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TODD PARKER (https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8878-1046)
Todd Parker has an MSc in Game Development & Design from the University of Lincoln. Their master's thesis was an exploration of how a game's ludic elements could be designed to improve queer representation through the lens of asexuality. Todd's research interests include queer game design and narrative design with a general focus on games as social commentary.
tparker4068@gmail.com

RENATA NTELIA (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2996-6330)
Renata Ntelia is Assistant Professor in the School of Computer Science, University of Lincoln. She holds a PhD from the Institute of Digital Games, University of Malta. Her research interests include love and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), death and the macabre, and experimental game design. She also works as a game writer and localisation expert.
rntelia@lincoln.ac.uk

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I'D RATHER HAVE CAKE: ASEXUAL REPRESENTATION AND QUEER DESIGNING OF GAMES

TODD PARKER
Independent Scholar

RENATA NTELIA
School of Computer Science, University of Lincoln

Abstract

Queer game academics have identified an increase in the number of games that explore queer experiences by experimenting with the limitations of games, particularly from small independent creators, that has been described as a queer games avant garde. Despite this, this paper identifies a notable under representation of identities and experiences along the asexual spectrum. In this vein, it documents a study that looked to explore whether the dominant way in which game design is approached as practice, with frameworks that separate formal gameplay elements from aesthetic elements, hinders the authentic representation of the asexual lived experience. This falls in line with existing pushes in the queer design space to move beyond popular forms of queer representation in games that have often limited it to dramatic elements such as narrative and art. To do this, the study employed popular design frameworks for designing a playable proof of concept with the aim to convey asexual experiences. Using design as a research method, the study showed that while these formal elements can convey themes, even those relating to the asexual lived experience, they fall short as a lone avenue for queer representation. Instead, the paper calls for the exploration of a more comprehensive design framework and proposes affect theory as an appropriate conceptual tool not only for game analysis but also for game design.

Keywords - *Asexuality, Queer Game Design, Affect Theory, Games, Representation, Play*

Introduction

Video games, like all forms of media, provide an opportunity to present lived experiences of minority identities in wider culture. This representation plays an important role in presenting an identity as imaginative possibility, which is particularly important for people who identify with such identities (Gross, 2001). Moreover, such representations can demystify these identities for people who are not generally exposed to them in their family and social circle, reducing the prevalence of harmful stereotypes (Valdivia, 2002). As Chess (2017) has contended, play is political. In other words, play, and by extension games, can be a fertile ground for designers to convey themes and messages that regard social issues. Ruberg (2020) has identified a growing "queer games avant-garde" that speaks to a growing number of queer indie games and creators that experiment with the limitations of games as a medium to convey queer experiences. However, a notable omission, even within this avant-garde, is identities that fall on the Asexual and Aromantic spectra (Shaw 2015). As noted by Cole and Shaw (2017), LGBTQIA+ representation in games is largely dominated by gay and lesbian characters with other identities taking a back seat. For asexuality in particular, the LGBTQIA+ video game archive has just 4 articles for explicit examples of asexual characters in games, in comparison to 115 gay characters which was the largest group, and 20 for "non-binary or genderqueer" characters, which is the smallest for identities not on the asexual/aromantic spectrum or intersex (Shaw, 2015). Asexuality is defined by The Asexuality and Visibility & Education Network (AVEN, n.d.) as when a "person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way." This paper specifically looks at this lack of exploration into these asexual identities, during what is otherwise seen as a strong movement of queer games, which raises the question as to why asexuality is largely unrepresented in games and if this is linked to the frameworks that are used when designing games.

One possible reason for this omission was presented by the narrative designer of Bioware's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), a game that received accolades for its inclusion of LGBTQIA+ romance options (Sarkar, 2015). When asked if the character Cole, who has been speculated to be and analysed as asexual representation (Brown & Partridge, 2021), is asexual, David Gaider dismissed this interpretation and remarked that for more "complicated" identities like asexuality: "You can't just show it, you have to talk about it," (2015). While Gaider was likely talking about this in terms of a reverse "show don't tell" direction in that asexual representation demands explicitness, his remark can also be contextualised within a dichotomy between formal properties and aesthetic qualities of games that seems to persist in prevalent game design approaches. Fullerton (2014) describes formal elements as those which "make up the essence of games" (p. 38) and provide structure, such as objectives and rules. They are "the underlying system and mechanics of the game" (p. 189). Dramatic elements, on the other hand, "engage the players emotionally by creating a dramatic context for the formal elements," (p. 46). These are things such as story and characters. In this context, a "show don't tell" take on asexuality in games could mean that asexual representation should come from the formal elements of games instead of their dramatic elements. It is also worth noting that Gaider's use of the

phrase "complicated" to describe asexuality is emblematic of the unfamiliarity concerning asexuality, even in queer friendly spaces, and does not denote a particular uniqueness to asexual identities, as all identities, even heteronormative ones, are "complicated" and multifaceted.

The term structural queerness was coined by game designer Alder (2020) to argue that game mechanics themselves can be queer. This view speaks to a wider push in the queer games space to more effectively centre the queer experience in games, particularly through gameplay. For example, designer Bee (2020) sought to do this in her game *We Know The Devil* (Date Nighto, 2015) through the repurposing of branching narrative mechanics seen in games such as Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012) but focused on a queer audience. Efforts such as the above are few and far between, however, and queerness, and asexuality for that matter, remain underrepresented in games. Moreover, any representation remains in most cases a matter of narrative and/or aesthetics, which are considered auxiliary aspects of games. In the words of Fullerton (2014), when designing a game: "Story and characters are important [...] but do not let them obscure your view of the gameplay. They should remain in your mind, but secondary, until you pin down the formal elements," (p. 189). This shows that designing queer and asexual representation as resulting from dramatic elements alone equals treating it as subordinate and ancillary. As shown later in the paper, this can also lead to limiting queerness and asexuality to skippable content or tokenisation (McGee, 2020).

