Abstract

*Dating Ga(y)mes: Queer Performance in Farming-Simulation Roleplay Games* examines the differing ways in which LGBTQ+ people resist hegemonic structures and perform their queer identity within video game franchises such as *Harvest Moon*, *Story of Seasons*, and *Stardew Valley*. This successful genre of games contains a highly identifiable and heteronormative formula in which players must run a farm and court a heterosexual partner. Despite their popularity, little scholarship exists on these games, from a critical queer perspective or otherwise. This lack of academic attention means that these games, despite their clear, shared structure, have not yet been deemed a specific genre of roleplaying games – much less studied as a site of queer resistance. From a queer gaming studies perspective, my paper asserts that these games do constitute an important gaming genre, Farming Simulation Roleplay Games (FSRPGs), particularly for LGBTQ+ players who ‘queer’ the technonormative matrix of these games and perform resistant identities. This paper first identifies the key characteristics of this genre classification, and then examines communications about the games, taking place in microblogs, blogs, and forum posts, by LGBTQ+ players. Analyzing online communications best informs this taxonomy as they detail the organic experience of LGBTQ+ players, either as they play or shortly after they finish, as well as the conversations between members of the community about resisting the games’ heteronormativity and, in some cases, how they work together to queer these games. Ultimately, this paper creates a taxonomy of how resistive ‘queerness’ is performed within these games. The results of the methodology conclude that users queerly play FSRPGs in five ways: [1] playing as the binary ‘opposite’ gender to achieve the desired dating outcome, [2] using affordances to explicitly play queerly, [3] using affordances to implicitly play queerly, [4] creating a headcanon, and [5] modding the game.
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<tr>
<td>AAM</td>
<td>anna anthropy Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSRPG</td>
<td>Farming Simulation Roleplay Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>Non-Playable Character</td>
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<td>VGC</td>
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1 Introduction

Farming Simulation Roleplay Games (FSRPGs) were first introduced to the Japanese video game market in 1996 and the North American market in 1997 with the release of *Harvest Moon*. The game sold well and received numerous positive reviews from video game journalists. Over the next 20 years, the genre garnered significant success with the release of a new game nearly every year and millions of copies sold. Some of the long-term popularity is attributed to the formulaic nature of the games; each one requires the player to own a farm and build relationships. The ludonarratological structure is comparatively unique from other simulation games which focus *just* on the farming aspect or *just* on the relationship building. The games, however, are redundant in how they treat sexual/romantic orientation. The majority of these games afford only hetero¹ relationships and, in some cases, require a hetero marriage to “win” the game. Despite this, the games remain popular, even among members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Even with their popularity, little scholarship exists on these games, from a critical queer perspective or otherwise. This lack of academic attention means that these games, despite their clear, shared structure, have not yet been deemed a specific genre of roleplaying games – much less studied as a site of queer resistance. This gap in academia is surprising as their history of in-game heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, as well as their sizeable queer fan base, make them an ideal candidate for academic analysis using queer gaming theories.

¹ For this study, I am using the word ‘hetero’ to encompass people who are both heterosexual and/or heteroromantic, as I want to acknowledge that asexual and aromantic people also play FSRPGs and that some even find solace in the lack of blatant sex-based content in the games.
Based on this, I seek to address the current gap in knowledge about FSRPGs. From a queer gaming studies perspective, my paper asserts that these games do constitute an important gaming genre, Farming Simulation Roleplay Games (FSRPGs), particularly for the LGBTQ+ players who ‘queer’ them. For this study, I draw upon research from modern queer gaming scholars such as Adrienne Shaw, Bonnie Ruberg, and Edmund Chang, as well as foundational queer scholars such as Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. Using content analysis and thematic clustering, this thesis ultimately [1] defines FSRPG as a genre and identifies common characteristics, [2] establishes the history of heteronormativity, and thus the technonormative matrix, within the games, and [3] creates a typology of ways players perform queerness within the games or add queerness to them to resist the aforementioned technonormative matrix.

1.1 Defining an FSRPG

At the time of writing, the genre of video games I dub Farming Simulation Roleplay Games (FSRPGs) has not been defined or extensively researched. Thus, I must define the genre for this analysis. The term FSRPG is a synthesis of the genres most commonly associated with the games on platforms like Steam and gaming media websites like IGN: farming simulators, dating simulators, and roleplay games. I propose this holistic term as FSRPGs are a deliberate and symbiotic combination of the three and would not work with one genre removed.

The first FSRPG introduced to the North American market was Harvest Moon which was released in 1997. Since then, various companies have developed over 30 new games. The history of FSRPGs can be split up into three periods, each characterized by the major game or series: (1) The Harvest Moon era (1997-2013). This was the foundational era that defined the stories. During this period, Marvelous Interactive/Natsume, who produced the Harvest Moon series, dominated exclusively the FSRPG industry. (2) The Story of Seasons era (2014-2016). After a
conflict between the Japanese developer Marvelous Interactive and the American distributor Natsume, Marvelous Interactive lost the rights to the *Harvest Moon* name. Marvelous Interactive took this opportunity to revamp the series and formula with the American distributor Xseed Games and release new games under the title *Story of Seasons*. (3) The *Stardew Valley* era (2016–present). This era marks the most distinct change in FSRPGs. With increased accessibility to game development software and the introduction of gaming platforms like *Steam*, creators can now independently develop and distribute their games without needing to garner the attention of major publishing companies. While a myriad of FSRPGs exist on *Steam*, by far the most successful is *Stardew Valley* (2016).

To determine defining characteristics of the games, I took the official descriptions and the *Wikipedia* descriptions for all games released during the *Harvest Moon* and *Story of Seasons* eras as well as *Stardew Valley* (2016) and ran them through a topic modelling program\(^2\) to find the most verbs and nouns featured. Based on this, the commonalities between the games fall into five categories: static avatar, time structure, farm life, explorable land, and social life.

![Figure 1.1 Word cloud. A visual representation of the topic modelling.](image)

\(^2\) Topic models are a form of content analysis. Topic modelling programs take bodies of text and find both the most common words within that text, as well as compare the frequency of words between multiple bodies of text. For this thesis, I used topic modeling scripts developer by Stanford found at [https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/tmt/tmt-0.4/](https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/tmt/tmt-0.4/)
1.1.1 Static Avatar

Avatars in FSRPGs have historically been static characters (see Chapter 2.12). Typically, the characters have less defined physical features than the non-playable characters (NPCs) in the game, few-to-no distinguishable personality traits besides ‘hard-working,’ and a relatively undetailed backstory. Typically, the backstory is either “your city job made you unhappy so you moved to the idyllic countryside” or “a distant relative died and left you their farm.” For example, *Stardew Valley* (2016) begins with a letter from the player’s deceased grandfather,

“There will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life and your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness. ... The same thing happened to me, long ago. I’d lost sight of what mattered most in my life: real connections with other people and nature. So, I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belong. I’ve enclosed the deed to that place. ... Good luck.”

1.1.2 Time Structure

The structure of time is relatively consistent throughout all FSRPGs. The player typically plays a 24-hour day where their character wakes up at 6:00 am and must go to sleep before 5:00 am. The days move forward in consistent increments per game (e.g. ten in-game minutes per real-world second) and many of the games pause the movement of time when the player enters a building. The game organizes these days into a roughly 30-month calendar with one month for each season, creating four months in a year. Each of these months has a unique weather pattern and unique festivals (e.g. the Harvest Festival in fall, the Love Festival in spring).
1.1.3 Farm Life

The most frequent commonality between FSRPGs is, in fact, farming. Specifically, all of the games within this genre focus on raising livestock to generate products such as eggs, milk, and wool, as well as season-dependent crops. This husbandry requires daily care such as watering the crops, brushing and feeding the animals, and collecting the generated product. Typically, the purpose of raising the crops and animals is monetary gain; however, some gains also have associated achievements and plotlines.

1.1.4 Explorable Land

Outside of the player’s farmland and the town, FSRPGs have vast forest landscapes. These forests are explorable and have collectable items which the player can sell, give as gifts to villagers, or use in various other ways. This is compounded with other exploration-based skills such as fishing and mining.

1.1.5 Social Life

Other than farming, the essential aspect of FSRPGs is relationships. This separates FSRPGs from regular farming simulators such as *Farmville* (2009) and *Farming Simulator* (2008). Typically, the social life is divided into two aspects: relationships with the villagers and relationships with the marriage candidates. Relationships can usually be improved by talking to them every day, giving them gifts they like, and attending seasonal festivals. Not talking to them for a lengthy period, giving them gifts they dislike, or avoiding seasonal festivals may cause a demoted relationship status. A status bar or symbol sometimes denotes the relationship status. For example, the character may have a heart symbol next to their character that changes colour
as the relationship increases (see Figure 1.2). Some games only apply the relationship status bar or symbol to the marriage candidates, while others apply them to all characters.

