# The Trial Grounds: Exploring Transgressive Queer Play Possibilities in Dead by Daylight

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# Abstract

The Trial Grounds: Exploring Queer Play Possibilities in Online Multiplayer Games

Online multiplayer games are notable breeding grounds for toxic behaviour that disproportionately affects marginalized players. For LGBTQ+ players, this is due in part with videogame's problematic history of queer representations which relied on harmful tropes and stereotypes. Although there have been many efforts for more inclusion and representation in these games, deep rooted hegemonic play structures persist and often players resort to transgressive styles of play to create a sense of community and identity. Despite the toxicity of these spaces, many online multiplayer games have very vibrant and diverse queer player communities, especially the asymmetrical horror game *Dead by Daylight* (2016). This thesis uses two combined methods of analysis *Dead by Daylight* (2016) and its surrounding fan-content on TikTok to explore how LGBTQIA2S+ players challenge hegemonic games cultures in online multiplayer games through transgressive queer play. This thesis will first use a media-specific analysis of the game text to explore the queer play potentials of *Dead by Daylight*. This will inform a discourse analysis of LGBTQ+ fan content on the short form video platform TikTok to explore the documented queer play strategies of players. This project forwards the concept "the queer metagame" to describe the linkages and impact of player paratext and game text, recognizing how queer transgressive play can manifest in online multiplayer games.

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# Table of Contents

# List of Figures

# Introduction

It's dark. A heavy fog obfuscates your surroundings as you tirelessly fix a generator. You begin to cross its wires, repairing its internal mechanisms to revive the pistons that begin to work one by one as you progress. A few more seconds and it's complete, its lights will shine overhead, and you'll be one step closer to powering up the exit gates and escaping. But it's quiet, too quiet. None of your fellow survivors are being chased, you can't hear the pounding heartbeat that signals that a killer is in your vicinity. You deduce that the killer is operating with stealth, which narrows down the options of who they might be, all of them dangerous. Your eyes scan the fog for your pursuer hoping to catch them before they catch you. You narrowly succeed in a skill check that keeps the generator from malfunctioning, which would give away your position. Then you see it, a crouching hooded figure, its white mask staring right at you through an opening in the bushes: Ghostface.

You release your hold on the generator and ready yourself to run but you can already tell they're too close and within distance to catch and down you. Ghostface rises to their full height and walks forward, knife in hand, slowly closing the distance before – crouching? Ghostface crouches. Then they stand. They crouch again, then stand, and they repeat this movement several times. A curious action for a killer who has very clearly caught their prey by surprise, yet you in this moment are compelled to return the gesture. Only then does Ghostface approach the generator and hit it with their knife. You pause, and Ghostface swings at the air to you from a safe distance, then hits the generator again. Understanding the meaning of this non-verbal communication you decide to return to your task. As you work, Ghostface crouches and stands

repeatedly in possible approval before turning away and disappearing in the distance, possibly in search of your other teammates.

The above is an example of an experience I had while playing the game *Dead by Daylight* (2016). *Dead by Daylight* is a 4v1 online asymmetric multiplayer survival horror videogame produced by Montreal-based company Behaviour Interactive. *Dead by Daylight* or DbD has players take on the role of either survivor or killer. Survivors play in a team of four and must work together to fix five generators and powerup the exit gates to escape the game area called the Trial Grounds. The killer plays alone and is tasked with locating and capturing the survivors to place them on sacrificial hooks. Players engage in competitive isolated matches in the Trial Grounds, a purgatory environment ruled by a god-like being known as the Entity or L'Entité. The Trial Grounds can manifest as a variety of different settings, each with their own unique layout. Lovecraftian in nature, The Entity created the Trial Grounds to feed off the emotions of the survivors and killers to amass power to corrupt and consume worlds. It is because of this inter-dimensional being that players are given a catalogue of characters to choose from, many of which originate from iconic horror films and games (e.g., Laurie Strode, Michael Myers, Ghostface, Freddy Kreuger, Cheryl Mason, and Leon Kennedy). These characters are reimagined and redesigned to fit the game space, with their descriptions and lore translated into perks and powers that can be used in-game. While in the Trial Grounds, these characters must act out the Entity's cat and mouse game of life and death, over and over again.

