USING ROLE-PLAYING GAMIFICATION TO CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR LGBT STUDENTS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

Emma Kostopolus

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the
Department of English and Philosophy
University of Central Missouri
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This thesis examines how applying gamification (the practice of using games and game-based mechanics) in the composition classroom can help foster a safe environment for expression for members of the LGBT community. Role-playing games (RPGs) – both video games and classic tabletop games – allow players to create distinct, unique characters in a game-world that is entirely separate from their real-world identities. While acting as these characters, queer players can experiment with and express facets of their gender and sexual identities in a safe and non-judgmental space, something that they may not be able to do in their real lives. By turning the composition classroom into a gamified experience with role-playing elements, teachers will be creating safer spaces for students from marginalized communities to share their experiences. Since unhindered expression is extremely important to the writing process, making sure that the composition classroom is a place where all students can freely discuss and share ideas will not only help queer students find acceptance within academia, but improve the overall quality of instruction and increase the potential for learning and student growth.
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A Thesis

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Many members of society view the idea that video games can have lasting social and educational import with disbelief. People tend to associate various forms of electronic entertainment – video games chief among them – with laziness and passivity, and do not generally consider them to contain anything of constructive value. This myth is something that contemporary rhetoric and new media scholars have begun to dispel. The incredible learning potential inherent in the interactive nature of video games has already been amply proven by scholars like James Paul Gee; in order for games to function, they have to fully engage and to some degree immerse the player in their experience. And not only can video games be used for education purposes in a traditional classroom environment, but the mechanics and philosophy of game design can specifically instill important prosocial attitudes and promote acceptance of the LGBT community through player choice and experience. To put it simply, Role-playing games create a safe space for people to experiment and come to terms with being members of the LGBT community in an isolated and non-judgmental way, as well as work to familiarize and humanize queer individuals for younger and more impressionable gaming demographics.

The issue of representation for people not stereotypically associated with gamer culture – i.e., anyone who is not a straight white male – is a pressing one, since video games are rapidly increasing in popularity and accessibility, and are on their way to becoming one of the most prevalent entertainment media of the early 21st century. As video games grow and reach a larger audience, the medium needs to become more inclusive and representative of its diverse players.
Games that attempt inclusive representation are taking an important first step for queer and marginalized communities in the world of video gaming.

This chapter seeks to situate a discussion of gaming and representation within the larger scholarly discourse of queer theory. Video games are not often subject to the same critical scrutiny as other forms of media such as literature or film. By using the work of established queer theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as well as the thought of scholars who work in technology and new media studies, gamers and game theorists can evaluate video games for their rhetorical merit.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” introduces the concept of the male gaze. The gaze dictates the way that movies and other forms of visual media are constructed. Specifically, things like cinematography are machinated in order to suit the preferences of heterosexual males. The female form is often accentuated by things like lighting and screen time, and female characters are not presented as nuanced subjects, but as sexual objects for the visual gratification of male audience members, as well as for the male characters in the film. According to Mulvey, women act as a “signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions” by “imposing them on the silent image” of the other, who acts as a “bearer of meaning,” a passive vessel for the viewer’s perceptions (834). Essentially, this means that in any piece of media, viewers need to be wary not just of their own preconceived notions and biases, but those of the work’s creators, since those biases will affect the way information is presented. Viewers cognizant of the gaze can never accept a work uncritically, but must always consider the ways in which what they are being given has been influenced by the dicta of traditional masculinity.
While Mulvey’s concept of the gaze is originally applied only to women in film, many of the same ideas and issues can be applied to the presentation of queer identities in other media. In addition to non-cisgendered males, people of non-heterosexual orientations are also often placed in positions of marginalization or otherness, and thus are still bound by the perceptions and expectations of mainstream heteronormativity. The male gaze is largely informed by notions of traditional masculinity, which is threatened by ideas of gender non-essentialism, gender fluidity, and homosexuality. This means that representations of queer characters, even those created by LGBT-friendly designers, need to be examined critically by the players, because they could still perpetuate toxic stereotypes. The gaze does not need to be consciously applied to a work by the creators; internalized notions of heteronormativity are often present even in the most well-meaning ally.

In the world of role-playing games, the concept of the gaze is complicated by the level of involvement the player has in the construction and development of the narrative. Instead of having a static work that was created by one person with one set of perspectives that influence the whole, RPGs allow players to interact with the game-world however they so choose, and so the world must be able to accommodate a multiplicity of perspectives and desires. RPGs that take place outside of the (still fairly structured) space of a video game, such as tabletop games like the iconic Dungeons and Dragons, are even more fractured in their ability to preserve a unified gaze, since rather than players interacting within the pre-existing, limited framework of the game, the players are the sole architects of the game-world. The question of the gaze is twofold: how can players efficiently and objectively identify the gaze in a work they created for themselves, and how does the interplay of gazes generated by multiple players in the same game affect the creation of the game-space?
The question is easier to answer in the case of video-game RPGs, where players only help to shape their personal experiences within an already existing game world, since they can assess the gaze of the creators and adjust their perceptions and in-game actions accordingly. In tabletop games where there are no visual representations of the game world except what the players themselves may create, it would at first appear that the issue of the gaze has been resolved: there cannot be a gaze if there is nothing to gaze at. What actually happens, however, is that the gaze becomes problematized, because each player is visualizing the game scenarios, but there can be no way to reach effective consensus about how things or people are represented with only the tools provided by the game. In order to combat the multitude of gazes going on in a non-video game RPG, such as a session of Dungeons and Dragons or a gamified classroom, every participant needs to be critical of how the other players are constructing the game space. This does not mean that players should contradict or shut down other players’ interpretations of scenes or events, but that everyone should work together to reach a consensus about the world they are moving through.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s The Epistemology of the Closet deals with the nature and motivations of how queer identities are viewed in society, as well as how overly simplistic ideas of gender and sexuality are inherently damaging to society. Sedgwick asserts that society feels that everyone is “necessarily assignable” to both “a male or female gender” and “a homo- or hetero-sexuality” (2). This sexual assignment is “a binarized identity…full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence” (2). This black-and-white designation also, according to Sedgwick, leaves “no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherencies of homo/heterosexual definition” (2). This statement supports the idea that, not only is the inclusion of queer identities in video games important, but that these
identities – or at least preconceptions about the gender and sexual orientations of the characters – are always already present, and thus must be dealt with in any critical examination of a game. Sedgwick goes on to discuss how the differences between sexuality and gender can never be truly separated, and that neither of these issues can ever be sectioned off as a distinct, isolated problem:

For this reason, and because the structuring of same-sex bonds can’t, in any historical situation marked by inequality and contest between genders, fail to be a site of intensive regulation that intersects virtually every issue of power and gender, lines can never be drawn to circumscribe within some proper domain of sexuality (whatever that might be) the consequences of a shift in sexual discourse. (2-3)

This idea effectively negates the complaints of the archetypal gamer community (i.e., straight white males) who rail against “social justice warriors” unnecessarily inserting issues of gender and queerness into games. The unconscious categorization of everything into binaries of sex and gender means that these issues are present whether or not the creators intend them to be, and that all they can do is attempt to create positive, nuanced depictions of characters in gameplay, rather than depictions that perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Judith Butler is most famous for her theory of gender as performance, in which roles and behaviors typically associated with being either male or female are not the product of biological imperatives but are learned traits conditioned into people through society’s expectations. Her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* outlines her ideas about the performed nature of gender, as well as discussing how people’s physical presentations of gender and sex are effected and influenced by societal scrutiny:
“the body” appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. (12-13)

This highlights the importance not just of recognizing performance, but of gender presentation in general. This means that fictional characters, such as those created in role-playing games, are already subject to players’ notions about their gender and sexuality, before they even begin interacting with the players. Thus, performance is not just about what people do, but about how they look, and perceptions based on physical appearance can color how all of a given character’s actions are interpreted.

Butler’s assertion that the body is an essential part of performance is complicated in several ways by the nature of role-playing games. Everything in a role-playing game is already a highly conscious and constructed performance, including the gender presentation and sexual orientation of a player character. However, this performance is filtered through the player’s real-life gender performance, a large part of which may be unconscious. In order to effectively understand the ways in which gender is being performed in a role-playing game, players need not just examine the ways in which the other players’ characters are being consciously performed (which can say a lot in and of itself about the way the player sees the different genders, especially if players are acting as a character of a different gender than themselves), but how the players themselves present their gender, in order to better understand all the layers of performance at work.
Video games are known for being able to engage the player and convey information in an immersive context. In a game where the environment is distinct and separate from the world outside, players need to create a new identity in which to move through the game, since their “real-world” identities are not compatible with the new world they must navigate. The creation and enactment of this game identity is a type of performance, not just of gender and sexuality, but of all the aspects of a person (although, as Sedgwick points out, there are not any parts of personality that are without some kind of gendered or sexuality-based assumption). And while the performance of a person’s real-life gender and sexuality can be in large part unconscious, a game identity is consciously curated; this means that players can use a game to intentionally perform a gender or sexuality different from the way they present themselves elsewhere.

