoretical companion for queerbaiting, especially since social semiotics serves as a tool to examine hidden meanings that intersect with social life (Hodge, 2016, p. 49). As Hawkes (1977) points out: "Every speech-act includes the transmission of messages through the 'languages' of gesture, posture, clothing, hairstyle, perfume, accent, social context etc. over and above, under and beneath, even at cross-purposes with what words actually *say*" (p. 102). These queer-coded speech-acts occur in a cultural context, one that often exists in tandem with and is shaped by the heterosexual norm. If social semiotics accounts for the social context surrounding an expression of these coded speech-acts, then it also accounts for the naturalized assumptions within that society—assumptions that fuel the ability for queerbaiting to retain a veneer of heterosexuality should the production crew desire. Normative understanding of

coded speech-acts are so pervasive "that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be 'naturally' given. . . . [E]ven apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized*" (Hall, 2006, p. 206). Here, Hall argues about the dangers of naturalized assumptions: "The functioning of the codes on the decoding side will frequently assume the status of naturalized perceptions. This leads us to think that the visual sign for 'cow' actually *is* (rather than *represents*) the animal, cow" (p. 206). In other words, queerbaiting functions largely due to naturalized tendencies in decoding that allow queer-coded speech-acts to be lost, or at least hidden, from the main audience.

The cultural assumption of heterosexuality and the implications of social semiotics when joined with queer-coding in media is exemplified in the case of Nickelodeon's *The Legend of Korr*a (2012-2014). When the romantic relationship between the two lead women Korra and Asami (known by fans as "Korrasami") was officially declared "canon", or canonical, some viewers struggled to get beyond naturalized heterosexual codes and view their interactions as romantic. Creator Bryan Konietzko explained, "If [Korrasami] seems out of the blue to you. . . I think a second viewing of the last two seasons would show that perhaps you were looking at it only through a hetero lens" (Konietzko, 2014, para. 10). In the case of queerbaiting, this "hetero lens" helps provide cultural context for the dominant-hegemonic meaning that prioritizes heterosexual readings as the preferred readings. Fan-generated and even canonical representation, must function under and work against this cultural context. To decode queerness in a text using social

semiotics means to work within and against these naturalized perceptions that shape and in the case of queerbaiting often obfuscate queer potential. Even though this is the case, queer readings can also arise though negotiated or oppositional approaches that reshape the meaning in the text by means of alternative codes. These are the queer codes that queer people have been trained to look for: the gestures, clothing, hairstyles, and other messages transmitted through speech-acts, style, and media texts. Social semiotics can be seen when a reader understands a character or couple or even an artifact or location as queer. Understanding how queer readings can be encoded in ways that appeal to queer audiences while heterosexual audiences are unaware of them is part of what this Major Research Paper attempts.

Data collection for texts

The texts being analysed in this Major Research Paper were selected based on the following four criteria. First, each Urtext had to be complete so that a full analysis could be achieved. What this means is that the core text or Urtext must be narratively finished. In the case of the *Life is Strange* series, this was established by creators confirming that the upcoming sequel, *Life is Strange 2* which will be released in September 2018, would not follow the story of Chloe, Rachel, or Max, and that their story was finished in the games. *Persona 4*, while still producing paratextual games, has completed the main story and has already been updated in *Persona 4: Golden*. Now that Atlus has released *Persona 5*, it is unlikely that there will be any narrative additions to the series. This criterion, of course, does not account for paratexts or paratextual sequels like *Persona 4*'s dancing games that are

connected but do not relate to the plot. Second, each text needed to have external

confirmation of queer readings. This was verified through both official and fan

paratexts, scholarly and entertainment articles, and cross-references with queer

media databases—some of which will be discussed in each text's analysis. Third,

each of the texts had to have been produced around the introduction of the concept

queerbaiting in the early 2010s. Fourth, each text needed to have both

confirmations and denials of queerness within the text itself and/or through

external paratexts. This criterion removes *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) as a

candidate for analysis since its upcoming sequel has yet to be released. Older games

that may have failed to properly represent queer people but are far removed from

the current debate of queerbaiting were also excluded. This study also focuses on

texts that have supported queer reading, removing games that might have large

queer followings but might not have large amounts of queerness textually

embedded, like the *Ace Attorney* series (Campcom, 2001-present). Including games

that have denials or mediations of queerness also removes games like *Dream Daddy:

A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017) or the *Metal Gear* series (Konami,

1987-present) where the quality of queer representation might be debated amongst

fans but the games do not have a sizeable counter hegemonic narrative that the

creators engage in. The *Fire Emblem* series (Nintendo, 1990-present), in particular

the representation of Niles, Rhajat, and Soleil in *Fire Emblem: Conquest* (Nintendo,

2015) and *Fire Emblem: Birthright* (Nintendo, 2015) met the criteria but was

ultimately rejected due to length constraints, the game's close resemblance to the

"gay option" representation format, and comparative lack of queer narrative.

The following texts were selected for analysis[5]:

Persona 4 (Atlus, 2008)

Persona 4 is a Japanese roleplaying game that stars a nameless main character (whom the player has the option to name) who moves to rural Japan just as a series of murders begin to take place. Together with a growing group of friends, they learn that the murders are connected to a mysterious television show "The Midnight Channel." People who show up on The Midnight Channel are found dead whenever the rural town of Inaba becomes foggy. The characters travel inside the television to save the people who appear and the characters fight enemies called "shadows." Inside the television world, a larger shadow manifests (serving as the boss battle) that represents an aspect of the captive person that they wish to keep hidden from the outside world. When the team members defeat their shadow the captive character is granted the power of a persona that allows them to fight other shadows.

Persona 4 was chosen for analysis because of the long-standing debate it generated amongst fans and critics about queer representation in video games. The game's representation has been touted as both "lip service" (Kaiser, 2015, para. 8) and "problematic" (Petit, 2013, para. 5), but also as a "well thought-out use of diversity" (Extra Credits, 2012) by others. These opposing opinions and the ambiguous approach that the producers take towards the orientation and gender of

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[5] Various other texts were consumed to help from a more rounded view of queerbaiting and queer representation in video games (see Appendix K).

characters with queer narrative arcs also points to queerbaiting potential. The game

also functions as an example of a more contained game where queerbaiting and

queer erasure is often enacted regardless of player choice*.*

Life is Strange (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015)

Life is Strange: Before the Storm (Deck Nine Games, 2017-2018)

The *Life is Strange* series is currently composed of two games[6], the original

game *Life is Strange* (2015) and the prequel *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*[7] (2017-

2018). The first game follows Maxine "Max" Caulfield as she returns to her

hometown of Arcadia Bay only to discover, after witnessing the murder of her ex

best friend Chloe Price, that she has the power to rewind time. Together with a

revived Chloe she uncovers what happened to Rachel Amber, Chloe's friend who is

missing, all while learning to control her time rewinding powers. The game allows

players to rewind the gameplay to manipulate dialogue options and solve puzzles,

while presenting the player with choices that affect the narrative—including the

option to romance Chloe or Warren Graham. *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, while

created second, takes place three years before the original game. Chloe, not Max, is

the main character and the game deals with the death of Chloe's father, befriending

Rachel Amber, and uncovering secrets about Rachel's parentage. The sequel

removed the time travel mechanic, instead using Chloe's sharp tongue in "back

talks," allowing her to challenge opponents to a battle of wits and comebacks. Much

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[6] *Life is Strange 2* will feature new characters and will release in September 2018.
[7] The deluxe edition of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* included a bonus episode *Farewell* about Max and Chloe as children, which came out in March 2018.

like the original game, choice-based storytelling is an important mechanic in the sequel.

The *Life is Strange* series was chosen for reasons similar to *Persona 4*. The *Life is Strange* series has been both praised and heavily critiqued for its queer representation and has a plentitude of producer paratexts that obfuscate and muddy issues of representation around the game. The *Life is Strange* series, unlike *Persona 4*, is as an episodic graphic adventure game that relies on player choice. This opens up room to account for player agency in relation to queerbaiting in greater depth.

Each game was played with the coding charts in mind and in moments that fulfilled categories within the following coding charts were noted and categorized accordingly. Each game was completed, with both Kanji and Naoto's social links given special attention, and Rachel and Max's romance routes completed in their respective *Life is Strange* game. In the case of each relationship, alternative dialogue and choices were researched to compare and contrast. It must be noted that each playthrough conducted for this Major Research Project was my secondary playthrough of the game since I had previously played the games as a casual consumer and fan.

Categorization and content analysis of texts
For the purposes of this study queerness was accounted for in each of the selected main texts and catalogued in charts (see Appendix B). The style of the charts was inspired by the content analysis in Mallory Giunchigliani's (2011) work in *Gender Transgressions of the Pixar Villains*, which utilizes a simple checklist

format when accounting for queer-coding. Since video games present a unique set of challenges for analysis because of the ability for players to influence the narrative of the text, modify the text through game mods, and customize characters, categories were selected that mirror the categorization system in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive (Shaw, n.d.). Queer content in video games is divided on the LGBTQ Video Game Archive by: actions (actions players can take in the game, crossdressing being an example), artifacts (in-game objects or visuals, like a pamphlet the player finds for a gay conversion camp), change in localization (removing or altering LGBT content when exporting a game into another culture or language)[8], characters (explicitly or implicitly queer-coded characters), Easter eggs (hidden extras within the game), homophobia/transphobia (homophobia or transphobia expressed within the game), locations (queered spaces, like gay bars), mentions (text that references LGBT content, like off-handed comments regarding sexuality), mods (game modifications either by fans or creators, the *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014) mod to make a character, Cullen, a romance option for both men and women is an example), queer games/narratives (games about or that reflect queer experience), relationships/romance/sex (the ability for the player or characters to engage in a queer romantic or sexual relationship), traits (queer characteristics that the player-character can have) (Shaw, n.d.). In addition to these categories, queer action was expanded to include moments of queer dialogue choice to hone in on queer choice in

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[8] Although Shaw does not list localization on the website's drop down menu or in "Where Is the Queerness in Games?" (Friesem & Shaw, 2016), it is listed on the website's category descriptions.

Life is Strange. Character analysis was expanded to highlight queer character design in order to highlight socially coded aspects of appearance and design.

Queer game mechanics was added as a category in addition to queer narratives to account for both the ludic and narrative qualities of video games. Together these help account for the question: "what does a queer game *do*?" (Macklin, 2017, p. 251). While "queer narrative exists in the never-ending middle that is dependent on alternative pleasures and is unconcerned with the reproductive act" (Chess, 2015, p. 88), queer gaming mechanics can be said to follow a similar vein, looking at alternative pleasures that exist outside normative structures of design. For Macklin, these queer mechanics can subvert player expectations and change their level of control within the gaming world (2017, p. 252). Chang (2017b) provides a more concrete way of looking at queergaming, through queer(er) design (p. 18), queer(er) play (p. 19), queer remediation (p. 20), and queer futures (p. 21). Although Chang poses questions surrounding how queer games might function, both narratively and ludically rather than providing answers to them, he does state that queergaming must be more than window dressing and binary choices. Chang argues, instead for engaging in "different grammars of play, radical play, not grounded in normative ideologies like competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states" (p. 19).

When looking at games that are prized for their queer mechanics, such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), as studied by Bagnall (2017) and Kopas (2017), and *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012), studied by Chang (2017b), there is a common trend is

towards the ludical push for styles of radical play that favour more fluid and non-normative styles of gaming in the ludic functions and mechanics themselves. Game mechanics that embrace this style of were included in the chart.