This paper looks to explore the role of formal elements in the portrayal of asexual lived experiences. In particular, the subset of these elements that are ludic, in other words the elements that are or directly affect gameplay and gameplay mechanics through the documentation and review of the design and creation of a playable proof of concept game regarding asexuality, titled "AceWars" (Parker, 2022), following a playcentric game design approach, including a paper prototyping phase for feedback. This focus allows us to see whether games can represent asexuality through their ludic elements without the need to resort to dramatic elements such as art or narrative. It will also lead us to question whether such a distinction between formal and dramatic elements, while hailed by practical approaches to game design, is indeed an inclusive way to design games. This 'playcentric' approach aligns with mainstream thoughts on game design as discussed above (Fullerton, 2014). The design process was further informed by current discussions and examples of LGBTQIA+ representation, especially concerning the lived experiences of asexual people. The study was undertaken by a white non-binary asexual main author and designer who grew up firmly working class and a white cis-female allosexual supervisor, who bring their own biases and unique experiences in an intersectional manner. The main author's own asexual identity was the basis for the interest in this topic, to explore their identity within the realm of games. Their working class background creates a bias for analysing things through the lens of class while their non-binary identity provides a stronger lens into queer identity through gender rather than sexual orientation. The supervisor's position as a heteronormative, white cis-woman offers a counterweight standpoint based on the lived female experience. Both authors' whiteness creates intersectional blindspots to the specifics of the experiences of asexual people of colour.

The study's results present flaws in this canonised approach to game design. Prevalent design processes that focus on the distinction between formal and dramatic elements in games undermine LGBTQIA+ representation in games, asexual identities included. This segregation results in formal elements being considered as constituting the universal experience of games while dramatic elements provide an optional flavour. As such, the design of complex lived experiences that deviate from the dominant ludic structures and cannot be included solely as formal elements is circumscribed as additional, and thus skippable, content. This becomes even more problematic because, as argued in this paper, these dominant structures that are favoured as the basis of all games and game design approaches coincide with hegemonic prescripts of heteronormative experiences, while alternative lived experiences, such as asexuality, are confined to the realms of dramatic properties. The article then points to the need for a more comprehensive approach to game design by positing affect theory as the appropriate conceptual tool to understand, analyse, and design games as a conglomeration of facets that can invite and afford a multitude of lived experiences.

Examples of Asexuality in Games

Using data from the generations study, a long term study of 1523 US lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents, it was estimated that 1.7% of sexual minority adults, 19 of the respondents, identify as asexual (Rothblum et al., 2020). It is worth noting this number could be so low due to the nature of explicitly targeting other sexual minority people as respondents and not the wider queer community. Elsewhere, Stonewall, the UK's largest LGBTQIA+ charity, commissioned a study by Ipsos for the Rainbow Britain Report (2022), a survey of 2150 Britons, which estimates 5% of all Gen Z respondents (approximately 17% of those who did not identify as "straight") self-identified as asexual. This number is greatly higher than the 2000-01 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, (Johnson et al., 2005) which was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which has long been the basis of estimates that around 1% of people are asexual. Any skewed statistics notwithstanding, the above numbers still show that asexual people comprise a significant part of the general population, at least in those two countries.

In contrast, there are very few examples of asexuality in games. One such example is the asexual character Pavarti from Obsidian Entertainment's *The Outer Worlds* (2019). Pavarti undergoes a compelling arc of understanding and accepting what a relationship means for her as she comes to terms with the lack of sexual attraction she feels for anyone. While the game captures the messiness and difficulty of the asexual experience, it is focused around the narrative elements of the game. Furthermore, her role as an optional companion makes her story entirely missable. Another example is Kitfox Games' *Boyfriend Dungeon* (2021) which sees the player date a variety of characters that can turn into weapons for the dungeon-crawling part of the game. The game allows the player to interact with the dating sim aspects of the game in a way where they can set their own boundaries, including establishing their player character as asexual. While both the genre mashup and premise are indicative of queer game design and structural queerness, the game still has shortcomings in regard to asexuality. In particular, it falls into

a criticism Shaw (2014) has levied of putting the responsibility for queerness in the hands of the player. Additionally, the game fails to capture the full nuance of asexuality as a spectrum. Although it does allow the player to be asexual and both be fine with and dismiss kissing, the game struggles to capture other identities such as sex positive asexuality or demisexuality within its systems by removing the possibility for sex entirely once the player character is established as asexual, falling into a common misconception that asexual people do not have sex at all, when the label, as defined by AVEN (The Asexual Visibiltity and Education Network, n.d.), applies specifically to the amount of sexual attraction a person feels and not their libido or how much they enjoy sexual acts.