The benefits of performative immersion are not only helpful for traditional execution of an educational experience – offering up facts, teaching critical thinking, etc. – they also encourage exploration and self-discovery on the part of the player. This exploration is also not limited to the purely intellectual; it can impact the social and emotional development of the player as well. As Kurt Squire says in his book on video games and participatory culture, the “possibility spaces” of games “are deeply social, even in single player games” (10). This is particularly true of role-playing games, or games wherein players are allowed to construct the character who they move through the game-world as, rather than being given a prefabricated avatar with distinct characteristics. Even in a game where the main campaign does not offer any opportunities to engage with other players either online or locally, players still must construct an identity for themselves in order to navigate the virtual world of the game, and this identity can and often does have consequences for the player’s identity in the reality outside of the game space.
As acclaimed games scholar Ian Bogost says in *How to Talk about Videogames*, “Videogames are narcissistic. They are about you, even when they put you in someone else’s shoes …. We may think we play videogames to be someone or something else, but inevitably we do so to be ourselves as well – ourselves in the guise of someone else” (1912). No matter the circumstances, players bring parts of their original identities into the gameplay, and who players are in the reality outside the game influences their in-game choices. The choice to enter a game world and play as another character is always, in some form, the act of experimenting with a new and different identity, whether it be trying on the life of a ready-made action protagonist or a custom RPG character.

The identity that the player constructs for the purposes of the game does not originate in a vacuum; it is informed by the rules of the fictional universe that it exists in, as well as the needs and desires of players in regards to how they wish to tailor their experience. In turn, character-creation mechanics are designed by the developers to predict the various ways in which people might want to build their in-game identity. Thus, the content of the game itself and the identities constructed by players are deeply interrelated, and each informs how the other acts in the game. This is one of the key principles in the argument constructed by James Paul Gee about how video games can be productively used in education. This content, according to Gee,

… gets made in history by real people and their social interactions. They build that content in certain ways because of the people they are (socially, historically, culturally), the beliefs and values they share, and their shared ways of talking, interacting, and viewing the world. That content comes to define one of their important identities in the world. (28)
This idea can be readily applied not just to the transferal of information, but to the creation and acceptance of LGBT identities. The continual creation and reinforcement of diverse identities in games allows both for members of the LGBT community to move through a game world with their orientation intact and to teach acceptance of non-heterosexual identities to people otherwise steeped in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality.

Using virtual reality and cyberspace to assume new identities is a trend long recognized by the larger community. Lisa Nakamura specifically discusses the use of “identity tourism” by people in privileged social groups to adopt personae of oppressed or marginalized communities in online chat forums for pleasure and excitement (442). Nakamura’s research is focused on the detrimental effects of identity tourism, mainly in terms of increased racial stereotyping when minority identities are adopted by Caucasian internet users for the purposes of escapist fantasy. Racial identity tourism is essentially used by members of the dominant culture to delve into hyperbolized, exoticized versions of minority groups, thus allowing them to deny the complex lives and diversity inherent to any group of people in favor of harmful one-dimensional perspectives. This is an incredibly harmful phenomenon that works to the detriment not only of the targeted ethnic group, but of whatever digital community the identity tourist is a part of, since other participants can now be exposed to toxic ideas about racial identity; members of the ethnic group that is being “toured” would be particularly negatively affected, since this harmful discourse already has a tangible impact on their daily lives and has now permeated what is meant to be a place of escape from reality.

This concept can also be used for an opposite effect, however, if the participant is assuming new sexual or gender identities instead of racial ones. The critical difference lies in societal assumptions surrounding gender and orientation that queer people must deal with and
Compulsory heterosexuality is the concept that, in a given cultural context, people are assumed to be straight and cisgendered. Pervasive assumptions of heterosexuality are harmful to members of the LGBT community, since these assumptions commonly come with value judgments: straight and cisgendered are “normal” and “right,” while queer identities are “strange” and “wrong.” While these assumptions may not be recognized on a conscious level, the implications they carry are significant in the oppression they enact on a group already consciously marginalized by society.

Compulsive heteronormativity is the reason that sexuality and gender-based tourism is not only radically different from racial tourism, but essential to developing queer identities. Rather than donning a persona that they do not and cannot possess in the world outside of the game, as is the case with racial identity tourism, people can explore behaviors and actions associated with different genders and sexualities as a means of self-identification in an environment where being straight and cisgendered is not the norm. This allows members of marginalized communities to explore facets of their identities that they feel the need to conceal in the “real world,” for fear of receiving conscious or unconscious negative bias. In this way, identity tourism functions as an important tool for self-exploration and discovery. People can use role-playing games to explore their sexualities by romancing same-sex partners in a private, risk-free environment.

The lowered risk of a video game environment is crucial to the safe space it creates for members of the LGBT community. Video games act as a venue in which fear of failure, rejection, or social ostracism are practically non-existent; even if players engage in an action they later regret, they can simply load a previous save and choose a different narrative path the next time the choice presents itself. This is an instance of what psychologist Eric Erickson calls a
“psychosocial moratorium,” or a “learning space in which the learner can take risks where real-world consequences are lowered” (Gee 59). Even in light of recent social movements geared towards greater acceptance of the LGBT community, the process of “coming out” still contains the distinct possibility of negative social consequences. Video games possess unique qualities that allow for “self-protection, self-restoration, and … personal transformation,” according to Lorentz, Ferguson, and Schott, that can aid those “facing traumatic or challenging” events, such as the prospect of openly revealing their status as an LGBT individual (np). Games can allow players to come to terms with their orientation and let them experiment with how they want to function and present as an LGBT person without the fear of rejection or bullying that may accompany such actions in the real world.

In addition to allowing players to move through the game world with a queer identity, some RPGs already include representation in the game, through the presence of non-player characters (NPCs) with distinct LGBT identities. These characters exist in the narrative and interact with the player, regardless of whether or not players themselves are presenting a queer persona. This choice on the part of the game’s development team has implications beyond simple storytelling: by forcing players to confront non-heterosexual identities, these games are working to normalize the presence of LGBT people in contexts outside of the queer community.

Unfortunately, not all games deal with queer representation in a universally positive way. Some games, rather than having queerness built into the game as a presence that cannot be altered or done away with, allow players to determine the level of LGBT content that they encounter. Stephen Greer explores the benefits and pitfalls of games that present queer identities in this way in his article on “affordances for sexuality” in video gaming. Greer defines affordances as “the ways in which the player is able to express his or her wishes ‘in role’ as
player character in relationship to the game designer’s conception of that role” (7). This definition is handy because it deals not only with how the player chooses to create and act out their own character in games with customization options and role-playing features, but also with how the player character chooses to have their avatar interact with other NPCs in a sexual/romantic context. Greer asserts that “custom queerness play” can be detrimental to the idea of inclusivity in a digital experience, and he states that “[a] designed neutrality towards gender and sexuality, then, describes a kind of inconsequentiality that marks the border of meaningful inclusion – where the act of inclusion may be ignored without penalty” (11). The “seeming disappearance” of queer identities in gameplay, then, is entirely due to player choice, but is still “counter-intuitive” to the ideas of representation that prompted LGBT options in the first place (11). In spite of these pitfalls, however, Greer does point out that allowing players to ease in to the ideas of queerness may actually have positive outcomes for both the individual player and society at large:

… the very existence of those parallel alternatives – in games whose branching narratives invite multiple excursions – may open up a queering discourse. Do we play “straight” differently, knowing that there are other, active alternatives? Might knowledge of simultaneous other selves offer a route past the preconception of sexual orientation as always directed towards a singular object choice of same or ‘other’ sex? (15)

When viewed in this light, allowing players to control the amount of LGBT content they experience could actually prompt self-reflection and experimentation with identities the player would not have otherwise considered. Only having characters with contingent queer identities, however, still means that people can safely avoid confronting issues of their own
heteronormative assumptions and continue to deny or ignore the presence of queer people in
gaming spaces.

As Krobova, Moravec, and Svelch suggest, “heterosexualization can be even more
implicit” than what takes place at the level of game content (np). They claim it can “be simply
inscribed into the game mechanics and the rules of the games” themselves (np). Prioritizing
things like ease of developing – having one stock arc for both straight and gay romance means
no special coding for encounters based on player gender or re-recording lines of dialogue –
reinforces ideas of compulsory heterosexuality. In cases of “custom queerness” game design,
NPCs act in identical ways toward their romantic partner regardless of the player character’s
gender, and in a society that implicitly codes all behavior not specifically identified as LGBT as
heteronormative, this means that gamers who want to engage in LGBT romance options get a
straight romance with a same-sex partner plastered over the top. Treating queer identities as an
afterthought in this manner is damaging and disrespectful, and it poses the question of why these
developers chose to include LGBT romance options at all.

