

# Queer Indie Games on *itch.io*, 2013-2022

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## Abstract

As we turn to queer independent games, we tune our senses to their appearance, narrative structure, and stories to arrive at what authentic queer experiences can be through the lens of queergaming. In this paper, we propose to queer game studies via a multidisciplinary triangulation of critiquing games and theorising queer experiences through queer theory, by counting queer representation in queer indie games, and by conducting a thematic game analysis with two case studies on a collection of LGBT games on *itch.io*. By orienting ourselves to the desire of having agency as a queer person, we will show how queer indie games provide authentic embodiment of queer experiences. Although our qualitative sample is relatively small to be statistically significant, we found the gender representation of queer character seem to mimic that of global industry game developer surveys, and we also report the proportions of LGBT games by platform, genre, tools, language, and price points. We also reported the representation of queer pairings, which to our knowledge has not been reported elsewhere. Through the thematic analysis, we identified three themes throughout the game collection, and present two brief case studies on smartphone messaging apps and the use of queer horror in the game sample. This work fills a gap in the literature on what queer experiences are in games through illustrating human connections in queer indie games.

## CCS Concepts

• Social and professional topics → Gender; Sexual orientation.

## Keywords

game studies, indie games, queer studies

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## 1 Introduction

“This is a game about queer community. If it’s going to make anyone happy, it should be queer people,” Mo Cohen, independent game creator, quoted from *Indie Games in the Digital Age* [21].

Between 2013 and 2022, *itch.io* distributed more than 2,500 games published with the tag “LGBT” placed by their independent creators. LGBT creators collectively crafted stories and narratives in the form of gameplay, allowing this interactive art form to intertwine with personal experiences. Experiences for and with queerness became the connecting ley lines where queer folks felt safe to tell their stories and be heard.

Don’t let the numbers fool you: queer games are barely a fraction of all the games available. As of April 2022, *itch.io* distributes over 530,000 games, which give queer indie games about 0.47% of the marketplace. Mainstream market representation of queer content on Steam is significantly poorer. At the time of writing, Steam listed merely 89 games tagged “LGBTQ+” on their platform with only a grain of market share. On both store pages, there are no direct categories to queer games. Queer games are essentially invisible to most players.

The invisibility of queer games perpetuates a false impression about queer folks as if we were rainbow unicorns in a mythology, only ever heard in passing yet never spotted. But queer people do exist. In fact, queer people take up a substantially higher proportion of the games industry than their national population censuses would report.

Western games industries majorly employ people who were born and identify as straight, white, and cisgendered male. New Zealand found only 19% women in the games industry, 1% gender-diverse, and “19% who identify as LGBTQI+” [9]. The UK games industry reported 30% women, 3% non-binary, and 24% did not identify as heterosexual [28]. The games industry in Australia similarly reported 23% cisgendered women, 8% transgender, and 2% non-binary, but did not report on their sexual orientations [13].

Worldwide, the International Games Developer Association reported that 30% of the games industry are (cis or trans) women, 7% identifies as transgender, 8% gender-diverse, and 32% did not identify as straight [30]. If about one-third of the games industry are gender-diverse or queer, why are there less than one percent of gender-diverse or queer games on the market?

We tend to the word “queer” as to capture the multidimensional gamut of personal identities and identity expressions under the rainbow. “Identifying as queer” is a “good catch-all ... like a family” [21] that welcomes anyone whose gender, sex, and sexual orientations are not so straight-forward, or as “deviations from the straight line” [1]. Living a queer life embarks the challenge of breaking down assumptions about gender identities. There are not singular, but multiple socially constructed expressions used to communicate an

idea of identity. In a similar vein, attempting to illustrate all forms of queerness and queer identities in a singular game is an impossibility, and so we orient ourselves to study games as a collective text towards a new understanding of queer indie games.

As we turn to queer independent games, we tune our senses to their appearance, narrative structure, and stories to find “queer transformations, happy accidents, glitches, and switches ... juxtaposing and experimenting with form, genre, function, and experience” through the lens of queergaming [6]. We propose to queer game studies further via a triangulation of queer theory [1], counting queerness [26], and game analysis [8] as a proposition to visualise the invisible, and magnify the marginalised games on *itch.io*.

To that end, our work seeks to understand how stories, narratives, and gameplay support the everyday experience of queer folks through queer game design. How do queer indie games tell stories, whose perspectives do they bring, and for whom? In what ways does queer structure and narrative take place, for what purpose, and why?

If we think of representation in media as providing a glimpse into a differently lived experience, the act of playing games would not only be just a portal for such possibilities, but games vanguard a safe, interactive space [16] for queer experiences to take place.

However, performing such an analysis of queer experiences in games requires acknowledgement of misalignment in pleasure and labour as well. We need to recognise that much of the pleasure of mainstream games “comes at the expense of women and people of color”, with a saturated portrayal of negative stereotypes and violence against others [6]. We cannot ignore the “socioeconomic disparity and the material realities of queer game-makers, game-makers of color, game-makers with disabilities, and others”, and the exploitation of labour in the games industry [19]. The motivation to focus on queer indie games, as in, to closely examine games created by independent queer game creators for queer people, is to conjure a potential paradigm shift that can illustrate, alter, or enhance queer possibilities in games. This paper fills the negative space in queer games studies literature with a hopeful and pleasurable analysis of queer games designed by and for queer people.

