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GaymerX and the Politics of Inclusivity through Images of Counterpublicity [**working title**]

Synopsis

This project investigates the politics of inclusivity of the LGBTQ social movement in the United States. Specifically, the project focuses on the visual representations of “community” and “solidarity” used in the promotion of and activity at GaymerX, a video gaming convention that focuses specifically on LGBTQ issues. I explore and interrogate the romantic notion of solidarity and community that focuses the rhetoric of the convention’s creators in order to determine how the space functions as both a site of counterpublicity and countervisuality.

Context and Significance

GaymerX, which will be held August 3-4, 2013, purports to be a safe space where all members of the queer community and their allies are welcome to create community through a common interest – video games and geek culture – as well as to provide an alternative public space for queer gamers (sometimes referred to as “gaymers”) to add themselves to an already increasingly visible queer presence in gaming. While LGBTQ peoples involved in gaming and other activities related to “geek culture” have grown more vocal about the demand for better queer representation in video games as well as better industry regulation of hate speech, the convention is the first of its kind: one that makes the LGBTQ gamer community its central focus.

Among the larger GSM (Gender and Sexual Minorities) or LGBTQ communities, issues related to particular subsets – transgender and intersex individuals, queers of color, and queers with disabilities – have not been as focused and present in mainstream media as have neoliberal policies that favor representation of white, cisgendered lesbian and gay men. Images of the marriage equality movement and the project to end the banning of gays in the military (DADT) have typically featured white, financially stable, able-bodied, cisgendered lesbians and gay men in an effort to appeal to white, patriarchal, heteronormative culture. While there may be a somewhat conscious effort at strategic essentialism, the results thus far have been to strengthen hierarchies within the LGBTQ community despite a romantic notion of solidarity.

GaymerX could potentially be quite significant in bringing more visibility to neglected groups, at least among the “elite” within the LGBTQ community. The convention could also benefit other subaltern groups fighting for better representation in gaming, including women gamers and gamers of color, no matter their sexual orientation. But there is a concern that, despite the intentions of the convention’s creators, GaymerX may not be as inclusive as it advertises. Images used in the promotion of the event tend to be concentrated in particular ways, notably on the representation of the gay white male as gamer. The goal of this project will be to

examine how the event itself expands (or not) on this representation and will include analysis of images, activity (including presentations, panels sessions, official cosplay activities, and industry involvement) and participation by eventgoers.

As avenues for raising awareness about larger injustices among queer groups, the importance of popular culture and popular leisure activities such as gaming cannot be understated, since there are established connections between cultural representations of subaltern groups and material violence against those groups. Continued stereotyping or erasure of LGBTQ communities from video games in a time when more and more people are playing said games contributes to an atmosphere of neglect and intolerance when it comes to creating/enforcing legislation and protecting queer communities from discrimination, abuse, and hate crimes. The focus on gaming in particular is important because the industry is evolving: the increase in casual, portable gaming as well as the continued popularity of traditional gaming mean that the image of the young white straight cisgendered male gamer is losing traction, even in the arena of “hardcore” gaming (first-person shooter console games are the staple of this particular market).

Statement and Trajectory of Guiding Research Questions

The path of my questioning for this events moves from expectations and assumptions to execution of those expectations in the course of the convention’s activities. The convention’s creators have explicitly brought forth in their promotional materials a politics of inclusivity and a notion of solidarity that seems idealistic on its face. I am interested in how the convention will function to manifest these concepts and how well said concepts are communicated to eventgoers.

- 1) What is the relationship between the expectations of the convention’s creators and the experiences of eventgoers in terms of creating an inclusive space?
- 2) How does the convention (and its creators) define and manifest “solidarity”?
- 3) How does the social philosophy of neoliberalism affect the event in its marketing, publicity, execution, eventgoer interaction? With the understanding that the event operates within a neoliberal system, is there a concerted effort to demonstrate resistance to neoliberal principles? How successful is that effort?
- 4) What do the creators of GaymerX expect will be the short- and long-term effects of holding this event?
- 5) How are images and various technologies being used to promote the ideas of inclusivity and/or solidarity, and what are material relationships are created as a result of the use of those images and technologies?