Beyond simply creating safe spaces for LGBT individuals to explore their identity, video
games also function as powerful educational tools that can help sway public opinion and bring
about greater acceptance and representation of non-heteronormative people. A study done by
Martinez, Samaniego, and Martinez de Morentin in 2015 shows a positive correlation between
the playing of video games and the transmission of “certain values” to the players (230). While
the study focused particularly on the presence of certain positive values like loyalty or
compassion in games played by adolescents, the idea that games can act as vehicles of social
change through altering public opinion means that inclusion of distinct LGBT identities in
gameplay is not only significant for self-identified “gaymers,” but for society as a whole. Seeing
player characters and other NPCs in positive interaction and healthy romance with LGBT characters humanizes and normalizes the non-heteronormative for players, particularly young or adolescent gamers who have not yet fully codified their expectations of the “normal.” These formative experiences contribute to an eventual overarching view of justice and morality concerning the treatment of LGBT individuals. As Craig John Newbury-Jones puts it:

… video games create an active experience, going beyond mere observance and making the player participate in the construction of narrative and in-game decision making. Where themes of justice are concerned, it is the individual player that becomes the arbiter of justice. (79)

Placing players in this position of decisive power allows them to weigh the consequences of their actions and look at moral situations with new gravity, while still in a low-risk, no-failure environment.

As has been pointed out several times by many different scholars (Shaw and Krobova come immediately to mind), even when games do not explicitly present a hostile environment to queer players, the game environment more often than not carries with it assumptions of heteronormativity. This is due in part to the continued assumption in the gaming community and amongst video game developers that the majority consumer base is composed of straight Caucasian cis-males. There are even substantial portions of the gaming community that display homophobic tendencies, such as the use of “gay” or “faggot” as pejoratives during competitive online play.

Video games that include choice allow players not only to customize the experience of their play, but can instill ideas about morality that expand beyond the scope of a single game. In a study done concerning the possibilities of game design for teaching prosocial values, Kaufman
and Flanagan assert that “by leveraging the unique benefits and affordances of games and play to facilitate personal growth and to address pressing social concerns, game designers and researchers have the ability to make a tangible lasting impact on society through their work” (np). They go on to claim that “games can encourage positive shifts in the hearts and minds of players,” through things like which themes the games choose to address and how they portray different demographics of people (np). By constructing multifaceted interactions with positively-portrayed queer characters, video games encourage self-reflection of the player’s actions in the world outside of the game and can effect positive social change.

Working on this assumption about the persuasive power of video games, it becomes apparent that the importance of positive LGBT representation in games is multifaceted: not only do these depictions allow members of this marginalized community a space to explore and express this part of themselves, but they serve to further acceptance and integration of LGBT identities into “mainstream” popular culture. Video games command a powerful consumer base and continue to grow in popularity, yet there has been shockingly little done in terms of diversifying who is represented by game content.

Inclusive queer gameplay sets a new precedent for embracing LGBT identities within the world of video games. Queer characters are given distinct personalities that neither overlook nor overplay their gender and sexuality, and LGBT issues are presented in a nuanced and sensitive manner. By giving queer NPCs a role other than “optional sex object,” games give members of the LGBT community a safe space to explore their own identities and escape from compulsory heterosexuality in a low-risk environment. Positive depictions of marginalized communities also helps humanize queer individuals and promotes acceptance in the “real world”; no matter how you play these games, the queer community wins
Chapter Two: Examples of Games and Representations

The previous chapter presented the theories that lay the groundwork for the conjecture of this thesis. Theory in and of itself, however, does not make a strong argument when discussing pieces of media and their real-life repercussions. Thus, this chapter presents several examples of LGBT representation in video games and examines the impact of said representation on both the queer community and the larger gaming community, composed of both queer and cisgendered/heterosexual members. While the main focus of the chapter deals with various types of role-playing games, from single player to entirely multiplayer experiences, examples from other genres of games are brought in to demonstrate the breadth of representation in video games as a whole. The representations also differ in positivity: in order to get an accurate picture of the way in which the queer community is presented in gaming, damaging and toxic representations cannot be ignored.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition*

In 2014, Bioware, a division of the video gaming company Electronic Arts (EA), released the third iteration of their popular high-fantasy role-playing series, *Dragon Age*. The new game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, quickly garnered praise for its graphic design, quantity of available in-game content, and nuanced storyline with outcomes that can be drastically altered at several key points by the player’s choices, something that Bioware has long been known for. The game also, however, came under scrutiny from sections of the gaming community for its inclusion of several characters who identify as LGBT. The controversy specifically originates in that Bioware allows the player character to initiate and develop romantic relationships with certain other non-
player characters. Since one of the biggest draws of the franchise is the emphasis on player choice, some gamers were displeased with their inability to romance NPCs regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; why is it, they ask, that a straight male player character cannot romance the NPC who identifies as a lesbian, or a straight female cannot woo the gay man? Surely, limitations like these place unfair restrictions on the players’ experience.

In actuality, by including distinct non-heterosexual identities, Inquisition displays a forward-thinking view of inclusivity that provides invaluable services and experiences to gamers, particularly adolescents. By presenting the player with the option to romance characters with differing and complex sexualities, Bioware is creating a safe space for people to experiment and come to terms with being members of the LGBT community in an isolated and non-judgmental way. Spaces like these are essential to the community, in that they also serve the purpose of familiarizing and humanizing queer individuals.

Inquisition broke ground with its inclusion of three characters representing identities that do not often receive nuanced treatment in video games: Sera, a female elf who is only attracted to other females; Dorian, a male mage – in-game language to indicate a magic user – who is only attracted to other males; and Cremisius Aclassi, a male-identifying transgender mercenary. Even if the player character does not choose to romance these characters, their identities are still apparent. If left alone by the player, all three characters will engage in relationships with other NPCs. Dorian’s sexuality is actually the impetus behind a side quest the player can choose to engage in that attempts to reconcile the mage with his estranged father. Furthermore, Cremisius, or Krem, cannot be romanced by the player character yet still retains his distinct identity, demonstrating that LGBT identities exist and are relevant outside of the context of sexual encounters. Thus, Inquisition not only gives LGBT gamers a safe space in which to pursue
aspects of their identity, it reinforces the idea that their identity is a valid and important part of themselves outside of purely sexual endeavors.

The safe spaces presented by Bioware in *Inquisition* are incredibly important to LGBT gamers, especially when considered against the depictions of sexuality and romantic attraction presented in other popular video game titles released around the same time. The distinction of release date is significant, because it shows that equal representation of identities is not an issue of the past for the video gaming industry, and is in fact something that several prominent developing companies have neglected to really work on at all. Instead, these companies reinforce heteronormative expectations of behavior, whether implicitly or explicitly, through their games’ content. This “ideological problem,” as Adrienne Shaw refers to it, is significant because even though there is already a storied history of gamers “queering the text” of the games they play, “not being referred to in the public discourse” is a form of “Althusserian ‘symbolic annihilation’” (231). In other words, by refusing to acknowledge the identities of a specific group of players, developers are telling “gaymers” that their lives and experiences are not significant enough to merit inclusion in the world of the game.

In *Inquisition*, the player character can increase an NPC’s opinion of them through choosing specific dialogue options and completing a side special side quest that relates to that NPC, often called “personal” or “companion” quests. Dorian’s companion quest depicts a situation that many members of the LGBT community are all too familiar with: reuniting with an estranged parent after coming out and being rejected¹. The player character accompanies Dorian to a meeting with his father, wherein Dorian both officially “comes out” to the player and reveals

that he left home after his father attempted a form of magic-based conversion therapy on him without his consent. The player can choose to have their character be enraged and leave immediately, taking Dorian with them, or to attempt to help Dorian reconcile with his father, who has come to seek forgiveness and admit that he was wrong.

While many LGBT people never get a chance at reconciliation in their own lives, this is still a significant experience that resonates with the queer community because it acknowledges that sexual difference can lead to conflict. The pain that Dorian goes through as he decides whether or not to forgive his father is something that queer gamers can relate to in a way they cannot in a heteronormative gameplay experience. The inclusion of this quest is very important in terms of representation because it presents a pivotal experience for a queer character, humanizes them, and presents the pain they feel as valid.

