

# Romance Never Changes...Or Does It?: Fallout, Queerness, and Mods

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## ABSTRACT

Romance options are common in mainstream games, but since games have been criticized for their heteronormativity, such options are worth examining for their contribution to problematic elements within gaming culture. The *Fallout* series suffers from many of these issues; however, recent games in the can be modded, offering fans a way to address these problems. In this paper, I examine heteronormative elements of the *Fallout* series' portrayal of queerness to demonstrate how these issues impacted the series over time. I also look more specifically at heteronormative mechanics and visuals from *Fallout 4*, the most recent single-player game in the series. Finally, I discuss three fan-created mods for *Fallout 4* that represent diverse approaches to adding queer elements to the game. I argue that one effective response to problematic portrayals of queerness in games is providing modding tools to the fans so that they can address issues in the games directly.

## Keywords

Mods, Modding, Queer Game Studies, Representation, Romance, *Fallout*

## INTRODUCTION

Romance options are common in videogames: players can interact with non-player characters in flirtatious ways and have sex, form relationships, or even get married to those characters. Since mainstream games have been criticized for their heteronormativity by including elements that suggest “queerness is just a different twist on non-queer heterosexuality” (Lauteria 2012, 2), such options are worth examining for their contribution to problematic elements within gaming culture. While games have addressed sex and relationships for some time, developers have recently included queer relationships in videogames to both expand the commercial appeal of their games and respond to criticisms of their heteronormative portrayals of relationships. When discussing queer relationships in popular games, Chang argued that “most ‘queer’ games focus on superficial content, on same-sex *sex*, and queer marriage or couple plots” (2017, 17). Chang also claimed that “in these mainstream games, the solution to difference and diversity in games in token inclusion or flattened representation” (2017, 18), suggesting that portrayals of queer relationships in mainstream videogames are often simplistic. Such work highlights the problem with many games, which often reduce queer relationships to little more than alternatives to the default state of straightness.

The *Fallout* series, a longstanding franchise in the roleplaying game genre, suffers from similar problems to those described above, and fans and critics have criticized

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

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the way the series has depicted queerness. The most recent single-player game in the series, *Fallout 4*, is notable because it places a significant emphasis on sex and relationships when compared to previous games in the series and offers many opportunities for queer relationships. On the surface, *Fallout 4* allows players a great deal of freedom in how they interact with the game's romance options, but that freedom comes at the cost of placing players in control of the sexuality of other characters in the game, creating a simplistic portrayal of relationships.

In this paper, I demonstrate that the *Fallout* series has always struggled with its portrayal of queerness, mirroring many of the larger issues within gaming culture. I suggest that fan mods are one method of addressing these issues, using gameplay from *Fallout 4* to provide specific examples of these problems as well as fan mods created for *Fallout 4* to show the ways in which user generated content can queer a videogame's heteronormative representation of relationships. Overall, I argue that one potential solution to heteronormative elements and problematic portrayals of queerness in gaming is developers providing modding tools to the fans so that they can address issues in games themselves.

## **METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION**

In the first section of this paper, I examine fan sources, gaming news coverage, and critical discussions of the *Fallout* series, relying on sources that are contemporary to release dates of the games whenever possible. I use these sources to demonstrate the ways in which fans and gaming journalists have responded to the *Fallout* series' portrayal of relationships throughout its history. My goal is to show that fan and gaming news sources have consistently criticized the problematic ways in which the *Fallout* series has handled queerness. I suggest that since early games in the series could not be easily modded, fans were unable to put these criticisms into practice.

I then focus more specifically *Fallout 4*, the most recent game in the series that is narrative-driven. I chose this game because it places a heavier emphasis on relationships than previous games in the series. *Fallout 4* can also be modded, a key difference between it and the early games in the series. Most importantly, the game offers opportunities for queer romance but focuses on a heterosexual family relationship in its main plot, such that it very heteronormative. I provide examples of game mechanics, narratives, and visuals from *Fallout 4* to show that the game assumes heterosexuality as a default. I argue that *Fallout 4* has many of the same problems that the series has struggled with over the years, especially in terms of suggesting heteronormativity through game mechanics and visuals.