In summary, the charts tracking my research findings themselves function as a way to trace the appearance of queer codes in the texts within broad categories. Social semiotics accounts for the way that these queer codes were identified, as demonstrated previously. For example, to have Kanji's shadow listed within the queer character design category, the queer-encoded gay "lisp" must be understood as a queer code and not a mere character quirk. Similarly, the exchange between Max and Chloe (see Appendix B) in *Life is Strange* can be seen to function as a metaphor for sexual orientation in connection to bathroom choice, but the social knowledge of queer codes must be accessed in order to produce this meaning. These categories within the chart help point to spaces of queer potential within video games and are thus not meant to be all-encompassing, due to the fluid and culturally specific nature of queer codes, but instead to provide grounds for a queer reading within the video games.

Queerbaiting and paratextual context

Social semiotics relies not only on codes, but also on their context. In the case of queerbaiting, the context comes not only from the interpretive communities in which queer meanings circulate, but is also created around the texts themselves. According to Fish (1980), context determines interpretation. Therefore, it is possible to "examine the role that texts and paratexts play in constructing contexts and interpretive communities that will be activated when interpreting other texts"

(Gray, 2010, p. 33). Paratexts serve as a place for these interpretive communities to find contextual meaning. In the case of queerbaiting, paratexts help support/deny/or obfuscate queer readings. Thus, as Ng (2017) discussed in her research, paratexts are central to identifying practices of queerbaiting.

Data collection for paratexts

After the core texts were analyzed for queer content, my next step was to analyze each of the larger bodies of work surrounding the series and their production studios that help to form the "queer contextuality" and the "media paratext" (Ng, 2017, para. 1.3). The paratexts that are the focus of my analysis were selected by first observing the larger pool of paratexts that sounded a text, including those both from authorial sources and fans. This larger pool includes fanworks like fan edits, metatextual fan analysis, fanfiction, and fan-created queer dating simulators (the *Life is Strange* queer dating simulator, *Love is Strange* [2016] and the *Persona 4* queer dating simulator, *Persona 4 New Days* [2015]). It also includes paratexts from official contributors encompassing interviews, promotional content like advertisements, trailers, and while not all were consumed, in the case of *Persona 4* the spin-off games and animes were researched. It was important to at least consume both authorial and fan-produced paratexts as fan-created texts are important for creating critical intertextuality. Critical intertextuality functions by "[attacking] a text, to subvert its preferred meanings and to propose unofficial and unsanctioned readings" (Gray, 2006, p. 37) that go against the grain of producer intent. Johnson (2007) takes critical intertextuality and further applies it to the way fanfiction "[delegitimizes] institutional authority over the hyperdiegetic text"

(p.291), a concept that works well in tandem with queer readings. One such

example of critical fanfiction is "fix fics" whose aim is to alter an aspect of a text that

fans found dissatisfactory, including character deaths, certain romances, or poor

narrative resolution. This is shown in action in Waggoner's work that highlights the

outpouring of fanfiction in the wake of Lexa's death in *The 100* related to "fixing" the

episode's ending (p. 11). Despite the power of fan texts, fan texts are not the focal

point of this analysis as it is taken up by many scholars, including work on

queerbaiting by Collier (2015). Paratexts with authorial connection, or what Ng calls

"producer paratext" (para. 2.5) include interviews, creators', actors', and other

official creative collaborators' social media, and interconnected texts created by

producers like sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and promos. These paratexts were

selected for discussion in order to illuminate the ways in which producer-created

paratexts suggest preferred interpretations of the core text, preferred audiences,

and preferred readings of characters or plots (Gray, 2010, p. 72). Producer paratexts

help illustrate the way that producers acknowledge queer audiences and queer

readings of plots and characters while simultaneously refusing to fully represent

them in a visible and rewarding way.

There are limitations to analyzing the texts and the paratexts surrounding

them. One of the major issues with analyzing texts and paratexts for queerness and

signs of queerbaiting is the ever-changing face of queerness itself. Highwater (2001)

expressed this beautifully when he positions homosexuality as "a chameleon

identity, a chimera that slips from its mooring in one era only to reappear in another

era as a new amalgam of disparate parts" (p. 201). Homosexuality, and by extension

queerness, is difficult to definitively code or decode because not only are codes themselves dynamic systems based on social designs (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 41) that are notoriously hard to identify in practice (p. 45), but also because queer codes are socio-historically contingent and rapidly changing.

My own position as a researcher on the topic of queerbaiting also needs to be addressed. Queerness is experienced as an identity and carries with it baggage that I as a researcher bring to the task of decoding signs of queerness and interpreting practices of queerbaiting. As Ng (2017) admits, "what counts as queerbaiting is often contested" (para. 2.9). My identity as a researcher may direct my analyses based on sets of my own assumptions and experiences with decoding culture. As such, what I feel constitutes as, for instance, a queered character design might be wholly different for another researcher from another background and experience of queer culture. Queer is, to a degree, subjective as it falls outside of a clearly definable binary. Due to this, I have formatted the charts to highlight key, less ambiguous moments in the text that point to a categorization's fulfillment rather than listing all potential queer moments.

Analysis

I conducted an analysis of three video games, *Persona 4*, and two games in the *Life is Strange* series: *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) and *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine, 2017-2018). My findings are separated into three sections. The first is the queer rationale, which substantiates a queer reading within the text. This foregrounds each analysis by positioning the text amongst queer debate and provides clues as to why the text is useful for looking at issues of

queer representation. The second section will utilize Eve Ng's queerbaiting format

that accounts for queer contextuality and producer paratexts for the text, with room

to expand to accommodate the video game medium. The third section will unite the

queer reading and intersection between queer contextuality and paratexts that

create the queerbaiting climate that Ng's work situates. Then, I will discuss how

each text has queerbaiting potential. Queerbaiting is evident in each of the video

games I have analyzed; illustrating that queerbaiting cannot only thrive outside of

the television medium, but that it has unique considerations within different genres

that account for the limits of player agency.

Persona 4

Queer rationale for *Persona 4*
When queer games are discussed, *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008) is an oft-included

example for better, as demonstrated by Friesem & Shaw (2016), Extra Credits

(2012), and Flanagan (2014), who generally position *Persona 4* as a positive form of

queer representation, or for worse, as in Brice (2011), Youngblood (2013),

piercestream (2014), Petit (2013), Dakota (2014), and Grant (2017). Grant's 2017

article is a critique of *Persona 4*'s use of queer narratives and the ways the game and

surrounding paratexts control, minimize, or erases these narratives. At first blush

the fourth installment of the *Shin Megami Tensei Persona* series holds a surprising

amount of queer potential. Not only are there two characters (Kanji Tatsumi and

Naoto Shirogane) whose story arcs are heavily queered on the external semiotic

level to be a gay and trans narratives respectively, but also hidden in the code there

are queered dialogue choices of a potential queer romance that was removed before the game was released.

Persona 4 checked the majority of boxes in the queer video game chart (see Appendix B). More generally, the game is well aware of queer subcultural cues. The games draws from gay male bathhouses to encode Kanji's dungeon as a queer space, and uses substantial queer-coded language throughout the game. This queer-coded language appears heavily in both Kanji and Naoto's respective dungeons. Shadow Kanji lisps out, "Tonight, I'll introduce a superb site for those searching for sublime love that surpasses the separation of the sexes!", a coded reference to same sex desire, while Shadow Naoto uses language referencing a gender confirmation surgery when they state, "I will be experimentor and experimentee both in a forbidden yet wonderful bodily alteration process!" Outside of Naoto and Kanji's dungeons, other dungeons likewise have queer-coded dialogue. In fellow classmate Yukiko's dungeon, her shadow looks at the main character, Yosuke (the MC's friend) and another female character (Chie) and exclaims, "three princes are here to see me!?", to which Chie responds "Three princes? Wait, does that include me, too...?" Yukiko confirms as much and replies "Chie... *chuckles* Yes, she's my prince... She always leads the way... Chie's a strong prince." Queer-coded language is not only relegated to the fantastical dungeons but is also present in the day-to-day life of the MC. Yosuke says, "Whoa, you can cook? Well, you do seem to be great with your hands..." after it is revealed the main character can cook packed lunches. Kou from the basketball club also says, for comedic effect, "I get to stay here and play with balls. I loooove balls," a rather obvious homoerotic pun. While these examples are

not all encompassing, they represent some of the more prominent examples of queer-coded language in *Persona 4.*

Character designs are also quite queer with Naoto sporting an "androgynous charm" with short hair, a bound chest, and wearing the school's male uniform (see Appendix D). Kanji's shadow in his dungeon has a stereotypical lisp and his final form manifests as a hyper masculine body with a soft, flowered-covered interior (see Appendix E). His shadow also wields two mars symbols ($\male\male$), a well-known cultural symbol for gay men. The representation of both Kanji and Naoto move beyond mere connotations as there are multiple examples of queer identification from both themselves and others. At multiple points in the game Kanji appears to accept his sexuality. When the main character has maxed out Kanji's social link he states "Now I can say it straight out... That 'other me' is me", referring to his heavily queer-coded shadow. After the player completes his dungeon by defeating the final boss, Kanji also admits, "What if I'm the type who never gets interested in girls...?" Kanji's shadow likewise confesses his potential attraction to the other male characters stating, "I think that you three... would make wonderful boyfriends." Additionally, there are multiple points in the game where other characters bring up Kanji's bathhouse sauna themed dungeon or Kanji's date with Naoto when Naoto was not yet "revealed" to be female at the end of their own dungeon. Yosuke also asks Kanji if their male friend Teddy is his "type."

The character of Naoto openly discusses their gender identity during their social link with the MC, stating outright "Why couldn't I have been born male...?" Naoto expresses discomfort with being put in a beauty pageant with women in one

scene, saying "it seems ill-fitting for someone like me to get up on stage." Naoto's

gender identity is discussed by other characters, quite often in troublingly

transphobic ways. One student states: "Naoto's that boyish... girlish... whatever,

right?" reducing Naoto's place as a gender fluid character to that of an object, a

"whatever." The main cast continue to use the male honourific ("-kun") for Naoto

despite their social transition to being a female character, a possible confirmation of

their queer or gender fluid identity. Overall, the story arcs belonging to Naoto and

Kanji's stories are rife with both connotative and literal queer potential. Brice

(2011) and Youngblood (2013) both provide powerful analyses of Naoto and Kanji's

stories within *Persona 4*, discussing the nuances of their depictions. Youngblood

reads *Persona 4* as providing a commentary of queer digital utopias that are

disrupted by player engagement, using both Naoto and Kanji as examples of

transgressive bodies that are disrupted (Youngblood, 2013). Youngblood's analysis

lends well to issues of queerbaiting in video games as he interrogates the scope of

player intervention with queer narratives and potential. In *Persona 4*'s encoded

narrative "no possible outcome exists in the game code for Naoto to undergo the

process of transformation, nor is there any other option given to the player than to

fight against her achieving it", in other words players' actions and disruptions are

thus limited by game code (Youngblood, 2013). Youngblood also views Kanji's

dungeon as intertwined with issues of Butler's performativity, especially in regards

to gendered norms of "manliness", paired with an "inversion of hegemonic

expectations" when Kanji's shadow states that he prefers men since he sees women

as gatekeepers of the definition of "manliness" (Youngblood, 2013). Brice (2011) too

focuses on Naoto and their gendered position within the game in relation to player agency, but also discusses Naoto's place within the context of Atlus' other representations of trans people. Brice's work in particular helped to ignite my understanding of Naoto's position as a trans character within the larger meta-narrative of the *Persona* series.