![Figure 1.2 Relationship status indicators. A status bar style relationship value in Stardew Valley (2016) [left] vs. a status symbol style relationship value denoted by a heart in Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town (2003) [right].](image)

The progression of relationships is also characterized by a series of events which reveal more about the NPCs and their backstories, making the player and the protagonist feel closer to them. For example, if the player pursues Ann in *Friends of Mineral Town* (2003) (see right image in Figure 1.1), she will slowly reveal information about the death of her mother and how it affected the relationship between her and father. Alternatively, if the player pursues Shane in *Stardew Valley* (2016), they will help him through the lowest point and subsequent recovery from his alcoholism. While all of the characters have relationship-based cutscenes, those involving the marriage candidates are more complex. Additionally, in some FSRPGs, getting married is one of the requirements to win. The social life aspect of FSRPGs is the focus of this case study due to the heteronormativity involved in the romantic relationships of these games.

### 2 Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to establish the context in which this thesis resides; at the intersection of foundation queer studies, queer gaming studies, and studies of FSRPGs. First, I establish the historical context of video game studies and the development of
ludonarratology as a holistic approach to studying video games. Then I discuss the emergence of queer gaming studies and the current scope of research occurring. Finally, I discuss avatars and identity, specifically concerning queerness.

2.1 The Ludology vs. Narratology Debate

After the introduction of video games, game studies scholarship primarily fell into two camps: ludology and narratology. Ludologists study video games as “rule-based simulations that allow players to perform specific actions to fulfil concrete purposes” (Belmonte Avila, 2015, p. 12), rather than as texts or media artifacts (Clark, 2017; Shaw, 2010a). Ludologists would, for example, analyze the coding of a game’s economic system. Narratologists, alternatively, emphasize narration and representation above the physical actions of playing (Konkonis, 2014).

Historically, scholars viewed the two as opposing sides, unable to be synthesized (Clark, 2017; Fung, 2017). This dualism began with Espen Aarseth’s (2001) article “Computer Game Studies: Year 1” (Konkonis, 2014). In it, Aarseth defines Game Studies and positions it as an “emerging, viable, international, academic field” (2001, para. 2), outside of the arts (Consalvo, 2003; Konkonis, 2014). This catalyst led to game theorists questioning the place of narrative and ludics and the importance they hold (Chess, 2016).

2.2 Ludology

The main proponents of ludology are Markku Esklinen, Richard Rouse, Jesper Juul, and the previously mentioned Espen Aarseth, most of whom oppose narratology and frame their ideas based on what they feel it lacks. Markku Esklinen (2001) states in the same issue as Aarseth’s article, “stories [in video games] are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings … [and] any emphasis on studying [them] is just a waste of time and energy” (para. 8; as cited in...
Konkonis, 2014). He posits that the primary difference between the two fields is the act of play versus the act of narrating an act of play. Esklinen (2004) expands on this by stating,

“[outside of] theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories,” (Eskelinen, 2004, p. 176; as cited in Belmonte Vista, 2015; Chess, 2016).

He suggests that traditional theories in literature, cultural studies, and rhetoric are ill-suited for understanding the dynamics of video games and how they influence studies and scholars in ludology (Chess, 2016). This includes the theories of Richard Rouse (2003) which assert that the essence of the gaming experience is challenge and immersion in gameplay and that players find narration to be a tiresome distraction (Konkonis, 2014).

2.3 Narratology

Narratologists, while acknowledging the existence of games without stories, emphasize that most blockbuster video games, such as the ones I will analyze, have strong narrative elements which need to be represented and studied (Konkonis, 2014). They argue that games should be viewed as cultural narratives and analyzed like media artifacts (Shaw, 2010a) and that academics should research “aspects of visual representation, the notion of movement, narrative space and time, character narrativity, animation techniques, etc.” (Konkonis, 2014, p. 173).

Early years of gaming narrative analysis relied upon the Freytag model of an initial event, rising action, a climax, and then falling action (Chess, 2016). In newer research, scholars opt for an altered Freytag model of delayed climax with several rises and falls before the highest point (Chess, 2016). Chess (2016) refers to this as the “moments of narrative middle” (p. 85) and acknowledges its similarity to Barthes’ (1975) theory of textual pleasure, in which the real
pleasure is not the climax but delayed answers to problems created within the text. Other scholars, particularly in the queer gaming communities, entirely reject the Freytag model because of the belief that humans are ahedonistic, or not inherently oriented around pleasure (Ruberg, 2017). Outside of the Freytag model, prominent narratology scholar, Janet Murray (1997, 2004), frames stories as “cyberdramas” and uses drama as a model to analyze how stories are retold in digital media (Chess, 2016; Clark, 2017; Fung, 2017). She notes three player experiences that characterize cyberdramas: (1) “immersion involving [active] creation of belief” (Murray, 2004, p. 110); (2) “agency, or satisfying power to take meaningful action” (p. 136); and (3) “transformation through variety” (p. 155).

2.4 The Debate

The divide between ludologists and narratologists revolves around hesitancy for inclusion. Many ludologists view the inclusion of narratologists into the field of video games as academic colonialism. As, prior to the 2000s, scholars studied video games in scientific terms rather than through the humanities, ludologists fear “the newly established discipline of computer game studies [will] be overwhelmed by a neo-colonial discourse and could be annexed as a subfield of English, Literature, or Media Studies” (Konkonis, 2014, 173). Specifically, Markku Eskelinen articulated this fear after Janet Murray’s (2004) declaration that “all games are narratives” and analysis of Tetris as a narrative (Koenitz, 2018). Narratologists, alternatively, view this resistance to inclusion as a form of maintaining the hegemonic status quo. Alexander (2017), for example, characterizes it as a way of limiting acceptance of under-represented voices and marginalized communities under the guise of maintaining academic integrity.
2.5 Ludo-Narratology

Despite the tension between ludologists and narratologists, many scholars, such as Henry Jenkins (2004) and Nick Montfort (2004), study video games holistically, or ludonarratologically. Jenkins (2004) views video games “less as stories” and more as ludic “spaces ripe with narrative possibility” (p. 119; as cited in Chess, 2017, p. 86) while Montfort (2004) separates games from interactive fiction and recommends studying games as cohesive interactions between rules and narratives (Chess, 2016). King and Krzywinska slightly oppose the holistic model but suggest that scholars use both methods and apply them differently based on the context (Shaw, 2010). Others strongly oppose any separation of ludics and narrative. Clark, for example, notes,

“reducing a game to its formal elements … seems akin to insisting that invertebrates … must primarily be understood by examining and evaluating their internal bone structure. Giving primacy to the skeleton of a game ... [removes] the distinguishing characteristics of experience that are the first encountered by a player, to prioritize the skeletal system that [only an] expert … can take apart to gain a supposedly truer understanding of the game,” (2017, p. 43).

Advocates of the exclusively-hybrid model commonly cite Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg (Belmonte Avila, 2015; Jenson et al., 2015). Haraway (1987) defines a cyborg as a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (p. 1) and suggests that when a human and computer interact they create a cyborg. Thus, hybrid scholars suggest the creation of the cyborg through video games means that the human elements (the narrative) and the computer elements (the rules) cannot be separated in
the analysis (Belmonte Avila, 2015; Krobova et al., 2015, Shaw, 2018). This reasoning is why the analysis presented in this thesis will include a holistic ludonarrative approach.

2.6 Queer Ludo-Narratology

Queer scholars, in particular, are proponents of the ludonarratology (Burrill, 2017) as they acknowledge that heteronormative hegemony exists both in the narratives (Chess, 2016) and the rules of games (Linzi, 2015; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). As human create both, they are inherently informed by the same dominant and oppressive paradigms that inform society (Bagnall, 2017; Engel, 2017; Linzi, 2015; Ruberg, 2018). They tend to ‘transcode’ societal hegemonic paradigms, or translate them from society into their games (Linzi, 2015). For example, the ludic mechanisms of an FSRPG may allow the player to choose an avatar of either binary gender, while the narrative consists of a hetero courtship. Despite the illusion created by choice, the game, intentionally or unintentionally, creates a heterosexist ideological cyborg (Belmonte Avila, 2015; Haraway, 1985).

Queer scholars combine queer and gaming theory to undermine narrative and ludic hegemony. Teresa de Lauretis introduced queer theory in 1990 out of the idea that people can critique and resist normative societal structure using queerness (Burrill, 2017; Halberstam, 2017), or “the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside of normative boundaries” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. 11). This includes heteronormativity, the idea that male/female heterosexual binary relationships are stable and, therefore, the most ‘natural,’ (Burrill, 2017; Halberstam, 2017) and compulsory heterosexuality, the system that enforces heteronormativity and punishes those who deviate from it (Consalvo, 2003; Rich, 1997). Within video games, Chang (2017) refers to these structures as the “technonormative matrix.” Queer gaming scholars, in general, agree on the use of queering to combat hegemonic structures in
games (Krobova et al., 2015). Rather than seeking a place for LGBTQ+ people within these structures (Burrill, 2017), queering seeks to challenge them (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). For instance, the gay rights movement seeks to add LGBTQ+ people to structures such as marriage, while queering seeks to dismantle such structures altogether. Similarly, queering of games seeks not to simply have LGBTQ+ representation, but to dismantle and rebuild the structure of games entirely (Clark, 2017).