Finally, I discuss the services that provide *Fallout 4*'s mods and touch on the issues with relying on fans to create content that fixes problematic portrayals in the game. I then examine three fan-created mods that add queer content or remove heteronormative elements from the game. I selected these mods because of their diversity of approaches to the problems described above and because two of the three mods make clear changes to visual elements of the game that can be demonstrated through screenshots. I argue that these mods are created in response to the problematic ways that the series has portrayed queerness and that such mods represent a potential response to such portrayals.

## **SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FALLOUT SERIES**

The *Fallout* series has a history of portraying both sex and relationships that likely informed the approach taken in *Fallout 4*. The first game, *Fallout* (Interplay 1997), did not allow the player to form romantic relationships with other characters, though the player could have sex with two of the game's female characters, and in one specific instance could do so even if the player was also female (Sex and

Relationships in the *Fallout* Series n.d.) These elements made *Fallout* one of the first mainstream games to an opportunity for queerness, though that opportunity was quite brief and had little depth. In addition, the game's only potential sexual partners were female, suggesting an assumption of straightness and maleness, and this shallow engagement with queerness set the tone for the way the series would handle it, as most of the later games included queer content as a minor side story at best.

*Fallout 2* (Black Isle 1998) placed a heavier emphasis on sex, which Bratt (2017) argued was surprising for a mainstream roleplaying game published in 1998. The game offered opportunities for queer sex, though once again, most of the game's potential sexual partners were female, usually coming in the form of sex workers throughout the game world. Notably, *Fallout 2* also allowed for queer relationships because the player could marry someone of the same gender during one of the game's side quests. The game's marriage subplot was not presented in the most positive light, however: the player was forced to get married at gunpoint, and the player's spouse was a weak party member that the player could not easily get rid of. In fact, Hughes (2015) argued that "the player's 'relationship' with their spouse is never presented as anything but a burden," a fact that is reinforced by the character's ineffectiveness in combat and other gameplay situations. This approach to sexuality and relationships was also noted by contemporary game reviewers of *Fallout 2*: a Gamespot review published soon after the game's release suggested that *Fallout 2* "occasionally presents a distinctly adolescent male perspective, which may offend or alienate some gamers" (Desslock 1998). This review suggests that the *Fallout* series has always engaged with queer relationships and sex from a heteronormative perspective and that the early games in the series reinforced some of the problematic issues in gaming culture at the time. It also demonstrates that conversations about the series' portrayal of sex have been ongoing through its history, but since the first two games in the series did not come with modding tools, fans and journalists could not address the portrayals directly.

The *Fallout* series focused on spinoffs throughout the early 2000s that rarely involved relationships or sexuality, but when the main *Fallout* series returned in 2007 with Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 3*, the developers reintroduced romance options to the series. *Fallout 3* did not offer many queer choices, however: the game only offered one opportunity for queer sex with a female character, much like in the original *Fallout*. The game otherwise touched on the player's sexuality through a pair of perks, "Black Widow" and "Lady Killer," that occasionally allowed the player to flirt with members of the opposite gender during conversation sequences. *Fallout 3* therefore suggested heteronormativity through its narrative and game mechanics by only offering the player the choice to have sex with a female character and only offering an opportunity to be straight through the game's perk system, replicating many of the problems of the first two games.

*Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian 2010), the follow up to *Fallout 3*, allowed the player more flexibility with regards to sexuality than previous game did. The game included perks called "Cherchez La Femme" and "Confirmed Bachelor" that allowed the player to flirt with the same gender much like as the perks described earlier, and the game also featured two queer companions that could join the player as well as other queer characters who were important parts of major plotlines. The game still struggled to address queerness with a great deal of depth, however; for example, Lauteria (2011) argued that because the perks described above offered damage bonuses to queer characters, they created a "potential to speak to the lived experience of queer people in 'survival mode,'" but that "in its current iteration... that potential has gone untapped and the linkage between the fictive and the procedural remains artificial at best" (Lauteria 2011). These claims suggest that while *Fallout: New*

*Vegas* was a step forward, the game's increased focus on queerness still fell short and longstanding problems in the series were still not fully addressed.