Krem is not available as a companion or a romance for the player character, so there is no side quest associated with his character. Instead, the game puts the experience of exploring Krem’s queer identity entirely in the hands of the player with a series of dialogue options. Krem is introduced as part of a band of mercenaries, The Chargers, led by another of the player’s companions, a man called The Iron Bull. Iron Bull is a member of a race of people called the Qunari, and he is visually differentiated from other characters by his grey-toned skin, large stature, and horns reminiscent of the animal for which he is named. When the player character approaches The Chargers in an in-game tavern, they walk into a conversation about breast-binding, which is the first indication the player receives that Krem is transgender. The player can then have their avatar enter the conversation in several different ways, including bluntly asking

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“Are you a woman?” (Dragon Age: Inquisition). Depending upon the nature of the player’s statement, Krem either responds calmly or derisively, and Iron Bull steps in with an explanation of the “aqun-athlok,” the Qunari term for transgender individuals (Dragon Age: Inquisition). Even though Krem is human and not Qunari, Iron Bull is firm in his statement that Krem “is a real man” and should be treated as such. Later on, Iron Bull will tell the player character that neither he nor they are in any position to decide what’s “normal,” effectively cutting off further inquiry by the player into the legitimacy of Krem’s gender.

By situating the game’s longest exposure to Krem in a dialogue over which the player has control, Bioware is letting the player respond to the existence of trans* identities in whatever way they choose (either understandingly or reactionarily), and then inserting a teachable moment about the difference between genitalia and gender identity. This is a large step forward for the gaming community, where discussion of transgender individuals was previously limited to attempts at humor through depictions of “crossdressing” cisgender characters (the popular Final Fantasy series is guilty of this in several of its games).

Inquisition also succeeds at not allowing the relative novelty of a queer identity in gaming to prevent the creation of a nuanced, valuable character. All three LGBT NPCs (Dorian, Sera, and Krem) are “out” early in the game as queer. These aspects of them, however, are not the only significant trait that the player character learns about them, and all NPCs contribute substantially to the plot of the game in ways that have nothing to do with their LGBT identity. In this way, Bioware succeeds in making the player aware of the importance of sexual orientation

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and gender identity to whom these characters are, while not falling in to the trap of making their LGBT status their only defining trait.

**Fallout 4**

Many other games possess romance options for the player character, mechanically similar to those presented by Bioware, but without the specific emphasis on representing and validating different queer identities. These games allow the player to customize the level of queerness they encounter in their gameplay by having potential partners, while ostensibly all bisexual, present in a heteronormative manner unless otherwise prompted by the player. This is a philosophy of game design directly opposed to *Inquisition*’s, which has romance options with distinct sexual identities that they perform regardless of the orientation of the player’s character.

Bethesda Softworks is a company most well-known for *Fallout* and *Elder Scrolls*, two series applauded for their sprawling open-world environments, hundreds of hours of gameplay, and heavy emphasis on player choice to tailor the experience of the game. In Bethesda’s latest endeavor, *Fallout 4* (released in November 2015), the player can not only control every aspect of their gameplay experience by picking one of four political factions to side with, but they can also create entire settlements for their character to live in, up to and including customized modular homes and agricultural developments. It certainly seems odd, then, that a game with such a wide array of options for player experience somehow lacks any mention of distinct LGBT identities.

Upon first glance, Bethesda appears to have put forth a well thought-out and nuanced dating simulator within the context of a larger gaming experience. *Fallout 4* presents the player character, who can be either male or female, with several potential romance options of both genders. Before the player character can initiate a romance with any character, they must engage
the NPC in conversation to learn more about them and engage in friendly banter, as well as complete their desired partner’s loyalty quest, an optional side-mission that is unlocked after the partner’s affinity for the player reaches a certain level. In short, the player has to make an effort to woo their electronic paramour, regardless of NPC or player-character’s gender. The issue here lies not in the depth of romance or specific exclusion of homosexual relationships; rather, the sexual orientation of the NPCs is designed in such a way that the characters do not present as anything other than entirely heteronormative until prompted by a same-sex player character.

A perfect example of *Fallout 4*’s “custom queerness” feature is the potential romance between a female player character and a female NPC named Piper. The player first meets Piper inside Diamond City, one of the game’s largest hubs of activity, where she presents as an archetypal “spunky female reporter” who runs the local newspaper. After completing her introductory quest, Piper becomes available as a travelling companion for the player character, and she can begin to be romanced. The dialogue and completion of Piper’s romance arc are identical for both male and female players, and cut scenes play out in exactly the same way, regardless of if the relationship is homo- or heterosexual. While this design decision could appear to be a lucid recognition of the fact that queer and straight relationships do not actually differ significantly at the end of the day, the heteronormative and sometimes misogynist nature of the gaming industry as a whole means that a move like this is more likely the effect of lazy developers: rather than taking the time to create a nuanced depiction of different sexualities,

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Fallout 4’s bisexual romances are a simple code-swap that make a vague gesture towards LGBT representation without putting forth any more effort than it took to create the default heterosexual couplings. YouTube videos by gamers with titles like “Romance With Piper: Take Piper to Bed” with views in the tens of thousands – and which coincidentally, depict a male player character – support this hypothesis.

Bioware itself is not immune to criticism for inclusion of “custom queerness” features; Inquisition’s predecessor, Dragon Age 2, operated on a model of romance options similar to Bethesda’s, with four potential partners, all available to player characters of either gender; Greer specifically categorizes these characters as “not ‘essentially’ bisexual, but potentially bisexual” (15). Bioware, however, does acknowledge that there is a difference between hetero- and homosexual relationships through recording different dialogue options for different types of pairings between characters. And Dragon Age 2 is the only Bioware game to construct romance options in this way; all other games preceding and following represent a mixture of sexual identities, although Inquisition is the first to contain solely homosexual or transgender characters.

The Witcher Series

Even though it contains several ideas complicit with compulsory heterosexuality, Bethesda does at least present the option to engage in same-sex relationships, unlike several other games with potential romance arcs. Many of the games that do not give the player the option to explore the game-world through an LGBT lens also suffer from several other gender and sexuality-based issues prevalent in the gaming community, like the need for “fanservice” and the predilection towards heterosexual male fantasy fulfillment. These games can be otherwise very well-executed and enjoyable, but by forcing the player character into a false
choice of “straight romance or no romance,” they stand to alienate substantial portions of the gaming community and deny LGBT people a representation of themselves in-game.

One such example of this detrimental model of game development is Projekt Red’s *Witcher* series, which stars the rough-and-tumble super-human Geralt of Rivia. In each of the series’ three games, Geralt has multiple opportunities to engage in sexual activity with a bevy of busty female characters and can even have dalliances with female prostitutes for a small amount of in-game currency. There is never an occasion in the series where the player as Geralt is given the option to engage in same-sex romance, and there are only two encounters with gay male characters in the entire series: Dethmold the Sorcerer in *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011) and Mislav the Hunter in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015). Mislav is a tertiary NPC in an early quest, and his orientation is revealed only after a direct line of questioning about his past – he was driven out of his former home because of an affair with another man and refers to himself as a “freak” because of his preferences (*Witcher 3*). The speech options presented to the player allow Geralt to be either distantly apologetic or entirely unconcerned with Mislav’s story, and there is no option for Geralt to correct the name that the hunter gives himself. Mislav is still treated better than Dethmold, however, whose identity as a gay man is displayed onscreen (via a lascivious conversation with a younger naked man) specifically for the audience’s disgust shortly before he is castrated by an associate of Geralt’s (*Witcher 2*). Dethmold’s character design is also meant to convey undesirability and immorality: he is old and wrinkled with unattractive facial features, an unpleasant voice, and appears frumpy and unclean. Dethmold’s exaggeratedly negative persona

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holds his identity as a queer man front and center, which makes the way in which his death is portrayed, as if he deserves it, very troubling. Mislav is not shown to be an evil or even immoral character, but his story of trauma and self-loathing is met with indifference, almost as though Geralt believes that Mislav got what he deserved. Both of these depictions are not just damaging to perceptions of queerness in gaming, but serve to alienate queer male gamers, who are effectively being told that, in the game world, their sexual orientation deserves at best ostracism and at worst violent death.

While male homosexuality in *The Witcher* is viewed with revulsion and disgust, female homosexuality takes on a radically different tone, as it is fetishized and presented for the titillation of straight male players. Throughout the series, Geralt is presented with several female NPCs he can pursue romantic and/or sexual relationships with. The two most prominent of these romance options are Triss Merigold and Yennefer of Vengerberg, and both appear as viable partners in the third *Witcher* game. If Geralt chooses to pursue both Triss and Yennefer, the two women eventually find out, and a ménage a trois is proposed. The scene plays out as standard wish-fulfillment: Geralt arrives to find the two scantily-clad women eagerly anticipating his arrival, and Triss and Yennefer kiss as Geralt watches. Shortly after Geralt enters, Triss even says to him “we couldn’t wait for you to show,” heavily implying that she and Yennefer had already been engaging in sex (*The Witcher*)⁷. The scene ends with the women chaining Geralt to the bed and leaving him there as punishment for his romantic faithlessness, but the implications of the scene go beyond simply condemning infidelity. The two women use the fetishization of lesbianism as bait to lure Geralt into the trap they have laid for him, and even engage in

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disingenuous homosexual acts (i.e., kissing) in order to “sell” their deception. This depiction of female homosexuality panders to decades of creators using women as sexual objects for the voyeuristic straight male to observe and enjoy and alienates queer players who are not interested in these sexual dalliances or who are turned away by this reductive weaponization of lesbianism.

