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“Everyone Games”: GaymerX and the Politics of Inclusivity at the Crossroads of Counterpublics

Synopsis

This project investigates the politics of inclusivity of LGBTQ social movements in the United States by focusing on the visual representations of community and solidarity used in the promotion of and activities at GaymerX (previously known as GaymerCon), a video gaming convention that focuses specifically on LGBTQ issues. I explore and interrogate the convention creators’ notions of LGBTQ solidarity and community in order to determine how the convention space functions at the crossroads of various counterpublics and as spaces of countervisuality. In the context of trying to affect the gaming industry’s politics of representation in leisure activities such as video games, I feel it is important that LGBTQ communities publicly recognize the differences in agendas among themselves so that none are neglected in the larger battle against LGBTQ discrimination and abuse. My methodology involves the use of ethnographic methods – participant observation, interviews, and surveys – to collect data that will be presented in a filmic context. The end result will be a short documentary suitable for educational television programming.

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 show solidarity 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 further marginalized communities – transgender and intersex individuals, queers of color, and queers with disabilities – have not been as present in mainstream media as have 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. Even among members of these communities there is debate as to the necessity for one larger LGBTQ grouping versus smaller separate movements that address the specific needs of these communities (“Gay Vs. Trans”).

GaymerX could potentially be quite significant in bringing better visibility to more 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. 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. Adrienne Shaw points out that, in addressing the lack of queer representation in leisure activities such as video games through Althusser’s structuralist model, “not being referred to in the public discourse is just as problematic as being referred to stereotypically. Not being ‘hailed,’ in [Althusser’s] terms, is a form of ‘symbolic annihilation,’” and the lack of representation tells queer communities that “‘Your concerns/thoughts/lifestyle and so on are/is not important’” (231). Although Shaw notes that gaming producers and others argue that representation is not particularly important and that gamers who do not fit into the heterocentric mold can appropriate characters and storylines to better fit their style of play, she notes that representation does matter: “queer readings may allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation, but that does not preclude a demand for representation. Rather it signals that queerness is always-already a part of ‘straight’ media and thus does not have to be seen as something at the margins” (232).

Continued stereotyping and erasure of LGBTQ communities from video games in a time when more and more people are playing 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 imagined “core” player – the young white heterosexual cisgendered male – is losing traction, even in the arena of “hardcore” gaming (first-person shooter console games are the staple of this particular market). According to the Entertainment Software Association’s 2011 study on game sales, demographics, and usage, 42% of gamers identify as women, and the average game player age is 37 (Entertainment Software Association). While specific statistics do not seem to be available on the numbers of gamers who identify as LGBTQ, such numbers are not necessary in considering whether LGBTQ communities deserve the same kind of representation in video games. But although gamers are becoming more diverse, the mainstream gaming industry continues in large part to cater to the imaginary of the young, white, heterosexual, cisgendered male (Shaw 232), which contributes to the overall atmosphere of neglect and intolerance.

My personal stakes in undertaking this project involve making sure that all queer communities are adequately represented in video games and other leisure activities (including the GaymerX convention) because, as Shaw points out, there is a correlation between what gamers see and how they then interpret the world. While better queer representation in terms of characters and storylines may not have a direct impact on other issues of discrimination related

to these communities, better representation can contribute indirectly to a more tolerant atmosphere and a better awareness of the existence and needs of queer communities.

The stakes for the convention's creators seem primarily concerned with creating a safe environment for "gaymers." As Matt Conn, one of the creators, has stated on the convention's Kickstarter video, "I want to create a safe space for gay nerds and their awesome straight friends to come together and create a really strong community" (GaymerCon). It should be noted that "gaymers" alludes particularly to players with a homosexual sexual orientation and may not apply to others in the LGBTQ community, such as trans players. But despite this somewhat limiting rhetoric, the convention's creators have also expressed a desire for GaymerX to be part of the larger conversation about LGBTQ equality. Conn, in an interview for the upcoming documentary *Gaming In Color*, notes that the convention has received much negative response and that there is a "desperate need for equality" in the gaming space (*Gaming In Color*). Since the creators seem to have an interest in contributing to larger discussions about LGBTQ issues as a whole, the convention itself should be a space that is respectful of the differences within difference that LGBTQ communities represent.

