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"Being Cute and Hella Gay:" Pokémon Reborn, Fan Labor, and Queering the Pokémon World

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“BEING CUTE AND HELLA GAY:” *POKÉMON REBORN*, FAN LABOR, AND QUEERING
THE POKÉMON WORLD

by

David Kocik

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

“BEING CUTE AND HELLA GAY:” *POKÉMON REBORN*, FAN LABOR, AND QUEERING THE POKÉMON WORLD

by

David Kocik

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020
Under the Supervision of Professor Michael Newman

Created in 2012, *Pokémon Reborn* is a fan game made by and for queer fans of the Pokémon franchise. Featuring an LGBTQ+ development team and multiple queer characters, from pansexual Rival Cain to gender non-binary Gym Leader Adrienn, *Pokémon Reborn* articulates queer desires in a franchise and gaming industry notorious for ignoring and dehumanizing queer individuals. While most research on independent queer game development focuses on how creators subvert heteronormative gameplay elements, *Pokémon Reborn* challenges dominant industry practices through its queer characters and stories. The fan game incorporates LGBTQ+ lived experiences and queer temporalities in its narrative, queering the traditional storytelling tropes of the Pokémon franchise. The development of *Pokémon Reborn* queers industry production practices through online collaboration and a vested interest in queer lives and struggles. LGBTQ+ fans of the game use the queer characters of *Pokémon Reborn* to renegotiate and understand their queer identities. The fan game points to several ways video game industries can meaningfully include and respect LGBTQ+ individuals in production, reception, and games themselves.

To
my family for your love,
my friends for your kindness,
Tony for your never-ending support,
Amethyst for your thoughtful work and words,
and all the queer people who love video games

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Introduction: Queer Video Game Fans, Modders, and Developers

In late October 2019, a blog post by Niantic, the creators of *Pokémon Go*, referred to Team Mystic leader Blanche as “they”, seeming to confirm many fans’ suspicions that Blanche is nonbinary.¹ Around the same time, the Pokémon Anime series revealed Ash’s new traveling companion, Gou. Due to Gou’s perceived androgyny, fans debated whether Gou might similarly be nonbinary.² Unsurprisingly, many commenters used transphobic language and relied on heteronormative tropes about identity and sexuality to argue against fans’ interpretations of Blanche and Gou as nonbinary. Yet, many other fans saw the introduction of non-binary characters as a welcome change to the Pokémon series, which features no overt queer characters. Although relatively recent, the debates around Blanche and Gou are a culmination of the long history of queer investment and struggle over acknowledgment and acceptance in the Pokémon series and Pokémon fan communities.

Beginning in 1996 with the release of *Pokémon Red and Green*³ on the Game Boy system, the Pokémon name has become a mainstay of global popular culture. Beginning with video games and trading cards, the Pokémon brand has grown into a multimedia franchise, with TV shows, movies, merchandise, mobile apps, and other products contributing to the international multi-billion-dollar industry. Although children and young adults are the main targets of the Pokémon franchise, the majority of players of the last two generations of Pokémon

¹ Camden Jones, “Pokémon Go’s Blanche is the First Nonbinary Character in a Nintendo Franchise,” *Game Revolution*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.gamerevolution.com/news/611035-Pokémon-go-blanche-first-non-binary-character-nintendo-franchise>.

² Hero Hei, “News Claims New Pokémon Anime’s Gou is Non Binary and then HILARIOUSLY gets Called Out for Mis Info!,” November 8, 2019, YouTube, video, 6:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKfDxP157-M>.

³ Game Freak, *Pokémon Red and Green*, Game Boy, (Nintendo, 1996).

games and *Pokémon Go* are twenty to thirty-five years old.⁴ As the fanbase for Pokémon grows older with the franchise, fan labor by adult fans of Pokémon continues to grow prominence online.

Fan labor has long provided places for discussion and dissemination of Pokémon news and cultural production. For example, the popular fan site Serebii.net, which began in 1999, provides in-depth coverage of Pokémon video games, trading card games, anime, and other ancillary media products, while also hosting forums and Pokémon competitions between users in the Serebii community.⁵ Other fans use social media to market and sell Pokémon jewelry, artwork, and even zoological guides on sites such as Patreon and Instagram.⁶ Queer fan laborers similarly sell works related to Pokémon online, like the artist Sindre who creates pixel art combining RuPaul's Drag Race drag queens with aesthetically-similar Pokémon.⁷ The Pokémon fan game *Pokémon Reborn* is another work of queer fan labor, taking the game mechanics and titular creatures from the Pokémon franchise and creating a new video game for adult fans of the franchise.

In my thesis, I will look at *Pokémon Reborn* and the production and consumption of the fan game to better understand how queer fans develop communities around shared texts, experiences, and pleasures to provide space for expressions of queer desires for representation and acknowledgment in heteronormative gaming cultures. I also investigate how *Pokémon Reborn* contests assumptions in queer games scholarship that LGBTQ+ individuals are overall

⁴ Newzoo Staff, "Analysis of Pokémon GO: A Success Two Decades in the Making," Newzoo, Accessed March 26, 2020, <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/analysis-Pokémon-go/>; Nintendo, "Nine Months Financial Results Briefing for Fiscal Year Ending March 2017," Nintendo, March 2017, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2017/170201_2e.pdf.

⁵ "Serebii.net Forums", Serebii.net, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://forums.serebii.net/>.

⁶ Joshua Dunlop, "Joshua Dunlop Concept Artist Pokémon Zoology," Patreon, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://www.patreon.com/JoshuaDunlop>

⁷ Sindre, "Pokémon and gay stuff <3," Instagram, November 11, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/sindorman/>.

ambivalent about queer representation in games and that queer narratives are less politically powerful than queer gameplay in challenging and critiquing hegemonic gaming industries and communities. The fan game was created and developed by Amethyst Liddell, who grew up and currently resides in the northeastern portion of the United States. Released in episodes since 2012, *Pokémon Reborn* is a free-to-play, downloadable video game that replicates the gameplay of a typical Pokémon video game and features over fifty-five hours of content drawn from the first seven generations of the Pokémon game series.⁸ (Amethyst wants to be referred to as her first name in the body of the thesis but is fine with including her last name in citations. I will respect her wishes and will refer to her as such throughout this thesis.) Using RPG Maker XP and Pokémon Essentials, *Reborn* follows a long line of other Pokémon fan games, such as *Pokémon Insurgence*, constructed using online tools.⁹ *Pokémon Reborn* dramatically increases the difficulty of Pokémon gameplay, potentially queering the original series' gameplay mechanics. The game adds level caps, Field Effects, and other challenging gameplay updates to the Pokémon battle system, requiring players to adjust their Pokémon party and play styles throughout the game. *Pokémon Reborn* also requires players to focus on skill and planning when developing their Pokémon teams, somewhat queering the heteronormative approach of reliance on overt strength to win Pokémon battles.

Although much of queer games research focuses on the gameplay, rather than narrative structures, of queer games and mods, *Pokémon Reborn* centers queerness in its narrative. *Pokémon Reborn* also has a considerably diverse queer cast of characters, including transgender Pokémon Champion Ame, pansexual rival Cain, and gender non-binary Gym Leader Adrienn.

⁸ Amethyst Liddell, *Pokémon Reborn*, PC/Mac, v. 18.3, (2018) <https://www.rebornevo.com/index.php?pr/index.html/>.

⁹ Deukhoofd and EchoTheThird, *Pokémon Insurgence*, PC/Mac, v.1.2.5, (2016), <https://p-insurgence.com/>.

These characters engage in many familiar queer narratives, including coming out, familial discord, and negotiating pressures from heteronormative institutions, while also encountering typical problems associated with the Pokémon world, such as defeating the evil Team Meteor. Both the gameplay and narrative structures of *Pokémon Reborn* articulate a desire for queer representation and recognition in Pokémon and gaming fandoms by orienting the Pokémon world toward queer futurity and a rejection of chrononormativity.

Pokémon Reborn also operates in a wider circuit of Pokémon culture, video game fandoms, and queer online communities. Often listed as one of the best Pokémon fan games, *Pokémon Reborn* circulates prominently in Pokémon fan game communities and even mainstream publications like *Polygon*.¹⁰ Fans also engage directly with other players through the forums hosted on the game's website, discussing how to improve Pokémon teams, sharing theories about characters, and providing access to their fan works based on the game.¹¹ *Pokémon Reborn* not only advocates for queer inclusion and recognition in its gameworld but also facilitates discussions about queer identities and issues, topics that are usually vehemently dismissed and regulated by straight male-presenting commenters on popular forum sites.¹² *Pokémon Reborn* gains political potency by explicitly connecting the world's largest media franchise to queer desires for inclusion, acceptance, and recognition while also challenging dominant assumptions about gamer identities. The game also challenges heteronormative gaming industry practices by placing LGBTQ+ characters at the center of the narrative. *Pokémon Reborn*

¹⁰ Griffin McElroy, "You haven't played these Pokémon games, but you should," *Polygon*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/8/22/6054087/Pokémon-fan-games-hacked-roms>.

¹¹ Freya, "A wild fanart appeared!" *Pokémon Reborn Forums*, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.rebornevo.com/forum/index.php?/topic/28532-a-wild-fanart-appeared>.

¹² Megan Condis, "No homosexuals in *Star Wars*? BioWare, 'gamer' identity, and the politics of privilege in a convergence culture," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 21, no. 2 (2014): 198-212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856514527205>.

not only challenges assumptions about narratives, characters, and mainstream gaming development but also builds a community around the affective pleasure of the Pokémon franchise while highlighting queer contributions to gaming culture.

Literature Review

Although *Pokémon Reborn* is made by LGBTQ+ individuals and features queer characters and narratives, pinpointing the queerness within the game requires a deeper look into definitions of queerness, particularly as it is understood in queer fan and queer video game scholarship. As noted by many scholars, the term queer has been slippery for scholars, as no one definition has emerged as a clear description.¹³ Most queer scholars agree that queer theory is interested in politics of resistance to dominant institutions that promote heteronormative ideologies and practices. Queer game scholars investigate a range of issues in both video games and queer studies, such as LGBTQ+ video game characters, queer game creators, and queer game audiences. Drawing from queer scholars like Judith Butler and Sarah Ahmed, queer games scholar Bo Ruberg's definition of queer refers to both "An umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality" and a resistance to "the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued heteronormative (or homonormative) subject..."¹⁴ Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros similarly argue that queer refers to a group of people with lived identities and a practice that always constitutes a "specific politics of resistance" that challenges heteronormative and hegemonic institutions.¹⁵ As I use the

¹³ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 7.

¹⁵ Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros, "Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ Role-Play," in *Queerness in Play*, eds. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, (Basingstroke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167-184.

term queer, I follow the same two-pronged definition of queer, which can refer to people who identify outside heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality, as well as a political resistance against dominant discourses and institutions that reject queer identities, desires, and pleasures.

Queer theorists have discussed many forms of resistance against hegemony, some of which centers on queer challenges of heteronormative discourses of space and time. Elizabeth Freeman uses the term chrononormativity to refer to the ways hegemonic pressures use discourses of time to point “individual human bodies toward maximum production” under the pretense of a natural trajectory of human life.¹⁶ Judith Halberstam notes that dominant discourses about time in Western countries often position “natural” human development with heteronormative life milestones, including puberty, adolescence, marriage, and the desire for the longevity of life at all costs.¹⁷ To these scholars, hegemonic institutions dismiss or erase queer individuals and desires by positioning the path toward marriage and childbirth as a natural, indisputable element of every human’s life. Because chrononormativity dominates much of Western life, Jose Estaban Munoz contends that queerness itself is embedded within futurity, unable to be fully articulated in the present due to current neoliberal ideological practices. Munoz advocates for investment in queer futurity, “a world not quite here,” rather than the incremental incorporation of LGBTQ+ individuals in current neoliberal societies.¹⁸ Ruberg claims video games themselves reject chrononormativity by finding pleasure in playful, affective

¹⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Jose Estaban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 97.

experiences often seen as wasteful to neoliberal capitalist institutions.¹⁹ Ruberg also argues queer indie game developers enact queer futurity by creating the games they wish to see be made in mainstream gaming environments.²⁰ Jordan Wood argues some games reflect a challenge to chrononormativity by world-building alternate temporalities that encourage queer playfulness.²¹ Video games offer a potential avenue into understanding queer resistance to hegemonic discourses, particularly in what is considered meaningful to neoliberal norms.

Queer game design is only one way in which queer individuals interact and negotiate their identities with cultural products they enjoy while resisting heteronormative institutions. Research into queer fans and queer fan labor also shows how fans negotiate their queer identities with cultural products. Alexander Doty argues that investigating and articulating queer readings of popular cultural texts can help redefine queerness as something more than deviant or subcultural.²² Doty points to a wide variety of popular texts long associated with queer audiences and reception practices, such as *Golden Girls*, movie musicals, and *Laverne & Shirley*, to discuss how queer audiences read and share understandings of queer subtexts of pop-cultural texts. Yet, many of these texts encourage ambivalent readings, at once making room for the suggestion of queer desire while keeping that desire unable to be fully realized. Doty asserts that queer readings are not simply wishful misreadings. Rather, queer reception practices encourage the

¹⁹ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

²⁰ Bonnie Ruberg, "Queer Indie Video Games as an Alternative Digital Humanities: Counterstrategies for Cultural Critique through Interactive Media." *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2018): 417-38. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0029>.

²¹ Jordan Wood, "Romancing an Empire, Becoming Isaac: The Queer Possibilities of Jade Empire and The Binding of Isaac," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, eds. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 212-226.

²² Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

overt discussion of the complex modes of queerness that have always already been present in popular culture production and reception.

By circulating these queer readings, LGBTQ+ individuals can build fan communities around common understandings of pop-cultural works. Henry Jenkins and John Campbell discuss how queer fans of *Star Trek* circulate fan works, such as fanfic, and support for the inclusion of queer characters through online forums, chatrooms, and email campaigns.²³ Frederick Dhaenens investigates how gay men re-edit the German soap opera *Verbotene Liebe* and share their works on YouTube to place the gay male characters as the protagonists of the show and resist how the show often marginalizes the love lives of gay men.²⁴ Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill look at how fans used hashtag campaigns on Twitter to protest the death of two lesbian TV characters, Lexa from *The 100* and Poussey from *Orange is the New Black*.²⁵ Because TV production companies use Twitter to measure audience involvement with programs, Navar-Gil and Stanfill argue these fans strategically used Twitter's algorithms to trend on the platform, draw attention to these mistreated characters, and intervene in production practices that negatively affect queer characters. Through these interventions online, LGBTQ+ fans challenge traditionally heteronormative production practices and advocate for the inclusion and better treatment of queer characters.

²³ Henry Jenkins and John Campbell, "Out of the Closet and into the Universe': Queers and *Star Trek*," In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, 89-112, (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Frederick Daehnens, "Queer cuttings on YouTube: Re-editing soap operas as a form of fan-produced queer resistance," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2012), 442-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412442205>.

²⁵ Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions," *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3 (2018): 85-100. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.70.3-4.0085>.

Queer fans also use online methods to counteract the voices of sexist and homophobic fans. Sarah Beth Evans and Elyse Janish discuss ways critics of GamerGate established a coalition on Twitter that rejected the binary opposition put forth by GamerGaters.²⁶ GamerGate was a movement of mostly cis-gendered, straight, White men harassing, doxing, and threatening prominent feminist video game developers and critics. Evans and Janish argue that while GamerGaters' targets were mostly women, these men were negatively reacting to a queering of the heteronormative Gamer identity. As more nonhetero, nonwhite, and nonmasculine gamers and developers gained notability in video game cultures, they subverted norms and expectations of what gamers look like and how they act within game cultures. Men who perpetuated GamerGate harassment often simplified the Gamer as male and the non-Gamer as female and rearticulated video games as an inherently masculine and an explicitly *unfeminine* medium. Rejecting the use of binary opposition, the hashtag campaign #INeedDiverseGames brought together people of various identities together to call for more inclusion in the video game industry and games themselves. Because of its collaborative, coalitional nature, Evans and Janish argue #INeedDiverseGames is an exemplar in resistance to the gatekeeping practices of dominant groups like the GamerGaters.

While many fans use social media to advocate for what they wish to see a change in pop culture products and fandoms, some video game fans modify (mod) the code of existing games to create game worlds that reflect what they wish to see and play. According to Tanja Sihvonen, modding is the process of “extending and altering officially released computer games... with custom-produced content” ranging from sound design to character skins to gameplay

²⁶ Sarah Beth Evans and Elyse Janish, "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015): 125-50. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0125>.

mechanics.²⁷ Modding practices exist in many gaming communities but the most popular mods come from work on popular games like *Skyrim*²⁸ and circulate via commercial video game distribution sites such as Steam. On these distribution sites, video game companies often encourage the circulation of mods by providing easy-to-mod content for users and creating marketplaces where users can buy and sell mods. Most of the commercially successful mods exhibit what Matthew Wysocki calls “partial conversions,” which alter maps, costumes, or character designs.²⁹ Partial conversion mods are most successful because they tend to follow the normative marketing logic and industrial practices of mainstream gaming industries.³⁰ Mods may even become commercially successful games themselves. *Counter-Strike*, originally a fan mod of the Valve game *Half-Life*, was bought and distributed by Valve to capitalize on its popularity.³¹ Gaming companies most likely encourage partial conversion mods because this practice seldom challenges their original work and provides economic benefits by both encouraging and exploiting fan labor for their profits.³²

Modders also alter mainstream games to challenge the gaming industry, discover more about the game-making process, enact artistic expressions, and articulate desires for specific content. Modding has at least some basis in the practice of pirating and distributing copies of computer games for free or reduced prices in the 1990s, and that same anti-gaming industry

²⁷Tanja Sihvonen, *Players Unleashed! Modding the Sims and the Culture of Gaming*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

²⁸Bethesda Game Studios, *Skyrim*, PC/Mac, (Bethesda Softworks, 2011).

²⁹Matthew Wysocki, “It’s Not Just the Coffee That’s Hot: Modding Sexual Content in Video Games,” In *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, eds. by Matthew Wysocki and Evan W. Lauteria, 194-209, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 196.

³⁰David B. Neiborg and Shenja van der Graaf, “The Mod Industries? The Industrial Logic of Non-Market Game Production,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 177–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088331>.

³¹Valve LLC, *Counter-Strike*, PC/Mac, (Valve Corporation: 2000).; Valve, *Half-Life*, PC/Mac, (Sierra Studios: 1998).

³²Abigail de Kosnick. “Fandom as Free Labor.” In *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, edited by Trebor Scholz. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 187-212.

ethos still permeates certain modding circles.³³ Giacomo Poderi and David J. Hakken argue that modding allows novices to hone their game-making skills while building supportive communities to share resources online.³⁴ Chronis Kyiangos and Nikoleta Yiannoutsou see modding as a potential educational tool for challenging the normative logics and often poor designs of the educational video game market.³⁵ Through interviews with modders, Olli Sotamaa found modders of the same game have different motivations for their modding, including hacking, debugging (the process of eliminating mistakes in coding from the game), artistic expression, and cooperation and community-building.³⁶ Wysocki notes that modding recontextualizes the nexus of interactivity and video games by affording players the ability to both consume and produce video game content, allowing for spaces of resistance even in large gaming markets.³⁷ Hence, the desires, motivations, and goals of modders are not solely market-driven but also aim to negotiate meanings of video games with larger gaming industries. Modding reflects other forms of fan labor, in that they express, as Henry Jenkins says, “not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism” with the fan object.³⁸ Modders have complex relationships with the video games they alter. While modders often rely on mainstream gaming industries to produce codes and content to modify, the modification

³³ Stephen Kline and Nick Dyer-Withford, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 210.

³⁴ Giacomo Poderi and David J. Hakken, "Modding a Free and Open Source Software Video Game: 'Play Testing Is Hard Work.'" *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15, no.1 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0493>.

³⁵ Chronis Kyiangos and Nikoleta Yiannoutsou, "Children Challenging the Design of Half-baked Games: Expressing Values through the Process of Game Modding," *International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction*, no. 17 (2018): 16-27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijcci.2018.04.001>.

³⁶ Olli Sotamaa, "When the Game Is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2010): 239-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009359765>.

³⁷ Wysocki, "It's Not Just the Coffee That's Hot"

³⁸ Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 23.

process also subverts mainstream video game production practices by inscribing modders' desires for new forms of video game consumption directly into existing gameworlds.

Much like other modders, queer modders alter video game content for a variety of reasons. Much of the queer mod research to date has been focused on mods that explicitly resist heteronormative gameplay practices in mainstream video games. However, by focusing on only games that alter gameplay, this research often neglects other queer modding practices that focus on queer narratives. Tom Welch argues queer modders deliberately confound the models of neoliberal work and labor by creating media products for affective, rather than economic, purposes. To Welch, queer game modding “constitutes a form of affectively necessary labour which both stems from and ameliorates a lack of queer representation in gaming, both narratively and mechanically.”³⁹ Queer modding allows queer individuals to design and construct video games that are affectively and politically satisfying to themselves and queer communities. However, not all queer mods modify the same kinds of content. Welch identifies three levels of modification: at the level of visual design, at the level of the rules of the game, and at the level of software technology (game physics, AI behavior, etc.). For Welch, queer mods that affect the rules and software technology of games are more politically subversive, as they challenge the heteronormative ideologies behind mainstream video game production. Welch states that queer modding also represents an act of “queer futurity” by renegotiating game design in the present to envision how representation and gameplay might look in mainstream video games of the future.⁴⁰

³⁹ Tom Welch, “The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018). <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch>.

⁴⁰ Welch, “Affectively Necessary Labour.”

Evan Lauteria views queer modding practices as actively resistant to large-scale video game production. To Lauteria, queer modding is one of several “means of resistance to the gamified global capitalism of Empire and its intrinsic connections to biopolitical, normative sexualities and gender.”⁴¹ Combining Marxist, feminist, and queer theories, Lauteria argues queer mods subvert mainstream game design and circulate beyond the realm of capitalist markets such as Steam, challenging the traditional means of production and consumption in video game industries. Similarly, those alternate modes of production challenge the ideological and heteronormative influence of mainstream video game industries. Like Welch, Lauteria argues queer mods that affect gameplay challenge the video game industry more by providing “anti-normative play spaces through an orientation to queer sexualities and genders.”⁴² To Lauteria, queer play resists both heteronormative and capitalist ideologies.