2.7 Current LGBTQ+ Representation

Early years of queer gaming studies focused on identifying LGBTQ+ representation. Foundational scholar Adrienne Shaw created the quintessential taxonomy of LGBTQ+ representation for her LGBTQ Video Game Archive. Shaw identifies nine categories of representation, which can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly. These include (1) relationships/romance/sex, (2) characters, (3) actions, (4) locations, (5) mentions, (6) artifacts, (7) traits, (8) queer games/narratives, and (9) homophobia/transphobia (Shaw & Friesen, 2016). Studying representation has, in more recent years, fallen out of favour. Despite her previous contributions, Shaw (2013) critiques representation-based scholarship. She frames the problem of representation within the context of capitalism as it “collapses being identified as a member of a [marginalized] group into consumer demand for representation” (Shaw, 2013, p. 65).

While queer gaming scholars favour dismantling structures, many acknowledge the importance of representation. Specifically, they note that including LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream games is “a lifeline to ... young, closeted queer people who may not yet be aware of more experimental, lesser-known games done by queer creators” (Clark, 2017, p. 5). While a person does not have to identify as a member of a marginalized group to identify with a character from that group (Shaw, 2013), positive representation has a powerful impact. Specifically,
representational video games can be used as tools to repair children’s self-identity (Wonica, 2013), as when gender-variant children witness positive representation of marginalized communities, their psychological health increases (Clark, 2017; Harper, 2017; Talbert, 2016).

The history of LGBTQ+ representation in games is relatively short with the majority appearing in the last few years (Pavlounis, 2016). While the earliest example of an LGBTQ+ character is contested, it is commonly thought to be Vivien Pentreath, who appeared in the 1986 game Moonmist (Shaw & Friesen, 2016; Talbert, 2016; Shaw, Rudolph, & Schnorrenberg, 2019). The number of queer characters in video games is exponentially larger than when Vivien was introduced. While only 91 games with LGBTQ+ characters were created worldwide in the 1990s, at the time of writing, 947 games were released with LGBTQ+ characters in the 2010s (Shaw, “2010s”).

2.8 Queering Ludology

While queer gaming studies uses ludonarratology and fundamentally believes the two fields cannot be analyzed individually, there are individual methodologies of resistance that can be classified as one or the other, though they do not exist independently.

Currently, there is a large amount of scholarship on the queering of game mechanisms, mainly because of the initiative of queer game designers acting as both creator and researcher. Game designer anna anthropy, for example, not only developed over a dozen games but also published *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) in which she discusses and encourages developers to resist hegemony by dismantling structures within video games (Bagnall, 2017). Several of her games, including *Mighty Jill Off* (2008), are also the locus of others’ queer ludic analysis.
In *Mighty Jill Off* (2008), the player takes part in a queer, BDSM relationship. Scholars consider the narrative of the game queer as it includes LGBTQ+ representation and touches subjects (i.e. BDSM) not typically considered in the video game industry. The mechanisms are also queered as the game acts as the dom (the sexual partner in power), while the player is positioned as the sub (the sexual partner who submits to the power of the dom), submitting to the game itself. This subverts the majority of game structures which put the player in power, seeking to defeat the game (anthropy, 2012; Bagnall, 2017; Clark, 2017; Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Nielsen, 2015).

This restructuring of power has most recently been discussed in the ‘queer art of failing video games.’ This theory, based on the foundational work of Juul, Halberstam, and Ruberg, examines the societal nature of ‘failure,’ why people enjoy failing at video games, and how restructuring or developing games that challenge the traditional values of winning and losing is a resistive act. In Halberstam’s book, he notes that queer people find pleasure in failure because the act of being queer itself is seen as a societal failure (2011). The hegemonic structure of Western society positions ‘winning’ life through normative acts such as lucrative careers, heterosexual unions, bearing children, good health, etc. Anyone who falls outside of these categories is inherently viewed as ‘failing’ life because they either chose not to win or are not trying hard enough (Ruberg, 2017). In the case of the LGBTQ+ community, it is framed by hegemonic powers, such as the church and government, that gender and sexuality are a choice (Halberstam, 2017). In video games, not winning is framed in the same terms of either choice or lack of productivity (Clark, 2017; Juul, 2013; Ruberg, 2017). Thus, as Ruberg (2015) argues, taking pleasure in or purposely failing is an inherently queer mode of play. She offers the example of making a choice to jump off of the edge of the platform upon defeating one’s
enemies in *Street Fighter*-esque games (thereby winning and losing at the same time) as an example at the queer art of failing video games (Ruberg, 2015); few games, however, incorporate this as a mechanism. The most compelling argument for a game encapsulating this theory is *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017) (Lipson, 2018). In it, the user plays as a person in a pot attempting to climb a mountain with a pickaxe (see figure 2.1).

![Figure 2.1 A man with a pickaxe in a pot. From Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (2017).](image)

The overly sensitive controls and slippery terrain make the game nearly impossible to complete. Meanwhile, Foddy, the developer, gives a running narrative about the pleasure of failure. He includes statements such as, “imaginary mountains build themselves from our efforts to climb them, and it’s our repeated attempts to reach the summit that turns those mountains into something real” (Bennett Foddy, 2017). This relates to the theory postulated by Kathryn Bond Stockton that is the accumulation of loss, the anticapital, that builds and benefits life (Ruberg, 2017). Through the glorification of failure, Foddy’s game resists normative structures of video games (Lipson, 2018). Rather than the pleasure of winning the pleasure is in the repeated failure.
2.9 Queering Narratology

One of the base assumptions of queer narratology is that video games are a collaboration between the creator and player (Clark, 2017; Condis, 2015; Miller, 2017). Much like the early tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons, the “games master” creates a world where the player has some narrative control (Harper, 2017; Leong, 2014; Turkle, 1994). In this way, the game developers and gaming community become part of what Henry Jenkins (2006; 2009, 2013) refers to as “participatory culture.” Specifically, he defines participatory culture as

“a culture with [1] relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, [2] [with] strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, … [3] informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices, … [and] in which [4] members believe their contributions matter, [5] [and] care what other people think about what they have created.” (Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009, p. 3)

He asserts that several characteristics of gaming are a part of this culture including play, performance, and simulation (Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009). The collaboration between player and creator typically happens in one of two ways: through game mechanisms or internal narrative (Harper, 2017). Turkle (1994) notes an example of gaming mechanisms in her work on Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). She examines a MUD where users are allowed guns. This allowance was debated among players and ultimately, to appease users, the developers split the world in two; a town without guns and a forest with them. The players then created a democratic voting process whereby they elected a sheriff to enforce player-created rules of law and order (Turkle, 1994).
Collaboration through internal narrative, alternatively, requires less direct communication between player and creator and resembles the phenomenon of fanfiction. As Jenkins (2013) notes, fan narratives come from a place of both fascination and frustration; they love the world the creators built but are unsatisfied with developers’ inability or refusal to tell the stories the consumers want to see. The fans then pull “narrative issues from the margins; they focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within the fans' own conceptions of the [game]” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 155). Video games take collaboration through internal narrative further than traditional forms of media such as film or books, as they offer “emotional agency” and the opportunity to shape the character’s personality. This is done by offering a ‘silent protagonist’ who is relatively devoid of personality, and thus a player can place an internal narrative upon them (Harvat, 2018; Miller, 2017). The silent protagonist allows the player to **actively** create the narrative as they consume the media, rather than post-consumption like traditional fanfiction (Fung, 2017).

Susan Lanser proposed the concept of queering narratology in 1995 with her analysis of the Jeanette Winterson novel *Written on the Body* (Fung, 2017). She postulates that queering a narrative is possible “so long as [it] include[s] its absence of a narratological variable” (Lanser, 1995, 87). Specifically, this includes the omission of sex, gender, and orientation (Fung, 2017; Lanser, 1995). In the case of the silent protagonist, this means that the characteristics of the playable character are omitted, and thus the audience can create an internal narrative in which they are queer (Harper, 2017). This concept of omission, however, is also used in a collaborative creation of narrative through gaming mechanisms.

Lanser’s (1995) concept of omission appears in multiple queer gaming analyses. With the exception of Fung (2017), most do not attribute this theory to Lanser (1995), and all use different
terminology to describe the phenomenon. This includes “gay window advertising” (Consalvo, 2003), “sexuality blindness” (Greer, 2013), “playersexual” (Cole, 2016), “Easter egg” (Shaw, 2010), and “Schrödinger’s sexuality” (Harper, 2017). In the context of video games, these theories refer to one of two things: either queer identities afforded but are not explicit or blatantly hidden, or the sexuality of a NPC is hidden until the player chooses to engage it. Chang (2017) and Shaw (2015) note that the latter means queer options are easily lost through one wrong choice. Consalvo (2003) discusses the former in her analysis of The Sims. She notes that, despite the option of queer relationships in the life-simulation game, no same-sex or same-gender couples appear as NPCs or in any promotional material. This allows the game to appeal simultaneously to the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexist players (Consalvo, 2003). Harper (2017), alternatively, experiences the latter in his playthrough of Mass Effect. In the game’s entirety, Kaidan’s sexual orientation is never explicitly mentioned. If the player chooses to be a female Commander Shepard in the game, they can pursue a (presumably) heterosexual relationship with him, but if they choose to be male, they can pursue a (presumably) queer relationship with him (Harper, 2017). His sexuality is not based on stable game mechanisms, but the choice of the player.