The few other remaining examples of asexuality in games do not fare much better as either asexuality becomes increasingly less prominent within the game, meaning that asexual representation is implied instead of explicit, or the game itself is much less prominent. The playable *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012) character Maya's asexual identity is ascribed to a handful of throwaway lines of dialogue and the now defunct ask.fm page of the game's writer Anthony Birch (Nico, 2015). The case of Zoe, a romanceable NPC in the competitive dating sim *Monster Prom* (Beautiful Glitch, 2018), focuses much more heavily on the character's trans identity than their asexual one. Finally, *When Aster Falls* (Sad Ghost Studios, 2018), a visual novel about an asexual lesbian, Rohan, meeting and falling in love with a genderfluid succubus, provides some of the most sincere representation of asexual romance in games and even subverses pre-existing stereotypes by placing Rohan as the romantic instigator throughout the narrative. However, its reach in the wider gaming industry is tiny compared to all the other games mentioned here, having been created by a small team for the 2018 Maximum Monster Month game jam.

In fact, while one might expect these smaller games to be a haven for asexual representation, *When Aster Falls* being a prime example of independent queer creators creating new indie games to convey a queer experience in the same way as Ruberg describes the growing queer games avant-garde, even in this space asexuality remains underrepresented. At the time of writing, on Itch.io, the largest hosting site for small independent games, of the 4303 games tagged "LGBT" just 43 are also tagged as asexual, making up approximately 1% of the games, falling comfortably short of the conservative estimate of 1.7% (Rothblum et al., 2020) and extremely short of the number's implied by the Rainbow Britain Report.

This underrepresentation also exists inside of what remains a general underrepresentation of queer characters in the video game industry. A 2024 report from the US-based Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD, 2024) found that 17% of active gamers identify as LGBTQIA+, a number that goes up to around 1 in 4 for active gamers under the age of 35. Despite this, the report goes on to show that Steam, the most popular storefront for PC games, has just 2.5% of the games it sells tagged as LGBTQIA+. Respectively, the major console storefronts for the current generation Xbox, Playstation and Nintendo systems all have under 2% of games they sell including LGBTQIA+ content (ibid.). They also do not provide options for searching specific identities, such as asexuality, preferring one unified LGBTQIA+ tag. This shows a huge gulf in the amount of games about queerness and asexuality

relative to the number of people who identify as such. Due to the aforementioned importance of representation as both imaginative possibility (Gross, 2001) and to dispel harmful stereotypes (Valdivia, 2002), closing this gap is a priority this paper looks to address through considering new ways to design asexual experiences in games. Importantly, this does not mean a pursuit of a specific number of games with asexual representation but the orders of magnitude difference between real life population demographics and the percentage of games with asexual representation points to the need for a new framework that would better allow for the inclusion of asexual experiences in the design of games.

Designing Asexuality in Games

Before considering existing discussion and examples of asexuality in games it's important to understand the asexual spectrum. While the scope of this paper is too small to consider the experiences of the full asexual spectrum a study by Carrigan (2011) was considered to address the need to show that asexuality is a spectrum and not a monolith. Carrigan found in his study both a wide variety of asexual experiences and labels. These can range from the amount or pre-conditions for sexual attraction (Asexual, Demisexual and Gray-A), terms that describe an asexual individuals' feelings about the physical act of sex (Sex-Positive, Sex-Neutral, Sex-Averse), and the use of the suffix -romantic in place of sexual to delineate the nature of any non-sexual attraction they may feel (e.g. homoromantic, biromantic, aromantic).

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (n.d.) defines an asexual person as "a person who feels no sexual attraction" however they also note that asexuality is a spectrum and many people may identify as what they call "graysexual." These individuals feel very little or fleeting sexual attraction. AVEN notes that "people in the gray area have had some semblance of sexuality that is far lower than almost all other people who identify as sexual." This, in turn, can show in different ways. Demisexuality is another identity often seen as part of greysexuality that AVEN describes as "feeling no sexual attraction towards other people unless a strong emotional bond has been established."

In queer game studies, a large proportion of the notable academic work has been anthropologically focused. Specifically, the work of Shaw (2014) and Ruberg (2020) focuses heavily on interviews with queer game players and designers respectively to explore the ways in which queer game design should be approached. Shaw's focus on representation speaks of two main types of identification, as sameness, which refers to shared goals between the player and player character, such as reaching the end of a level in Mario, and as empathy, which is found through a game's dramatic and narrative elements. These types of identification might be interpreted as designers' not needing to focus on characters that share identifiers with their target audience per se. Indeed, when asked, many queer and minority players take more of an ambivalent "it's nice when it happens" approach to seeing characters with shared identifiers as them in games (Shaw, 2014).

However, Shaw sees this mindset as "a coping mechanism of sorts, which pushed back against discourse which sought to make them responsible for their own exclusion," (Shaw, 2014, p. x) as well as an indictment of the gaming industry's

poor attempts to "hail" (p. 77) minority groups. This combined with the ideas that identification need not be linked to shared identifiers, Shaw argues, provides the opportunity to represent various marginalised identities through characters even in big AAA titles that are targeted at the stereotypical cisgender, heterosexual, white male gamer. Some big games such as those in the Character Shooter genre like *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) and *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), whose large cast allows for many different identifiers to be represented throughout their roster, have taken this approach to representation. While these titles lack specific asexual representation, they provide important wider LGBTQIA+ representation that can show queer identities as imaginative possibility (Gross, 2001) and help stop the spread of harmful stereotypes (Valdivia, 2002). Activision Blizzard, the creators of Overwatch, have gone so far as to create what it calls the "Diversity Space Tool" (Hernandez, 2022) which tracks the diverse identifiers of characters it adds to a game such as sexual orientation, gender identity and race in order to ensure its characters and overall roster are sufficiently diverse.

