HOW TO NOT SUCK AT GAME DESIGN

GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH, CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.

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This is my 5 cents to Andrew Meade's article on the absence of relatable gay characters in video games and to the INSANE reactions it spawned on gamasutra.com.

There were of course the unfortunately usual homophobic and offensive comments (thankfully moderated and deleted by gamasutra staff, good job). Expected and ugly. But most concerning to me are the ones that appear moderate, asking for the purpose of including gay protagonists. Not seeing the purpose comes from their privileged perspective and I need to rattle that perspective for a moment.

Andrew Meade already wrote a follow up to his article, tackling related social responsibility issues for game creators. He fairly well adresses what games could teach the heterosexual audience and how game creators could use games to promote a more inclusive way of thinking. I'm going to focus on the individual player experience and how gay gamers are excluded from having certain essential experiences by having game makers ask "Why a gay guy?".

The argument I'm going top present applies to every kind of LGBT people, as much as to heterosexual women, disabled people, ethnic minorities and other minority groups. Though I'm going to mostly refer to gays here, to keep it simple. And this post only addresses heterosexual people with the discussed views on homosexuality. Don't waste my time reminding me, that not everybody thinks like that. Thanks.

Defining Emotional Content

Let's talk about emotions. If you don't consider strong emotional content to be essential for a memorable piece of fiction, you can leave now, recharge your batteries and plan for the destruction of all humans. Because you probably are a robot.

Affection, fear, tension, relief, desire, satisfaction, joy… No matter the subject of a story, feelings are what separates cold information from intense experience. We need to talk a bit psychology basics here.

Scenes, stories and images trigger emotional reactions by resonating with just three basic desires that are programmed into the human mind: Survive, be safe from harm and be well provided for.

As it turns out, humans as a species tent to achieve these goals better when working in groups. So they project their desires onto other humans of their choosing, like members of their family, their tribe, society. Even sometimes going as far as sacrificing their own well being or life for the well being of their peers. (There are interesting studies about that in the realms of evolutionary psychology.)

Whenever there is something at stake in a story, no matter if horror, romance, adventure, whatever, it traces back to those three desires. The protagonist always either wants to save his life, be safe or ensure the possession of something. Or he wants all that for somebody else or is looking to bind with somebody else who can help ensure survival, safety and

maintenance.

Meeting the three demands just for yourself works fine as a hook for survival games, anything related to treasure hunting or being the champion of something. But being a hero is all about meeting those three demands for somebody else. Taking responsibility for other people and fighting/sacrificing your ass off to ensure their survival, safety and maintenance.

The closer the relationship between peers, the stronger the emotional interdependence. Providing for your partner probably triggers stronger emotions than providing for a stranger.

And this is where sexuality comes in and the ignorance starts.

Sexuality Is Not Just About Fucking

One of the biggest misconceptions many heterosexual people have about the term "homosexual" is, that they think it mainly describes a preference regarding who to fuck. Especially bigoted persons are even going as far as calling it "a lifestyle choice".

Of course with that view in mind, it makes sense to ask, "Why a gay guy?" If there is no actual sex acts in the game, why should anybody care, if the protagonist would prefer to have sex with another dude?

But in fact, the term includes all forms of same-sex relationships. Partners for sex, for affairs, for raising children, to marry, to grow old with. Or in storytelling language: partners to die for, to protect, to conquer, to save, to provide for, to avenge.

Every emotional investment a character has in another character from the opposite sex, like a plumber wanting to save a princess, a man wanting to marry a woman, a girl and a boy holding hands, a mother and a father caring for their children and a wife mourning for her fallen soldier husband, all of that, while having nothing to do with sex acts, is sexual. In this case heterosexual.

If you are a woman in love with another woman, you can draw more emotions from a game where you play a woman in love with another woman, because you can project real life feelings onto your player character. It is that simple. When there is an articulated demand for gay protagonists, it is not a demand for anal sex or girl-on-girl action. It is the simple demand for relatable emotional content.

Privileged Position

There was a lot of fuzz from heterosexual gamers regarding how they were made uncomfortable or downright annoyed by the same-sex signals they got from NPCs in Bioware's Dragon Age 2. The signals are mild, rare and can even be completely shut off be the player, depending on his ingame decisions. The player has a choice in that game.

