1. ORIENTATIONS IN QUEER GAME STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradigm of *queer game studies.* In order to do so, I employ Sara Ahmed's (2006; 2007) queer phenomenology as a method, which I call a spatial discourse analysis, to trace orientations in the paradigm's foundational texts from 2017-2018. I identify how queer gets meaning in relation to objects via proximity and distance, and present three orientations in queer game studies: representation, materiality, and fun. I argue that representation becomes constituting for queer game studies, in the effort to escape it; that tech-materiality perceived as video game

specific gets articulated as carrying queerness; and finally, that fun is a central site of contention for queerness, both on a gameplay and community building level. I end the paper by bringing attention to the paradigm's internal contradictions, so that scholars might mobilize them in their efforts to further queer research practices and methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

Aim

In the late 2010s, two collections of articles about queerness and video games were released; Ruberg and Shaw's (2017b) anthology *Queer Game Studies* and Ruberg and Phillips' (2018b) special issue of *Game Studies, Queerness and Video Games.* While queerness and games have never been strangers to each other, the arrival of these two collections changed the academic landscape of queer game studies: In the introduction to the anthology, aptly titled "Imagining Queer Game Studies" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017), *Queer* is positioned as a catalyst for a new "paradigm" in game studies (xii). This articulation of a paradigm reflects a shift towards a more pronounced presence of *queer* in game studies, but it also simultaneously constructs *queer game studies*.

What the *queer* of queer game studies refers to, however, varies greatly. This is partly due to the term's elasticity, and partly due to contradictory applications. In this article, I investigate how *queer* is articulated in the two collections. To do so, I employ Sara Ahmed's (2006; 2007) queer phenomenology as a method, which I call a spatial discourse analysis. I identify how queer gets meaning in relation to

objects via proximity and distance, and present three orientations in queer game studies: representation, materiality, and fun. To contextualize the orientations, I build on Margot Weiss's (2022) understanding of queer studies as driven by a core tension. The aim of this paper is to make visible the paradigm's internal contradictions; not to eradicate them, but to enable scholars to mobilize them when traversing the opaque landscape of queer game studies. By doing so, we might further queer research practices and methodologies.

Background

Queer garnered mainstream academic attention around 1990 as "a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects" (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1). Since, the term has been employed for analysis of sexual subjects, and as a more open signifier.

In the introduction to the anthology *Queer Game Studies*, Shaw and Ruberg (2017) argue that *queer* is able to disrupt hegemonic understandings of what video games are and how they "should be studied, critiqued, made, and played" (x). Queer theory, they claim, is able to refigure games "as systems of pleasure, power, and possibility, excavating the queer potential that can be found in all games" (x). Because this theoretical framework signifies a radical shift, as earlier game scholarship primarily investigates LGBTQ characters and players (xiv), the "paradigm" (xii) of queer game studies emerges as a counter reaction to existing scholarship, especially research on LGBTQ representation.

According to Shaw and Ruberg (2017), the shift occurs in North America around the mid-2010s. The year 2013, they argue, becomes a turning point for rethinking what it means to do queer work in video games, with the establishment of two new queer conferences and a fan convention. These initiatives are followed by the digitally organized mass harassment event, #gamergate, in 2014, which forces a conversation of how women, especially racialized women, and queer

subjects are treated in the industry, online spaces, and game communities (for further reading on #gamergate see Gray and Leonard (2018)). In this historic context, queer game studies can be understood as a way for marginalized gamers to reclaim the study of games from both non-marginalized gamers and non-gamer researchers, and becomes a project with activist intent.

Theory and Method

ORIENTATION IS FEMINIST, queer, and race scholar Sara Ahmed's (2007; 2006) concept, which she uses to explore queerness (2006) and whiteness (2007) in relation to bodies in space. Her theorization builds on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, and manifests as bodily accounts explained through spatial metaphors. Ahmed's (2007) notion of orientation enables a way of understanding the relation between subjectivities, objects, and spaces, and is considered ideologically significant: "What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken. Or we could say that orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach" (152). How we are oriented both relies on, and is directed by, distance and proximity to objects, which Ahmed (2007) calls orientation devices: "...bodies are orientated when they are occupied in time and space. Bodies are shaped by this contact with objects. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, and in turn affects what bodies can do" (152). For Ahmed, orientations and objects are tools that show how queerness operates, not as individual constructs, but as complex bodily orientations related to objects in space.