Like queer modding, independent game development is another avenue for queer game designers and their audiences to resist heteronormative narratives and gameplay. Allison Harvey’s research on queer game makers that use the simple programming system Twine reveals both the subversive and precarious nature of queer indie game design.⁴³ The queer games produced on Twine challenge heteronormative game design by rejecting and subverting masculinized design elements, such as win states, violence, and difficulty, and focusing on the lived experiences of queer individuals. For example, Anna Anthropy’s *Dys4ia* documents her struggles with gender dysphoria through a succession of mini-games, one of which requires the player to avoid women in a restroom so they are not kicked out due to their transgender

⁴¹ Evan W. Lauteria, “Ga(y)mer Theory: Queer Modding as Resistance,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 12, no. 2 (2012).

⁴² Lauteria, “Ga(y)mer Theory.”

⁴³ Allison Harvey, “Twine’s Revolution: Democratization, Depoliticization, and the Queering of Game Design,” *Game: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, no. 3 (2014): 95-107. https://www.gamejournal.it/3_harvey/.

identity.⁴⁴ While Twine allows queer creators to create subversive work, that work is often precarious due to the lack of economic support queer creators receive. Many queer creators rely on Kickstarters or Patreons for their income, create games in addition to paid labor elsewhere, or combine crowdfunding with other forms of income. In their discussion of the queer indie game *Curtain*, Whitney Pow also notes the economic precarity of queer indie game design but agrees with Lauteria that part of queer game design's political power comes from its resistance to heteronormative and neoliberal capitalist market logics.⁴⁵ Through discussions with queer indie game makers, Bo Ruberg asserts these game developers engage in a form of digital humanities by directly critiquing heteronormative game design through "intellectual - if not academic - engagement through interactive media."⁴⁶

Academic work into queer modding and queer game design makes several assumptions associated with queer game making. First, queer game development articulates queer desires by representing queer characters, narratives, and design elements that provide affective pleasure to the maker and/or the audience. Queer game makers make queer content for queer audiences. Next, almost all the research about queer modders and indie game makers stress that mainstream gaming relies on heteronormative trends that queer game developers wish to subvert. These researchers argue that large game companies are simply not providing enough meaningful queer content for queer gaming audiences, a sentiment echoed by research into the dearth of queer characters and narratives in games.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, PC/Mac, (Newgrounds, 2012).

⁴⁵ Laura McGee, *Curtain*, PC/Mac, (Dreamfeel, 2015).; Whitney Pow, "Reaching toward Home: Software Interface as Queer Orientation in the Video Game *Curtain*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 81, (2018): 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8105>.

⁴⁶ Ruberg, "Queer Indie Video Games"

⁴⁷ Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem, "Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content in Digital Games," *International Journal Of Communication* 10 (2016): 3877-889. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5449>.

Finally, most of the research into queer game development supposes that queer gameplay is more politically potent and subversive than queer video game narratives. To many queer games researchers, queer narratives are not sufficiently disruptive of heteronormative video game industries. Many queer games researchers assert that games with LGBTQ+ characters and stories may not be fully queer when the game features heteronormative gameplay. In their discussion of *Gone Home*, Ruberg acknowledges the historical importance of the lesbian love story at the center of the game but argues that the walking simulator aspects of the game are much straighter than they first appear.⁴⁸ Through gating, the game prevents the player from exploring the main setting of the house fully without completing certain tasks first, making the game more similar to a rail shooter than a walking simulator. The player discovers their sister's lesbian relationship by finding small notes and diary entries and generally learns about the relationship in chronological order, which Ruberg claims straightens out the narrative through the chrono- and heteronormative storytelling practice of requiring love stories to have a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Ruberg argues that, despite its queer narrative, *Gone Home*'s "engagement with queerness remains surface level; the promise of its queerness beyond representation goes unfulfilled."⁴⁹ Dimitrios Pavlounis' discussion of the archival politics of *Gone Home* argues the game makes the player complicit in the heteronormative restructuring of the queer narrative. As Pavlounis writes, the straightened gameplay "raises the possibility that even a game with a lesbian love story at its center might not be queer."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The Fullbright Company, *Gone Home*, PC/Mac, (The Fullbright Company, 2013).; Bonnie Ruberg. "Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in *Gone Home*," *Games and Culture* (2019), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019826746>.

⁴⁹ Ruberg, "Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators," 13.

⁵⁰ Dimitrios Pavlounis, "Straightening Up the Archive: Queer Historiography, Queer Play, and the Archival Politics of *Gone Home*," *Television and New Media* 17, no. 7 (2014): 579–594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416631627>.

While the work on queer modding, queer indie game design, and the limits of queer representations have provided fruitful inquiries into the complex nexus of queerness and games, I resist the notion that games with queer characters and narratives cannot be queer because of their conventional, heteronormative game design. From a purely semantic point of view, *Gone Home* and other games featuring queer narratives would be queer based on Ruberg's and others' definitions of queer, as they feature the lived experiences of queer individuals. Similarly, queer fans of *Gone Home* have responded positively to the queer love story at the center, even using the game and its surrounding communities as ways to come out and share their queer identities with others.⁵¹ The fandom and fan labor surrounding *Gone Home* suggests that queer audiences are using the game as a means of resistance to heteronormativity by coming out and building queer communities online. In this case, representation seems to matter much more to audiences than queer game scholars. Diana Anselmo's work on queer fan labor shows that queer audiences often insert queerness into narratives because they desire more recognition and representation by the makers of media products.⁵² So to many queer fans, it seems representation is important. Yet in downplaying the power of representation, queer games scholars, perhaps unknowingly, seem to delegitimize fans' affective pleasures from these narratives. By policing what can and cannot be queer, queer games scholars may regulate what fans and players understand about the texts they consume. This divide between queer gamers and queer academics then necessitates a revision of the previous question: What makes a game queer and *to whom*?

One problem with discussing the queerness in narratives of a game, and representation in general, is that the term has been used in many different settings and analytical approaches that it

⁵¹ Anima GAMING, "SUUUPER DUPER GAY. | *Gone Home* [Full Let's Play/Gameplay]," February 1, 2016, YouTube, video, 2:19:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSf7EAu7oDwandt=2s>.

⁵² Diana W. Anselmo, "Gender and Queer Fan Labor on Tumblr: The Case of BBC's *Sherlock*," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 1 (2018): 84-114. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.1.84>.

can be hard to pinpoint exactly what “representation” means. Adrienne Shaw argues for a reevaluation of the use of representation and identification in media studies, particularly in video game research. In her interviews with queer gamers, women gamers, and gamers of color, Shaw notes that many of them were ambivalent about the idea of increased representation in video games.⁵³ For these gamers, representation was something positive for other members of minority communities but not for the gamers themselves. According to Shaw, “media representation makes certain identities possible, plausible, and livable,” but individuals’ experiences with individual video game characters seemed to have little effect.⁵⁴ Shaw argues that diverse characters are not so important on their own but gain power through a meaningful network of diverse characterizations across media. Although one game may include queer stories and characters, the individual representations may not be politically powerful against a larger system of mainstream games that rejects queer characters.

Fan games offer one avenue to look at the gaps between queer game studies’ critical stance toward queer characters and narrative and the importance of representation for some queer gaming communities. As Anastasia Salter notes, authors of fan games, which she calls “personal games”, are “participating in a postcommercial venue of production that encourages the proactive remix of cultural artifacts.”⁵⁵ Creators make productive decisions about what to include or to alter in fan games, indicating what’s important and valued to the fan game’s creators and potential audiences. Similarly, Jenkins notes that fans are not unthinking consumers but rather they negotiate meanings and communicate cultural understandings about a text through fandoms

⁵³ Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 67.

⁵⁵ Anastasia Marie Salter, “‘Once More a Kingly Quest’: Fan Games and the Classic Adventure Genre,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2 (2009). <http://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0033>.

and fan labor.⁵⁶ Fan games offer one avenue to investigate which aspects of a cultural product are important to fans, as well as how queer individuals negotiate understandings of their identity with other fans of large media franchises.

Methods

For this thesis, I investigate and analyze the game mechanics, narrative, art design, and characters of *Pokémon Reborn* as well as the cultural production and reception of the game. I first conduct a textual analysis of the game, then move into a production study using interviews with and online postings by the development team, and a reception study using online discussions and fan works about the game as my primary source. In the first chapter, I focus on the game itself, analyzing the ways queerness is negotiated in the game. This section begins with secondary research on queer fandom, queer fan labor, queer video games, and independent game development. I then move to a textual analysis of *Pokémon Reborn*, investigating all parts of the game, from sound design to gameplay. Through this analysis, I discuss how the fan game articulates queer desires for inclusion and recognition in the Pokémon franchise, fan communities, and video game communities more generally. Similarly, I compare *Pokémon Reborn* to other official Pokémon games and Pokémon fan games, noting how *Reborn*'s queer narrative and gameplay challenge the types of gameplay encouraged by these games. I also draw contrasts from previous work on queer games, particularly the notion that queerness must move beyond narrative to be considered politically potent.

In the second chapter, I analyze the production, consumption, and fan labor surrounding *Pokémon*, *Pokémon Reborn*, and other Pokémon fan products. I interview Amethyst and/or other *Pokémon Reborn* developers to discover more about the production and creative processes

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

behind the fan work. Since the game has been produced from the ground up using fan-created online tools like Pokémon Essentials, I ask questions about how the developers became familiar with these tools and what kind of support they received from other game developers. I also ask about the decisions to include queer characters and how the producers developed queer narratives. Because the characters in the game are based on individuals who all competed in a fan Pokémon league online, I ask how that league developed and how the producers of *Pokémon Reborn* negotiated the use of real individuals in their story. In my interview, I situate the production of *Pokémon Reborn* as a node on the circuit of culture in multiple spheres, including Pokémon fandom, independent game development, video game fan communities, and online queer communities. I also analyze the Development Blog of *Pokémon Reborn*, which acts as a way for the creators to communicate with players and fans about the development process of the game, as well as social media postings of the game developers that pertain to the production process of the game.

In this section, I analyze fan reception of the game to understand how individuals negotiate their own identities with *Pokémon Reborn* and the Pokémon fandom. To look at fan responses, I look at the various forums available on the *Pokémon Reborn* website. Some posts focus on fan reception of the characters of the game, while other posts showcase fan labor surrounding *Pokémon Reborn*, such as the mods fans of *Pokémon Reborn* make and give away for free in the Mod Market. I also focus on the fan labor surrounding *Pokémon Reborn* that is circulated on the internet outside of the *Reborn* website. This fan labor includes fan fiction, drawings, photographs, and other work that focuses specifically on the characters and narrative of *Pokémon Reborn*. By doing so, I argue fan labor about the game acts as a way for fans to

negotiate their understandings and identities with Pokémon, video game communities, and online queer communities.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 1 focuses on *Pokémon Reborn* as queer fan labor, investigating the ways the game challenges dominant heteronormative assumptions about video game narrative, design, and Pokémon more broadly. By centering queer characters and narratives in the Pokémon world, the fan game shifts attention to the presence and contribution of queer individuals in Pokémon and video game fan communities. *Pokémon Reborn*'s narrative touches on many important issues that affect LGBTQ+ individuals, including coming out, suicide, and abusive relationships. Similarly, by using mostly the same mechanics and Pokémon characters from mainstream games, *Pokémon Reborn* builds an affective community for fans of the Pokémon franchise while also advocating for the acknowledgment of queer fandom and labor of the franchise. However, the game differs from academic understandings of queer fan labor, particularly queer modding practices. *Pokémon Reborn* diverges from other queer mods by building upon the existing gameplay structures of the original Pokémon games, rather than subverting the original gameplay. While *Pokémon Reborn*'s new gameplay mechanics challenge the methods of success employed in official Pokémon video games, they also rely upon fans' existing knowledge and familiarity with the gameplay of the original Pokémon games. Unlike many of the queer independent games described in queer games research, both the subversion of and reliance on the heteronormative gameplay mechanics of the original series is inextricably linked, possibly limiting resistance to the heteronormative game design of the official Pokémon series. The game's focus on queer representation over what is considered queer game design thus

differentiates it from other queer game production practices. *Pokémon Reborn* challenges both heteronormative gaming conventions and previous research into independent queer video game production. *Pokémon Reborn* raises questions about what makes a queer game politically potent and “authentically” queer.

Chapter 2 centers on the interactions *Pokémon Reborn* has with larger communities and institutions, such as queer fan communities and international gaming economies. *Pokémon Reborn* operates at the nexus of several cultural circuits, and the game uses its position to advocate for the importance and inclusion of queer individuals at several levels. First, the production of the game, which took place over many years, subverts dominant heteronormative practices in game development by using open source software, fostering an almost exclusively queer development team, and releasing the game in segments for free to anyone with a computer and internet access. Although this labor is often precarious, the team behind *Pokémon Reborn* operates outside and challenge the typical practices of gaming development. Next, the game provides a way for fans to negotiate and understand their own identities and queerness with the game. The forums on the *Pokémon Reborn* website feature discussions about the queer characters in the game and many fans create fan works such as art and fan fiction to articulate their understandings of the game. *Pokémon Reborn* not only advocates for the inclusion of queer individuals in gaming communities but also allows fans to understand their queerness with the game and the Pokémon franchise. The game also allows queer individuals to express both their admiration and frustration with the Pokémon franchise. Finally, *Pokémon Reborn* functions as another form of queer fan labor that highlights the connection between queer individuals and Pokémon. The fan game exists in a network of online queer fan labor that expresses desires for more queer recognition in Pokémon and gaming more generally. By explicitly placing queer

characters and narratives in the Pokémon world, *Pokémon Reborn* realizes the desire for queer representation in the games and legitimizes queer fan labor about Pokémon online.

Chapter 1: “no but literally chaos is like sex”: Queer Play, Time, and Space in *Pokémon Reborn*

From the start, *Pokémon Reborn* distances itself from the typical Pokémon experience. The game opens with the player choosing their avatar, preferred pronouns, and name, then riding on a train toward Reborn City, the hub of action in the game. After a mysterious man named Shade floats into the train and warns the Pokémon Champion Ame that the train will crash, the player’s avatar narrowly avoids destruction by jumping through the window. The player then controls their avatar and brings them to the Reborn City registration desk, where they receive their starter Pokémon from Ame who also explains the basics of *Pokémon Reborn*. The first battle of the game is with a man named Cain, who has acid purple hair, cut fishnets, and a biker jacket. After the battle, Cain flirts with the avatar in a playful monologue laced with double entendres about being defeated by “master” and how he and the avatar could “~have some fun~.” The powerful and professional Ame, who is transgender, and the playful and passionate Cain, who is pansexual, are the first two significant characters the player meets in the game. Although

Pokémon Reborn may be a fan game of a mainstream, heteronormative franchise, the game incorporates queer identities, pleasures, and play throughout its 55 hours of gameplay.

Based on the Pokémon and gameplay from the seventh generation of Pokémon games, *Pokémon Reborn* was made using Pokémon Essentials, a crowd-sourced online programming system that reconstructs the official Pokémon gameplay and assets from the ground up. Many of the updated battle elements of *Pokémon Reborn* tend to replicate and further entrench the Pokémon games in what queer game developers and scholars consider to be heteronormative game design by. Yet, *Pokémon Reborn* challenges the chrononormativity of the original series by rejecting how Pokémon can be obtained and raised. The game also features queer, affective elements of the official Pokémon franchise that foster connection between players of *Pokémon Reborn*, including trading and breeding. However, the reliance on Pokémon battles, which feature competition and violence, may somewhat lessen the queer political impact of *Pokémon Reborn*'s gameplay. The tension between queer and heteronormative design elements highlights the ways the official Pokémon series also resists a strict reading of the queerness (or lack of it) in the franchise.

The basic narrative for *Pokémon Reborn* follows the same plot points as a typical Pokémon game. However, the story in the fan game incorporates queer characters and narratives to reject the chrononormative plots of the original games and imagine queer futurity for LGBTQ+ people in the Pokémon franchise and video games as a whole. *Pokémon Reborn* features many of the same standard plot points from the past eight Pokémon generations. The player plays as a flat, speechless avatar, battles against Gym Leaders on the way to the Elite Four, and fights against an evil team, in this case, Team Meteor and its leader Lin, who tries to destroy the world of Reborn. Unlike the original series, many of the characters in *Pokémon*

Reborn are queer, such as transgender Champion Ame. These characters engage in typical Western queer narratives, such as coming out and family conflict, while also participating in stories not overtly about queer identity. The fan game also takes a considerably darker tone than the original Pokémon series, signaling both the intended adult audience of the game and how LGBTQ+ individuals often deal with difficult issues in their lived experiences. Although *Pokémon Reborn* relies on the official series as a basis for its gameplay and narrative, the fan game challenges the hetero- and chrononormative design of the main series by focusing on queer lived experiences, incorporating a variety of queer characters, using narratives that highlight issues within queer communities, and envisioning queer futurity for LGBTQ+ individuals in the global franchise. Although *Pokémon Reborn*'s approach to queering video game norms are more measured than avant-garde games, the fan game offers LGBTQ+ players an opportunity to experience queer time, space, and play in a familiar series while subverting some heteronormative tropes in mainstream gaming.

Chrononormativity in the Pokémon Franchise

Pokémon games are filled with colorful creatures, vibrant settings, and a child-like aesthetic. Yet, the game design of the Pokémon franchise has gotten increasingly complex over the last twenty-four years, requiring players to attain a deep knowledge of the intricacies of its world. The gameplay elements of the official Pokémon series also encourage heteronormative modes of understanding the game, particularly in its emphasis on linear progression, competition, and defeating others. Analyzing the gameplay of video games may not appear at first to be a meaningful process, yet how the game encourages and rewards certain behaviors can affect understandings of the meaning of a game much as narrative or visuals can.

Ludologists such as Ian Bogost and Jesper Juul investigate how the rules and structures of a game are made, implemented, and experienced. These rules and structures shape interactions with games, forming the gameplay of a video game.⁵⁷ Video games, as opposed to television shows or movies, draw some of their meaningfulness from the ability of the player to interact directly with what is occurring on screen. Jesper Juul notes that while the construction of a physical world cues the player into making assumptions about game rules, the gameplay can also inform players' perceptions of the gameworld.⁵⁸ Games employ what Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric," encouraging certain beliefs and opinions not simply through characterization or story but also through the methods of actually playing the game.⁵⁹ Bogost posits that video games create rhetorical authority by utilizing underlying and invisible codes to encourage systems of behavior, thus making claims on what behavior should/should not and can/cannot be taken in certain situations. This encourages specific modes of understanding and knowledge through the playing of a game. As Bogost notes, procedures not only dictate how a game works but also makes "a claim of how things work" outside of the game itself.⁶⁰ The procedural rhetoric of a game gains its persuasive strength from its position as an underlying, invisible structure of the game. Because the procedural, or ludic, elements of a game operate as code that the player cannot physically manipulate, the procedure is assumed to be an integral and objective part of the system that goes unquestioned in its effect.

In response to theories of the rhetorical power of gameplay, games scholars argue for the development of new forms of gameplay. Alex Galloway argues that for games to be politically

⁵⁷ Jesper Juul, *half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ Juul, *half-real*.

⁵⁹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 28.

⁶⁰ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 29.

progressive, “artists should create new grammars of action, not simply new grammars of
visuality.”⁶¹ To some game scholars, gameplay that subverts the logic of mainstream game
development is a powerful way to challenge dominant institutional practices. Games scholars
interested in queerness often focus on ways in which games themselves may cue players into
heteronormative readings of games and the larger world. Stephen Greer notes how rules allow
players to interact and improvise in the game world materializes those allowed actions as
“coherent norms within the rhetorical logic of a game.”⁶² As Arne Schröder discusses, the
repetitive quality of gameplay may train the player to “act in a specific way in a game-world that
follows predetermined rules...” which plays a part in “the reproduction of social hierarchies and
norms by becoming a point of reference for the player.”⁶³ Games may replicate real-world
inequalities and biases by constructing systems of behavior that reify hegemonic discourses and
forms of knowledge as the basis for action in games. Queer games scholars argue the current
gaming environment overwhelmingly supports heteronormative modes of play and power in
video games, partially because most workers in the video game industry are straight, cisgender
men.⁶⁴ In turn, heteronormative approaches to game design become the unspoken norm with
which most dominant games are constructed and compared against.

Much like the term *queer*, there is no one definitive description of heteronormative game
design, other than that it replicates heteronormative discourses and forms of knowledge in game
design. However, many queer game scholars agree current dominant trends in gaming exemplify

⁶¹ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 125.

⁶² Stephen Greer, “Playing queer: Affordances for sexuality in Fable and Dragon Age,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 5, no. 1 (2013): 3-21, 8. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.5.1.3_1.

⁶³ Arne Schröder, “‘We don’t want it changed, do we?’ - Gender and Sexuality in Role-Playing Games,” *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Games Culture* 2, no. 2 (2008): 241-256. <https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/46>

⁶⁴ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

heteronormativity, particularly in how games encourage the player to succeed by becoming dominant over a space. Queer game developer and researcher merritt kopas claims that heteronormative game design tends to perpetuate a “male, colonial gaze” through the encouragement of mastery over gameplay systems and gameworlds.⁶⁵ Dimitrios Pavlounis argues that some elements of heteronormative game design include elements that “facilitate movement; encourage spatial, temporal, and technical mastery; promote individualism; and depend on clearly defined goals and linear character progression.”⁶⁶ Other queer games scholars posit that competition, violence, success, emphasis on personal achievement, and infinite use of natural resources also constitute heteronormative game design.⁶⁷ Most video games utilize some, if not all, of these game design principles, and game design textbooks and classes often urge the necessity of heteronormative design elements such as win states, freedom of movement, and competition.⁶⁸ Through an emphasis on consumption, mastery, and linear progression towards clear and unquestioned goals, heteronormative video game design elements also resonate with chrononormativity, a neoliberal discourse that positions the transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage, child-rearing, and death as the “natural” trajectory of human life.⁶⁹ Chrononormative game design encourages the accumulation of skills and experience points throughout a game, mirroring the ways people are expected to “grow up” under neoliberalism.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ merritt kopas, “Interrupting Play: Queer Games & Futurity,” last modified February 18, 2014, <http://mkopas.net/build>.

⁶⁶ Pavlounis, “Straightening Up the Archive” 584.

⁶⁷ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*; Jordan Youngblood, “I Wouldn’t Even Know the Real Me Myself: Queering Failure in *Metal Gear Solid 2*,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 211-222.

⁶⁸ Bonnie Ruberg, “Queer Indie Video Games”

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.

⁷⁰ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

Like heteronormative game design, queer game design does not have a concrete description or set of principles. Yet, most queer game scholars note that queer game design often rejects, subverts, or questions dominant modes of design that foreground difficulty, competition, mastery, and linear movement. Queer game design challenges the notion that elements of heteronormative game design are vital to produce fun and meaningful game experiences. As Allison Harvey notes, many independent queer game creators using the coding program Twine construct games that overtly challenge heteronormative game design, rejecting elements like “avatars, artificial intelligence, graphical environments, and in many cases winning conditions, opponents, and engrained game design values such as balance and challenge.”⁷¹ Queer games may also challenge the celebration of difficult or “hardcore” game design, which also has heavily masculinized connotations.⁷² Pavlounis argues queer games reject the notion of objective truth and linearity in storytelling, making narrative messy in ways that subvert hegemonic understandings of narrative and history.⁷³ In these ways, queer game design disrupts chrononormative narratives of progress and consumption, questioning mainstream game design elements that focus on the accumulation of skills towards a set path of beating the game.