The style of an asymmetrical game is that both opposing sides are given their own set of objectives and mechanics. Killers are given map awareness and a special ability to hunt survivors, while survivors are given tools and each other to fix generators and escape the Trial Grounds. One key aspect of DbD's design is that players have no in-game means to

communicate apart from a chat function in the lobby, and through limited gestures: pointing, crouching, and a “come here” hand movement. This encourages novel forms of communication and teamwork through in-game contextual clues. As seen in the previous example, this is not restricted to just survivors as some killers, like Ghostface, can also use similar gestures to communicate. However, Ghostface not only used gestures to communicate but they also encouraged me to complete my objective, effectively forgoing theirs. This interaction with Ghostface was very playful but I never fully understood their motivations for doing so until I perused fan-generated content of DbD.

While on TikTok I found out that my interaction with Ghostface wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Players describe “friendly” Ghostface players who instead of pouncing once finding a survivor use their ability to crouch (a feature that only Ghostface and the Pig can do) to communicate and proceed to playfully run around the map while survivors are free to complete their objectives. This behaviour - which completely opposes the expectations of the game - showcased an alternative form of play that is facilitated by the game’s affordances. Ghostface’s unique ability to crouch and their position as the main antagonist of the match allows them to make contact with survivors, releasing the tension of impending danger and challenging the expected gameplay process. My experience and continued research revealed more strategies and experiences by fans that opposed the meritocratic aspects of the game. It was here that I stumbled upon an important intersection, DbD content by and for LGBTQIA2S+ players.

While in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic I found myself in the Trial Grounds for hours, playing match after match in both positions, readapting my play styles, and familiarizing myself with new modes of escape and of murder. In the time spent during match queues I was also concurrently frequenting TikTok, the descendant of the app Musical.ly. While

exploring the app, I found a myriad of game related content for *Dead by Daylight*, most of which were by queer fans who remixed and reinterpreted gameplay through TikTok sound overlays, meme edits, streaming clips, and game modifications. Soon my TikTok feed was populated by drag queens, queer streamers, and meme edits about DbD. I even stumbled on videos that expressed a strong attraction for Ghostface, one editing scenes from the 1996 thriller *Scream*, where the character originates, and using seductive songs to play in the background. There was an emergent "queer feeling" with every passing video, one that I reflected on after reading the work of José Esteban Muñoz and their concept of ephemera. In his text "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling", Muñoz describes ephemera, "as a trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor" (2009, p.65). This trace is that "queer feeling" I felt, fostered by the many videos I watched and the jokes and trends that threaded each of them. That trace that I explored on TikTok lingered the more I played, and I became more actively aware of in-game elements that were both spotlighted on TikTok and that I personally resonated with. Furthermore, I was introduced to DbD's very visible and vibrant queer player base that use the platform to document their experiences.

In 2021, Behaviour recognized their large LGBTQIA2S+ fanbase during Pride month with a blog post on their website entitled "DbD x Pride: Finding a Home in Horror." Behaviour's article consisted of interviews with, "LGBTQIA2S+ leaders," and explored their relationship to the game as queer people. This post followed the implementation of the Pride charm in the same year, a small wearable cosmetic of the iconic Pride flag for players to put on their virtual avatars. This cosmetic sparked disdain from some players, with many from this group even claiming that they would target any player who used the charm. This is unsurprising as online multiplayer games are often breeding grounds for toxic behaviour, especially against marginalized groups

(Nakamura, 2013, p. 2; Paul, 2018, p. 69; Tayler & Hammond, 2018, p. 227). Despite these issues, DbD has developed a notable queer fan base, and the recognition this player base has received is important. However, in consideration of the reputation for toxicity in these games, I wonder how queer players have carved out this space using platforms like TikTok. When Behaviour references the term "home" it implies a safety that is never truly guaranteed within online gaming cultures. There is a variety of research related to the impact of queer play in games despite issues of toxicity (Chang, 2017; Evans, 2018; Ruberg, 2019; Stenros & Sihvonen, 2018). However, these games are usually single player games and MMORPGs rather than games like DbD that are more restrictive to these practices. For these reasons I look towards queer fan appropriation and transgressive possibilities to answer this thesis' primary research question:

How does LGBTQIA2S+ fan appropriation of online multiplayer videogames inform the way that these players challenge hegemonic games cultures through transgressive queer play?