The ways the previous games depicted queerness created expectations for how *Fallout 4* would handle it, but those expectations were heightened because the game placed a more direct focus on relationships than any game in the series had before. During the lead up to the release of *Fallout 4* in 2015 many gaming news sites noted that Bethesda had responded to criticisms of the portrayal of queer relationships in the *Fallout* series by taking a more inclusive approach. In fact, *Fallout 4* is unique for adding "romance options" to the series that allow the player to form relationships with his or her companions, something that had only been touched on as a brief subplot in *Fallout 2* in the past. *Fallout 4* also allows the player a great deal of freedom in the game's romance options, which many reviewers focused on when the game was released, as it seemed to be an attempt to deal with the series' previous problems with portraying queerness and sex. An article published the same day the game was released noted that "that players can be not only bisexual but also polyamorous in *Fallout 4*" (Whitaker 2015), while an article published two days afterwards pointed out that "once you've established a strong enough bond with a companion, you can choose to move your relationship in a romantic direction, regardless of their gender" (Pullam-Moore 2015). These articles highlighted Bethesda's attempts to deal with the series' previous problems with queerness and generally took a positive tone.

While some critics were satisfied with how *Fallout 4* handled queerness, responses to *Fallout 4's* approach were not always positive. About three months before the game came out, an article appeared in *The A.V. club* in which the author argued that the dark tone of the series does not fit well with any kind of portrayal of relationships, including queer ones: "This doesn't mean Bethesda's experiments with romance in *Fallout 4* are inherently doomed. It just means the developers are going to have to pull out all the stops if they're going to tell a real love story that's worthy of this ugly, bitter, beautiful world" (Hughes 2015). Likewise, in an article published three months after *Fallout 4's* release, Lo (2016) argued that "the way that it has actually handled the presentation and possibilities of being queer or polyamorous speaks more to developer laziness than actual careful reflection of minority experiences." These examples highlight the controversy surrounding the way the game handled queer relationships, one that has surrounded the series frequently in the past, and they suggest that *Fallout 4's* approach is not completely successful. These articles point to an overall problem: while *Fallout 4* superficially allows for queer relationships, it undermines them through shallow mechanical and narrative implementation of relationships, as well as visuals that reinforce heteronormativity. Examining these mechanics and visual elements provides context for the ways that fans have engaged with specific portions of *Fallout 4's* gameplay through mods.

## **RELATIONSHIP MECHANICS IN FALLOUT 4**

In one sense, *Fallout 4* offers more freedom than any game in the series with regards to sexuality: the player can form relationships with almost all the game's companion characters regardless of gender. As such, relationships are a significant part of gameplay in the series for the first time in *Fallout 4* and drive the narrative and visuals of the game. While *Fallout 4's* approach to relationships might seem open, it results in a separation of the companion's sexuality from their other character traits, rendering the character's sexuality subject to the player's desires. Lo (2016) argued that because companions never express romantic interest in the player first, the player decides upon a companion's sexuality for that character when initiating a romance. She claimed that "*Fallout 4* allows for same-sex relationships, but not queer ones" (Lo 2016) and suggested that the game uses a "cookie-cutter approach to

relationships” (Lo 2016) because romance options operate in almost exactly same way for each character: in some cases, even the content of the conversations are nearly the same. The goal of *Fallout 4*’s approach is to solve a problem common in many roleplaying games in which NPCs have defined sexualities and will only respond to the player if his or her character is a gender that the NPC is interested in. Since that structure can be restrictive and only allows the player to form relationships with certain characters, *Fallout 4* instead allows the player to form relationships with any companion, which offers players more freedom in terms of their choice of partner.

While *Fallout 4*’s is more open approach in terms of relationships than the previous games, it introduces a new problem with regards to portrayals of queerness in the series: the game’s mechanics reduce sexuality to a trait that the player can manipulate, rather than an important narrative element of a character’s personality. Romance in *Fallout 4* consists of the player completing objectives that increase the companions’ “Affinity” score, and an opportunity for romance appears in a companion’s dialogue once the score is high enough. The process works in the same way every companion, leading fans on both GameFaQs (duckyhunter3 2015) and Reddit (flashman7870 2015) to mockingly describe the game’s companions as “player-sexual” because they always respond to the player’s advances once certain in-game requirements are met. While this approach offers the player freedom to romance any companion, it undermines the portrayal of all relationships in the game, including queer ones, since the player essentially controls the sexuality of all the characters in the game and romance with any of them works the same way every time.