## 2 Theorising Queer Experiences in Games

When a game is designed by and for queer people, it initiates a living connection to the queer community that mainstream games are struggling to establish. Independent game creators established their standing in the market by rejecting the necessity of mega-publishers and pursued their own paths. The paths to financial success as independent game creators are severely difficult to sustain, attributed to the considerable labour and the long lead time to produce games, especially for queer game creators [19]. To arrive at an understanding of queer experiences designed for queer people in games, we need to first critique what historically has been there: queer experiences designed for the cisgendered, heterosexual audience.

Queer representation in mainstream games is already familiar to the public consciousness of players. *The Sims* (2000) offers same-sex relationship options throughout its series, with later instalments featuring fluid gender identities and expressions. *Overwatch* (2016) revealed its cover art and playable character, Tracer as a lesbian

through a comic series. These examples were praised by players and game critics for their ongoing efforts in representing queer characters in games. Even so, queer characters and content continue to appear as side quests, an optional gameplay structure that can be ignored and discarded, like a sidekick in a much greater heroic journey. Opportunities to explore queer relationships tend to be hidden behind a series of side quests to unlock. Relationship game mechanics in the *Dragon Age* series (2009) and in *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019) are two examples. In *Overwatch*, Tracer’s lesbian identity has almost no effect on the gameplay or the main narrative. In *The Sims*, the player can actively include or exclude relationships between characters, removing their agency.

*The Last of Us Part II* (2020) prominently featured a lead lesbian character, Ellie with her girlfriend, Dina, and a supporting transmasculine character, Lev. The game’s central premise of forcing “players to play as somebody with ... discomfort”, extends this discomfort into “a hesitance to perform such violent acts against each other” [23]. This feeling is ever-present throughout the game, creating layers of character tension and realism. For example, Lev experiences having his birth name outed by the player character Abby, a cisgendered woman, before a series of traumatic events take place around them. In another scene, Lev shares that he ran away from a forced marriage by shaving his head and affirming his identity as a man, a decision that continuously exposed him to more harm. The portrayal of Lev and the narrative around him is grounded in realism, but at the same time, Lev’s trans identity is constantly denied through physical violence. We only see Lev through Abby’s perspective, not through him, nor understand him as a person, and so we could only experience Lev’s story through a cisgendered lens [29].

Games that were not designed for queer players run into trouble when representing queer characters. It becomes a narrower, or shallower kind of representation. Shallow representations often appear in games that offer “transgender” as only a checkbox or attribute for a character, and it has little effect in character or player agency, or in its narrative or gameplay. Shallow representations make the game impossible to offer queer experiences in “the intersections and interconnections of games, race, gender, sexuality, and other marginalized identities and embodiments” [5]. Shallow representation limits the possibilities of players internalising the behaviours or motivations of characters and downplay their identities.

To challenge and question what game design can become, we need to draw from Edmond Chang’s queergaming. Queergaming is a response to mainstream games that are “simply adding another checkbox, another token, another plotline”, featuring flat and narrow queer experiences [6]. Queergaming reconfigured many works of feminist and queer theorists as a provocation for the need of a queerer game design. He argued for the use of gender and sexual orientations to be procedurally relevant, to appeal to a broad audience, and purposeful [11], and asked how might game design enable “narrative ... game play, mechanics, consequences, and possibilities” for characters who are “fully gay” [6]. For players to experience queer possibilities, games must be designed for queer players in the forefront of mind. To represent queer experiences in games “wholly, honestly, and responsibly” [27], games must be designed by, or led by queer creators who understands the trouble of living a queer life. This doesn’t mean queer games cannot be enjoyed by

people who do not have first-hand queer experiences. Rather, games are excellent opportunities for anyone to explore discomfort in “a safe environment outside of reality” [10], as games are excellent digital storytelling spaces which have the potential to legitimise and elevate players as co-creators of queer experiences [4].

Games that are designed by queer people for queer people have an inherent imperative to tell queer stories without the need to safeguard the game world from the outside world. Within the game world, queer games are already queer spaces for stories to flourish. We have posited that queer games initiate a living connection to the queer community. We argue that it is through this living connection, authenticity around queer experiences is seen, heard, and felt. Extending that position further, we see that queer experiences can be established, validated, and accepted through queer indie games. Queer experiences are stories about queer identities and queer people, and for that reason queer games exist to tell stories of queer experiences.

As we begin to understand what queer experiences in games can be, let us orient our mind to where they can be found. We have been referring to the collection of LGBT games on *itch.io* more broadly as *queer indie games* in this paper to represent queer games on any platform that are made by and for queer people. Indeed, as we will show later in this paper, queer indie games are authentic embodiment of queer experiences, because game creators who lived through and drew from their own queer experiences made these games. To better support our illustration of queer indie games, we will first present an analysis of LGBT games on *itch.io*, based on the methods of counting queerness [26].