In terms of adding omissive elements for the explicit purpose of queer narratology, scholars have varying opinions on the effectiveness of this method. Some praise the ability of developers to hide queer content in games, while simultaneously making a safe space for queer people to explore (Fung, 2017; Harvat, 2018). Meanwhile, others criticize the method as it continues to encourage hegemonic norms rather than directly challenging them (Cole, 2016; Harper, 2017).
2.10 Avatar Studies

Avatars are a primary area of study within queer gaming scholarship. Most analysis on avatars and identity involves massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) such as World of Warcraft and Second Life (Ruberg, 2017), rather than single-player games, like FSRPGs. As Turkle notes, there may be a significant disparity between studies of the two genres as users “alone with the computer … [use it] to work through identity issues that center around control and mastery,” while when computers are “used as a communications medium, there is … a greater capacity for collaboration and even intimacy … [and it] enables the [user] to explore a social context as well as to reflect on [their] own nature and powers” (Turkle, 1994, p. 159). The information collected regarding avatars may, therefore, not be fully applicable due to the lack of studies based on single-player games.

Avatars are inherently about the body and, as a central area of concern within queer theory, using the body with game studies “serve[s] to enable queer theoretical approaches … in order to break from past biases toward visuality, textuality, and formal structure” (Burrill, 2017, 63). This includes breaking away from the concept of the body itself. As previously mentioned, Haraway (1987) theorizes that the interaction between humans and computers creates a cyborg. Through this lens, avatars are, therefore, cyborgs. They are not only a synthesis of human and machine (Haraway, 1987) but a synthesis of players’ real selves and digital selves, real-life and digital life (Turkle, 1994). This is, comparatively, different from Consalvo’s (2003) concept of liminality whereby the player is between real-life and the life of their avatar, rather than a fusion of the two.

As Turkle (1994) notes, players often put themselves into their avatars as a means of working through identity-related crises (Jenson et al., 2015). For example, a woman within
Turkle’s (1994) study, put her character into situations where she was the mother, to have the cathartic conversations she could not have with her own mother due to their turbulent relationship. In this way, the player takes characteristics from their real-life and places them within digital contexts to rework them and create an idealized self (Harper, 2017; Turkle, 1994; Wonica, 2013). Additionally, the lives created within digital worlds affect players outside of them. Waern (2015) refers to this as ‘bleed.’ As one of the few scholars studying avatar-identity in single-player games, Waern (2015) studies this within the context of romance. She explains that players of RPGs develop genuine feelings for the NPCs they court because the lines between their feelings and their character’s feelings blur upon becoming a cyborg (Harper, 2017; Waern, 2015).

The cyborg is, according to Haraway, inherently queer as it is free from biological and socially constructed identities, (Haraway, 1987) challenging what is considered natural and the very concept of nature itself (Leong, 2014). As they are not born from a womb, nor from Western creation myths which frame sex and gender as binaries where women are inherently inferior, cyborgs are, theoretically, free from sex, gender, and orientation (Haraway, 1987). In video games, this affords a place where players can explore and perform varying identities (Fung, 2017; Shaw, 2009; Turkle, 1994). Early gaming scholars viewed video games as an escape from one’s own identity and into a world where identity is more malleable (Jenson et al., 2015). Proponents of Butler disagree with this based on her theory of performativity, a theory which I will discuss further in Chapter 3. According to Butler, gender, sexuality, and the body are not inherent or automatic (2004), but rather, constructs defined by the hegemonic societies in which they reside (1993). Societies create norms and expectations for these constructs and punish those who do not conform (Butler, 1990; 1993). Gender and sexuality are, within this
system, something we do rather than something we are. We can perform these identities using their constructed characteristics (Butler, 1990; 2004). This performance occurs in video games within two categories: player-created avatars and static avatars.

2.11 Player-created avatars

Player-created avatars allow users to decide which identities to perform and afford the ability to perform a multiplicity of identities through different avatars (Jenson et al., 2015). There is contention within the academic community as to whether player-created avatars successfully infuse identity. In her dissertation, Linzi (2015) summarizes this debate by acknowledging,

“while some view the “open-casting” of a game protagonist as radically democratic, I counter that this particular brand of visibility flattens lived aspects based on gender or race to interchangeable variables—casting ‘anybody,’ ‘everybody,’ and ‘nobody’ simultaneously.” (11)

Studies of player-created avatars note that users engage in “gender swapping” (Chang, 2015; Fung, 2017; Jenson et al., 2015; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). This phenomenon occurs when users create and play with avatars that are different from their real-world gender. Fung (2017) posits that this gender play is a form of identity tourism, and explains that it is “motivated by a sense of self-exploration, to see what [sex, gender, or orientation are] like from a different point of view” (McRae, 1996, 249; as cited in Fung, 2017, para. 8). While some consider identity tourism a positive experience in which people can safely explore their own sex, gender (Grosman, 2010), or orientation others, like Lisa Nakamura (2002) who coined the term ‘identity tourism,’ view the behaviour as problematic. Specifically, Nakamura notes that those who engage in gender swapping often “participate in stereotyped notions of gender” (2002, p. 13) and view gender as something amusing which can be put on and taken off without real-life
consequences (Nakamura, 2002). Others postulate that identity tourism in video games is a form of “masking;” whereby gender play consists of placing an identity on top of oneself as a form of concealment (Jenson et al., 2015). Fung (2017) positions gender swapping in the context of Haraway’s cyborg and Butler’s theory of performativity. Rather than putting on an identity, the player becomes that identity through the avatar. Fung mentions that,

“[The] metaphor [of masking] is insufficient … because exploration is an introspective process. ... There must be a temporary adoption of the digital body’s identity (the digital body as the avatar or player-controlled character) by the real body such that the experience of the digital body can be internalized by the real body and thus modify players’ conceptions of themselves.” (2017, para. 9).

Studies show that up to 10% of self-identifying women and 15-30% of self-identifying men engage in gender play in MMOs (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015). Gender swapping is also used by players to explore various romantic and sexual orientations. Outside of engaging in relationships with other players (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015), some perform LGBQ+ identities through exaggerated, socially constructed stereotypes of those sexualities (Krobova et al., 2015).

Some scholars disagree with the assertion that most players engage in gender swapping as a method of self-exploration. The conclusions of Jenson et al.’s (2015) study of World of Warcraft players starkly differs from Turkle’s seminal work (1994; 1995). They found that gender swapping is most common among players with several avatars, and they are motivated more by a curiosity of the game’s affordances than by exploration of identity. They note, however, that these findings do not inherently mean all previous research about gender swapping in games is incorrect. Instead, they suggest the disparities are due to (1) a change in attitude
towards MMOs over time, (2) the restrictive gender affordances of modern MMOs compared to historical MUDs (Jenson et al., 2015), or (3) hesitation to express desires to subvert normative roles when playing games historically coded as hegemonic, masculine domains (Street, 2017; Sundén, 2012).

2.12 Static Avatars

While relatively under-researched, player performativity and identity with static avatars are comparably different. Static avatars, unlike player-created avatars, are made by game developers. Their appearance and characteristics remain static for all players, regardless of their real-world identity. Shaw (2013), as previously noted, posits that individuals do not need to be part of a group to identify with characters of that group. This applies to static avatars as players do not choose the avatar with which they create a cyborg or the identity they perform but are instead given an avatar and identity by the developer to become during gameplay (Consalvo, 2003).

It is theorized that the queering of normative structures is easier within static avatars due to limited choice (Consalvo, 2003). Whereas users within games with player-creator avatars have to choose to subvert norms and engage in gender swapping actively, players of games with static avatars are afforded a space where social expectations and normative hegemony are temporarily lifted. Users can play blockbuster games featuring protagonists of another gender and justify the gender swap as “just part of the game” (Consalvo, 2003). Other scholars disagree with this sentiment as they believe social expectations are not inherently lifted by gender swapping, as the ludics of the game remain hegemonic and thus need to be actively, and not passively, queered (Belmonte Avila, 2015; Yang, 2017).
Static avatars afford more abilities than player-created avatars for queering. If the static avatar is a silent protagonist, the game affords the ability to create internal narratives that subvert the hegemony in the underlying ludics or narratives. If the static avatar is a dynamic character with an extensive backstory, moments of omission allow players to expand on the given narrative as a method of queer resistance. For example, Harper (2017), in his previously mentioned article detailing his playthrough of the Mass Effect series (2007, 2010, 2012), uses the omission of Commander Shepard’s sexual identity in the first two installments of the trilogy to queer the game and create an internal narrative whereby Shepard is a closeted gay man until the third game when he comes out after falling in love with and choosing to romance Kaidan.