Beyond solely Naoto or Kanji, in *Persona 4*, physical and emotional intimacy between characters of the same genders at times wander along the spectrum of Eve Sedgwick's homosocial and homosexual continuum (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1-2), creating space for queer readings. Rise, one of the romantically available female characters, is particularly physically intimate with Naoto during a hot spring excursion, to the point that Naoto exclaims "Eek! H-Hey, where are you touching…?" At the end of Yosuke's social link, Yosuke and the MC share a hug. Yosuke is quick to claim that the hug they shared is "for girls". Whether Yosuke's response is a sign of heteronormative response to hugging, a spurning of same sex physical contact, or an acknowledgement of the hug as something romantic is unclear, although Vrai Kaiser (2015) in "Queerness is Not a Gimmick: A Look at Persona 4's Failed Representation, and How Persona 5 Can Fix it" reads it as pseudo-romantic. Both Yosuke and the MC also share a deep emotional connection, with Yosuke claiming near the end of his social track: "Yeah... Like you... You're special to me, you know?" At the last level of his social track, Yosuke extends this even further, stating "I think out of everyone, I wanted to be acknowledge by you the most..." Homosocial representation opens up the possibility of a queer reading that sees homosocial as a position on a continuum with homoeroticism. Chie and Yukiko also share a strong

bond, admitting that they draw strength from each other. Both these homosocial relationships, if substituted with members of the opposite sex would be coded as romantic in nature so it is worth documenting this potential.

Persona 4 also includes queer gender play when three of the male characters cross-dress for a school event. According to Friesem and Shaw (2016), cross-dressing is usually a humour tactic that is represented with distaste (p. 3884) and this generally holds true in *Persona 4*. While the main character can express excitement to cross-dress by selecting dialogue options ("I'll give it my all") and when asked if you signed yourself up for the cross-dressing event can respond with a resounding "damn straight", the response from the crowd cannot be controlled, and their response is damning.

For the boys who do not noticeably pass as cisgendered women, the responses vilify them with transphobic language. When Yosuke cross-dresses as a schoolgirl one boy in the crowd says: "Dude, it's terrifying... I can just imagine someone like him sitting across from me on a train!" When Kanji cross-dresses as a Marilyn Monroe-type, a girl responds "Ewww! That's so creepy!" and a boy adds "This is wrong on every level..." In comparison, Fellow teammate Teddie's cross-dressing as an Alice in Wonderland figure renders him "passable." In comparison to the other boys, he is fetishized. A girl in the audience says "Huh!? That's a boy!? He's so cute!" while a boy says "I'd hit it..." Both of these transphobic responses mirror the common transphobic responses to real life trans people: fetishization and disgust.

When creating the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, both Friesem and Shaw (2016) saw the importance of including both homophobia and transphobia in the discussion of queer content in games, stating it would be "incomplete" without it (p. 3885). The response of the schoolmates in *Persona 4* to the cross-dressing scene is one of many instances of homophobia and transphobia within *Persona 4* that help place it as a queer text—even if it does so in a cruel way. Some other notable examples include Yosuke's reaction to Kanji trying to share a tent with him and the MC, asking "Are we gonna be safe alone with you?" implying Kanji's perceived sexuality might render him a sexual threat. Another example being when the MC picks Yosuke as who he would like to date while on a fake group date and Yosuke responds with "Now quit it! You're creeping me out..."

There is plenty of fodder for a queer reading of *Persona 4* both subtextually or simply textually by players as demonstrated above, but there is equally room for homophobia and transphobia. These two opposing forces within the text help to contextualize and prime the paratextual context towards the queer content in *Persona 4* and evidence for queerbaiting.

Persona 4's queer contextuality
Eve Ng's (2017) work on queerbaiting in relation to producer paratext and queer contextuality can be applied to *Persona 4* to showcase the ambiguous producer responses to the debate around the sexual and gender identity of both Kanji and Naoto (though noteably most discussion centers around Kanji's representation) along with the parent company Atlus' and the larger *Persona* franchise's history that help create room for queerbaiting. Before addressing this,

however, it is important note the release date of *Persona 4* as this helps to contextualize responses to it and my discussion of it as an example of queerbaiting. Since queerbaiting discussions only began in the early 2010s, it is understandable that *Persona 4* (2008) might not reveal characteristics of queerbaiting in as fully developed a form as games, like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), released after the discourse began. Despite this, I argue that *Persona 4* fits the criteria of my study because of the franchise the game spawned in the 2010s. The larger *Persona 4* franchise includes two fighting games, (*Persona 4 Arena* [2012], *Persona 4 Arena Ultimax* [2013]) a dancing game (*Persona 4: Dancing All Night* [2015]), two animes (*Persona 4: The Animation* [2011-2012], *Persona 4: The Golden Animation* [2014]), a movie (*Persona 4: The Animation –The Factor of Hope* [2012]), and an expanded HD re-release of *Persona 4: Golden* in 2012. In addition, one could include the later release dates of the English translated games or the most recent PS4 re-release of *Persona 4: Dancing All Night* in 2018 to situate the franchise as dominantly post-2010. *Persona 4*'s core game might have come out before the discourse on queerbaiting began, but as a franchise *Persona 4* continues to create a Matryoshka doll-esque franchise-within-a-franchise to this day. As such, it is still a relevant text that continues to generate profit for its parent company, Atlus. Even without this current relevance, "there is never a point in time at which a text frees itself from the contextualizing power of paratextuality" (Gray, 2010, p. 45) that can extend the text temporally beyond its first moment of distribution. Despite *Persona 4's* first text being created before the queerbaiting discourse began, it is still affected by the discourse and may be re-contextualized (p. 43-44). These paratexts, along

with other games within the *Persona* series, and other games Atlus has produced,

lend *Persona 4* an intertextual frame of reference for seeing queer contextuality (Ng,

2017, para. 2.10).

Queer contextuality serves as an important pillar of Ng's definition of

queerbaiting. For Ng (2017):

Queer contextuality. . . informs how viewers assess (1) the validity of reading

queerness in a text, (2) the political and economic feasibility (particularly in

regard to studio and network financial considerations) of having a canonical

LGBT narrative, and (3) the quality of the canonical LGBT narratives that are

produced. (para. 2.8)

The validity of a queer reading of *Persona 4* was established in the last section. The

political and economic feasibility and the quality of LGBT narratives in surrounding

texts help inform the queer context of *Persona 4*, and the readings of Kanji's gay

narrative and Naoto's transgender narrative in particular.

Taking into consideration the broader context for *Persona 4*, Naoto's trans

narrative is not surprising given Atlus' past experience with trans characters.

Another game by Atlus, *Catherine* (Atlus, 2011), has a transwoman character, Erica,

who is subjected to misgendering, harassment, and cruel japes towards her sexual

encounters with another character that position her as part of the "deceptive

transwoman" trope (Dakota, 2014; Grant, 2017). The upcoming re-release of

Catherine (*Catherine: Full Body*) in 2018 features an additional character that many

critics have jumped to identify as another example of Atlus' poor treatment of trans

characters. The character of Rin is, according to Grant (2017), "nearly every

'deceptive trans woman' cliché rolled in one. Hyperfeminine, gender–neutral name, horror-movie cinematography as soon as her skirt's off" (para. 16). Other parts of the *Persona* series also suffer from Atlus' poor handling of trans narratives. For example, *Persona 2: Innocent Sin* (Atlus, 1999) has a scene where a transman is misgendered and *Persona 3* (Atlus, 2006) includes a scene outing a transwoman for not "passing" (Dakota, 2014; Grant, 2017). The end result, put frankly by Carol Grant (2017), is that "it often feels like Atlus hates its queer audience" (para. 3). Why, then, would queer audiences seek out the *Persona* texts?

Carol Grant (2017) provides a reason as to why queer audiences are drawn to the *Persona* franchise: "[Atlus has] made earnest attempts to honestly portray queer and trans identity, providing rare crumbs of visibility in a medium that makes us invisible" (para. 4). The sheer number of trans characters that have appeared in Atlus' products is rather shocking, regardless of how they are portrayed (Brice, 2011, para. 1). Situating Rin as a character that can be romanced also promises a potential queered relationship within the unfolding of the game. This is made doubly important as there will be two transwomen in a single game—a rarity in any text. While these narratives have been handled poorly, they were still included even though Atlus was not compelled to include reoccurring trans characters.

Homosexuality provides far more promising queer context for the franchise. *Persona 2: Innocent Sin* (Atlus, 1999) includes an openly queer character, Jun Kurosu. Not only is he queer, but also he is positioned as a possible love interest for the male main character, Tatsuya Suou (Kwan, 2009). In *Persona 2* in 1999*, Atlus integrated homosexuality as an equal choice (Kaiser, 2015; Kwan, 2009). Queer

female characters are also included with the addition of a female main character in the re-release of *Persona 3* on the PlayStation Portable (Atlus, 2009). Agnis, a female robot, can fall in love with both main characters, regardless of gender and engage in subtextual sex. While the queer context is not nearly as strong as in *The 100*, at least as it is discussed by Ng, it still provides an example of the previous inclusion of queer narratives that, since they have repeated, suggest that were not seen to be financial concerns. In fact, an Atlus employee even admitted in a *Persona 4* strategy guide that the character of Jun Kurosu was included to attract fujoshi (or women who consume homoerotic media in Japan) to increase the market for the game (Kwan, 2009, para. 9). This, combined with a textually and subtextually rich queer text that provides queer representation, helps to produce the queer contextuality of *Persona 4*.

Persona 4's paratexts

The second pillar of Ng's (2017) definition of queerbaiting includes the use of paratexts, in particular producer paratexts, that help position a text (para. 2.5). The paratexts surrounding *Persona 4* are great in number, but a collection of interviews and paratextual outtakes help to point out the ways in which *Persona 4's* paratexts help to establish it as a queerbaiting text. These paratexts confirm, deny, and obscure queer readings but, as Ng (2017) states, we should not point to them as evidence of the "true" intentions of producers. Instead, these paratexts should be used in conjunction with textual evidence for considerations about queerbaiting (Ng, 2017, para. 7.1).

Paratexts for *Persona 4* have polysemic value as, much like many other

queerbaiting paratexts, they hold various viewpoints. One such view is the

confirmation, or at least encouragement, of a queer reading. Kanji's voice actor Troy

Baker, in a panel at EXP Convention, emphatically states: "Kanji was clearly gay.

Clearly gay" (Schuler, 2009). Baker then went on to lift the proverbial curtain

behind Atlus' English translation by saying that not only did Atlus describe the

character as gay, but also encouraged him to "go as far as you want with [Kanji's

sexuality]" (Schuler, 2009). Nich Maragos, Atlus USA *Persona 4* Editor, also supports

reading Kanji as queer (Xu, 2009, para. 11), while Katsura Hashino, the director

of both *Persona 4* and *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016), positions the *Persona* series as one

that diverges "from what's normal", making a queer reading not outside the realm of

possibilities (James, 2015, para. 12). In "Disregard Canon, Acquire Representation:

Naoto Shirogane is a Transman," Robyn Tyrfing (2014) discusses how Shigenori

Soejima, the art and character designer of *Persona*, confirmed that Naoto's character

was originally intended to be male but was subsequently changed (para. 4). This

change points towards authorial intervention with their[9] gender at an early stage of

development, one that haunts Naoto's depiction in the game, despite what the canon

of *Persona 4* tries to relegate and mediate.

Another paratext that hints towards queer reading is the removal of the

potential romance path between the character of Yosuke and the MC. Ng (2017)

points towards outtake paratexts as "almost-textual possibilities" (para. 7.4) that

help hold queer potential for fans. Outtakes, DVD commentary, and other extra texts

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[9] I take some direction from Tyrfing by referring to Naoto with gender-neutral pronouns.

have been locations for hidden queer content in other forms of visual media. Hidden code or content within video games (including easter eggs) can be seen in a similar light as both a way to hide while nonetheless still producing queer possibilities in video games. The homoerotic tension between Yosuke and the MC is thus framed in another light with the addition of hidden audio files in the game files of *Persona 4* that imply this relationship was potentially a queer romance path. Notably, this audio was cut from the game late enough that an English recording of these lines is still included (Kaiser, 2015). One of these cut lines is Yosuke saying "I like you" to the MC, which in the Japanese version uses the same grammar as the female love interests' confessions (Kaiser, 2015, para. 20).