*Fallout 4*’s mechanics also undercut its portrayal of relationships by associating in-game benefits with them: the player receives an experience point boost for sleeping with a partner, meaning that the player’s character becomes more powerful when he or she does so. Characters can potentially benefit even more if they are straight: *Fallout 4* offers “Lady Killer” and “Black Widow” perks that grant damage boosts and extra dialogue with opposite sex characters, but not the “Cherchez La Femme” and “Confirmed Bachelor” perks from *Fallout: New Vegas* that give the same options to queer characters. The fact that the player can gain more benefits for being straight reinforces heteronormativity: *Fallout 4* offers the appearance of queer narratives, but the game suggests straight ones as a default, and even further suggests that such options are better than queer ones through gameplay mechanics. As such, these mechanics are often the target of queer fan mods that alter, remove, or offer queer alternatives to them, but this default heteronormativity is further reinforced by visual elements throughout the game’s introduction and main quest that place a heavy emphasis on straight marriage.

## VISUAL HETERONORMATIVITY IN FALLOUT 4



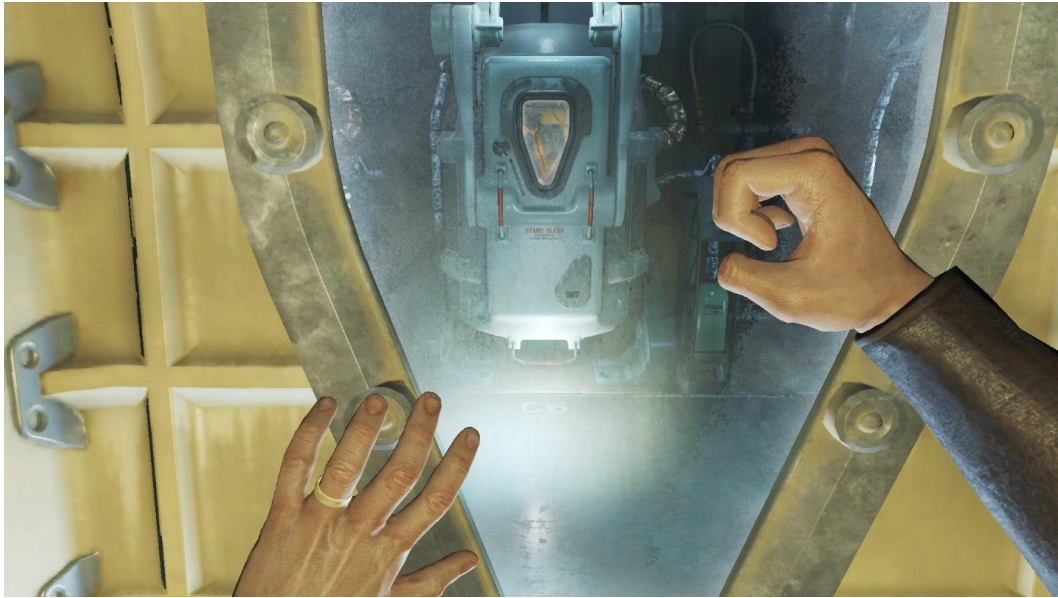
**Figure 1:** The default character creation screen in *Fallout 4*. (Source: *Fallout 4*).