2.13 Romance with Non-Playable Characters

The majority of romance studies in video games examine player-to-player romances in MMOs (Brown, 2015; Craft, 2012; Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015; Jones, 2010); only more recent scholarship began looking at how players create and develop romantic relationships with NPCs. Interestingly, the rise in NPC-based romance studies, more commonly called ‘game love,’ coincides with the rise of queer gaming scholarship and many overlapping scholars (e.g. Chess 2015; 2016; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; 2015; Pozo, 2017a; 2017b).

Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart (2017, p. 6) define game love as a model which must contain at least three of their identified categories: (1) the game ‘itself’ is love as communicated by semiotics or mechanisms, (2) the game has player-generated love or love as a social process, (3) the game discourse involves love, and (4) the game has ‘ludic affection’ or game-related emotion. They also note that game love does not necessarily mean game sex (Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart, 2017). This is a seemingly common problem within queer gaming studies. Many previously mentioned scholars conflate queer sex and queer romance and thus create a
single category for all games that challenge heteronormativity. I, however, believe that it is worth distinguishing between games that queer sex and games that queer romance. While equally essential endeavours, games like *Mighty Jill Off* (2008) and FSRPGs accomplish different things.

Literature specifically written on game love mainly focuses on the ludic aspects of games. Kelly (2015) and Lange (2017) both acknowledge the frequency of ‘gifting’ in romance-based games. Typically, players ‘buy’ the love of NPCs by repeatedly giving them gifts. The frequency of this may be due to the ease of coding this mechanism and the ability to create ranks and differing levels of difficulty. For example, an NPC may ‘like’ a flower players can easily pick in the forest, and give the player five ‘romance’ points. Adversely, they may ‘love’ a specific dish whose ingredients grow in several different seasons. While making this dish is worthwhile as it adds 500 additional ‘romance’ points, it takes significantly more time and effort. This mechanism, however, simplifies the complexities of romance. It puts romance on a binary line from ‘no love’ to ‘love,’ and only requires gift giving to progress (Kelly, 2015; Lange, 2017). Furthermore, it removes the complexities of agency and consent. Characters are not allowed to say ‘no’ to your gift-giving advances (Lange, 2017). Queering within the context of gift-giving mechanisms looks at creating more nuanced systems whereby NPCs have more agency and the ability to reject the character, and not all romance candidates are inherently playersexual (Cole, 2016).

### 3 Theory

This section seeks to construct a framework under which the collected content will be analyzed. For this research project, I have chosen the theories of both foundational and modern queer academics, specifically, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Edmond Chang. Together I
use their work to create a model which specifically addresses the complexities associated with the ludonarratology of FSRPGs as well as both the queer and non-queer desires of the developers and players who interact with the game.

3.1 The Cyborg

As mentioned previously, Donna Haraway (1987) theorizes that when humans interact with technology, the two synthesize to become a cyborg. This can include any technology from someone putting on a pair of glasses (Chang, 2012) to using a computer (Leong, 2014). In regards to video games, the synthesis of the user and the game create the cyborg. In her writing, Haraway identifies three key aspects of the cyborg: it is (1) “a hybrid of both machine an organism” (Haraway, 1987, p.1), (2) “a creature of [both] social reality [and] fiction” (Haraway, 1987, p.1), and (3) “about transgressed boundaries” (Haraway, 1987, p.7). This cyborg encapsulates Haraway’s (1987) critique of then-modern feminism; that it prioritized identity politics despite most identities being social constructions used to uphold the patriarchy. Haraway (1987) specifically problematizes the common overuse of and reliance on the identity marker ‘female’ among feminists because “gender … is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (p.9) and “there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women” (p.8). Haraway’s ultimate point is that by focusing on identity markers such as ‘female’ and uniting through those constructs, we miss the opportunity for real change through the defenestration of the identities constructed to constrict and control us. Her cyborg acts as a critique of identity politics by representing the utopian ideal, as she positions it as inherently identity-less, transcending gender, sex, and race, and thus free of identity-related baggage (Haraway, 1987).
Haraway’s theory assumes that no imprint from either the creator of the technology nor the user of it transfers onto the cyborg. From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with Haraway’s (1987) idea that gender is overused, even as a benchmark to subvert normalized expectations. This assumption, however, directly opposes the foundational work of queer gaming scholarship which, as previously mentioned, asserts that developers can insert or “transcode” (Linzi, 2015) hegemonic ideology from society into both the ludics and narrative of games. In the context of this thesis, this would be the consistent exclusion of non-heterosexual identities in FSRPGs by their creators. Haraway’s theory of the cyborg removes the agency from both the technology user and the developer of the technology. In the case of FSRPGs, hegemonic norms regarding gender and orientation are transcoded by the developer and experienced by the player regardless of whether or not the cyborg itself is gendered by Haraway’s standards. The players, who also have agency within the cyborg, can subvert these norms and expectations.

For this thesis, I use Haraway’s cyborg to describe the fusion between the developer, video game, and player, henceforth known as the “video game cyborg” (VGC). However, as I am using queer gaming theory, I dispute her assertion that cyborg is completely outside of the social constructions of gender. Rather, I utilize the cyborg to describe the fusion of the identity and ideologies of the creator and player.

3.2 Technonormative Matrix

One half of the VGC consists of the developer(s) of the video game and their ideologies. Edmond Chang explores the ideological transcoding from the creator to a game in his theory of the technonormative matrix (2012; 2017). His theory pulls from Butler’s writings, and he describes the technonormative matrix as “the technologically enhanced and informatically infected version of Butler’s [heterosexual or] heteronormative matrix” (Chang, 2012, p. 58).
Butler (1990) coins the concept of the “heterosexual matrix” in her book *Gender Trouble*. She defines this as,

“a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable [binary] gender ... that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 194).

Essentially, Butler suggests that society enforces a norm by which the binary genitalia of a person informs their gender identity and their oppositional, heterosexual attraction. This matrix “naturalizes” (Butler, 1990, p.194) dyadic, cisgender, and heterosexual bodies and positions intersex, transgender or non-binary, and queer bodies as deviant. For example, society would assume that a person born with a penis would ‘naturally’ identify as a man and thus exclusively experience heterosexual attraction towards women.

Additionally, the heteronormative matrix asserts that certain characteristics and behaviours are gendered. For example, society assumes the quality of empathy in women and aggression in men. These gendered characteristics and behaviours are, however, also socially constructed, which led to Butler’s (1988; 1990) later discussed idea that gender is a verb. According to her theory, gender is not an inherent, biological characteristic of each person, but something that we perform (Butler, 1990). This will be discussed further in section 3.3.

Edmond asserts that technology is used to enforce this heteronormative matrix, thus creating the technonormative matrix. Edmond uses the example of prosthetics to explain his theory. When someone is disabled, society views them “as lacking, weak, unstable, passive, even asexual” (Chang, 2012, p. 66) which opposes society’s constructions of men and masculinity.
Prosthetics for cisgender male military personnel and veterans often employ intentional masculine aesthetic to counteract the societal concepts of disability, such as a prosthetic arm with “Terminator-like silver-gray skin” (Chang, 2012, p. 66). In this way, even before the creation of the cyborg, hegemonic ideologies about gender and masculinity are transcoded into the technology. Though Chang later notes that the use of prosthetics can also be viewed as a resistive act as users are changing the societal narrative around disability. This cyborg, itself, is polyvalent; it can be used to enforce hegemonic norms or to resist them.

In regards to video games, the technonormative matrix is created when developers code hegemonic societal ideals into the ludic mechanisms and narrative of video games. For this paper, I will use Chang’s technonormative matrix to frame the experience of queer players with FSRPGs. Specifically, that the mechanisms and narrative of FSRPGs are coded heteronormatively and attempt to enforce compulsory heterosexuality.

3.3 Performativity

Butler’s foundational theory suggests that gender and biological sex are not stable, inherent identities imparted upon us at birth. Instead, they are “a stylized repetition of acts … [defined by] the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1990, p. 179). Butler (1988) refers to these acts as “performativity.” The concept of performativity comes out of speech act theory, whereby speech is performed. Speech, it is suggested, both communicates and creates identity. For example, uttering “I do” at a wedding both communicates that a person is wed while also transforming the person from the identity of “single person” to the identity of “spouse” (Sedgwick, 2003). Butler’s concept of gender performativity follows suit by suggesting that it both communicates gender while creating gender.
Moreover, the repetitive acts of performativity imitate the hegemonic norms defined in the heteronormative matrix. According to Butler’s (1990) theory, the entire concept of “doing” gender “properly” is socially constructed and enforced through socialization. However, Butler notes in her interview with Liz Kotz that “gender is an impersonation, that becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits” (Kotz, 1992, p. 85). Thus, hegemonic gender performativity becomes an ongoing battle to become the gendered ideal, which only serves to enforce the patriarchy. Butler also notes that sexual and romantic orientations fall into the trap of oppressive performativity and that “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself [also] a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (Butler, 1993, p. 125).

