Queer Gamers Search in Vain For Representation in Video Games

Naylynn Tañón Reyes

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The third episode of The Last of Us, HBO’s new show based on the video game of the same name, was a huge leap forward regarding representation for the 10% of gamers that are part of the LGBTQ+ community, according to [a recent study by Nielsen’s Games 360 Survey](https://www.out.com/tech/2020/8/07/10-percent-gamers-are-lgbtq-nielsen-study-shows).

Almost [7 million people](https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/the-last-of-us-episode-3-ratings-viewership-1235506462/) tuned in to watch Bill and Frank’s decades long love story explored in the episode which was met with high acclaim from critics and viewers alike. Despite the LGBTQ+ community being a large part of the gaming community, main playable characters continue to be incredibly rare. LGBTQ+ characters are essentially absent in video games with only 0.03% of characters being identifiable as queer, [reports the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media](https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gaming-study-2021-7.pdf). The same study, after reviewing thousands of video games, only found two playable queer lead characters.

To gamers, Bill was always gay, which in itself was a rare and important event in the gaming world. However, in the game, Bill was a side character that helped propel the story forward for the lead characters Joel and Ellie. Therefore, it was a very welcomed, albeit unexpected, change to see Bill and his partner Frank’s story made the focal point of an entire episode.

Daniel Maisonave is a 29-year old living in San Diego and refers to himself as a “gaymer”. He states, “For us to have a whole episode is just amazing. It’s also an episode that has touched so many people.” Maisonave then mentioned that all of his heterosexual friends and family that watched “…bawled the whole episode.”

While queer characters are few and far between, some video game developers are taking steps to create more inclusive and diverse representation in their games. In a 5-year span over 800 games featured some queer content, found Shane Hansaruk in a 2022 University of Windsor thesis titled [Indie Developers and the Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games, 2013-2017](https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1237&context=major-papers).

However, for the community, more needs to be done by the largest gaming companies with the highest-profile games, often referred to as AAA game publishers – including Nintendo, Sony Interactive Entertainment, Electronic Arts, Activision and Microsoft. Of those 800 or so titles, only 7% were AAA games with any LGBTQ+ representation, according to Hansaruk. Coincidentally, Ellie from The Last of Us II is the only canonically queer main playable character in a AAA game.

Even with this lack of representation, video games provide a sense of community and belonging for members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially in cases where they may not feel fully accepted in their offline lives, say LGBTQ+ gamers. Such online gaming communities can often be safe spaces where individuals can connect with others who share similar interests and experiences, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

“Basically all of my most important and deep connections … friendships that have persevered until now have been in online gaming communities,’’ says Wren Bennett, 34, an employee at Riot Games. “It’s definitely easier to find people like you out there than offline.”

With The Last of Us being considered one of the most iconic and loved games of all time, gaming companies of all sizes are likely carefully watching this all unfold. One would hope this would inspire them to have the courage and urgency to create more stories centered around queer characters. Only time will tell.