### 3 Counting Queerness in Queer Indie Games

The *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*<sup>1</sup> is an ambitious archival research project founded by Adrienne Shaw [24] to document examples of queer content in games. This project significantly and uniquely documented well-researched entries of about 400 games, with over 1,200 games containing known queer content on the list [25]. *Represent Me*<sup>2</sup> ran a similar crowdsourcing initiative which allowed anyone online to submit examples of queer content to their database but has since ceased accepting entries to consolidate documentation efforts into the archive [17, 26]. The archive aims to be comprehensive and includes of all sorts of queer references and content, as Shaw describes on the archive about page:

“... our goal is to offer a record of how characters are explicitly coded, what creators have said about these characters, as well as how fans have interpreted these characters. We have included games and characters [that] have been read queerly as well as games where players have created modifications to the original game to create LGBTQ content. We also include homophobic and transphobic content, as well as other forms of ambient LGBTQ representation.” [25]

The motivation to undertake counting queerness on queer indie games is partly because most of them are not yet on the archive list, and partly because we expected to find a different distribution in the proportions of queer representation. While we can only

broadly speak to what we have documented so far, and not to the entire LGBT games collection on *itch.io*, we have already found meaningful differences between mainstream games with queer content, and queer indie games, which we will describe next.

#### 3.1 Method

Between November 2021 and January 2022, the authors documented 61 games tagged with “LGBT” on *itch.io* published between 2013 and 2022. We documented the types of queer content such as queer character names, gender, and sexuality where possible. Our method is based on counting queerness [26] with several differences. For instance, we did not encode for race (most games do not describe race) as we were limited by the available game text. We also did not encode for non-character, or non-narrative categories (e.g., “locations” and “artifacts”) because they did not apply to indie games well. In our encoding process, we found that queer indie games tend to be centred around queer lives, and so we opted to encode for queer stories, inner struggles, and pairings.

Our selection criteria required games to have sufficient player commentary (e.g., playthroughs or “let’s play” videos, sufficiently detailed comments on the store page, or fan discussions found elsewhere on the Internet) as we relied on these sources to document the players’ experiences encountering queer content. Other than that, we tried to organically strike a balance in genres or themes, as most queer games on *itch.io* were visual novels or interactive fiction in nature [7, 12]. In a couple of cases where the character’s sexuality was implicit, we encoded it based on observed romantic attraction. Finally, there were games that we did not find any queer content, which we excluded from analysis, as we speculated that the creators themselves identified with the LGBT tag and not the game.

We were able to encode most character gender and sexuality with high confidence based on the explicit mentions by their store page descriptions, or the tags that had been applied by the game creators. Games that were not suitable for analysis were abstract in nature, or did not feature humanoid characters, or featured characters but with little context. The three authors each encoded an equal proportion of games and met weekly to discuss the previous week’s findings.

In addition, on 10 March 2022, we scraped the entire catalogue (n=2,499) of games tagged with LGBT on *itch.io* to collect the standard metadata such as the release dates, platforms, genres, and tags, using a public endpoint *itch.io* itself uses to display search results. Web scraping allowed us to see the entire game collection only on a high level. We observed a few, but not many games tagged as “LGBT” by the creators which did not feature queer content. We were also not able to glean the queer representations in the entire game collection via web scraping. Nonetheless, we did not find many LGBT games without queer content and suggest that the calculated proportions should be close to the real proportions of content.

#### 3.2 LGBT games and creators on *itch.io*

We will first report the quantitative results for the entire *itch.io* LGBT collection, and then report the subset of games analysed for queer content. Table 1 shows the total count and proportions of

<sup>1</sup><https://lgbtqgamearchive.com>

<sup>2</sup><https://representme.charity>

queer indie games by platform tags. On *itch.io*, tags are placed by the game creators themselves. As *itch.io* is primarily designed for desktop players, and because many free game creation tools can target multiple platforms, we found nearly half of the LGBT games that are available cross-platform for Windows, Mac, and Linux simultaneously. Surprisingly, 167 games listed Android as a platform, but iOS and the Nintendo Switch had no results. Examining closer revealed that *itch.io* did not offer either iOS or Nintendo Switch as tags in March 2022, the time of data collection. When we revisited this in April 2022, iOS became an available tag on *itch.io* with 14 results in its LGBT collection. Note that games can be listed to be available on multiple platforms in the following table.

**Table 1: LGBT games on *itch.io* by available platform, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Games	Proportion
Windows	1,599	64.0%
Mac	1,098	43.9%
Linux	828	33.1%
HTML5	822	32.9%
Android	167	6.7%
Total	2,499	100%

Next, we counted the number and proportions of games by genre. On *itch.io*, a game can belong to one or more genres tags. We expected to and did find most games listed as visual novel or interactive fiction. In the period for analysis, *Twine* [14] and *Ren'Py* [18] were gaining fast popularity with independent game creators thanks to their low barrier to entry to make games [12], and both were designed to create visual novels and interactive fictions.

*itch.io* itself describes visual novels as “interactive stories [that] focus mainly on character development and plot rather than action and gameplay mechanics”, but it does not offer any description for interactive fiction on the site. We found many games listed as both visual novel and interactive fiction together as a result. Table 2 shows the list of featured genres on *itch.io*. There are more genres intersecting with LGBT than listed here, such as “LGBT” and “horror” (317 games), or “LGBT” and “retro” (92 games).