Butler also notes, however, that this performativity does not mean that gender, sex, and sexuality are a “radical choice [or] voluntarism” (Kotz, 1992, p. 84) and while they are performative, they are not necessarily a performance (Butler, 1988); we cannot simply take off and put on identities as we choose (Kotz, 1992). Fundamentally, like Haraway’s cyborg, Butler’s theory serves as a critical lens of “identity-based models of feminism” (Kotz, 1992. P. 84). It seeks to move away from essentializing ourselves and our activism through gender or orientation and instead problematize the behaviours we repeat in order to align ourselves with specific identity traits. Butler emphasizes that “performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify” (Kotz, 1992. P. 84). Thus, her theory seeks to encourage the dismantling of the hegemonic system revolving around these stylized behaviours, as this system is specifically socially constructed in order to maintain an oppressive societal hierarchy.

For Butler, performativity “is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Kotz, 1992, p. 84). Butler uses the example of drag to show performativ
gender subversion (Butler, 1990). Drag performers use gender expression as a way of subverting expectations; a man is expected to act in particular ways to “do” gender properly as per societal norms, but drag queens do not adhere to the conventions of “manliness” thus subverting the social construction of gender (Butler, 1990).3

Similar to what Butler (1993) suggests with humans, the video game cyborg is not ‘born’ with a stable, inherent identity; though it is also not, as Haraway suggests, completely void of identity. In addition to the ideology that is transcoded on it by the developer, the VGC gains identity through the performativity of the player. This process is both similar and dissimilar to the performative identity paradigms found in the non-virtual world. Butler’s theory of performativity is inherently associated with body studies, as an identity is imparted onto a person’s body at birth due to the heteronormative matrix. With video games, there is not necessarily a body to impose identity on at birth. Due to this, in some cases, identity can be put on and taken off as a form of identity tourism (see section 2.11).

Instead of being imposed onto a body, the performative paradigm is imposed onto the game by the developer through the technonormative matrix, and it is expected that the player will follow the repetitive behaviours found in both society and the game. With FSRPGs, the “repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms” (Kotz, 1992, p. 84) are found through the binary gender choices for avatars, exclusive heteroromantic dating options, and dialogue surrounding the courtship between men and women in the games. It is expected that players will adhere to these norms as they play the game. Performativity, however, can be used to subvert these norms. Specifically, when a queer player engages with these games, they may perform the hegemonic hetero identity enforced within the game. Alternatively, they may choose to oppose

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3 Butler later notes that drag can also be used to enforce the performative gender paradigm. Specifically, she notes that drag queens can enforce a specific image of the proper way to “do” femininity (Kotz, 1992).
this and ‘perform’ their queer identity within the FSRPG, thus subverting the hegemonic norms coded into the ludics and narrative of the game.

3.4 Space of Possibility

The VGC, like Haraway’s cyborg, consists of the fusion of two structures to make something new (see Figure 3.1).

![Figure 3.1. Video game cyborg. Visual representation of the combination of Haraway, Butler, and Chang’s theories.](image)

One side consists of the developer and their ideology. Together, these create the technonormative matrix which exerts the ideology of the developer onto the player. The other side consists of the player and the identity which they perform within the game. This performance interacts with the technonormative matrix created by the developer. Together, they create the VGC, which is inherently a space of possibility due to its polyvalence. It is not necessarily hegemonic nor subversive but is also not neutral. If the ideology of the developer is queer, such as games created by anna anthropy, then the game becomes a utopia for queer players. They can perform their identity in a way that still subverts the heteronormative matrix (as games still exist within the real world), but resistive performance is a joint effort between creator and player. In the case of FSRPGs, developers have not created queer games, and thus players are positioned within the hegemonic technonormative matrix.

The latter cyborg creates an opportunity for players to use the performance of gender and sexuality as a resistive act. This resistive performativity is unique as the VGC cyborg does not
function in the same way as real-world society. We cannot, for example, open up the text file for society and add lines of code that make queerness the ‘naturalized’ state. This uniqueness of the opportunity that occurs during the fusion of the developer's technonormative matrix and player’s performance, as well as the historical hegemony of FSRPGs, is thus why I will be exploring the ways by which players perform queer resistance within them.

4 Methods

Developers, as previously mentioned, act as one half of the cyborg and infuse personal ideology into their video games. As romance simulation is a major component of FSRPGs, creators can code heterosexist ideology into the games, thus creating a technonormative matrix. Using the definitions of queerness in gaming discussed by Shaw and Ruberg (2017), we can interpret any form of performative queerness within this cyborg as an act of resistance against it. The method of this thesis aims to collect content documenting instances of players performing queerness within FSRPGs for the purpose of creating a typology.

4.1 The Technonormative Matrix of FSRPGs

For my hypothesis of queer resistance to exist, there needs to be a technonormative matrix to resist. Thus, I first needed to examine the games to establish whether or not technonormative matrices existed within FSRPGs\(^4\). To do this, I created a spreadsheet of all

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\(^4\) While I focus on the interactions between players and marriageable candidates, there are instances of LGBTQ+ representation among non-marriageable NPCs. This includes [1] Howard, an implicitly gay-coded (Shaw & Friesem, 2016) man in Harvest Moon: The Tale of Two Towns (2011), and [2] Marian, a queer and gender non-conforming character from Story of Seasons (2015). Although, it is debated among fans as to whether Marian is non-binary, a trans woman, or an okama stereotype (Tsunderin, 2016; tumblingkori, n.d.). In addition, some cite Jamie from Harvest Moon: Magical Melody (2006) and Inari from Story of Seasons: Trio of Towns (2017) as non-binary or genderfluid representation as their gender and pronouns change depending on the protagonist’s gender (i.e. their gender become the binary opposite of the protagonist’s gender so as to remain a marriageable option).
FSRPGs and identified the gender(s) of the protagonist(s) and the options for romantic and sexual orientation (see Appendix A). Of the 40 games identified, 26 exclusively afforded hetero dating options while only seven included explicitly queer romance. Those seven were published within the last four years and developed exclusively by small, independent creators who released them for computer download via Steam rather than on mainstream gaming consoles. Additionally, all games feature binary gendered protagonists, except for Howling Moon Software’s *Verdant Skies* (2018).

4.2 Content Collection

To determine the ways by which people perform queerness within FSRPGs, I performed a qualitative analysis of content generated by players using a deductive coding system to create thematic clusters.

I examined three areas of online content which provide different methods of expression: [1] microblogs, which have more personal, impromptu posts and afford a simplistic way to share pictures and links; [2] blogs and personal essays, which afford longer, more precisely crafted posts and offer deeper insight; and [3] forums, which put personal thoughts into conversation and allow posters to expand upon others’ ideas. I chose several websites for this collection and specifically chose them because they were broadly popular in North America, among gaymers, or among FSRPG players. I used:

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5 There are two notable exceptions of “queer” dating which I chose to mark as hetero in the analysis. The first is the Best Friends System in *Harvest Moon DS Cute* (2008). In the game, the female protagonist has the opportunity to move in with her female best friend and have a “commitment to friendship” ceremony. While some view this as queer representation, I chose to mark it as hetero because [1] the game explicitly state multiple times that the relationship between the two characters is platonic and [2] this thesis focuses on English user-generated content and the Best Friend System was removed from the English translation of the game. The second game is *Harvest Moon: Seeds of Memories* (2016). After the original release, the mobile game seemingly allowed same-sex marriage. This, however, turned out to be a glitch which was quickly patched out of the game by the developers.
1. Microblogs: tumblr.com

2. Blogs: autostraddle.com; femhype.com; ineeddiversegames.org; medium.com; nymgamer.com; wordpress.com

3. Forums: fogu.com; neoseeker.com; reddit.com; resetera.com

I completed a Boolean search on the search engine specific to the website, and through Google’s search engine using the “site:” function. I chose three games/series to represent the three eras of FSRPGs. The search terms consisted of:

1. “harvest moon” AND (queer OR gay OR lesbian OR homosexual OR lgbt* OR bisexual OR pansexual OR asexual OR transgender)

2. “story of seasons” AND (queer OR gay OR lesbian OR homosexual OR lgbt* OR bisexual OR pansexual OR asexual OR transgender)

3. “stardew valley” AND (queer OR gay OR lesbian OR homosexual OR lgbt* OR bisexual OR pansexual OR asexual OR transgender)

I then collected posts if they included both explicit indications of playing an FSRPG and performing a queer identity within the games in any capacity. This included 40-50 microblog posts, 1-2 blog posts or personal journalist essays, and 10-15 forum threads for each game era on each website.

I then analyzed posts using a deductive coding system. The initial coding system consisted of four codes: [1] modding games to perform queerness, [2] using clothing option to perform queerness, [3] creating an internal narrative of queerness while playing, and [4] explicitly playing queerly using the affordances of the game. I then expanded this initial system during the coding process to seven primary categories and two secondary categories, which will be discussed in the analysis portion of this thesis.
4.3 Delimitations

I limited collection to content posted during or after 2015. I chose 2015 as it was the year when both the USA (one of the largest consumers of FSRPGs) legalized same-sex marriage and when Japan (where most FSRPGs are developed) offered partnership certificates to same-sex couples. In addition, while FSRPGs are popular in Japan, I limited the scope of the collected content to English language posts due to personal Japanese fluency constraints.