While "courting" queer-minded fans through paratexts is a large part of queerbaiting (Ng, 2017, para. 9.4), I would argue that *Persona 4* does more than contain paratexts encouraging queered readings in a queer context. *Persona 4* courts queer audiences within the text itself to create a kind of Schroedinger's sexuality (or gender) for both Kanji and Naoto (Harper, 2017, p. 130) in which the characters both are and are not queer. Despite this, paratexts are still important as they attempt to corral queer readings into an ambiguous space that mimics more traditional queerbaiting narratives. Both *Persona 4* director Katsura Hashino and art director Shigenori Soejima notably refused to give a comment on Kanji's sexuality in interviews (Kwan, 2009, para. 1). *Persona 4*'s project leader, Yu Namba, has also admitted there is no "official answer" to Kanji's sexuality (Xu, 2009, para. 10). Kaiser's (2015) response to the lack of answer on the question of characters' identities echoes broader concerns about queerbaiting: "It all feels, ultimately, like

lip service: the desire to obliquely nod at the possibility of a non-straight character

to rope a queer audience without spooking the heterosexual player base" (para. 8).

What I have discussed above, both in terms of the textual content, paratexts,

and the surrounding queer context for *Persona 4* is not entirely new. Many writers

since *Persona 4'*s release have commented on the confusing back-and-forth nature

of both Kanji and Naoto's representation and the text's position as a queer narrative

in general. These scholars have put time and effort into providing breakdowns of

Kanji and Naoto's story arcs (Youngblood, 2013; Brice, 2011; Tyrfing, 2014; Kaiser,

2015; Xu, 2009; Kwan, 2009; Petit, 2013), Japan's treatment of homosexuality in

reference to *Persona 4*[10](Kaiser, 2015; Xu, 2009), and a few have either implied that

Persona 4 engaged in queerbaiting (Kaiser, 2015) or stated it outright

(piercestream, 2014). I am interested in extending this discussion by showing that

there is queerbaiting potential in video games as illustrated by an analysis of

Persona 4 and the surrounding context, paratexts, and critical engagement.

Queerbaiting rationale

While *Persona 4*'s paratexts and queer contextuality are mixed in how they

view queerness, it is still important to consider the ambiguity and other

queerbaiting strategies within the text itself. Queerbaiting consists of a "text-

paratext-queer contextuality matrix" (Ng, 2017, para. 2.8), and, in the case of

Persona 4, much of the charges of queerbaiting come largely from failings within the

text that are only amplified through paratextual content and queer contextuality.

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[10] Another point of contention regarding the cultural context of queerbaiting that, while important, will not be addressed in this Major Research Project.

The strong queering of textual content helps to push it beyond the realm of queer subtext into queerbaiting territory when paired with the queer context and paratextual context (see Appendix C).

Unlike Ng's work on *The 100* and *Rizzoli and Isles*, and most other pieces written on queerbaiting, *Persona 4* provides a unique chance to examine queerbaiting largely outside of the same-sex relationship structure that is usually referenced as authorizing it. Although I disagree with Valentine's (2016) assertion that studying queerbaiting might be a step backwards because it often denies queer ambiguity, I do agree that queerbaiting often focuses on couples, and, by association, the definition of a character's sexuality only in relation to their potential partner(s) (para. 1.1). *Persona 4* expands, albeit only to a degree, Ng's definition of queerbaiting as it opens up to queer narratives outside of the relationship model. The characters of Naoto and Kanji have queer narratives that are marked by ambiguities that highlight the ways in which queer narratives are often bait-and-switched in favour of heteronormative recuperations rather than an ambiguity that leaves room for queer potential.

In the game, Kanji's is a moving story about accepting one's sexuality. This is significant, especially set against Japan's rigid gender expectations. Yet it presents a narrative, not about, to quote Kanji, "guys or chicks," but instead about being "scared shitless of being rejected". Kanji spends much of the game after the dungeon negotiating his way back into heterosexuality. In his social track, which is available after completing his dungeon, Kanji talks about liking a female classmate whose bag he fixed in elementary school. Kanji calls female characters cute, and attempts to

jump into bed with a female character to "prove" he is a man. He even famously begs Naoto, now presenting as female, to ease his doubts about his sexuality and "Make me a man!" After spending an entire dungeon working towards Kanji accepting his sexuality, it is disappointing to see Kanji's sexuality quickly ushered back into an ambiguous realm where his sexuality is uncertain. Carolyn Petit (2013) summarizes the affect this backpedalling has: "To me, this is a huge cop-out. It rings psychologically false," (para. 4) she says, arguing that the very clearly queer-coded imagery of Kanji's dungeon does not mesh with the game's attempt to situate him back in the heterosexual realm. Petit (2013) goes on to say: "By clearly raising the idea in the player's mind that Kanji is gay and then rejecting that idea, *Persona 4* sends the message that homosexuality is shameful and should not be accepted" (para. 4). To both code Kanji subtextually and even textually as queer to then rejecting the idea, Kanji's story alone supports *Persona 4*'s place as a queerbaiting text.

When paired with Naoto's story arc, the use of queerbaiting in the game is damning.

Despite sex-change imagery and discomfort in being seen as a woman, Naoto's feelings towards their gender is muddled after the dungeon. The narrative surrounding gender dysphoria becomes a narrative about women's place within the Japanese workforce and the gendering of detective fiction. Naoto's time living as a man is discounted by immediately slotting her in as "one of the girls" to make them sexually available for the MC, and, by extension, making Naoto less threatening to the player's assumed heterosexuality (Brice, 2011, para. 5). While the story is not

overtly changed by romancing an available character, in *Persona 4*, it is an option. When romancing Naoto, there are choices the player can make to have Naoto change the pitch of their voice to sound more feminine, and, later in *Persona 4: Golden*, dress in the women's school uniform. In the Japanese version of the game, this change also involves Naoto changing their pronoun. Additionally, the first romance flag is telling Naoto that you are glad they are a girl, while the second is protecting them, despite their constant rejection of being treated differently because of their gender. Players can decide to effectively erase Naoto's queerness through interaction and intention (Brice, 2011).

The game finishes with a return to the heteronormative. Kanji appears in *Persona 4: Golden*'s "true end" epilogue without his usual punk aesthetics (see Appendix F). The queer look, with the dyed hair and earrings, is replaced with short, cropped black hair and glasses. Naoto also appears in the epilogue with their buttoned shirt open exposing unbound breasts, wearing a necklace, and forgoing their trademark paper-boy hat (see Appendix F). *Persona 4: Golden*'s epilogue came four years after the game's original release date and it finishes what the text's original ambiguity sought to do: to return the game back to the heteronormative.

Life is Strange series

Consider: queer romance, choice, and indie gaming
In the current video game landscape, the largest avenue for queer

representation is through what Anthropy (2012) coined as the "gay button."[11] Gay

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[11] Although I will be discussing gay option in relation to *Life is Strange*, an argument can be made that *Persona 4* is at least a queer option game if Naoto is allowed to maintain some semblance of queerness. I choose to disregard this as the game itself clearly pushes characters to recuperate

button, or gay option, games have been interrogated by numerous scholars (Chang, 2017b; Bragança, Fantini, & Mota, 2016; Macklin, 2017; Kelly, 2014; Shaw, 2015; Anthropy, 2012; Harper, 2017) as being less queer than their representations suggest. In gay option games, "Players are made responsible for making their game go against male, heterosexual norms in game representation" (Shaw, 2015, p. 33). This means not all players will see the queer romance since they must actively select LGBTQ content. Shaw (2015) in particular sees this shift of representation on to players as a truly neoliberal approach where choice is given to players to make sure they are represented—a free market of representation of sorts that places responsibility on the player (p. 35). A particular criticism of gay option games is that the distinct lack of variance between queer versus non-queer in-game dialogue denies any queerness beyond the dominant coding already within the game. In effect, gay options are straight options, simply with a queer skin applied (Macklin, 2017, p. 250). Bioware's *Dragon Age* (2009-present) and *Mass Effect* (2007-present) series are often chosen as the poster children for this form of queer representation. In these Bioware games, the main character's sexuality is thus articulated by non-player characters (NPCs) (Wood, 2017, p. 214) and queer content, by proxy, can be avoided by not engaging with these queer NPCs [12].

Against gay option games, there has been a push to create main characters that are not queer by choice (a rather dicey insinuation to begin with), but are

Naoto's queerness in order to date them, thus pushing the MC into normative heterosexuality. *Persona 2*'s Jun Kurosu is an example of a gay option in the *Persona* series.

[12] Though less so in later games when orientations are introduced.

simply queer. An example of this is *Dreamfall Chapters* (Deep Silver, 2014-2016)[13],

whose main character, Kian, is gay. Games with inherent queerness are positioned

to hypothetically speak to a deeper level of queer experience and can produce queer

narratives that feel authentic (Friesem & Shaw, 2016, p.3885). As compared to gay

options, queer narratives are one of the rarest forms of queer content in video

games (Friesem & Shaw, 2016, p. 3885). Queer narratives include experiences of

LGBTQ people. An excellent and well-cited example of this is *Dys4ia* (Anthropy,

2012) by Anna Anthropy that deals with trans issues by building gender dysphoria

into the very fabric of the game and telling a transition narrative through it. Games

with queer narratives and queer mechanics open the possibilities of queering games

beyond just "gay option" representation that simply applies a queer skin to a

heteronormative relationship. Queer narratives and mechanics open room to

explore alternative ways of gaming and push the boundaries of what a video game

narrative might look like.

Chang (2017b) and Wood (2017) have criticized using queer characters as a

marker of queerness in video games, drawing on the work of Halberstam, Sedgwick,

and Anthropy's critique of Boolean-style diversity checkboxes, looking instead at

"queer aesthetic potential" (Wood, 2017, p. 218) and "queergaming" as possible

approaches (Chang, 2017a, p. 242; Chang, 2017b). Bonnie Ruberg (2015) also pulls

from Halberstam's (2011) work on queer failure to provide ways of looking at "no

fun" games that create fear, frustration, annoyance and hurt, as having queer

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[13] Problematically, despite being openly gay, Kian can only kiss women in the games.

potential. These articles lie within the larger field of "queer game studies" that view games through a non-normative lens to includes and go beyond representation (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. x). Queer game studies overall seek to apply queer theory as a methodology to video games (p. xvii). Nowhere is this move from triple-A[14] games' more standard visibility to queer fluidity in gameplay and aesthetics more apparent than in Twine and indie games.

Twine games, video games produced on the open-source platform Twine, are important for understanding queer video games and queer game studies because these underground games have, in recent years, and particularly since the 2012 Twine Revolution, begun to challenge the same issues of gatekeeping and production that have plagued video games for decades (Bragança, Mota, & Fantini, 2016; Harvey, 2014). Without the same financial risk and with the ability to appeal to a narrow market, indie games are able to include more queer content (Shaw, 2009, p. 243). Twine's format is also text-based and open to people outside the industry, thereby making it accessible to those not normally serviced by the gaming industry, including queer people (Bragança, Mota, & Fantini, 2016). The resulting games that are produced often include issues of gender and sexuality in ways outside of the more hegemonic forms of gameplay. They also exist outside of profit-generation and commodification and are thus not held to the same editing and censorship standards as mainstream games hoping cash in on their main audience (Harvey, 2014, p. 103).

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[14] Triple-A or AAA games are produced by large publishers and typically have both a bigger budget and revenue than non-AAA games.