Queer relationships in *Fallout 4* are undermined because the game's visuals, especially during the introduction sequence, suggest maleness and straightness as the default state of the game. Bagnall noted that many mainstream games are "digital artifacts bound up with naturalized, patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality" (2017, 135) that assume femaleness or queerness as a deviation from the norm. This situation is the case in *Fallout 4's* introduction, as one of the first steps in the character creation process in *Fallout 4* involves choosing a gender for the player's character. During this sequence, the player designs the appearance of husband and wife characters and selects one to play as; the game places the male figure in front (Figure 1), tacitly assuming the player will play a straight male character. Character creation in *Fallout 4* recalls Sundén's claim that "for queer gamers, sexuality comes into play in ways that make visible the cultural norms of the 'ideal' player – a player who is at least symbolically male and straight" (2009, 3). That the game defaults to a straight male character in a heterosexual marriage also reflects a common problem in gaming: that "the status quo, to nobody's surprise, is that games have seldom been made by or for queers, or even with queers in mind" (Clark 2017, 2). The player can choose the female character instead, but the character will always be the male character's wife; if the player's character is a male, the female character holds the couple's baby throughout much of the introduction (Figure 2). These visual elements, combined with the game's suggestion that the male husband character will be the player's first choice, recall Mulvey's classic description of the "patriarchal status quo" (1975, 1) which reinforces heteronormative relationships and portrays femaleness, queerness, and many other things as outside of the straight male norm.



**Figure 2:** The female character holding the couple's child during the introduction sequence (Source: *Fallout 4*).

While the sequence described above is only part of the game's introduction and the player is thereafter free to engage in many other kinds of relationships, these visuals inform the rest of the play experience, as many of the game's main quests focus on finding the player's long-lost son and getting revenge on the people who murdered the player's spouse. Therefore, a heteronormative family relationship drives the narrative of the game as well as the visuals: the player witnesses his or her spouse being murdered and the couple's child being kidnapped during the introduction, and as soon as the player regains control of the in game action, his or her wedding ring and the body of his or her spouse are visually emphasized (Figure 3) to remind the player of the game's main goal. The player can avoid *Fallout 4's* main quest and focus on side quests and other goals afterwards, but completing the game requires heavily engaging with the narrative of the player's former heterosexual relationship, and it offers many visual and narrative reminders of it. The game therefore suggests that playing it in another way – for example, avoiding the main quest focused on a heterosexual family relationship and forming a queer relationship instead – is a kind of non-standard gameplay. While I agree with Jahn and Möring (2018) whom argued that this kind of transgressive gameplay should actually be considered a regular form of gameplay, *Fallout 4* continuously implies the opposite, suggesting that queerness is a side story or subplot at best. One solution this assumption of straightness in *Fallout 4* therefore involves modding the game, and the game's heteronormative introduction is one of the most commonly modded sections in queer mods. Some of the first mods available were ones that allow for a same sex family at the start of the game, illustrating the community's desire for such freedom of choice. As such, it is worth exploring the ways in which mods can be used to add queer options to the game before discussing examples of player-created mods that alter the introduction.



**Figure 3:** The end of the introduction sequence  
(Source: *Fallout 4*).

### **FALLOUT 4 AND QUEER MODS**

That *Fallout 4* forces the player into a heterosexual relationship is problematic for players desiring a queer playthrough of the game: the game's main story focuses on a heterosexual family relationship and its mechanics and visuals suggest heteronormativity as a default state. *Fallout 4*'s official modding tools, however, offer a streamlined method of creating and implementing game mods and provide players with a great deal of control over the game itself. They also offer a solution to the game's problems with queerness: players can easily find and download mods that change the game's play experience to reflect their own desires and can even create their own mods to queer the game. This method of solving the *Fallout* series' problems with queerness is not new: two previous games, *Fallout 3* and *Fallout: New Vegas*, introduced a modding scene to the game series. Modding these was possible because they are built on Bethesda Softworks' game engine rather than the one used for the first two. Bethesda's games are popular with fans long after their initial release because the company has typically provided mod creation software that allows fans to create their own content. Queering the *Fallout* series through modding therefore has a history that began with the change to Bethesda's game engine in 2007, as it added a capability for the creation of queer mods that had not been present beforehand.

