"Queerness is unstoppable": How video game publications frame LGBTQ topics

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Abstract

During the 2010s, video game content and subsets of the gaming community have been diverging in polarized directions regarding LGBTQ topics in video game culture. On the basis of these discourses, this study utilizes framing and discourse analysis to examine how video game publications frame LGBTQ topics in gaming. Analyzing 269 articles published between 2002 and 2020, it finds that 57,2% of articles utilize framing characterized by egalitarian equality, compared to 0,7% that use traditionalist morality framing, while 36,1% use neutral framing. A majority of articles likewise deploy politically loaded keywords in a sincere manner rather than a veiled manner, in which these words function as stand-ins for conservative views. Further, the study points to conservative discourses like GamerGate affecting the output of articles between 2014 and 2015 and charts the potential construction of a journalistic paradigm in which journalists do not utilize slurs. This paradigm and high levels of egalitarian and neutral framing differ from previous findings regarding framing in game journalism.

KEYWORDS: framing, video game journalism, GamerGate, video game representation, LGBTQ representation

Introduction

Throughout the previous decade, the discourse surrounding diversity in video games has diverged in two polarized directions. The games industry has been developing in an egalitarian direction regarding LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) representation. This is perhaps best emblemized by the Sony conference at the 2018 Electronic Entertainment Expo. Sony began the conference with footage from their 2020 game, *The Last of Us Part II*, in which the main character, Ellie, kisses another woman (PlayStation, 2018). This was the first time two women had been shown kissing at E3, signaling increased inclusion of LGBTQ characters within video games. Only a few years prior, video game culture, including journalism and social media, was affected by the movement GamerGate (GG). GG gained traction in the late summer of 2014, when independent game developer Zoe Quinn was accused of "trading sex for positive game reviews" (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 210). The harassment campaign against Quinn developed into a sustained online movement that adopted ideas from right-wing philosophies in order to oppose increased diversity within video game content, culture, and the industry (Mortensen, 2018, pp. 788–791).

GG was one of several harassment campaigns that targeted women within the games industry, and proponents of GG spread misinformation about games studies and its purpose, stalked and harassed female game scholars (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 210; Mortensen, 2018, pp. 788–789), journalists, women, and minorities by doxing[1] them and sending them death threats (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 554). The movement claimed that video game journalism was collaborating too closely with the games industry to promote a progressive "social justice" agenda (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 554). As video game scholars Adrienne Shaw and Shira Chess express in their article about the controversy:

> [GG] is a poignant example of the sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchal undercurrents that seem to serve as a constant guidepost for the video game industry. (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 208)

A tension exists between video game production progressing in an egalitarian direction and a conservative subset of video game players. In the context of this tension, this article examines how and to what degree game publications reflect right-wing discourses within the video game community, as well as the inclusion of LGBTQ persons and characters within video production. This study is interdisciplinary, situated primarily within the field of media studies and utilizing media sociological methods, such as the content analytical method of coding, as well as the significant communications theory of framing through a queer and feminist lens. This article maps the developments of LGBTQ framing over time, illuminating the attitudes journalists have and have had within video game journalism, and how and to what degree they reflect the polarized spheres of video game content and the culture surrounding it. This allows comparative analysis of several video game news publications as well as thorough analysis of queer discourse within this subgenre of journalism. Numerous studies have examined attitudes towards LGBTQ subjects in game culture and communities from feminist and queer theoretical perspectives (for example: Gray, 2014, 2018; Ruberg, 2020; Shaw, 2017), but writing on queerness within video game production, content, and cultures remains a budding field that this study contributes to.

First, this article will review literature on the history of video game publications and their contributions to gaming culture, the theory behind framing, and how other researchers have used framing analysis to analyze LGBTQ topics in journalistic media publications. Next, the methods section details the key words used to locate and collect articles on LGBTQ topics, the magazines and publications chosen for analysis and the logic behind these selections, and details the method of coding and the manual created for the study, which labels and describes the articles included in the study (Bryman, 2016b, p. 293; Punch, 2014a,

p. 173). The findings section will then detail the quantitative results of the coding of articles, such as chronological framing developments, followed by a qualitative analysis of articles that most saliently represent different framing categories. Finally, the discussion section will reflect on the implications of these findings, and the conclusion will reiterate these and suggest further research that may be carried out based on these results.

Literature review

This section will first detail the depictions of male and female gamers and characters within video game magazines historically, which can put into perspective the importance of the framing of LGBTQ topics within such publications. It will then elucidate the mechanics of framing and framing analysis, and finally detail how other researchers have used these techniques, and how this article draws inspiration from these in designing this study.

Gendered marginalization in game magazines

Several studies have been carried out on the inclusion of men and women in video game magazines as well as the differences in how male and female characters are depicted. Media and culture scientist Howard Fisher and media and cultural theorist Robin Bootes found that women and non-white people received little page space within game magazines in the mid- to late 1990s and early 2000s (Bootes, 2024, p. 219; Fisher, 2015, pp. 551–52). Female characters were fetishized and portrayed as sexualized pin-ups, while real women were depicted as interlopers into gaming culture that should be "bullied" (Bootes, 2024, p. 224; Fisher, 2015, pp. 551–52). Fisher argues that these depictions align with the theory of *hegemonic masculinity*, excluding women from representation "in favor of multiple portrayals of men performing those same actions" (Fisher, 2015, p. 555).

Fisher, social psychologists Alicia Summers and Monica Miller, and cultural theorist Graeme Kirkpatrick also argue that the culture cultivated

by game magazines helped ingrain the idea that video games are made for and enjoyed by men; games were not conceived as being a male space but developed into one. Fisher argues that the 1982-84 Atari Age magazine depicted men and women more equally, while modern magazines are "far more" aimed at men than women (Fisher, 2015, pp. 551–552). Kirkpatrick argues that English game magazines published between 1981 and 1985 were concerned with including female participants and, "present[s] a milieu that was reflective on gender issues", while magazines published after 1986 became increasingly gender exclusive and reinforced stereotypically masculine values, which coded video games as a male activity (Kirkpatrick, 2017, p. 453).

These studies argue that depictions of men and women within game publications help shape both the views of readers and the make-up of the gaming community. Kirkpatrick argues that the magazines are "crucibles for the production of gaming discourse" and active participants in shaping gaming culture with their representation of games and players (Kirkpatrick, 2017, pp. 455-457); social psychologists Summers and Miller argue that the sexist shift in how female characters are depicted may impact real attitudes and have tangible consequences (Summers & Miller, 2014, p. 1037); and Fisher asserts that media shapes people's perceptions of the world around them "both by actively encouraging specific behaviors […] but also in the ways that the media portray people or things" (Fisher, 2015, p. 557). These arguments emphasize the importance of researching how minoritized groups are depicted within video game publications because the framing of LGBTQ topics, characters, and persons may affect the attitudes of readers towards these groups. This study is a part of this research on the framing of minoritized groups in video game publications, addressing a lack of research regarding LGBTQ topics within these magazines.

Framing

Media and communications scholar Robert Entman describes how framing explains the power a communicating text can exert on someone's

consciousness (Entman, 1993, pp. 51–52). Framing involves making information within a text more salient to make that information more noticeable and memorable to the reader (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Drawing on sociologist William A. Gamson's research on framing from 1992, Entman describes an approach to analyzing frames and their functions. Entman describes four key functions of framing: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. Defining problems means determining what causal agents are doing, alongside the costs and benefits of their actions. Diagnosing causes establishes the sources creating the problem, and as the writer or journalist makes a moral judgment, they evaluate the causal agents and their effects. Suggesting remedies involves offering and justifying treatments for said causes and problems and predicting the remedies' effects (Entman, 1993, p. 52.).