We then aggregated the collection by the quoremade with tag. *itch.io* uniquely offers this discovery mechanism to filter games based on the tools used by the creators. This tag can also be used to search for games made with the same tool for new users to see what is possible. These tools include, both free and paid, game engines, 3D modelling tools, sprite editors, micro-platforms, digital audio workstations, and image editing software. Table 3 shows a truncated list with less than 10 counts excluded to maintain readability. The top three tools are all free and open source, demonstrating their popularity with independent game creators. As with the analyses above, a game may list one or more tools on its “made with” tags, and not be exclusionary in nature.

Cultural diversity is an equal vector for our analysis of this collection. Table 4 shows the count of queer indie games by the available languages and localisations. We expected most of the games to be in English, which *itch.io* launched in and continues to gain an audience. Importantly, we also wanted to count how many

**Table 2: LGBT games on *itch.io* by genre, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Games	Proportion
Visual Novel	1,189	47.6%
Interactive Fiction	663	26.5%
Adventure	310	12.4%
Role Playing	289	11.6%
Simulation	120	4.8%
Platformer	116	4.6%
Puzzle	113	4.5%
Action	89	3.6%
Educational	35	1.4%
Survival	35	1.4%
Shooter	32	1.3%
Strategy	21	0.8%
Rhythm	18	0.7%
Sports	15	0.6%
Card Game	10	0.4%
Fighting	9	0.4%
Racing	6	0.2%
Total	2,323	100%

**Table 3: LGBT games on *itch.io* by tools, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Games	Proportion
Ren'Py	378	29.0%
Twine	267	20.5%
Bitsy	100	7.7%
RPG Maker	93	7.1%
Adobe Photoshop	82	6.3%
Clip Studio Paint	62	4.8%
Aseprite	57	4.4%
Audacity	56	4.3%
Construct	54	4.1%
GameMaker: Studio	43	3.3%
Paint Tool SAI	31	2.4%
Blender	28	2.1%
GIMP	28	2.1%
Godot	28	2.1%
Krita	24	1.8%
TyranoBuilder	24	1.8%
FL Studio	21	1.6%
Unreal Engine	15	1.2%
Paint.net	13	1.0%
PICO-8	12	0.9%
GB Studio	12	0.9%
Adobe Illustrator	11	0.8%
Total	1,303	100%

non-English games there are available in the LGBT collection, which may be used as an approximate indicator for cultural reach. For readability we excluded results less than 10 from the table. In line with our expectations, LGBT on *itch.io* are overwhelmingly written in English. On the other hand, we counted 36 games available in

French, and 35 in Latin American Spanish, which are promising results and suggest there may be queer game creator gatherings or movements since the last decade in the region.

**Table 4: LGBT games on *itch.io* by languages, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Games	Proportion
English	915	96.9%
French	36	3.8%
Spanish; Latin America	35	3.7%
Portuguese (Brazil)	32	3.4%
Spanish; Castilian	29	3.1%
German	18	1.9%
Japanese	18	1.9%
Korean	18	1.9%
Russian	18	1.9%
Chinese (Simplified)	14	1.5%
Italian	11	1.2%
Polish	11	1.2%
Total	944	100%

Table 5 shows the number of games aggregated by price range in US Dollars, the site’s default currency. We found that more than 90% of queer indie games on *itch.io* are free, or as a pay-what-you-what donation scheme to support the creators. On the other hand, we know many queer game creators are struggling to make ends meet, and so we wanted to find out how many games are paid, and for how much. This number gives us an indication of the affordability of queer indie games. We could not access sales figures, and so we were not able to report copies sold and estimated earnings.

**Table 5: LGBT games on *itch.io* by price, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Games	Proportion
Free or name-your-price	2,262	90.52%
\$1 or less	17	0.68%
>\$1 and less than \$5	93	3.72%
>\$5 and less than \$10	62	2.48%
>\$10 and less than \$15	47	1.88%
>\$15 and less than \$20	14	0.56%
More than \$20	5	0.20%
Total	2,499	100%

Lastly, we counted the number of games uploaded by unique creator accounts. This number indicates an indirect measure of productivity of queer game creators and their investment on the *itch.io* marketplace. Table 6 shows the number of games uploaded and the associated count of independent creators. While most queer creators only ever released 1 game on *itch.io*, 239 uploaded at least 2 games, and 87 uploaded at least 3 games. We were not able to count the total number of queer creators who did not release any games, so the proportions reported here is based on the number of queer creators with at least 1 game released.

**Table 6: LGBT creators by games uploaded on *itch.io*, up to 10 March 2022**

	Count of Creators	Proportion
With at least 1 game	1,784	100%
With at least 2 games	425	23.8%
With at least 3 games	186	10.4%
With at least 4 games	99	5.5%
With at least 5 games	65	3.6%
With at least 6 games	41	2.3%
With 7 games or more	31	1.7%
Total	1,784	100%

There are additional tags which we did not include but mention here for completeness: status (released/in-development), release date, last updated date, average 5-star rating and number of ratings, average session length (e.g., about half-hour, about one hour), inputs (e.g., keyboard/mouse, controller), and accessibility (e.g., subtitle, colour-blind friendly).

We originally planned on analysing queer indie games by year, however, *itch.io* does not consistently publish when the game is first made available, released, or both. We hope to see this data being made available in the future for analysis over time.