The potential to mod the *Fallout* games and add queer content to them created an avenue for new fan responses to heteronormative elements in gameplay. Of course, a fan community dedicated to creating queer content for an existing narrative is not a new concept: queer fan modding could be compared to the practice of creating slash fanfiction, which Kustritz (2003) described as "placing two television or film characters of the same gender, usually male, into noncanonical romantic relationships with one another" (371). This process of fan creation of content for a larger franchise "originated in science fiction fandom" (371), the same narrative tradition that the *Fallout* series resides in, so it is perhaps unsurprising that queer mods for the series are common. Queering videogames through mods is not a new concept either: Lauteria (2012) highlighted queer mods "which yield anti-normative play spaces through an orientation to queer sexualities and genders" from the previous game in the series, *Fallout: New Vegas*. Some of the first queer mods available for *Fallout 4* were updated versions of similar mods for previous games in the series, or mods that



reintroduced options available in earlier games but that were cut from *Fallout 4*, such as the “Cherchez La Femme” and “Confirmed Bachelor” perks. Queer modding and the *Fallout* series therefore has a long history, but queer mods are particularly popular for *Fallout 4* because of its emphasis on straight relationships and other heteronormative elements.

Mods for *Fallout 4* can be found in many different ways, but there are three main venues for them at this time: Bethesda’s own Creation Club, which offers mods that are sponsored by the company itself and must be purchased by the user; nexusmods, which is a large, longstanding community that hosts mods for many videogames, especially Bethesda Softworks games; and LoversLab, a community that has split off from nexusmods and focuses on mods that offer adult content. Bethesda’s store is moderated by the company, but the relationship between nexusmods and LoversLab is complicated: most of the game mods that add queer gameplay elements to the game are hosted on the nexusmods site, but those that involve sexual content are usually created and discussed on the LoversLab forums. LoversLab exists because nexusmods requires that users have special account settings to view adult mods and has the final say on their content, so creators of queer content sometimes prefer to share them via LoversLab as their mods are less likely to be taken down or censored on that site than on nexusmods. Most importantly, all queer mods for *Fallout 4* operate in fan-moderated spaces like nexusmods or LoversLab: mods that add queer or sexual content are not offered through Bethesda Softworks’s online store, which means that fans must turn to these alternative, fan-moderated sources to find such content. This approach could suggest that the company wants to avoid queer topics and narratives, but Bethesda Softworks may not want to monetize queer mods because forcing players to pay for mods that enable queer relationships would be problematic. It seems that the company would rather allow the community to create such elements and share them freely among themselves, taking a hands-off stance toward mods that add queer or sexual content to the game.

While Bethesda’s approach to queer mods allows fans to address portrayals of queerness in *Fallout 4* without the company profiting from those solutions, it creates a new issue: it forces fans do the work of fixing problematic narratives that the developers created and to share that work in unofficial, fan-created spaces. In many ways, the situation recalls Henry Jenkins’ famous description of the relationship between television and fan fiction, which is usually created in unofficial, fan-moderated spaces: “Fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk” (Harmon 1997). This similarity can be seen in the way some queer mods are discussed, as many are framed as offering options that fans believe should have been in the game in the first place; for example, one mod creator responded to commenters who were grateful for a mod that enabled same-sex relationships at the beginning of the game, noting that “I know it means a lot to many of you to have this option” (Sensia 2017). The situation also recalls Sotomaa (2005) discussion of the gaming industry capitalizing on the free labor of fans through mods, but the issue here is different because Bethesda is not financially profiting from *Fallout 4*’s queer mods. The approach allows companies like Bethesda to benefit from fan mods in another way: the company can absolve itself of concerns about whether the portrayals of queerness in their games are problematic and avoid addressing the issue.

Overall, *Fallout 4* provides an example of one solution to problems with queerness in games, but also highlights the drawbacks of that solution: Bethesda Softworks provided modding tools to the fans, letting them fix the game’s issues with queerness themselves without engaging with queer mods in any official capacity. Offering such tools to fans is a not a bad thing, and in fact, it is one very effective solution because

it places more power in their hands; however, it would be better if games presented queer relationships effectively so that such mods were not necessary, and providing such tools does not absolve developers of problematic depictions of queerness. Regardless of Bethesda Softworks' approach, however, fans have modded *Fallout 4* to change the way the game presents queerness, and such mods also provide examples of the diversity of ways that mods can address problems with queerness in games.

### EXAMPLES OF QUEER MODS IN FALLOUT 4

There are numerous mods available for *Fallout 4* on both the nexusmods and Loverslab sites, so discussing all the mods that remove heteronormative elements or add queer content to the game would be difficult. Instead, I focus on three specific examples of mods that change these elements to varying degrees. My goal is not necessarily to offer a representative sample of the modding community, but instead to highlight mods that provide examples of the diversity of approaches to adding queer content to games.