I narrow content to include only queerness performed through identity markers of the player’s avatar or interactions between the player and a marriageable candidate. Posts discussing the potential queerness of non-marriage NPCs or desire for two NPCs to date were excluded from the analysis as to narrow the focus to a player’s direct performed queerness within the game.

I chose not to perform interviews for this analysis due to time constraints. Due to this, the orientation and the intention of the content posters are unknown. Non-queer players could post about performing queerness, or players could not view playing queerly as an act of resistance. As this thesis focuses on queer performance within technonormative matrices, however, I posit that any rejection of the historical and coded heteronormativity, regardless of the orientation, gender, and intention of the player, is inherently resistive.

5 Results and Discussion

During data collection, a total of 150 microblog posts, 20 articles, and 45 forum threads were identified for use in the analysis. In the 215 artifacts, there were 444 instances of a person describing a method of performing queerness within an FSRPG (see Figure 5.1 for statistical breakdown). Through this, I identified the following typology:
1. Playing as the “opposite” binary gender to marry the desired marriage candidate but not viewing the character as queer. (i.e. Playing as a “boy” to marry a “girl” but viewing the protagonist as a heterosexual man rather than a queer woman or non-binary person.)

2. Using explicit affordances provided by the developer to play as a queer person in a queer relationship.

3. Utilizing in-game identity markers to perform queerness despite the developer not intending them to be used for that purpose. This is split into two further subcategories:
   a. Using avatar specific identity markers (e.g. name, clothing, hairstyle)
   b. Using external identity markers (e.g. farm or house decor)

4. Creating an internal narrative, or headcanon, in which the protagonist is queer and/or in a queer relationship. This is split into two further categories:
   a. Stating that they feel their protagonist is queer or creating an internal narrative of queerness as they play. (e.g. Choosing the “boy” protagonist to marry a “girl” candidate, but internally viewing the protagonist as a queer woman.)
   b. Creating explicit fanfiction or fanart depicting the protagonist with a queer identity or in a queer relationship.

5. Creating or using a “mod” (modification) to add queer content to the game.

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**Figure 5.1 Types of in-game queer performance.** Data set of performed queerness found within FSRPGs.
Beyond the scope of the typology, several other commonalities surfaced in the data. Within the 215 artifacts, content creators mentioned their sadness or disappointment with the lack of queer options 82 times, and mentioned that FSRPGs helped them realize their queer identity 32 times. Additionally, the majority of posts about games from the *Harvest Moon* era discussed femme pairings or lesbian relationships, while the posts from the *Story of Seasons* era onward contained more equal representation of both binary same-gender pairings. This may be in part due to the majority of *Harvest Moon* games containing only male protagonists or releasing versions of the games with female protagonists years later. Overall, discussions about trans and non-binary identities were uncommon among the sample. Mentions of playing as a non-binary character were more common among the *Harvest Moon* and *Stardew Valley* eras, while posts describing playing as a binary trans person were more common among posts from the *Story of Seasons* era. The latter may be due to *Story of Seasons’* addition of genderless clothing options.

5.1 Playing as Binary ‘Opposite’ Gender

7.2% of players chose the “binary opposite” avatar to date their preferred gender (e.g. playing as a “boy” to date “girls”) while still viewing their character as the developer-identified gender (see Figure 5.2).

![Figure 5.2 Example of user post explaining they play as the “opposite binary gender.”](image)
The resistive nature of this form of queer play is debatable. In many cases, the players engage in hegemonic performativity by repeating painful heterosexist behaviours while validating and enforcing the technonormative matrix. For queer players, this lack of intention resistance may be an extension of their experience with the real-world heteronormative matrix. For non-queer players, this may be a form of identity tourism where one can experience the stereotypical queer experience without facing real-world consequences (Nakamura, 2002).

Alternatively, ‘opposite’ binary gender play can be viewed as passive queer resistance (Belmonte Avila, 2015; Yang, 2017) through the queering (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017) of the gaze (Mulvey, 2009). While the player may adhere to the hegemonic ludics of the game, they are not the intended audience. Rather, with the heterosexist ideology of the developer, it could be presumed that they intended for a person to play an avatar with the same assigned gender at birth, and subsequently pursue a marriage candidate of the “opposite binary gender” of their gender. However, a queer person playing as a different gender than their own to achieve the desire marriage outcome acts against this model. By being queer and playing the game in a way that satisfies their needs as a queer person, they are inherently resistive even if they engage in hegemonic performativity. It should be noted, however, that as a passive form of resistance it is less intentional and effective as active queer resistance.

5.2 Using Affordances to Explicitly Play Queerly

20.5% of the user-created content featured mentions of explicitly playing games queerly based on the affordances created by the developer. While the majority referenced Stardew Valley (2016), there were mentions of World’s Dawn (2016) and My Time at Portia (2019). Most of the posts included expressions of joy or happiness, along with references as to the specific candidate they pursued or their experience playing queerly (see Figure 5.3).
Figure 5.3 Example of user post acknowledging explicit queer play. Tumblr image post.

Regarding the VGC, this form of queer play is what I henceforth refer to as the “annaanthropy model” (AAM). Here, the ideology of the developer is not heterosexist and thus the type of queer resistance the player enacts is not against the developer or game. Rather, the developer and player work together to combat heteronormativity in the gaming industry by creating and playing explicitly queer games.

However, FSRPGs which fall into this type are not always perfect AAMs. Multiple posters from the collected content acknowledged that many of the explicitly queer opportunities in the games are actually cases of “playersexuality” (Cole, 2016). Expressly, in Stardew Valley, queer orientation is only incorporated if the player pursues a marriageable candidate of the same gender as their avatar. None of the NPCs in the game explicitly identify as queer, there are no queer storylines if one does not pursue a queer relationship, and all of the marriageable candidates are automatically attracted to the player’s avatar. If someone were to purchase the game and be unaware of the potential queer options, they could easily play through the game without once being confronted by queerness. This masking of queer identities in Stardew Valley continues to enforce the technonormative matrix. As has been done historically, queerness is
pushed into the shadows, out of sight and out of mind. This places an uneven onus on queer players to actively seek representation. While hetero players can easily find and access games with depictions of their identity, queer players must search the shadows for representation.

5.3 Using Affordances to Implicitly Play Queerly

15.4% of content detailed how users performed a queer identity through the use of game ludics unintended by the developer for that purpose. This is broken down further into 12.2% who used avatar identity-markers to convey identity such as clothing and hairstyles, and 3.2% who used markers external to their avatar such as their house or farm decor.

Content posters commonly mentioned this type of queer play in conjunction with the *Story of Seasons* franchise. At the beginning of the series, like most FSRPGs, users must choose to play as either a male character or a female character. This initial choice affects the attire of the protagonist: a “male” character wears a button-down shirt and pants, while a “female” character wears a dress. However, once a player builds a closet in their home and collects enough wool, they are able to sew and wear any garb regardless of gender (see Figure 5.4).

![Figure 5.4 Example of user explaining how to use avatar-specific identity markers to play queerly. Tumblr ask post.](image-url)
This method of playing queerly is more performative than other types. The use of identity-markers, notably clothing and hairstyle, most closely matches Butler’s theory of performativity. In the context of FSRPGs, the repeated behaviours of the player both communicate and create the gender. By wearing a dress when one is designated a “boy,” the player communicates they are a woman or non-binary person and thus in a queer relationship, while simultaneously equating the act of wearing a dress with womanhood. In this way, like the VGC itself, this type of queer play is resistive, hegemonic, and neutral at the same time.

5.4 Creating a Headcanon

Around 37.4% of posts included headcanons. Headcanons are interpretations of fictional narrative accepted by one or more fans, but that are not part of the official canon (Pelurson, 2018). Regarding the content posted by FSRPG players, headcanons fall into two categories: those which involve explicit fanfiction or fan art and those that do not.

Headcanons that do not contain explicit fanfiction or art are typically expressions of ideas or feelings experienced while playing, revolving around the sexuality or gender of the protagonist or NPCs (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5 Example of user creating a headcanon. Tumblr ask post.
Headcanons that contain fanfiction or fanart are significantly more formal and detailed. Like the simple headcanons, the fanfiction and fanart used in this study focused on the queer identity of either the protagonist or the NPCs. Of the data collected, the fan-created content ranged from comics detailing romantic interactions between characters to artwork featuring the protagonist and their marriage candidate to detailed backstories of characters explaining their gender or orientation. For example, in one post, the author details the experience of his avatar and he maneuvers the world of farming as a trans man:

... The old lady on the farm next to you, Eda, trains you and gives you some hand-me-down farm supplies, but you’re still starting basically from scratch. (Roger was happy with the hard work, but really wanted to cut his hair and change out of that dress. Especially before getting to know that really attractive restaurant owner, Raeger.) ... Once [you upgrade your home], you’ll find that your new home includes a wardrobe. It doesn’t contain any new clothes yet, but at least you can step in and change your hairstyle and hair and eye color. (Finally, Roger can cut off his long locks and take off that stupid pink hat he hates. He’s stuck with the dress, though, since there’s nothing else to change into.) By the end of Fall your character will [have] enough money and shorn enough sheep to build a sewing studio. ... (Now Roger feels more confident in what he’s wearing. He feels like his image represents him.) (Michele, 2015)

Headcanons are the least restricting type within the typology as they extend beyond the ludonarratological confines of the game. While previously mentioned types, such as the use of clothing and hairstyles, requires the developer to create specific affordances,
headcanons transcend these obstacles. In the VGC, the player can challenge the technonormative matrix through thought and creativity alone.