In this paper, I use Ahmed's concept, *orientation,* and her notion of *objects as orientation devices* to conduct a spatial discourse analysis of the queer game studies paradigm. Consequently, I use the term *object* to describe signifiers in the material which function like orientation devices, thus taking the form of signposts. This makes it possible to examine how something gets meaning from being far away or close

to an object, and how this distance facilitates certain practices or modes of being. I call this method a spatial discourse analysis, which enables a reading of how the articles articulate queerness in terms of movements and proximity to certain objects, and consequently enables me to examine the directions the texts are moving in, and the directions queer game studies is urged to move in.

Material

THIS PAPER's material is the anthology *Queer Game Studies* (2017b) and the articles published in the 2018 special issue of the online journal, *Game Studies*, volume 18 issue 3. They are significant in two ways. First, the anthology calls into being queer game studies as a paradigm, a practice the special issue builds on, and second, the collections constitute a substantial contribution to research on queerness and games, providing a solid foundation for scholars to build on.

The respective introductions to the two collections, Shaw and Ruberg's "Imagining Queer Game Studies" (2017) and Ruberg and Phillips' "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games" (2018a), are particularly central in constituting the paradigm. As an anthology of articles, *Queer Game Studies* is organized around different ways of discussing queerness and video games, which manifests as five different parts: "Defining queerness in games", exploring definitions of queerness in games; "Queering gameplay and design", how we might actively queer play and game design; "Reading games queerly", exploring how game texts themselves might be analyzed queerly; "Queer failure in games", exploring the concept of failure, both in and out of games; and finally, "Queer futures for games", looking at the relationship between growth and queer theory.

FINDINGS

The following section presents three orientations I have articulated by performing a spatial discourse analysis of the texts: represen-

tation, materiality, and fun. I show how the texts provide different directions for queer game studies in relation to these three themes, which all shape the paradigm.

Representation

REPRESENTATION IS an important concept in queer game studies, which is oriented both towards and away from representation. The orientation *away* from representation guides Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) introduction to *Queer Game Studies*, which is simultaneously the introduction that establishes queer game studies as a paradigm. The text constitutes representation as an important term that helps facilitate this establishment:

> ...this volume calls in part for a break with existing trends in LGBTQQ game scholarship. The key distinction we are making here is between scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQQ topics—from LGBTQQ players or designers to games with LGBTQQ representation—and work that seeks to understand video games through the conceptual frameworks of queerness (xiv).

The break with previous trends is explicitly articulated as a break from representation. Representation as an object, when understood as an orientation device, becomes something to move away from, and this moving away from becomes a constituting element of queer game studies, and representation becomes something it is not. However, the break with representation is challenged by several articles that make up the bulk of the paradigm, as these texts are oriented *towards* representation, or seek to go *beyond* representation.

The texts moving towards representation are, from a disciplinary perspective, no break from previous studies on representation, in terms of method or how representation is utilized as an analytical tool – the difference, however, is where these representations occur. Instead of LGBTQ characters in AAA games, they are concerned with

representation of gender queerness in fan fiction: "This research began with the intent to further understand how queer players react to and interpret representation of queerness in video games as represented through fan fiction" (Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler 2018, 4); representation of queerness in Easter eggs: "I analyze the historical relationship between Easter eggs and current efforts to increase queer representation by AAA developers" (James 2018, 2); and representation of daddy figures in a dating simulator: "I offer a close playing of Dream Daddy to analyze how the game works with and against representational trends of daddy figures" (Schaufert 2018, 2). While these authors themselves position their studies as studies on representation, they stand apart from studies on characters in AAA games. The method remains the same, but the target of analysis is different.

The paradigm also seeks to go *beyond* representation. Moving beyond something is different than moving away and moving towards. A movement beyond is following the same direction, but going past. Using the term *beyond* to signify this desire is not coincidental. Bagnall (2017) summarizes a talk from Joli St. Patrick and Avery McDaldno at the queerness and games conference in 2013 titled "Beyond Representation". This is significant, as this specific conference is used by Shaw and Ruberg (2017) as part of their argument to date the emergence of queer games studies to around 2013. Bagnall (2017) argues that the presentation "outlines many features of queerness and queer life, as related to games, including uncertainty, change, fluidity, and complicated multilayeredness" (140). The preposition *beyond* designates a specific orientation: Representation as an analytical tool is insufficient to move queer game studies forward; only by moving beyond do we grasp the complexity of games. Or, in Bagnall's (2017) words: "...how we might, by looking beyond character representations and stories, understand games as digital artifacts bound up with naturalized, patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality" (135). By looking beyond representation, we can understand games differently, as digital artifacts. Character representation and stories are here articulated as obstacles in the way; obstacles we

must overcome to understand the complexity of games. The introduction to the special issue reiterates this perspective:

> [The special issue] also represents a call to question, challenge, and ultimately move beyond the neoliberal rhetorics of representation and inclusion that continue to surround games and LGBTQQ issues. Each of the articles in this issue explores queerness in games in modes that move beyond representation" (Ruberg and Phillips 2018a, 2).