Although Twine and other indie games have allowed space for queerness to be articulated, it is not enough to only have queerness relegated to the shadows of games with small numbers of players and low distribution. I stand firmly with game writer Samantha Allen (2014) in her article "Closing the gap between queer and mainstream games": "we have to employ a plurality of tactics to bring down the monolith" by both creating indie games and advocating for queer mainstream games (para. 12). The idea that small is good and that big is bad is rather reductive and fails to fully conceptualize the multiple ways in which queerness can be put into games (Allen, 2014, para. 8). It is a stance against a false binary between inclusion of marginalized identities in mainstream games or queering game norms that Naomi Clark herself echoes in "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyway?" (N. Clark, 2017, p. 9). Much like how I use queerness as both an identifier and as a fluid opposition to norms, mainstream visibility and the indie opposition to the hegemony appear to be both useful tools in an already commodified world. Allen uses *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) as an example of a queer game bridging this gap between indie and mainstream, a bridge that has been noted by many other critics studying queerness in games (Shaw, 2016; Bragança, Fantini, & Mota, 2016; Kopas, 2017; Bagnall, 2017). I would add that the *Life is Strange* series also serves as a potential bridge between indie and mainstream, positioning it as a game that rides the line between more mainstream gay option games and indie queer narratives.

While Twine and other indie games help move queerness outside of commodification, there is also a beauty in being seen in the mainstream. Lucien Soulban, an openly gay Ubisoft writer, said in a 2014 interview, "So when are we

going to see that gay protagonist in a AAA game? Not for a while, I suspect, because of fears that it'll impact sales" (Dansky, 2014, para. 15). As of 2018, we now have Tracer, the face of Blizzard's *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), identified as a lesbian, although this took place in a paratextual comic. More importantly, as of 2018's E3 (The Electronic Entertainment Expo) in June, Naughty Dog opened Sony's press conference with a kiss between *The Last of Us'* (Naughty Dog, 2013) deuteragonist Ellie and another woman, Dina. The sequel to one of the most critically acclaimed modern games seems, by all promotional accounts, to not star the main character Joel from the first game, but, instead, Ellie, a queer woman. While the game is not yet out, barring the possibility that the character of Ellie will be killed, it appears to not be shying away from placing a lesbian with visible same sex attraction at the very forefront of not only their promotional material, but also the game itself.

Queer rationale for *Life is Strange* series

Life is Strange is positioned amongst issues of gay option representation and queered mechanics and narrative, especially in a contextual climate where both indie and mainstream games are beginning to openly star non-ambiguous queer women. This is now what I will turn my attention to, asking how a game like *Life is Strange* navigates this climate when it seeks to have a queer narrative while also providing the more neoliberal façade provided by gay options. Does the game's queerness turn to queerbaiting, as some fans have accused it of doing?

Queerness is a difficult thing to pin down in the *Life is Strange* series by virtue of it being a graphic adventure game that relies on choice and by placing the

inclusion or exclusion of queerness as one of the central choices in both games.

There is, of course, the obvious inclusion of queer romance options (Chloe in the

first game and Rachel Amber in the prequel) that queers the game on a

representational level. *Before the Storm* goes one step further to include an explicitly

queer woman, Steph, whose sexuality is not left to choice. Both games are also full of

stereotypical queer female coding: they include punk aesthetics, grunge music, lots

of plaid clothing (notably Chloe, Max, and Rachel Amber all share the same red plaid

shirt throughout the series), and intimate homosocial friendships between women

that echo throughout the games even when the queer options are not selected.

There is also ample queer-coded language in both games. For example, in *Life is*

Strange Chloe asks Max to choose which locker room to explore by asking coyly,

"Boys or girls?" a subtextual sexuality pun (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015

"Episode 3"). If Max selects boys, Chloe calls her a "perv" if she selects girls Chloe

comments, "Girls? Ooh la-la..." (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 3"). In

Before the Storm, one of the first scenes with Rachel Amber consists of Rachel asking

Chloe whether or not she believes in true love and, if the player agrees, Chloe says,

"Sometimes when you meet someone who is going to change your life, you just

know it, I guess..." while looking at Rachel Amber (Garriss, Floyd & Pickersgill, 2017

"Episode 1"). This is a subtextual reference to Chloe having just met—and

potentially fallen in love with—Rachel Amber the night before. Later in the episode,

if Chloe chose "something more" in relation to her relationship with Rachel Amber

she yells at herself, "You know she's fake, yet you can't take your eyes off her"

(Garriss, Floyd & Pickersgill, 2017 "Episode 1"). These are some examples of numerous queer-coded language moments in the game.

There are also multiple examples of queer dialogue/action choices, from the more standard choices to kiss Chloe or Rachel Amber to the more subtle choices to bring Rachel Amber her belt while she is in the middle of changing out of a costume, or Max asking Chloe in episode 3, "You crushed on Rachel?" to which Chloe responds "You would have too. Smart, sexy, and sassy… Like me, right?" (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 3").

Chloe's room in both games include queer artifacts, including a poster of two women about to kiss, Chloe's un-used condoms, and the rainbow wax hand in *Before the Storm.* Another example is Chloe's diary in *Before the Storm* that—regardless of player choice—discusses masturbating to the character of Pris from *Blade Runner*. In the first game, Max's journal entries also hint at queerness regardless of choice. If players decide to not kiss Chloe in episode 3, in episode 4 Max still writes: "I kind of regretted not kissing her when she double dared me." Ashly Burch, the voice of Chloe in *Life is Strange*, acknowledges that "the subject of queerness is present regardless of how you choose to shape Max and Chloe's relationship" (Sloane, 2015). With large amounts of queerness present in the games, even *beyond* choice options, the *Life is Strange* series presents the possibility for a queer narrative. Arguably, *Life is Strange* undermines this possibility by relying on binary choices to represent queerness (to kiss or not kiss Chloe in the original game, for example [see Appendix G]). In comparison, *Before the Storm* holds far more opportunity for a queer narrative by allowing players in the process of romance to change their mind and

accumulate points in a counter mechanic. The intimacy counter adds points

depending on player choices by performing more nuanced actions, like flirting with

Rachel Amber or confessing romantic feelings long before physical intimacy

becomes an option. This format of digital romancing allows for the fluidity that the

original *Life is Strange*'s more essentalistic format simply cannot, on a ludic level,

allow for. By moving beyond binary choice, *Before the Storm* thus engages in

Edmond Chang's (2017b) queergaming design by utilizing a design that "demands

more than window dressing, more than binary choices, and more than the politics of

representation" where "representation must inform mechanics, and mechanics

must deepen and thicken representation" (p. 18). *Before the Storm*, by allowing

players to craft a queer narrative, works toward queering game mechanics

themselves.

Persona 4, in contrast, follows many of the more traditional gaming conventions: a

linear narrative with a special chosen hero who seeks to return the world to order

(Wood, 2017, p. 221)[15]. Like other graphic adventure games, including *Until Dawn*

(Supermassive Games, 2015) and Telltale's episodic games (*The Walking Dead*

series [2012-2018]*, The Wolf Among Us* [2013]*, Game of Thrones* [2014]), the

choices in *Life is Strange* are made by the main character and the game alters the

story (with varying degrees of intensity) to fit players choices. The narrative

branches out, and while often it coalesces back together for a few varied endings,

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[15] This is not to completely deny *Persona 4* all aspects of queer game mechanics. *Persona 4* could be
seen as including some aspects of queer gameplay by including randomized dungeon levels and
unpredictable combinations of monsters that make it difficult to transfer knowledge about
playthroughs or ever truly dominate and understand the full game (Wood, 2017, p. 224).

player choice creates a much more complex web of narrative experiences.[16] In this sense, *Life is Strange* could be seen as a queer game that, because of its mechanics, engages with both queer(er) design and queer(er) play. Queer(er) play, defined by Chang (2017b), is "not grounded in normative ideologies like competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states" and instead focusses on cooperation, ambivalence, exploration, or engages in a Judith Halberstam-esque "queer art of failure" (p. 19). There is no way to "win" either *Life is Strange* game, either narratively or in terms of game mechanics. There are no levels or competition (although there might be some vindication in choosing in-line with the majority), nor are there any meta achievements beyond tracking photographs taken in *Life is* Strange or graffiti done in *Before the Storm.* Instead you explore, you choose, and you experience. It is not a productive game; it is instead a "lean back" game in which, much like other indie ludically queer games such as Merritt Kopa's *Hugpunx* (2013), "you can't fail, unless you think you did based on whatever goal you set for yourself" (Macklin, 2017, p. 253). In this sense, as choice-based games with no win state, both of the *Life is Strange* games engage in queer, unproductive play that is driven by queer game mechanics that refuse to reward players and break away from linear narratives. *Life is Strange* doubles down the queer readings available within it by providing not only representational semiotics representations but also by engaging with queergaming within the mechanics of the game itself.

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[16] In the case of *Life is Strange*, Max is indeed special because of her super hero powers but Chloe in *Before the Storm* has no special power, nor does she seek to return the world to order (in fact, quite the opposite).

Life is Strange's queer contextuality

Before *Life is Strange* catapulted Dontnod Entertainment into the spotlight, its first game, *Remember Me* (2013), was an attempt at an AAA-style game that was met with mediocre sales and mixed reviews (Farokmanesh, 2016, para. 3). After *Remember Me*, Dontnod as a company began to shift from an AAA model and instead modeled itself after smaller companies like Telltale Games (Farokmanesh, 2016). Its next game, *Life is Strange,* was a smaller budget game that included "unsellable" content like female protagonists and was pushed by other companies to change the game's themes. Although not articulated, it is not a stretch to imagine that queer content was on the cutting block because of this outside pressure.

CEO Oskaw Guilbert admitted in an interview with *Polygon* that the success of *Life is Strange* has only solidified their shift from AAA titles to being "like the Sundance Festival of movie independence" or "like HBO in TV" (Farokmanesh, "2016, para. 5). This shift towards becoming a high quality indie producer, and *Life is Strange'*s original position as a smaller budget game outside of the AAA sphere, helps contextualize how the inclusion of a queer romance was possible. That is not to say there was no risk involved. Co-director Michel Koch confirms as much in an interview with *Vice* but then admits: "we never really thought about audience or marketing when making it" (Diver, 2016, para. 3). Much like Twine games and other indie games, this lack of concern for marketing or the audience helps provide the conditions in which queerness could be explored.

Life is Strange's episodic nature means that the "gaps" between seasons or episodes[17], much as with television, open up spaces for queer paratexts to be produced and shared. Not only were paratexts shared between episodes, but a queer context and expectation grew around the game. After the possible kiss between Chloe and Max in episode 3, many players took to forums and social media to discuss the possibility of queerness. By putting ample time between the kiss and the finale (approximately five months), this gave time for fans to build queer readings. For example, Carly Smith (2015), a freelance writer, writes of the third episode:

> I wasn't just idly shipping Max/Chloe with little context... Max kisses a
> dumbfounded Chloe, and the game frames it as a dare and nothing more. Max
> laughs as if she pulled a "gotcha!" on Chloe... I hope episodes 4 and 5 will
> explore their relationship with that in mind. Will these two eventually date
> because of my decision? I really can't tell, but I hope this wasn't a throwaway
> moment because we need to see greater representation. (para. 6-11)

These gaps also helped provide feedback between episodes to help shape the game. Director Raoul Barbet shared that "after episode two we changed a lot, and a lot of players gave us good feedback" (Diver, 2016, para. 5) though the main arc was determined beforehand and the changes were often just additional lines and tweaks (Donato, 2015; Mejia, 2016). Regardless of the changes this points to an awareness of the audience and a response to them.

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[17] Similar to gaps between the *Persona* spin-off games.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm's queer contextuality

Financially, *Life is Strange* had proven to be a smash hit with 3 million unique sales since its release in 2015 (Handrahan, 2017). The inclusion of gay options within the game did not hamper sales. In fact they likely helped generate them thanks to the large queer following around the game. When Dontnod passed the sequel to Deck Nine it followed that Deck Nine, admitted fans of the original game (Conditt, 2017, para. 11), were aware of the queer following the *Life is Strange* series had gathered and how important the game had become to queer people. Lead writer Zak Garris confirmed this in an interview with *Waypoint* (Klepek, 2017, para. 12). In turn, Deck Nine promised to be less ambiguous and far more forthcoming with the queer content in the sequel (Favis, 2017; Klepek, 2017; Riendeau, 2017).