Furthermore, Entman describes the locations of frames in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. The communicator makes conscious or unconscious decisions regarding their communications, guided by their own belief systems, while the text itself is what contains the actual frames. These can be detected by examining the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that reinforce facts or judgments. However, the frames that guide the receiver's thinking may or may not reflect the framing intended by the communicator. Finally, the culture is the stock of commonly used sets of frames that are employed in the thinking and discourse of people within a social group (Entman, 1993, pp. 52-53). It should be noted that, as Entman uses these terms, framing denotes the act of utilizing these strategies to make certain information meaningful to a reader, while the frame itself is what contains these key functions and keywords (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As such, Entman's examination of framing details how framing strategies affect the opinions of the receivers of messages.

LGBTQ framing categories

To gather examples of and inspiration for how to construct relevant framing categories, I examined articles that likewise investigate the framing of LGBTQ topics in journalistic media, drawing insights from studies that closely resembled this study in methodology and research topic.

Political scientist Tyler Johnson examines how articles from the Associated Press regarding LGBTQ marriage affected the opinions of readers (Johnson, 2012, p. 1053), and applies two master frames to his examination of the articles: *the equality frame*, measuring "the core value of egalitarianism", and *the morality frame,* "measuring the core value of moral traditionalism" (Johnson, 2012, p. 1063). Johnson found that when equality framing increased, opposition to LGBTQ marriage would decrease, and every word and phrase characterized by equality framing would decrease opposition by a little over one half of a percent (Johnson, 2012, p. 1069). These findings indicate that the equality and morality frames are of great import to LGBTQ-oriented framing, and they corroborate with Fisher, Summers and Miller, and Kirkpatrick's arguments regarding the impacts of representation.

Examining how Russian news media frames the LGBTQ movement (Semykina, 2018, p. 2), sociologist Kseniia S. Semykina describes the equality frame as arguing in favor of LGBTQ people being equally respected by the law and morality framing as using religious or moral arguments to discredit the LGBTQ community. Among others, she also identifies *the victim frame*, which identifies LGBTQ persons as victims of an unjust status quo (Semykina, 2018, pp. 6-7).

Communications researchers Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside identify several frames in a feminist context that are also relevant in an LGBTQ context. Their *demonization frame,* which frames feminism as deviant (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010, pp. 320–321), resonates with the morality frame, and they also identify a *victimization frame* that frames feminists as weak and vulnerable. Further, they identify *the goals frame,* in which goals such as civil rights receive attention, and *the agency frame*, which frames feminists as

strong and capable (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010, p 321).

Many of these frames are relevant to this study, with the morality and equality frames standing out as most essential. I will describe the frames I selected for analysis and coding in section 3.3.

Method

To analyze the contents of numerous articles, I utilized content analysis to characterize and systematize disparate articles across a number of years, sources, and authors (Bryman, 2016b, p. 284).

I used coding to systematize my data by way of a coding manual and a coding schedule. The manual defines codes by applying labels to articles, describing and grouping their characteristics on a schedule (Bryman, 2016b, p. 293; Punch, 2014a, p. 173). This indexation allows one to identify patterns throughout articles (Bryman, 2016b, pp. 293–4; Punch, 2014a, p. 173). I will elaborate on the categories and labels in the coding manual for this study in section 3.3 and analyze article patterns and chronological developments in section 4.1. The articles that most saliently represent identified frames will be analyzed for their usage of these frames and how they are made meaningful through the text, drawing on the practice of discourse analysis, focusing attention on "the way language is used, what it is used for and the social context in which it is used" – a discourse itself referring to the framework or perspective within which language and ideas are formulated (Punch, 2014a, p. 191).

Prior to these analyses, I will elaborate on which articles were collected, which publications they were collected from, and which labels and categories the coding manual contains.

Game publications for analysis
To determine which publications should be included in this study, I utilized a chart created by market research company Electronic Entertainment Design and Research ("EEDAR", n.d.). The chart maps the 20 most 'influential' video game magazines, ranked by 3500 North American respondents in

2015. Several magazines have ceased publication since 2015, but the top three most influential outlets, GameSpot, Game Informer, and IGN, were still in circulation when articles were collected. These were established between 1991 and 1996 (Game Informer, n.d.; GameSpot Staff, 2019; IGN, n.d.), and their years in circulation and positions on the chart make them crucial cases for analysis. It should be noted that the Game Informer magazine, website, and digital archive were closed in 2024. The articles gathered prior to closing remain in this study's population and samples, though they are no longer accessible to journalists, scholars, or the general public. I additionally chose to examine PC Gamer, established in 1993 and one of the older publications still in circulation (PC Gamer, 2016), alongside Kotaku, Polygon, and Gameranx. Part of Polygon's editorial focus regards "who is making and playing games, not just the games themselves" (Stark, 2012); Kotaku aims to be inclusive for gamers of any sexuality and gender (Totilo, 2013); and Gameranx is described as a platform that hosts diverse perspectives and "diverse groups of people" (Gameranx, n.d.).

IGN reaches "more than 200 million monthly users around the world" (IGN Press Room, 2020). I contacted the remaining publications to obtain reader statistics but received no responses. Thus, these seven outlets have access to a global monthly readership of at least 200 million.

Search terms and sampling
To collect relevant articles for analysis, I composed a list of keywords; if an article contained a keyword, it was collected as part of the population of articles. I compiled relevant LGBTQ terms by scrutinizing *The A-Z of Gender and Sexuality* by writer and LGBTQ community organizer Morgan Holleb from 2019, which details LGBTQ terminology, slurs, historical terms, and more (Holleb, 2019, pp. 10–11). Some keywords had alternatives that were also used to collect articles; for example, searching using the keyword 'LGBTQ' also required searching for 'LGBT+', 'LGBTQIA', 'LGBTQIAP' et cetera. What follows are examples of keywords:

- Terms for sexuality and the LGBTQ community:
  - LGBTQ, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual, sexuality, pride parade, homophobia.
- Terms for sex and gender:
  - Intersex, transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, cisgender.
- Slurs:
  - Faggot, tranny, hermaphrodite, dyke (Holleb, 2019, pp. 19–293).

Searching for slurs identifies texts in which journalists deploy these words and ones where journalists mention or discuss them. I hypothesize that journalists tend to discuss slurs rather than actively use them, as using slurs would break their journalistic paradigm. Paradigms consist of the unwritten norms that members of a field must follow in order to maintain authority and be a respected member of the journalistic community (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 555). Using offensive language would likely break the paradigm and render an article illegitimate.

I also included the term 'social justice warrior' (SJW) based on arguments made by game scholars Adrienne Massanari and Shira Chess. Within certain far-right communities, including white ethnonationalists, islamophobes, and misogynists, the term is used as a pejorative that describes individuals who are "overly" invested in politics and "policing" the behavior of others (Massanari & Chess, 2018, pp. 525–26). Supporters of GamerGate often use the term to describe their "opposition" (Massanari & Chess, 2018, p. 527). In keeping with this reasoning, I included similarly politically loaded "key concepts in politics, privilege, and oppression, which intersect with queer politics" (Holleb, 2019, p. 11):

- Representation, diversity, oppression, equality, progressive, identity politics.

The inclusion of terms whose meanings can be egalitarian or moralistic depending on context made evident the need to code these keywords and the context in which they are used. I opted for the categories of sincere and veiled meaning, which depend on the context surrounding, for example, the word SJW. An article coded as using this word sincerely may involve a writer enthusiastically identifying with the term as an activist, while an article coded as using it in a veiled manner may lament the presence of SJWs within the gaming community. The term veiled was selected as, rather than writers explicitly expressing conservative views (Massanari & Chess, 2018, pp. 525–26), they were observed to instead use politically loaded terms as stand-ins.