What becomes evident, however, in this orientation of moving beyond representation, is how representation still lingers and is stretched out into the beyond, both as an analytical tool and as a definitional boundary. Chang (2017, 18) makes a distinction between flattened representation and representation that informs and is informed by mechanics. This is a critique of how the games industry conceptualizes queer difference, and the crux of their argument is how representation is articulated as not enough on its own. In this article, mechanics as a signifier is used as a modifier, enabling a movement towards representation, as queer game studies can be oriented towards representation, if this movement is simultaneously towards mechanics: "Representation must inform mechanics, and mechanics must deepen and thicken representation" (18). Only by moving beyond an old notion of representation, towards one that is more medium specific, do we pave the way for worthwhile representation. Representation figures as a key concept, yet becomes a loosely defined "thing" that needs to be understood in a relationship with mechanics: "I advocate moving further from representation as the end-all category of queerness in games and more into an investigation of mechanics" (Welch 2018, 8). Mechanics has an impact on the movement away from and beyond representation, which becomes synonymous with a move away from the previous debates about representation solely focused on visual elements. This is done by moving closer to the materiality of games, and in this way, the orientation beyond representation (or away

from representation) depends on the orientation towards materiality.

This connection to materiality is a repeated tendency. Pozo (2018) argues for a design philosophy where representation reaches beyond characters and narratives, but this "beyond" is not articulated as the relationship between representation and mechanics, but as queer experience communicated as affective familiarity, facilitated by haptics (8). Haptics, connected to sensory inputs and hardware, are activated as queer sites. This approach of considering representation as part of a larger system is likewise explored by Phillips (2017), who uses the term *gamic system* to encapsulate an idea of assemblage. Phillips (2017) discusses how, if game studies were to have a term similar to film studies' "the gaze", it could be "a matrix of recursive vectors of desire among the elements of a gamic system: human, hardware, software, rules, narrative, and representation" (121). This invention of a gamic system emphasizes the media specificity of games underlying most of the critique of representation in the beyond orientation. Representation, previously understood as characters and narratives, is insufficient in discussing games.

In a twist of language, Freedman's (2018) text urges 'us' not to go beyond, but to look underneath: "We must not look beyond the representation, we must look underneath it to find its coordinates – seeing the mappable body as a physiognomic system and a mechanical system" (12). This rally to go *beneath* evidently entwines with the materiality orientation; yet, looking underneath to the mechanical system, to the code, simultaneously benefits the politics of representation. Instead of moving beyond, we are urged to move under, to strengthen what is above. While beyond and underneath makes for two different narratives, in praxis the analysis becomes similar; representation alone is insufficient to articulate what happens at the intersection of queerness and games. The language of looking underneath, as a way of moving beyond, continues a conversation from Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm's introduction to their anthology *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Video Games* (2017). Freedman (2018) writes:

"To push representational politics forward, we must understand its many origin points. This is not an either/or proposition, of studying code or image. Malkowski and Russworm note that representation is tethered to software and hardware, but this dependency does not negate the politics of the image (which in the public arena is often of greater immediacy and consequence); rather, they suggest we must situate computational and representational code side by side, and understand their specific discursive (and functional) histories" (14).

The introduction is called "Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies Beyond the Politics of the Image". This title simultaneously emphasizes the desire to move beyond, and reiterates the politics of representation and the image as central signifiers in game studies. Moving beyond representation becomes a proposed direction for queer game studies, and this moving beyond becomes intertwined with game studies' discourse around game ontology and defining representation. There is thus a certain tension around representation, coming both from queer studies and game studies, which queer game studies has not quite managed to release.

Materiality

THE SECOND ORIENTATION I have articulated in queer game studies is materiality. A significant number of articles are oriented *towards* objects like hardware, design, systems, game engines, code, mechanics, and mods (Bagnall 2017; Chang 2017; Freedman 2018; Phillips 2017; Shaw and Ruberg 2017; Welch 2018; Yang 2017), and while these terms are defined to a highly varying degree, they nonetheless function to direct the texts towards tech materiality, while simultaneously directing queer game studies away from previous debates and conversations about gender and sexuality in games and gaming.

Shaw and Ruberg (2017) and Ruberg and Phillips (2018a) negotiate both the ontology of the object (video games) and the subjectivity it is interdependent and reflective of (the scholars). As shown in the

following reference, this negotiation happens through a continuous return to video games' medium-specific attributes, and through arguments of queer subjectivities laying claim to, and re-claiming, video games.