Despite being a seemingly natural progression of Shaw's ideas, when this became public knowledge there was heavy backlash due to the feeling of tokenisation of minority identities (ibid.). This outrage speaks to a wider shift away from this more surface level representation as shown in the work of Ruberg (2020). Bee (2020) and McGee (2020) have talked about a need to embrace the messiness and complexity of queer lives to avoid the tokenism of the character shooter genre's style of representation while Alder (2020) states that "games are not made queer because they have queer representation. Games are made queer when they have structural queerness," (p. 191). Even in her work that was quite positive towards the more thin style of representation presented now in games such as *Overwatch*, Shaw (2014) was critical of games that place the onus on the player to create their own representation describing this type of optional representation as "part of the neoliberal logic that dominates much of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century social and political life." (p.35) seeing queer players as a new potential revenue stream they wanted to invite in without pushing away existing players.

This posits that the queer games space should strive towards games that are structurally queer. In this context, structurally means that the games are queer in all aspects, particularly through gameplay, and not just making a change of a single element in a game that was otherwise made in a heteronormative way, such as simply labelling the main character queer. It is important to consider that such a harsh limitation such as "queer in all aspects" risks creating a norm that would then in and of itself uphold structures that would be in need of queering. Instead, we can consider "queer in all aspects" to point to a need for a framework that has the potential to overcome binaries such as formal and dramatic elements, mechanics and narrative, or rules and aesthetics. This idea of structural queerness in games calls for an examination of the ways in which games as a whole can be designed to be more inclusive and how this resonates with and updates established paradigms around game design practices and learning tools.

This does not imply a set of features that would make a game tick the boxes of "queer enough" or dictate the conditions of

the development process - particularly, who can create queer games or what types of games queer creators can make. Enigmatic cis male game creator Hidetaka "Swery65" Suehiro wrote and directed *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories* (White Owl Inc. 2018), a puzzle platformer that provides some of the most sincere and touching trans representation in games. *The Missing's* narrative focuses on the story of a transgender teenager, JJ who is trying to find her lover Emily after she goes missing on a camping trip. Over the course of the game however it is revealed that this adventure is a dream like sequence taking place in the mind of protagonist JJ Macfield after her attempted suicide due to her mother finding out about her identity. These ideas of trans self harm under immense societal pressure are reinforced through the puzzle platformer gameplay that uses a mechanic centred on harming yourself, such as grotesquely removing body parts, in order to solve puzzles, which is both a powerful metaphor and an obvious visual hyperbole of the self harm trans teens such as JJ are pushed to (Muncy 2018). Upon awakening from her attempted suicide JJ is reunited with Emily who reinforces her gender in this moment of extreme vulnerability, despite her not presenting femininely, in a touching scene. Swery's next game however, *Deadly Premonition 2,* (Toy Box Inc., White Owls Inc., 2020), would be mired in controversy around the problematic presentation of a trans character who is repeatedly misgendered and deadnamed. This included the protagonist using her deadname, and by extension her trans identity, to justify his mistrust of her (Carpenter, 2020). Swery has, as a cis man, played a key role in the creation of both very positive trans representation, that can serve as a powerful example of using gameplay to convey trans experience, and created work that is actively harmful to trans people.

At the same time, queer creators are all over the game industry developing games of all kinds, not only conveying their own lived experiences but also working on mainstream triple A series. Such is the example of *Call of Duty* (2003-2024), as Sledgehammer Games, one of the studios that create *Call of Duty* games, mentioned in a pride post (Sledgehammer Games 2022). *Call of Duty* as a series has historically been associated with stereotypical representations of white, cisgender, heterosexual masculinity. This shows the ability of queer developers to create a wide variety of experiences and alleviates the pressure to export their queer experiences in the same way feminist filmmakers were "tasked with making feminist films that change people's mind" (Stone 2020, p.132). The above examples highlight that queer creators can create both queer and non-queer games alike but also that even creators who may be seen as hostile to queer identities are capable of creating work that can resonate with queer experiences. This points to an element of the experiences the players themselves bring to the game being an important factor in the representation of queer experiences, both in place of and coinciding with those of the creators.

The above challenges all the more the dominant approaches to game design and development that treat representation as an added feature that is not integral to the game experience. This becomes even more obvious when it comes to asexuality. Asexuality highlights the difficulty in presenting characters, themes, and lived experiences authentically simply as additional features. For identities that subvert heteronormativity and the ways in which existing game design approaches portray relationships, such as a sex scene as a reward for entering a relationship with an NPC (Ntelia, 2025),

it is more challenging or perhaps impossible to represent them in games using current design frameworks, even compared to more represented queer identities such as allosexual gay, lesbian or bisexual ones. For instance, in CD Projekt Red *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) the game has a series of four major side quests that provide the opportunity for romance. These romance options have different orientations: straight male, straight female, gay, and lesbian. The design of these questlines does not deviate very far from the game's typical mission structures of open-ended combat scenarios broken up by conversations with NPCs that provide light choices and wider context to the action the player has just or will soon partake in.

Ludically, these romance quests all function quite similarly, being dependent on choosing the correct dialogue options at specific points throughout the questlines in order to be rewarded with the relationship and a sex scene. Obviously, asexuality clashes with this type of game content, as the use of a sex scene as the player's material "reward" for and signifier of entering a romantic relationship centres sex in romantic love in a way that contradicts many asexual experiences and indeed some allosexual ones as well. Cerankowski and Milks (2010) form then the pressing question: "How do we begin to analyse and contextualise a sexuality that by its very definition undermines perhaps the most fundamental assumption about human sexuality: that all people experience, or should experience, sexual desire?" (p. 651). Seeing how asexuality counters our collective understanding of sexuality, it makes sense that it needs new frameworks to be properly understood and expressed.