Before analyzing how *Pokémon Reborn* plays with heteronormative game design principles, a look into the official video games can provide insight into the relatively chrononormative design already present in the series.⁷⁴ In a mainline Pokémon game, the player takes control of an in-game Pokémon Trainer, choosing between a male- or female-presenting avatar. The player controls the avatar in an overworld, exploring cities, towns, and natural

⁷¹ Harvey, “Twine’s Revolution,” 99.

⁷² Harvey, “Twine’s Revolution.”

⁷³ Pavlounis, “Straightening Up the Archive.”

⁷⁴ For this section, I will focus exclusively on mainline console Pokémon games, including games from Pokémon Red and Green to Pokémon Sword and Shield. No spin-offs, ancillary games, or phone app games will be included in this discussion, as Pokémon Reborn directly stems from the mainline titles.

environments such as seas and caves. In certain areas of the game, the player's in-game avatar can encounter Pokémon, the name given to a collection of mostly animal-like creatures that have special powers. When a player encounters a wild Pokémon that has not yet been caught by another Trainer, the player can attempt to catch it by engaging the creature in a Pokémon battle. The player then sends out their Pokémon, tries to weaken the other Pokémon using moves, and attempts to catch the wild Pokémon with a PokéBall.

Although Pokémon games encourage players to catch every species of Pokémon, the main gameplay centers on Pokémon battles between the player's avatar and AI Pokémon Trainers. The player wins a Pokémon Battle with another Trainer by attacking the opposing Pokémon until the entire team of Pokémon has no Hit Points (HP) left. Pokémon attack one another by using Moves that have different elemental Types, e.g., the move Hydro Pump is Water-type, while Flamethrower is Fire-type. Each Pokémon has one or two types as well, and the matchup between the type of move used and the type of Pokémon it is used on determines how much HP the Pokémon uses. When Hydro Pump is used on a Fire-type Pokémon, it hits for double damage, since Water is "super-effective" against Fire. When Flamethrower is used on a Water-type, it hits for half damage, since Fire is "not very effective" against Water. At the time of writing, there are currently 18 elemental types, 893 Pokémon, and 796 moves, creating an extremely complex system of battle options.

×		Defending type																	
		NORMAL	FIGHT	FLYING	POISON	GROUND	ROCK	BUG	GHOST	STEEL	FIRE	WATER	GRASS	ELECTR	PSYCHO	ICE	DRAGON	DARK	FAIRY
Attacking type	NORMAL	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	0x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x
	FIGHT	2x	1x	½x	½x	1x	2x	½x	0x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	2x	1x	2x	½x
	FLYING	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	½x	2x	1x	½x	1x	1x	2x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x
	POISON	1x	1x	1x	½x	½x	½x	1x	½x	0x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x
	GROUND	1x	1x	0x	2x	1x	2x	½x	1x	2x	2x	1x	½x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x
	ROCK	1x	½x	2x	1x	½x	1x	2x	1x	½x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x
	BUG	1x	½x	½x	½x	1x	1x	1x	½x	½x	½x	1x	2x	1x	2x	1x	1x	2x	½x
	GHOST	0x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	½x
	STEEL	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	½x	½x	½x	1x	½x	1x	2x	1x	1x	2x
	FIRE	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	2x	1x	2x	½x	½x	2x	1x	1x	2x	½x	1x	1x
	WATER	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	2x	1x	1x	1x	2x	½x	½x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x
	GRASS	1x	1x	½x	½x	2x	2x	½x	1x	½x	½x	2x	½x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x
	ELECTR	1x	1x	2x	1x	0x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	½x	½x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x
	PSYCHO	1x	2x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x	0x	1x
	ICE	1x	1x	2x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	½x	½x	½x	2x	1x	1x	½x	2x	1x	1x
	DRAGON	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	0x
	DARK	1x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	1x	1x	½x	½x
FAIRY	1x	2x	1x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	½x	½x	1x	1x	1x	1x	1x	2x	2x	1x	

These matchups are suitable for Generation VI onward.

Figure 1: Current Type Match-Up Chart for Pokémon Games (“Type/Type Chart,” Bulbapedia, accessed February 24, 2020, https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Type/Type_chart.)

When Pokémon win a Battle, they gain Experience Points (EXP). If a Pokémon gets enough experience points, they grow by one Level and receive a boost to their strength in several areas, called Stats. If a Pokémon grows a certain number of levels or achieves several other requirements, they will evolve into a stronger species of Pokémon.



Figure 2: Evolutionary Line of Rowlet (“Rowlet (Pokémon),” Bulbapedia, accessed February 24, 2020, [https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Rowlet_\(Pokémon\)](https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Rowlet_(Pokémon)))

The primary goal of Pokémon games is to amass a team of six powerful Pokémon by battling, gaining experience, and evolving into more powerful Pokémon. Then the player must

defeat all eight powerful Gym Leaders, take down an evil group that threatens to destroy the Pokémon world, beat the Elite Four, and become Champion of the Pokémon world. The Pokémon games also allow players to trade their Pokémon with other players, battle online with others, and breed Pokémon to make them as strong as possible. However, these modes of play are secondary to the main quest. Despite their cute and cartoonish appearance, Pokémon games contain incredibly complex systems of gameplay, requiring players to have deep knowledge of the structures and variability of the game to be successful.

That complexity contributes to the game's heteronormative game design. The act of catching, collecting, and battling Pokémon throughout these games positions the player as one capable of controlling nature itself, echoing kopas' and Pavlounis' argument that mastery over the natural world is one of the core elements of heteronormative game design. The game also awards players who deeply understand the ways Types, moves, and Pokémon stats intersect to build a robust battle system, echoing Pavlounis' argument that video games tend to encourage technical mastery of complex systems. Pokémon games also support a notion of linear progression, both in the raising of Pokémon and the objectives of the game, tying it to neoliberal ideals of chrononormativity. As the player raises Pokémon, they become stronger, gaining strength with each level and turning into stronger Pokémon in the progress. Both in play and narrative, the Pokémon follow an arc of progress throughout the game, going from weak to strong and young to old. In the Rowlet evolutionary line above, Rowlet starts as a cute, weak, and small Pokémon and then evolves into Dartrix and eventually Decidueye, a significantly larger and strong-looking owl. The player's avatar follows similar linear progress throughout the game, collecting more powerful Pokémon and battling more powerful Trainers as the game progresses. Both the evolution lines and the linear trajectory of the player's avatar throughout the

Pokémon games highlight a chrononormative approach to age and experience, in which younger people gain more experience and become stronger and wiser the older they get. Pokémon cannot revert to previous Pokémon either, further establishing the notion that growth occurs in a straight path. The emphasis on growth also requires players to capture and train the most powerful Pokémon available to win the game, encouraging players to use certain Pokémon based on their utility and strength in battle, rather than affective, queer reasons, such as finding a Pokémon to be particularly cute. Although Pokémon does not explicitly tie the evolution of Pokémon to human growth, the display of inevitable growth towards an ultimately powerful form reflects chrononormative ideas of “appropriate” ways to grow up and become a proper adult.

The Pokémon battles themselves most explicitly connect to heteronormative game design, as the game only allows players to progress by defeating other Trainers in the game, requiring players to focus on strength, opposition, and violence to succeed. Pokémon games do not show the Pokémon taking realistic damage from attacks, bleeding, or otherwise showing physical signs of being hurt. Even so, Pokémon games require the player to approach the Pokémon in an inherently oppositional manner, in which the enemy must be either caught or wholly defeated. Pokémon’s battle system also exemplifies Harvey’s connection of heteronormative gameplay and balance and challenge. Through the incredibly large variety of Pokémon, Types, and moves, the creators of Pokémon games have set to balance the game so no Type or Pokémon can dominate the others. Players must know each of the 324 possible Type matchups to effectively defeat opponents as the game progresses, requiring players to have intimate knowledge of the balances between Pokémon. The game also increases the difficulty throughout the game by giving the most difficult Trainers a team of Pokémon with a variety of different Types. Most trainers including the Gym Leaders and Elite Four focus on battling with

one Type of Pokémon, while the Pokémon Champion and other difficult trainers' battles with a variety of different Pokémon types again requiring players to remember all the possible Type matchups as well as the Types of opposing Pokémon. In Pokémon's evolution, Trainer paths, and Pokémon battles, the games encourage players to follow a linear progression by conquering the natural world, defeating other trainers, and learning complex, balanced, and challenging combat systems to become the ultimate trainer in the world, directly linking Pokémon games to heteronormative game design.

Queering(?) the Pokémon World

Pokémon Reborn challenges some of the gameplay of the official Pokémon games by creating new battle mechanics that subvert traditional methods of success in Pokémon battles. Yet, the reliance on the original Pokémon battle system, particularly with its emphasis on linear progression, strength, and competition, somewhat hinders the political queerness of *Pokémon Reborn's* gameplay. This tension highlights the ways the original Pokémon series similarly has been designed with heteronormative frameworks yet also allows for queer expression and pleasure. The fan game replicates the original series' focus on linear progression and chrononormativity by maintaining the emphasis on Pokémon evolution and the accumulation of strength throughout the game. *Pokémon Reborn* introduces level caps which prohibits Pokémon on the player's team to go beyond a certain level before receiving Gym Badges. For example, players cannot have Pokémon over level 20 before receiving the first Gym Badge. This might be a slight queering of Pokémon gameplay, as the level caps forbid players simply from training Pokémon to extremely high levels to easily defeat the most difficult trainers in the game. However, the very limit on levels in *Pokémon Reborn* recognizes how linear progress is necessary to navigate the Pokémon battle system, a system that the fan game dutifully replicates.

Pokémon still evolve at particular levels, learn stronger moves as they gain levels, and gain stat boosts as they level up. Using the base Pokémon battle system, the game still encourages heteronormative notions of progress and strength.

Similarly, some of the game's new features also replicate elements of heteronormative game design. *Pokémon Reborn*'s most drastic change to Pokémon battles is the Field Effect system. In *Pokémon Reborn*, the environment the player's avatar is in in the gameworld determines which kind of Field Effect will be present in a Pokémon Battle. For example, encountering a Pokémon in a forest will result in the Battle having the Forest Field Effect, while a battle with a Swimmer while surfing on a Pokémon's back in Lake Azurine will have the Water Surface Field Effect. Currently, *Pokémon Reborn* has thirty-five Field Effects, each of which influences Pokémon battles in a variety of ways. For this section, I will use the Misty Terrain Field Effect to discuss the ways this new game design feature might queer the game design of official Pokémon games. The Misty Terrain provides a variety of effects on a Pokémon battle, none of which exist in the official Pokémon games. These effects greatly influence the styles of play that are viable to win under such conditions. Several moves are given a boost in power on the terrain, particularly Fairy-type moves. Dark-type moves and Dragon-type moves suffer a decrease in power, while other moves, like Explosion, become unusable. Certain moves may terminate the Misty Terrain entirely, eliminating all the benefits and detriments of the Field Effect. Other moves can transition the Misty Terrain to another field changing what strategies might work in the battle. Trainers can also give Pokémon seeds to hold that boost stats and/or provide special benefits when on that field. Each of the thirty-five fields provides the same complex system of gameplay changes, further complicating the Pokémon battle system.

In many ways, this may seem to be further entrenching the Pokémon series in heteronormative game design elements. The Field Effect system appears to be yet another way to balance and provide a challenge to Pokémon battles, requiring players to learn and memorize even more information to be able to win even the earliest of battles. This system also requires players to consider the moves each of the six Pokémon on their team, requiring constant attention to the ways current moves may be affected by Field Effects. The complexity of the system awards players that investigate Reborn City thoroughly for the places of various move tutors and TMs (Technical Machines) that can teach Pokémon new moves that may assist them in battles on certain fields. The battle system also replicates the official series' emphasis on success and win states by asking players to defeat many opponents throughout the game.

Most notably, the Field Effects encourage temporal and spatial mastery in ways the original series does not. In mainstream Pokémon games, the area around the in-game avatar rarely affects the ways players adjust their gameplay style in battle. Official Pokémon games require players to understand the nexus of complex elements in the battle systems encouraging technical mastery over the algorithms of battle. Yet, rarely does spatial and temporal mastery of the gameworld affect the success of players in battle. With Field Effects, *Pokémon Reborn* explicitly connects the battle system with the gameworld, linking the player's in-game movement in and around Reborn City to the strategies of battle gameplay. To succeed in almost any Pokémon battle, *Reborn* players must not only achieve technical mastery over the algorithms of the battle but also understand how the spatial and temporal elements of the overworld affect the strategies and methods of success that are viable in battle. For example, battles in the Coral Ward, including the battle with Gym Leader Adrienn, all take place on the Misty Terrain field due to the harsh effects of fog in the area caused by the pollution of Team Meteor. When the

player must travel inside traitorous Gym Leader Terra's computer to capture and defeat the villain, all battles inside take place on a Glitch Field. These Field Effects are both spatially located in only particular segments of the gameworld and temporally related to the narrative of the game mostly through the ways Team Meteor has negatively affected Reborn City. For a player to succeed in Pokémon battles in these areas, she not only must have technical mastery over the Field Effect system but also a deep knowledge of the ways the gameworld and the narrative contribute to the Field Effect system. By inextricably linking the gameworld, narrative, and Pokémon battle system, *Pokémon Reborn* appears to further encourage mastery over all portions of the game and contribute to the official series' heteronormative game design.

Other new gameplay elements reject the heteronormative game design of the original Pokémon series, particularly through the encouragement of affective connections in Pokémon encounters. In the official Pokémon series, most wild Pokémon appear in grassy patches in areas called Routes. Each Route has a specific set of Pokémon species that appear ad infinitum in the grassy areas of these routes. For example, Route 1 of *Pokémon Sword and Shield* contains eight Pokémon that can be captured, each of which can be captured as many times as the player wants.⁷⁵ The constant repopulation of Pokémon echoes the heteronormative and colonial game design trope that natural environments in gameworlds exist solely for the constant exploitation by the player.⁷⁶ *Pokémon Reborn* features some grassy patches and Routes as well but also features an extensive amount of Pokémon only obtainable through one-time Events. These Events often have basic narrative elements that require the player to assist the Pokémon in some way. For example, the only Litleo available in *Pokémon Reborn* must first be found in a corner

⁷⁵ Game Freak, *Pokémon Sword and Shield*, Switch. (The Pokémon Company, 2019).

⁷⁶ Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

of Obsidia Ward. Once the player tries to capture Litleo, the Pokémon runs away to the Underground Railnet. Litleo then runs into the hostile Pokémon Klingklang. The player must defeat the high-leveled Klingklang to save Litleo, who then gladly joins the player's Pokémon team. The only Zigzagoon available early must be saved from an abusive Pokémon trainer. The only Meditite can be obtained by attending training sessions at Apophyll Academy with the Pokémon. These special encounters subvert the original games by positioning Pokémon not just as replaceable creatures but beings with their own stories and experiences. This encourages players to think of these Pokémon as something of a companion with a backstory and history of their own, challenging some of the heteronormative design of the original.

The connection between players and these individual Pokémon connects to notions of queer pleasure and intimacy. Despite being made of mere code, players are encouraged to build affective connections with these troubled Pokémon in the game. As Ruberg notes, "Queer intimacy is intimacy done differently... [it encourages] forms of interpersonal connection that do not conform with normative logics of relationality and closeness."⁷⁷ While queer intimacy may refer to LGBTQ+ individuals' connections with one another, it also describes ways in which people may develop affinities for objects in ways considered appropriate only for human connections. *Pokémon Reborn* encourages players to develop connections with these Pokémon and although the narratives behind the Pokémon's troubles is slight, that narrative design can instill an intimacy between the player and the creature. This intimacy may be a queer one, as the investment in digital creatures resists chrono- and heteronormative norms of beneficial emotional connection. Despite the affective connections with these Pokémon, players still capture them and force them to fight other Pokémon, again operating with the heteronormative frameworks of

⁷⁷ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 41.

competition and success. *Pokémon Reborn* introduces queer game design elements, yet its closeness with the official Pokémon video games produces a reliance on heteronormative frameworks.

The tension between the subversion and reliance on heteronormative game design in *Pokémon Reborn* points to ways the official Pokémon series also exemplifies a seemingly heteronormative game with some potentially queer elements. Although the main storyline and gameplay of official Pokémon games focus on the competition of Pokémon, the trading and breeding of Pokémon can provide affective pleasures that echo queer game design. In all mainline Pokémon games and *Pokémon Reborn*, players can trade Pokémon with one another either via the internet or, in previous generations, a link cable connecting two game systems. The trading of Pokémon is not required for players to win the game, but if a player wishes to truly “catch ‘em all,” they must trade Pokémon with at least one other player. In each generation of official Pokémon games, two versions of the same game are released, and each game contains Pokémon that the other version does not. To complete their Pokémon collection, players must coordinate with other players, which could be yet another way players engage in mastery over the natural world. Traded Pokémon also gain experience faster than Pokémon caught in-game, further encouraging the exchange of Pokémon for success in-game. Trading encourages competition by rewarding players with battle advantages and cooperation by requiring players to communicate and coordinate to share Pokémon.

Players can trade Pokémon for other purposes than just to complete their Pokémon collection or to gain an advantage in battle. As Nakazawa Shin'ichi argues, the original Pokémon games were always designed to be communal experiences between young children, epitomized in the trading of Pokémon from one player to another. Shin'ichi claims the trading of Pokémon

constitutes a gift “which one player deems both desirable and precious and the other player is gifting to him out of kindness.”⁷⁸ Players not only exchange Pokémon, but also the effort it took to capture and raise the creature, along with a nickname that cannot be changed. The exchange of Pokémon not only sends the coded creature between the games but also conveys a positive affective connection from one player to another, creating an affective economy of gifts. Sara Ahmed notes that in a neoliberal economic environment, “emotions *do* things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”⁷⁹ The trading of Pokémon not only expands collections but also builds community networks around the sharing and exchanging of Pokémon, as evidenced by the vast number of Pokémon trading groups on social media sites like Facebook.⁸⁰ The potential affective connections a player has with individual Pokémon and the bonds that form when trading Pokémon echoes notions of queer pleasure. If queer pleasure situates in “alternate forms of pleasure,” then the system of trading Pokémon in official games and *Pokémon Reborn* taps into the alternate pleasure of embracing connection through the exchange of digital objects and creatures.⁸¹

Pokémon Reborn reveals the ways official Pokémon games engage with queerness as an integral portion of the game, even if the affective connections between players and Pokémon are secondary to the battle system. Yet, saving troubled Pokémon and trading with friends gains meaning not only through gameplay but also narrative. In *Pokémon Reborn*, the character

⁷⁸ Nakazawa Shinichi, *The Lure of Pokémon: Video Games and the Savage Mind*, (Japan’s Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture: Tokyo, 1997), 86.

⁷⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117-139, 119. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>.

⁸⁰ “Pokémon Sword & Shield Trades and Giveaways (AKA Best Group Ever),” Facebook, accessed February 28th, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/PokémonTradesAndGiveaways/>.

⁸¹ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 41.

intervenes on Litleo's behalf, who then joins the player's team. The only way to catch Litleo is through this method but the narrative of the endangered lion cub provides far more potential affective connection than if Litleo simply appeared in the Underground ad infinitum as typical Pokémon do. In trading, Pokémon are exchanged, but the affective connections associated with trading occur because of the relationship between the two traders, a narrative part and parcel with the Pokémon flying between Game Boys. Although the gameplay encourages and rewards these ludic features, the affective elements stem from the stories these Pokémon encounters tell, no matter how simple these narratives are. Even though the gameplay elements of the official Pokémon series and *Pokémon Reborn* mostly align with heteronormativity, these small instances of queerness within the games represent a potential subversion of mainstream gaming norms. This tension between "straight" and queer in Pokémon may partially explain the queer investment in the series, as well as the largely queer narrative of *Pokémon Reborn*. Much as the design of special encounters in the fan game resists some of the heteronormative elements of the Pokémon series, the queer stories in *Pokémon Reborn* create another queerer variation of the typical Pokémon story.

Queer Narrative and Futurity in *Pokémon Reborn*

In *Pokémon Reborn*, the non-playable characters wait. Luna hides at Radomus' house to avoid her religious zealot father, El. Gym Leader Noel and Anna are locked in an abusive orphanage. Aya stays with her overbearing mother, and Adrienn remains stuck in time. When the player's avatar intervenes in the lives of these characters, things change. When the player battles Radomus, El captures Luna, who eventually escapes. The player helps Noel and Anna escape the orphanage. The player convinces Aya to leave her mother after a Gym battle, and Adrienn

manages to escape the world beneath Reborn City with the player's help. This is the formula of many game narratives, where the non-playable characters (NPCs) have a problem that exists before the player intervenes. Through the player's help, the problem is resolved, and the NPCs transition to another form of stasis, free from problems for the rest of the game. The NPCs in *Pokémon Reborn* appear to follow the same trajectory, but the narrative paths in the game are much queerer than they first appear. Contrasting previous work on queer video games and queer modders, *Pokémon Reborn* focuses on the narrative as its main site of political queerness by placing queer characters at the front and center of traditionally heteronormative video game narratives. These stories reject chrononormative story arcs of mainstream games by rejecting narratives of linear progress. Through doing so, *Pokémon Reborn* imagines a queer futurity not just for its queer characters but also for LGBTQ+ people in gaming narratives and communities.

Both in academic research and the popular press, mainstream video games have been rightfully called out for their homophobic narratives and lack of overtly LGBTQ+ characters.⁸² Many games simply do not include any queer characters. AAA game developers often claim the inclusion of queer characters could hurt sales figures, despite the deep investment of queer games developers and players in video game communities.⁸³ Other video games deride, humiliate, or otherwise make fun of gay and transgender individuals.⁸⁴ Although queer characters have slowly entered more mainstream works, they rarely have central roles in the game, appearing as NPCs or one of a large number of playable characters. As Adrienne Shaw

⁸² Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

⁸³ Alex Wawro, "LGBTQ devs & players speak up about the need for authentic queer culture in games," Gamasutra, March 23, 2018, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/315784/LGBTQ_devs_players_speak_up_about_the_need_for_authentic_queer_culture_in_games.php.

