

# **“I Guess We’re All Gay Now”: A Content Analysis of Gamers’ Reactions to New LGBTQ+ Characters on Reddit**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The lack of diversity in video games is a topic that has risen to prominence in recent years, with audiences and creators alike expressing concern regarding the homogeneity of representation within the gaming industry (Sheikh 2017). Many researchers have focused on the corporate and creative aspect of this problem, ultimately blaming the industry for a lack of diversity in the workforce (Johnson 2013; Harvey and Fisher 2015). The industry has made efforts in the last 20 years to incorporate more diverse characters into their games, however, there is limited research regarding how the community has reacted to these efforts and whether or not they have been successful. This paper looks into how gaming communities on Reddit have reacted to new LGBTQ+ characters in the last two decades. Implications for the research are discussed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In a media landscape that struggles to incorporate diverse characters in respectful ways, video games have fallen considerably behind in comparison to other mediums, such as cinema and television shows (Shaw 2009). Historically, queer video game characters have been few and far between, with a majority of early characters heavily stereotyped and censored to fit heteronormative standards (Talbert 2016). Only 60 out of over 4000 video games published between 2010 and 2015 feature queer characters or allowed the player to act as a queer character (Talbert 2016). LGBTQ+ characters experience a specific type of challenge when it comes to representation; queer traits are not visible. While the representation of various minorities in media is dependant on both how a character looks and acts, LGBTQ+ characters tend to depend solely on their actions to express themselves as queer. This requires higher involvement from the game’s production company in order to incorporate LGBTQ+ characters into their games. Fortunately, various major video game companies have acknowledged the need to diversify their games, both due to increasing diversification within current audiences and communities they hope to reach in the future (Shaw 2011). As a result, several major video game companies have decided to introduce LGBTQ+ characters into their games. However, research has found that just because LGBTQ+ themes or

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characters are introduced into a game does not necessarily mean that they are accepted by the community (Ruberg 2018). Currently, the gaming community in the United States is more diverse than ever before, yet it continues to be dominated by white, heterosexual males (Williams 2008), and gamers that participate in mainstream video game culture have been known to be “notoriously hostile towards those perceived as ‘different’” (Ruberg 2018). It is no surprise, then, that major video game companies, who tend to cater to much larger audiences, struggle to introduce LGBTQ+ characters in a way that pleases, rather than upsets, a majority of their customers. This is a crucial aspect of the character introductions, as the perceived acceptance of LGBTQ+ characters could have possible effects on how welcome LGBTQ+ individuals feel in gaming spaces. Therefore, this process should be looked at critically when trying to understand how to better introduce new LGBTQ+ characters into games in both a diverse and inclusive way. However, different companies have attempted to introduce new LGBTQ+ characters through different methods, with some companies addressing the topic through interactions with their fanbase, while other companies do little to acknowledge them. In order to understand how these communities react to new LGBTQ+ characters, it is also necessary to address possible confounding variables, such as the process through which the characters were introduced by each individual company and the character’s demographics (ethnicity, gender, etc.). Additionally, the increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals/themes in American society throughout the years should also be considered. Thus this paper asks the following questions:

RQ1: Under which conditions do new LGBTQ+ characters receive the most positively valenced reception?

RQ2: What themes/critiques are consistently used in negatively valenced posts?

RQ3: Has the reception of new LGBTQ+ characters changed over time?

RQ4: Does the character’s demographics have an effect on the community’s reactions?

## **METHODS**

This paper will employ qualitative and quantitative content analysis to study gamers’ reactions on the social media platform Reddit. First, a qualitative content analysis of Reddit posts and comments will be conducted in order to identify themes and keywords, including specific memes and response images/videos. That data will then be used to construct a codebook used to assess the valence (positive, negative, neutral) of the posts and comments. This same codebook will also contain manifest concepts related to the characteristics of the character’s introduction through the gaming company (release date, confirmation from creators, relationship status, etc.). Second, a quantitative content analysis of the data will be conducted using said codebook in order to analyze the valence of the posts and responses, as well as the introduction process by the companies.

### **CHARACTER CRITERIA:**

The video game characters used for this study need to have been confirmed as being queer no earlier than the year 2005 (the year Reddit was founded), regardless of the game's initial release date. They must also belong to a game produced by a major video game company. The characters must either be a protagonists, playable characters, or important secondary characters (such as a companion); and have to be explicitly queer, whether by actions expressed in the game or by confirmation from the development team. This criteria ensure that the character's queer trait cannot be easily overlooked by the gamers. Finally, major video game companies are defined as those who have created Triple A (AAA) games, meaning games with the highest budget and sales respective to their times.

### **POPULATION**

Reddit is a social media platform that consists of various subreddits, which can be defined as pages used by communities that focus on specific topics. In these subreddits, users can post and comment about the before-mentioned topic and can include text, images, and video. There are various subreddits that are dedicated to specific video game communities that users can use to post about their experiences and thoughts regarding the video games they play (Reddit). Additionally, Reddit's demographic contains a high percentage of gamers, as it is a very popular platform amongst the gaming community (Sattelberg 2019). The sample used for this study will be the subreddits that belong to the games where the aforementioned LGBTQ+ characters were introduced. Using Python, posts and comments that include the LGBTQ+ character and/or LGBTQ+ topics will be collected and limited to a timeframe of 7 days from the character's introduction. Only the initial post and the top ten comments will be included.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper seeks to understand how the Reddit gaming community reacts to the introduction of new LGBTQ+ characters in major video games. Through the use of mixed methods content analysis, Reddit comments regarding LGBTQ+ characters since 2005 will be analyzed for positive, negative, and neutral valence.

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