To collect articles in practice, I utilized the magazine websites' search functions rather than Google. Google algorithmically personalizes and contextualizes result rankings in complex ways that cannot be opted out of (Graham, 2023a, p. 9). While the search functions embedded within magazine websites are likely based on Google's algorithm, they restrict result indexing to the current search within the chosen publication, rather than potentially hiding relevant results due to personalization. Ranking describes how search results are sorted so that users are presented with "useful" and "relevant" results first (Graham, 2023b, p. 131). This method was only troubled when searching IGN's website, as its indexation did not differentiate between exact keywords and similar alternatives; searching using the keyword 'gay' would also index all results containing the word 'gray' and sometimes rank 'gray' higher than the exact term. For IGN in particular, relevant articles may have been missed.

Articles that discuss diversity, but do not concern LGBTQ topics, could still hold relevance as they may intersect with LGBTQ politics (Holleb, 2019, p. 11) and include sincere or veiled applications of loaded keywords. For example, an article regarding depictions of cis men and women in video games may mention feminism and inclusion of women, while another article discusses diversity, a politically loaded keyword, in games or the gaming community without specifying minoritized groups. The former article would not be collected, as it explicitly does not concern LGBTQ topics, while the latter would be collected, as discussion of loaded keywords may include LGBTQ people and topics. A step-by-step example of how

to select an article for the population of this study looks as follows:

1. Open a publication website.
2. Click the search icon and type in a keyword.
3. Select an indexed article.
4. Verify: Does the article concern LGBTQ characters, persons, and/or topics or use politically loaded keywords that may include LGBTQ topics?
   a. If it fulfils any of these criteria: The article is added to the population of articles.
   b. If it does not: The article is not added.

Sampling

Probability sampling involves a random selection process that gives each unit in a population an equal chance to be selected in the sample, ensuring representativeness of the population (Punch, 2014b, p. 244). My sample of articles is a stratified probability sample, dividing the population by publication before making a random selection (Punch, 2014b, p. 244).

Population articles were collected between the 3rd and the 13th of March 2020, and it consists of 807 articles, the most recent of which is from March 2nd 2020 and the oldest of which is from March 28th 2002. In order to lower the amount of sampled articles for analysis, I took a systematic sample – a type of random sampling (Bryman, 2016a, p. 178). I selected 1 of every 3 units in the sampling frame, resulting in a final sample consisting of 269 units. Figure 1 illustrates the full sampling frame and the distribution of articles between game publications.

Coding

What follows is an explanation of the coding manual's instructions. This manual is synergized

Year / Outlet	Game-Spot	Game Informer	IGN	Kotaku	PC Gamer	Polygon	Game-ranx	Total per year	Per year aggregate
2020	2	0	2	7	2	2	0	15	807
2019	5	6	14	39	29	26	2	121	792
2018	4	6	13	39	19	23	0	104	671
2017	2	6	1	27	13	15	3	67	567
2016	8	1	2	19	5	17	6	58	500
2015	10	3	10	16	4	15	12	70	442
2014	20	4	13	29	9	50	20	145	372
2013	5	1	4	24	1	25	16	76	227
2012	4	1	8	33	0	5	15	66	151
2011	0	1	2	16	1	0	1	21	85
2010	2	2	2	13	1	0	1	21	64
2009	2	0	2	21	0	0	0	25	43
2008	0	0	1	5	0	0	0	6	18
2007	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	6	12
2006	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	6
2005	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
2004	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
2003	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
2002	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	70	31	80	288	84	178	76	807	
	(8,7%)	(3,8%)	(9,9%)	(35,7%)	(10,4%)	(22,1%)	(9,4%)		

Figure 1 – Quantitative sampling frame data

from research discussed in the literature review and methodology described in this section. Figure 2 displays the manual.

- *Article type* refers to the type of article in question.
- *LGBTQ identity discussed* refers to which LGBTQ identity is discussed within the article. These identities consist of keywords and categories described in section 3.2. The N/A label signifies articles that do not concern a specific LGBTQ identity.
- *Does the article concern video game culture, content or industry?* describes whether the article concerns gaming culture, such as cosplays and social media commentary; content, such as LGBTQ characters in games; and industry, such as workplace rights.
- *Article framing* refers to the way in which the journalist frames their writing on LGBTQ

topics. This is the most essential category in the manual. The master frames *traditionalist morality* and *egalitarian equality* are synergized from Johnson, Semykina, and Hardin and Whiteside's studies: egalitarian equality frames LGBTQ issues by using egalitarian arguments and arguing in favor of equity, while traditionalist morality uses traditionalist or moral arguments to discredit the LGBTQ movement and frame it as deviant. I also included *neutral framing*, describing journalistic framing that does not involve arguing for or against LGBTQ subjects, and *unclear framing*, which refers to articles that employ both morality and equality framing without taking a defined stance, or articles in which it is not evident whether the journalist utilizes equality or morality framing.

- *Topic frames* is separate from how journalists frame LGBTQ topics. Topic frames detail the framing characteristic of different article

Article type
1. Original interview
2. Opinion piece
3. Review/press material
4. Feature
5. News reporting
6. Video

LGBT identity discussed
1. Umbrella terms
2. Gay
3. Lesbian
4. Bisexual
5. Pansexual
6. Asexual
7. Transgender
8. Non-binary
9. Intersex
10. Several identities
11. N/A

Does the article concern video game culture, content or industry?
1. Culture
2. Content
3. Industry
4. Several
5. N/A

Article framing
1. Traditionalist morality
2. Egalitarian equality
3. Neutral
4. Unclear
5. N/A

Topic frames
1. N/A
2. Demonization and victimization
3. Agency
4. Goals
5. Representation
6. Sex

Are slurs used?
1. Yes
2. No
3. Mentioned/discussed
4. N/A

Are loaded terms used?
1. Yes – sincere
2. Yes – veiled
3. No
4. Mentioned/discussed
5. N/A

Figure 2 – Coding manual

topics, as they were observed to be character-ized by consistent sets of frames distinct from the ways in which journalists frame their views. Recording these frames allows the coded data to more closely reflect article nuances.

○ The *demonization and victimization frame* is synergized from Semykina's victim frame and Hardin and Whiteside's victimization and demonization frames. It describes LGBTQ people as vulnerable victims of a status quo that frames them as deviant. I combined these frames as the demoniza-tion and victimization frames share similar-ities, and as I observed that victimization appeared due to demonization with such frequency that coding the frames separate-ly ceased to be meaningful. *Agency* frames LGBTQ people as strong and capable; *goals* describes civil rights goals, such as work-place rights and equality; *representation* is a form of goal in and of itself, but it appeared with high enough frequency on its own that the agency and representation frames

ought to be separated; the *sex frame* turned out to be a necessary inclusion, as certain articles discuss sex within video games using keywords that are not elucidated by other framing categories.

- *Are slurs used?* describes the journalist's usage or discussion of slurs.
- *Are loaded terms used?* describes whether journalists use politically loaded keywords and whether these are deployed in a sincere or veiled manner.

