



# a matter of visibility



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It wasn't a huge surprise that when the entertainment platform STEAM released the documentary *Gaming in Color*, which I was lucky enough to be a part of, it drew a fair amount of hate. The comments initially began in the form of off topic tag suggestions and homophobic discussion threads on the community page. The tags have been removed by now but the community discussions still remain.

The worst of the discussions are a good representation of common criticisms that are often made of *Gaming in Color* and GaymerX, the annual San Francisco-based gaming convention that inspired the documentary. However, over the past two years the convention has evolved into something beyond its original concept. Although the GaymerX convention is rooted in celebrating queer gaming culture, the fight for inclusivity extends beyond sexuality.

*Gaming in Color* is a documentary that was produced during the first year of the GaymerX convention in 2013. Anyone who attended the convention had a chance to be interviewed about the issues regarding diversity and LGBTQ representation in video games. It was great to see that many different people decided to lend their voices to the project even if they all couldn't make the final cut of the film. The documentary is a mix of interviews with game developers, writers like myself, and con attendees addressing a wide range within the queer gaming community. Ultimately what I've come to realize is that this convention - as well as the documentary - highlights the lack of diversity in mainstream games. Intersectionality and the examination of multiple oppressive institutions including racism, sexism, and homophobia has become a prevalent theme for the GaymerX conventions for all the right reasons.

Think about all of the incredible games that have released in recent years and how changing one small detail would have been a major step in diversity without changing the plot of the game. Would it be any less believable that Nathan Drake of the *Uncharted* video game series may be the descendant of Sir Francis Drake if he was a man of mixed race, appearing Asian, Black, or Hispanic? Would *The Last of Us* have been any different if the roles of characters Joel and Tess had been swapped? In the short amount of time we see Tess, she proves to be just as capable as Joel, and even a tad more ruthless. Tess could have easily had a similar backstory

and developed a strong maternal bond with Ellie by the end of the game. Although, I'm guessing that would have been a hard sell considering that the video game company Naughty Dog had to fight just to have Ellie in the foreground of the cover art.

Stories with two prominent female characters who are equally capable are non-existent outside of games like *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age* where many female characters are present within the narrative whether you play as a female or not. That is why I am eternally grateful for games like *Life is Strange* where there are two female lead characters whose relationship is one of the key factors of what makes the game incredible. I am thankful for developers like DONTNOD entertainment who did not compromise the integrity of their game by caving to the pressure of publishers who wanted to make Max a male character. Instead, they ended up working with Square Enix who didn't make them change a thing about the characters and the game is better for it.

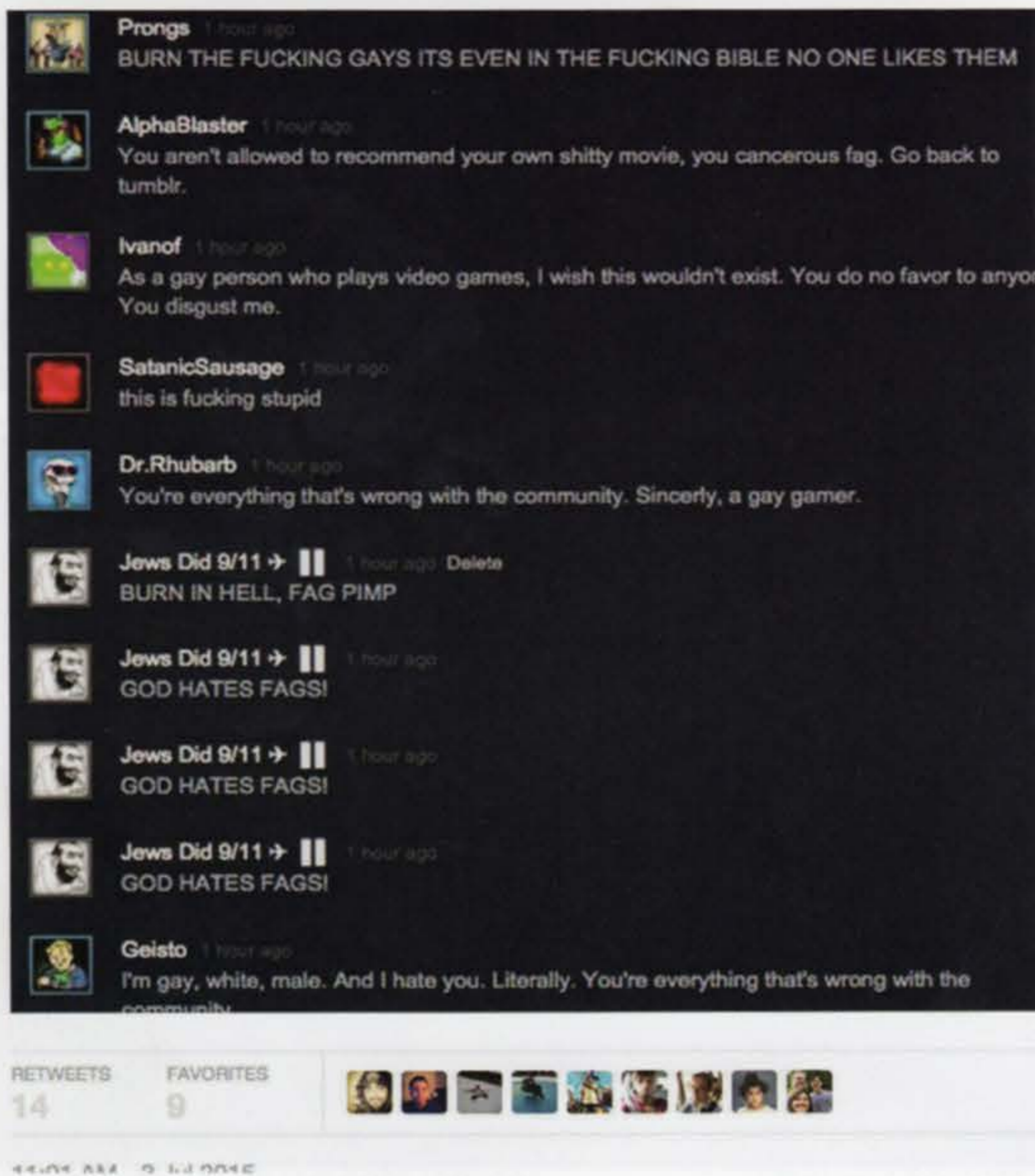
Why does the visibility of varying character types matter? Think about it. As children how do we come to that point in our lives where we go from thinking "eww they have cooties" to "I want to put my face on his/her face"? It's the imagery we are constantly bombarded with in children's films, television, and even video games. All three of those entertainment spaces are dominated by the stories and triumphs of white heterosexual individuals. I can't help but think back on the characters I identified with as a kid only to find out as an adult that their queer identity had been erased entirely or buried within subtext in order to appease the masses. Idgie and Ruth from *Fried Green Tomatoes*? Romantic in the novel, "friends" in the movie. Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*? Romantic in the book, "friends" in the movie. Roberta in *Now and Then*? Originally written as a lesbian, rewritten into a heterosexual tomboy.