⁸⁴ Ebony Adams, "Queer Tropes vs Video Games: Press 'B' To Hate Gay People," Feminist Frequency, March 5, 2019, <https://feministfrequency.com/video/queer-tropes-vs-video-games-press-b-to-hate-gay-people/>.

and Elizaveta Friesem note, many queer characters in games are often not explicitly referred to as such, but rather players and fan communities surrounding a game circulate readings that a character is LGBTQ+. ⁸⁵ So while the rest of the gaming industry struggles with queer characters and narratives, it is hardly surprising that the Pokémon series has similarly ignored queer individuals and storylines in the series.

The official Pokémon series not only foregoes the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters but also firmly entrenches its story in chrononormative tropes. Each Pokémon game follows almost the exact story beats with a few variations throughout the twenty-four years of the series. In each game, the player takes control of a young avatar, often said to be ten years old. The avatar lives with their mother, who receives little characterization beyond being a mom. Notably, almost none of the games mention why these avatars do not have fathers. ⁸⁶ When the avatar chooses to leave to explore the Pokémon world, the mother agrees with a little bit of sorrow. With the help of a (usually male) Pokémon professor, the avatar chooses their first Pokémon of the game. This professor acts as a much more prominent parental figure throughout the game, checking in with the avatar's progress, asking them to assist in taking down the evil team, and using their unreasonable omnipresence to remind the avatar not to use items at any inappropriate time, like biking indoors. ⁸⁷ Each game also has one or two rivals who receive their first Pokémon at the same time as the avatar. This rival follows a similar path as the avatar throughout the game, often acting as a foil for the player to chart their progress. For example, the avatar battles with rival Gary seven times throughout the game before finally facing him after he gains the title of

⁸⁵ Shaw and Friesem, "Where Is the Queerness in Games?"

⁸⁶ The third generation Pokémon games are the only ones that explicitly discuss the avatar's father, Norman, who is one of the Gym Leaders that must be defeated.

⁸⁷ Memes about the phrase "Professor Oak's words echoed: There's a time and place for everything..." have been very popular. For an appropriately queer meme, see RandomMan, "Nidoqueen," KnowYourMeme, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/641975-professor-oak>.

Pokémon Champion in *Pokémon Red and Green*. In each official Pokémon game, the rival replicates the avatar's journey as a way to gauge the player's progress throughout the game.

Like the battle system described above, the narrative of official Pokémon games follows similar discourses of chrononormativity as players progress through the game. Pokémon games follow a typical growing-up narrative, in which the child protagonist faces a series of challenges before emerging victorious and successfully transitioning to an adult. Yet, as children's literature scholar Jacqueline Rose discusses, the children in these stories and the children's literature genre itself are socially-constructed mostly to reinforce dominant hierarchies.⁸⁸ In his discussion of the queer potential of *The Legend of Zelda*, Tison Pugh notes that the Zelda games, along with much of Nintendo's child-oriented video games, serve to model "a young boy's journey into heteronormativity."⁸⁹ The narrative arch of the avatar's journey in Pokémon games follows much the same ethos. By defeating enemies, many of whom are adult trainers, the child avatar grows stronger throughout the Pokémon game. On the path to becoming the strongest trainer in the land, the avatar also takes down a large criminal organization that threatens to steal Pokémon and/or destroy the world, despite the failure of adults to do so. Finally, the avatar becomes the strongest trainer in the land by defeating the Elite Four and Pokémon Champion, becoming the Champion themselves. The storyline of an official Pokémon game appears to follow a strictly chrononormative arc, where the avatar and the player turn "toward maximum production" through defeating others in their way and growing to become the strongest trainer in the land, a full-fledged adult.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992).

⁸⁹ Tison Pugh, "The Queer Narrativity of the Hero's Journey in Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* Video Games," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 48, no. 2 (2018): 225-251. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2018.0009>.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

Pokémon Reborn queers the narrative conventions of official Pokémon games by incorporating queer characters, challenging the chrononormativity of the typical narrative arc, and imagining a queer futurity for the characters and, by proxy, fans of the Pokémon games. By simply incorporating queer characters and stories, *Pokémon Reborn* resists the queer erasure of the typical Pokémon narrative. Several of these stories highlight common issues LGBTQ+ people face. When Cain first appears in the story, he has been kicked out of his mother's house because of his pansexuality and is homeless, a common problem that LGBTQ+ individuals face in the United States.⁹¹ Cain's existence also subverts the common trope that pansexual and effeminate men in games are sexual predators.⁹² Another prominent queer narrative in the game centers on the abusive relationship between the female Gym Leaders Titania and Amaria, which reflects the unfortunately high frequency of abuse in queer relationships. The avatar meets Titania and Amaria individually through the first few episodes of the game and both Gym Leaders gladly help the avatar fend off the evil Team Meteor. However, once the player-avatar reaches their mansion in episode 12, they discover Amaria suffers from depression and has scars from self-harming. Titania supports Amaria through her mental illness despite not loving Amaria back. Titania's diary entries strongly hint that Amaria threatens suicide and self-harm to force Titania to stay with her, resulting in an unfortunate cycle of abuse. When Amaria discovers Titania does not love her, she throws herself down a waterfall with Titania jumping after her. Both survive, but after Amaria tries to drown the player-avatar to get back at Titania, Titania leaves Amaria for good. While nowhere near as light-hearted as Cain, Titania and Amaria's

⁹¹ Kristen A Prock and Angie C Kennedy, "Federally-funded Transitional Living Programs and Services for LGBTQ-identified Homeless Youth: A Profile in Unmet Need," *Children and Youth Services Review* 83 (2017): 17-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.10.023>.

⁹² Meghan Blythe Adams, "Bye, Bye, Birdo: Heroic Androgyny and Villainous Gender-Variance in Video Games," In *Queerness in Play*, ed. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, 147-163, (Basingstroke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

relationship touches on many important issues in queer communities, including suicide, self-harm, and abusive relationships.⁹³

Other queer characters appear in the game but do not engage in narratives closely associated with their queer identities. Pokémon Champion Aimee, who casually mentions being transgender, introduces the player-avatar to the Reborn region and provides advice for the player before Gym Leader battles but is not involved in a narrative overtly about common LGBTQ+ lived experiences. Gym Leader Adrienn, who identifies as non-binary, briefly mentions xyr/xem pronouns but spends most of their time in the game helping to fix Reborn City after the invasion of Team Meteor. Nonheteronormative relationships appear as well. The Gym Leaders Ciel, Terra, and Samson discuss their somewhat tenuous polyamorous relationship, which falls apart due to Terra's alliance with Team Meteor. The long running time of *Pokémon Reborn* allows the creators to place queer characters in a variety of settings and narratives which may or may not focus on that character's gender and/or sexuality. Most importantly, these narratives are central and vitally important to understanding the complex narratives in *Pokémon Reborn*, rejecting the type of "gay buttons" that require players to actively seek out queer content hidden in video game narratives.⁹⁴

Several storylines in *Pokémon Reborn* also reject the typical chrononormative arcs of a typical Pokémon game. At first glance, *Pokémon Reborn* simply replicates the progress of the avatar of a typical Pokémon game. The avatar receives their Pokémon, fights strong characters, travels the gameworld, aims to take down an evil organization, and, following the release of the

⁹³ Courtney McDonald, "The Social Context of Woman-to-Woman Intimate Partner Abuse (WWIPA)," *Journal of Family Violence* 27, no. 7 (2012): 635-45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-012-9455-z>.

⁹⁴ Meghan Blythe Adams, "Renegade Sex: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the Mass Effect Series," *Special Issue: Game Studies In Media Res* 9, no. 14 (2015): 40-54. <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/154>.

final episode, will aim to beat the Pokémon Champion to become the strongest trainer in the game. Yet, *Pokémon Reborn* queers this basic narrative by rejecting the discourses of coming-of-age stories, allowing the game to explore more mature themes not often associated with child-centered narratives. Each of the six possible avatars is coded as a young adult rather than a child and none of the avatar's parents or family members are mentioned in the narrative. Players also get to choose their pronouns, altering the dialogue used throughout the game to suit the player's desire. In official Pokémon games, players can only choose between boy and girl characters which have automatically assigned he/him and she/her pronouns. As Adrienne Shaw notes, avatar selection is a relatively insignificant way games try to incorporate queer characters.⁹⁵ Yet, the ability to choose young adult characters with preferred pronouns already breaks with official Pokémon games' chrononormative discourses of youth and heteronormativity.

Other archetypal characters have been replaced as well. The patriarchal professor character of the typical Pokémon games is replaced by Ame, the in-game avatar of the game's creator Amethyst, who saves the avatar from a deadly train crash, gives them their first Pokémon, and acts as a reference for help in tough Gym Battles. Rather than acting as some parental figure over the player, Ame simply sets the player up with a Pokémon and offers advice in tough battles as needed. Ame does not interact with the avatar narratively at all, besides when they both attack a major Team Meteor Base. With the avatar options and the exclusion of both the male and female parental figures of the original Pokémon series, *Pokémon Reborn* rejects the typical coming-of-age narrative of chrononormative game stories in favor of situating the player in a decidedly adult world, a world of train crashes, natural disasters, and adult themes.

⁹⁵ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*.

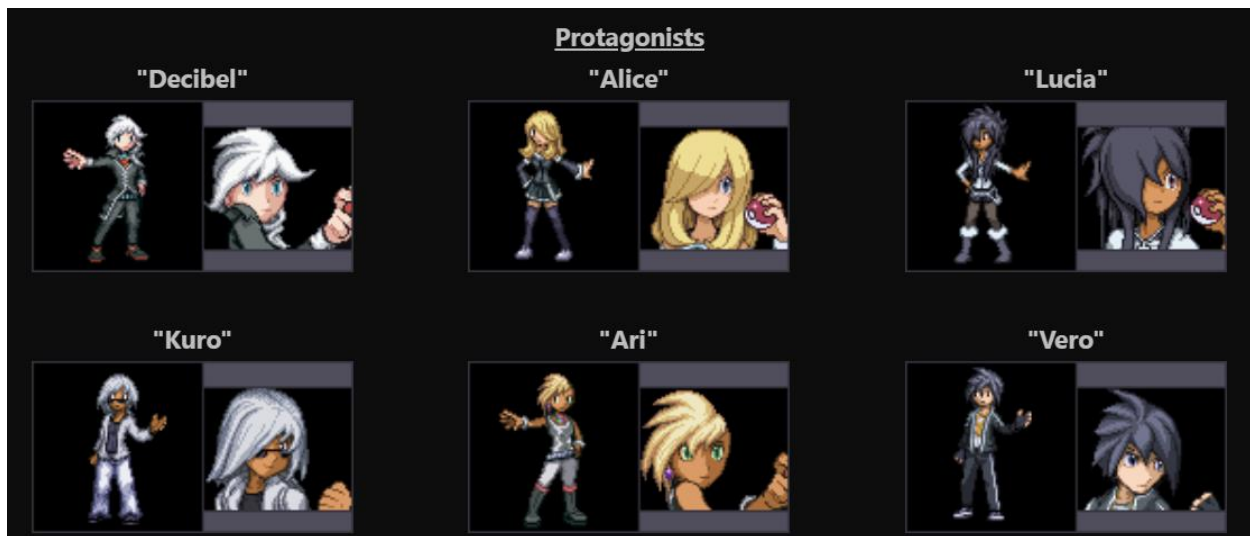


Figure 3: Avatar Options for *Pokémon Reborn*. Lucia and Alice are women, Vero and Kuro are men, and Ari and Decibel are nonbinary, although players can choose to use any pronoun for any character. ("Characters," *Pokémon Reborn* Forums, accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.rebornevo.com/pr/characters/>.)

Other queer characters in the game challenge chrononormative tropes of physical and narrative movement. The role of the rival in *Pokémon* games is to reflect the growth of the avatar and your rival Cain does so throughout most of *Pokémon Reborn*. As the avatar progresses in the game, they cross paths with Cain at various points throughout the story, fighting him six times and assisting him in taking down sects of Team Meteor at various locations. Despite Cain's origin story and pansexuality, most of his character arc pertains little to his queerness. He does make some flirtatious jokes with the avatar no matter their gender, but mostly just follows the path of a typical chrononormative rival, fighting Gym Leaders and the avatar every couple of gameplay hours. Yet Cain's last moments in the penultimate Episode 18 shows how his character's future rejects the chrononormative happy endings associated with most Nintendo and *Pokémon* games.

As the game progresses to its ending, the tone turns considerably darker following Ame's death at the hands of Team Meteor leader Lin and several other deaths and traumatic

experiences. Cain also becomes more serious throughout the game as he fails to save people he cares about, like his sister Aya. In one section of the game, the avatar and Cain get sucked into a black hole created by Gossip Gardevoir, a Pokémon belonging to the avatar's friend Radomus. For a reason unbeknownst to them, the avatar and Cain are alive and able to move around the darkness. Inside the black hole, Cain is much more contemplative and stoic than the rest of the game, reflecting on his past traumas at home and reliving some of the worst moments of his life. Cain's dialogue in this section of the game often references movement and waiting, pointing to queer temporalities that challenge the chrononormative arc of the rest of the game.

To many queer scholars, the lived experiences of queer individuals are often out of synch with homonormative institutions both spatially and temporally.⁹⁶ Heather Love posits that queer lives are "intimately bound up with backwardness," including the despair and shame of their past.⁹⁷ Jose Estaban Munoz contends that queerness exists in a yet-to-be-obtained future utopia free from the neoliberal capitalism of the present.⁹⁸ Elizabeth Freeman argues that queer temporalities are simultaneously in a traumatic past, hopeful future, and present that is "sideways to forms of being and belonging."⁹⁹ The complex ways in which queer individuals experience altered temporal and spatial dimensions appear in many stories about LGBTQ+ individuals. According to Shira Chess, queer narratives break down the "structural grip forcing narrative to move in a singular, inevitable direction."¹⁰⁰ Queer narratives may not only focus on the lived

⁹⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.

⁹⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

⁹⁸ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

⁹⁹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.

¹⁰⁰ Shira Chess, "The Queer Case of Video Games: Orgasms, Heteronormativity, and Video Game Narrative," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 84-94, 89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129066>.

experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals but also incorporate temporal elements that reject hegemonic linear storytelling tropes.

As Cain progresses through the game, he appears to move toward that heteronormative direction. In the black hole, the past, present, and future all collapse around Cain, revealing how the supposed linear progress of his narrative is queered to reveal the cyclical nature of his story. When the avatar finds Cain after waking up in the black hole, Cain says “I’ve been wandering around here for a while... What do you say we stick together until we figure out what’s what in this place? Then again, there’s only one path so I guess it won’t be hard.”¹⁰¹ Cain then walks on air off the side of the screen, forcing the avatar to walk a different route than him. After seeing a flashback where Cain runs away from home and leaves his sister Aya with their abusive mother, the avatar finally runs into Cain again. Reflecting on his past, Cain says “I’d rather forget about most of that stuff. But I suppose that’s why I ran haha... But then, the only place I ran was in circles. I guess it’s hard to do anything else when you don’t know where to go.” In both quotes, Cain points to the illusion of the “straight” path and the queer temporality of cycles.

As revealed in the flashbacks, Cain left both his Pokémon and Gym Leader status to his sister Aya when he ran from home to escape persecution from his mother. When the avatar first meets him at the very beginning of the game, Cain is not starting on his first Pokémon journey, but rather his second, repeating the same actions that led him to become a Gym Leader. Cain’s whole journey features cycles and recollections of the past. Despite having the chance to build a new team, he catches many of the same Pokémon he once owned. He returns to his mother’s house to defeat his sister Aya in battle to receive a Gym Badge and continue his journey, again leaving his sister. He follows around Heather across Reborn City to comfort her after she loses

¹⁰¹ Liddell, *Pokémon Reborn*.

her father, only for her to shun him for being overly involved in someone he barely knows. He tries to help Luna escape from her abusive father, but she gets captured anyway, echoing him leaving his sister with his abusive mother. Despite Cain's best efforts, his experiences in *Pokémon Reborn* keep repeating and reflecting his life before the game's narrative. Much like the one path in the black hole led him astray, the one path of becoming Pokémon Champion replicates much of the pain and suffering he had before he met the avatar. Cain's guilt over leaving his sister also manifests in the various ways he tries to help other young women throughout the game, again entrenching him in the mistakes of the past. Although the growing strength of Cain's team indicates the typical linear progress of the typical Pokémon rival, Cain's narrative arc emphasizes a circular relationship with the past and present, rejecting some of the chrononormative elements of the official Pokémon narrative.

Yet, Cain's narrative has tenuous connections to queer futurity. In his last conversation in the game (so far), Cain claims to have no idea or plan for his future. Unsure of what to do, Cain chooses to stay in the black hole, existing in a liminal space between life/death and reality/imagination. Cain refuses to wander anymore, rather staying in one spot to contemplate his life and how to move forward, if at all. Cain's queerness then not only comes from his pansexuality but also his liminal existence in the world of *Pokémon Reborn*. Constantly wandering and eventually stopping at the precipice of death, Cain's movement throughout the game places him on the outside of typical chrononormative Pokémon characters. In the typical Pokémon gameworld, where problems are solved, bonds are made, and successes are won, Cain's story is one site of queerness in *Pokémon Reborn*.

Another character who queers the typical Pokémon story is Terra, a hyperactive, cartoonish Gym Leader whose very presence breaks the internal logic of *Pokémon Reborn*.

Through dialogue and queer movements, Terra acts as a glitch in the gameworld, breaking down the barrier between player and game. Terra and two other Gym Leaders, Samson and Ciel, comprise the Agate Triumvirate, a trio of leaders that host battles under a big top at Agate Circus. These three Gym Leaders also have what appears to be a polyamorous relationship or at least have slept with each other multiple times. While Samson and Ciel are relatively reserved, Terra speaks openly about sex with Ciel and others throughout the game, often in detail. Terra communicates using leetspeak, a system of modified spellings often used in chatrooms, online gaming spaces, and other areas associated with nerd culture and the Internet.¹⁰² Words such as teh, pwned, and n00b have crossed over from these subcultures to wider Internet discourses, often appearing in memes, videos, and other content meant to go viral online. The only one to use leetspeak, Terra acts as a fourth-wall-breaking character, using dialogue that many players would be familiar with while deliberately breaking the distance between game and player. Before her battle with the avatar, Terra says “A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY NOT VERY FAR AWAY AT ALL IN FACT IT WAS THIS ONE THIS GALAXY RIGHT HERE THE MILKY TIT AND SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENED: I GOT BORED. so i was like awhh yeaaaa lets cause some ANARCHY bc anne r. key is great in bed.”¹⁰³ The sexual references and queer content of Terra’s speech point to her queer identity, but the Star Wars reference about the galaxy “not very far away” and the leetspeak further queer her character. Terra is a character for comic relief who breaches the slippery distance between computer and player, articulating Terra as a site of queer pleasure and subversion in the game.

¹⁰² Constance A. Steinkuehler, “Massively Multiplayer Online Video Gaming as Participation in a Discourse,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 13, no. 1 (2006): 38-52. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1301_4.

¹⁰³ Liddell, *Pokémon Reborn*.

By breaking the fourth wall, Terra does not glitch the game but rather performs as a glitch would in a game world. The ways glitches break down game worlds and immersion are considered a potential site of queerness in games. Glitches are “the place where code breaks and the game world reveals its cracks.”¹⁰⁴ By deconstructing the distance between the player and game, structure and chaos, glitches situate queerness within the breakdown of complex systems.¹⁰⁵ Terra not only glitches dialogue but also her movement in and through the game. While Cain’s queer movement is more metaphorical, Terra’s is literal, performing various acts of movement that no other character could perform. Terra first appears near the midpoint of the game, saving the avatar from a sleeping spell by hitting them over a mountain with a cartoonish large hammer. Terra then takes incredibly large bounds across the gameworld to catch up with the avatar. While that may appear standard for a Pokémon fan game, other characters have died from the kind of blunt force necessary to project a human that far with a hammer. Terra also can magically conceal the hammer on her person and walk upside down during an otherwise typical portion of the game.

¹⁰⁴ Ruberg, *Video Games*, 198.

¹⁰⁵ Judith Halberstam, “Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 187-200.



Figure 4: Terra's First Appearance in *Pokémon Reborn*. This introduces players to both leetspeak and her queer movement. ("Reborn Pokémon," *MasterPoké*, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://master-poké.forumactif.fr/t16825-Pokémon-reborn>)

Yet it's Terra's movement through digital space that most resonates with glitches and queer movement. After the avatar discovers Terra works for the evil Team Meteor, Terra escapes into her complex computer network, transitioning from one computer game to another. Like in the normal gameworld of *Pokémon Reborn*, Terra can jump large distances and move quickly through the world. At one point, Terra almost flattens the avatar with her signature hammer. She routinely smashes large areas of the gameworld to create glitches, impeding the avatar's progress through the aptly named Glitch World. The gameworld inside Terra's computer replicates both the gameplay system and design of *Pokémon Red and Green*. The avatar travels through many areas from the original Pokémon games, including Victory Road and Mt. Moon. The Glitch World also features several areas from *Pokémon Reborn* that have been restyled in the design of the original Pokémon games. Pokémon and trainers inside Terra's computer also glitch out. In-battle trainer sprites appear as glitched images or the infamous Missingno glitch from *Pokémon Red and Green*, further blurring the boundaries between player and game(s). Terra not only

queers the game by breaking down the distance between the player and *Pokémon Reborn* but also the series. By manipulating assets and areas from *Pokémon Red and Blue*, Terra collapses the chrononormativity of the original series as well, forcing the avatar to explore the original games through a glitched experience. The avatar explores areas in the Glitch World out of sequence than as they appeared in the original games and the areas from *Pokémon Red and Green* often lead to places from *Pokémon Reborn* and vice versa, further blurring the lines between fan game and official game. Terra's character blurs the supposedly distinct lines between player bodies and gameworlds, queering the official games by literally and narratively breaking them down. As of the current episode, Terra is still trapped inside her computer after Samson turns restarts it with her inside. Terra and Cain are both in liminal spaces, further rejecting the chrononormative norms of linear progress.

In contrast, Gym Leader Adrienn's narrative arc is the exact opposite of Terra and Cain. Initially found frozen in time, Adrienn transitions from a state of suspension to a potential for queer futurity. Adrienn first appears in the game in Citae Arc-d'Astrae Aerie, a large cavernous area that houses Arceus, the god of all Pokémon, beneath Reborn City. Before the narrative of *Pokémon Reborn* begins, Adrienn had been the de facto mayor of the city, helping with a variety of problems while also running the Fairy-type gym. While inspecting the gear room of Reborn City's gate, Adrienn fell into Citae Arc-d'Astrae Aerie through a hole in the floor. When the avatar discovers xem, Adrienn claims to have fallen only an hour or so ago but soon discovers xem has been trapped in the cavern for over a decade. Xyr existence in the sacred ground also caused the large gates of Reborn City to remain shut for all that time. Adrienn's body becomes the site of both xyr entrapment and the stasis of Reborn City, queering the chrononormative narratives of linear progress present in Pokémon games.