Findings

This section consists of first a quantitative ana-lysis of the data gathered in the coding schedule. This covers chronological framing developments and distributions of framing categories, hypothe-sizes on what may inform increases or decrea-ses in articles published on LGBTQ topics, and charts the possible construction of a journalistic paradigm within game journalism. Second, this

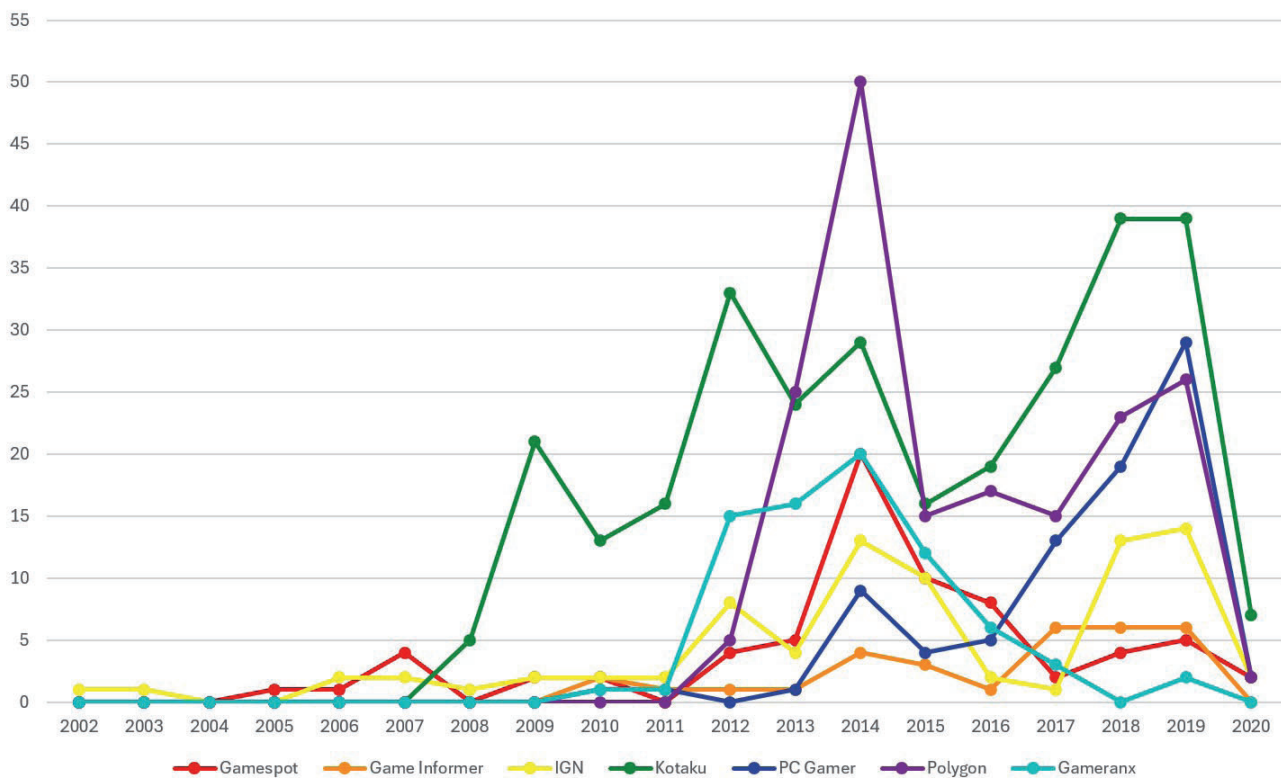Figure 3.1 - Articles published per year stratified by magazine

Figure 3.2 - Articles published per year in total

section contains a qualitative framing analysis of the nine articles that most saliently represent the categories and labels of the coding manual, allowing characterization of these codes and framing categories.

Quantitative analysis

Figure 3.1 charts the number of published articles regarding LGBTQ subjects and diversity through 18 years, from 2002 to 2020, stratified by publication. Figure 3.2 displays the data in total.

Figure 3.2 shows significant increases in articles in 2009 and 2012 with the highest number of articles published in 2014. The peak in articles in 2014 is followed by a universal decrease – figure 3.1 shows that no magazines published more or maintained the same level of articles published. The GamerGate movement reached its zenith during August 2014 and January 2015, in which the majority of press responses were published (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 558). GG targeted female journalists, among others, with "physical, digital, and symbolic threats of violence" so intense that game developer

Zoe Quinn, originally the catalyst of the GG movement, had to flee her home (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017, pp. 1-2). Such threats against female figures in the gaming community and female journalists posit the reduction in LGBTQ-related articles from 2014 to 2015 as potentially significant.

Journalist Becky Gardiner examined the gendered prevalence of hostile comments posted in response to articles in the English newspaper The Guardian, finding that female and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic journalists were more likely to receive abusive comments on their articles (Gardiner, 2018, pp. 603–604). Receiving abusive comments affected how journalists approached writing articles: "[A] quarter had subdued or changed angles in stories, and 20% had refused assignments as a result of abuse" (Gardiner, 2018, p. 601). Considering that GG flourished during 2014 and early 2015 and that receiving harassment affects how and what journalists write, it is possible that GG influenced the decrease in articles on LGBTQ topics published in video game magazines. It would require further research, such

as qualitative interviews with writing staff, to confirm this possibility.

Figure 4 illustrates that only a single journalist utilized offensive terms in an article in 2019. This may indicate the construction of a journalistic paradigm regarding LGBTQ topics within game journalism; the standard has changed in such a manner that offensive terms are rarely if ever used. Figure 5 illustrates that most journalists utilize politically loaded terms in a sincere, egalitarian manner. While veiled language is more common than using slurs, it is consistently surpassed by articles that do not use loaded terms and journalists that do so sincerely. Unlike how game magazines published after 1986 reinforced masculine values (Kirkpatrick, 2017, p. 453), game publications have since 2009 instead discussed slurs and sincerely utilized loaded terms when framing LGBTQ topics – a significant difference and a significant finding.

Figure 6 illustrates that 57,2% of journalists utilize equality framing in their articles on LGBTQ subjects, 36,1% use neutral framing, and 0,7% use morality framing. Major differences between magazines are characterized not by conflicting egalitarian equality and traditionalist morality framing, reflecting the tension between modern

video game content and conservative communities such as GG, but rather equality and neutral framing. The greatest variations between publications likewise involve equality and neutral framing, Kotaku's output being characterized by equality framing while Gamespot's articles are characterized by neutral framing, for example. Morality framing is consistently minimal, illustrated by figure 7. As found by Johnson and argued by Kirkpatrick, Summers and Miller, and Fisher, egalitarian framing may influence readers' mindsets in an egalitarian direction, marking this data as another noteworthy finding.