> Queerness has emerged as a focal point in the push to diversify both games culture and games critique. Providing a valuable framework for interrogating the very systems that structure the medium, queer thinking has the potential to simultaneously destabilize and reimagine video games themselves (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, ix).

Queerness is positioned as a potential and powerful key to transform video games, able to interrogate their very ontology as a unique, separate medium. Additionally, this potential is not only located within the medium itself, but is something made possible via attachment and ownership to/of the medium: "The frameworks of queer theory offer lenses through which to reclaim the medium, giving voices to the experiences of queer player subjects and bringing to light the fact that games are queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw & Ruberg 2017, xiii). Queer theory can help queer subjects to not only claim but reclaim video games, and queer game studies then becomes a way of moving away from the medium's past, a past both aligned with hegemonic forces, but also a past always already queer.

Hardware and code are introduced as central to queer game studies as objects to orient towards, beyond, or below, but while they share a function of signifying computational technologies, they also differ slightly in the analysis they enable. For Ruberg and Phillips (2018), hardware serves as an important object to nuance the field: "Addressing these complexities in video games requires attending to many layers of gamic systems, including but not limited to representation, procedural logics, hardware, player communities, and economic concerns" (4). This focus on hardware relies on and plays with the cultural notion of the hardcore gamer: "The classic preoccupations of the "serious gamer," such as overclocking graphics cards

and reducing latency through manipulation of hardware settings, become moot in queer temporalities of play" (Knutson 2018, 5). Instead, Phillips (2017,

121) ties hardware to desire, and names it an integral part of a so-called gamic system, whereas Bagnall (2017) discusses hardware in terms of normativity and queerness. Queer technologies are central to his text, and he writes how queer gaming hardware "must question and transform patriarchal paradigms. The design and functions of this hardware must enable subversive play strategies" (40). Like Phillips (2017), this text discusses controllers and their sexual implications. The standardized controllers and control schemes are implementations of heteronormativity, patriarchy and masculinity, and the joysticks allude to phallocentric design ideals.

In investigating a script file in *Dead Island* (2011) with a notoriously sexist name, Yang (2017) looks at code and how it exposes misogynist practices within game companies: "…this incident highlights sexism in game development as a systemic bias from a technical as well as cultural perspective: a bias engineered directly in the game- play systems, user experience design, and the workflow of the game engine itself" (97). Technology and culture become an assemblage in Yang's analysis, but most relevant for my analysis, is the last articulation of the game engine itself. Freedman (2018) explicitly links queerness to game engines and coding, calling code a "method to distribute norms" (16), while game engines are articulated as foundational elements delimiting mutable processes, "as an engine is built and versioned, the otherwise latent potential of code, found in its modularity, is readily sealed over" (3). The article thus understands engines as concretizations of code promoting a language gap, and as binding code in normative structures. In Chang's (2017) article on queergaming, code is something below: "After all, what is a game but a matrix of code, power relations, and constraints? . . . In other words, games always constrain players via normative narratives and mechanics" (16). Games are here articulated in their simplest forms as matrix of code intertwined with power, which manifest as

constraining narratives and mechanics. Code appears free flowing but arrested in normative structures facilitated by the engine.

Reading these discussions of hardware and code in relation to the following citation from the introduction to *Queer Game Studies*, queerness can be understood to enable access to the very fundamentals of games, their essential free structures: "Rather than restricting themselves to the study of a game's narrative or even rules, [the authors in the anthology] seek out the queer implications of its hardware, of its code, of the individual experiences of nonnormative subjects as they play" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xvi). Hardware and code are positioned opposite the restrictiveness of narrative and rules, and queerness is positioned in close proximity to these non-restrictive objects, enabling a leaving behind of the traditions of narratology and ludology and their limiting frameworks. Consequently, this can be read, not only as an orientation towards hardware and code and away from narratives and rules, but also as an orientation away from former confines within game research, former debates, and conversations, that queer game studies, with this orientation towards other objects, can distance itself from.

Technology, perceived as video game specific, gets articulated as carrying queerness. Thus, being close to it becomes important. This needs to be understood in the context of disciplinary tension within game studies around visual representations, as well as significant political tensions in games culture and an ongoing othering of sexual and gender minorities in the games industry, in academia and in games themselves (notably the infamous #gamergate event). This climate facilitates an enhanced necessity of positioning queerness in close proximity to medium-specific objects, discursively constituting games as "queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xiii), to convincingly and inarguably claim belonging in the industry, academia and the games themselves. The orientation towards tech- materialistic objects like hardware, controllers, game engines, and code, provides closeness and places queerness and queer game scholars in proximity to games.