### 3.3 Queer content in LGBT games on *itch.io*

We sampled 61 games and documented any queer character’s gender, sexuality, and recorded if they appeared in pairs. We counted both main characters, which are the majority in the data collection, as well as supporting characters in the game. Mainstream games rarely featured two queer couples together. In contrast, we saw many queer pairings in our analysis. Queer game creators also advertise their queer characters in the front page, often listing their pronouns and sexual orientations, which were helpful for our encoding. We were also able to deduce character gender and sexualities through gameplay context and fan discussions on the store page. Table 7 shows the number of character gender representations in our sample of 61 games. We did not record any intersex character representations. Although our sample size is too small to be conclusive, the proportions of gender representation are closer to the global game developer survey demographic: 34.2% women in our sample versus 30% women game developers, 10.5% transgender representation in our sample versus 7% transgender game developers, and 10.5% non-binary representation in our sample versus 8% gender-diverse game developers. We conjecture that queer indie game creators are making games as a reflection of their own personal experiences and surroundings when working with gender constructs, drawing from similar motivations observed in many interviews with queer game creators in the literature [21].

When we surveyed character sexual orientations, as shown in Table 8, we found 50% of the sexuality representations were about gay relationships between men, and 34.6% were about lesbian relationships. These numbers diverge from the global developer surveys by far. In our sample, 84.6% of sexual orientation representations are gay or lesbian, versus 18.8% of all queer identifications in the global survey. There are 7.7% bisexual representation in our sample versus 65.6% of all queer identifications in the global survey. Note that

**Table 7: Character gender/sex in sample, LGBT games on *itch.io***

	Number of Characters	Proportion
Man	31	40.8%
Woman	26	34.2%
Non-binary	8	10.5%
Transgender	8	10.5%
Player-specified	3	3.9%
Total	76	100%

the global survey proportions here have been normalised based on total non-heterosexual representations to be comparable. We speculate this may be due to the process of our encoding (e.g., we would encode “lesbian” for a queer couple of two women, when one or both might be pansexual, not visible in the text), and we also recognise that sexual orientations are fluid directions that may not always fit neatly in labelled boxes. As such, Table 8 is more suited to illustrate the visible representations in LGBT games on *itch.io*.

**Table 8: Character sexuality in sample, LGBT games on *itch.io***

	Number of Characters	Proportion
Gay	26	50.0%
Lesbian	18	34.6%
Bisexual/Pansexual	4	7.7%
Asexual	2	3.8%
Queer	1	1.9%
Open to player	1	1.9%
Total	52	100%

Next, we documented instances of queer pairings. We looked for when a pair of queer characters were featured as de facto couples, romantic pairs, or have clear coupling endings in the game, and were not just options for player romance mechanics. To our knowledge, there has not been any quantitative analysis on the number of queer couple representation in games, which we felt was a worthwhile contribution to include. One of the games we analysed was *My Sweet Zombie* (2022) that featured one polyamorous ending out of the potential four endings, and it was the only poly representation in the sample. Table 9 shows the various queer pairings found in our analysis. We would like to note that there is an inherent limitation in documenting queer pairings by sexuality. As we saw before, there are potential troubles in encoding homosexuality with bisexual couples of the same sex. Thus, we present the table by gender. In our analysis, we found much fewer queer couple pairings than there were queer characters in the sample. Although the sample size is too small to be definitive, the relative difference may suggest that queer indie games are more likely to feature narratives for exploring romantic and sexual relationships with characters who are single.

While we documented examples of queer character gender and sexuality, we also recorded the overall narrative, visual aesthetics, and the inner struggles of these characters. Simply counting representation has not yet answered our inquiry into queer experiences

**Table 9: Queer pairings in sample, LGBT games on *itch.io***

	Number of Pairings	Proportion
Two men	3	20.0%
Two women	6	40.0%
Two non-binary	1	6.7%
At least one transgender	4	26.7%
Three characters	1	6.7%
Total	15	100%

in depth, although it was and remains a useful activity to gather starting points for qualitative analysis. For the third phase of our research, we conducted weekly readings of queer games and used the game mechanics, narrative, and events as our text, following Fernández-Vara’s approach to game analysis [8].

## 4 Thematic Game Analysis on Queer Indie Games

After curating a group of 61 games from *itch.io*, we undertook collaborative brainwriting and mind mapping over two sessions in two weeks to generate major themes. For the brainwriting exercise, we independently generated nouns, adjectives, and abstract themes, and created a visual collage as a group until saturation. For the mind mapping activity, we wrote each game on sticky notes, and identified social and emotional themes associated with these games, and progressively put them on a large whiteboard with lines connecting games and themes. We ended the mind mapping activity when all games were mapped.

### 4.1 Themes in queer indie games

Through these generative and collaborative activities, we identified three game design themes related to queer experiences in the sample of queer indie games. They are multiple connections, queer play, and remixing techniques. Together, queer indie games challenge and resist the hegemonic logic that defined what is acceptable and valued [20]. In our reading, queer games are redefining games as a journey to experience, not just a set of objectives to complete. Queer indie games are trailblazing that pathway and demonstrating what can be done and the queer possibilities of game design. For example, games made with *Twine* often contain multiple divergent storylines and plotlines, all without clear objectives or goals, aside from concluding or ending the narrative. Some have critiqued interactive fictions and microgames as “not games” and rejected games as an art form [3]. We take the position that queer games are art precisely because both art and queer games are about expressing humanity through a medium that allows unfamiliar yet provoking experiences to enter minds. Both art and queer games are about critiquing the lack of diversity and thought by pointing out the alternative in plain sight. Of course, art is more general than queerness as a concept, and encompasses more than what is ordinary as well as the everyday ordinary. Inverting and connecting that line of thinking, our point is that queer games express the everyday ordinary experiences in queer lives as events and narratives that feel extraordinary.