This project seeks to answer this question using a two-pronged approach. The first part is an analysis of the game text that highlights its queer potentialities despite its more restrictive in-game affordances for enacting queer experiences and desires (e.g. romance options, roleplay, failure). The second part investigates the way that queer play strategies are discussed, developed, and possibly negotiated via community engagement in online spaces. This thesis utilizes both a media-specific analysis and a discourse analysis for this approach, respectively. The platform for the discourse analysis is TikTok, which was released in 2016 and focuses on short form video content. The reason for this choice is based on both its presence in my personal experiences and its global impact as a platform. This project commits itself to both continuing relevant work on the strategies, interpretations, and impact of queer play and the importance of paratextual practices by fans about games. This thesis uses TikTok to identify relevant strategies and

interpretations by fans who populate the queer DbD digital public of TikTok. The end goal is to conceptualize the relationship between the game text and fan-generated content that promotes queerer play strategies and interpretations, which I call: the queer metagame.

The queer metagame stems from my experience with metagaming, which is an important practice in online multiplayer games where players optimize their playstyles for success. This can include playing certain characters to make a team more "balanced" or building specific powers to complete objectives. Metagaming is embedded within the meritocracy of competitive gaming space. A queer metagame is not a guide on the correct ways to be queer, it is the recognition of transgressive possibility, an applicable reading strategy, a redefinition of the win condition. Much in the way metagaming discusses strategies to be implemented in-game, queer metagaming engages with elements and affordances of the game that can be read queerly by players.

A queer metagame reflects the concept of "assemblage" developed by Deleuze and Guattari and reinterpreted in game studies by scholars such as T.L Taylor in their work "The Assemblage of Play" (2009). The queer metagame draws specifically from Bo Ruberg's concept of the "assemblage of queer meaning," in their article "Hungry Holes and Insatiable Balls: Video Games, Queer Mechanics, and the Limits of Design" (2022). An adaptation of Taylor's definition, an "assemblage of queer meaning," is that which emerges from the queer interpretations of a games' mechanics, representational elements, and considerations of the games' receptions (2022, p.117). A queer metagame engages this assemblage with the explicit inclusion of paratextual media, which lay the groundwork for queer transgressive possibilities in these games. Transgressive play is important in the ways it counters hegemonic structures of play that scholars, like Christopher Paul, notes are instantiated in the design and culture of games

(2018, p.90). Queer play is an oppositional and resistant strategy that allows players to carve spaces for themselves in games, in the words of Edmond Chang:

"Queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits, and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure." (2015, p.17)

The difficulty in these strategies for games like *Dead by Daylight* is that the game places players in an in-between space, as matches happen in isolation: they are played, evaluated for points, and forgotten. Harassment in these spaces benefit from this isolation, harm is enacted, felt, possibly reported, and then forgotten. Forgotten by the system yes, but not the player. What is allowed in these isolated moments is contingent on the culture of the game, these evaluations thread the disjointed experiences of play. These threaded experiences are where the queer metagame operates and it's what this thesis illuminates in the coming chapters.

Chapter 1: The Archives – A Literature Review, reviews relevant work that lays the theoretical foundations for this project. There are three main points of observation that my literature review seeks to explore: toxicity and transgression, queer play and possibility, and paratext. The first section on toxicity and transgression explores the contrasting qualities of both subjects, where transgression is an oppositional strategy to in-game toxicity, which has become an expected and unfortunate reality for players of online multiplayer games. Transgressive strategies like queer play are effective by opposing hegemonic play structures and the image of the "ideal player" (Aarseth, 2014; Sunden, 2007). The next section on queer play and possibility is the core of this project, highlighting the relevant works that explore what queer play looks like and its impacts on game text. These strategies and interpretations can go beyond sexual and

romantic expressions of queerness and seek to illuminate how a game's affordances can be engaged with via a queer lens offering newer understandings of the game (Evans, 2018; Krobova et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2019). Lastly, the section on paratext emphasizes the importance of paratextual media in the form of fan-generated content. Content and discussions by fans on platforms external to the game are directly part of the game's narrative quality, they affirm and reinforce queer play strategies (Consalvo, 2017; Mukerjee 2015). This section also asserts why TikTok is a generative platform for this analysis outlining the platform's unique tools for co-creative discourse, it's emergent digital publics, and its cultural impact amongst its users (Karizat et al, 2021; Schellewald, 2021; Zeng, 2021). This chapter lays the groundwork for how this thesis approaches *Dead by Daylight* within a queer lens and the qualities of fan generated content that encourage queer alternative forms of being in-game.

