Designing Games in the Margin: Queer and Intersectional Feminist Meanings of Gender Perspective in Videogames Design

Alexandra Samper-Martínez
University Euneiz
Paseo de la Biosfera, 6, 01013, Vitoria-Gasteiz (Álava), Spain
0034 945 25 50 07
sandra.samper@euneiz.com

Beatriz Legeren-Lago
University of Vigo
Campus Universitario, s/n, 36310, Vigo (Pontevedra), Spain
0034 986 81 20 00
blegeren@uvigo.es

Diana Moisés-Toro
Open University of Catalonia
Rambla del Poblenou, 156, 08018 Barcelona, Spain
963 15 44 84
dmoises@uoc.edu

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The inclusion of cis women and queer people continues to be negotiated, especially in traditionally masculinized sectors, such as happens in the video game industry, transforming the cultural norms and practices of the overall industry (Young, 2018). As it has been demonstrated, including marginalized feminist and queer voices in discursive efforts has transformative implications as critical reflections arise in the game design process (Hantsbarger et al. 2022).

The literature on Queer Game Studies points to three basic issues that, to date, are still under discussion in relation to gender perspective integrations (Ruberg, 2017, 2019, 2020): (1) the stereotypical representations of characters in games recently resulting in gender and embodiment stratification, (2) the under-representation of cis women and queer people within the industry teams leading to non-inclusive and non-diverse narratives and game design (perpetrating norms and constructs that ignore important topics for those collectives such as affect, consent, vulnerability, power, etc.), and (3) the gaming community behaviours, from those of individuals to collectives, manifested in the gaming environment itself, paratexts and metatexts.

Queer Game Studies have manifested as an emerging field of study based primarily on theorizing, critique, and pedagogy around the gaming phenomenon (Fron et al. 2007; Pozo, Rugberg and Goetz, 2017) and, although in recent years emerged a "Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games" (Hansaruk, 2022), few studies focus on the queer designers' perspective (Marcotte, 2018). Our aim is to understand how is interpreted the introduction of the gender perspective in videogames design when developed exclusively by people with diverse gender identities usually marginalized in

the videogames industry (cisgender women, transgender, nonbinary and gender fluid developers).

There is also an extensive lack of primary qualitative data analysis as a substantial number of studies related to queerness and intersectional feminism in the videogames medium are based on existing app and games analysis (e.g. Harvey, 2014; Shaw and Friesem, 2016; Stone, 2018) or previous readings analysis (e.g. Pozo, 2018). Although the latter has been undoubtedly necessary, we took advantage of the community formed in a pre-incubation program specifically for cis women and queer game developers to gather primary data.

The initiative gathered game developers in an online forming and mentoring program to incentivize entrepreneurship among people with marginalized identity genders (regardless of sexuality, class, neurotypicality or race). Participants did not know each other before, however, 45 people (out of 63) ended up completing the program without any other pressure other than a personal compromise, as the program was publicly funded and for free. As a result of the program, teams had an indie game demo build towards which they could keep working and begin their entrepreneurship journey. The program ended up being a community of game developers designing games by, for, and about queerness and feminism as it was the participants' ethos (Ruberg, 2020).

The research agenda includes two stages. The first exploratory stage consists of holding personal interviews, through a semi-structured interview protocol, with the game developers of each team (from the teams that ended up in the pre-incubation program) who were most involved in game design - as for being those who veil during the design process to preserve the game vision, ideology and/or final message of the game (Morgan, 1996). We gathered those topics of internal debate that arose along each game design process when teams were rethinking how to introduce the gender perspective. Some topics have pivoted around what 'queerness in games' has covered before in Game Studies: the nature of the games moral, differences in character design, visual design, game mechanics, or wording adaptation.

Now that the main themes and topics have been settled, it would begin the second stage of the research, which consists of a series of focus groups. The focus groups will be carried out during the second edition of the pre-incubation program which will take place in 2023. Three rounds of the same focus group would be used to compare visions of how to interpret the introduction of the gender perspective in video games design. The first focus group will take place at the beginning of the program, whose content will pivot around themes and topics that have been found in the first stage of the study. The second and third focus groups will serve to observe differences among participants' perceptions from the beginning of the program until the end, as well as to guarantee data saturation.

For the extensive corpus of qualitative data analysis, we will be carrying out continuous thematic content analysis (Mayring, 2000), based on a hybrid inductive-deductive codification strategy: (1) setting up categories and themes based on the research question and previous literature review on queerness in games and (2) comparing them continuously with new categories and codes emerging from data. To that end, we use the CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis System) Atlas.ti, which does not guarantee the analysis itself but its consistency.

Results from the first stage data point to what really means for cis women and queer indie game designers to introduce the gender perspective in games. On the one hand, it means to design for women and queer people, and it implies (1) to represent inclusión

from different realities, in terms of gender representation by including sexual orientation, class, race or neurotypicality aspects in character design, (2) to create safe places in games for woman and queer people to freely be, to free their minds, to relax and just play, to rest from external and internal pressures, (3) to design experiences adapted to their life contingencies, thus, short experiences, clear and easy mechanics, in happy environments, in order to run out of routine and to not to be productive at least some minutes a day, and (4) to design with an open mind towards new sensibilities and vulnerable life situations. On the other hand, all the participants coincide in reporting that a game with gender perspective, can not be designed without the proper labour and design environment, which implies designing with other women and queer designers in the same team. On this regard, participants reported (1) to feel free and safe to speak out loud in expressing their ideas, especially important for designers in a situation of vulnerability (e.g. voice dysphoria), (2) to feel confident to take decisions by losing the fear to be wrong (impostor syndrome), (3) to feel supported to lead people when needed, and (4) to feel that health, especially mental health, is prioritized over results.

The second stage of data gathering will be focused on determining if more horizontal decision-making structures, mutual care and cooperation - arising intrinsically from the collective's values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014) - guarantee free-minded participation in creative processes, and if it leads to innovative aesthetics, narratives and mechanics: game design.

Keywords

queerness, intersectional feminism, gender perspective, game design, qualitative data analysis

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