*Multiple connections.* Queer indie games create and encourage creativity drawn from within the everyday experiences in queer

lives. Collectively, queer games facilitate a space of freedom, not permission as there is no one to grant such things, where queer independent creators are empowered to tell their stories through game narrative. In our sample the narratives include relationships, dating, sexuality, separation, different journeys to save someone or something, finding the true, building friendship, exploration, haunting places or people, texting or messaging, self-discovery, engaging with uncomfortable topics, acceptance, sci-fi, community, important decisions on life, horror, spirituality, and respect. We found many instances of multiple narratives intertwined in our sampling of queer indie games, which are often unique on the market for the mix between concepts.

Queer indie games embrace the multiplicity of concepts and the interconnection of personal, social, and political troubles from the perspective of queer characters. Queer characters are connected by more than their gender identities and expressions, more than their sex and sexualities. Queer games offer political critiques and social experiments in friendships, relationships, and bigger troubles through a broader perspective in what it means to queer game design. Queer indie games are doing what mainstream games can do better because they connect game play and game design as queer experiences. Experiences and game design where the “representation must inform mechanics, and mechanics must deepen and thicken representation” [6] also redefine what it means to be a narrative designer in games. Game design brings all the elements of the game together as a coherent experience. Queer game design connects people in the game together as a journey of human experience.

*Queer play.* Queer indie games are not afraid “to lose, to playing to hurt, to playing too fast or too slow” [20]. In our readings, we observed many ways to design and play games: games without an ending, games where the players decided the end, games that had no competitiveness, games where the end was attached to a personal decision of the player, games with multiple endings, games where the players just vibe around and chill together, and games with analogies about the journey of self-discovery. To play queer indie games is to embrace unconventional game structure, because there is no convention to be found, aside from what are commonly accessible to queer game creators. Even so, queer indie games defy the expectation of convention through the diversity of cast, mechanics, and narratives that went into the play of the game.

We found that the journey of queer play is more valuable than the ending. Queer play, or to play queerly is to embark on a different journey. Indeed, every playthrough of queer games detailed a person, or a group of people and their stories, stories that provided players the opportunity to not just experience what it is like to be a different person, but also to internalise their motivations, desires, and feelings. Designing games for character needs provides a springboard to go beyond simple representation. Queer indie games are embodiments of queer character motivations which drive the game narrative and possible outcomes. The game mechanics too are diverse, including examples like crushing dolls, going for a walk, solving a crime, and acting as a judge. These embodiments exemplify how designers can see games differently and allow players to take different roles within the same game. To play a game queerly is to experience how the journey transforms the player.

*Remixing techniques.* Queer game design features unconventional combinations of game mechanics. From the development of each

game to the rendering treatment of visual elements we observed the artists, developers, musicians, writers, and designers taking complete artistic freedom in designing their games. Queer indie games are non-conforming with conventional visual styles, some offering no pretence to polish visual elements when abstract visual elements make excellent storytelling foundations. This is not to say that queer games are not polished outcomes of game design. We found many games executed to a very high degree of visual fidelity. Our point is that queer indie games have a keen awareness of why they exist as games, and that the queer game creators poured more time and resources towards the aspects of games that mattered the most and worked to push the boundaries of the tools they used to make games.

Queer game creators take a step beyond appropriation of game mechanics as well. Queer games may suggest simple motivations like “I’d be interested just because it’s gay” [22], but we found that queer indie games also go on to tell much deeper stories. These stories are supported by extensive use of clever visual cues and aesthetic choices to further reinforce the main message of the game. Queer indie games, as they centre around queer people and their experiences, take every aspect of the game to create high value products that go far beyond the kinds of representation of queer experiences mainstream games have been able to include. Queer indie games involve the player in the queer experience at every stage of game design. Collectively, queer indie games represent what game design can become, and how queer experiences can be incorporated in games from the small to the less well-defined. At the same time, queer indie games continue to resist to be defined, as every game entails a very different mixture of real life and game design. Queer experiences in game design are strengthened through stories that follow the needs and actions of queer desires. Queer games invite the player to undertake a journey through kinship, discomfort, relaxation, and finding themselves. In the next two subsections, we will highlight from our thematic game analysis two examples of queer indie game design, and how they bring out the human experience in games.

## 4.2 Case study: messaging apps

During our exploration of queer indie games, there was a strong and recurring presence of messaging apps, prominently feature the familiar conversational user interface design as a primary space where gameplay took place. We found that most of the visual novels allowed players to use the messaging apps in first person. It is perhaps not surprising we found smartphones and messaging apps present in many games, since most of the queer indie game creators drew from their personal experiences as their source of inspiration. Through the interaction of messaging apps and gameplay, these visual novels explored the role of smartphones in daily life. In this case study, we will briefly discuss two examples. *A Normal Lost Phone* (2017) subverted the expectation of privacy and sharing by building player tension on using someone else’s lost phone. 湯圓 [*tong jyun*] (2021) brought the joy of learning about one’s culture from their parents through learning how to cook a traditional Chinese delicacy.