Queer erasure and repression is prevalent all over the entertainment industry. Video games have a chance to stray from these trends because game characters are created from scratch and so are the worlds they reside in. Does every game have to have a character that is a person of color or LGBTQ? No. Plenty of games have proven that gender or sexuality don't even have to be a part of the story in order to make it a good game. The issue of lack of diversity in a video game usually arises from the fact that when big game companies have the opportunity to tell more inclusive stories they don't. Instead we are given feeble excuses.



## Gaming in Color; a Look Into the Documentary and Its Reception

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"The concept of being masculine was so key to this story" - Dan Houser - *Grand Theft Auto V*.

False. This is clearly problematic as the "concept of masculinity" is not solely reliant on someone being a heterosexual man.

When I think of one character that shows how progressive games can be, I find that the best example isn't the protagonist of a major game series, but is instead a NPC (non-playable character) named Krem. He is from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and I would argue Krem is one of the most important video game characters of the past decade. Krem, voiced by Jennifer Hale, is a male transgender character and is a member of Iron Bull's mercenary group, the Bull's Chargers. The Bull's Chargers are essentially Iron Bull's posse throughout *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and although all members are unique in their own ways Krem definitely stands out amongst them. To me it was obvious

that Krem was a transgender character, but there may have been players who didn't catch on right away. After all, depending on how you play it is possible to never realize that Krem is a queer character, which makes him even more important.

If you befriend Iron Bull you get to sit down with him and the Bull's Chargers and share a drink. You also have the option of discussing Krem's sexuality but Iron Bull often chimes in, standing up for Krem. Despite progress in gay rights and visibility in the media transgender people still experience more misrepresentation due to a widespread lack of understanding. The brief exchange you get to have with Iron Bull and Krem about his sexual identity helps facilitate a conversation about transgender issues. To my knowledge, no other high profile video game franchise has ever come close to doing that and I applaud Bioware for making that happen.

When people look at a convention like GaymerX or a documentary like *Gaming in Color* and question its existence or accuse it of ostracizing queer individuals from the gaming community, I have to strongly disagree. If conventions like GaymerX did not exist the movement never would have become what it is today. It would never have drawn the attention of significant individuals such as Ellen McLain, the voice of GLaDOS (the fictional computer system Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System) of the game *Portal*, Darren Young, an openly



gay wrestler in WWE, video game writers like David Gaider and Anthony Burch, prominent game critics like Katherine Cross, Evan Narcisse, Anita Sarkeesian and many more. You need only reference the lists of Bosses of Honor over the past few years to see that these are people in the public eye who create games, make artwork, compose geek-centric music, critique games academically, and come together to further the discussion of diversity regarding an artform they all love - and that is huge.

As someone who was bullied growing up I understand the importance of having safe spaces. As someone who spent almost twenty years in the closet I understand the importance of being able to fully express who you are in an open setting. We are not victims because we come together to express our love for queer gaming culture and discuss diversity: we are stronger for it.

The stories of all people regardless of race or sexuality need to be told, and they deserve to be told well.