**God of War Series**

Quite possibly the most alienating example of compulsory heterosexuality in modern video games comes from the God of War series. The male protagonist, Kratos, not only engages in sexual acts exclusively with women, but these encounters are more directly tied in with the action of the game-world, in that sex can be used to further the ends of the protagonist. Each of the first three games in the series includes at least one sexually charged interaction between the musclebound protagonist and a topless, conventionally beautiful woman.

In particular, Kratos’s encounter with the goddess of love, Aphrodite, in God of War III is indicative of a toxic set of heteronormative expectations, as well as a crippling dependence on fanservice to bolster the game’s profits. While the audience does not get to see Kratos and Aphrodite having sex, the game forces the player to participate through a series of “quick-time events” or QTEs that test the player’s reaction time; if the player fails to push the correct button in time, things in the narrative do not go as planned. In this case, the QTE centers itself on Kratos’ ability to sexually pleasure Aphrodite. The player manipulates a controller’s analog stick per the directions on the screen, clearly meant to imitate manual stimulation of the clitoris. On-screen for the encounter are two of Aphrodite’s handmaidens, who undulate and make commentary on their own desire for Kratos while watching the amorous gods just out of sight of
the camera\(^8\). Aside from the general discomfort felt by players that do not particularly wish to engage in simulated sex to any degree, *God of War*’s sex scenes establish a culture of male fantasy fulfillment and fanservice in the game that alienates gamers who are not being directly catered to.

*God of War* has no explicit references to homosexuality or other queer identities, but by so aggressively catering to the sexual preferences of an assumed straight male fanbase, the game actively sends the message that heterosexuality is expected in its players; the developers would not have included sex-based QTEs if they did not earnestly believe that the majority of the players would enjoy it. This sort of pandering reinforces compulsory heterosexuality by neglecting to account for queer players, and thus alienates them from the experience of playing as Kratos.

**World of Warcraft**

*World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) is perhaps the most famous iteration of a highly popular game genre: the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, commonly referred to simply as an MMO. MMOs are different from video game RPGs like *Fallout* or *Inquisition* in that the entirety of the gameplay takes place in the same game-world as other players. Players can talk over a shared chat system, cooperate with each other to complete missions or defeat enemies, or engage in combat with each other. Even if a player does not wish to communicate with other people in the game-world, their experience is notably affected by the other players around them. And in some cases, player interaction is required, with tasks that are impossible for one character to complete alone.

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There are no mechanics for explicit romances in *WoW*, either between players or a player and an NPC, but the issues of gender presentation and performance crop up in interesting ways when researchers examined player behavior. In their article “The Strategic Female: Gender-Switching and Player Behavior in Online Games,” Rosa Martey and her fellow researchers tracked the behavior of a large group of players over a set amount of time as they completed a predetermined questline. They also noted the gender identity of both the player and their chosen avatar: twenty-three percent of men chose to play as women, and seven percent of women chose to play as men (Martey). The reasoning behind an avatar-gender swap is not, however, an instance of Nakamura’s identity tourism, at least not consciously. When the men were asked why they chose to play as a female character, the answer was overwhelmingly that they did not want to stare at a male character’s backside for hours on end as they played.

Reinforced notions of traditional masculinity aside, the behavior of these men in-game proved to hold some interesting data about gender presentation. According to Nick Yee’s analysis of the study, “gender-switching men somehow end up adopting a few female speech patterns even though they had no intention of pretending to be a woman” (Yee). These men used more emotional language and had greater occurrences of punctuation for emphasis in their text-speech as compared to men who played as male avatars. Yee believes that this trend points to men unconsciously taking on what they believe to be markers of traditional femininity, and he asserts that “people will conform to the expectations of their avatars without consciously being aware of it” (Yee). Yee’s conclusions about the study are bleak; he says that “virtual worlds are often thought of as places where we are free to play and reinvent ourselves, but game design and psychology often conspire to encourage us to enact and perpetuate offline stereotypes and the status quo” (Yee). The most “fascinating irony of our contemporary virtual worlds,” according to
Yee, is the way in which it continues to reinforce established social norms, or as he puts it, “how little they actually allow us to play” (Yee).

Martey’s own analysis of the study is less overtly negative and chooses instead of focus on an anomaly in the gender presentation of the male players as female avatars:

Analysis revealed that men may not necessarily seek to mask their offline gender when they use a female avatar, but there is evidence they do reinforce idealized notions of feminine appearance and communication. Movement behaviors, however, show no differences across men who do and do not gender-switch. (Martey)

The similarity in the movements of male players (ie, how close they stand to a group, how often they jump while running) indicates that while the speech pattern shift does change based on avatar gender, the shift is a conscious one, not unconscious as Yee asserts. If the shift in gendered behavior were unconscious, all aspects of their play would alter in some way to reflect the totality of the assumed identity. This simple fact says a lot not just about how men consciously view women, but about how the virtual environment of the game, the space in which players interact, is itself an entity that players interact with in a gendered way. As Matthew Rossi says in his article on gender in Wow, “these men, deliberately or not, emulate how they believe women communicate while playing a character that is one, whether or not they actually do communicate that way, but are betrayed by a kind of body language unique to the game world” (Rossi). This means that, even in games where the vast majority of play is based around talking to other real people, the groundwork of the game environment still influences gender presentation.

**Conclusion**
From traditional single-player action games to the most variable of multiplayer online experiences, representations of the LGBT community abound, and even when games only explicitly show instances of heterosexual activity, the concerns of queer players cannot justly be ignored. It should be here noted that none of these franchises are bad games; they are well-designed, well-executed, and players of all genders and sexualities play and enjoy them, but the problematic nature of their in-game sexual opportunities mars the experience for queer players seeking representation or simply wanting to get away from the notions of compulsory heterosexuality that abound elsewhere. While games like The Witcher and God of War do not promote either prosocial behavior in the traditional sense or acceptance of the LGBT community, their existence and popularity are important to consider because they prove the need for games with distinctly LGBT characters and the possibility of queer player choice. Games like Dragon Age: Inquisition provide the representation that gay and trans* gamers do not get in most popular video game titles, and give them a safe space to escape from societal heteronormativity and experiment with personal expression. Additionally, Inquisition’s popularity may prompt other developers to begin to incorporate more developed LGBT elements into their games, thus eventually improving the landscape of the gaming community for queer gamers overall.
Chapter 3: Gamification

Because of its rise in popularity in recent years, gamification has become a controversial topic in certain academic circles. Scholars and teachers afraid that people will use low-level gamification mechanics like points or leaderboards as an ill-fitting panacea for a flawed classroom environment have written off gamification as a fad, a pop-pedagogy trend that will soon disappear once. Even acclaimed games scholars have gotten involved in the debate, most notably Ian Bogost, with his short 2011 treatise “Gamification is Bullshit,” although the piece focuses on the uses of gamification in business rather than education.

Despite the multitude of voices in opposition to gamification in the classroom, the issue stems not from gamification itself, but from a lack of understanding of what gamification is and how to implement it. Many people, including games scholars like Bogost, approach gamification with the assumption that it means integrating actual video games into the classroom or workplace. While it is entirely possible for video games to have a place in education, most gamification involves taking game mechanics and applying them to real-life situations. Thus, the
thoughts of Bogost and his colleagues, although highly informative, do not apply to most of the current critical conversation surrounding gamifying the classroom.

Gamification proponent Matthew Farber stresses in his book *Gamify your Classroom: A Field Guide to Game-Based Learning* that, in order to properly gamify a classroom, the experience "should not be tacked on to learning. It needs to be integrated into an environment" (129). What this means is that simply re-skinning standard classroom practices with a video game veneer, like a rewards system for completing tasks or simply calling assignments “quests” without making any other changes from standard format, is incorrect gamification, and can actually negatively impact the classroom. Proper gamification is nuanced, and involves not just using the mechanical aspects of games, but constructing a narrative and contextualizing the experience of learning so that students get the most from their time working on the course content.

Furthermore, gamification has been explored almost solely in terms of improving student engagement and performance, which, while an entirely necessary and important goal, has not yet begun to exhaust the possible uses of game mechanics in the classroom to positively affect the classroom experience. Game mechanics can clearly be used to create either safe or damaging spaces for members of marginalized communities, as was clearly demonstrated in Chapter Two. This chapter will break down a few of the major theories of gamification, discuss their benefits and shortcomings in a composition classroom, and how they can specifically be used to foster safe spaces for expression for LGBT students.