Fun

QUEER GAME STUDIES is oriented both *towards* and *away* from fun on multiple levels of game design, gameplay experience and community constituting discourse. In game studies, fun is a contested signifier in research pertaining to game design and gameplay experience, in large part because defining what makes a game fun is difficult (Koster 2014; Lazzaro 2012). Designers have tried to use less contested terms, notably Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept "flow", when designing an "ideal" gameplay experience (Cowley et al. 2008). Simultaneously, in a different vein of game studies, fun can be related to the argument by Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2016) and Roger Caillois ([1961] 2001) that games happen in a magic circle, and are played without conse-quences to real life. This simultaneously aligns with a dominant discourse that popular culture is *just for fun*, and politics belong else-where. Queer game studies is in dialogue with these prior conversa-tions, and as my analysis shows, queer gets meaning in relation to fun in mainly two ways, towards and away from fun.

In the orientation towards fun, fun itself is either something that can be queered, for instance queer fun (Chang 2017), or something worth keeping in proximity to queerness, for instance designing for queerness without losing the principle of fun (Burrill 2017). Chang (2017) articulates a mode of playing oriented towards fun, a fun that itself can be queer: "Like Galloway's call for a radical countergaming, queergaming is stepping out of "the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" into "a collective temporal distortion" into queer fun, fantasy, even ecstasy" (22). AAA fun is rigid, but queer fun can be made possible via queergaming, a disruption of seamlessness and the notion of immersion. Burrill's (2017) argument is slightly different, as it is not fun itself that is queered, rather: "Queer games should be collective, shared, productive, and liberating, a means of celebrating difference without sacrificing fun" (31). For Burrill (2017), moving towards fun is indeed a desirable orientation, but while it is desirable, it is not what makes the orientation queer.

Queer games are not queer, despite, or because of, being fun, but

they *should* be fun. In this way, by having fun be a travelling companion in this queer orientation, contrary to Chang's (2017) argument, queer is compatible with core design principles of designing for fun, and thus placed in proximity to game studies proper.

The orientation towards fun also works through enjoyment and video games' connection to childishness. Stockton (2017) articulates queerness by way of lateralization and jouissance, and centers her argument around the subject of the child. The concept of sideways growth, or lateralization, is tied to pathologization of the homosexual figure as suffering arrested development, but also to queer temporalities and lifelines not organized around heteronormative milestones (227). She argues the connection to children goes beyond inhabiting the same non-adult position or not participating in heterosexual reproduction, as "homosexuals" were often categorized together with pedophilia. And yet: "All these assumptions, funny enough, fed the public imagination of gay life as a wild hedonism, truly over- pleasure, painful in its excess" (227). Stockton (2017) thus attributes the queerness of gay subjects to sideways growth and excess, painful over-pleasure. But queerness slides, and she now maps this terminology onto gaming

(227). Goetz (2017; 2018) builds on Stockton's work using the concept of sideways growth to reclaim the pleasures of indulging in AAA games. The Lacanian terminology employed by Stockton (2017) and Goetz (2017; 2018) make possible an orientation away from productivity and legitimacy, and towards frivolous fun. These texts are oriented towards fun through the figure of the child, and negotiate how the medium is understood differently via its proximity to adults and children.

Cross (2017) and Clark (2017) are oriented towards fun via discussions of productivity. Clark (2017) advocates for unproductive play, which she links to the notion of fun, as a site of queer resistance. Dismantling the conflict between inclusivity via representations of LGBTQ characters in AAA games and queerness, she argues the threat of inclusionist logic lies not with assimilating queer subjects into big game franchises, but with assimilating games themselves

into capitalist society. This entanglement of productivity and affect likewise orients Cross (2017), but in a different way: "As gamers, we will have to learn how to develop a critical community that does not mistake acidic rage and hatred for the kind of productive passion that has so often led to great games" (Cross 2017, 184). For Cross (2017) there is something like productive passion, implying the existence of unproductive passion. Clark's (2017) discussion about how one should be wary of channeling fun into productive goals gets another dimension here, where productivity tied to affect can be a good thing, if this affect is directed towards something "great". This orientation should be understood in a context where it is continuously debated if video games should outgrow their childish nature and become productive members of society (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xxvii).