In *A Normal Lost Phone*, the player finds Sam’s smartphone and is asked to solve a series of narrative puzzles with information

provided by different apps and chatting with Sam's friends. By interacting with Sam's phone, the player soon discovers that Sam, who sometimes introduces herself to family and friends as a straight male, is in transition and has not been able to share her identity with her family. During the game, the player learns about Sam's life, dreams, and frustration. At the end of the game, the player is asked to delete the information in the phone and protect Sam's privacy.

How to use everyday smartphone apps like emails, photo albums, and messaging apps is familiar to most players, and yet the narrative was centred around Sam's troubles with her transition. *A Normal Lost Phone* used smartphones and messaging apps to show the interactions with the characters and their world, to explore their private lives, and to understand how some characters explore and grow in their identities. At the same time, smartphones are private personal spaces where all our treasured memories and conversations reside and using Sam's phone protrudes a sense of discomfort around privacy invasion. The player would discover that Sam wanted someone else to find the phone. She wanted her story to be heard, but also wanted her privacy to be respected. The tension between the player's desire to put away the phone and digging deeper is finally resolved when the phone asks the player to delete all of Sam's personal information.

The second example with messaging apps is 湯圓[tong jyun]. *Tong Jyun*, named after the popular Hakka and Cantonese traditional sticky rice ball dessert, is a delightful game which shows the impact of how we share and connect with family, friends, and relatives every day on messaging apps. *Tong Jyun* is about a Chinese American girl who is trying to share with her mum by learning how to make tong jyun during the Lantern Festival. Indeed, this game is about connecting cooking, chatting, and culture. The player takes the role of Polly Chan, who is trying to learn how to cook tong jyun to celebrate the Lantern Festival, but her reading comprehension of Chinese is not strong enough to follow the recipe her mother linked. So, Mrs. Chan, being a good mum, decided to do a video call with the daughter and show her how to cook tong jyun.

*Tong Jyun* and *A Normal Lost Phone* are examples of how social connections are crucial in the development of personality and character. They showed how the appropriation of daily interactions like sending a message or having a chat with a friend can help in the development and exploration of gender and identities without making them "less" real because they are still in the process of exploring. Exploration of gender, sexual orientations, and identities in ordinary things like smartphone messaging apps are a recurring theme of queer experiences we documented in queer indie games.

### 4.3 Case study: queer horror

"Horror" is a popular genre on *itch.io* with over 20,000 games tagged with the label. Within those games, we counted 317 horror games that were also tagged with "LGBT". As we showed earlier in Table 2, we counted 310 tagged "Adventure" and "LGBT", and 289 tagged with "Role Playing" and "LGBT". To wit, there are more queer horror games than there are queer roleplaying games, cementing the popularity of queer horror games. Horror games portray personal "anxieties and fears deep in our conscious" [16] in a way that can be safely experienced by players. Horror does have a connection with

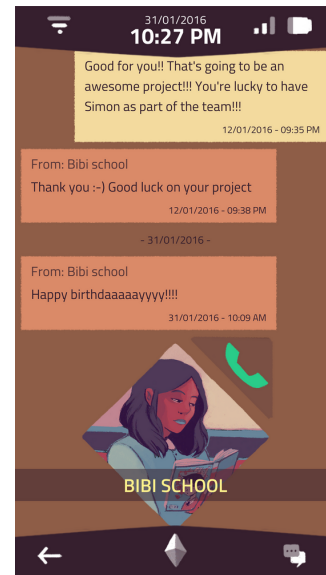


Figure 1: Chatting app game screen in *A Normal Lost Phone* (2017). Screenshot by Dear Villagers, via *itch.io*. (<https://dear-villagers.itch.io/a-normal-lost-phone>)

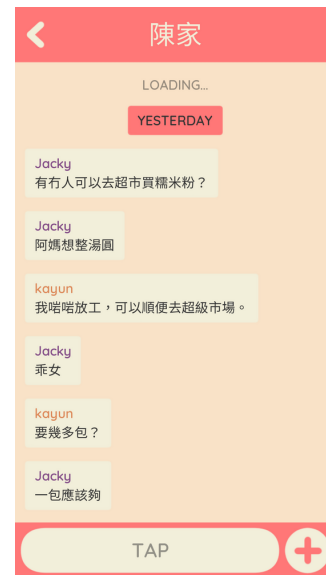


Figure 2: Conversation with Mrs. Chan in 湯圓[tong jyun] (2021). Screenshot by npckc, via *itch.io*. (<https://npckc.itch.io/tongjyun>)

queerness through its identification as "monstrous" and a "threat" as seen in Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* [2]. However, many of these queer horror games follow a "postmodern" presentation of horror, one that focuses more on the "nature of the subject, its frailty and corruptibility" [15] with the horror being more grounded in reality.