Framing analysis

I will analyze nine articles and their utilization of key functions of framing and the locations of frames within the texts, organized around the coding categories and labels described in the coding manual. These articles make salient the characteristics of these categories and labels. Figure 8 displays the distribution of each topic frame, contextualizing what types of framing and which keywords are most significant. When analyzing topic frames, I will focus less on the key functions of framing and more so on the keywords that characterize each.
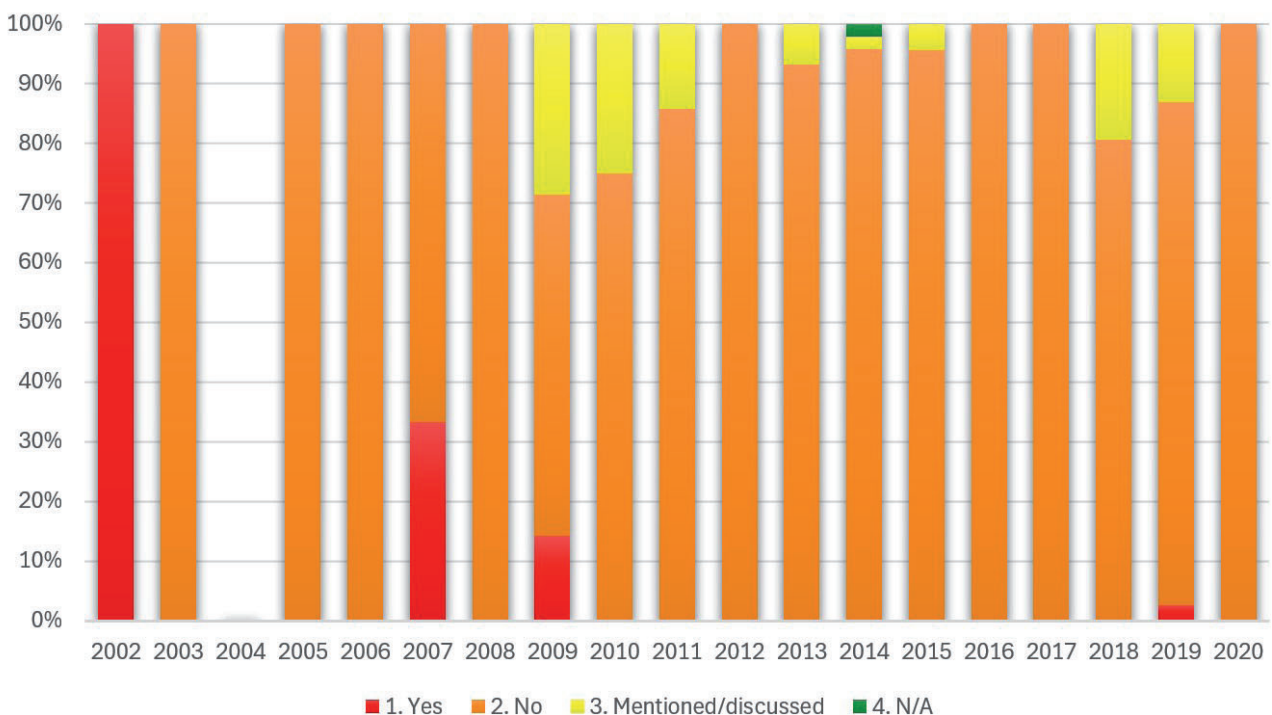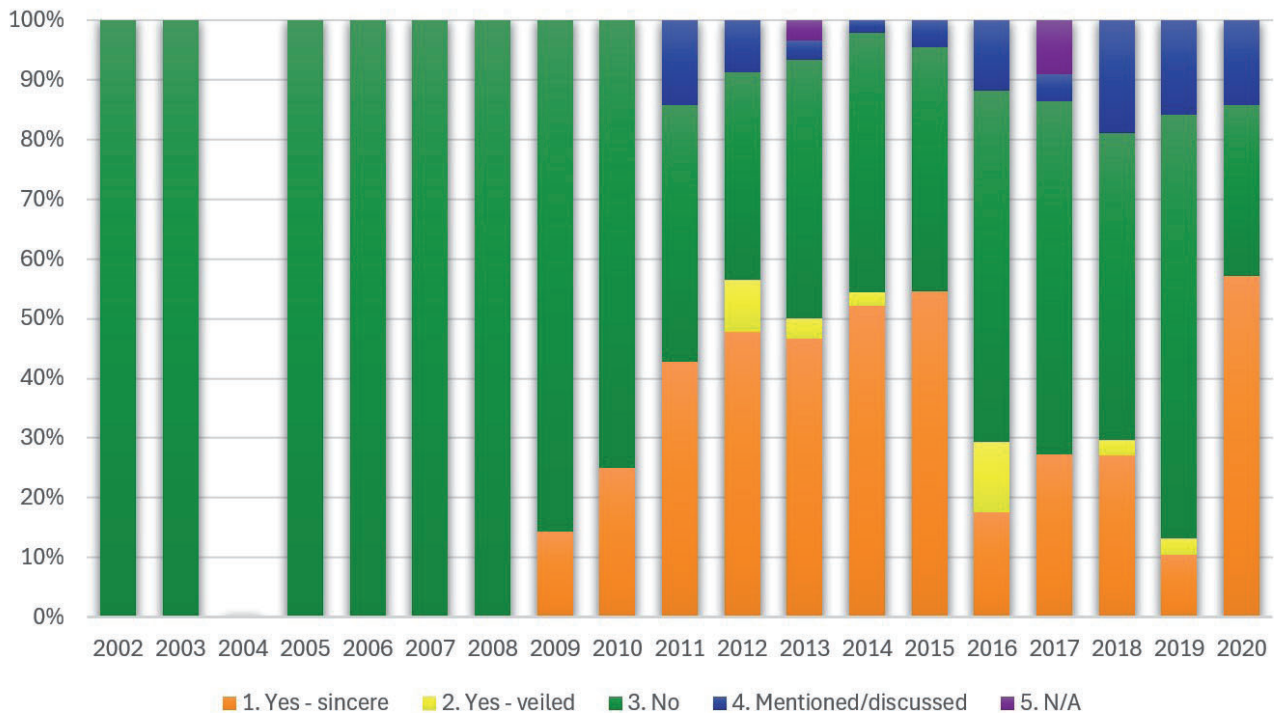
Figure 4 - Usage of slurs per year

Figure 5 - Usage of loaded terms per year

Figure 5 - Usage of loaded terms per year

Legend: ■ 1. Yes - sincere ■ 2. Yes - veiled ■ 3. No ■ 4. Mentioned/discussed ■ 5. N/A

Egalitarian equality

To analyze egalitarian equality framing, I selected Samantha Allen's 2014 Polygon opinion piece "Nintendo's 'whimsical' simulation erases an entire population of people, and that's intolerable". Allen defines problems by quoting a statement made by the game company Nintendo regarding criticism the company received for the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ relationships in its simulation game *Tomodachi Life* (2013). The company's statement asserts that it did not intend to provide social commentary with the game and that it represents a "playful alternate world" (Allen, 2014). Allen utilizes sentences that reinforce her judgments: "Nintendo has chosen to remain on the wrong side of history", "behind all the corporate jargon […] lies hatred, pure and simple" (Allen, 2014). She diagnoses causes by stating: "The beating, bigoted heart of Nintendo's statement is this: Nintendo does not care about its lesbian, gay and bisexual audience" (Allen, 2014). Making moral judgments and evaluating causal agents, Allen states that same-sex relationships are a cultural reality, not social commentary, and reinforces her argument by including statistical and scientific sources of information, such as the Pew Research Center and social

theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. She frames the "erasure" of same-sex marriages as "offensive and scary" and Nintendo's words and actions as portraying these relationships as abnormal, deviant, and "other" (Allen, 2014). She suggests a remedy with the article's last sentence, expressing that Nintendo should live up to the company's reputation for innovation and choose differently (Allen, 2014).