Urging queer game scholars to contemplate what is lost in the effort to make games legitimate forms of art, Clark (2017) moves away from an antagonistic relationship between the study of representation and queer game studies, looking for tension elsewhere, and primarily finding it in consumerism and assimilation, not of subjects, but of games themselves. This moves the conversation away from fiction and towards the function of games in a neoliberal capitalist society. The resistance of assimilation being resistance to legitimization and co-option of games for productive means thus circumvents the concerns about assimilation connected to politics of representation. In my reading of Clark's (2017) text, queerness seems to coalesce around resistance to consumerism and productivity, dwelling on pleasure and leisure time – moving towards fun. This orientation makes possible a queer Marxist strand of queer game studies, but also enters queerness into a complicated arena, as free time and leisure are concepts intrinsically linked to capitalism. The attempt to move the problem of assimilation away from representation and towards productivity risks remaining centered on individual subjects to the detriment of the social and political whole, while also maintaining the consumer's individual play experience as epistemologically privileged over the worker experience by disregarding the means of production necessary to facilitate this anti-productive fun.

While the previous texts are oriented towards fun, some texts are oriented directly away from it. This orientation negotiates fun both at the level of game making principles and gameplay experience, and in relation to discourses pertaining to gameplay experience and the cultural purpose of games.

The rejection on a gameplay level is expressed by Shaw and Ruberg (2017) as something that can shape queer play experiences: "Ruberg, for example, has addressed queer failure as a game play mode and elsewhere reframes play experiences that reject "fun" as queer world-making opportunities." (2017, xv). Failure and the rejection of fun on the level of gameplay experience is articulated as the queer element. Marcotte (2018) and Schaufert (2018) both draw on Ruberg's notion of no-fun, focusing on design and experiences. Marcotte (2018) explicitly advocates for "reflective" design, a critical design practice challenging game design principles around fun, notably the concept of flow: "Through failed or negative affects and experiences, queer design practices can problematize the flow state and similar "seamless" states" (7). The argument is to use game design practices to deliberately disturb a player's flow state experience, because flow is perceived as discouraging reflection and relying on subjugation, which is connected to control: "Many of the best practices concerning control in games relate to encouraging this flow state [...] Therefore, it is also a key concept that must be queered to disrupt the status quo" (7). The no-fun orientation here is thus related to core game design principles and finding the critical queer potential in challenging these.

Related to these design questions, is the discourse around the status of games as art and the purpose of play. In queer game studies, these questions tie into practices of constructing subjectivities around who gets to play games just for fun. If queer fun is not necessarily different fun, it is however dependent on which subjects get to have access to the fun, and which subjects do not, as discussions around community building (Alexander 2017; Ruberg 2017; Ruberg and Shaw 2017a) make visible. Alexander (2017) links fun to specific subjectivities among both players: "ultimately, they're just for fun, say

gamers when they've run out of defenses against the mainstream industry's embarrassing, stagnant homogeneity" (59), and game makers: "veteran game developers are masters of creating "fun," and understandably they lead the charge against the idea that games can or should be anything else" (59). The subjectivities interpellated by this quote are constructed around their proximity to fun, and placed in connection to the gamergate movement and more generally associated with sexism, racism, ableism, trans- and homophobia. In this way, fun becomes a central point of contestation for both gaming and game making communities.

This connection between fun and politics is made visible in Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) text, as they tie fun to a larger discussion about games as cultural products, understood in a post gamergate context: "Those who rail against critiques of games often insist that games should be understood as fantasies— just "for fun"— and therefore impervious to scrutiny. To the contrary, as queer studies knows well, fantasy is always already political" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xxi). The phrasing *just for fun* points to a dominant discourse in public games discussions, where some elements (like queer subjects) get politicized, and others naturalized. The elements deemed political are then proclaimed to not belong in games, as they are meant to be *just for fun*. In the quote above, the authors link a rejection of fun to opposition of this discourse, framing the rejection of fun on a gameplay level in a way where this too can be read as a reaction to not only core game design principles centered on fun, but the dominant discourse de- politicizing games through the notion of fun.

While Alexander (2017) expresses similar arguments, opposing the dominant *just for fun* discourse, they also tie the movement away from fun to cultural legitimacy: "The idea that, at the end of the day, games are obligated to serve the purpose of "fun" above all others has been the main wrench in the works of the gaming industry's machinations for legitimacy" (Alexander 2017, 59). Thus, moving away from fun, and away from the gamergate *just fun* rhetoric, is also beneficial for the status of the medium as legitimate: "if video games want cultural legitimacy, designers will have to concede that it's not all

about fun" (Alexander 2017, 55). In this way, queerness oddly gets placed as a way of creating cultural legitimacy. If Clark (2017) offered a direction for queer game studies towards fun, questioning legitimacy, then Alexander (2017) moves away from fun, and advocates for legitimacy.