As noted above, the official Pokémon series is all about movement and growth, from the evolution of the titular creatures to the journey of the avatar. In each official Pokémon game, the avatar leaves their hometown and embarks on their journey via a Route, usually Route 1. Although these beginning routes contain no important landmarks, these routes serve as important milestones for the adventure. In Route 1, players encounter their first wild Pokémon, learn how to catch these creatures, and engage in the first battle with another Pokémon Trainer. The Pokémon on these Routes are also easy to capture, usually Normal-type, and relatively quick to train and evolve. This introduces players to the basics of Pokémon evolution. Route 1 also introduces players to the basics of avatar movement through the world and the general layout of the Routes throughout the game. Route 1 often lays the groundwork for the rest of the game, introducing players to a variety of important elements. The player's chrononormative journey through the Pokémon world starts at this first Route, training the player in the basics of the game as well as the discourses of linear progress and growth throughout the game.

In *Pokémon Reborn*, Adrienn's suspension in time prevents the avatar from breaching Route 1 until much later in the game by physically limiting the avatar's movement. Route 1, the typical starting point of Pokémon games, cannot be accessed until about hour twenty. Because Adrienn's presence in the Aerie keeps the city gates closed, the avatar cannot go outside of Reborn City until they find a secret passage in underground tunnels. The avatar must circumvent the typical ways of movement in Pokémon games by making their convoluted way underneath the city, finally reaching Route 1 through a dense side forest rather than the front entrance. Adrienn's body disrupts the chrononormative linear progress of the typical Pokémon game by preventing the player from moving through the expected narrative beats of a Pokémon video game. Route 1 is no longer the area to learn the basics of battle and in-game movement.

Pokémon Reborn features very few tutorials at all, never explicitly covering the basics of the Pokémon battle or overworld systems that come from the original games. In the fan game, Route 1 exists outside the usual chrononormative Pokémon story and reflects how *Pokémon Reborn* often rejects the ways Pokémon games train players to understand its system. Adrienn's suspension in time not only reflects xyr narrative but also how the fan game forces players to wait for the typical Pokémon beats to occur. The player wanders through the game attempting to find that linear path, much as Cain does. Adrienn's body suspends the typical story, allowing other, queerer events and movement to occur.

Adrienn not only suspends the typical chrononormative Pokémon story but also exemplifies *Pokémon Reborn*'s investment in a queer futurity, one built through a broad coalition of individuals. Queer futurity is a term often used to describe a vision of the future as an improvement on the present. The antinormative nature of queerness places it always in the future, a goal to never be completely attained. As Munoz describes, queer futurity is not just about imagining minor improvements for the everyday lives of queer individuals, but a "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."¹⁰⁶ Queer futurity is interested in a utopic vision of the world that rejects neoliberal goals in favor of radical change for the improvement of society. Munoz calls for a future in which queer individuals not only advocate for incremental change, like gay marriage, but rather advocate for causes that radically deconstruct and challenge heteronormative institutions.

In *Pokémon Reborn*, Adrienn is the nexus for the queer futurity of Reborn City, modeling the ways queer futurity can exist within games and game communities. After Adrienn escapes their entrapment with the avatar's help, xe sees that over the decade while xe was lost in time,

¹⁰⁶ Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

Reborn City has become a dangerous, dilapidated city. Adrienn commits to leading a coordinated effort with other citizens of Reborn to create a new future for the city. The avatar leaves Reborn City for a long time in the game to deal with other issues, and when they return, the city has been cleaned and repaired. Streets once cracked and barren are now filled with flower beds and parks. Slums have been cleaned out. A defunct power plant now houses a homeless shelter. When the avatar finds xem, Adrienn is standing outside of xyr gym, discussing several issues in the city, including public safety ordinances, blackouts, and earthquake relief, with volunteers. The day-to-day operations of city management seem to exemplify the kinds of incremental change Munoz rejects, but Adrienn’s vision and volunteer coalition both point to queer futurity.

In the same scene, Adrienn shows the avatar Reborn City, saying “This whole place- This is the city I can be proud of. Even if it fell apart before, the pieces were always there. It just took someone to put them back together.”¹⁰⁷ Adrienn argues even though the city fell into disarray, the elements of a potential future were held within that sordid past. To build toward a new future, Adrienn had to investigate the past to inform the work of the present. This reflects Munoz’s claim that “a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”¹⁰⁸ Although Adrienn’s efforts appear to simply rebuild Reborn City in the narrative of linear progress, the improvements of Reborn are positioned as both a look toward a better future and a reclamation of the past, led directly by queer individuals Ame and Adrienn.

The narrative of the renovation of Reborn City also includes many references to coalition building, an organizing tactic that brings disparate individuals and groups together to advocate

¹⁰⁷ Liddell, *Pokémon Reborn*.

¹⁰⁸ Munoz, 16.

and work toward a common goal. As Pascal Emmer argues, coalition building is a necessary step towards envisioning and enacting queer futurity.¹⁰⁹ Adrienn mentions to the avatar that the rebuilding of Reborn City was only possible with the combined efforts of many Gym Leaders, students from Pokémon academies, and many volunteers. Adrienn also requires the player to request the help of even more volunteers around the city before they can battle. The avatar can interact with up to fifteen NPCs around Reborn City to assist in renovation who all have different motivations for joining in the effort. One woman wants to help preserve the natural environment, a man wants to repay his neighbors for their help in rebuilding his house, and another NPC volunteers to help preserve areas that low-income individuals used for recreation. Other characters simply use the volunteer group as a chance to meet new friends. Although each of these NPCs only has a few lines of dialogue, the variety of motivations for joining the volunteer effort shows how building coalitions assists in changing the city in equitable ways.

Like its gameplay, *Pokémon Reborn*'s narrative similarly draws from and subverts official Pokémon games. Although the fan game's story replicates many of Pokémon's familiar story beats, several characters and narrative arcs queer the time and space of the original series. By incorporating issues many LGBTQ+ individuals face, *Pokémon Reborn* highlights the struggles of queer individuals today. Several characters also queer typical storytelling of the series by rejecting common tropes of movement and linear progress in games. The game also encourages a look at queer futurity, even though the game acknowledges that not everything is perfect in the present. Later in the game, Adrienn notes there are still problems in Reborn City. Building new houses encourages deforestation. Cleaning up the slums displaces large numbers of

¹⁰⁹ Pascal Emmer, "Talkin' 'Bout Meta-Generation: ACT UP History and Queer Futurity," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 89-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2011.638664>.

homeless and low-income individuals. And plenty of people still do not have access to clean food and water, especially since the decrease in available goods over the past decade has caused prices to skyrocket. Yet, Adrienn's commitment toward building a more equitable future with the help of a coalition of Reborn City citizens points toward ways of building toward a queer futurity and the contributions of queer individuals to game communities.

Conclusion

Both the gameplay and narrative of *Pokémon Reborn* show the tensions between heteronormativity and queerness in the fan game. The fan game's reliance on gameplay systems and narrative tropes from the official Pokémon series may be an affirmation of hegemonic gaming norms. As a fan game of the world's largest media franchise, *Pokémon Reborn* works by replicating many of the standards that fans come to expect of the series. Yet, the queer changes *Pokémon Reborn* introduces to the series challenges the typical Pokémon content in politically potent ways, especially in its use of queer characters, desires, and aesthetics in its narrative. The narrative becomes the main site of the game's queerness, contrasting with previous work on fan modding and queer game development in which the gameplay system is often queered to subvert standard heteronormative gaming practices.¹¹⁰ So what do the differences between *Pokémon Reborn* and other fan mods tell us about the negotiation of queerness within the fan game and larger gaming communities?

First, while many of the queer avant-garde video games covered in queer games research look to subvert hegemonic gaming practices, *Pokémon Reborn*'s scope is more modest. The game advocates for the inclusion and recognition of queer individuals in the Pokémon world and

¹¹⁰ Bonnie Ruberg, "Queer Indie Video Games."

fan community but does not appear to completely challenge the gaming industry. While that limited scope may be seen as not all that subversive, *Pokémon Reborn*'s political queerness resides in the ways it takes one style of gameplay and explores ways it can be changed and queered. Rather than develop new forms of play, the fan game shows ways queerness can be brought out in existing frameworks. Next, the closeness between a queer game and hegemonic video game norms does not completely indicate the political subversion of a game. Queer avant-garde game designers often place their games as oppositional to production standards in the game industry. For example, Robert Yang notes that his production of *The Tearoom* was influenced by how Twitch and other streaming sites regulated the appearance of penises or gay sex.¹¹¹ Fan games like *Pokémon Reborn* may not operate as directly oppositional as other games created by queer developers, as the reliance on the gameplay systems and narrative forms of the original heavily influences the way creators can make games both for their desire and their audience. The fan game locates its subversion in its ability to replicate the official games while simultaneously upending expectations of what a Pokémon fan game should do, queering the processes of gameplay and storytelling that fans come to expect of the series.

Finally, queer indie games research focuses mostly on individual creators or themes across avant-garde works, with relatively little emphasis on the ways players of these games circulate queer meanings and readings. With its close connection to the official series, *Pokémon Reborn* highlights the ways queer video games operate within larger systems of fan cultures and video game consumption practices. Both a video game and a work of fan labor, *Pokémon Reborn* exists as a node on a network of complex interactions between video game cultures, global marketplaces, fan communities on and offline, and a wide variety of other circuits of culture. The

¹¹¹ Robert Yang, "The Tearoom as a record of risky business," Radiator, June 29, 2019, <https://www.blog.radiator.debacl.us/2017/06/the-tearoom-as-record-of-risky-business.html>.

fan game's queerness not only comes from the game itself but also in its relationships with other cultural products and the fans that circulate readings and understandings of official Pokémon games and *Pokémon Reborn*. While a textual analysis of *Pokémon Reborn* reveals some of the ways the game negotiates and articulates queerness, a production and audience analysis of the fan game can further contextualize how fans of the game negotiate their queerness with the global franchise.

Chapter 2: “their struggles, their stories:” Queer Production and Consumption of *Pokémon Reborn*

Introduction

In summer 2016, Nintendo of America sent a cease and desist letter to Game Jolt, a website that contained download links for over five hundred fan games related to official Nintendo franchises. Game Jolt promptly took down the links to these games and published the letter they received from Nintendo of America online.¹¹² In response, creators of the free fan game *Pokémon Uranium* took down the direct link to their fan game, despite not receiving a cease and desist letter from Nintendo.¹¹³ The creators noted that with over one and a half million downloads, the popular fan game was bound to be targeted by Nintendo next. Fan responses were mixed, with some people criticizing Nintendo for clamping down on fan creators with others noting that Nintendo was completely within their legal rights to protect their intellectual property.¹¹⁴ Soon after the game was taken down, fans of *Pokémon Uranium* uploaded download links for the game on several other websites, an action that was subtly encouraged by the creators of the game. In their official statement regarding the cease and desist letters, the creators of *Pokémon Uranium* claimed they “have no connection to fans who reupload the game files to their hosts” but ended the statement calling for everyone to “share the love of Pokémon!”¹¹⁵ Several fans of *Pokémon Uranium* continued to develop the game, creating a new host website, sharing download links on Reddit, and hosting a forum for fans to discuss the game.

¹¹² hworld, “DMCA Notice,” GitHub, September 1, 2016, <https://github.com/gamejolt/dmca/blob/master/2016/2016-09-02-nintendo.md>.

¹¹³ JV and Involuntary Twitch, *Pokémon Uranium*, PC/Mac, August 6, 2016, <https://Pokémonuranium.co/index.html>.; Jason Shreier, “Pokémon Uranium Creators Pull Game After A Reported 1.5 Million Downloads,” Kotaku, August 13, 2016, <https://kotaku.com/Pokémon-uranium-creators-pull-game-after-1-5-million-do-1785258831>.

¹¹⁴ Kritical02, “Pokémon Uranium official download links have been taken down.,” Reddit, August 12, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/4xlqu1/Pokémon_uranium_official_download_links_have_been/.

¹¹⁵ Shreier, “Pokémon Uranium.”

Pokémon Uranium provides an apt example of the ways fan games engage in various cultural circuits, including online fandoms, video game production, and even international trade law. As a popular Pokémon fan game, *Pokémon Reborn* faces many of the same challenges from Nintendo that *Pokémon Uranium* experienced. At the time of this writing, the creators of *Pokémon Reborn* have not received any communications from Nintendo or its lawyers, but the threat still looms. In January of 2020, the website hosting the *Pokémon Reborn* game and forums went down for maintenance and many fans were concerned Nintendo finally took down the game.¹¹⁶ The game was created using Pokémon Essentials, a mod of RPG Maker that was taken down by Nintendo of America in 2018 but still is maintained and developed by several modders around the internet.¹¹⁷ The people who put work into *Pokémon Reborn* and Pokémon Essentials engage in precarious labor, garnering no profits from their work and facing legal challenges from Nintendo and The Pokémon Company. However, that very precarious labor shows how fan game development challenges and subverts hegemonic video game production and consumption practices. The circulation of open-source coding software online allows for game developers to gain knowledge and experience creating games outside of dominant institutions like colleges and large video game corporations. The collaboration between game developers in creating and refining online systems like RPG Maker and Pokémon Essentials allows for game developers to work and connect outside of dominant industry forces. By providing these games for free, the creators of fan games like *Pokémon Reborn* provide fans with the opportunity to play and interact with popular franchises in new ways, challenging neoliberal modes of consumption.

¹¹⁶ Amethyst Liddell, (Amethyst), “January Site Flatulence Summary,” Pokémon Reborn Forums, January 26, 2020, <https://www.rebornevo.com/forums/topic/50289-january-site-flatulence-summary/>.

¹¹⁷ Kyle Orland, “Nintendo shuts down tool used to build Pokémon fan games,” ArsTechnica, August 29, 2018, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2018/08/nintendo-shuts-down-tool-used-to-build-Pokémon-fan-games/>.

Although these production and consumption practices are unstable, that very instability creates fan games' political power against mainstream gaming institutions.

The instability of fan games also allows for a deeper exploration of queerness in both the production and consumption of *Pokémon Reborn*. While the fan game does not have access to the global markets of the official Pokémon franchise, *Pokémon Reborn*'s production outside of the dominant gaming industry lets it explore queerness in ways that mainstream game companies would not. Ironically, the liminality of the *Pokémon Reborn* within larger gaming economies allows for the exploration of the ways queerness itself is liminal in gaming spaces and communities. For the game developers, *Pokémon Reborn* is a site of queer expression, where they can explore and communicate queer narratives and stories they have encountered in their lived experiences. In turn, the queer content in *Pokémon Reborn* encourages fans to negotiate their understandings of queerness with the game and the larger Pokémon franchise. Fans discuss the queer narratives and characters of the *Pokémon Reborn* or share their queer fan labor about the game on the *Pokémon Reborn* forums or social media sites like Tumblr. The queer understandings and coalitions formed around the fan game convey how fans remediate and collaborate to understand their interpretations of queerness in games. Through interviews with the creators, social media posts by the development team, and audience analysis of various responses from fans on the forums about queer characters and narratives, I argue the production and consumption of *Pokémon Reborn* convey ways online communities articulate, circulate, and negotiate understandings of queerness with larger media franchises.

Cultural Circuits of Fans, Games, and Queerness

As discussed in Chapter 1, multiple aspects of video game texts, from gameplay systems to narrative structures, can be sites of queerness. Much like other cultural products, video games do not exist within a social, geopolitical, or historical vacuum. How video games articulate and negotiate queerness also resides within audience reception practices, game developer identities, and historical discourses. *Pokémon Reborn* not only illuminates how queer fans of the Pokémon series wish to see video games change in terms of representation but also how queer production practices and audience receptions construct, negotiate, and alter the meaning of both official and fan works. An investigation of the queer practices surrounding *Pokémon Reborn* necessitates looking at the cultural circuit of the game and other communities and products the game interacts with.

In their conceptualization of the circuit of culture, Paul Du Gay, Stuart Hall, and their co-authors define five major cultural processes that a cultural text should be studied through to flesh out the ways meaning is created across cultural areas: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation.¹¹⁸ These five areas are also sites where cultural meaning is articulated, circulated, and negotiated. While each category is distinct, they also overlap and affect each other in meaningful ways. For example, governmental or industrial regulation of queer content in games affects the production practices of individual gaming companies which in turn changes which kind of representations are economically viable in large gaming industries. To Du Gay et al., for cultural texts to be completely analyzed and understood, academic research should investigate both these individual areas and how they interact with one another.

¹¹⁸ Paul Du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed., (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), xxx.

Although not explicitly echoing the cultural circuit model, many academic discussions of queerness in cultural products use similar language to describe how queerness plays out in cultural texts. In *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Alexander Doty argues that queerness potentially resides within several sites of cultural products. Doty notes that queerness may appear through influences during the production of a text, “historically specific cultural readings and uses of a text” by LGBTQ+ individuals (audience and identity), and using queer lenses in the reception of texts (audience, identity, and representation).¹¹⁹ Doty argues that the circulation of understandings of queerness in texts requires the different nodes on the cultural circuit to interact in meaningful ways. Much scholarly work on queer video games focuses on the categories of identity and representation within video game texts. For example, Cody Mejeur investigates how Sander Cohen in the Bioshock series both supports and subverts stereotypes of gay men in the US.¹²⁰ Yet, as a mass-market medium with interactive elements, video games often resist the clear delineation of cultural circuit categories, with many scholars incorporating production and audience analyses along with textual analysis. Yowei Kang and Kenneth C.C. Yang investigate the lack of same-sex relationships in games following a controversy over Nintendo’s decision to not include same-sex couples in the production of several video game series.¹²¹ Victor Navarro-Remesal notes that “personal assumptions, sociopolitical contexts, technical and industrial limitations, and design goals” affect how avatar creation tools limit queer

¹¹⁹ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xi.

¹²⁰ Cody Mejeur, “‘Look at Me, Boy!’: Carnavalesque, Masks, and Queer Performativity in Bioshock,” in *Beyond the Sea: Navigating Bioshock*, ed. by Felan Parker and Jessica Aldred (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018), 113-142.

¹²¹ Yowei Kang and Kenneth C. C. Yang, “The Representation (or the Lack of It) of Same-Sex Relationships in Digital Games,” in *Queerness in Play*, ed. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018,) 57-80.

bodies in games.¹²² Bonnie Ruberg's research on queer indie game development engages with both game production outside of major industries and textual analysis of queer methods of play.¹²³ Megan Condis analyzes how fan communities negotiate understandings of queer relationships in-game, while Tom Welch investigates the affective necessity of queer fan mods, melding textual, audience, and production analysis.¹²⁴

Other queer scholars argue the interaction of these nodes may also limit the potential queerness of texts. As Adrienne Shaw argues, "The problem with media representation, regardless of who produces it, is that it is selective even when it is not necessarily distortive."¹²⁵ To Shaw, because production practices include the process of choosing specific stories to tell, they inherently limit the breadth and depth of stories and identities media products represent in meaningful ways. The production practices and representations in games have long benefitted white men, and that kind of cultural and economic influence should not be denied. As Shaw notes, representations in the media come from production and regulation practices and affect the audience because they make "certain identities possible, plausible, and livable."¹²⁶ Throughout the past thirty years, most large gaming companies have explicitly catered to a male audience, mostly making only white, heteronormative, male and able-bodied characters viable in gameworlds. The economic and cultural power of this male-dominated field has affected fan communities, esports arenas, and debates about the morality of video games as a medium.¹²⁷

Many game scholars note that the aspect of play and direct audience participation in

¹²² Victor Navarro-Remesal, "Gender, sex and romance in role playing video games: Dragon's Dogma, Fable III and Dragon Age: Inquisition," *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2018): 177-191. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs.10.2.177_1.

¹²³ Ruberg. "Queer Indie Video Games"

¹²⁴ Megan Condis, "No homosexuals in *Star Wars*?"; Welch, "Affectively Necessary Labour."

¹²⁵ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 19.

¹²⁶ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 67.

¹²⁷ Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

video games complicates the power of regulation, production, and representation that benefits dominant influences in the gaming industry. As Navarro-Remesal notes, interactive elements in games show how audiences not only consume discourses but also “play them and with them... perform and negotiate them.”¹²⁸ In her field research, Shaw observed that individuals found pleasure in games not via deep immersion into the gameworld but through their social environments with others playing or watching the game. Shaw argues that “social contexts often superseded identification with the characters on screen,” limiting the influences of production on how players made meaning with the game.¹²⁹ Ruberg also argues that the ways players actually play games can queer the process of meaning-making. For example, choosing to explore the various hidden features in the tracks of *Mario Kart 8* rather than racing to win signals a shift away from heteronormative styles of play.¹³⁰ This echoes previous research on the ways audiences of other cultural products may similarly perform oppositional or negotiated readings to cultural texts.¹³¹

Another aspect of video games that allows for more negotiation of meaning is the ability for audiences and individuals to mod video games. The practice of modding games lets audiences alter, insert, or delete the code of existing games to adjust the games to their desire. The digital nature of these mods also lets fans share these works online, sometimes even in online stores the original game developer sets up. Modders become producers and consumers of these works, as they produce new ways to experience products they consumed or at the least interacted with. These mods further show how the ethos of playing with systems exists within

¹²⁸ Navarro-Remesal, “Gender, sex, and romance,” 187.

¹²⁹ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 117.

¹³⁰ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

¹³¹ Jacqueline Bobo, “Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*,” *Callaloo*, no. 39 (1989): 332-42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931568>.

video game communities. As Matthew Wysocki argues, modders help to “recontextualize the concept of interactivity beyond the idea of user input into the state of play.”¹³² Modding moves beyond oppositional or negotiated modes of playing video games, also playing with the very modes of production hegemonic gaming industries rely on. Queer modding practices take this another step further by challenging forms of regulation and representation in the AAA industry. Queer game developer and modder Robert Yang notes that Twitch and other streaming sites often block or censure gay sex, which only further emboldened him to feature explicit gay sex in his mods.¹³³ Welch argues that many queer mods reject masculinized and heteronormative game design and also advocate for the inclusion of queer identities not present in mainstream games. Modders may “make gaming objects more amenable to queer modders and queer fans” by removing or critiquing homophobic content as well.¹³⁴ While not inherently always oppositional to dominant industry forces, queer modding often critiques, challenges, and subverts the cultural circuits of mainstream gaming industries despite using the assets and codes from that source.