Literature Review

My primary sources for theorizing this project include Rosemary Coombe’s discussions of counterpublicity and collaboration in *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law* (1998) and Nicholas Mirzoeff’s idea of countervisuality in *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011). These sources investigate ways of reframing visuality in public spaces, which is what GaymerX is, in part, striving to accomplish as well.

Additionally, I connect this project to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's discussion of friction and scale-making in *Friction: an Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005).

Rosemary Coombe defines forms of counterpublicity as “articulations that deploy consumer imagery and the bodily impact of the trademark to make the claims of alternative publics and other(ed) national allegiances (184). In video game culture, the dominant consumer imagery consists of male and female characters who embody hyper masculine and feminine traits (respectively) as well as a distinctly heterosexual sensibility. Additionally, main protagonists are more often than not white, and characters of color are represented in stereotypically racialized ways. Gameplay itself is generally limited to a heteronormative backstory and gaming options, with some exceptions. Thus, queer gamers have taken to re-presenting video game and cartoon characters in order to demonstrate a queer perspective in public space, including online spaces.

However, Coombe warns her readers that even in working to re-present a counterpublic, care must be taken in presenting that alterity as a homogeneous space. In her discussion of the cultural representations of Native peoples, Coombe notes that there is often an insistence by dominant groups that “aboriginal peoples must represent a fully coherent position that expresses an authentic identity forged from an uncomplicated past that bespeaks a pristine cultural tradition before their voice will be recognized as Native” (243). This “authentic identity” flattens the diversity of Native cultures and their agendas. A similar problem arises with queer communities when queer gamers/geeks use particular images to highlight a queer presence in the industry. Quite often these images, when they show humans (versus machine characters), portray the “flaming” queer – a white gay male who dresses in bright colors and practices the art of “snark,” but still yearns for a homonormative lifestyle: marriage, children, career. Lesbian characters, when they are portrayed at all, are generally shown as ultra feminine, allowing space for the heterosexual male fantasy gaze. Transgendered characters, “butch” lesbians, and queers of color are severely underrepresented in these images. Portraying images of queer “difference” that rely on a very narrow set of stereotypes or a homonormative agenda may have a positive impact on creating a counterpublic by relying on strategic essentialism; however, as Coombe says, “In our constant utopian celebration of reinventions of difference, we must be careful not to simply reinscribe the privilege of the Romantic author and his unfettered rights to appropriate all cultural value and deem it his own creative work” (215). While queered images of gaming and geek culture more likely eschew authorship in the most literal sense (especially as these images travel through cyberspace and become nearly impossible to track back to an original author), there is still a claim to a homogeneous identity and agenda that is “authored” by the most elite among queer communities.

Coombe is interested in the “cultivation of a postmodern ethical sensibility [that] draws sustenance from contingency in identities” (298). An ethics of contingency recognizes and gains strength from the acknowledgment that no one system of organization can encompass the myriad identities that humanity may draw upon; these systems of organization need to allow for a space of alterity. I argue that just as hegemonic systems need to recognize and make room for these spaces to exist, less dominant groups must also be aware of the various hierarchies and agendas present within their own systems and strive to apply the same principle of allowing space for as many identities as possible. With regard to GaymerX, this means acknowledging and allowing

for the representation of the needs of groups that are not as well recognized in mainstream culture.

I also examine Nicholas Mirzoeff's idea of visuality with regard to this project. Mirzoeff defines visuality as an imaginary practice that claims an exclusive authority to the right to visualize history and thus retain hegemonic control. As a "discursive practice that has material effects" (3), visuality needs to be recognized as a way of framing the present that continues to have dramatic consequences for those who are not among the visualizers. Mirzoeff discusses countervisuality as an attempt to move the frame, to render the invisible visible, and thus to upset these hegemonic parameters. Countervisuality does not exist in binary to visuality; although it "claims autonomy from authority," it also "refuses to be segregated" (4).