*96* (2020) uses horror to present the queer experience of unrequited love. The game is set on a “small, post-apocalyptic island” after an unknown disease has spread. Its story follows Niles as he takes care of Sixten, a zombie who he has chained up in his cabin. Despite being unable to respond to him, Niles treats Sixten as if he were still conscious as seen in Figure 3. As the player continues to live through Niles’ daily routine, it becomes apparent that his relationship with Sixten is more than that of a caretaker and that he is deeply in love with the infected man. Due to the state of Sixten, Niles will never be able to have his feelings reciprocated or even know if Sixten was even interested in men.

When Elise, another survivor, appears at Niles’ door, players are met with the uncomfortable atmosphere of a person who must face his own past. Instead of leaving the island when he had the chance, Niles’ longing, and regret for being unable to protect Sixten led him to desperately cling on to any remnants of the man he knew. The story of *96* is “at its core ... a tragic love story” that is centred on the dread of a zombie apocalypse. It is through horror, that the gravity of how much unrequited love can affect a person who is experiencing this.

Queer horror can also merely be the existence of an uncontrollable unknown and simply feature queer characters without the need to justify why they are queer, just that they are. *There Swings a Skull* (2021) is a short game created for a game jam under the theme of “PSA (Public Service Announcement)”. The game features an older married couple, Anatoli, and Pyotr, as they go about their daily lives in a town that is slowly heating up by a sun that can “cause people to burst into flames”. The heat can be seen as a horrific representation of climate change and an exaggeration of its realistic effects. Although *There Swings a Skull* doesn’t revolve around the interpersonal fears within the queer experience the game still portrays the interactions and relationships between Anatoli and Pyotr who appear to be elderly, an age range that is not often represented.

These case studies are just two of the many ways queer indie games offer a deeper exploration and representation of queer characters and experiences. There are many more we could have discussed, as we wanted to highlight how human experiences are central in all these games. Whether the level of interaction is familiar or unfamiliar, these games showed how game design can become embodiments of human experiences through experiential play. It is through the act of playing games that we can appreciate the complexities and subtleties of queer experiences that are much needed in games today.

## 5 Closing and Future Work

Games that offer queer possibilities and multiply those possibilities to generate narrative outcomes have the potential to construct meaningful queer experiences. In this paper, we examined LGBT games on *itch.io* through a triangulation of critiquing and theorising queer experiences, counting queer representations in LGBT games on *itch.io*, and analysed these games through thematic analysis and two case studies. Our work is focused on queer games made by queer people for queer people, as we have argued the importance of authentic queer representation drawn from lived experiences and highlighted the need for queer games to exist for the pleasure of queer players.



Figure 3: Niles taking care of Sixten in *96* (2020). Screenshot by the authors. (<https://spongey-kitty.itch.io/ninety-six>)



Figure 4: Anatoli and Pyotr watching the news in *There Swings a Skull* (2021). Screenshot by Quinn K., via *itch.io*. (<https://quinnk.itch.io/there-swings-a-skull>)

Through questioning the disproportions of queer game developers and their lack of representation in games, our quantitative analysis showed that gender representation in queer indie games seems to mimic the actual proportions of surveys on game developer gender, which mainstream games still struggle to achieve, with the caveat of our relatively small sample size. Our quantitative study also showed a diverse range of platforms available, and the tools used to make these games. It also showed a wide range of genres and price points, although about 90% of the games are free or with a donation option. Further research on the remaining 10% paid games on the viability of queer indie game development would reveal insights into its financial viability and how to improve them. Our quantitative also offered a count of queer pairing representation in games, which to our knowledge has not been documented elsewhere.

We showed how queer indie games are embodiments of queer experiences through the thematic game analysis and two case studies. These games utilised the familiar elements of everyday life to explore many kinds of queer experiences, ranging from the desire to transition to the unrequited love from a boy zombie. In the thematic analysis, we presented three themes in queer indie games: *multiple connections*, *queer play*, and *remixing techniques*. Queer

indie games are spaces of possibilities where queer experiences take place around multiple human experiences, where the journey means more than the ending, and without conventional game design expectations.

There are of course limitations to our approach in this study. Studying games on *itch.io* granted us the benefit of looking at independent games rather than mainstream games for more authentic queer experiences, however *itch.io* is still primarily attracting a mostly English-speaking audience, and as such we examined mostly games made in English.

We hope queer games will become more diverse in languages in the future on the platform. Our sample of 61 games in the thematic analysis is a very small sample out of 2,499 games, which was largely limited by resource and time. However, counting queerness is also a very time-consuming process that requires careful documentation to be undertaken, which will need to be complemented with other ways to study queer indie games as they can be done with a larger sample. In addition, the multidisciplinary nature of this study meant that we could not perform close readings of our case studies. Future research can focus on how queer experiences are constructed in the space of queer indie games through a closer examination of game analysis.

Future stages of this research project would involve a continuation of counting queerness, and a more multidisciplinary approach to study queer indie games. One aspect we were not able to address is the trends over time because *itch.io* does not consistently publish release dates for the games. Future work might be able to reconstruct an approximation of the timeline by looking at when the game had its first post, player comment, or through an online archival resource such as the *Wayback Machine*<sup>3</sup>. Another element we could not include in this paper is the analysis of player comments, which we also scraped during the data collection process, which we hope to undertake in a future stage of this project.

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