Unlike the previous game where queer readings and expectations were built between episodes, from the first episode queerness was made an option in *Before the Storm*: Chloe could decide if she wanted to be friends or "something more" with Rachel Amber (Garriss, Floyd & Pickersgill, 2017 "Episode 1"). Queer readings were verified not only before the game's release but also through the text itself. The queerness in the game was placed in the forefront. While the quality of the queer content in the first game was not ideal, especially with the *thrilling* final choice between de-sexed queer misery or queer death (see Appendix H), *Life is Strange* provided context that canonical queer narratives were very much an option and would be treated with the same validity as those relating to the heteronormative love interest, Warren.

Grouping a financial motivation for queerness, validity of queer readings, and inclusion of non-homophobic queer options, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* had

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even stronger queer contextuality than its predecessor. However, despite strong

queer contextuality both texts have been accused of queerbaiting. This is a claim

that will be unpacked in what follows, first by looking at the ways in which the

paratextual discourse made the queerness more ambiguous, and then by analyzing

the rationale behind queerbaiting in the *Life is Strange* series.

<div align="center">

***Life is Strange* series' paratexts**
</div>

Tellingly, there are few paratexts surrounding queerness in the original *Life*

is Strange game. In fact, most interviews with the game creators, directors, writers,

and crew pay more attention to *Life is Strange*'s handling of other hot topic issues

like euthanasia and bullying (Donato, 2015; Diver, 2016). In an interview with

Engadget, both creative director Jean-Maxime Moris and artistic director Michel

Koch admitted that they had purposefully made Chloe and Max's relationship

ambiguous as to whether it was romantic, but both also qualified that "it is mostly

still a friendship story before everything" (Conditt, 2014, para. 11). In comparison,

the interviews surrounding *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* focussed largely on the

more prominent queerness in the prequel. Article titles like "How the 'Life is

Strange' Prequel Is Giving Queer Fans More Choices" (Klepek, 2017) and "With

'Before the Storm,' Life is Strange Finally Leans into the Gay" (Riendeau, 2017)

helped create queer expectation. Players were primed with paratexts and

interviews to expect not only explicit queer representation but also for it to also be

high quality representation.

For all the paratextual encouragement of queer readings and the inherent

queerness within the prequel, the creators have not taken an official stance on the

character's queerness. Outside of the game, Chloe, Rachel, and Max's sexualities are still very much akin to "Schrödinger's sexuality" (Harper, 2017, p. 130). Multiple people involved with the game take a similar stance, going against the paratextual "hype" generated around *Life is Strange: Before the Storm's* queerness. Game director Chris Floyd pushed the ambiguity of their relationship in the name of player choice, although he applauds Deck Nine for creating a "non-stereotyped gay relationship" (Conditt, 2017, para. 28). There is a strong overall insistence in interviews and paratexts that the game is purposely ambiguous to leave room to erase a queer narrator in case a player desires a platonic or heterosexual play through (Palm, 2017; Klepek, 2017). This paratextual engagement with queer ambiguity is one that feels at odd given the highly queered text itself and goes against the queer hype and expectations generated for *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, especially with Deck Nine being fans themselves and knowing the large queer following. After all, according to Gray (2010), "hype, synergy, and promos are just as much about *creating* textuality, and about promising value-added" (p. 30), in this case creating a queer textuality and promise.

This also goes against some creators who provided their personal views on the characters' sexualities. After @amberprices interrogated Garriss' dismissive "probably gay chick" to describe Chloe, she stated: "jesus you can't even say it outside of the game." Garriss confirmed this ambiguity, saying "to me, chloe is gay. but other players might make different choices and have different interpretations, and I want to respect that" (@zakgarriss, 2017). Garriss goes on to say that there is intentional ambiguity to her sexuality to provide various interpretations despite

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fans insisting the text itself left little room for ambiguity (see Appendix I). While the fans provided a strongly worded critique of the purposeful ambiguity, Garriss' personal opinion on Chloe does confuse the continuous push for ambiguity. The original voice of Chloe, Ashly Burch, tries to offer a confirmation of Chloe's queerness in her FemHype interview when she says: "I think Chloe is sexually fluid. I don't think she really likes to label herself in any particular way—same with her gender" (Sloane, 2015). Positioning Chloe as queer both in terms of gender and sexuality, Burch goes on to stress: "this isn't canon, this is absolutely just my interpretation" (Sloane, 2015).

Paratextually, there has also been engagement with the negative representation that was ultimately offered at the end of both games. While many of the creators of both games stand behind the endings, there has been some backpedalling. Hostility surrounding *Life is Strange*'s seeming preference for the ending in which Chloe dies so that Arcadia Bay may survive a storm, due to its doubled running time (10 minutes and 10 seconds versus five minutes and ten seconds), have now been addressed[18]. *Life is Strange: Dust* is a forthcoming official comic that promises to resume the story of Max and Chloe following the ending in which Chloe is chosen in exchange for Arcadia Bay's destruction. It remains to be seen if the comic will take an official stance on their relationship[19] or, more likely, continue the trend of ambiguity. In the prequel, Garriss also admitted that it was a

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[18] Chan likewise notices this, stating, "Judging by how the ending with Chloe's death was much more fleshed out than its counterpart, chances are that that is considered the more correct, or "canon" ending (Chan, 2017, para. 11).

[19] It might function like the *Legend of Korra* comic's paratextual confirmation of Asami and Korra's relationship.

point of contention whether or not to include the final scene in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* that depicts Rachel Amber's death in the original game happening off screen, against a cellphone picture of Chloe and Rachel together (see Appendix J). "I will tell you," Garriss said, providing some insight into the debates that circulated and the ultimate decision to override a happy ending with a reminder of queer death, "the flashbulb going off — I didn't want to do that" (Farokmanesh, 2018, para. 6).

While introducing paratexts that recontextualize the series and shift the narrative as a larger text is important, they do arrive too late to provide meaningful representation in the game itself. This is much like how, once a show has been accused of queerbaiting for not following through on a queer narrative, it cannot be erased from the queerbaiting debate even if producers deny it (Ng, 2017, para. 9.3). So too is it difficult to extract a text from accusations of queerbaiting by means of repairing problematic representations through paratexts.

Queerbaiting rationale

Both of the *Life is Strange* games have been accused of queerbaiting (Klepek, 2017; Chan, 2017; Arthur, 2015). Ng's (2017) expanded definition of queerbaiting helps to explain how a series that has the option for canonical queerness can still be seen as queerbaiting by fans. Much like Ng's treatment of *The 100*'s canonical couple Lexa and Clarke and how *The 100* queerbaited because of Lexa's death shortly after the two women have implied sex, Ng (2017) insists: "The crucial element is not a lack of canonicity, but how satisfactory queerness plays out in the canonical text relative to view expectations that emerge from the reading of multiple texts and

paratexts and that take account of queer contextuality" (para. 2.8). In the case of the original *Life is Strange* game the issues of queerbaiting are largely intertwined with the trope "Bury Your Gays." There is a long history of this treatment in film and television, as demonstrated in both Autostraddle's list of 198 dead queer women in television (Berbard, 2016) and the pioneering work of Vito Russo (1981). Russo (1981) tracked queerness in film and often noted queer deaths that were associated with these texts. In particular, Russo points to the connection between homosexuality becoming "literally speakable" in the early 1960s with more prominent and openly gay roles and "gays [dropping] like flies" (Russo, 1981). Similarly, the Hay's Code permitted queer subtextual content or "sex perversion" in film as long as it was used "to characterize the enemy", often resulting in death (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 35) or, in a slightly more positive representation, like in *The Children's Hour* (1961) and *Victim* (1961), suicides. Similar examples include Tara Maclay from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (20th Century Fox Television, 1997-2003) and in video games, Riley Abel in *The Last of Us'* downloadable content *Left Behind* (Naughty Dog, 2014), who is attacked moments after kissing Ellie.

In the *Life is Strange* series, the most damning accusation was regarding the representation of the final choice between rewinding time and letting Chloe die in order to save Arcadia Bay from the time travel-created storm or letting the town be destroyed in exchange for Chloe's life (see Appendix H). Chloe is killed at multiple points within the game: crushed by an oncoming train, hit by a stray bullet, shot in the head by the main villain Mr. Jefferson, and, the death that started it all, being shot by Nathan in the girl's washroom. The narrative revolves around Max

consistently saving Chloe and then, if players decide, engaging in a romantic

entanglement with her. Shann Smith (2017), a writer at Popdust, laments: "The

entire game relied on Max's relationship with Chloe - Max would have never started

on this journey without Chloe. And we have to kill her? Why is this always the twist

that people use? Why do we have to kill another queer woman?" (para. 17). To

reduce the game's final choice to either sacrifice Chloe and, by extension, her newly

queer relationship (as noted earlier, the metatextually less preferable response) or

sacrificing the town, has the potential to feel cruel. While both writer Jean-Luc Cano

and Koch framed the final choice as representing "real life" where "you do make

sacrifices and cannot go back and make the other option," this fails to account for

the very real jeopardy that queer women face (Phillips, 2016, para. 29). Queer

women are aware of the sometimes quite literal sacrifices media has made of them

in the name of returning to the heteronormative standard. From female queer-

coded vampires staked in the heart by the heterosexual male hero to the long

history of lesbian pulp novels, queer women die or suffer miserable endings lest

they be allowed to be happy. Beyond media, the sacrifices that queer women make

in order to live under a patriarchal and heteronormative world are significant and

largely unaccounted for. If *Life is Strange* is meant to represent "real life," perhaps it

does just that rather cruelly. This is without considering the final insult that when

players do choose to save Chloe, the ending results in Chloe and Max limply hugging

and near wordlessly leaving a destroyed Arcadia Bay for parts unknown. In

comparison, the ending where players sacrifice Chloe has the option of Chloe and

Max kissing. The only queer kiss not positioned as a dare is therefore locked behind queer death and inaccessible to fans who wish to defy the trope.

In both *Life is Strange* and also in the final scene of *Before the Storm* Rachel Amber will always die regardless of player choice. For players who decide to romance Rachel Amber in *Before the Storm*, after being shown Chloe and Rachel's "happy ending," they are reminded with a chilling shot of Chloe's 17 missed calls on Rachel Amber's phone in the location of her murder that they retroactively coded two women who will die as queer (see Appendix J). After all, a "different starting context as an interpretive lens" (Harper, 2017, p. 127) can be used to define queer narratives, and, by defining Rachel Amber and Chloe's relationship as queer, players condemn not one but *two* queer women to die. To quote a subtitle in Emily Browne's (2018) article "Life is Strange: Before the Storm broke our hearts in good and bad ways", "We get it, Rachel is dead." It feels needlessly cruel. As Jay Castello (2018), a writer at Rock Paper Shotgun, has said: "It plays like a Marvel cinematic universe tease, as though we are supposed to get excited for the brutal murder of yet another queer female character" (para. 11). Even if Garriss insists in his interview with *The Verge* that this was not meant to be a punch in the stomach to fans and that he regrets including it, Chloe and Rachel's happiness is still relegated to mere seconds before everything is upended (Farokmanesh, 2018, para. 7).

It is also worth interrogating the idea of a queer "happy ending" in the narrative of the game. The "happy ending" is an ending that itself is disappointing due to its lack of variance in comparison to the platonic ending, offering only a small kiss on the cheek between Chloe and Rachel as a culmination of the choices players

made in regards to their relationship. For a game that allows more fluidity in the

romance, it feels like a ludic disconnect between the game's premise of small choices

leading to big changes to be given such a small change to the end state as a "reward."