In his book *Gamify: How Gamification Motivates People to do Extraordinary Things*, Brian Burke discusses how to engage in “design thinking” when creating a gamified classroom experience (94). Simply put, design thinking means that teachers "don't approach a problem with
preconceived notions of the solution," but with the perspective that there are a multiplicity of ways that any problem can be approached and solved (94). By engaging in design thinking, teachers can more accurately tailor their gamified classroom experience for students with different learning styles. If the teacher outlines straightforward paths through the problem to the solution, then the students will be unable to engage in play with the coursework and work through it in their own way, and the game will become a mechanical routine that will fail to engage the students. This chapter will also work through how each of the theories utilizes design thinking, and will attempt to point toward how design thinking can be used to create a safe space and role-playing environment in the composition classroom.

**Farber’s Principles of Game-Like Learning**

In *Gamify Your Classroom*, Farber sets forth seven rules meant to define and govern a gamified classroom experience, which are as follows:

1. Everyone is a participant
2. Challenge is constant
3. Learning happens by doing
4. Feedback is immediate and ongoing
5. Failure is reframed as iteration
6. Everything is interconnected
7. It kind of feels like play (131)

By using these rules, teachers can measure the effectiveness of the gamified experience that they are implementing in the classroom. Most of the rules are very straightforward – no student is allowed to be a silent observer, but must play with the rest of the class, and interaction and hands-on activities are heavily prioritized over passive learning techniques like lecture. All
elements of the course are geared towards the same set of objectives – but a few create meaningful shifts in the dynamic of the composition classroom.

Rule number five, “Failure is reframed as iteration,” presents an interesting challenge for a normally assessment-based composition course, wherein students are most often given a “final grade” on a piece of writing (perhaps after some drafting and scaffolding exercises have taken place), and opportunities to rewrite and continue improving on the work are limited. Assigning traditional letter grades to papers and engaging in subjective assessment has, historically, led to discouragement and lack of motivation in students; it is hard to get excited for a course that they have a D in. But by reframing failure in gamified terms, discouragement can be actively turned into motivation, through the ideas of iteration and resiliency.

In video games, a fair amount of failure is expected as the player moves through the game-world. Enemies, environmental hazards, and even user-error are all assumed to, at some point in the game, lead to the player character’s untimely demise (often accompanied by graphics in dramatic font telling them that they have, in fact, died), and while being able to beat a game without death is considered a laudable achievement, failure in the sense of dying in-game is not a discouraging event for most gamers. This is because games employ the idea behind Farber’s fourth rule, wherein “feedback is immediate and ongoing.” When players die in a video game, they are put back a set amount in the game, often with no penalties in terms of score or items lost, and allowed to immediately try the encounter again, this time with the new feedback that whatever they tried last time was not the proper solution. This feedback keeps the player from progressing in the game, because they have not yet found the solution, but does not punish the incorrect attempt. Instead, the player gets to try to solve the problem an infinite number of times without penalty, and thus gets to experiment with different problem-solving skills and ideas until
they hit upon a solution. The failure does not carry any of the negative consequences or judgement that failure in the classroom does, and there is no arbitrary point at which the player has to stop trying and accept the failure.

Reframing failure is particularly important in the composition classroom because writing is emphasized as a process, not a product. Placing a letter grade on a paper and assessing the student based on a series of discrete writing assignments with final grades on them is, essentially, halting the process at an arbitrary point and forcing the student to accept failure or only partial success. Eliminating the fear of failure and of failure’s attendant judgement is the first step in creating a safe space for student expression.

In RPG terms, these failure-free writings create the perfect environment for creating and experimenting with a new identity as a character. Students can test-drive their new persona through their writing without the worry that they are damaging either their grade or their classmates’ perceptions of them in reality. If a student fails to complete an assignment appropriately, they can simply try again, modifying the actions and words of their character. This deflects the failure even further away from the students’ identities as students; the failure was not the fault of a fundamental lack of capacity on the part of the student, but merely through incorrect manipulation of the game’s mechanics.

Lee Sheldon’s Role-Play Grading Scale

There have been many attempts to move away from a traditional letter-grade assessment system in the composition classroom, from a portfolio system to Elbow’s “teacherless
classroom.“ However, standard collegiate protocol requires that teachers provide at least a final grade to be posted to the student’s transcript. This means that, no matter how instructors try to eliminate arbitrary quality assessment and focus on student growth, they are still ultimately subject to the flawed letter-grade system. Gamification, while it has not yet found a way around this system, can provide a compromise that allows the student to keep track of what letter grade they would receive without being constantly subject to the stress of a rising and falling grade.

Lee Sheldon has come up with a grading system that, while it does not eliminate letter grades, removes a lot of the stress and uncertainty of traditional grade-tallying. Sheldon outlines his scale and the way he uses it in his book *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game*. On this scale, all the players begin at level one, and level up through completing assignments and earning experience points (XP) based on their performance. This way, instead of fluctuating grades, students can see a steady forward progression through the class. This will also keep students from becoming easily discouraged by dropping grades, since they cannot decrease in level. The levels do, however, correspond to letter grades for final cumulative assessment, but this way, students remain motivated throughout the semester, in order to earn the highest level possible. The scale as Sheldon originally published it is displayed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Experience Points</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>1740</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nine</th>
<th>1660</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1600</td>
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<td>Two</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>D-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sheldon’s Experience Point Grading Scale

This scale not only removes the need for continuous fluctuating letter grades; it helps students remain dedicated to the class throughout the semester in order to receive a passing grade, since they have to progress through the assignments to level up.

Sheldon’s scale is far from perfect; it still ultimately falls prey to the standard grading system, wherein a number of points awarded in the course corresponds to a letter grade. What it succeeds in doing, however, is perhaps more important: it helps to eliminate the possibility of falling grades, one of the largest student stressors, and thus helps create a more relaxed environment, ripe for the creation of a safe space.

**Warren Spector’s Commandments of Game Design (and Harvey Smith’s addenda)**

Warren Spector’s contribution to gamification is unique, in that Spector is neither a scholar nor an educator interested in gamification; he’s a high-profile game designer. Spector and his fellow developer Harvey Smith came up with fifteen edicts for good game design while working on the beloved franchise *Deus Ex*. The first ten items listed are Spector’s, the final five are Smith’s:

1. Always Show the Goal
2. Problems not Puzzles
3. Multiple Solutions
4. No Forced Failure
5. It's the Characters, Stupid
6. Players Do; NPCs Watch
7. Games Get Harder, Players Get Smarter
8. Pat Your Player on the Back
9. Think 3D
10. Think Interconnected (Spector)
11. All missions, locations, and problems will be specifically keyed to: Skills, Augmentations, Objects, Weapons
12. Gameplay will rely on a VARIETY of tools rather than just one
13. Combat will require more thought than “What’s the biggest gun in my inventory?”
14. Geometry should contribute to gameplay
15. The overall mood and tone will be clear and consistent (Smith)

This list, while meant for the creation of traditional video games, is also easily applicable to live-action games and gamification. While some of the items, like numbers nine, ten, and fourteen, deal with the creation of a virtual game world and are thus not very useful to a live-action gaming experience, other commandments point out important characteristics of a nuanced gaming experience that teachers would do well to incorporate into their gamified classroom.

Many of Spector’s Commandments align with Farber’s rules, but one of the most important parts of Spector’s Commandments for the creation of a role-playing game in particular is the focus on characters. Commandments five and six deal with the importance of having engaging characters, both in terms of what the players themselves can create and the other characters with whom they interact. Spector correctly emphasizes that, in order for a player to become immersed in the experience, they have to be able to both create and interact with
interesting, nuanced characters. Rule six also emphasizes that players need to be the ones directing the action and moving the narrative forward, rather than the teacher guiding the experience through overbearing NPCs.

**Huizinga’s Magic Circle**

In his book *Homo Ludens*, John Huizinga discusses the nature and purpose of play, which he argues is not only ever-present, but essential to the growth and development of human civilization. Play, according to Huizinga, can only occur in a very particular set of circumstances, which he refers to as a “magic circle” (10). The “limitedness” of the space in which play can occur, both spatially, temporally, and psychologically, is integral to the experience of play itself, because it is within these boundaries that play takes on “course and meaning” (9).

Part of the reason why the magic circle is important is that, once play has begun in this highly ritualized, distinctive space, it “assumes [a] fixed form” that “endures as a new-found creation of the mind” (9-10). Once play has been engaged in and communicated between the players, “it can be repeated at any time,” which means that the experience of play is a powerful tool for promoting retention of processes and ideas (10). While rote memorization and recitation of facts or theories are not often found in the composition classroom, creating the repetition of behavior can be extremely beneficial in things like encouraging brainstorming, scaffolding, and drafting; by creating these magic circles around parts of writing, students can substantially benefit from process work without even realizing that they are engaging in work.

