

Reflecting on Pride at Play

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INTRODUCTION

Queer games have always been here. From the thrilling drag queen detective mystery *Caper in the Castro* (Ralph 1989) to the coming-of-age zen puzzle game *Unpacking* (Witch Beam 2021), queer games have since found their target audience. Everyone wants to see themselves represented in games ‘wholly, honestly, and responsibly’ (Smith and Decker 2016), but authentic representation is rare to come by.

Our previous research found that queer games (games tagged ‘LGBT’ and relevant tags) make up around 0.5% of the market both for *Steam* and *itch.io* (Ho et al. 2022). This figure seems even smaller as the International Games Developer Association global developer survey reported that 32% (Westar et al. 2022, up from 14% in 2014) of the global games workforce did *not* identify as heterosexual, a figure significantly higher than average in the UK (10.6%, 2021) and in the US (11.7%, 2021).

As more queer folks create queer games, the market for them is also growing. We point to the 2023 *Queer Games Bundle*, with ‘over 450 amazing, heartfelt, fun, and radical games and artworks’ (2023) raising \$161,628 in sales, and to another highly successful tabletop game *Artisans of Splendent Vale* (Valens 2022) starring queer people of colour as its main cast raised \$208,849 on Kickstarter as further evidence. Queer games are seeing a healthy audience growth and community support.

However, queer game designers regularly face discrimination, sexism, and harassment in games (IGDA 2022). It takes a significant amount of personal time and resources to make one game. According to Ruberg (2019), rarely do game revenues cover the living expenses of their indie creators. Even smaller indie games, made by people in the margins, must find income elsewhere to fund game development. In some parts of the Asia-Pacific regions, LGBTQIA+ folks continue to face rejection, prosecution, and harm (Sanders 2020).

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Pride at Play was founded in response to the need for a space where authentic and purposeful queer games can be seen, celebrated, and enjoyed by everyone. Coinciding with the Sydney WorldPride 2023 Festival and later programmed as part of the St Kilda Film Festival in Australia in the same year, *Pride at Play* featured 22 thoughtful LGBTQIA+ games from Oceania and the Asia-Pacific region, running from 21 February to 4 March in Sydney, and 3 to 24 June in Melbourne. The exhibition program invited visitors to read, experience, and reflect on the games through play at no cost.

We curated *Pride at Play* to advocate and amplify voices coming from the margins, especially for anyone who plays and makes games from LGBTQIA+ backgrounds. Formulating the following questions played a major role in achieve our curatorial aim:

- Would this game ‘move the conversation forward’ about LGBTQIA+ topics?
- Is this game being held back because of local cultural sensitivity and where it comes from?
- How does this game demonstrate accurate, original, and considerate queer content?
- If the game has explicit queer (character, sexuality, etc.) content, what narrative does it provide or frame around that content?
- What queerness does the game allow the player to interpret?
- Would a conversation with the game designer be interesting to pursue?

At the completion of curation the program, we launched with an illustrated print catalogue containing 20 interviews with the game designers. In one interview for *Pride at Play*, gay game developer Luke Miller told us:

Growing up, I didn’t have many representations of queer people, especially in any of the media I consumed. ... for years I was like oh, gee, I really would love to make a gay game.

In another interview with Vee Hendro and Hayley Gordon, we heard that the indie role-playing games audience are ‘queerer than ever’, and younger people are ‘more open about their weirdness’ going into the indie space. *Pride at Play* is a clear validation for young people that there is a need to grow the queer games market, and strong evidence for industry of the significant role queer games are playing in the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

As a team of researchers, designers, curators, and educators, together we will reflect on the making of *Pride at Play* and share our learnings with the DiGRA community. Queer games are story-rich experiences centring character gender and sexuality in the narrative made by queer folks for queer players. We will share the pure queer joy of encountering authentic queer content, designing for safe and inclusive exhibition play, responses from the industry, funding bodies, institutions, and impressions from the players who visited and interacted with queer games exhibited at *Pride at Play*.



Figure 1: Photographs taken at the Pride at Play exhibition in Melbourne. (Top left) Three visitors playing, from left to right, *The Beat: A Glam Noir Adventure*, *That Boy Is A Monstr*, and *Queer & Chill*. (Top right) People browsing printed bookmarks for the catalogue. (Bottom left) Tabletop games area with *Our Mundane Supernatural Life* in session. (Bottom right) One visitor answers the question ‘what does it mean to play with pride?’ on the exhibition wall.

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