Life is Strange: Before the Storm was touted as a queer game, one that was well

aware of its LGBTQ community, yet even the small romantic change in the ending is

overwritten. Playing overtop all endings is the song "Bros" by Wolf Alice (2015). As

if the name of the song itself is not enough, a brief sampling of the first few lines is

revealing: "Shake your hair, have some fun/ Forget our mothers and past lovers,

forget everyone/ Oh, I'm so lucky, you are my best friend" (Wolf Alice, 2015). Even

in the fleeting moment of queer intimacy that distinguishes the queer narrative, it is

overwritten by a song insisting and coding the scene as familial and platonic instead

of romantic.

Combining both of the endings in this series together with the queer

contextuality that provides ample room for queer readings and the wavering of the

producer paratexts, illustrate how *Life is Strange* presents a familiar queerbaiting

edge. The inability of creators to move beyond ambiguity and provide a clear

response regarding the characters' relationships and potential sexual identity,

despite both the mandatory queer subtext and optional text, is frustrating. While

this ambiguity offers fluidity in terms of label-less queer potential, when 78% of

players kiss Chloe, 75% of players decided to kiss Rachel Amber, and 75% choose

"something more" regarding Rachel Amber and Chloe's relationship, there is

statistical evidence that three fourths, or the vast majority, of players are seeking a

queered storyline. To state that Max and Chloe are bisexual or pansexual does not

eliminate the ability to produce a male/female or platonic play-through. By denying *all* queerness or queer sexuality is to preserve the hegemony of play and to choose to not alienate the larger audience while still creating queer narratives and games that are queer. In addition to the other ways it negotiates, denies, or provides poor representation, *Life is Strange* as a series uses queerbaiting as an anchor.

Summary of larger genre implications

Textual ambiguity and paratextual confirmations, denials and/or ambiguity at a time of queer contextuality produces queerbaiting regardless of medium. As queerbaiting expands as a concept and is applied to other forms of media, it is useful to look at a few ways that queerbaiting in video games differs from queerbaiting other media. While Eve Ng's (2017) theory of queerbaiting can be applied to video games, there are particular considerations regarding video games as a media form that must be taken into account. How *does* queerbaiting in fairly narratively linear video games like *Persona 4* differ from queerbaiting in television? How might queerbaiting change when player choices alter the narrative and either erase or create queer narrative possibilities like in the *Life is Strange* series?

At the risk of championing the ludic within the ludonarrative debate in game studies and stripping a game down to its bare bones (N. Clark, 2017, p. 8), I would argue that games have the unique ability to include player interaction and consequences resulting from it (Anthropy, 2012, p. 20) that are significant to thinking about queerbaiting as a phenomenon. Representations in games are not only constructed by audiences through the signs they interpret, as with film and

television. Audiences also do this interpretative work with video games, but the addition of code, hardware, and player actions within games means that queer meanings are produced through play itself (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017, p. 3). Issues of ludic and code capacities and player interaction create a unique area for the discussion of queerbaiting in video games.

The ability to hide queerness within the code and hardware is one way that video games represent a new challenge to theories of queerbaiting. Games have long had a tradition of hiding content, including secret levels and other Easter eggs, but when content is hidden in the code or hardware it is far less accessible. While queerness can be denied or encouraged through optional content or deleted scenes in film and television (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002; Ng, 2017), queerness can be hidden within the very fabric of games in ways that are not accessible without the right tools. In the case of *Persona 4,* this includes Yosuke's un-used audio, or, in the case of the *Life is Strange* series, there are large amounts of audio, text, and locations in both games that fans have found inside the game. In the first game, the audio files include Max wondering if she needs to impress men or not, Chloe debating how much Rachel Amber might have loved her, Max calling another girl cute, and one male character calling another a "homo." Notably, in the second game there is cut audio of Rachel Amber's mother in episode 3 saying to Chloe, "Look where you are Chloe, you obviously love my daughter to try so hard." How can these queer moments be accounted for when they are hidden and are only accessible to people with certain technologic skills?

In a marriage of ludic and narrative capacities as players interact with the

story, some games, roleplaying games in particular, offer the chance to interact

narratively. In the case of *Persona 4* and other non-choice-based games, this

represents a unique challenge for queerness as it tends to exist as only flavour text

giving the illusion of choice. When the player can queer the MC through specific

dialogue choices narratively but the ludic capacities of the game do not allow for

these choices to register or change the story, this represents an empty promise of

queerness, echoing the feelings often cited by queer people in response to

queerbaiting. For example, in *Persona 4* you can support Kanji in moments of

homophobia through dialogue choices, but ultimately the game will play out the

same way each and every time you play it (Kaiser, 2015, para. 6). Yosuke will always

say he fears for his safety around Kanji. It is an inevitable part of the game; the event

and dialogue cannot be skipped. Players must engage with homophobia no matter

how they narratively queer their game, ultimately erasing some of the queer

potential that this choice might present. Ludic limitations stop players from

changing the response. Yet, unlike television, this illusion of narrative control

creates a new dimension of queerbaiting in video games: one that queers narratively

but not ludically. That is the crux of these games; the story can only advance with

player input. To continue the game, you must press X. In the case of *Persona 4* this

means that in order to continue the game you *must* seek out Kanji and Naoto's

queerness and, quite literally, destroy it (Youngblood, 2013). The interactivity of the

medium means players have a hand in their own queerbaiting—they chose to press

X, after all. On a deeper level, when applied to choice-based narratives where player

choice forms the core game mechanic, these issues become more pronounced. Much like how gay options games are seen as a neoliberal approach to representation (Shaw, 2015, p. 35), the ability to deny queer narratives through choice shifts the responsibility to players. Unlike more narratively linear games where there is potential for ludic and narrative disconnect when queering a text, when choice *does* matter, is it queerbaiting when players can deny or craft their own queer narratives? Perhaps not. What then defines queerbaiting in these games is when the text itself has a queer narrative at its heart. When players are presented with queer narratives and then are given the ability both narratively and ludically to return it to the hegemonic heteronormativity of gaming, that feels like erasure. By extension, when combined with queer contextuality and paratexts that acknowledge its importance as a queer narrative, it is baiting.

Queerbaiting in video games[20] is akin to wrestling. Unlike television, where consumers must knock on (or kick down) the producers' proverbial doors to canonically change content to reflect queer expectations, video games provide spaces for players to fight for canonical queer representation within the gameplay itself. Paratexts and contextuality, according to Eve Ng's (2017) queerbaiting model, allow queerbaiting in some games, but these must be contextualized within the limits of ludonarrative powers gifted to players in the game. When players are given control of the queerness of their story and can create real, true, queer narratives

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[20] While I have selected one more narratively linear RPG and one choice-based game this still leaves a large amount of games not covered by this thesis. MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) represent one avenue that I did not explore.

beyond gay option games, then queer context and paratexts can only do so much when the real story is in the player's hands. When players are enticed to make choices but are robbed of the queer stories they have built, or are given no choice at all and must destroy or maim queer potential, then, paired with paratexts and contexts battling to encourage or suppress desired queer representation, it is damaging.

Conclusion

"Queerbaiting", much like queerness, slips through time only to reemerge to be rebranded in a manner that reflects the current sociopolitical climate. As media providers and creators become more aware of queerbaiting, it will continue to change, perhaps disappearing only to reappear in the future under a new name. This change is already somewhat apparent in the way Ng's (2017) expanded the importance of paratexts and queer contextuality in her definition of queerbaiting and included in it canonical queer representation that fails to meet the desired representation by fans. Breaking away from the monolithic investigation into queerbaiting in television will hopefully open doors to studying queerbaiting critically in other forms of media, like films or novels. I have also explored and pushed the current definitions to accommodate video games where players are presented with more queer choices and interaction in queer narratives. It theorizes that the uniting theme of queerbaiting, regardless of genres, lies in Eve Ng's (2017) "queer contexts" and "queer paratexts." In this way, this Major Research Paper serves to expand upon and support Eve Ng's definition as a way of viewing failed queer representation in *all* forms of media.

The study of queerbaiting is important as poor, backpedalled, or ambiguous representation is not enough. Playing *Persona 4* was inspiring when I was a teen up until the end of Kanji and Naoto's dungeons because, like me, they were struggling with issues of sexuality and gender. Even more so, *Life is Strange* holds an incredibly tender spot in my heart. I saw so much of myself in Chloe and rejoiced at the chance to experience a queer love story through her eyes. However, the love I have for these video games does not negate the ways in which they encouraged and ultimately failed their queer audiences, myself included. If anything, the queer potential that permeates both texts is a squandered potential, thrown away to appease the hegemonic market.

This recognition is especially painful as queerbaiting is not a new concept, just a new face to the old problem of how to gain the financial support of queer people without providing proper representation in return. Gay window dressing and subtextual coding have been used to address this problem in the past. What is different about queerbaiting is that it is not set against the sociopolitical climate of the 1930s Hays Code era or the queer-curious 1990s. It is set in the 2010s, when queerness is starting to be actively courted, or at least acknowledged, by creators. Queer people are thus encouraged and lured to see this as a new form of commodity exchange, the exchange of their hopes and voices for a chance at being culturally visible. This visibility dance within the "text-paratext-queer contextuality matrix" (Ng, 2017, para. 2.8), and the interrogation that queerbaiting scholarship provides, can not be confined to television alone. To Toby Miller (2006) once again, "Follow the money" (as quoted in Burrill, 2017, p. 31). We must follow the money that can

be had around the inclusion, exclusion, or inference to queerness. We must ask what the commodification of queerness means for queer identity. Anna Campbell (2016) of Medium writes that we must "stop pretending that "queerbaiting" is the *problem*—it's a *symptom*, if anything. And we have to talk about the problem to understand it, and we have to understand it to eventually fix it" (para. 39). While they go on to state that homophobia is the larger problem (and it is certainly a large part of it), I believe it is important to also see queerbaiting as a symptom of the quest for monetary gain. Including queer content might very well increase sales or interest around a show (Gennis, 2014, para. 34), but ultimately the appeal of queerbaiting is the ability to, in the case of non-canonical queerness, appeal to both the queer and hegemonic market and to profit off both without alienating either market. It is having your financial cake and eating it too. Even in instances of poor representation of canonical queerness, most often these clichés and stereotypes come from the pain and death of queer people that has historically found its roots in appeasing the mass market that is presumably not queer.

While I am doubtful that queerbaiting will be challenged until queer people are able to become both social and financial subjects in the fullest sense —what Hennessy (1994-1995) otherwise cautions as a "limited victory" (p. 32), it must continue to be interrogated and understood. Academia and critics alike must critically expand interrogations of queerbaiting, to hunt it down so that it cannot slip back into those shadowy realms queer people have so often populated or to be exploited for the bottom line rather than queer people themselves. For my part, that means carrying an oil torch away from the island of television and to shine a light

onto other forms of media where queerbaiting has been able been deployed without

critical eyes watching. This Major Research Paper aims to make a small first step

toward putting one more stake through its heart.

Appendices

Appendix A

1. Culture, society and politics as intrinsic to semiotics
2. Other semiotic systems alongside verbal language
3. *Parole*, the act of speaking, and concrete signifying practices in other codes
4. Diachrony, time, history, process and change
5. The processes of signification, the transactions between signifying systems and structures of reference
6. Structures of the signified
7. The material nature of signs

Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1988) *Social Semiotics.* New York, NY: Cornell University

Press.