Gay player's don't have that luxury. They put up with, to them, reversed gender relations, actively ignore constant sexual innuendo and try to squeeze their emotional content out of what little they get. They do this almost literally with every game out there. And in my opinion they are too quiet about that.

This is the landscape we are dealing with. Heterosexual players, so used to getting their love and sex stories tailored to their needs, that they throw a fit just for getting presented with another option. And on the other hand, homosexual players, so used at having to adjust to stories not written for them, that they don't even speak up anymore.

That is the privileged position you are questioning the relevance of a protagonist's sexual orientation from, my straight lads. It is bloody relevant, to you and to everybody.

List Of Demands

Every game which offers character selection or customization, being inclusive enough to allow the player to pick different genders or ethnicities, should be inclusive enough to provide a campaign that allows the player to pick his sexual orientation.
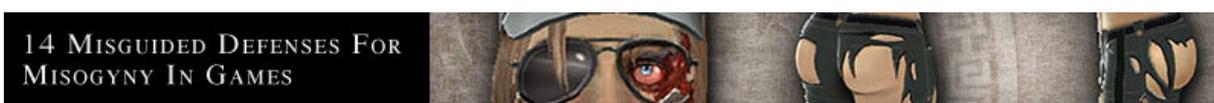
Every now and then there should be an IP starring a gay hero or heroine.

Hetero sexual players, journalists and makers should be strong or chilled enough to deal with that.

Emotional content for everybody and heroes for everybody.

Thanks.

Related posts:

14 MISGUIDED DEFENSES FOR MISOGYNY IN GAMES

23 THOUGHTS ON "A CASE FOR A GAY PROTAGONIST"

Caleb
on **January 5, 2013 at 11:39 am** said:

i forgot to write in other post,you are probably trying to stir up something to get your name out there,

i guess you are trying to get the attention of gearbox because you keep giving them shit,

really bad way to go,anyway with a website dedicated (i really dont think so after seeing threads and threads of you going with shitty game designs and not you making a single positive criticism like how they should have done it,like producing a single good idea)

either step up,do better work,or stop trying to create shit storms over nothing. Games try to appeal general demographics. You know it,i know it,everybody knows it !

Try to look for a job in a different way,you arent getting any results this way buddy.

Amazing Horse
on **November 23, 2012 at 7:39 pm** said:

I agree wholeheartedly on the article, except for one thing: Anders is an asshole and you should ignore him and go be with Fenris instead.

Captain Sodapocket
on **February 26, 2012 at 9:22 pm** said:

And thank you, by the way, for inspiring a post I felt was important enough to finally get a blog started.

Captain Sodapocket
on **February 26, 2012 at 9:20 pm** said:

Wrote my own lengthy response on the practical challenges of such a trend, if you're interested:
http://sodapocket.wordpress.com/2012/02/26/homosexuality-in-video-games-another-perspective/

n
on **February 16, 2012 at 5:10 am** said:

Thank you for this. I tried to pass it around wherever I could, because … reading some comments you got, it's still needed for these kind of articles to get a wider audience…

Eidan

I agree. Your Sexuality is not something that can be shaped in a specific way. You are born with it. To even imagine that people like Kaucukovnik think that someone can learn to be heterosexual goes beyond me. Also I don¬¨•t like the word tolerate. For me, it means that you "tolerate" something/someone, but don¬¨•t accept it/him.

Kaucukovnik, Homosexuality is natural thing in our World. Live with it.

Kaucukovnik
on **February 15, 2012 at 4:01 pm** said:

@Anjin:

Not entirely true. We have a pretty good example of homosexuality becoming a life style rather than one's innermost inclinations, which is ancient Rome.

Morality, values and beliefs, everything about us IS inevitably shaped by the environment we live in.
You can say we all learn to be heterosexual by living in mostly heterosexual society. I don't see that as a bad thing, as long as we can tolerate those who don't go with the flow.

And please, don't call people who discuss your opinions in a civillized way bigots. It turns the word against you.