A strong example of asexuality opposing the heteronormative underpinnings of games can be found in *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004). As pointed out by Shaw (2014), *Fable* by default lists the male protagonists' sexuality as unknown and upon marriage to a character will switch it to either heterosexual or gay depending on the gender of the NPC the player marries. Upon divorce and remarriage to a character of the opposite gender the protagonist's sexuality changes to bisexual. Ignoring the flawed representation of bisexuality, the game assigns sexual orientation to the player without them ever having or pursuing sex. This conflation of marriage, and by extension romantic attraction, with sexual orientation, that leaves no room for asexuality as an identity, speaks of how asexuality differs from heteronormativity in ways in which even games that attempt to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ identities struggle to come to terms with.

These less understood identities serve as more obvious examples of the flaws of the type of representation outlined by Shaw (2014) that aims to simply replace important non-queer characters with characters that hold queer identifiers. Replacing a heterosexual character with a heteroromantic asexual character could easily be misinterpreted as just heteronormative. Since prevalent design strategies uphold heteronormativity in ways asexuality cannot coexist with, if a more structural approach is not taken that goes beyond character identifiers, asexual lived experiences will continue to be misrepresented or not at all represented due to a perceived difficulty in doing so.

In this light, subverting heteronormative themes and design approaches becomes imperative when trying to create asexual representation in games. In the queer games space, *dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) uses broken minigames to convey the feeling of wrongness that comes with gender dysphoria. This thematic potential of ludic elements has previously been determined by Shira Chess's statement that the "playful is political" (2017, p. 175) which brings an understanding that the games we play and their rules both reflect and can affect the social structure they exist in. A similar idea is that of Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric (2008). Bogost presents procedurality as a tool game creators use "to craft representations through rules" within games to "create possibility spaces that can be explored through play," (p. 122). He goes on to identify how these rules create systems that can reflect real world experiences, such as the urban planning of *SimCity.* This ability of games to reflect society through procedurality opens them up to be powerful rhetorical devices that can make persuasive arguments about the world. This shows that there is a strong opportunity to make structurally queer games by creating games that are built within queer social structures or that subvert heteronormative ones. However, as will be shown below, rules and ludic elements alone cannot afford the representation of experiences and themes beyond the canon.

Design and Development of AceWars

As already explained, the focus of this study was to design a proof of concept game, AceWars, to test whether asexuality can be conveyed not by dramatic and aesthetic elements but by formal elements, such as mechanics and rules. As such, the study employed design as a research method (Waern & Back, 2015). Fullerton (2014) has outlined what she describes as a playcentric set of design techniques that can be followed for designing and creating games. Fullerton in particular presents two main methodologies that will prove useful in this design process. Firstly, formal analysis provides a strong way to consider all possible formal elements of play. This increased spotlight offered a wider opportunity to consider ways in which the design can be made structurally asexual by being forced to consider the game's limitations, rules, objectives and win conditions amongst other areas.

Additionally, the study employed Values At Play (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014) as a means to further refine the set of themes that would inform any design decision throughout the process. Based on survey results about asexuality in games and game studies as outlined above, the first and foremost core value of the proof of concept to emerge was that asexuality should be unavoidable in order to combat prior critiques of queer representation in games such as placing it in a side quest, such as in *The Outer Worlds* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2019), or putting the onus of representation on the player, such as in *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021). This would better position asexuality as an imaginative possibility (Gross, 2001) for asexual players and would also be more effective in dispelling misconceptions and preventing the perpetuation of social disparities (Valdivia, 2002).

As a further point of reference, and due to the minimal amount of asexual representation in games, the design drew from the main author's own lived experience as asexual as well as from anthropological work on asexual lived

experiences. Even with this wide range of identities within the asexual spectrum, Carrigan (2011) was able to identify a series of commonalities between the described experiences of many of the respondents. These commonalities informed the design choices around asexuality and are as follows:

a. feeling of difference or othering during, typically, adolescence before beginning self-questioning and eventual self-clarification as asexual people come to terms with their own identity
b. lack of concern due to a sense of temporality which usually manifests in an indifference to pursuing sex as asexual people find fulfilment with their quotidian involvements
c. sense of community identification as a way to deal with and remove self-questioning.

Further considerations around asexual representation concern the sense of self-doubt and feeling of exclusion often experienced by asexual people. Carrigan describes this as the questioning phase of the asexual experience, while from the main author's own lived experiences, the pervasiveness of heteronormativity made it hard to understand their own asexuality. Exclusion refers to both the incongruence with heteronormative expectations but also tensions asexual people can feel in queer spaces due to the, significant, centring of sex in queer spaces (Squinkifier, 2020). Equally important to convey is the eventual finding of community in spite of the aforementioned self-doubt. This is a common asexual experience that is often paired with self-clarification and acceptance of their identity. This serves as the conflict resolution showing that, in spite of difficulties, asexuality is not a deficiency (Flore, 2014). All three of these experiences are also shared by the main author of the paper who experienced similar feelings of exclusion due to the pressure of heteronormative expectations, especially in their teenage years, little concern for the immediacy of finding a relationship in young adulthood, and soothing self clarification upon understanding their identity in their early twenties.