To conclude, fun is an object queer game studies both moves towards and away from on different levels. The movement towards fun works through different objects in different lines, but what they have in common, is that fun either is in itself, or related to, radical norm critical potential. The orientation away from fun rejects fun, either because no-fun game design is an opportunity for queer affective disturbance on a gameplay level, or because this orientation challenges a dominant discourse that games are *just for fun*, and therefore should not be *political*.

DISCUSSION

I have shown how representation becomes constituting for queer game studies, in the effort to escape it; that technology perceived as video game specific gets articulated as carrying queerness, and being close to it becomes important, and that fun is a central site of contention for queerness, both on a gameplay, game experience and community building level. In the following discussion, I put these orientations in dialogue with queer studies through Weiss' (2022) summary of the field, which they argue is characterized by a core tension; an oscillating movement to and from proper objects (7). By proper objects, not to be conflated with Ahmed's (2007; 2006) definition of objects, Weiss (2022) refers to the typical object of study in queer theory, sexuality, and gender transgression. Moving away from this means to decenter these as the key interest of queer theory. This reading of a core tension in queer studies can help facilitate an understanding of some of the contradictions I have found in my analysis of queer game studies.

Representation as Constitutive Other

Queer studies within Western academia was articulated as a break with gay and lesbian studies and the study of the lives of gays and lesbians. Queer game studies positions itself similarly. Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) introduction bears resemblance to Teresa de Lauretis introduction to the special issue of *Differences* in 1991, where she popularized the term queer theory as a counter to gay and lesbian studies. In this context, the introduction to the anthology *Queer Game Studies* and its proposed break with LGBTQQ topics mirrors that of this introduction to queer studies as a break from gay and lesbian studies, and representation serves a key function in paradigmatization and as constitutive other to queer games studies. The difference between gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, as articulated by de Lauretis (1991), is about politics and which questions one's research wishes to ask. Around the same time as the conference and de Lauretis' article, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2011) addresses contemporary feminist debates about representational politics and its limitations:

> "The domains of political and linguistic "representation" set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (2).

Questions around representation have thus been an integrated part of the early formation of academic queer theory, both regarding analytical possibilities, and as demonstrated here by Butler, regarding ontology and subjectivation. In queer game studies, this conflict with representation is combined with game studies' disciplinary debates around game ontology, and how to understand representation in relation to games. This creates a double dilemma, where representation is negotiated via two disciplines, in crisscross ways, and as a result

becomes incredibly difficult to understand. As my analysis shows, representation figures as a central part of queer game studies, both in studies explicitly dealing with representation and as a term that keeps appearing, despite the expressed wish to escape it. Regardless of orientation, representation becomes a boundary-drawing object for queer games studies, and the away orientation, which is prominent in establishing the paradigm, establishes representation as a constitutive outside.

I suggest detangling these discourses through scholarly clarity, achieved through separation and acceptance of contradiction. Ida Kathrine Hammeleff Jørgensen (2020) shows how games can be understood as representational artifacts consisting of multiple modalities. Her way of understanding games as qualified media lets us research them as objects of sense making. If queer game studies can accept this ontological definition, that games are representational artifacts, we are free to discuss queer methodologies as different from cultural studies of representation, without having to re-negotiate game ontology. Drawing on Weiss (2022) we might reorient the tension queer game studies has with the notion of representation. By articulating the core tension in queer theory as a movement towards and away from proper objects, Weiss (2022) makes it possible to perceive the field dialectically, instead of dualistically. If we accept this premise, then we also accept that gender and sexuality, and how these concepts are acted out in games or manifested via narrative and characters, are not in opposition to queerness, but can be understood as integral to queer theory's inherently contradictory workings – this contradiction can enable us to obliterate the heteronormative meaning-making processes games facilitate. When the core tension is articulated in relation to proper objects, it frees up cultural studies of representation to do their own thing, while not pretending queer methodologies are not invested in subjectivities, as they are visually expressed in games as representational artifacts.

Materiality as Disciplinary Closeness

DISCIPLINARY TENSIONS within game studies are, like in most trans/ interdisciplinary fields, rife – not in the least in relation to existing literary and screen theory (Anable 2018). At the same time, the field has to reckon with political tensions in games culture, and an ongoing othering of sexual and gender minorities in the games industry, in academia and in games themselves, which manifested in the 2014 gamergate event. This climate facilitates an enhanced necessity of positioning queerness in close proximity to medium specific objects, discursively constituting games as "queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xiii), to convincingly and inarguably claim belonging in the industry, academia and the games themselves.