> Anjin Anhut
> on **February 15, 2012 at 4:30 pm** said:
>
> … homosexuality is not a moral issue. Heterosexuality is no flow which you can decide to go with or against. Morality, values and beliefs… none of these categories apply to homosexuality. You just displayed again, that all your opinions about homosexuality are based on a massive misconception what homosexuality is. Which effectively turns you into a stupid bigot, no matter how nice and civilized you think you are.
>
> I will now repeat myself and it is more true than last time:
> You have no fucking clue, what homosexuality is. Get educated. Don‚Äö√Ñ√∂√Ñ√¥t be stupid and don‚Äö√Ñ√∂√Ñ√¥t be a bigot. Cheers.

Kaucukovnik
on **February 15, 2012 at 2:27 pm** said:

I have several objections to this mindset.

1. Emotional attachment. If your point is making the characters emotionally relatable, then you should probably give the player the opportunity to choose the appearance and personality of his/her supposed love interest. Same with antagonists, because main villain accidentally looking like your dad would be unacceptable from that point of view.
Also you'd have to make any potentially controversial action of the protagonist optional/avoidable, since actions perceived as wrong can alienate the character a lot.
In the end you'd get a fully customizable game with very little creative space for…uhh..the creator. And while trying to satisfy everyone, you end up in mediocrity which is harmless to everyone.
Not that this outcome is unevitable, but large amount of customizability takes a special kind of game to accomodate for and by far not all games are viable this way.

And I don't think lesbians didn't cry a tear during Titanic because they couldn't relate to the couple.

2. Accepting minority. Well, then demand games to be made also for blind, deaf or armless people too. I'm sure there is more of them, and their problems with games' accessibility would be difinitely much larger than the protagonist's sexual orientation.

3. I think you downplay the "sex" part a lot. Looking around Bioware community, for instance, there is way too much sexual fantasy opposed to deep emotional involvement.
Heck, before games started incorporating sexual content on regular basis, there was not much need for protagonists' defined sexual preferences – unless there was a love story going on. Like it or not, in the eyes of gaming community sexual orientation is perceived mostly as a preference who to fuck.
And I think it's being turned into lifestyle choice exactly by the sort of implementation you are asking for. Especially when artists can't think of a likeable female character without coming up with a carbon copy supermodel (and IF they do, the community usually "fixes" this by mods).

4. In your Gears of War article you wrote about the protagonist serving as some kind of role model. I'd point you this

way now. By presenting an openly gay protagonist you are, in a way, saying that homosexuality is perfectly fine and normal, but it's not. We should certainly tolerate it, but not promote and encourage.

Personally I'm not very happy about homosexual characters, but i can relate to them just fine as long as they are interesting and well written.
An example here:
http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs70/f/2010/047/7/8/The_Raw_Hide_Kid_cover_by_Devilpig.jpg
This gay gunslinger is incredibly cool and in the course of the story I've read, he proves a point in a way no hetero could. THIS is the case for a gay protagonist.

Anjin Anhut
on **February 15, 2012 at 2:49 pm** said:

@Kaucukovnik
"By presenting an openly gay protagonist you are, in a way, saying that homosexuality is perfectly fine and normal, but it‚Äö√Ñ√¥s not. We should certainly tolerate it, but not promote and encourage."

You have no fucking clue, what homosexuality is. It is not something a person decides on, so there is nothing to promote, encourage, discourage, warn about or whatever. Nobody can learn to be homosexual or heterosexual, it's not an ism, not a movement or lifestyle… it's how you are wired to feel about genders.

The only thing you can decide on is how you deal with the feelings you are given. And fuck everybody who wants to discourage people from finding, sharing and expressing love. Damn well it's fine and damn well it is normal…

Get educated. Don't be stupid and don't be a bigot. Cheers.

Vivien
on **February 9, 2012 at 11:32 am** said:

@linu:
Congratulations, you completely missed the point of this article.

Jessica
on **January 14, 2012 at 1:11 am** said:

@ lintu…
of course there is a maximum.
I -for example- hate, hate, hate action movies with lots of romance.
i guess its the same. it is sumply too much.

LintuSotaRauha
on **January 8, 2012 at 5:55 pm** said:

How typically anime this picture is. :D

I know a lot of the German manga szene, I¬¨•m the moderator of Germanga and comics in Germany.
I saw a lot of stuff like that. I¬¨•m not homophobic. My opinion just is, it¬¨•s to much for me. Almost everyone is making stories with gay people. All the other good stories about the life are forgotten. It¬¨•s a pity that readers only want gay people having sex. As a storywriter and artist you are not able to make a different story.