TinyManticore's (2017) "Alternative Start and Dialogue Overhaul," which is available through nexusmods, is an example of a mod that only subtly changes the game in terms of sex and relationships. This mod does not add queer content to the game, but instead removes many of the game's heteronormative elements by changing the game's story. The mod offers alternative starting scenarios and "makes over 800 dialogue edits with voice and lip sync so you don't have to play as the 'concerned parent' character" (TinyManticore 2017). Some of the visual examples provided earlier would not be in the game for a player using this mod and dialogue is changed so that the child in the game's narrative is no longer the player's, freeing the character from a backstory that is focused on a heterosexual family relationship and marriage. Queering the game does not seem to be the creator's intent in this case, as the mod simply offers players the freedom to decide upon a different backstory for their characters. TinyManticore's mod might not necessarily be a queer mod, but it might be used by a player intending to use other mods in conjunction with it that add queer content to the game to achieve a play experience that both focuses on queerness and is free of the default heteronormative narrative and visual elements.



**Figure 4:** Character creation with "Same Sex Couples and LGBT Families" mod enabled. (Source:

<https://staticdelivery.nexusmods.com/mods/1151/images/25254-0-1499034544.png>

An example of a mod specifically designed to add queer elements to gameplay is Sensia's (2017) "Same Sex Couples and LGBT Families." This mod alters the character creation sequence described earlier, allowing the player to start in a queer relationship (Figure 4), and offers options that allow the player to configure it as desired. The mod also alters gameplay to reflect the player's chosen sexuality and is designed to be compatible with the "Alternative Start and Dialogue Overhaul" mod described above, allowing the player to use both in conjunction to drastically alter heteronormative elements in the game's introduction and throughout its storyline. This mod provides an example of a more significant change to the game and could therefore be more appropriately described as a queer mod. It also clearly targets visuals in the game's heteronormative introduction, queering those visuals while keeping *Fallout 4's* overall aesthetic. This mod suggests that some players may want the freedom to decide upon their character's sexuality from the start but may not necessarily want significant alterations to the game's overall look and feel. The mod represents a middle ground for players that want to add queer content to the game without significant alterations to the game's mechanics, narrative, or visual style.



**Figure 5:** Introduction sequence with "BoiBomb: A Femboy CBBE Preset V1" enabled. (Source: [https://www.loverslab.com/screenshots/df3110630fd5f7e6d12d2f65ace55b6-20161226193110\\_1.jpg](https://www.loverslab.com/screenshots/df3110630fd5f7e6d12d2f65ace55b6-20161226193110_1.jpg))

An example of a mod that makes very significant changes to the game's visuals is bxbblegumbxtch's (2016) "Boibomb: A Femboy CBBE Preset v1." This mod relies on queering an existing adult mod, "Caliente's Beautiful Bodies Enhancer," (Caliente\_Ousinus and Jeir 2017) that changes all the female characters in the game to allow them to appear nude, as well as giving them a more sexualized appearance. bxbblegumbxtch's (2016) mod "modifies the CBBE body to take a more androgynous shape with strong feminine notes, namely a flat chest, widened hips, and a large posterior," queering the CBBE mod's sexualized imagery. bxbblegumbxtch's (2016) mod uses the CBBE mod to add queer content to the game (Figure 5), subverting the original mod that sexualized female characters in the game. The mod's creator claims that "this is 100% a mod for people that enjoy more androgynous

frames, mainly those who have a niche for femboys” (bxbblegumbxtch 2016), suggesting that the mod is specifically intended to queer the game and could thus be described as a queer mod. The mod clearly alters the games’ aesthetic, representing a much more significant change than the previous mod. bxbblegumbxtch’s mod suggests that some players want to queer the game’s visuals themselves, perhaps in response to the significant visual heteronormativity throughout the game’s introduction.