Allen utilizes equality framing by arguing for the inclusion and equal representation of LGBTQ
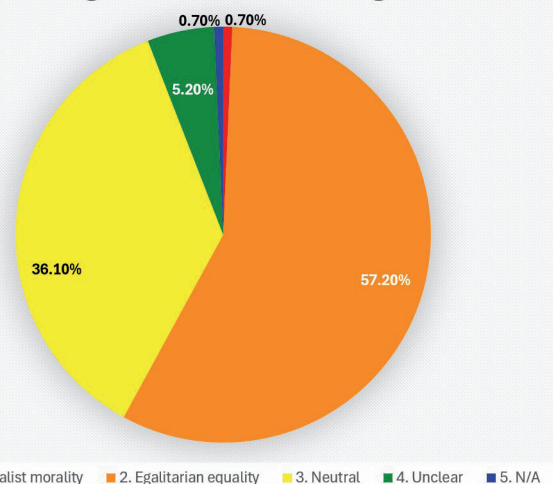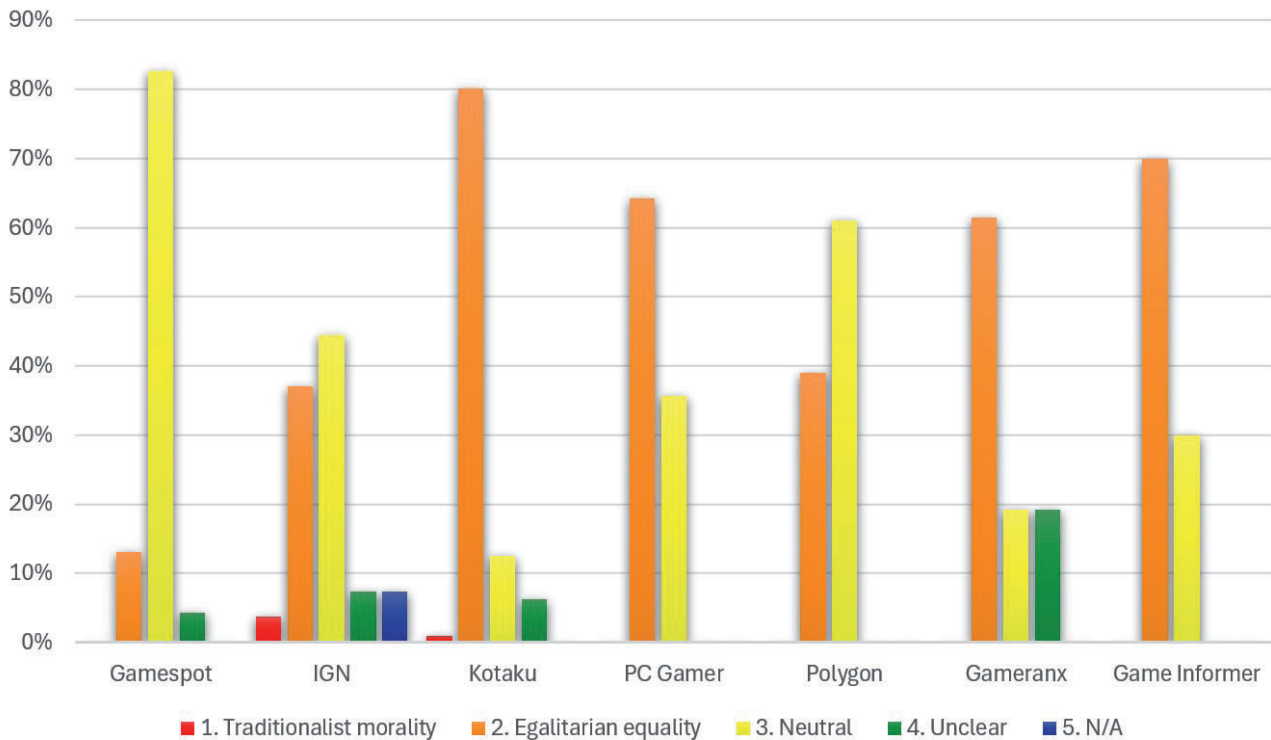

Figure 6 - Article framing

0.70% 0.70%
5.20%
36.10%
57.20%

Legend: ■ 1. Traditionalist morality ■ 2. Egalitarian equality ■ 3. Neutral ■ 4. Unclear ■ 5. N/A

Figure 7 - Article framing stratified by magazine

1. Traditionalist morality ■ 2. Egalitarian equality ■ 3. Neutral ■ 4. Unclear ■ 5. N/A ■

people. Several sets of keywords can be identified in her writing. First, she uses a set of keywords to frame Nintendo as being conservative: exclusionary, hatred, bigoted, normative, regressive, cowardly, offensive. Secondly, she frames the LGBTQ experience as being difficult partly due to conservatism like Nintendo's: dread, scary, abnormal, deviant, painful. This contrasts the keywords she uses to frame heterosexual identities: self-evident, invisible, privileged. Lastly, she employs a set of keywords to describe LGBTQ communities and LGBTQ love: "queer people can be themselves", fantasies, joy (Allen, 2014. This set of keywords has a small presence in the article compared to the difficult LGBTQ experience and conservatism, but it becomes noticeable due to this contrast it provides.

In summary, Allen's article characterizes egalitarian equality as framing traditionalist attitudes using conscious framing and active criticism while making salient the challenges LGBTQ persons face and the bonds and communities they form. The framework that Allen utilizes may also draw on social research, queer theory, and gender studies to reinforce its argument.

Traditionalist morality

To examine traditionalist morality framing, I selected Brian Ashcraft's 2009 Kotaku news article "NieR's Hermaphrodite Character". The article is short and uses few key framing functions. Ashcraft defines problems by reporting that Square Enix' game *Nier* (2010) features an intersex character. Ashcraft utilizes stereotyped images in his framing of intersex people and his usage of the slur 'hermaphrodite' (Holleb, 2019, p. 144). Ashcraft refers to the intersex character, Kaine,

Figure 8 - Topic frames

■ 1. N/A ■ 2. Demonization and victimization ■ 3. Agency ■ 4. Goals ■ 5. Representation ■ 6. Sex
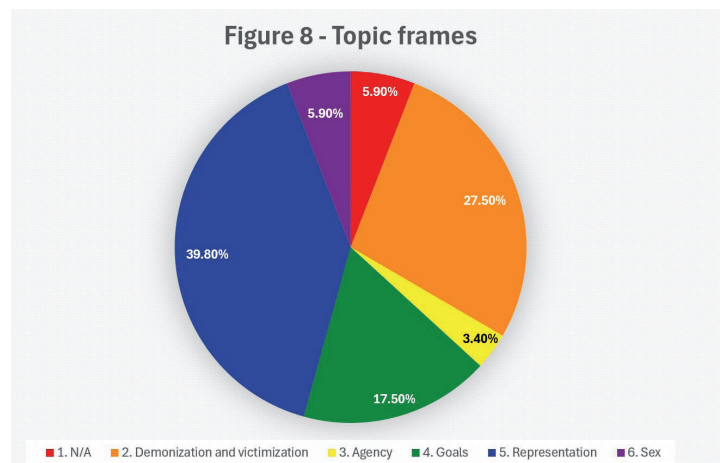
as a "two-for-one" and satirizes the character's pronouns:

> ~~Her, his, its~~ Kaine's attitude and manner of speech are manly — but she/he/it emphasizes her female qualities through her racy fashion style. (Ashcraft, 2009)

Using a slur and satirizing the character's gender expression is an example of morality framing, discrediting an LGBTQ identity and framing intersex characters as being deviant by way of satire. Articles such as Ashcraft's are emblematic of traditionalist morality framing, utilizing outdated terms and slurs in the discussion of LGBTQ topics as well as a satirical and flippant tone regarding LGBTQ identities.

Sincere and veiled usage of loaded terms

To examine the differences between sincere and veiled usage of loaded terms, I am analyzing two articles that illustrate the different usages. Carolyn Petit's 2013 GameSpot opinion piece "Heroes Who Look Like Us: A Call for Diversity in Games" utilizes loaded terms in a sincere manner. Petit defines the problem as being that game designer Cliff Bleszinski "asserts his own positive impact", which Petit finds unjustified, as Bleszinski has included too few female characters in his games (Petit, 2013). She diagnoses the causes as being that women and other minorities are underrepresented in games and makes the judgment that it "doesn't have to be this way", and that "baby steps" that slowly diversify video games do not remedy the problem quickly enough (Petit, 2013). Her remedial suggestion is that the industry ought to add more diversity immediately, despite the hostility displayed by "straight white males" (Petit, 2013).