Pokémon Reborn thus interacts with various areas of the cultural circuit in many ways. The fan game relies on dominant gaming production practices for its source material but also upends the gaming industry by using crowd-sourced coding materials. *Pokémon Reborn* resists regulation standards by providing copyright-protected materials to fans for free. The queer narratives, gameplay, and characters discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis subvert the identities and representation of the official Pokémon series. *Pokémon Reborn* resituates understandings of queerness in the official Pokémon series as well as the creators and audiences of the fan game. The creators of *Pokémon Reborn* are only a few of many queer game creators online, existing

¹³²Wysocki, “It’s Not Just the Coffee That’s Hot.”

¹³³ Yang, “Tearoom as a record.”

¹³⁴ Welch, “Affectively Necessary Labor,” 16.

and interacting with other creators of Pokémon fan games and indie queer games. Looking at the complex ways *Pokémon Reborn* interacts with these different cultural forces helps to understand the ways *Pokémon Reborn* understands, plays with, and circulates understandings of queerness beyond a textual analysis of queerness in the game. An analysis of the production and audience reception of *Pokémon Reborn* not only reveals the historical and social context of the game in a male, heteronormative industry but also provides detail of how creators and consumers in fan communities circulate and negotiate meanings of queerness. *Pokémon Reborn* and its online community reveal how queerness itself becomes a social and historical product of the interactions between various, often competing, cultural forces, complicating the ways queerness has been used as a theoretical concept in cultural studies. Rather than just questioning whether a cultural product is inherently queer, academic research into video games can do more to explore how different communities, fan groups, and fan laborers understand queerness with these texts.

Queer, Collaborative Production Practices and *Pokémon Reborn*

With over five hundred thousand downloads, *Pokémon Reborn* seems like a game designed from the beginning to appeal to the large audience of adult fans of the Pokémon franchise. The fan game takes the standard formula of Pokémon games and creates new battle formats that challenge players who find the official series too easy, a complaint often heard about the latest three generations of Pokémon games.¹³⁵ Yet, Amethyst, the creator and executive developer of the game, started *Pokémon Reborn* on a whim, taking over another friend's pet project and fully expecting "for the impulse to wear off after a month" to create more content.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Syy, "New Pokémon Games Are Too Easy," November 4, 2016, YouTube, video, 7:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD_aalrtpvo.

¹³⁶ Amethyst Liddell, Interview with David Kocik on Discord, February 5, 2020 - March 17, 2020. The full interview is in the Appendix. Since the interview is a personal communication, many words were uncapitalized or

(From now on, she will be referred to Amethyst, as she requests I use her first name in the body of this thesis, but is fine with using her legal last name in citations.) The first few chapters of the game were created only for a small group of Amethyst's friends, all of whom grew up in the United States, and the game only became popular after one of the friends began sharing the game with other fans online. Originally a two-hour demo created for only a few people, *Pokémon Reborn* has evolved into a widely lauded, nearly finished fan game with over fifty-five hours of content and a large fan base online.

As with the queer gameplay and characters discussed in Chapter 1, the production of *Pokémon Reborn* resists many dominant video game development practices, queering both traditional methods of game design and modding practices. The inception and continued development of *Pokémon Reborn* has relied on many collaborative efforts between friends and online game developers, some of which echo research on queer development practices online. According to Amethyst, the original idea for *Pokémon Reborn* came from the Pokémon Reborn League, a group of about twelve friends who participated in online Pokémon tournaments every summer when high school was not in session. The league would go down during the school year and then be “reborn” again each summer, inspiring the league’s name.¹³⁷ Amethyst, who had practiced coding and hosted websites since she was eleven, was the host of the server. One night, when Amethyst’s computer could not access and host the server, the other members of the Reborn League created a story about a city called Reborn falling apart because its leader, Amethyst, had gone missing.¹³⁸ One of the members of the Reborn League created a comic strip

otherwise do not follow the grammar of academic writing. Direct quotes will not include [sic] in the paper due to their frequency.

¹³⁷ Amethyst Liddell, (amethystblack), “Why is the game named ‘Pokémon Reborn?’” Tumblr, February 14, 2020, <https://amethystblack.tumblr.com/post/190829690017/why-is-the-game-named-pok%C3%A9mon-reborn>.

¹³⁸ Liddell, Interview, 1.

imagining Reborn City as a post-apocalyptic city. Amethyst drew a map of Reborn City to go along with the comic strip, which then became the inspiration for the setting and story of the video game *Pokémon Reborn*. One of the participants in the Reborn League started creating a Pokémon fan game using the Pokémon Essentials add-on to RPG Maker, a video game creation tool that Amethyst had experienced as a pre-teen. Inspired, Amethyst took over development and created the two-hour first chapter of the game in just two weeks.

The two tools used to create and develop *Pokémon Reborn* are a site of tension between dominant gaming practices and queer independent game development, signaling the ways fan games subvert industry practices through the reappropriation of cultural products. RPG Maker is the generic name applied to a series of game development programs that provide assets, gameplay systems, and other important video game elements to creators. While these programs provide access for people to try out creating their games, the practices and communities surrounding the program align with heteronormative game design. The latest and most popular version for computer, *RPG Maker MV*, costs eighty dollars, a price that may be difficult for some aspiring game developers to purchase.¹³⁹ The tools provided for individuals also encourage the use of chrononormative game design choices, such as save systems, combat systems, and chrononormative narrative structures. Many of the most popular games created using RPG Maker feature naked or near-nude women characters with exaggerated hips, butts, and breasts.¹⁴⁰ Marketing for RPG Maker similarly features sexualized women, with most nude characters placed behind high-priced paywalls.¹⁴¹ Although many games made with RPG Maker products

¹³⁹ Kadokawa Games, *RPG Maker MV*, PC/Mac, Degica, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Giada Zavarise, “Are RPG Maker games as bad as people think?” EuroGamer, September 1, 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-09-01-are-rpg-maker-games-as-bad-as-people-think>.

¹⁴¹ “Products,” RPG Maker (website), accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.rpgmakerweb.com/resources/rpg-maker-mv>.

may not use the system in heteronormative and overtly sexist ways, the program itself incentivizes the use of these sexualized characters in their advertising and by assigning these women a higher price than their male counterparts. As a product, RPG Maker aligns firmly with mainstream masculinized gaming practices.

The other tool used by Amethyst, Pokémon Essentials, is much queerer in its design and implementation, subverting heteronormative industry practices and encouraging community support and collaboration. Pokémon Essentials is a free-to-download original set of code designed to be used in RPG Maker products, basically converting *RPG Maker MV* into Pokémon Maker. People who don't have RPG Maker products can use Pokémon Essentials to make games as well but cannot add new assets or design tools available in RPG Maker to customize their games. As Allison Harvey argues, free-to-use tools like Twine and Pokémon Essentials democratizes game design, allowing people with little to no game design training or experience to create their games for no cost.¹⁴² These game design tools also challenge exploitative game labor practices, like forced overtime labor and minimal pay, by relocating the power of in-game creation to individual developers and small teams rather than large or even small independent corporations.

Since its creation, Pokémon Essentials has been maintained, debugged, and updated by a vast community of online collaborators. Made by an online user named Poccil, the original version of the game creation tool was based on the Pokémon Starter Kit, created by Flameguru. The manager of Pokémon Essentials is now a user named Maruno and other collaborators provide updated sprites, movesets, and other elements to the Pokémon Essentials kit.¹⁴³ For

¹⁴² Harvey, "Twine's revolution."

¹⁴³ "Pokémon Essentials," Pokémon Fan Game Wiki, accessed March 21, 2020, https://Pokémon-fan-game.fandom.com/wiki/Pok%C3%A9mon_Essentials.

example, a team of community members on the PokéCommunity forums shared the codes they constructed for new Pokémon, items, and abilities from *Pokémon Sword and Shield* on forum threads, collaborating to change the coding language to simplify the ability's implementation in Pokémon Essentials.¹⁴⁴ Pokémon Essentials users create a variety of tutorials to help train new game developers as they create their games as well, further building community around these tools.¹⁴⁵ The collaborative nature of developing the code for Pokémon Essentials and the bevy of design help and support given for community members send a message to community members that everyone can make games. Pokémon Essentials' collaborative nature subverts the rigid definitions of what counts as a real game and who counts as a real game designer. In an industry that privileges straight, cisgender, White male voices, the ability for anyone with access to a computer to create their own game subverts "defines normative understandings of game design processes, outcomes, and successes."¹⁴⁶ The Pokémon Essentials extension of *RPG Maker MV* takes a heteronormative game design product and subverts its uses, encouraging aspiring game designers to create their products and challenge industry practices.

The collaborative nature of Pokémon Essentials reflects the development of *Pokémon Reborn*, whose gameplay systems and stories have had heavy influence from the original Pokémon Reborn League and fans of the game. All the Pokémon, movesets, basic battle system, items, and abilities come from Pokémon Essentials, itself an extremely collaborative project. Amethyst made the first thirteen episodes of *Pokémon Reborn* herself before collaborating with some friends from the Reborn league in the subsequent episodes.¹⁴⁷ Although the Field Effect

¹⁴⁴ WolfPP, "ESSENTIALS SCRIPT [ESSENTIALS V17.2] GEN 8 STUFFS (ABILITIES, ITEMS & MOVE)," PokéCommunity, July 10, 2019, <https://www.Pokecommunity.com/showthread.php?t=422817>.

¹⁴⁵ Thundaga, "How to Make a Pokémon Game in RPG Maker - Part 1: Getting Started," June 17, 2016, YouTube, video, 12:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlnzaEhH5cI&list=PLuIp7Uf7plImpcFOHbj4r8cVQYywpRZB5>.

¹⁴⁶ Harvey, "Twine's Revolution," 96.

¹⁴⁷ Liddell, Interview, 1.

system was created by Amethyst and inspired by the use of space in battle in Pokémon TV shows, the other developers assisted in creating and outlining the various aspects of each Field Effect. The *Pokémon Reborn* team mostly works remotely, collaborating solely online rather than in the same physical space. Amethyst has also collaborated with Pokémon fan music developer GlitchxCity to make music for several areas in the game.¹⁴⁸ Fans have also inspired many game elements, from the designs of the shiny versions of certain Pokémon to the entire level cap system.¹⁴⁹ The creators also encourage fans to report any issues they have with the game, hosting a forum dedicated solely to bug detection and solving that features over 38,000 posts. Fans let the developers know about issues in the game, and developers patch and fix individual users' files if their game is glitching or no longer working.

The creators of *Pokémon Reborn* also encourage and facilitate a collaborative network for other game designers. New game developers have noted that some Pokémon fan game designers are protective of their work, saying that “they just made the community a bit negative and cliquy.”¹⁵⁰ While it is understandable that these creators are protective of their work, the anti-collaborative nature of some game designers goes against the community networks centered around fan cultural products like Pokémon Essentials. The code for every aspect of *Pokémon Reborn* comes along with the download of the game, allowing game designers to see and use these codes in their work. Amethyst also explicitly encourages other game designers to take and use the coding in their games, if they credit the original developers. To Amethyst, seeing others use things like Field Effects and specialized shiny sprites makes “the assload of work it took to

¹⁴⁸ GlitchxCity, “Pokémon Black and White: Entralink Remix,” February 19, 2012, YouTube, video, 3:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dgAxNI9g_Y.

¹⁴⁹ Liddell, Interview, 6.

¹⁵⁰ Amethyst Liddell, (amethystblack), “I just wanted to say...,” Tumblr, February 20, 2020, <https://amethystblack.tumblr.com/post/190935949072/i-just-wanted-to-say-how-awesome-it-is-that-youre>.

make even more worth it.”¹⁵¹ On her Tumblr, Amethyst answers fans’ questions about the game, offering a space for fans to directly ask the creator about queer identity and *Pokémon Reborn*. Many questions on the Tumblr site come from fans who want to make their Pokémon games but don’t know where to start. Amethyst provides many resources for new creators to consult, like Thundaga’s Pokémon Essentials videos cited above, and the advice that having fun is essential since it will all be unpaid labor.¹⁵² The forums on the *Pokémon Reborn* website include a mod market, where fans of *Pokémon Reborn* can post their mods of the game. The site also hosts a forum, with currently over 82,000 posts, where people developing their fan games can ask others for help and guidance. Unlike other Pokémon fan games, the creators of *Pokémon Reborn* have always emphasized the community-based nature of their work, building up discourses of collaboration and encouragement of other game developers, much like the users of Twine. This collaborative game production community directly subverts the competitive, oppressive labor in mainstream gaming industries.¹⁵³

The queer characters and narratives of *Pokémon Reborn* come from the same collaborative ethic as the game design. Many of the stories used in *Pokémon Reborn* come from issues the original league members experienced in their real lives growing up in the United States, all of whom have consented to these stories being shared.¹⁵⁴ Gym Leader Kiki’s struggle with a debilitating illness and eventual death was inspired by a league member’s illness. League member Luna struggled with her father’s zealous religious beliefs, inspiring her character’s

¹⁵¹ Liddell, “I just wanted to say...”

¹⁵² Amethyst Liddell, (amethystblack), “I’ve been considering...,” Tumblr, February 14, 2020, <https://amethystblack.tumblr.com/post/190828697842/ive-been-considering-making-my-own-Pokémon-fan>

¹⁵³ Sam Dean, “As video games make billions, the workers behind them say it’s time to unionize,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-video-game-union-movement-20190412-story.html>

¹⁵⁴ Liddell, Interview, 5.

controlling father El and the religious cultists who worship Arceus. The abusive relationship between Titania and Amaria discussed in Chapter 1 reflects the troubled relationship between two league members, although the real-life Amaria lost some of her memory in a car accident rather than by jumping over a waterfall.¹⁵⁵ Real-life Cain was barred from the Pokémon Reborn League after his mother discovered he was experimenting with other boys at school, reflected in Cain's mother kicking him out of the house in *Pokémon Reborn*. Being a gay and trans woman herself, Amethyst designed the online league to be inclusive and found the league naturally built up a coalition of queer individuals and allies who shared many stories about their struggles.¹⁵⁶

The use of these real-life stories is designed to create a space for players to understand and work through common issues people, especially queer individuals, experience in their daily lives that mainstream games often ignore. The queer narratives and dark themes in *Pokémon Reborn* are designed to push the series in a new direction, particularly for the series' adult audience. Amethyst acknowledges that these dark stories turn off or trigger some players, especially those who have a hard time accepting the "contrast of these darker themes with what is advertised as a kids' show and game."¹⁵⁷ She also contends that these queer stories don't necessarily translate easily to a series explicitly designed for children, sometimes struggling to reconcile the cute, kawaii nature of Pokémon designs with the dark narrative. Yet, Amethyst thinks the Pokémon series loses a lot of potential as a kid show by refusing to acknowledge even the existence of present issues, like climate change or queer experiences. She also acknowledges most games ignore LGBTQ+ stories, noting "we've all heard cis-het romance stories 1,000 times

¹⁵⁵ Liddell, Interview, 3.

¹⁵⁶ Liddell, Interview, 5.

¹⁵⁷ Liddell, Interview, 4.

over.”¹⁵⁸ Amethyst attributes the saturation of heterosexual love stories to media producers caring about money and positive reception more than social consciousness. In a YouTube video discussing how she writes her stories, Amethyst argues that game companies only care about what is “socially acceptable, monetarily lucrative.”¹⁵⁹ Amethyst argues that the emphasis on making money thus takes away the potential for most mainstream games to challenge popular discourse and advocate for oppressed peoples.

Pokémon Reborn deliberately challenges mainstream gaming practices by highlighting the lived experiences of queer individuals throughout the game. Since most Pokémon games do not contain extensive plot, Amethyst thought a fresh take on the series would incorporate more of a focus on the story. *Pokémon Reborn* spends most of its time with the characters rather than familiar plot elements since Amethyst believes that “characters are what people connect to emotionally.”¹⁶⁰ When creating the story arcs for the characters in the game, Amethyst thought the best way to connect with audiences was to take the league’s stories and present them as authentically as she could. In her storytelling tips video, Amethyst urges other creators to “be as authentic as possible and put your fucking emotional struggles in there” since she believes most players want characters that experience real-life struggles they can relate to.¹⁶¹ For Amethyst, creating authentic characters means drawing on issues associated with queerness and mental illness in her own life and the lives of those around her. In the interview, Amethyst noted that writing about issues like depression, suicide, and abuse in the lives of queer individuals did not scare her because she had experienced many of those issues personally, in addition to the real

¹⁵⁸ Amethyst Liddell, “Tips on Storytelling,” January 24, 2020, YouTube, video, 4:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHO2RYiSfJs&t=20s>

¹⁵⁹ Liddell, “Tips on Storytelling.”

¹⁶⁰ Liddell, “Tips on Storytelling.”

¹⁶¹ Liddell, “Tips on Storytelling.”

people the characters were based on.¹⁶² The emphasis on the lived experiences of queer individuals was also designed to create positive, affective communities around the characters and *Pokémon Reborn*. Amethyst argues that portraying the characters' struggles leads audiences to "connect to and support each other in deeper ways" through their shared empathy for the characters.¹⁶³ The portrayal of queer characters ameliorates the lack of queer characters in mainstream games, advocates for the acknowledgment of queer individuals in games and development, and aims to build communities around the shared experiences queer individuals face in their daily lives.

The narrative of *Pokémon Reborn* is deliberately made to challenge the types of stories not present in mainstream video games, but the mechanics of the game are not intended to be as inherently oppositional. When discussing the gameplay changes in *Pokémon Reborn*, Amethyst at first did not intend these changes to be subversions or challenges to the official game series. However, as the Pokémon series released more games that Amethyst found to be too easy, she began to see her modifications as more critical of the series, saying:

i'd say for their time they were much more in the way of loving additions. I came up with the idea of field effects before [Pokémon games] black/white, and most of the other major changes were early on in development, a time period which I will cynically refer to as "back when (canon) Pokémon was good". so i didn't really feel the need to critique anything back then... but since XY gamefreak got me like :o frankly i'm happy to let them stand as critiques now.¹⁶⁴

Amethyst thinks the newer Pokémon games cater too much to children and audiences who want an easy game. Although she enjoyed aspects of the seventh-generation games *Pokémon Sun and Moon*, she thinks the newest games, *Sword and Shield*, focus too much

¹⁶² Liddell, Interview, 4.

¹⁶³ Liddell, "Tips of Storytelling."

¹⁶⁴ Liddell, Interview, 8.

“polish, presentation, and pandering to the player that [they] fail to have any substance or challenge.”¹⁶⁵ The additions to the Pokémon system, including the Field Effect system and level caps, were added to increase the challenge players faced. While not at first meant to criticize the Pokémon series, Amethyst saw *Pokémon Reborn* to critique the growing easiness of the series. Amethyst also complains the official Pokémon games also have moved away from the narrative complexities of fourth and fifth-generation games in favor of simpler stories with little to no conflict. Yet Amethyst also sees similarities with *Pokémon Reborn* and the official series. When asked about the new ways to encounter Pokémon in the fan game, Amethyst said that these mechanics were not designed to increase difficulty but rather to encourage players to try playing with new Pokémon throughout the game. She says the official games have also encouraged using a variety of different Pokémon but just approach it differently.¹⁶⁶ While Amethyst does see some of *Pokémon Reborn* as a critique of the official Pokémon games, she doesn’t consider the fan game to be a complete subversion or departure from the main series. Rather, the game takes elements from the main series and changes, updates, or adds to them to create another game that sometimes goes against some of the easier sections of newer Pokémon games.

Although the story challenges mainstream industry practices, the gameplay of *Pokémon Reborn* is not intended to be wholly subversive of the main series, going against some of the ways queer game studies position queer modders and indie game developers. In much of queer games scholarship, academics dismiss the subversive potential of narrative and character, instead focusing on games that challenge hegemonic forms of gameplay.¹⁶⁷ In his work on queer modding practices, Welch argues that queer representation and narratives should not be the “end-

¹⁶⁵ Liddell, Interview, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Liddell, Interview, 8.

¹⁶⁷ Bonnie Ruberg, “Queer Indie Video Games.”

all category of queerness in games,” advocating for ways games can queer gameplay.¹⁶⁸ Queer game creator merritt kopas also argues that “if we fail to examine [game] systems in favor of focusing on surface imagery, then we will end up playing straight games.”¹⁶⁹ To these and other scholars, queerness in games cannot come only from the narrative but also reside at the heart of the game design process. So, a “game that simply slaps in a male NPC as a romance option for a male player-avatar, for example, is not queer.”¹⁷⁰

This argument places *Pokémon Reborn* in a precarious position as a Pokémon fan game made by a team of queer developers. The subversive production practices of Pokémon Essentials, the collaborative nature of gameplay development, and the emphasis on the retelling of the lived experiences of game developers all point to sites of queerness in the production of *Pokémon Reborn*. Yet, according to many queer game creators and scholars, these various sites of queerness are inefficient if the game itself still uses heteronormative gameplay systems. Although these queer games scholars and creators understandably wish to push the medium toward a more inclusive direction, the dismissal of queer mods that create subversive narratives and characters runs the risk of invalidating the ways queer communities collaborate and understand their queerness. Limiting the queerness of a game to its gameplay or adherence to chrononormative play styles also overlooks how games like *Pokémon Reborn* queer production processes, regulations, and even intended audiences. When claiming that queerness must and can only truly reside in gameplay, queer games scholars ignore the complex ways in which meaning is created, positioned, and circulated throughout the various areas of cultural production. If, as Bo Ruberg claims, queerness in games “operates from a deep investment in the perspectives of

¹⁶⁸ Welch, “Affectively Necessary Labor,” 16.

¹⁶⁹ kopas, “Interrupting Play.”

¹⁷⁰ Welch, “Affectively Necessary Labor,” 18.

marginalized subjects,” then queerness can also come from the production practices of queer game creators as described above.¹⁷¹ A fan game featuring a variety of LGTBQ+ characters in many stories based on the lived experiences of queer individuals that was created by a gay, trans woman and collaborative team of LGTBQ+ individuals that understands itself as queer is queer.

The production practices of *Pokémon Reborn* show the deep investment in queer identities and audiences for the fan game development team. The textual analysis in Chapter 1 and this production analysis shed light on how the game acts in various ways as a site of queerness. But those queer meanings may not necessarily translate directly to a player of the game. As Shaw says, “Analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed.”¹⁷² Queerness in design may not necessarily mean queerness in practice, especially with different audiences who may resist such queer inclusions to the *Pokémon* series. Analyzing various audience responses to the game might detail how different gamers understand the queerness of the game. Another site of queerness in the cultural circuit of *Pokémon Reborn* comes from the ways different audiences understand, circulate, and negotiate meanings of queerness in the fan game, further complicating the ways queerness exists in cultural products.