The creation of a magic circle relies heavily on the ritualization of the play process; in order to have play occur in its intended form, the players must consciously exit the reality they exist in most of the time and enter into the distinct and separate reality of the game. In the context of education, creating a magic circle is in some ways made easier by the already distinct
environment of the classroom: people entering a composition class automatically prioritize their identity of “student” or “teacher” over the other identities they hold in the outside world. This can also, however, make it more difficult for students to prioritize their identity as “player” in the classroom, since they still carry expectations of the need to be a traditional, serious student.

There is a strong connection between the creation of magic circles and safe spaces. Both magic circles and safe spaces are distinct from the reality outside of their purview, and both are meant to cultivate a specific environment where people can act in ways not necessarily accepted outside of the designated space. By creating a magic circle where one of the stipulations of the play space is the ability to express identity freely, teachers will both be furthering the integration of gamification in their classroom and helping foster a safe space for queer and marginalized students.

Bartle’s Player Types

Richard Bartle’s book *Designing Virtual Worlds* has been used by gamification scholars essentially since the field began to grow, but Bartle himself was relatively unconcerned with the applications of his ideas outside of traditional game development. Bartle’s work is important to gamification because in addition to creating the game-world itself – the environment, the rules, and the goals of the game – Bartle takes an in-depth look at the players. Rather than assuming a stock, featureless player who reacts to things in the way the developer intends, Bartle creates four dynamic player profiles that cover a variety of potential motivations and responses. Bartle’s player types break down as follows:

1. Achievers – According to Bartle, these players like to focus on tasks that “achieve defined goals” that “progress[] their character through the world’s built- in ranking system” (77). These are the players who, in the video-game world, are focused on
earning achievements, badges, and completing every quest and mission, no matter how small. Achievers are the most competitive of the four player types, and strive to play the game in what they perceive to be the “best” possible way.

2. Socializers – Rather than attempting to win or garner prizes and accomplishments, for these players “the greatest reward is interacting with other people” (77). In video-game terms, Socializers frequent multiplayer experiences, like MMOs and games where they can play with their friends. Although they favor multiplayer experience, these players tend not to be competitive, and do not place a particular emphasis on becoming proficient at playing the game. Socializers can be motivated either by playing games with their friends from the world outside the game, or with new friends they meet within the game.

3. Explorers – These players are the pioneers and scientists of the game world, who care about “increasing their knowledge about the way the virtual world works” and “seek[ing] out the new” in the virtual environment (77). Explorers enjoy testing out the limits of the game, figuring out exactly where they can go and what they can do. While the other three types’ behavior is altered by or dependent on other players, Explorers are mostly unaffected by the presence of other people in the game world. While they do not view other players with animosity and will gladly have questing partners, Explorers are focused on the world of the game instead of how to beat it.

4. Killers – Bartle classifies this kind of player as “People who want to dominate others” and ‘win’ the game by eliminating the competition (77). While Achievers can also be competitive if someone else has more in-game rewards than them, the drive to ‘beat’ the game and everyone else playing it is the Killer’s primary motivation. In games with combat mechanics, Killers can play out their type with traditional violence, but they can
also beat other players through things like manipulation, intimidation, and pedantry about the game’s rules.

Fig. 1: Bartle’s Player Taxonomy

This chart displays the ways in which the four player types act out their taxonomy. The types can either act or interact with other players or the game world. In brief, Killers act on other players and Socializers interact with other players, while Achievers act on the world and Explorers interact with the world. These four categories are obviously not always subject to the extremities of their characteristics, and players can exist at any point along the scale.
As players move through a game, they necessarily grow and develop as participants in the game world, and their taxonomies can alter as well. In fact, player taxonomy is both incredibly mutable and ambiguous. Players can change styles over time, present as playing in one style while actually being another, or misidentify their own type. In fact, according to Bartle, as players become more comfortable in their play and more proficient at the game, they often change their type in order to gain new experiences as a player, moving through the environment in new ways. This happens so frequently that there is a "classic path" of player evolution, beginning with the more primal killer, moving into the curious explorer, to the ambitious achiever, and finally, the comfortable and satisfied socializer (83).

The classroom environment presents interesting issues for Bartle’s Player Taxonomy. In a game-world where people are allowed to enter and leave at will, the different player types influence each other and lead to increases or decreases in player-type populations. But when players are locked into the game, as they are in the classroom, the possibility increases for a dangerous imbalance of player type. This means that instructors need to be very careful when assigning group projects or constructing large assignments to take the player distribution of the class into account, to make sure that they are designing an experience that all the players can enjoy, but that one group of players cannot dominate.

Players can easily determine their taxonomy with an online text designed by Richard Bartle himself, and easily enough called “The Bartle Test.”11 While the results of the Bartle Test have their uses, and determining player taxonomy is important to designing an effective gamification experience, the test is of course not without its flaws. Perhaps foremost amongst the test’s failing is the fact that the test is entirely based on answers given by players themselves, and

11 The Bartle Test can be found at http://4you2learn.com/bartle/
not from observation of the player in-game. This means that players can, to excuse a phrase, “game the system,” and answer the test questions so as to receive the type they desire rather than the type that they are. Bartle himself admits that “It is clear from the nature of many of the questions what is being tested for,” and that a savvy player can trick the test into assigning them an incorrect type (87). The test also suffers from issues with ambiguity and distinguishing between types who would answer a question in the same way, but for different reasons, not to mention questions that would simply not apply to a particular player type, because none of the given options would appeal to them. Finally, the test does not provide contingencies for players who select the same number of answers for two different types, so as Bartle says “If you choose achiever and socializer answers with equal frequency, you will be recorded as favoring A over S” (87). This is clearly non-ideal for people using the test to get a representative idea of how their test population will react to certain problems and situations, since these ambiguous-types could react in several different and unforeseen ways, disrupting the balance of the classroom.

While there has yet to be a foolproof way to determine what kind of player a person or student is, Bartle’s Player Taxonomy is highly useful in deciding what activities, assignments, and practices would best suit a gamified classroom environment. For a role-playing game in particular, the four player types can be assigned to conventional RPG classes, which can then be used to divide classes up into “parties” for “quests,” and also to determine what kind of gamification and incentive system will be most effective for the specific class.

Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow

One of the most prominent theoretical concepts in contemporary gamification is psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of “flow,” a state of total immersion and concentration that leads to the achievement of “optimal experience” (1). This optimal experience,
also referred as being “in the zone,” is often experienced by athletes and artists during prolonged periods of high performance, and leads to increased creativity, productivity, and satisfaction in the task at hand; achieving and maintaining flow is inherently pleasurable.

Csikszentmihalyi’s research deals with attempting to consciously instill flow in all aspects of life, from the professional to the personal, but the implications of flow for an educational environment are particularly intriguing. While flow is often associated with more physically engaging activities like athletics or visual arts, "words still offer many opportunities to enter flow, at various levels of complexity" (128). Authors, poets, rappers, debaters, and even skilled conversationalists often go into flow-states when dealing with language, because of the complex interplay of linguistic components and the rapid progression of thought processes. In the terms of a composition classroom, students often struggle with content generation and clarity of expression, leading to lots of time-consuming brainstorming, drafting, and revision. The latter of these processes is also often demoralizing for the beginning writer, because having to re-write or construct a new piece of writing after the original was deemed to be not ready can often be construed as failure rather than iteration. If teachers can create environments conducive to flow around these activities, students will not only begin to produce more content and enjoy the writing process more, their continued engagement in the flow will lead to an increase in skill and better quality written works.

In order to achieve a flow state, the participant must remain constantly challenged by the activity, so as not to become bored, but not become overwhelmed or be faced with difficulty too great for their current skill level. Thus, any flow-inducing activity must chart a specific path following the participant’s level of proficiency, to avoid falling out of flow and becoming either
anxiety- or boredom-inducing. The chart below depicts the way in which flow has to increase the difficulty of the task to meet the growing skill of the participant:

Fig. 2: Flow channel

After describing why the flow state is so desirable, Csikszentmihalyi goes on to discuss how people can enter and remain in flow in order to achieve optimal experience. As it happens, many of the necessary conditions for flow are also important to a gamified experience, such as the ideas that “goals are usually clear, and feedback immediate” (54). This is because playing and being immersed in a game is a type of flow state, and Huizinga’s magic circle is a precursor to the idea of optimal experience through play. At one point, Csikszentmihalyi describes flow activities almost identically to the idea of the magic circle, saying that "They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called 'paramount reality' of everyday existence" (72). The gamified classroom also seeks to
differentiate itself from the ‘paramount reality’ outside of class, so working to achieve flow would also mean achieving some independent goals of gamification.