Petit frames diversity and progressiveness in a positive manner, often quoting industry professionals: "greater diversity in games is smart business", "Diversity benefits creativity", "greater diversity in games would be good for everyone", "It's time for the heroes games give us to become more diverse" (Petit, 2013). She frames the experiences of women and minorities in game culture and as game characters as being difficult: vitriol, marginalized, victim, underrepresented. Additionally, she frames those who oppose the inclusion of women and minorities in games in a negative manner: hostile, trolls, "comfortably accustomed to the status quo", "You don't coddle cancer" (Petit, 2013). Framing those who oppose diversity as 'cancer' positions them as something destructive that needs to be removed or cured.

Sincere usage of politically loaded terms frames diversity and inclusion as positives that benefit the game industry and community while criticizing 'straight white males' and gamers that oppose diversity. This positions sincere usage of loaded terms in opposition to the ideologies that inform movements like GG and in favor of the inclusion of LGBTQ topics and characters in games. Sincere framing also appears aware of the egalitarian and moralistic discourses within game production and culture and characterizes egalitarian developments positively while criticizing moralistic attitudes as being 'cancerous'.

To examine veiled usage of loaded terms, I selected the opinion piece "Opinion: The Problem with Political Correctness in Video Games" by Marc Nix, published in IGN in 2012. Nix defines the problem as being that political correctness is "ruining" the creativity of the game industry. He makes the moral judgment that "[b]y refusing to address this problem, we are stripping gaming of its ability to be ingenious" (Nix, 2012). He suggests the remedy that games need to be "challenging" and that game creators and game communities should "throw off the shackles of political correctness" (Nix, 2012). Such sentences are illustrative of Nix' negative usage of loaded terms; he frames political correctness as a restriction that constrains creativity and 'ruins' games: "Should we succumb to the plight of political correctness and let it ruin the creativity of our industry like it's corrupted so many other artistic avenues?", "We've already let political correctness like this destroy gaming projects" (Nix, 2012). This frames "political correctness" and inclusion as corrupting influences that destroy projects – this framing is characterized by morality framing, using moral arguments to discredit progressive beliefs. Nix uses historical sources of information to reinforce his argument,

quoting founding father Benjamin Franklin and author George Orwell. Franklin, in particular, has strong patriotic connotations for Americans.

Nix uses a distinct set of keywords that frame diversity and inclusion as destructive: strangled, corrupted, "thought police", obliterate, censored. Another set of keywords is one that frames those who speak out against political correctness as being brave: "stand up", "push the envelope", "protect our inherent freedoms of speech" (Nix, 2012), refusing, dare. This stands in contrast to Allen and Petit's keywords and arguments, which frame opposition to diversity as conservative and cancerous. Nix's opinion piece makes salient the importance of registering politically loaded keywords; veiled usage of loaded keywords does not utilize homo- or transphobic slurs, instead expressing opposition against diversity in general, which may include LGBTQ topics, and framing this as supporting creative expression.

Demonization and Victimization

The opinion piece "Why I Don't Feel Welcome at Kotaku" by Mattie Brice in Kotaku from 2011 is an example of a topic characterized by demonization and victimization framing. Brice defines the problem of having nowhere to escape to as a transgender woman within video game culture and diagnoses the cause as not being seen as a "gamer" due to her identity (Brice, 2011). She makes the moral judgment that these factors have caused her to turn away from Kotaku in favor of other communities. She offers a remedy with the sentence: "I wish Kotaku would tell me 'We don't want you to go away'" (Brice, 2011). This is representative of the demonization and victimization frame, as Brice experiences hostility, exclusion, and victimization due to her gender identity. She utilizes keywords that frame the LGBTQ experience as being challenging: bullied, escape, monster, homophobic, martyr, and frames "straight white males" as negative influences: "typical gamers", "homophobic adolescent dudes" (Brice, 2011), toxic. According to Brice, the LGBTQ experience becomes difficult due to a community consisting of "typical gamers", making salient the difficulties associated with being an LGBTQ person and

writer, the identified keywords closely reflecting the frame's name: hostility, exclusion, and victimization. However, she also presents LGBTQ communities as positive alternatives to this difficulty: "empowered to be themselves", "each one of us mattered" (Brice, 2011).

Agency

"My Shepard is Asexual, and That's Okay" by Kris Ligman in Gameranx from 2012 illustrates the agency topic frame. Ligman defines the problem as being that sex is considered "the ultimate stage of a [virtual] relationship", which causes her discomfort (Ligman, 2012). She diagnoses her asexuality as being the cause of her discomfort, as she attempted to "convince myself I felt otherwise" (Ligman, 2012). She makes the moral judgment that experiencing media as an asexual person is confusing and frustrating, suggesting the remedy of including relationships in games that do not mimic sexual relationships. Agency framing is evident in the way in which Ligman frames herself as a capable asexual person who "took stock of what I was doing and who I was intending to play as" (Ligman, 2012). She describes her development as changing from believing that there was "something wrong about *me*" to a confident attitude: "[the characters] have *stopped caring* about conforming to expectations", "treating sex as an achievement could go hang itself", "I don't need to keep pretending" (Ligman, 2012).

Framing herself this way, Ligman employs a set of keywords that expresses her agency and the comfort of experiencing a relationship that she could relate to. The agency frame is characterized by LGBTQ people characterizing themselves as strong and capable and their experiences as liberating despite confusion and discomfort.

Goals

News article "EA scores top marks for LGBTQ equality in the workplace" by Megan Farokhmanesh from 2014 in Polygon exemplifies the goals frame. Farokhmanesh defines the problem as being the fact that the games company Electronic Arts (EA) was "named one of the best companies to work for in regards to LGBTQ equality by the

Human Rights Campaign" (Farokhmanesh, 2014), and diagnoses the cause as being EA's inclusion of LGBTQ characters and participating in LGBTQ events.

The lack of moral judgments and suggesting remedies is emblematic of articles that use neutral framing; the journalist refrains from asserting opinions on the reported subject. Neutral framing does not utilize egalitarian or traditionalist framing, nor does it use loaded terms in a sincere or veiled manner. Frame locations are few, instead relying on the receiver and the frames that guide their thinking rather than influencing them. Nevertheless, the article does report on equal rights goals, as a game publisher received acclaim for its "commitment to the LGBTQ community" (Farokhmanesh, 2014).

Representation

"Sexuality and gender in science fiction games" by Jody Macgregor from 2018 in PC Gamer illustrates the representation frame. Macgregor defines the problem that depictions of sexuality and gender in science fiction games have changed radically over the decades. He diagnoses the cause as sci-fi being a form of speculative fiction that examines the present and makes the moral judgment that showing a range of sexualities within games is "a positive trend" that helps players understand LGBTQ people and friends (Macgregor, 2018). He suggests the remedy that stories about the future "could stand to be a bit ahead of their time" (Macgregor, 2018). The LGBTQ experience is again framed as difficult: "feeling at odds with your own body", "feeling broken", "queer outcasts", abject, horror, taboo (Macgregor, 2018). He also utilizes keywords that frame LGBTQ communities and representation as positive: "readers accept it", "queerness is unstoppable", "understand your trans friends better", "people can reach 'resolution, conclusion, understanding, empathy'", "it's OK to be you" (Macgregor, 2018).

Using game developers and sci-fi authors to strengthen his argument, Macgregor frames LGBTQ representation as something that allows LGBTQ people to find a community within games and as allowing non-LGBTQ people to better understand

other sexualities and genders. The representation frame is characterized by the discussion of how inclusion may affect players; McGregor argues that understanding is fueled by diversity, which affects those who are exposed to it, framing this in an explicitly egalitarian manner with statements such as "queerness is unstoppable".

Sex

"This was the decade that sex in games became personal" by Emily Marlow from 2019 in PC Gamer is an example of the sex frame. Marlow defines the problem as being that romance and sex options in games are awkward. She diagnoses the causes as sex in games being poorly constructed and lacking in variation and makes the judgment that "the best sex in games in the last decade didn't actually happen" (Marlow, 2019), meaning that desire and longing were more important to the experience than physical sex acts. She suggests the remedy that sex in games should not be an inevitable result of romantic relationships (Marlow, 2019).