bxbblegumbxtch’s mod demonstrates the lengths to which players will go to add queer content to the game: they will even mod other mods if that is the best solution to getting the content they want. This process resembles a common practice in modding communities that Morshirnia and Walker have called “reciprocal innovation:” they noted that “instead of winnowing the uses of a modification for a single desired outcome, modders brainstorm all possible uses for the modification (2007, 6). Morshirnia and Walker described how the process works: “a user may create the code for a modification, share her code for her modification, which may inspire another user to adopt / adapt the modification, which will in turn inspire further modification” (2007, 6). Reciprocal innovation seems to be the process at play in bxbblegumbxtch’s mod, as it relies on queering both *Fallout 4* and the CBBE mod as well. The practice is important in the queer modding community, as demonstrated by the fact that many of these mods are designed to work in conjunction with each other to expand the possibilities of queer representation in *Fallout 4*. More broadly, it again recalls similar creative practices of queering employed in other fan communities such as slash fanfiction communities, where, as Kustritz (2003) claimed, “fans discuss the narratives and characters provided for them by the mass media, then alter those hegemonic messages to reflect their own needs, experiences, and desires” (374). The difference with queer modding is that creating mods requires a significant amount of game design knowledge, which may be why it is common for modders to build upon another’s mod rather than create an entirely new one.

Overall, queer mods such as these offer the player a diverse set of options in terms of defining a character’s sexuality, creating more inclusive gaming options for players who wish to avoid or subvert heteronormative elements in gaming. These mods have attracted negative attention from the gaming community, however: for example, the “Same Sex Couples and LGBT Families” mod described above was continued from a previous mod that added queer content to the game. When the original mod was posted, “homophobic players swarmed the comments section, posting hateful anti-LGBT messages and death threats” (Gohl 2016), and the original creator quit updating it because of those comments. This issue has likely also come up for the person maintaining the current mod, since the first text on its page is a large notice that reads “First off if this isn’t your thing just move along. Neither I nor the moderators will put up with any shenanigans” (Sensia 2017). The fact that these mods attract these kinds of comments suggests that attempts to queer mainstream games will likely be met with negative backlash, which may be one of the biggest challenges for creators of queer mods going forward. Queer mods for *Fallout 4* are quite popular, however, and the fact that the queer modding community is big enough that one modder can take over the work of another bodes well for the future of such mods.

## CONCLUSION

As one of the most popular mainstream roleplaying franchises, the way the *Fallout* series has engaged with queer relationships and sexuality is worth analyzing. The series has always had problems with its portrayals of queerness, a problem that *Fallout 4* tries to solve by presenting romance and sexuality in a free-form way: players can form relationships as they please with few restrictions. While this approach offers the player freedom, it reduces the sexuality of characters to an in-

game trait the player can manipulate, resulting in a shallow portrayal of all relationships in the game. The game's portrayal of queer relationships is also undercut by its visuals and narrative, which continually reinforce heteronormativity, recall the player's previous heterosexual marriage, and suggest that straightness is the game's default state. The fan community's creation of mods to address these problematic elements and queer the game is an interesting response to these issues and suggests a potential approach for the future.

It is also important to note that the potential for creation of queer fan mods for a particular game does not absolve developers from problematic portrayals of queerness in the game itself. Developers should always strive for better depictions of queer sex and relationships in their games; however, I argue that they should also design those games so that fans can help address the problems themselves. Critical and fan discussions about the longstanding issues with portrayals of queerness in mainstream games over the years suggest that developers will often struggle to handle the issue well, and it may be that discussion of these issues alone is not enough to solve the problem. As such, fans should create mods to add their own queer content to these kinds of games that highlight the problematic elements in the content created by the original developers.

Regardless of what approach is taken, however, Steinkuehler's claim that games "provide a representational trace of both individual and collective activity and how it changes over time" (2006, 98) recalls the importance of addressing problems with the ways that games portray queerness. Mainstream games have become a significant component of popular culture and will continue to address contemporary issues such as queerness and sexuality in the future. Since the portrayal of queer relationships in mainstream videogames is not likely to stop any time soon, considering these depictions will be a key part of gaming culture in the future, and it is worth analyzing other mainstream games that have active modding scenes to see how fans have addressed heteronormative elements with queer mods. This paper therefore provides a framework for both critical discussions of queerness in video game mods as well suggesting a method for queering videogames through modding.

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