I don¬¨•t know how the gamers will react when there are as many gay stories in games as in manga and comics.

I¬¨•m not homophobic. I read this stuff and I have my favorite stories as well. But it¬¨•s to much.

Jessica
on **January 3, 2012 at 7:13 pm** said:

I think we shouldn¬¨•t even discuss.
Gays are real. Why don¬¨•t some people can accept that? I can¬¨•t understand it.

A few days ago, i was watching a "soap opera", there was a gay couple kissing. I didn¬¨•t even realize it really, but suddenly my friend screamed at me " are they gay? why are they showing gay men? kissing in tv!? "
Honestly, i¬¨•m still shocked.
I asked him what his problem is, the world is full of homosexuals, why shouldn¬¨•t they show it on tv?! It would be much more unrealistic without.
He just answered it is disgusting…
head >> desk

TheBuzzSaw
on **January 3, 2012 at 6:29 am** said:

"Every now and then there should be an IP starring a gay hero or heroine."

I would like to draw emphasis to the word "should" here. You think this is some kind of moral imperative? The issue is much simpler than everyone is making it out to be. If people want to make more games with gay characters, they are absolutely free to do so. Obviously, not everyone can makes games, so here we all are petitioning "the game industry" to expose more sexual orientation options.

I am a game developer. My choice in genre for my games will have far more effect on sales numbers than my choice to to implement a heterosexual love story. Frankly, I don't have the resources OR THE INTEREST in creating a parallel homosexual love story option in my RPGs. If other game devs want to adhere to these pleas, they are free to do so, but please stop with suggesting "there should be more gay protagonists". The game industry SHOULD go on making the games IT wants to make.

Thomas
on **January 3, 2012 at 3:43 am** said:

If anyone is seeking out of gay protagonists, there is a game in development,the Arkh Project, which is doing that and then some. It is a 3-d adventure game made with and by queer people of color. Find out more here:
http://thearkhproject.tumblr.com/FAQ

Betti Gefecht
on **January 2, 2012 at 10:17 pm** said:

I iz a very proudz mama right now. The paragraph on 'emotional content' really got me. Well done! Pimped this article on twitter today… the tweeps approved!

Raphael
on **January 2, 2012 at 6:27 pm** said:

This post makes such an excellent point: Emotional depth separates great games (like Uncharted) from good games (like… well, nearly all other AAA games this year).

Sexuality is one way to provide that depth, and designers should be eagaer to include gay characters if doing so add dimensionality to a story-driven game.

John Maddening
on **January 2, 2012 at 6:20 pm** said:

I've played a poor black teenager (in GTA: San Andreas), an Asian female lab rat (in Portal), and a blue anthropomorphic hedgehog (ibid.), despite being none of the above. I think I can handle playing a gay dude.

Spagett
on **January 2, 2012 at 4:28 pm** said:

this is a bit inaccurate. I can recall more than a few gay characters who aren't just walking stereotypes. Vamp from metal gear solid, anthony prince from GTA IV, florian cravic again from GTA IV. they may not be protagonists, but the fact is that a protagonist's sexuality has minimal relevance to the plot. the protagonist is usually meant to be an extension of the player, and seldom has any distinguishable characteristics that make them differ from the public perception of the average mail or female.

Anjin Anhut
on **January 2, 2012 at 4:35 pm** said:

You know, being gay, to someone who is actually gay is not a "distinguishable characteristic ", it is just what he is. And "the public perception of the average mail or female" does not allow the protagonist to "be an extension of the player", if the player is gay. You are exactly the kind of person this article was meant to address. You are considering heterosexual characters to be "avarage", the default, and therefore don't recognize how heterosexual characteristics actually carry the story and the plot and how homosexual characteristics are missing for gay audiences.

Look beyond your own already satisfied needs and don't give me that "it is fact", when it is a knee jerk opinion. Cheers.

Lev
on **November 3, 2012 at 1:33 pm** said:

But heterosexual IS average. The vast majority of people are heterosexual. Mean, median or mode, hetero will always come out as average. And unless the plot is sexually or romantically driven, the protagonist's sexuality IS completely irrelevant.

XANTOMEN
on **January 2, 2012 at 1:33 pm** said:

Another great one, someone's on a roll!

I've never thought about it like that. Going to take this food for thought and try to find more cases of marginalized gamers.