With the above values determined, the design process moved on to playcentric aspects that allowed the values to be translated into the ludic elements of the proof of concept design, namely design patterns, resources, and boundaries. The first is design patterns (Björk and Holopainen, 2004), which was used to find common game design ideas that could portray the values. The first pattern was that of connection. By employing mechanics that are typically used to elicit a sense of connection but corrupting them instead to deny the player of this element of belonging, in a way that may be considered ludo-narratively dissonant (Seraphine, 2016), the design could more intensely convey the themes of self-doubt and isolation. This led to inspiration from the *Fire Emblem series* (Intelligent Systems, 1990-2023) and its "love metre" system. This system provides gameplay rewards for having two units fight near each other on a game board and build a connection. While the specifics vary by entry, this often manifests in the form of bonus damage dealt and reduced damage taken and powerful children characters becoming available late in the game based on establishing romantic relationships.

While more recent entries such as *Fire Emblem: Fates* (Intelligent Systems, 2015) and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems and Koei Tecmo, 2019) have included a handful of same sex relationship options, this diversity of representation has not come with changes to the rules of the system

and by extension the social structures the game is built on. This presents an opportunity to make the system more structurally queer. As such, design choices were made with the primary goal of representing asexual lived experiences that could not be represented by the typical mechanics of the genre, particularly by attempting to subvert the heteronormative prescripts of the system that were built to express heterosexual love. These changes were also purposefully spread throughout as many elements of the mechanics as possible to allow for continued reinforcement of the themes.

The design pattern of *asymmetric starting conditions* (Björk & Holopainen, 2004) also provided another angle to approach self-doubt and a sense of isolation. With a core game system similar to *Fire Emblem* in mind, this created the idea that initially the player would only be able to control their own avatar and over time unlock the control of the other friendly units. This disconnect in control aimed to portray the exclusion asexual people can feel not only in a heteronormative society

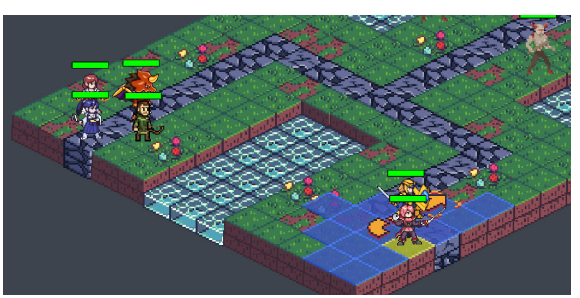

Fig. 1
Shows the lower half of the map where the the two initial player controlled units and initially ai-controlled units spawn. These two groups are separated by untraversable water which forces the player to take a longer path to close the distance to the allied units they are "alienated" from at the start.

(Carrigan, 2011) but also in queer spaces (Squinkifier, 2020), which the allied units would represent.

Continuing, understanding units as a key resource for the player allowed for explicit asexual representation, with each unit having the opportunity to represent different parts of the asexual spectrum, such as demisexuality or the adjacent aromanticism. Making many of these units queer but not asexual attempted to address the value of acceptance into the LGBTQIA+ community. Through being explicit and unavoidable, the design aimed to present asexuality as imaginative possibility (Gross, 2001) which, as already discussed, is extremely important for such an unrepresented identity.

Finally, boundaries provided an opportunity for interesting design in terms of both the game's space and limitations of the player. In terms of physical game space, a map that puts a large physical distance between the player and other friendly units was set in place to reflect asexual people's feeling of exclusion from both society (Carrigan, 2011) and the wider LGBTQIA+ community (Squinkifier, 2020). Giving the player limited movement (fig. 1) through the grid per turn also worked to add to this feeling of physical distance as the player would need to spend many turns closing the physical gap before they could even begin to build relationships.

Design Challenges and Limitations

Despite the above considerations and meticulous design, initial playtesting, which was performed by the designer acting as the CPU and 1 person being the player, showed that while the ludic elements were able to convey the broader

interpretations of things such as exclusion and finding community, the lack of explicit link to asexuality prevented those themes from being easily identifiable through the game's systems. Furthermore, the slow return to the expected systems of the genre felt too much of an acceptance of the heteronormative social structures the game was trying to subvert. While it became clear that the design choices such as the risk/reward around gaining control of units provided compelling gameplay moments, the lack of narrative framing devices made the desired themes either too missable or too easy to misconstrue as not about asexuality. To remedy this, it was decided all units should have unique abilities (fig. 2) that get stronger as relationships grow to represent the benefits of finding a community. Designing and naming the abilities based on the character's queer identities offered the opportunity to more explicitly tie these abilities to asexual lived experiences. For the three asexual characters (fig. 3), these identities were as follows:

- The biromantic asexual player character's ability "I'd rather have cake", titled after a common joke in asexual spaces about preferring cake to sex, provided the unit with defensive buffs to represent the lack of sexual attraction and the associated resistance to all sexual advances.
- The "Dragon Knight" character, dragons themselves being often used as an asexual symbol, was asexual aromantic and agender. Their ability "Scared of Dragons?" created a chance that they and any adjacent allies would avoid enemy attacks. This aimed to show the feeling of distance asexual people can feel from heteronormative society's general misunderstanding of the identity while still presenting that confidence in and acceptance of that identity as a boon for the character with the identity rather than focusing on a debuff to enemy units.
- The "Archer" was demi-heterosexual. As heterosexuality is seen as the default, the Archer's buff is a simple attack buff. However, much like demisexual people can take a long time to feel sexual attraction, the Archer's ability takes

Fig. 2
An example of part of the UI overlay that shows a units name "Player", their current and max HP, their ability name "I'd rather have cake", a description of Player's ability and the units pronouns

Fig.3
The 3 Asexual/Aromantic spectrum characters, Left: Heteroromantic Demisexual Ranger, Center: Aromantic Dragon Knight, Right: Biromantic Asexual Player Character

longer than the other abilities to level up. It was called "Still Queer!" to assert the queerness of a heteronormative-passing identity while signalling the Archer's own journey of self doubt and acceptance.