I read the orientation towards materiality as an attempt to both decenter the subject and depart from queer's proper objects (Weiss 2022, 3) and find queerness, not in characters or players' sexuality and gender or narratives dealing with these themes, but in games themselves. Material objects like hardware and code become imbued with queerness, and the implication is a notion that games as tech objects are queer in and of themselves. But this means, paradoxically, that the focus on materiality has the effect of de- centering queer subjectivity, but centering specific queer identities by making the subjects of queer game studies (the researchers, authors, and designers) inextricable from game studies and games, through this inarguable belonging and closeness. In this way, the material turn obscures epistemology, yet reinstates the liberal subject's centrality, as the orientation towards materiality becomes about scholarly belonging, a crucial academic survival strategy.

Fun as a Contested Signifier Between Subjectivities

THE LAST ORIENTATION, fun, is a central site of contention for queerness. In the orientation towards fun, fun itself is either something that can be queered as queer fun (Chang 2017), something worth keeping in proximity to queerness, (Burrill 2017), or linked to

anti-productivity as a place of anticapitalistic resistance (Clark 2017). The orientation away from fun builds on Ruberg's (2015) work on no-fun gameplay as opportunities for "queer world-making" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xv), while challenging the dominant discourse that games are apolitical and just "for fun" (xxi). The orientation away from fun targets fun both at the level of game making principles, gameplay experience, and discourses pertaining to the cultural notion of the function and purpose of games.

On the one hand, queerness is linked to anti-productivity as a place of resistance and fun, and a frivolous waste of time. This expansion and usage of queer aligns with the tradition of using queer outside of its proper objects. Simultaneously, orientation towards queer fun draws back to circle queer's proper objects, as the experience of subjects (players) performatively constituted as queer through non-heterosexual practice and gender transgression becomes the primary analytical object. The orientation away from fun likewise circles back to queer's proper objects, but this time by re-centering queer artists and designers. Fun thus exemplifies the core tension Weiss (2022, 2) articulates, as this movement of reaching beyond queer's proper objects, simultaneously draws us back in. The orientation towards and away from fun can therefore be understood as a negotiation of belonging through affectual ties to games and game communities.

CONCLUSION

My aim with this paper is to critically examine the paradigm of queer game studies to understand how queerness and games intersect. In doing so, I have articulated three orientations: representation, materiality, and fun. Queer game studies is paradoxically oriented both towards, away from, and beyond representation, and representation serves a key function in establishing the paradigm. The materiality orientation directs queer game studies away from previous conversations about gender and sexuality in games and gaming, simultaneously as the orientation towards tech-materialistic objects

provides closeness, and places queerness and queer game scholars in proximity to games. Fun becomes, regardless of orientation, a site of battling subjectivities through affective belonging. My spatial discourse analysis creates a mental map of queer game studies: *Representation* is the constitutive outside, *materiality* that which anchors subjects to the inside, and *fun* facilitates which subjects belong.

My analysis shows that queer game studies is deeply invested in subjectivities. Nevertheless, it is precisely where I suggest that this transdisciplinary and delightfully messy field should direct its future attention. Queer theory has enabled gender studies to explore subjectivity and the politicization of desire for decades. This history shows us that how we conceptualize queer subjectivity greatly affects the politics of our research: Do we, in our digital joy, accidentally reconstruct and celebrate the queer, free, transgressive subject; consequently making other forms of queerness invisible? A logic of othering ultimately benefitting the white, liberal nation state, as Puar (2017) warns us. Or do we perhaps sometimes conflate, as Edenheim (2020) critiques, a "symbolic position of non-reproduction with positions of vulnerability" (30)? How we theorize the subject and queerness matters in terms of the research it allows, and determines where the radical potential becomes located. In short, if queerness and especially queer subjectivity is not backed up by theoretical and methodological sharpness, a big risk is always that queer collapses into a transgressive new liberal subjectivity in its seductive fluidity and elusiveness.

Queer game studies expands far beyond the anthology *Queer Game Studies* and the special issue of *Game Studies.* While the two collections established the notion of the paradigm, the orientations they make possible have been, and continue to be, tremendously important for research on queerness and games. For this reason, they warrant critical attention. This paper identifies multiple orientations, where queer gets meaning in relation to various objects in a dissonant network of signification. It would be antithetic to queer theory to propose one streamlined way of understanding queerness and games; indeed, this dissonant array of potential orientations can itself

be argued to compose the queer of queer game studies. However, my goal with formulating these orientations is precisely to allow for scholars to be able to consciously and critically engage with these multiple and contradictory ways queer gets meaning in relation to games, to strengthen the theoretical and methodological positions we write from. Providing care for, and showing attention to our tools, is a vital strategy for sustaining critical research, and queer remains a most crucial instrument in our feminist kits.

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