Chapter 2: Characters, Chases, and Cosmetics – Queer Potentialities in Dead by Daylight, is a media-specific analysis of *Dead by Daylight* that explores the game's narrative and interactive potential. Drawing from the result of 100 game matches documented via play journal for this project, and my previous experience, this chapter reframes each match of *Dead by Daylight* as narrative experiences that develop through player action. Inspired by Bo Ruberg's exploration of "queer game mechanics", Korbova et al.'s research on queer play strategies (2015), and sara ahmed's work on "queer use" (2018), this chapter explores the affordances of DbD that can be used oppositionally to transgress the expected process of the game and make room for queerer narratives (Shaw, 2017). This analysis recognizes how integral paratextual practices are in establishing context for DbD's narrative qualities and the interpretations. This relationship is developed further in the follow chapter which explores explicit player examples on TikTok.

Chapter 3: Rollin with the LGBT – Queer Discourse on TikTok, is a discourse analysis of 200 videos collected from TikTok, documenting how queer fan content of DbD explores transgressive queer play in DbD. TikTok's focus on short form video content and its tools for co-creative discourse provides generative examples of threaded player experiences and community sentiments about the game. Drawing from the work of Andre Brock (2018) and Stefanie Duguay (2022), this analysis explores the cues and strategies that are used and discussed by LGBTQIA2S+ players on the platform. The videos of this dataset are divided into three overlapping categories: Commentary, Gameplay/Performance, and Edits which reveal various subjects of discourse and spotlight how its formatting to fit the TikTok platform contributes to its impact and reach. This chapter is a snapshot of the queer DbD community on TikTok, using a sampling plate of content to illustrate queer metagaming at work and the important continued work of documenting player experiences.

Chapter 4: Queer Metgaming, is the conclusion of this thesis that showcases the findings of the project, its limitations, and future trajectories. This chapter highlights the relationship between the case study and its surrounding paratext to forward the concept of the queer metagame. The queer metagame is the process of outlining play strategies, characters, and in-game elements that resonate with the experiences of LGBTQ+ players and are discussed on online platforms. It is an adaptable process that explores the entanglements and impact of player documented experiences to the game text. In conversation with Bolluck and Lemieux's concept of metagaming, this chapter develops not only what queer metagaming can be but how it affects the culture of a game. The queer metagame as a reinterpretation of the game space that points to queerer possibilities and futures, always in conversation, and a necessary part of game culture.

# Chapter 1: The Archives – A Literature Review

Before writing the first draft of this chapter, I was playing a ranked game of *Overwatch 2* (2022). I queued as my usual support role and chose the angel-like medic Mercy who wields a powerful staff that heals allies or boosts their damage, with a small pistol as a secondary weapon. Mercy's primary function is to support her allies, forgoing her own possibility for kills and relying heavily on positioning and map awareness to do her job effectively. Although it is not as celebrated, I enjoy the process of keeping my teammates alive and take pride in knowing I contributed heavily to their survivability and thus any victories. During this game one of my team members, who played the tank character D.Va, decided to write "fa99s" in the main match text chat for everyone to read. Spelling out the obvious homophobic slur in a way that wouldn't alert any filters.

No one responded, despite the entire team being present in the voice chat. Maybe no one felt it was relevant or important, I even rolled my eyes at the message and proceeded to play like normal. It was a ranked game and, like most players, I wanted to win. After a while the situation bothered me. I didn't say anything, I just simply didn't heal D.Va. Even though it was my job and D.Va requires extensive healing, as her role requires taking damage from the other team to win team fights.

No one said anything, despite my obvious lack of healing, we made it through the round because the other support, Moira, did an exceptional job keeping D.Va alive. I originally planned to continue this silent protest going into the next round, but I didn't want my team to think I was bad at my job. I was refusing to heal because I refused to accept a homophobic comment, so I messaged the chat:

Auraculum (Mercy): also, D.va not down to heal people who write homophobic shit.

Auraculum (Mercy): luckily [for you] Moira is good at her job.