Most importantly, however, it was the use of UI elements that highlighted growing connections and the benefits of the growing relationships and queer abilities (fig. 4). This came in the form of a contextual UI system that displayed the stats and ability of the highlighted unit. Stat changes were colour coded to draw attention to the more subtle abilities: red denoted lowered stats and green denoted raised stats. Furthermore, each ability displayed the name that ties it to the respective queer culture it aimed to ludically represent. These flavour texts, while more narrative than ludic, more tightly linked the themes in the ludic elements to asexual and

Fig.4
A full view of the UI system that now includes the stats and relationships levels with the defense and resist stats highlighted green to indicate that the Player unit is benefiting from being adjacent to the Tank who they have a "C" rank relationship with.

other queer lived experiences and by extension aided in making it more unavoidable for the player. It is also worth noting this process was limited due to the basis of the asexual lived experiences targeted being largely from the designer's own experiences and the work of Carrigan (2011). Further studies should consider determining these values through more rigorous means, such as interviews with asexual gamers and game developers.

Ultimately, designing this proof of concept highlighted that while ludic elements can convey the themes of a "more complicated" (Gaider, 2015), read less represented, lived experience, it can be limited in connecting it to identities. Returning to *dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012), while this game does convey its themes through its ludic elements, these themes are also reinforced and shaped by theming in other elements such as art, narrative and UI. For instance, *dys4ia* displays texts such as "I feel weird about my body" during the aforementioned broken minigames to allow the more narrative elements to take the ludic theme of feeling broken and link it to transitioning and gender dysphoria.

In other words, to make a game that is structurally asexual, strong consideration should be given to exploring ludonarrative design. Importantly, this does not necessarily mean a need for strict coherence to ludonarrative synergy that may have been implied by Clint Hocking's critique of *Bioshock* (2007) that brought the term into mainstream game design discourse. Instead, it is the relationship between the formal and dramatic elements that should be explored or even subverted to better represent non-heteronormative social structures. Ludonarrative dissonance has been found to be used as a powerful tool

for creating emotional responses (Seraphine, 2016) such as in games like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) that conveyed the effects of Ellie's trauma through the friction between its ludic and narrative elements. Therefore, this paper points to the need to further explore how ludonarrative design ideas can best be leveraged to create a structurally asexual game and increase the impact of using ludic elements to convey themes, particularly in regard to minority representation.

Within the proof of concept, this more holistic approach to queer game design arose as a natural response to the limitations revealed in the paper prototype playtesting. The implementation of the unique abilities did provide a stronger ludic base for representing asexuality but these themes were then more explicitly linked to asexual lived experience through the use of flavour text names and brought to the attention of the player more effectively through the UI, as shown above. Together not only did they convey asexual lived experiences through ludic elements but they also focused and enhanced player experience as explicitly asexual through the use of other elements of the game as well.

Discussion

The initial aims of developing a proof of concept to explore the efficacy of current design frameworks that centre formal elements in representing the underrepresented asexual lived experiences produced an initial design that fell incredibly short of accomplishing this. Even with the late additions to *AceWars* that attempted to create a comprehensive approach to representing the asexual lived experience, it is noted that they merely papered over the cracks created by the initial design process as recognised during playtesting. As already shown, Fullerton's playcentric approach employed in the study is predicated on approaching game design in this dichotomy between formal and dramatic elements. Similar dichotomies persist in other prevalent game theory and design frameworks, such as Bogost's (2008) discussed above. Tekinbas and Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play* (2003) equally support that games are predominantly defined by their rules and mechanics, while Aarseth has argued that "the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules" (2004, p. 2). The MDA framework (Hunicke, Leblanc & Zubek, 2004) discerns a category of aesthetics, the way the player experiences the game such as through narrative, that is separate to mechanics and dynamics which incorporate a lot of what Fullerton would describe as formal elements. Thomas Grip's SSM model (2017) that builds off of the MDA framework, does acknowledge that what he calls the system, the mechanics and dynamics, works in tandem with the story, which he describes as being composed of drama and mise-en-scène, to create a mental model, which is how the player experiences the game, yet still establishes the formal and dramatic dichotomy.

As evidenced, giving mechanics and rules precedence over aesthetics and narrative, favours an understanding of games and game design as essentially action-oriented instead of experience-oriented: in other words, the focus is given on what the player can do inside the game instead of what the player can experience. In this light, player experience becomes a "second order design" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 19) arising solely by player's actions, which are defined by the rules, with subsequent attention to how this set of actions

is presented and contextualised. Since rules, mechanics and other formal elements of games can only control action taking, complex experiences that cannot be represented by actions alone seem to resist being included as part of the core design of any game and can only be afforded as aesthetic additions, if at all. Yet if we understood game design as not solely about action taking but about constructing player experience as a whole, then games could afford a vast array of representations.