GaymerX, as an example of this concept, has been used to accuse LGBTQ gamers of segregating themselves from the larger gaming community. However, the convention's creators argue that, rather than segregation, the convention is attempting to shift the focus or the "frame" of traditional, dominant ideas about gaming to expose and insist upon an acceptance of queer gamers within the larger community. GaymerX, then, renders queer gamers visible as a "counter" to white heteronormative ideas about gaming. Even as GaymerX presents itself as a form of countervisuality, it recognizes that it is part of a larger system by encouraging gaming corporations to take part in the convention.

More generally, the argument that current attempts at queer countervisuality do not shift the frame far enough, such that the current movement in its neoliberal incarnation cannot be called countervisuality so much as perhaps a version of Visuality 2. Mirzoeff explains Visuality 2 as a "picturing of the self or collective that exceeds or precedes that subjugation to centralized authority" (23-24). Hegemonic structures recognize the existence of these selves or collectives, though they are labeled deviant in some fashion. Within the celebration of difference that some in the LGBTQ community employ in order to win institutional and legal "rights" is the acknowledgement that the community has little imperative to operate outside hegemonic ideology. In the effort to secure some freedoms within the larger framework, elite subjects within the LGBTQ collective shift the frame only as much as necessary. Essentially, this means the continued invisibility of groups more at risk to institutional and social violence.

GaymerX provides a well-publicized opportunity to create a truer countervisuality – one that recognizes the neoliberal framework within which it is always already operating, but one that allows for a wider shifting of the frame, an opportunity to provide links between leisure activities such as gaming and the impacts of cultural representation on a larger scale.

My exploration of the convention will also benefit from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's discussion of the relationship between the local and global, especially as she notes how affect happens in a multidirectional fashion: "it has become increasingly clear that all human cultures are shaped and transformed in long histories of regional-to-global networks of power, trade, and meaning" (3). This transformation doesn't happen simply in a top-down direction; rather, the idea of the "global" is shaped as much by local and regional communities as the reverse. This messy interaction between different scales she terms *friction*: "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (4). Using metaphors such as the

rubbing together of two sticks to create heat and light, Tsing says that “friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (5).

Tsing also discusses the concept of scale-making, which must be taken into consideration when exploring the convention as part of a larger social movement, as it seems to want to claim. She talks about the difficulties in creating dichotomies that make distinctions between local heterogeneity and global homogeneity, and she notes that these dichotomies are unhelpful because “[t]hey draw us into an imagery in which the global is homogenous precisely because we oppose it to the heterogeneity we identify as locality” (58). This same difficulty can occur whatever the particular scales being produced, and it can occur on multiple levels. In the case of the movement for transformative justice for LGBTQ peoples, the struggle is often simplified into a struggle between state and national government policies and the fight for “equality” and “rights” ostensibly for all queers who appear to have the same needs and desires. Local and regional differences are erased in favor of a celebration of a generalized difference from the heteronormative center.

I am interested in exploring how the friction and scale-making function at the convention. If indeed the convention is interested in creating a political, inclusive space for queer gamers, then its visual promotion and its activities during the event will not shy away from the awkward and the unequal or the specific needs of its various components.

Scholarly Impact

Based not only on the images thus far used to promote GaymerX but also on material posted by one of its creators to his followers on various social network sites, I believe that the convention’s creators have an understanding of their own positionalities with regard to the larger LGBTQ community as well as to the convention itself. They have some awareness of the complexities in re-presenting such a heterogeneous group as queer gamers. I hope to discover that, even within the neoliberal framework in which it operates, the convention can be displayed as a model of inclusivity and solidarity. The event’s successes and failures can be used together to provide an example of the friction that surrounds these activities.

This project will also contribute to the growing body of literature on the subject of the national movement for transformative justice for the LGBTQ community by documenting the various ways the convention addresses (or not) larger issues through its discussion of cultural representation in video games and other popular culture.