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 (Leonard 84). 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 (Shaw 232).

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. For LGBTQ communities in the United States, where notions of what it means to be queer are rooted in heteropatriarchal ideology, queer gamers/geeks use particular words and images to highlight a queer presence in the industry. The word "gaymer" is itself problematic, for although it is used as a catchall phrase for queer gamers,

not all gamers in LGBTQ communities identify as homosexual. The term conflates sexual orientation with gender identity. Another example comes from the Gaming In Color Kickstarter video during an interview with Keith Kurson, Founder of Agoge, Inc., who says about GaymerX, “It’s gonna be two thousand people who all enjoy playing games together, that all think the same way” (Gaming In Color). While it is reasonable to assume that the majority of attendees at GaymerX will be players, the assumption that these queer geeks will “all think the same way” is indicative of larger LGBTQ rhetoric. This sort of “lumping together” of queers into one category can be troublesome. This is particularly true when some members of these communities quarrel amongst themselves over agendas such as marriage or workplace equality (“Gay Vs. Trans”).

When gaming companies do make attempts to include options for queering characters or storylines, quite often these attempts are limited to the creation of “gay” interactions between players’ characters and NPCs (non-player characters), attempts that are both reviled and celebrated by players (Alderman). Transgendered characters, “butch” lesbians, and queers of color are severely underrepresented in games overall. Theresa Garcia lists nine characters who are described as trans or who have, in her opinion, a trans sensibility (Garcia), which is a miniscule number compared to the overwhelming number of cisgendered and overtly heterosexual characters, as well as being fewer than the growing number of homosexual options for characterization. Portraying images of queer “difference” that rely on a very narrow set of stereotypes or a homonormative agenda are problematic in that they move focus away from agendas important to others in the LGBT community.

Coombe is interested in the “cultivation of a postmodern ethical sensibility [that] draws sustenance from contingency in identities, recognizing that the abundance in human cultural capacities exceeds any particular organization of it” (298). This ethical sensibility should not only hold true for hegemonic identities and structures, such as the gaming industry, but also for marginalized groups such as LGBTQ communities. In centering LGBTQ needs around one agenda that recognizes merely homosexual orientation, there exists the possibility, as Coombe says, of settling into identities “that conceal violence in their terms of closure” (299). But in recognizing the various agendas of gays and lesbians, transgender and genderqueer people, queers of color, queers with disabilities, and the like, queer peoples can strive for representation that benefits the social and political atmosphere for the larger LGBTQ community. Coombe calls for an “ethics of contingency” in the field of intellectual properties (299). I define this ethics of contingency as a way of thinking that recognizes the idea that no one system of organization can encompass the myriad identities that humanity may draw upon; these systems of organization need to allow for spaces of difference within the difference from hegemonic discourses. 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 in order to demonstrate true solidarity and more ably accomplish the goal of inclusion in larger discussions about LGBTQ equality. 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 visibility with regard to this project. Mirzoeff defines visibility 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), visibility 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 visibility; although it “claims autonomy from authority,” it also “refuses to be segregated” (4). Countervisuality still exists within hegemonic discourses, but it presents alterity in order to expose the violence within hegemonic systems.

GaymerX, as an example of countervisuality, 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.

Some critics, such as Michael Warner, Lisa Duggan and others, have argued that current attempts at queer countervisuality do not shift the frame far enough, that the focus on issues such as marriage equality and DADT have benefited certain segments of the LGBTQ community at the expense of others. Duggan discusses how homonormativity leads to a “gay tunnel vision” in which mainstream gays and lesbians maintain a narrow focus on particular issues of equality such that larger issues of violence and injustice retain their invisibility (47). I connect this to Mirzoeff’s discussion of *Visibility 2*, which is 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 alter selves or collectives, though they are labeled deviant in some fashion, but they are seen as perhaps less threatening than those who would seek true countervisuality. Mainstream (white, abled) gays and lesbian agendas are somewhat relatable to a heterocentric, cisgendered hegemony and thus may not shift the frame far enough to expose material violence perpetrated on the more marginalized within LGBTQ communities.