Divergent Fan Readings of *Pokémon Reborn*'s Queerness

Queer fans of Nintendo games have built large communities online, yet research into these communities is relatively limited. Some research about queer fan cosplay, anime, and

¹⁷¹ Bonnie Ruberg, “Queer Indie Video Games,” 433

¹⁷² Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 63.

manga briefly mention Nintendo characters yet almost no research looks at how queer fans of some of the world's largest franchises understand and negotiate their queerness with these cultural products. Part of this dearth of research may come from the fact that Nintendo makes products directly marketed towards children, limiting the perhaps overtly queer signifiers of other Japanese games. In his discussion of queer fans of games from Japan in the 1990s and 2000s, Rob Gallagher discusses games marketed for young adults and only briefly mentions Nintendo products in relation to other games.¹⁷³ Despite the limited recognition from academia, queer fans continue to build and circulate meanings of queerness in online fan communities. Queer fans of Nintendo games run and share content in many Facebook groups.¹⁷⁴ Several websites host fan fiction and other works by queer fans on Nintendo games.¹⁷⁵ Most recently, the release of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* has stimulated many discussions from and about queer fans of the popular Nintendo series.¹⁷⁶ While queer fans of Pokémon are not the only segment of queer audiences of popular games, the creation, circulation, and negotiation of understandings of queerness in these fan communities provide insight into how queer fans of other media products similarly circulate queerness in their communities.

All fan labor involves both consumption and production, as fans respond to a cultural text with the production of another text that communicates some form of understanding or response to the original text. Often, fan labor involves sharing new readings and interpretations of a

¹⁷³ Rob Gallagher, "From Camp to Kitsch: A Queer Eye on Console Fandom," *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, no. 3 (2014): 39-50. https://www.gamejournal.it/3_gallagher/.

¹⁷⁴ Gay Geeks, "LGBTQ Pokémon Trainers," Facebook, accessed March 25, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LGBTQPokémonTrainers/>.

¹⁷⁵ Lordoftheghostking28, "Link Goes to Gay Island," FanFiction, April 19, 2013, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9217333/1/Link-Goes-to-Gay-Island>

¹⁷⁶ Nintendo EPD, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Switch, Nintendo, 2020.; Erica Lenti, "'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' is the queer utopia we need right now," Xtra, March 20, 2020, https://www.dailyxtra.com/animal-crossing-new-horizons-queer-utopia-168690?fbclid=IwAR03NIuf5sS1_1O0FdrwsG4HaBeqQakx4NQ7NVxw5jwNiexuXQA604QV6QU.

cultural product as the original text fails to satisfy. In response, fans “try to articulate to themselves and other unrealized possibilities within the original works.”¹⁷⁷ The queer fan labor based on Nintendo games above shows how fans take seemingly heteronormative texts and read them with queer potentials. By distributing new meanings of beloved texts, queer fans of these series can share their understandings and build community around their shared love of a certain Nintendo game. As Abigail de Kosnik says, “fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions.”¹⁷⁸ As both audiences and cultural producers, fans make new meanings of a text by taking elements from an original, mass media text and adjusting it to communicate their ideas. *Pokémon Reborn* differs from other fan labor texts, such as fan fiction or Facebook groups, in that the labor reappropriates the code and medium of the official Pokémon games directly into another game. Much fan labor operates in relatively similar mediums as the original text, such as the re-cutting of soap operas into YouTube videos that focus on queer stories, but most fans do not produce another cultural product that performs almost the same function as the original text.¹⁷⁹ So, queer fans on the LGBTQ Pokémon Trainers may make memes using pictures from the Pokémon anime, but almost none actively make their games as Amethyst did. Taking de Kosnik’s statement, *Pokémon Reborn* takes mastery over the raw material, the code, of the official Pokémon series and uses it to communicate new, queerer ideas about the franchise and to build a space where queer fans of Pokémon can share their love of both the official games and the fan games.

¹⁷⁷ Jenkins. *Textual Poachers*, 23.

¹⁷⁸ de Kosnik, “Fandom as Free Labor.”

¹⁷⁹ Dhaenens, “Queer Cuttings on YouTube.”

To foster an environment where fans can share their interpretations of *Pokémon Reborn*, Amethyst and the other creators actively support and validate individual fans' readings. On Amethyst's various social media profiles, she recognizes the ability for fans to create their meaning, saying "frankly as far as i'm concerned y'all are welcome to project whatever you want on the game anyway and regardless of anything i say here."¹⁸⁰ The *Pokémon Reborn* website also hosts several forums that allow fans to share their interpretations of the game. In the "Reborn City" section, fans can discuss events of the game, characters they like, and provide advice for how to proceed in the game. The "Creative Works" forum focuses on the sharing of fan works like art and fan fiction, providing a definitive place where fan laborers can circulate and share understandings through their creative works. The developers explicitly make space for fans to share their ideas and work, providing room for fans to negotiate their identities and thoughts about queerness.

For the audience analysis, I cannot cover all the different ways communities and fans react to and discuss the queer elements of *Pokémon Reborn*. To make the task easier, I put up a forum post asking for fan responses to various aspects of the game, including their thoughts on queer characters.¹⁸¹ I identified myself as a graduate student writing a thesis about *Pokémon Reborn*, also notifying respondents that their responses may be used in the thesis as well. I decided to include questions in the forum post that directly related to some of the elements I write about in the thesis, including how these fans found the fan game, thoughts on the gameplay and narrative, and what they thought about the queer characters in the game. I did not want to ask

¹⁸⁰ Amethyst Liddell, (amethystblack), "Hi! Just out of curiosity..." Tumblr, February 14, 2020, <https://amethystblack.tumblr.com/post/190828540942/hi-just-out-of-curiosity-are-there-canon-ages>.

¹⁸¹ David Kocik (Volbeatbeats), "Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses," Pokémon Reborn Forums, February 23, 2020, <https://www.rebornevo.com/forums/topic/50576-looking-for-Pokémon-reborn-fan-responses/>. Like the interview with Amethyst, several responses to this forum included grammar and/or spelling mistakes, so direct quotes from respondents will not feature [sic].

simply about queer characters, as respondents who may not care all that much about the queer content may be less likely to respond to a post. For my research, I wanted to hear the voices of fans who had a vested interest in the queer characters of the game and those who did not so I could see how different fans negotiate their understandings of queer characters differently. I also wanted to take these respondents at their word. As Shaw notes, interviews and correspondence include several factors that may limit the veracity of respondents' true thoughts and actions but choosing to take respondents at their word is a rhetorical choice that validates the respondents and their ability to communicate what they think.¹⁸²

My post asking for fan responses was put up, with permission from Amethyst, on the Reborn City forum, a general thread that all players can easily access. Posted on February 24th, the post has received 1090 views and twenty-nine responses as of the time of writing. Although relatively few players responded, the responses received began to show differences in fan responses to queer characters. The replies to the post generally resulted in fans describing their relation to queer characters in two ways. One group saw the queer characters as a nice addition to games in general but found meaning more in an individual character's personality traits than their queerness. The other group generally found the inclusion of queer characters to be beneficial to the game and to provide much-needed representation in games that queer individuals usually do not have. These fans also used the queer characters in *Pokémon Reborn* to reflect on their queerness, using the game as a method of understanding their identities more deeply.

These two general responses echo Adrienne Shaw's work on representation in gaming. Through ethnographic interviews of game players in the Philadelphia area, Shaw claims that

¹⁸² Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*.

marginalized audiences may identify with fictional characters contrary to conventional academic and industrial wisdom. Shaw notes that many of the interviewees did not see identifying with a character in a video game as fundamentally important to finding pleasure while playing it. Shaw argues most games encourage the player to envision themselves *as* an avatar, rather than *with* NPCs with personality and backstories. Shaw contends that the interviewees mostly felt ambivalent or disinvested in the personalities of game characters, showing most do not identify *with* these characters and making representation more complicated than simply showing a body or character on screen. Some of the interviewees (including black, queer, and women gamers) saw video games as a realm of escape, free from the cultural and sociopolitical struggles of the “real” world. In contrast, other gamers believed more diverse representation was needed in video games to reflect the “real” world more realistically. To all the gamers, though, representation mattered much more at the abstract and societal levels and much less at the individual level. Shaw advocates for the dismissal of the notion that people will consume, identify with, and find power in characters that merely share social characteristics with them. To Shaw, the goal of increasing representation is not just to show more women or people of color, but rather to “reflect more modes of being in the world.”¹⁸³ Representation of marginalized identities mattered personally to few interviewees, but all players argued that representation mattered generally, specifically for players of marginalized identities.

Respondents on the Pokémon Reborn forum echoed the interviewees from Shaw’s research. Most fans who responded to the forum post found the queer characters to be nice additions to the game but did not find much meaning in characters’ queer identities, reflecting Shaw’s work on the ambivalence of audiences’ responses to representation in gaming. While

¹⁸³ Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 145.

none of the respondents were outright hostile or dismissive of these characters, several respondents were uninterested in queerness in characters. These fans were more likely to find meaning in the character's personality traits or backstories rather than their queer identity. As commenter Edo said, queer characters like Cain and Adrienn are "normal people, just like any other, I don't really think of them as special or different from the other characters, so I don't care about their queerness or however it's called."¹⁸⁴ Despite this apparent dismissal, Edo goes on to describe how he loves both characters since Cain was an "upstanding [person] with a good heart" and Adrienn is "dutiful and stays true to his convictions."¹⁸⁵ Edo points to several instances of both characters exhibiting those positive traits, showing he does enjoy these characters. Yet, Edo misgenders Adrienn in his response and dismisses the queerness in these characters by saying they are essentially like other, cisgender and heterosexual characters.

Many respondents echoed this sentiment, saying that having a queer identity did not add nor subtract anything from these characters. Rather they pointed to specific plot points or character traits as to why they enjoyed these queer characters. Outside Indoorsman says they wished they had the same kind of motivation that Adrienn had when rebuilding Reborn City, but "neither Adrienn or Cain is really defined by their LGBTQ - it is, at most, a side part of their characters or backstory."¹⁸⁶ Mimikyu Dayo thinks Cain is a fun rival who sometimes makes poor choices and Adrienn serves a crucial role in the city's restoration, yet he states "Sexuality don't made me care more or less about them."¹⁸⁷ For these respondents, Cain's pansexuality and Adrienn's non-binary gender seemed unimportant to these characters and their development

¹⁸⁴ Edo, February 24, 2020, comment on Kocik, "Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses."

¹⁸⁵ Edo, comment on Kocik.

¹⁸⁶ Outdoor Indoorsman, March 1, 2020, comment on Kocik, "Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses."

¹⁸⁷ Mimikyu Dayo, March 17, 2020, comment on Kocik, "Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses."

throughout the game, with many even saying you could simply take their queerness away without affecting the rest of the character. As Waynolt says, the queerness of each character “belongs to their private life, just like how often they have to go to the bathroom or the exact details of what they did in there, and is noone else's business but their own. It's not central to who they are, what they believe, or why they act.”¹⁸⁸ Many fans, even a self-identifying gay man, rejected the idea that a character’s queer identity could or should their affect personality or plot events, even though many characters' queer traits directly influence their interactions with other characters.

Fans who saw queerness as a relatively unimportant aspect of individual characters also noted that having queer characters was nice in general, especially for players who may come from underrepresented groups in games. These fans also pointed out how the video game industry’s struggle with representation echoed many other areas of entertainment. Although Des Toto didn’t find characters’ queerness to be that important to individual characters, he did think “that representativeness matters to minorities in any field,” comparing *Pokémon Reborn* to the first year of full media coverage of the Women’s World Cup.¹⁸⁹ Several other fans also noted that representation in gaming matters by pointing out how *Pokémon Reborn* includes characters from other underrepresented groups. Respondent jbastian1 found the inclusionary practices of *Pokémon Reborn* to be refreshing because “the introduction of queer characters not only makes the game unique, but feel more realistic as that is a definite demographic in todays world,” also noting that “there are numerous POC in the games that are rarely present in the actual games.”¹⁹⁰ Poster Egzample also applauded the game for its diverse cast of female characters, noting that

¹⁸⁸ Waynolt, February 26, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

¹⁸⁹ Des Toto, March 17, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

¹⁹⁰ jbastian1, March 11, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

most of the NPCs the player interacts with are “strong, meaningful and distinct female characters” with a variety of roles and complexities.¹⁹¹ The analysis of representations of cisgender women and people of color is beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to note that fans were aware of how video games typically do not include a large number of women and non-White characters. With this first group of respondents, queerness was unimportant to how they connected with and found meaning in the queer characters of the game. At the same time, these players acknowledged that showing queer characters in the game were important in general and for other queer players. That kind of ambivalence echoes Adrienne Shaw’s research on representation in gaming.

The other group of *Pokémon Reborn* fans found queer characters to have a profound impact on their playing experience. These respondents were also the ones who self-identified as queer in their profiles and responses, showing that several, but not necessarily all, queer fans of *Pokémon Reborn* found meaning in the queer characters in the game. Many of these respondents noted their positive affective responses to these characters. Player Lua finds joy in Adrienn’s character, since “*Every time an NPC refers to Adrienn with xyr correct pronouns I gain 10 years to my life span [emphasis theirs].*”¹⁹² Respondent Gastronely feels he could understand the lives of the queer characters, saying he could “connect with these people (yes people), because i, myself, suffer with that. I could understand their struggle, because i know their struggle, and it wasn't just empathy.”¹⁹³ Fans also communicate these affective responses in other places like Tumblr. One fan direct messaged Amethyst on Tumblr, saying “Cain be like, ‘Lets get one thing

¹⁹¹ Egzample, February 28, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

¹⁹² Lua, February 25, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

¹⁹³ Gastronely, March 26, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

straight, I'm not.' and i love him for that.”¹⁹⁴ Many fans communicated their positive emotional responses to these characters, contrasting the responses from the first group, which found queer characters to be positive on a general or abstract level but found little meaning with that queerness directly.

Respondents who found characters' queerness to be important also argued *Pokémon Reborn* included queer characters in more meaningful ways than most media products. Respondent Aeilic bemoaned that “One of the common things that plagues a lot of media is “token inclusion”, but these characters are a lot more how real queer people are,” noting that each queer characters' queerness is a part of, but not their whole, personality in *Pokémon Reborn*.¹⁹⁵ Echoing Shaw's critiques of neoliberal inclusion practices, Gastronely notes that when mainstream media incorporate queer side characters “it feels more like following an political agenda to make a group of people happy.”¹⁹⁶ Like Aeilic, he feels most queer characters are simply there so media companies can say they are inclusive without putting in any of the labor toward telling stories by, for, and about queer individuals. Gastronely argues queer characters in *Pokémon Reborn* are included in a “more organic way... from minor characters like the Name Rater in South Peridot Ward, to major characters like Adrienn and Cain.”¹⁹⁷ By including queer characters throughout the game in small and large roles, *Pokémon Reborn* makes these NPCs less like a formality and more like a fully integrated part of the game.

These respondents also note *Pokémon Reborn* avoided stereotypes and token inclusion by giving each major queer character different personalities and including them in a variety of

¹⁹⁴ Amethyst Liddell, (amethystblack), “Cain be like...” Tumblr, March 21, 2020, <https://amethystblack.tumblr.com/post/613255223450943488/cain-be-like-lets-get-one-thing-straight-im>.

¹⁹⁵ Aeilic, March 16, 2020, comment on Kocik, “Looking for Pokémon Reborn Fan Responses.”

¹⁹⁶ Gastronely, comment on Kocik.

¹⁹⁷ Gastronely.

stories in the game. Cain, the main rival of the story who is also pansexual, is a fan-favorite character. Lua appreciates Cain because of “how much he cares about others,” particularly when he tries to help Heather whose father had just committed suicide.¹⁹⁸ Although he might be a tad reckless, Lua likes that his heart “was in the right place.”¹⁹⁹ Aeilic and Gastronely like how Cain’s humorous sexual innuendos and his design matches well with his personality and how his sexuality has an effect on his interaction with others. Lua also enjoys Adrienn, particularly because xe helps with the reconstruction of Reborn City and has a positive attitude. Both groups of respondents felt that the personality traits and actions of the queer characters were vital to understanding and connecting with the NPC. However, fans who identify as queer were much more likely to see queerness as a similarly vital part of these characters’ identities.

In particular, these fans discussed how queer characters in *Pokémon Reborn* reflected their struggles, showing how fans use characters to negotiate understandings of their identities. Before *Pokémon Reborn*, Lua felt much like the other group of respondents who thought representation was overall nice but wasn’t necessary for them to enjoy the game. As they say, “I never even knew how much I wanted representation until I got it, but now I really don’t want to let it go, it’s just so nice.”²⁰⁰ Lua, who is gender non-binary, appreciates how *Pokémon Reborn* incorporates non-binary characters and avatars in the game, changing their mind about the power of having queer characters that reflect their lived experience. As they say, “As a genderfluid person, having a canon enby character is just so, so amazing. Every time NPCs use ‘xe’ or say ‘Mx. Adrienn’ I feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It’s like being told, ‘Yes, you exist. I know. I see

¹⁹⁸ Lua, comment on Kocik.

¹⁹⁹ Lua.

²⁰⁰ Lua.

you.’ Every time.”²⁰¹ While Lua likes Adrienn as a character, the consistent use and honor of xe/xem pronouns in the game make Lua feel like *Pokémon Reborn* recognizes and humanizes non-binary individuals. Lua also enjoys being able to play as a non-binary avatar, noting that “Even the villains are nice enough to use they/them pronouns, sure they might kill me, but at least nobody’s misgendering me.”²⁰² The process of choosing their desired pronouns and having those pronouns respected throughout the game, even by villains, makes Lua feel like the creators of the game care enough to recognize individuals like themselves. After seeing how *Pokémon Reborn* includes and respects non-binary characters and their pronouns, Lua sees the importance of representation in reaffirming their own identity and lived experiences, saying “You can pry Adrienn and the Enby Player Character out of my cold, dead hands now.”²⁰³

Gastronely used characters from *Pokémon Reborn* to understand his identity, reaffirm his sexual orientation, and find bodily autonomy in the expression of his queerness. Gastronely’s favorite character and largest influence was Cain, who is pansexual and dresses androgynously. While Gastronely enjoys Cain for his personality traits and story arc, he also resonated with Cain’s story about finding himself after being rejected for his queerness. Gastronely denied his bisexuality in his life, mostly because of how negatively he saw bisexual people and feminine men portrayed. For Gastronely, Cain’s story toward acceptance “worked as a way to release my prejudices and doubts about myself, specially those regarding to sexual tendencies, i can consider myself to having bisexual tendencies, and Reborn served as a way to clear my mind about that.”²⁰⁴ By seeing another character express themselves and struggle with acceptance,

²⁰¹ Lua.

²⁰² Lua.

²⁰³ Lua.

²⁰⁴ Gastronely.

Gastronely felt more comfortable in accepting his sexual identity, feeling that the game helped him normalize his bisexual tendencies. Cain acted as a foil for Gastronely, helping him realize his bisexuality by showing how others understand and show their queer lives. He also now feels more comfortable growing out long hair and painting his nails since resonating strongly with Cain's fashion sense. Gastronely also found *Pokémon Reborn* covered many issues, such as depression, that many mainstream media outlets and texts don't. To him, "Reborn is a way of people to liberate themselves, it's a psychological story that emphasizes in the characters and their struggles, their stories, which involves the player naturally in the story."²⁰⁵ He sees the game as a way he liberated himself from preconceived notions of his sexuality and claims the game can do so for others as well.

While Lua and Gastronely's responses differed from other fans, their stories show how some fans find queer meaning by negotiating understandings of their queerness with characters from *Pokémon Reborn*, echoing previous research into fan cultures. A significant number of respondents were otherwise ambivalent about the queer characters in the game, saying that representation was important in general for minority populations but not seeing queer identity markers as inherently important to the characters of *Pokémon Reborn*. These divergent responses show how even fans who participate in the same communities online may differ in their responses to a fan object. While this is seemingly a given for larger media objects, the replication of these divergent opinions across media texts with smaller audiences shows how even niche media objects can elicit different understandings of representation, queerness, and identity in fan communities.

²⁰⁵ Gastronely.

Conclusion

In both production and consumption, *Pokémon Reborn* shows how queer creators and audiences of mainstream media understand, circulate, and negotiate ideas about queerness in their fan labor and online communities. Queerness appears in production practices that subvert hegemonic industry norms, especially in the collaborative process of creating, providing, and maintaining free-to-use software online. Programs like Pokémon Essentials show how fans can both create fan labor and undermine the original fan object by providing new access to people who wish to inscribe their desires and interpretations of the Pokémon world in video game format. A production that includes a deep investment in the inclusion of queer creators and lived experiences can be another site of queerness. Amethyst and the other developers of *Pokémon Reborn* deliberately included stories and characters that echo the struggles and lived experiences of queer people and designed the forums to be safe and supportive space for queer individuals. Yet, the inclusion of a multitude of queer characters and stories in a text does not mean all fans will understand queer characters in the same manner. Many players saw the queer characters in the fan game as generally good for the representation of minority groups but felt ambivalent about the queer markers and identities of the specific characters. Self-identifying queer players were most likely to discuss how the queer characters and stories of *Pokémon Reborn* were meaningful, particularly in how the players understood and negotiated their own identities with the game.

In the interview with Amethyst and responses from the *Pokémon Reborn* fan community, queerness operated most deeply through stories and characters, rather than queer gameplay. Amethyst included stories from queer friends' lives and her lived experience because she feels sharing real stories can positively impact people who experience similar events. Queer fans use

the characters' queer experiences and lives to understand their own identities. These queer creators and audiences did not see gameplay as a significant site of queerness, contradicting some of the research in queer games and the views of other indie queer game developers.

Pokémon Reborn rejects the notion that video games can only truly be queered through gameplay by showing how queer production practices can subvert typical industry work and how queer characters and stories can affect audiences and their understandings of queerness. Although subversive gameplay is a strong site of political queerness in video games, queer stories and characters in games can still have a deep impact on audiences and creators as well. *Pokémon Reborn* shows how a deep investment in queerness in all aspects of the cultural circuit, particularly production and audience, can imbue political power in the stories and characters of video games.

Conclusion: Honoring Queer Lives and Labor in *Pokémon Reborn*

Around the midpoint of *Pokémon Reborn*, you wind up in a morose circus outside of Reborn City. One of the first NPCs you interact with asks you to specify your preferred pronouns again because coding in an update of the game caused some characters to use the incorrect ones. This NPC directly hails you, saying “Excuse me, ma’am, sir, or person of an otherwise unspecified gender... Due to a bug, you may have seen various characters use incorrect pronouns now and then. My apologies for that!”²⁰⁶ Once you confirm your pronouns, the NPC says “Got it! That should be fixed up now; sorry for the inconvenience. This NPC will now self-destruct.” Like Terra, this NPC breaks the fourth wall of the game and calls attention to the vested interest in queer identities in *Pokémon Reborn*. The NPC’s dialogue respects players’ pronouns and gender identity while also honoring queerness in a joking manner, particularly when the NPC does self-destruct in the game. This caring yet light-hearted approach to queer players, characters, and experiences echoes how the creators and audiences understand and negotiate queerness through the production and consumption of the fan game.