Further, through the use of ethnography and visual representation in film, the project itself will serve as a statement for the functioning of visibility and countervisibility by documenting not only the action of the convention but also the filmmaker’s relationship to that action and to the process of creating the film. Documentary filmmaking, just as written literature, still very often relies on a concept of the romantic author and a notion of intellectual property of the filmmaker. My goal is to demonstrate that a thought-provoking visual representation can be produced through self-reflexivity and through participant involvement in all stages of the project.

Research Methodology

This project involves the use of ethnography in a filmic context [**awkward**] to collect, analyze, and interpret data from the convention. I will conduct extensive, in-depth interviews with each of the co-creators for GaymerX, who will serve as my principal informants. I will also conduct less involved interviews with individual eventgoers, panelists, and industry executives present at the convention. For eventgoers who may wish to participate but who do not wish to be filmed, I will provide questionnaires that can be filled out during the convention or returned via mail by a specified due date. Additionally, I will collect “action” footage of the convention itself. This footage will be concentrated in two main areas: representative imagery for the convention itself, and the self-representations of individual eventgoers up to and including “cosplay” (dressing in costume). All interviews and footage will be approved in writing by participants before being used in the final project.

Data collection and analysis will extend beyond the parameters of the event to include the gathering and analyzing of images from the Internet that are used to represent the larger LGBTQ movement, particularly within the gaming community. Comparative analysis will help determine the function of these images in promoting a romantic notion of solidarity and politics of inclusivity. Several of these images will be included in the final filmic product. It is possible that some of these images will have been disseminated to the point that origin is impossible to determine. However, I plan to use copyleft strategies to ...

It is critical that I assess and communicate my social location with regard to this event. Assessment entails understanding my own limitations and privileges with regard to race, class, gender and sexuality. Communication entails making participants aware of my social location as well as my personal investment in this project via my “insider” perspective with regard to gaming culture. Additionally, I will endeavor to be as reflexive as possible in the final product (the film) such that said reflexivity is communicated to my viewing audiences, both general and scholarly. My attempts to be open and forthcoming about my social location and personal investment should serve as a response to questions in the use of the filmic approach.

The project should be finished approximately four months after the end of the convention, providing enough time not only for editing the film but also for any necessary follow-up with the principal and auxiliary participants. Allowing time for possible follow-up questions and clarifications ensures that I am being as open as possible with participants about the direction of my research and providing them opportunities for input into the data interpretation process.

Project Timeline

- I. Through August 3, 2013:
 - A. Build rapport with convention co-creators, establish community
 - B. Plan for filming equipment (with contingencies), establish editing schedule
 - C. Plan for the collection of data, including permission forms, survey forms, establishment of convention space for conducting informal interviews, etc.

- II. August 3-4, 2013:
 - A. Convention attendance, data collection
- III. August 6-December 2013:
 - A. Online data collection, analysis
 - B. Analysis of film footage
 - C. Film production

Interview Questions for Principal Informants

(all questions may be revised for the comfort of the participant)

- 1) Biographical information, including age, past and current living locations, class background, family and friends, community.
- 2) How long have you been playing video games? What is your gaming background? (Ask about particulars, including console vs. PC gaming, consoles/games owned or played, MMORPG experience, favorite types of games, etc.)
- 3) Do you prefer certain games over others? Why? Can you describe some favorite games?
- 4) How do you identify in terms of race and gender/sexual orientation?
- 5) What are your concerns regarding gaming and the LGBTQ community?
- 6) Have you had any personal experiences that have influenced these concerns?
- 7) What was your motivation for creating this event?
- 8) How did you come up with the various logos and marketing images for the event? (TuringBot, ConwayBot, etc.)
- 9) How have you advertised the event? (Determine whether this advertising has reached as many groups within the larger community as possible.)
- 10) Do you see a relationship between this event and other communities that focus on women gamers and/or gamers of color (of all sexual orientations)? If so, can you describe that relationship? [**awkward**]
- 11) Are you or have you been involved in any other public activities that bring awareness to LGBTQ issues? Such as?
- 12) What is your reasoning behind the excluding of younger players (under age 21) at this event?
- 13) (something about appealing to straight players, too)
- 14) Would you like to see GaymerX become an annual event? Pros and cons versus a one-time event?