It is the preconception of games as primarily ludic objects with supplementary aesthetic components that creates tension in the first place. In this sense, asexuality shows how games pose difficulties at representing complex phenomena, but only when game design is concerned with solely structuring actions instead of experiences. This points to a flaw in how games can convey all experiences, not just queer ones but the heteronormative ones games have been trying to centre as well. A different approach proposed here is that of affect. Anable (2018) building off of Tomkins' (2008) understanding of affect as a multi-way response system to intrapersonal and interpersonal stimuli which shapes our self and notion of self, supports an all-inclusive gaming experience that does not favour rules and mechanics over visuals and narrative. Unlike Massumi (2002), who by treating affect as an autonomous virtuality beyond representation perpetuates the binaries of structuralism, Anable approaches affect as a relationship that is shaped by representation and situatedness. In the same vein as Ahmed, who has described affect as leaping from one body to another (2010, p. 36), and Gibbs, who has talked about affect as a trajectory of mimesis (2010, p. 194) or aparallel evolution (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 11), Anable posits affect as an approach to games that sees them as a continuous and dynamic point of communication between the player and the machine out of which all parts are further morphed.

For Anable, game aesthetics or game affect is the appropriate term to describe and analyse gaming experience in an all-encompassing, comprehensive manner. When one privileges game rules and mechanics, what a player can do in a game and how they can do it best, the gaming experience is treated as a technical manifestation. This for Anable is an institutionalised phenomenon that finds its way into the gaming industry and academia, defining the canon and gaming as a cultural practice and identity. Instead, as Anable contends, digital games do not affect us, meaning shape our experiences and understanding by activating and engaging our response system, only because they formulate what we can do, but because they are an interface of constant communication, which encompasses all their set up: code, algorithms, visuals, design, and sound: "The interface is where it's at, if by it we mean the everyday intimate encounter where code, images, and subjectivity collide in ordinary but important ways" (2018, p. 62). Aesthetics in games is then argued to be a whole understanding of gaming rather than referring simply to the visuals of a game. Unlike common approaches to game design presented here, aesthetics is not the alternative focus to mechanics and rules that is usually treated as the less important aspect of a game. It rather encompasses the rules and does away with the binaries of formal and dramatic elements described above.

What we argue here is that affect theory can be a valid way to overcome the above restrictions not only when it comes to

analysing player experience but also when designing player experience. To achieve a true all encompassing player experience, consideration should be taken to design in a way that is all-encompassing. However, dominant design strategies, such as Fullerton's playcentric approach (2014) used in the creation of the proof of concept, often isolate the ludic elements of a game at the start of the design process calling attention to its dramatic elements only in the aftermath. This prioritisation counteracts the opportunity games have to afford complex experiences, queer and asexual included, not just through additional narrative, UI, and art but instead through the possibilities of engaging the player in all forms and fashions, also taking into account the life experiences the player themselves bring into the game. As argued throughout this paper, this process does not concern only queer life experiences as a form of tokenism or appropriation. It instead showcases through the liminality of queerness and asexuality how stifling and limiting these binary perspectives on game design are as they cater to a very narrow and hegemonic abstraction that does not take into consideration the individuality of each lived experience, heteronormativity included. As such, to achieve an authentic representation of lived experiences, such as asexuality, a design process that considers all elements of the game experience while allowing for particularities based on situatedness and positionality should be aimed for. It is in this inclusive approach that structural queerness may also be found.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the queer games avant-garde (Ruberg, 2020) continues, it is important to make sure minority identities that may be seen as more complicated (Gaider, 2015) or are less understood, such as asexuality, are not left behind and that the type of representation achieved is sufficiently helping to dispel harmful stereotypes (Valdivia, 2002) and most importantly presenting these queer identities as imaginative possibility (Gross, 2001). This can be achieved through creating games that are structurally queer (Alder, 2020) as opposed to pre-existing ideas of minority representation that focus on replacing shared identifiers of important characters to those of a minority identity (Shaw, 2014).

The attempts to achieve this in the proof of concept through a playcentric design approach (Fullerton, 2014) identified flaws of such design concepts in creating complex experiences in games. The dichotomy between ludic and dramatic elements proposed by these dominant design strategies pushes unconventional representations to the side as additional content. As shown in *AceWars* (author, 2022), while the ludic elements were able to convey broad themes such as isolation and connection that would play a part in representing asexual experiences, this design approach alone struggled to be unambiguous about the queer identity, in this case asexuality, and needed the aid of other elements such as UI, narrative, and art to begin to make this connection.

This limitation stems from the way current design strategies uphold games as an action-oriented medium that corresponds to heteronormative underpinnings. While the design process for the proof of concept attempted to subvert these design approaches, queerness should not be treated as a subversion of heteronormative practices but as its own complete alternative. As such, it would need its own comprehensive design process that considers not just the ludic elements but

things such as the narrative, the screen, and the experiences the player brings to the game. This queer design process, which we argue can be based off of affect theory, may also provide the opportunity for structurally queer games.

This paper presents many opportunities for future research. Most prominently, defining better this comprehensive design process based on affect theory by further proofs of concept and studies by design. Furthermore, the limitations of this paper also present opportunities for more thorough research on asexuality in games. While the scope of this paper focused on the design process based on literature survey and the main author's own lived experience, a deeper investigation into the experiences of asexual game players and developers would provide a much stronger framework for the asexual lived experiences that need to be present in games. Furthermore, the efficacy of any asexual representation could be complemented by more qualitative methods such as playtesting. Finally, it would be naive to map the findings of this paper on to other identities without more studies that would explore the link between game design and identity representation pertaining to age, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, neurodivergence, or class, as consideration should be given. Finally, consideration should be given into the role intersectionality can play in this.

Authorship statements

Todd Parker: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Design, Writing-Original Draft and Editing

Renata Ntelia: Writing-Review, Original Draft and Editing, Supervision

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