Much of queer games research marks gameplay in video games as the most politically potent form of queer subversion, but *Pokémon Reborn* situates its queerness in narrative and characters. While the fan game updates the Pokémon gameplay system with Field Effects and level caps, these changes don’t necessarily reflect a queering of gameplay. Rather, the new battle system requires knowledge from the official game series, entrenching the game in chrononormative game design elements like leveling up and competition. However, *Pokémon Reborn* subverts the Pokémon franchise by incorporating queer characters and issues throughout the game. The game includes narratives about familiar LGBTQ+ lived experiences, including

²⁰⁶ Liddell, *Pokémon Reborn*.

coming out and abusive relationships. *Pokémon Reborn* also queers the narrative by incorporating queer movement and breaking the fourth wall of the game, as seen in characters like Cain, Terra, and Adrienn. Although the fan game doesn't queer gameplay, it fully subverts the typical stories of mainstream gaming by focusing on the experiences of queer individuals in a heteronormative franchise.

Pokémon Reborn's investment in queer lives stems from the production practices and identities of its development team. The tools used to make the fan game come from online collaborative labor that subverts mainstream gaming industry practices. Amethyst included stories in the game that reflected the experiences of her LGBTQ+ friends to create a welcoming environment for all players of the game. The development team also designed the forums on the *Pokémon Reborn* website to be inclusive and positive, providing space for fans to engage in many ways that would reflect their interests. Audience responses to the queer characters and stories in the fan game were mixed. Many fans were ambivalent about the representation of queer characters. These fans thought it was nice in general to have LGBTQ+ people and stories in video games. However, the fans also felt that the characters' queer identities were unimportant to how they connected with them. Queer fans were much more likely to say that a character's sexuality or gender identity were important parts of their personality. These fans also used the characters in *Pokémon Reborn* to understand and negotiate their own queer identities. Like *Pokémon Reborn* itself, the creators and fans found queer meaning in the characters of the game, pointing to ways narrative can be a site of political subversion and queerness. Although gameplay is one way to critique and queer dominant video game practices, *Pokémon Reborn* shows how fans, creators, and video game communities create and circulate understandings of queerness through narrative elements.

Although I analyzed *Pokémon Reborn*, its creators, and audiences in-depth, there are several limitations to my research. First, I could not include how audiences that dislike the game responded. *Pokémon Reborn* is only one of many Pokémon fan games online, most of which are much shorter and include no queer narratives. Even though it is popular in fan game circles, the game is an outlier with its queer creators and cast of characters and several posts online show people criticizing the game for being too “edgy” or too “gay.”²⁰⁷ An analysis of these negative responses might illuminate how, even in niche fan game communities, fans may attempt to denigrate and regulate fan interpretation and labor from queer individuals. Although I analyzed audience responses to a post on the forums, I was unable to study other ways queer fans circulate understandings of queerness on the *Pokémon Reborn* forums and elsewhere online. Many fans share their fan art or fan fiction about the queer character from the game online. Investigating how these fans interpret and share their works might convey other ways fans negotiate queer understandings and identities.

Pokémon Reborn also articulates the complex network of signifiers of queerness and Japanese anime tropes in United States fan communities. The main characters in the fan game are all drawn in stereotypical anime style, including exaggerated hair and costumes. Queer fans in the US have adopted many of these anime styles into their work, whether it be cosplay, fan games, fan fiction, or drag makeup.²⁰⁸ However, the relationship between queer fans and anime/Japanese video games is complicated by industry practices in Japan that encourage an exaggerated construction of “Japanese-ness” in cultural products and adoption practices by White fans in the US. Gallagher argues both Japan and its cultural products are often “treated

²⁰⁷ DatOpStank, “The fuck IS this?,” Reddit, November 15, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/PokémonReborn/comments/3sz26j/the_fuck_is_this/.

²⁰⁸ Kristina Manente, “6 Insta-Famous Queer Cosplayers Reveal How Their Identities Intersect,” GoMag, July 16, 2018, <http://gomag.com/article/6-queer-cosplayers/>.

with a mixture of awe, incredulity and derisive amusement” by mainstream US audiences.²⁰⁹ Mia Consalvo notes that “Western interest in Japanese games and the game industry can include a certain element of exoticization... it is also as likely to include understanding, reworking, and identification.”²¹⁰ So, *Pokémon Reborn* is just one of many reworkings of Japanese media that reflect the interests of a queer Western audience, which comes with potential racialized problems.

Further research into how queer audiences reinterpret Japanese media in a global context could help us understand both how media is reappropriated by audiences and how queer individuals and communities build and understand queerness around these global media flows. Queer fans of other Nintendo franchises offer one place to start. From *The Legend of Zelda* to *Animal Crossing*, queer fans have put in labor sharing their understandings and interpretations of these popular franchises.²¹¹ How might these fans unwittingly engage in exoticization and racialized stereotypes in their understandings of queerness? How do international companies like Nintendo adjust their media products to address calls for more queer characters in the US while still appealing to audiences and countries with different, often more oppressive, views and policies on queer identities? How do queer fans assert their understandings of these Japanese media products while negotiating the lack of governmental and societal support for queer identities and experiences in countries like Japan? *Pokémon Reborn* begins to answer some of these questions, but more research into queer fans of Japanese games, anime, and manga may

²⁰⁹ Gallagher, “From Camp to Kitsch,” 44.

²¹⁰ Mia Consalvo, “Visiting the Floating World: Tracing a Cultural History of Games Through Japan and America,” (presentation, Digital Games Research Association Conference 2007: Situated Play, Tokyo, Japan, September 4, 2007).

²¹¹ Malcolm Thorndike Nicholson, “We’re Here, We’re Queer and We Love the Legend of Zelda,” Narratively, June 26, 2015, <https://narratively.com/were-here-were-queer-and-we-love-the-legend-of-zelda/>.

begin to reveal how companies, governments, and audiences negotiate understandings of queerness on a global scale.

The production, consumption, and community practices surrounding *Pokémon Reborn* highlight how games, companies, and audiences can support LGBTQ+ stories, labor, and experiences. Games can challenge gaming norms through subversive, queer gameplay, but games like *Pokémon Reborn* show that a deep investment in queer characters and narratives can also combat heteronormative industry practices. The production of *Pokémon Reborn* reveals how game developers can collaborate to develop cultural products with queer gamers in mind by creating supportive working environments, respecting individuals' lived experiences, and amplifying LGBTQ+ voices at all points of production. Game creators can support queer audiences by providing safe, moderated spaces online where queer fans can share their ideas, understandings, and interests. The gaming industry has many problems, from toxic working environments to overtly homophobic characters. *Pokémon Reborn* shows how queer fans and laborers negotiate their love of heteronormative video games with their queer identities by creating games, stories, and communities that respect and celebrate queer lives.

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Appendix: Transcript of Interview with Amethyst Liddell over Discord

Transcript of Interview with Amethyst Over Discord

2/5/2020

David: So, I'm first kind of wondering about how you decided to start making Reborn. What drove you to make the game? What did you use to make the game, and how did you learn those tools to make it?

Amethyst: that's a great set of questions to ask together because they're all directly connected. so the game as a whole is based off of the events of the reborn league, which was an online challenge i hosted for about two years before the start of the game. during that time a lot of our challengers were like "wow! wouldnt it be cool if this was made into an actual romhack!"

eventually one challenger pointed to an existing project made with Pokémon Essentials, which is a scriptset for RPG Maker XP that basically turns it into Pokémon Maker XP and was going to try and make the game himself based off of that, and i jumped in like "did you say RMX?" because i actually spent a lot of time working with rpg maker when i was younger. already having experience with the engine, i stole that person's thunder, jumped into development on impulse, and made the first episode (start to julia) in two weeks.

i fully expected for the impulse to wear off after a month or two and that i would get bored and drop the project. but. i didn't.

2/6/2020

David: That's great! What's kept you motivated to work on the project for 8 years? (I believe it started in 2012 right?) Did you collaborate with others to help make the game, and if so, when did they join you in working on it?

Amethyst: Correct, it did. I made the thirteen first thirteen episodes myself (through Charlotte) and then accepted help from some friends after that, so that would be mid 2014.

As for motivation, I think the simplest answer is that I was enjoying making it, and seeing the community enjoy it so much too was really inspiring.

David:

What kinds of response have you gotten from the community? Have you been the moderator for the forums or have other people done that job?

Amethyst:

so along with coincidentally using rpg maker since the time i was 11, i've also been running websites since i was 12. so i've always been the admin for the site, but naturally i get other people to help out with the moderation and such... basically if i ever feel like i can't focus on development because i need to babysit the community, that's my cue that it's probably time to pick a new mod

as for the community response.... well, the biggest pattern is the fact that the community grew so much because of it. i mentioned before it was based off of our online league, but being that way, i originally expected the game to be -only- for our community. when people started sharing it outside of here and we started gaining members from it, i was frankly surprised, and had to edit the game over time to be more accessible to those who weren't already around for the league. on a more personal level, i've had a lot of people thank me for making the game, many have said it got them back into Pokémon or restored their faith in the series after gamefreak has been doing god knows what in recent gens... more critically i've had a handful of people over the years tell me the game helped them overcome their depression and suicidal moments, which makes everything extremely worth it to me, and there have been a number of cases where people said they found their own personal conflicts in the game's story (especially with titania and amaria) and it helped them to sort it out.

David:

How do you decide who will be a new moderator? Is it someone you know personally? Also, I forgot to ask, but how did the original league start up in the first place? (I'll ask more about the fans later! That's so great it's helping people!!)

Amethyst:

for mods, it used to be that way, just whoever i knew in the community and believed would be best suited for the job... nowadays the existing staff team nominates people and we decide as a group together. it isn't always people i know, even if i'm the one nominating them-- sometimes just people i've seen helping out. and as for the league,

i originally made the league as a challenge for an best friend/ex of mine since we were always talking about how cool it would be to fight gym leaders if they were actually real people. but even though i set some stuff up, they never actually wanted to try the challenge. after we had a falling out, i decided to make the challenge publicly available instead out of spite ^^; and it just picked up from there.

David:

Awesome! So you mention Titania and Amaria's story has been important to some people. Are there any other characters that people point to as having an effect on them?

Amethyst:

hmm. so taka's an obvious fan favorite since he's basically the ultimate millennial, a lot of people relate to his insecurity and depression... but aside from him i don't think there's any other noteworthy trends to mention.

there are some isolated extreme instances... ZEL has become a critical coping mechanism for at least user i know well. there was one guy on my patron server who said that that scene with charlotte in the yureyu building, where she takes shelly back, actually helped him to survive an armed robbery (? iirc) where he was held at gun point and disarmed the gunner by employing charlotte's gambit. and uhh, actually my character dying became pivotal for a former friend of

mine who, as a result of that scene, developed a vore fetish and became obsessed with me both in-game and out... i'm sure there are some smaller cases that i'm not as keenly aware of too.

David:

Okay! As you mentioned before, a lot of the characters are based on the original league. How did you go about writing storylines that were related to these real people?

Amethyst:

yeah that's the real question, i'm not even sure tbh. so, one side effect of starting this game on impulse and expecting myself to get bored of it is that i didn't actually even make a plan for the longer story until i was in the middle of episode 3 (florinia to corey) and was like "wait, i'm still actively doing this... that's weird, but i guess i should figure out where this is going." so at that point a lot of my planning was just like, all right, we have all these characters who are usually gym leaders and a lot of them have overlapping types, how can i work this in a way that is going to get all of these disjointed people into this disaster. on top of that, there's a lot of drama from the online league itself (which is in part i think why so many people originally wanted a game version of it) that i've made a point of preserving or at least referencing in game... for instance, kiki's illness and passing, the relationship between amy and tania and her losing her memory, luna struggling with her father's religion, etcetc are all conflicts from the online league that i just fit in. so a lot of that was predetermined.

if there is some kind of structure or rhyme or reason to how that's worked out, frankly i barely know it. like i think i've done well under the circumstances but compared to the usual approach i'd take to writing and narratives, reborn is a hot chaotic mess. the one unifying thread is basically team meteor. pretty much anything related to meteor as a team or the four characters who did not exist in the league (solaris, sirius, taka, ZEL) was free reign for me to try and create a conflict that would unify all these other characters. my focus has basically been, aside from representing the conflicts from the online league, to help these characters try to grow and change in some way that they would still be recognizable as themselves, but that could hopefully be meaningful to players too. newer episodes have done that a bit better than older ones.

David:

That's really really interesting. So you actually knew people who went through all of these struggles? Someone lost their memory? That's crazy.
That also brings me to the queer characters and narratives. Did you base queer characters like Cain off of people from the league as well?

Amethyst:

yeah for a small online league it was ridiculous tbh. and granted, some of it we exaggerated for the challengers benefit, but like. still. it's kind of surreal in retrospect.
in amy's case irl the memory loss was actually from a car accident rather than a suicide attempt, but her being suicidal was also real.
and yes, cain was from the online league... we got his sister to replace him after his mother grounded him for doing stuff with a boy :sweat_smile:
i'm trying to think if there was anyone who is canonically queer in game and was not in the league. and i don't think there is. everything is faithful.

David:

Okay! How did you approach writing about issues like suicide and partner abuse when it hits so close to home for the people you were writing about and the community around the game?

Amethyst:

this might be a little dark to say, but then, we're already there, so. i didn't really feel shy about writing about that kind of stuff since i've also struggled with it personally.
for the most part it's just my own experience

David:

No need to worry about being dark. I just want to make sure that in my thesis I discuss Reborn and the work you all put into it with respect. I understand completely.
It sounds like fans of the game have responded positively to the narrative of the game so I think it's really helping lots of people discuss these issues
How did it feel putting those narratives in the Pokémon world? Did it seem to fit well with the Pokémon series?

2/9/2020

Amethyst:

that probably depends who you ask. a lot of people are turned off of the game because of how 'edgy' it is, and i often feel that how much you enjoy the game depends largely (as a prerequisite) on if you're willing to accept the contrast of these darker themes with what is advertised as a kids' show and game. personally, i think TPC loses out on a lot of potential by refusing to explore any of that, especially when the Pokémon adventures manga has already happily show an arbok's severed spinal cord.

so i don't think it's especially cohesive or fits very well, but i do think that -avoiding- those things is a waste. and in my case i veer towards them because that's what my experience and interest lends itself to.

frankly in a similar vein i feel like so many franchises limit themselves by never so much as considering LGBT stories, we've all heard cis-het romance stories 1,000 times over each and i feel like it's the rare work that actually manages to make that kind of romance stand out in a meaningful way. on the other hand, LGBT romance and conflicts are all but nearly unexplored entirely, so it just kind of seems like, the obvious path to take for something fresh.,

it's probably similar to that in both cases.

David:

So when you started out, did you intend to include lots of queer stories? Oh and also, I was interested how the setting for the game focuses a lot on the city of Reborn and is much more urban than any other Pokémon game. What was the motivation behind choosing that setting?

Amethyst:

so for the setting, that was also from the community. in the early days of the online server i went offline for 1 (one) night and apparently something?? happened that i, as the sole admin at the time, was needed for. and not being there, the handful of regulars we had at the time apparently devised some story where the region of reborn fell into ruin because i, as its leader, disappeared. i woke up to that story and to this day don't really know why that happened. one of the people present at the time then started writing a comic about reborn and its characters (which is where team meteor came from) and he imagined reborn as a giant post-apoc city. although i didn't decide it, it lead me to drawing this detailed map of what reborn might look like if it were a region (<http://www.rebornevo.com/images/pr/rebornmap.png> if you haven't seen it) , and in the process of drawing the map i did start thinking about what reborn might be like as a game. so really the setting shaped the game from the very beginning.

2/10/2020

Amethyst:

as for queer stories, it definitely wasn't intended since the beginning, or probably ever? i -did- go out of my way after a point to get a nonbinary person as our fairy leader in the online league, since there was a lot of debate about whether it should be a boy or a girl. i was like, "what if no". but frankly i feel like the game is relatively lacking in it and i'm looking forward to making that more of a focus in my next project.

probably the stories that do exist in it already are mainly because of the company we kept in the community. i'm gay and trans myself, so it's always been a priority for me to make sure that minorities would feel safe on our server and site. amy was one of my best friends, cain was recruited from-in community, cal ended up dating a male challenger for a while (that one hasn't been mentioned in game yet tho)... etc. a lot of it just sort of happened, i guess.

David:

I want to just take time to say again how helpful you've been!! Ah this is all great stuff to know. Have you had any discussions with people who have characters based off them in the game? How have they felt about being in the game?

Amethyst:

overall they've pretty much been fine with it. one exception from a long time ago but it's been settled since. frankly i'm surprised how few of them have voiced any significant feelings about it, probably in part because many don't even follow the site or game closely anymore. when i talk about stuff and fans talking about their characters it's usually a little more than "oh, right, that's a thing. cool!" there's a few who are still around and actively follow it though, they're usually pleased when things they know about finally come up

David:

That's good to know. I was also wondering, has anyone from Nintendo and/or The Pokémon Company contacted anyone about the game. I've always wondered how fan games stay online even though Nintendo has been kind of brutal with some copyright stuff

Amethyst:

Not yet, no. That's part of why we're releasing e19 and postgame together. Nintendo tends to hit folks at the completion of the main story so we're expecting that and being careful so that we can finish the game. So far it's flown under radar. Somehow

David:

Hm that's interesting. You'd think they would want to nip it in the bud. Hmmm..

Okay my last round of questions are about the gameplay of the game. What inspired you to make changes to the Pokémon gameplay?

In other words, why did you add extra elements to Pokémon battles?

2/12/2020

D:

Ohh I was also wondering if you would be okay with me making a post on the forums asking about why people enjoy Pokémon Reborn? I would send you the full post before hand so you could approve it

Amethyst:

Hi! Sorry! Somehow I missed the last message

Firstly yes go ahead post away

Secondly, field effects were just something I had fun thinking about and planning in the past and hoped Nintendo would implement in fifth gen. and then ten episodes into development I realized wait I can actually make those. It was inspired by the anime though, and how some of the best battles in show make creative use of the environments

The level cap was just because some punk in episode 1 was like "ummmm I thought this game was supposed to be hard???" how come I solo'd Julia with only my level thirty two typhlosion then???? :/"

Mmm... is there anything else major?

David:

So it sounds like some players affected your development? Interesting. Hmmm last thing! One of the things that I wondered was how you decided which Pokémon to make available when for trainers to capture. Also, why are some Pokémon in the wild while others only have one encounter in the game?

Amethyst:

I think the relative density of event Pokémon is a plus reborn has over the main series. Events are way more interesting, Pokémon make great rewards for sidequests, and I wanted to have more meaningful encounters, again, like in the anime

Plus there's a lot of Pokémon to cram into this game.

As for availability it is -roughly- by in game strength and popularity

What I don't want is for people to get the best Pokémon early on and never give a second thought to catching other things for the rest of the game

And I don't want them to feel like they always have to get the same things in each playthrough

Many events early on have random chances to change Pokémon for that reason- to help replayability early on when the selection pool is still limited

So you're not always stuck with the same team before Julia

But on the whole I mostly want people to be developing their teams throughout the whole game, and trying new stuff

D:

Awesome! So there's an emphasis on like customization and trying out different Pokémon and strategies!

You've been so so so helpful. Thank you so much!!!

Amethyst:

happy to ^^

3/3/2020

D:

Hi Ame! I was wondering if I could just add you a couple more questions about gameplay

Amethyst:

sure thing

D:

Cool! As I was doing my research on modders, some of the research has been about people who were like deliberately trying to explore styles of gameplay that most mainstream video games don't do. I was wondering if you saw your own adjustments to the Pokémon games as like a subversion/critique or more of like a loving addition?

Amethyst:

i'd say for their time they were much more in the way of loving additions. I came up with the idea of field effects before black/white, and most of the other major changes were early on in development, a time period which I will cynically refer to as "back when (canon) Pokémon was good". so i didn't really feel the need to critique anything back then... but since XY gamefreak got me like :o frankly i'm happy to let them stand as critiques now

David:

Haha what about the new(er) games do you feel is not good?

Amethyst:

that's a can of worms but to keep it short

SwSh is certainly the most egregious example yet, the game is so focused on polish, presentation and pandering to the player that it fails to have any substance or challenge that makes the mountains of praise it heaps on worth it... and there's basically no conflict through the entire story aside from like two vague instances??

like if i were to sum up Sword Shield in a single word that word would be "flaccid."

i feel like these problems really started in XY to a lesser extent; the exp all became a voluntary kill-difficulty switch that it took them a generation and a half to learn to balance around and by the time they did it seems like they had just fully embraced the game series being easy enough for kids despite SwSh being originally touted as being for veteran players. aside from the difficulty, most people i know agree with my feeling that the story and region was just incredibly forgettable.

Sun Moon wasn't so bad. They took some risks with the format and put more into the story which I really appreciated. Lusamine is my favorite character in the series. But because of the Exp All the level curve is still very awkward for the majority of the game. I was really hoping SwSh would continue SuMo's pattern of taking risks and building a narrative and learning to work with the difficulty curve more adeptly but it sort of just did the opposite.

David:

mm that's really interesting!! I agree that the new game just seems really way too easy. Even though the Pokémon games have always been targeted at kids, Gens 1-5 at least put up reasonable challenges for players

So do you see Reborn as going against the trend of making Pokémon for kid-friendly?

Amethyst:

yeah, i usually describe the game as a more mature take on it, and we've had some younger / more sensitive players who had to back away from it because it was a bit much for them :x

David:

That makes sense. It can be a little much for people with similar experiences. Hmmm so the story is very deliberately trying to incorporate queer stories/narratives as opposed to the main series. Would you say then that Reborn also kind of opposes the gameplay of the original?

Amethyst:

in terms of difficulty at the very least. i'm not sure about beyond that though.

i was going to say it sort of is opposite to it in that we are somewhat careful about when we let the player have access to things like better Pokémon and such but that's less about difficulty and

more about encouraging people to continue changing up their teams throughout the game... which i think is definitely something the main series has supported. it's just a different approach.

David:

Cool cool. That takes care of some of the questions I have for now. I've finished the rough draft of my first chapter of my thesis and I'm starting to outline the second so I might have some more questions coming up. Again, thank you so much for all of your help

Amethyst:

totes. best of luck ^^

3/17/2020

David:

Hi Ame! Do you happen to know an estimation of how many downloads the game has?

Amethyst:

I don't actually have a very good estimate, no... The site I used to use to track it went under back in 2015, but it showed 250k before that, and that was 1/3 mirrors. I would wager that 500k is a fairly conservative guess

David:

Sounds good! Thanks so much again!