GaymerX provides a well-publicized opportunity to create a truer countervisuality to trans gamers, queer gamers of color, and other more marginalized groups within the larger LGBTQ community – a countervisuality that recognizes the hegemonic 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). GaymerX provides an opportunity for queer gamers to negotiate spaces both within and outside the gaming industry, demonstrating how queer worldviews create friction that can actually be fruitful new territory for gamers and game creators alike.

Tsing also proposes the concept of scale-making, which must be taken into consideration when exploring the convention as part of larger LGBTQ social movements. 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 “rights” ostensibly for all queers who appear to have the same needs and desires. Social differences are erased in favor of a celebration of a generalized difference from the heteronormative center.

GaymerX potentially operates as a social scale-making project on multiple levels. On one level, the convention may expose and expand heterogeneity within the larger LGBTQ community by including activities that address the needs of more marginalized queer gamers such as trans gamers (to provide just one example). Additionally, though the convention may provide opportunities to expand the conversations with the hegemonic state and expose the state as a non-homogenous entity. With these potentials for scale-making in mind, I am interested in exploring how scale-making will function at the convention. If indeed the convention’s creators are interested in creating a political, inclusive space for queer gamers, then their visual promotion and selection of activities during the event will not shy away from the awkward and the unequal or the specific needs of its various components.

Framing Research Questions

The path of my questioning for this event 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. This politics is present not only in the GaymerX slogan “Everyone Games” but also in the marketing for GaymerX on Kickstarter, Facebook, and the event’s website, where one of the “prime directives” of the convention is listed as “[s]upporting an inclusive group spanning all orientations, ethnicities and gender expressions in the gaming community, collectively titled ‘Gaymers’” (“What Is Gaymer X?”). 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 do the convention's creators define and manifest "solidarity"?
- 3) What do the creators of GaymerX expect will be the short- and long-term effects of holding this event?
- 4) How are images, textual rhetoric, and various technologies being used to promote the ideas of inclusivity and/or solidarity, and what material relationships are created as a result of the use of these elements?

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 intend to explore how those complexities do or do not manifest at the convention itself and how attendees feel about the convention's functionality as a space of solidarity and community. I am also curious to discover how attendees feel the convention operates within the context of larger LGBTQ movements.

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 how the convention functions to bring a different perspective to issues such as marriage equality, safety for LGBTQ peoples in various institutions (immigration, the prison-industrial complex, and others), and better legal protections for queer communities and families. Can discussions of cultural representation in video games and other leisure activities help advance agendas for transformative justice in a way that is not exclusionary to some within the larger queer community?

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 counter-visibility 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 through film as well as more traditional methods to collect, analyze, and interpret data from the convention. My first agenda will be to file paperwork for the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Then, during the convention, I will conduct extensive, in-depth interviews with each of the 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 access to a questionnaire (using either paper or online format, or both) that can be filled out during the convention. 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 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. As a white, queer, cisgendered, alter-abled female gamer, I will situate myself within the hierarchies of privilege such that participants can recognize that my reflexivity while also being aware of my “insider” knowledge of gaming. Communication entails making participants aware of my social location as well as my personal investment in this project. 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 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. Participant may choose not to answer any question that causes discomfort.

- 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, gender identity, 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/attending this event?
- 8) How did you come up with the various logos and marketing images for the event? (TuringBot, ConwayBot, etc.) (For convention organizers only)
- 9) How have you advertised the event? (Determine whether this advertising has reached as many groups within the larger community as possible.) (For convention organizers only)
- 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?
- 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? (For convention organizers only)
- 13) Would you like to see GaymerX become an annual event? Pros and cons versus a one-time event?

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