Articles that utilize the sex topic frame employ a distinct set of keywords: foreplay, soft-core, screwing, sexy, limp, shag, titillating, orgasm, thrusts, "bump and grind", "hook-ups", "dick pics", chemistry, desire, lust (Marlow, 2019). These keywords are rarely present in other topic frames and do not function as the focus of other articles as they do in articles that employ the sex topic frame. Marlow additionally frames LGBTQ game creators as valuable sources of the kind of sex in games that Marlow suggests as a remedy, framing LGBTQ creators as positive influences:

> Some of the best sex in games of the last ten years came from [LGBTQ] developers such as Nina Freeman, Anna Anthropy and Robert Yang. Each told all-too-familiar stories of messy love[.] [...] Here, sex is personal, heartfelt, and delicious. (Marlow, 2019)

The sex frame is not only characterized by its unique keywords, but by reflections on sexuality and gender and how they intersect with sex-related storytelling. Why the sex frame is not identified

by prior studies, but appears frequently enough to necessitate coding when game publications frame LGBTQ topics, is a question that could be elucidated upon by perhaps a comparative analysis of how minoritized groups are framed within game magazines.

Discussion

While GamerGate employs arguments characterized by right-wing philosophies to oppose diversity and inclusion within video game content, video game journalism utilizes egalitarian and neutral framing regarding LGBTQ topics. To summarize the results of the framing analysis of articles representative of coding manual categories, I found several distinct sets of keywords:

- Keywords that describe the LGBTQ experience as being difficult and characterized by hardship.
- LGBTQ communities making a positive impact on LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ representation within games allowing LGBTQ people to connect with the medium and non-LGBTQ people to understand the LGBTQ experience.
  - This set of keywords can concern both the LGBTQ spectrum and diversity in general.
- Those who oppose LGBTQ inclusion as being conservative and a negative influence.
- Keywords that concern (LGBTQ) sex and sexual content.

These sets of keywords are generally utilized in articles that employ egalitarian equality framing. In contrast, articles that use traditionalist morality framing employ different sets of keywords:

- Keywords that describe loaded terms such as inclusion and diversity as being destructive and inhibiting creativity.
- Those who oppose inclusion as being brave and standing up for freedom of expression.
- The usage of slurs and outdated terms.

These differing sets of keywords characterize two distinct cultures of frames: one stock of commonly used sets of frames describes the egalitarian attitude and discourse of journalists employing equality framing, while the other culture describes framing utilized by journalists that deploy morality framing.

57,2% of journalists employ equality framing, 36,1% use neutral framing, and 0,7% use morality framing. As explored in section 4.1, this means that more than half of journalists frame LGBTQ topics in a manner characterized by a conscious usage of framing that criticizes traditionalism and treats LGBTQ topics with consideration, informed by social research. While traditionalist morality framing uses outdated terms and can be characterized as flippant in tone, morality framing is not what contrasts equality framing within game publications; rather, it is neutral framing which does not draw from either stock of cultures in its framing of LGBTQ topics. These articles instead rely on the frames that guide receivers' thinking, the effects of which require further study, such as interviewing journalists on the matter and reception analyses of the comments section and debates surrounding such articles.

Sincere usage of loaded terms more often contrasts veiled usage, and veiled language is more common than traditionalist morality framing. As stated by Massanari and Chess, far-right communities veil their conservative views by using loaded terms (Massanari & Chess, 2018, pp. 525–26), and the contrast between sincere and veiled usage of these terms more closely reflects the tension between GamerGate and the game industry. However, sincere usage, like egalitarian framing, is consistently far more common than veiled usage. Whether one examines the usage of politically loaded terms or equality and morality framing, game publications consistently frame LGBTQ topics primarily in an egalitarian, sincere manner, though some publications utilize a higher rate of neutral framing. Across all types of framing utilized by journalists, the topics of inclusion and diversity as well as demonization and victimization receive a great deal of attention within game magazines. The representation topic is present in

39,8% of articles, demonization and victimization in 27,5%. As a result, 67,3% of articles surround topics characterized by an awareness of the difficulties associated with being an LGBTQ person and a focus on who is included in games and their community and how.

This stands in contrast to previous research regarding depictions of women and non-white people and characters within game magazines; game journalism since 2002 appears conscious of inclusion and diversity and deploys egalitarian or neutral framing, rather than reinforcing hegemonic gender roles (Fisher, 2015, p. 555). The differences between framing of LGBTQ topics compared to depictions of women and non-white people and characters are likely the result of a journalistic paradigm surrounding LGBTQ topics being established between 2009 and 2020, when the number of articles on LGBTQ topics increased severalfold, in which using offensive language and morality framing would render an article illegitimate. The print publications studied by Kirkpatrick established paradigms between 1982 and 1985 that subsequently shifted towards masculine hegemony, affecting the surrounding gaming culture after 1986. It is possible that the hegemonic paradigms of the late 80s and 90s and the political and cultural environments in which they were produced are the cause of this difference, but while LGBTQ content has been a part of video gaming since at least 1988 (Henley, 2023) or 1989 (Zomorodi, 2023), reporting on LGBTQ topics in digital publications was rare and infrequent until around 2009. Print articles from the 80s and 90s are likely also scarce. This hypothesis can only be confirmed by studying older print editions of the publications included in this study, which is not within its scope. Additional research on LGBTQ topics within game publications is undoubtedly needed.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand how and if the tension between the increased diversity within the content produced by the video game industry and the opposing, right-wing attitudes regarding this content is reflected within video game publications. As more games and their creators broach LGBTQ subjects and themes, and as these games and their creators are met with harassment and aggression from movements such as GamerGate, game journalism does not reflect this opposition and division. Rather, 57,2% of articles on LGBTQ topics in game publications utilize equality framing, while morality framing makes up 0,7% of framing. Game publications have constructed a journalistic paradigm that is characterized by egalitarian or neutral framing of LGBTQ topics in which slurs are no longer used, which has persisted despite the effects GG may have had on article output in 2015. Consequently, the framing utilized by video game publications regrading LGBTQ subjects contrasts GG discourses that opposes diversity in video games. This can possibly influence readers towards an egalitarian mindset, as Tyler Johnson found and Graeme Kirkpatrick, Alicia Summers and Monica Miller, and Howard Fisher argued.

The total amount of articles published on LGBTQ subjects in game publications decreased from 145 in 2014 to 70 in 2015. Considering that GG flourished during 2014 and early 2015 and that, as Becky Gardiner found, receiving abusive comments and harassment affects how and what journalists write, it is possible that GG influenced the decrease in LGBTQ-related articles published in video game news outlets. It may be valuable to research GG's effects on journalists via interviews and examining articles written on GG during this period. To this end, it may also be beneficial to research reader responses to LGBTQ-related articles, analyzing framing within comment sections or interviewing readers.

To conclude, this study expands the knowledge within media and communications research through a queer and feminist lens of how minoritized groups are framed and depicted within video game magazines, revealing significant historical contrasts between the framing of female and non-white people and characters and LGBTQ topics. It charts differences between game community and culture as compared to journalism and elucidates how game journalism generally engages in

egalitarian discourse, in contrast to conservative communities like GamerGate – a valuable addition to the field of humanist game studies that expands the understanding of video game journalism as well as how it compares to its surrounding community and industry.

Image sources: IGN Entertainment, Gameranx, Game Informer, Gamespot, Kotaku, PC Gamer

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Notes

[1] 'Doxing' being a form of harassment that involves publishing identifying information about a person online with malicious intent.