Appendix B

Slightly modified from the LGBTQ Video Game Archive organized by Adrienne Shaw. Shaw's original categories for sorting LGBTQ content in the archive are as follows:

Category
Characters
Romance/Sex/Relationships
Actions
Locations
Mentions
Artifacts
Traits
Narratives
Homophobia/Transphobia
Easter Eggs
Mods

My charts are altered slightly. They include a focused section on character design, dialogue options, and also includes a space for queer video game mechanics. Although Shaw does not list localization on the website's drop down menu or in "Where Is the Queerness in Games?" (Friesem & Shaw, 2016), it is listed on the website's category descriptions and thus is included in my chart.

Category
Characters
└ Character Design
Romance/Sex/Relationships
Actions
└ Dialogue Options
Locations
Mentions
Artifacts
Traits
Narratives
Queer Mechanics
Homophobia/Transphobia
Easter Eggs
Change in Localization
Mods

Each chart uses a yes/no checklist format and cites notable examples of said category in each text where applicable.

Persona 4

Category	Yes/No	Notable examples
Characters	Yes	• Naoto (trans) both implicitly through queer-coded language and explicitly by stating, "Why couldn't I have been born male...?" • Kanji (gay) both implicitly by queer-coded language and explicitly when he states, "Now I can say it straight out... That 'other me' is me."

└ Character Design	Yes	• Naoto's short hair, bound breasts, male uniform • Shadow Kanji's lisp and effeminate expressions
Romance/Sex/Relationships	Maybe	• Naoto is arguably a queer romance option for the MC but since their queerness is recuperated for heterosexual desire, it feels less authentic.
Actions	Yes	• Kanji, Teddie, MC, and Yosuke cross-dressing at the beauty pageant.
└ Dialogue Options	Yes	• MC asking Yosuke: [Do you not like girls...?] • MC in regards to cross-dressing: [I'll give it my all!] • MC being asked who he would date: [Yosuke/Kanji/A girl] • MC when asked if he signed up to crossdress: [Damn straight.]
Locations	Yes	• Kanji's dungeon is modeled after a gay bathhouse.
Mentions	Yes	• Yukiko's shadow refers to Chie as her "prince." • Chie sees a woman on the Midnight Channel and, by proxy of the rumour that your soul mate appears on the Midnight Channel, wonders if her soul mate is a woman. • A schoolgirl questions her sexuality after

		realizing Naoto is a woman.
Artifacts	No	
Traits	No	
Narratives	Yes/Maybe	• Both Kanji and Naoto's queerness permeates *Persona 4* and both deal with the echoing affects of holding a queer identity long after their dungeon is finished. Despite this, due to ambiguous backpedalling on both their narratives, it is hard to say definitively whether they can be queer narratives.
Queer Mechanics	Maybe	• Randomized dungeon and shadow encounters makes it difficult to transfer knowledge (Wood, 2017, p. 224).
Homophobia/Transphobia	Yes	• One female student: "Naoto's that boyish... girlish... whatever, right?" • A random NPC when Yosuke cross-dresses: "Dude, it's terrifying... I can just imagine someone like him sitting across from me on a train!" • Yosuke when Kanji comes into their tent during a camping trip: "Are we gonna be safe alone with you?"
Easter Eggs/Hidden Content	Yes	• Unused audio of a possible Yosuke

		romance route for the male MC
Change in Localization	Yes	• Atlus admits to making some same sex moments more "subtle" (Xu, 2009). • Naoto is asked to change their pronoun in the Japanese version. In the English version it is the pitch of their voice.
Mods	Maybe	• *Persona 4: New Days* is a fan made dating simulator where the MC can date Kanji, Yosuke, or Kou and Daisuke in a poly relationship. It is not a mod, but a separate game.

Life is Strange

Category	Yes/No	Notable examples
Characters	Yes	• Max (bisexual) both implicitly with queer-coded language and explicitly. It is explicit even if you do not kiss Chloe due to comments Max later makes: "The second I saw her blue hair and that beautiful pissed off face, I kind of regretted not kissing her when she double dared me" (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 4"). If the kiss ending is achieved Max confesses that she

		loves Chloe. Max can also date Warren. • Chloe (bisexual, potentially a lesbian). When Max says "I can't see you with any of the guys around here..." Chloe responds: "Because you have a good eye. That's why I was so glad Rachel came along to rescue me." She also admits to having had a crush on Rachel Amber.
└ Character Design	Yes	• Chloe has a punk style, a tattoo, and dyed hair.
Romance/Sex/Relationships		• Max and Chloe can kiss and at the end of the game can share another kiss and say that they love each other
Actions	Yes	• Players have a choice to kiss Chloe.
└ Dialogue Options	Yes	• The player has the choice to say: [You crushed on Rachel?] (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 3")
Locations	No	
Mentions	Yes	• There are many instances of queer coded language throughout the game. • For example, when Max is forced to pick between changing in the empty men's or women's change rooms Chloe comments frame the choice as Max's sexual preference (Cano,

		Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 3").
Artifacts	Yes	• In Chloe's room there are multiple queer-coded posters, including one of two women about to kiss. • Max's journal has multiple entries regarding her feelings around Chloe as the game progresses.
Traits	No	
Narratives	Maybe	• *Life is Strange* has a more essentialized representation of queerness as a "gay option" but there are some hints of inherent queerness through dialogue. The tone and feel of the game is rather sapphic.
Queer Mechanics	Yes	• There is no win state for the game (Chang, 2017b, p. 19).
Homophobia/Transphobia	Maybe	• In the unused audio there is a snippet where Nathan calls Warren a "homo" (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 5").
Easter Eggs	Yes	• Unused audio, including: Max: "She's cute... I wonder what kinda style I'll have in a few years." (Cano, Divine, Barbet & Koch, 2015 "Episode 5")
Change in Localization	N/A	
Mods	Maybe	• In 2016 *Love is Strange*, a fan made dating simulator was created where Max

|		could date four different women from the game. It is not a mod, but a separate fan-made game.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm

Category	Yes/No	Notable examples
Characters	Yes	- Chloe is either a lesbian or bisexual by proxy of starting a relationship to Rachel Amber, but also implied through her - Rachel Amber, by proxy of being in a relationship with her as Chloe - Stephanie is explicitly a lesbian
└ Character Design	Yes	All three women wear stereotypical queer-coded clothing (plaid, beanies, punk aesthetic)
Romance/Sex/Relationships	Yes	Chloe and Rachel can enter into a relationship together at multiple points in the game. They share a kiss and also a kiss on the cheek at the end of the game if this route is chosen.
Actions		
└ Dialogue Options	Yes	Chloe can decide to have "something more" with Rachel Amber, or flirt with Rachel Amber.
Locations	No	
Mentions	Yes	There are many instances of queer

		coded language throughout the game. For example, Rachel Amber asks Chloe if she can fix the truck in the junkyard, if Chloe selected that she "definitely" can, with an intimacy counter of over 5, Rachel Amber responds with "That's hot" (Garriss, Floyd & Pickersgill, 2017 "Episode 2").
Artifacts	Yes	• In Chloe's room there is a rainbow wax hand, poster of two women about to kiss • Chloe's journal includes her admitting she masturbated and thought of a woman, and if her relationship with Rachel Amber becomes romantic the journal includes her thoughts about it • Chloe can use a rainbow beach towel in her truck repairs
Traits	No	
Narratives	Yes	• The game is inherently queer regardless of choice due to Rachel Amber's agency to define their relationship in both episode 1 and 2 outside of Chloe's/the player's choice. • Chloe's sexuality is hinted to outside of choice due to her admitting

		masturbating to Pris from Bladerunner. • It has a large queer fan base due to the queer-nature of the narrative (Klepek, 2017, para. 12).
Queer Mechanics	Yes	• There is no win state for the game (Chang, 2017b, p. 19) • It utilizes a more fluid form of romance through an intimacy counter.
Homophobia/Transphobia	No	
Easter Eggs	Yes	• Unused audio including Rachel's mother telling Chloe, "Look where you are Chloe, you obviously love my daughter to try so hard" (Garriss, Floyd & Pickersgill, 2017 "Episode 3")
Change in Localization	N/A	
Mods	No	

Appendix C
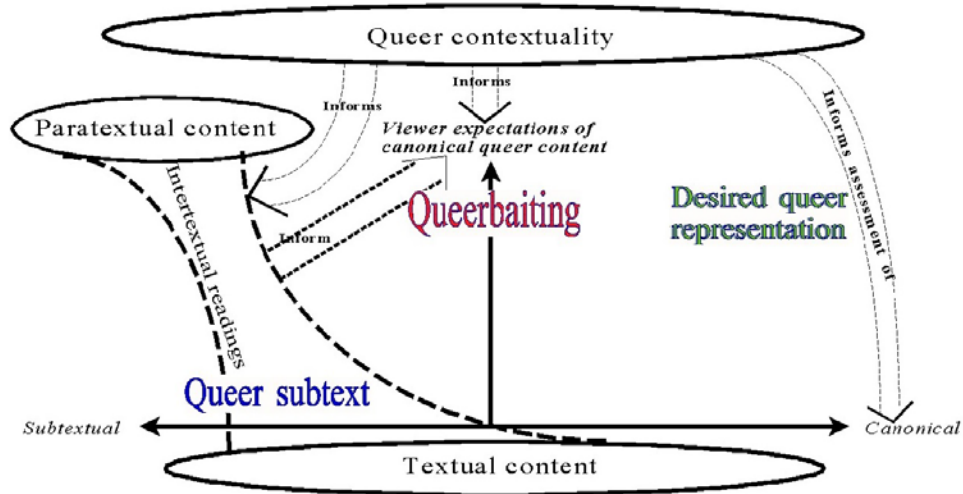
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10.3983/twc.2017.917.

Appendix D

Persona 4. (2018). Atlus. PlayStation 2.

Appendix E

Persona 4. (2018). Atlus. PlayStation 2.

Appendix F

Persona 4: Golden. (2012). Atlus. PlayStation Vita.

Appendix G

Life is Strange. (2015). Dontnod. PlayStation 4.

Appendix H

Life is Strange. (2015). Dontnod. PlayStation 4.

Appendix I

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might make different choices and have different interpretations, and I want

to respect that [Tweet]. Retrieved from

https://twitter.com/zakgarriss/status/

943556824296509441

Appendix J

Life is Strange: Before the Storm. (2017-2018). Deck Nine. PlayStation 4.

Appendix K

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Dragon Age: Inquisition. (2014) BioWare. Xbox 360.
Dys4ia. (2012). Newgrounds. Internet.
Gone Home. (2013). Fullbright Company, 2013. Macintosh Computer.
Persona 4: Golden. (2012). Atlus. PlayStation Portable.
The Last of Us: Left Behind. (2014). Naughty Dog. PlayStation 4.

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    Episode 1: Chrysalis [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange. Dontnod

    Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Cano, J., Divine, C., (Writers), Barbet, R. & M. Koch (Directors). (2015, March 24).

Episode 2: Out of Time [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange. Dontnod

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Episode 3: Chaos Theory [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange. Dontnod

Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Cano, J., Divine, C., (Writers), Barbet, R. & M. Koch (Directors). (2015, July 28).

Episode 4: Dark Room [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange. Dontnod

Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Cano, J., Divine, C., (Writers), Barbet, R. & M. Koch (Directors). (2015, October 20).

Episode 5: Polarized [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange. Dontnod

Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

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Garriss, Z. (Writer), Floyd, C. & W. Pickersgill (Director). (2017, August 31). Episode

1: Awake [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange: Before the Storm. Deck

Nine. PlayStation 4.

Garriss, Z. (Writer), Floyd, C. & W. Pickersgill (Director). (2017, October 19). Episode

2: Brave New World [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange: Before the

Storm. Deck Nine. PlayStation 4.

Garriss, Z. (Writer), Floyd, C. & W. Pickersgill (Director). (2017, December 20).

Episode 3: Hell is Empty [Episodic video game]. In Life is Strange: Before the

 Storm. Deck Nine. PlayStation 4.

Persona 4. (2018). Atlus. PlayStation 2.

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