Additionally, the creation of fanfiction and fanart help the resistance even transcend beyond the VGC. Players can become developers in their own right, not just consumers, as they engage in a form of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992). This form of resistance is also strengthened as it becomes a communal activity rather than just an individual activity. For example, several collected posts containing written fanfiction has several comments that expanded upon the original poster’s idea with new information or backstory, weaving a communal resistive narrative.

5.5 Modding the Game

Roughly 10% of posts contained references to either modding games or playing modded versions of games. Modding involves taking the code of the original game and changing it for an expressed purpose. With FSRPGs, this means taking an original game and “swapping” the gender to make it more explicitly queer. This involves changing the sprite (or avatar) of the protagonists, as well as rewriting dialogue to include different pronouns and vocabulary (such as swapping “husband” to “wife”). In the case of the Harvest Moon: True Love Edition, this meant replacing the “Pete” sprite in the original Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town with the “Clare” sprite from original Harvest Moon: More Friends of Mineral Town, and vice versa (see figure 5.6).
In total, ten different complete mods of FSRPGs were referenced in the posts (see figure 5.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modded Game</th>
<th>Original Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 5.7 Queer FSRPG mods. A list of all games modified by players.

This type of queering of video games uniquely alters the video game cyborg. Rather than the player and the developer coming together to create the cyborg, the modder, in some aspects, takes the place of the developer. In this way, the modder exerts an agency onto the game not originally intended by the developer. It is similar to the cyborg created when a queer developer
and queer player come together but is more distinctly resistive. When they host their mod online, and other players download it, the cyborg becomes a fusion of the modder with player rather than solely the developer and the player. Moreover, the publishing of the modded game enables other players to engage with a ‘queered’ game and affords them the ability to resist the technonormative matrix in a way that was not previously accessible to them. In this way, modding of games to enable queer representation is not only an inherently resistive act, but it also enables a communal level of gamer engagement that resists heteronormative hegemony.

Interestingly, modding existed beyond just the games which featured no queer representation. *Stardew Valley* (2016), despite explicitly featuring queer dating options, had a vibrant online modding community. The modders shared open-source code for changes such as flowers in the colours of various pride flags, clothing with pride flags, mods to make two same-gender NPCs date, and mods to make NPCs appear queerer (such as the “Clint Bear” mod). This longstanding tradition of modding in FSRPG demonstrates the insufficiencies of past game theories that conceived engaging with a game as a unilateral transmission of intent from the developer to the player. The refitted conception of the cyborg I propose is amenable to understanding the agency present in game modding communities.

This type of modding more closely resembles traditional participatory culture. Much like fanfiction, these mods are game *adjacent* rather than a directly affective and resistive. They impact the players’ feelings about the game and ability to create a headcanon, but they do not directly challenge the ludonarratology of the game. Furthermore, in the case of *Stardew Valley* (2016), this modding shows the stark influence of the developer on the technonormative matrix and thus the VGC. As *Stardew Valley* (2016) is created by a developer whom both wanted to include queerness into his game and also created a game engine that afforded players the ability
to create and share open-source mods easily, the VGC is more harmonious. Rather than being directly resistive to a heteronormative game, the developer and the player both actively participate in the queering of the game.\(^6\)

6 Conclusion

Ultimately, this thesis sought to establish the technonormative matrix of FSRPGs and create a typology of ways that players queer the heteronormativity. Through my analysis of game descriptions, I found that 65\% of FSRPGs exclusively included hetero dating options, while 17\% afforded explicitly queer dating. Then, through my analysis of player-created online content, I found that players queered the games through [1] playing as the binary ‘opposite’ gender to achieve the desired dating outcome, [2] using affordances to explicitly play queerly, [3] using affordances to implicitly play queerly, [4] creating a headcanon, and [5] modding the game.

During the course of writing this thesis, independent developers released three new FSRPGs which featured queer dating options, one of which featured the first intentionally gender-neutral protagonist. This counted not only for 7\% of all FSRPGs but 42\% of explicitly queer FSRPGs. This development alone proves the relevance of FSRPGs as a point of critical queer analysis and the importance of further research on the topic.

As a foundational work, however, this thesis large acts as a recognition of the aforementioned queer resistance that exists within FSRPG communities. While acknowledging, \(\ldots\)

\(^6\) One additional distinction in FSRPG modding communities should be noted. While earlier FSRPG modding communities focused mainly on adding diversity to the games, the Stardew Valley modding community featured many mods that actually took away diversity and aided the technonormative matrix. For example, the character Clint pursues the marriage candidate Emily in the game. However, in the cutscenes, Emily continuously rejects his advances. Some players viewed this interaction as an indication that she prefers women to men. (Although it should be noted that [1] straight women have autonomy and are allowed to reject men even if they are attracted to men, and [2] Emily is still romanceable if the protagonist is a man.) However, other players created mods so that Emily married Clint. Other mods were even more clearly hegemonic, such as those that removed racial diversity or changed all of the character sprites to make them more conventionally attractive.
celebrating, and analyzing queer potential in these games is essential, it is still important to engage critically with the nature of queer resistance and its necessity. Queer players largely rely on back-channels and more labour-intensive play to find representation and self-expression in FSRPGs. Thus further, more critical analysis is required in these areas, the developer-player relationship, and the role both play in creating more accessible, less hegemonic games.

6.1 Further Research

As this thesis is an initial analysis of FSRPGs, there is ample space for further research in this area. As I based this analysis around user-generated content as media artifacts, the intention and feelings of the posters are not entirely clear. A study of FSRPG player who perform queerness within the game using structured or semi-structured interviews could fill the gaps of knowledge regarding how players of the games view the act of playing queerly and whether they see it as a radical act of dismantling digital power structures. Moreover, due to the vibrancy and impact of FSRPG modding communities, ample opportunity is available for further analysis, both from a critical queer perspective and otherwise. Beyond adding queer content, players have created mods to add diversity including more racially diverse characters, more discussion of disabilities among characters, more character backstory and thus more nuanced character conversations about the impact of trauma, etc. Additionally, some further technonormative matrices through mods that change sprites to make all characters more conventionally attractive, decrease the nuanced discussion, etc. An ethnographic study of these modders could both bring light to the intentions behind why people mod these games, as well as the complexities of modding non-linear, choice-driven FSRPGs.
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Appendix A: List of FSRPGs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>North American Release Date</th>
<th>Developer</th>
<th>Game Platform</th>
<th>Gender of Protagonist</th>
<th>Romance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>Super Nintendo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon GB</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>Game Boy</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Harvest Moon 64</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>Nintendo 64</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon 2 GBC</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>Game Boy Color</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon 3 GBC</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>Game Boy Color</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon: Save the Homeland</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>PlayStation 2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon: [Another] A Wonderful Life</td>
<td>2004 / 2005</td>
<td>Victor Interactive Software</td>
<td>GameCube</td>
<td>Male / Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest Moon DS [Cute]</td>
<td>2006 / 2008</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male / Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 The Harvest Moon DS Cute best friend system has been cited by some as queer representation. As a girl in the game, you can choose to commit to being best friends with one of the female characters in the village and have them move in with you. I have, however, chosen not to include it as queer representation as the game is explicitly state that it is a non-romantic union and the system was not included in the North American release of the game.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Harvest Moon: Magical Melody</strong></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</th>
<th>GameCube</th>
<th>Male or Female</th>
<th>Hetero</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon DS: Island of Happiness</strong></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon: Tree of Tranquility</strong></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Wii</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon DS: Sunshine Islands</strong></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon: Animal Parade</strong></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Wii</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon DS: Grand Bazaar</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon: Hero of Leaf Valley</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>PlayStation Portable</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shepherd’s Crossing 2</strong></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Graffiti Entertainment</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon: The Tale of Two Towns</strong></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon 3D: A New Beginning</strong></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo 3DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harvest Moon: The Lost Valley</strong></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Tabot, Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo 3DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story of Seasons</strong></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
<td>Nintendo 3DS</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Our Love Will Grow</strong></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>John Wizard</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Season</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Quickfire Games</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero + Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stardew Valley</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>ConcernedApe</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero + Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melting Hearts: Our Love Will Grow 2</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>John Wizard</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hetero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World's Dawn</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Wayward Prophet</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero + Queer</td>
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<td>Harvest Moon: Seeds of Memories</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Tabot, Inc.</td>
<td>iOS/Android</td>
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<td>Hetero</td>
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<td>Nintendo 3DS</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Marvelous Interactive Inc.</td>
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<td>Kynseed</td>
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<td>PixelCount Studios</td>
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<tr>
<td>My Time at Portia</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Pathea Games</td>
<td>Steam</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
<td>Hetero + Queer</td>
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