While the end-goal is self-evident in a lot of games and flow activities, such is not always the case in freeform endeavors, such as writing. This can make achieving flow in the composition classroom difficult, unless the student has a "strong personal sense of what she intends to do" in her writing (55). In this way, gamification, with its necessarily more clearly stated goals, helps promote creativity and productivity by achieving flow in the classroom. Gamifying a classroom also promotes flow because, according to Csikszentmihalyi, “The desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them,” which naturally moves people along the flow channel, keeping them from either boredom or anxiety (76).

The largest problem with a flow-oriented classroom is, rather obviously, ensuring that the activities induce flow for all, or at least a majority of, students. Optimal experience is inherently personal, and it is difficult if not impossible for an outside observer, like an instructor, to continually curate the individual flow channels of a class full of unique students. Any classroom that attempts to induce flow with a single activity is doomed to fail with the majority of the student population. This is why designing a role-playing-specific gamified experience is particularly conducive to flow. Educational flow – i.e., the optimal experience of learning – needs to be largely self-directed. As Csikszentmihalyi says, "The importance of personally taking control of the direction of learning from the very first steps cannot be stressed enough" in order to insure that the student is entering and maintain a flow state (138). Thus, creating a game where the student/player controls the majority of their experience via the way they choose to have their character interact with the game world opens up the opportunity for a creative flow
state, which will help the player with both the brainstorming and drafting parts of the writing process.

**Chou’s Actionable Gamification**

Yu-Kai Chou is a prominent proponent of corporate gamification, and it shows: his method of creating and assessing gamified products and systems, aptly named Octalysis for the eight “Core Drives” it measures, is nuanced and applies concepts of gamification that came before it, while still remaining accessible to people unfamiliar with other theories of gamification theory. While Chou’s system is specifically tooled for industry and not education, the principles of Octalysis and the simple means it provides for measuring the effectiveness of a gamified experience are highly useful for assessing a classroom environment. The eight Core Drives of the Octalysis framework, along with specific ways in which to promote each Core Drive, are displayed in the graphic below:
The navy blue ring around the Octalysis framework depicts how much emphasis a particular gamified experience places on a Core Drive. While the stock Octalysis has evenly distributed blue all the way around, this is actually far from the ideal gamified experience. Chou asserts that Octalysis needs to be used differently to achieve different goals. A gamified experience meant to sell a product, for instance, would focus on different Core Drives than an experience meant to teach a group of people about a subject.

There are also, according to Chou, four different stages of gamification, that range from the initial encounter with the gamified experience, to the final stretch of gamification, when the player fully realizes their potential in the game and the experience’s purpose is fulfilled. Each of these stages in the process emphasize different Core Drives, as they move the player through the game. Chou also makes use of Bartle’s Player Taxonomy and constructs an example chart displaying a hypothetical Octalysis framework for each player type at each stage of gamification:
Fig. 4: Octalysis synthesized with Player Types and the stages of gamification

This chart displays not only the many ways in which the Core Drives can be utilized, but the complexity of planning a gamified experience that is effective for all the different kinds of players.

The largest danger inherent in using this framework is that it was originally designed for corporations to use, not schools. While there are broad similarities between nearly any two rhetorical situations, persuading someone to buy a product is very different from persuading them to be engaged in a subject and put forward the effort to learn about it. Once the end-goal of industrial gamification is reached and the consumer has purchased the product, the interaction between consumer and game can end to the detriment of neither party. However, educational gamification requires prolonged engagement with the player and must keep the player interested
for a long time in order to achieve its goals. The two different sets of goals between business and classroom gamification means that two groups will find different techniques effective. However, Chou’s Octalysis is still useful for teachers in the classroom because rather than provide a set of theoretical reasons for why gamification is effective, like many of the other authors in this chapter, it begins to discuss practical motivations and means to implement gamified activities. Teachers can use his Octalysis framework to consciously tinker with the motivational tools that they employ in their classrooms, and from there go on to create not just a gamified experience, but one specifically designed to meet specific end-game criteria – in this case, the acquisition of skills sufficient to pass the composition course – and that is personalized for differing student profiles.

**Gee’s Identity Theory**

James Paul Gee is perhaps the most famous gamification theorist, and it was in large part his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* that began the current boom in gamification research. Most of Gee’s research deals with how professionally developed video games, both the explicitly educational and the recreational, can be used as learning tools in the classroom. In discussing how players become invested in their digital avatars, however, Gee creates a theory of gaming identity that is critical to creating an effective gamified environment. Any game that has players take on another persona necessarily requires the creation of a new, affected identity in order to participate in play. This identity as a player is then filtered through the person’s other identities, from student to family member to athlete and so on. In fact, according to Gee, “all learning in all semiotic domains requires… taking on a new identity and forming bridges from one’s old identities to the new one” (50). In Gee’s theory, not
only does creating a character in an RPG not a distraction from the serious learning environment of the composition classroom, new identity formation is a critical part of learning.

When people play a game, they must account for three distinct identities: their identity as a person outside of the game world, the identity of their created character, and a third identity that strives to meld and reconcile the two. As Gee describes it,

A third identity that is at stake in playing a game … is what I will call a *projective identity*, playing on two senses of the word “project,” meaning both “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” … and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities, of course).”

(53-54)

This identity is, obviously more complex to understand than the first two, but simply put, the projective identity is the filtration of the virtual identity through the real-world one. No matter how dedicated people are to role-play, their beliefs and personality always play a part in the actions of the character that they control, whether that means working within or against the real-world identity’s ideology.

It is exactly the reconciliation between these two identities into the projective that makes role-playing games the perfect outlet for safe expression for members of the LGBT community. The queer identity of the player can be expressed through the virtual identity of the character in ways that the player may not get to engage in when in the public sphere. Gee describes his projective identity when playing as a female character as a way that he “can transcend both her limitations and [his] own” (55). Players can take on new personas and traits in their characters
that they cannot in real life, whether due to fear of harm or social ridicule, and thus can move beyond the limitations of their reality into a realm of freer expression.

In terms of education, players not only have to filter their character identity through their general perception of themselves, but also specifically through their identity as a learner. While this may seem to add a damaging layer of complexity to the issue and possibly work to the detriment of free expression, Gee holds that the development of projective identities is good for learners in the classroom, because it shows them new potential for their other identities. As he puts it, “if learners in classrooms… take on a projective identity, something magic happens… the learner comes to know that he or she has the capacity, at some level, to take on the virtual identity as a real world identity” (65). If a learner is insecure about a facet of themselves or about their abilities as a student, taking on a projective identity and moving through the classroom environment as a character can embolden them and increase self-esteem and performance. This principle also holds true for developing prosocial attitudes in addition to more traditional academic skills, since “if children are learning deeply, they will learn, through their projective identities, new values and new ways of being in the world based on the powerful juxtaposition of their real-world identities… and the virtual identity at stake in the learning” (65).

The conscious treatment and creation of identities in the classroom through RPG gamification takes Gee’s theory of identity work to the next level, and actively relies on the revelations that come with the projective identity to foster safe, and thus more sophisticated and fluent, expression. Players as students as characters have the potential not just to learn more and become better students and writers but to become more comfortable with facets of themselves in ways they could not act out in the world outside the classroom.

Conclusion
This chapter has hopefully demonstrated that all of the theories presented here can come together in any combination to create a potentially effective gamified classroom. There still remains, however, the question of how these practices can create safe spaces and inclusivity for queer and marginalized students. There is no one gamification technique or theory that lends itself to an LGBT-friendly environment. Rather, the process of gamification itself opens up the possibility for inclusivity and safe spaces for expression through role-playing. The distinct game world of RPGs allow for players to create new identities in which they can safely explore facets of gender and sexuality that they cannot in the real-world. With the emphasis on immersion and optimal experience to create a magic circle, gamification helps turn classrooms into a separate environment, in which students-as-players can forgo their “real-world” identity for a time. Within this unique classroom environment, students can learn to express themselves freely and without fear of judgment or ridicule, which is of paramount importance in a composition classroom, since in order to write well, students have to feel like they can write honestly and be able to express the extent of their experiences, including their experiences and emotions as members of a marginalized community. In short, by gamifying a classroom, teachers are opening up not just an avenue wherein students learn not just to improve their standard writing skills, but to learn how to become more honest and open in their personal expression, which will carry over into their voices as writers.

The relatively trendy nature of gamification means that theories and handbooks for practical implementation abound, and this chapter has barely scraped the surface of the prolific body of work available to interested educators and corporate workers. What this selection of scholarship succeeds in doing, however, is to point out that, no matter what form or manner the gamification takes, there are marked possibilities for the use of role-playing games to make
classrooms more inclusive, as well as more generally effective in the teaching of composition concepts. With the strength of the theory in hand, educators can move forward to create a gamified experience tailored to each students’ needs, ensuring that no player gets left behind.

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