PervySage (D.va): alright fa99

Auraculum (Mercy): <3

I was shaking the whole time. I was worried about the reactions from my team. But, no one said anything, I didn't heal D.Va, and we somehow won. I took pleasure in the moments that D.Va needed healing and Moira couldn't heal them sufficiently. I smiled when I watched D.Va's mech get destroyed over and over again. Some fights were tough, and I cursed myself whenever I healed D.Va accidentally. I tensed up during fights where I knew healing D.Va would be advantageous. D.Va attempted to devalue my actions in the end game, and I called them a homophobe in response. But I still feel shaken, not that I was on the receiving end of a slur, but because I chose to stand up for myself in an environment that I was sure would react negatively.

It's because of this experience and many others that I've had that has led me to my current project of interest. From this one moment, I have already touched on several subjects that my literature review seeks to explore: The toxic meritocracy of online gaming space, the mentality wanting to "just play the game", the fear that my decisions wouldn't be supported, the ways I took pleasure in refusing to heal, even the choice to play Mercy in the first place. This project observes similar elements in *Dead by Daylight* to answer this project's primary research question:

How can LGBTQIA2S+ fan appropriation of multiplayer videogames on online platforms inform the way that these players challenge hegemonic games cultures through transgressive queer play?

For this thesis I have sought out relevant literature that tackles three main points of observation. The first being work that focuses on hegemonic structures of play and the ways transgressive play challenges these structures. I am specifically focused on interactions in online multiplayer games as it relates to the concepts of toxicity and meritocracy. The second section will further elaborate on the transgressive qualities of queer play. As the core of my project, this section will be pulling from both games' studies and queer theory alike to explore the nuances of queer identification and alternative ways of being as it manifests both within and outside of game text. The third will focus on the relationship between paratext and game text. Paratext is an important avenue for many queer play practices, I believe it's imperative to continue following the threads of online interactions and how they can influence play. This section will also factor in relevant work on platform studies as it relates to TikTok, which is the primary source of player data for this project. These three modes of inquiry are meant to help take a "snapshot" of the player culture surrounding *Dead by Daylight*, exploring the threads that foster possible queer transgressive play practices.

I feel it's important to outline the types of online multiplayer games I refer to in my research question. Primarily I look towards games that operate on a match-by-match basis where players compete against opposing teams to complete objectives. Consider first person shooters (FPS) like *Overwatch* (2016) and *Call of Duty* (2003) or multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games like *League of Legends* (2009) and *DOTA* (2003). These games track progression via player level or rank, the speed at which they develop is based on the frequency of play and player performance within each match. I am also particularly interested in games that allow for customization of the in-game characters the player controls via cosmetics. My interest in these games is to explore concepts of queer play and possibility in digital spaces, moving away from

MMORPGS and single-player narrative games and exploring games that are more restrictive to these practices.

## Toxicity and Transgression

I pose research on toxicity and transgression in tandem to recognize the contrast in these subjects. Research that commonly looks at transgressive play often places these strategies in opposition to hegemonic structures that are reinforced within games and the surrounding player culture. As Jenny Sundén describes in her work, "Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game Cultures," transgressive play refers to play strategies that are in opposition to the "implied" or "ideal" player of a game (2009, p.2). To Sundén this process, "is play as innovation and, possibly, subversion, of finding, exploring and exploiting loopholes in the game fabric" (p.2). The "implied" player can be described as the player that follows the structures imposed by the game text, as explored by Espen Aarseth (2014). Discussions of the ideal player also echoes the work of Janine Fron et al. in what they describe as the "Hegemony of Play" (2009). Fron et al, describe the hegemony of play as an existing power structure in games and game production that reinforces a specific definition of who should be playing games and the values that are praised in these games (p.309). The ideal player is primarily described as a cis-straight white man, a demographic that has historically been the most visible in games production and marketing (p. 310 & 314). Considering this, alternative modes of play are often devalued and marginalized players who do not fit the expected identity aren't as represented (p. 311). This is what has reinforced the idea of what a "gamer" is (Fon, et al, 2009, p. 310; Paul, 2018, p. 68; Shaw, 2009, p. 32). The term "gamer" is quite loaded, but the contentious nature of gaming identity and issues toxicity in gaming space continue to reveal how deep rooted these hegemonic structures are in varying facets of videogames.

Many scholars have documented the ways that these structures permeate various aspects of game cultures, with lasting and harmful effects (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2013; Nakamura, 2012, p. 9; Paul, 2018, p. 63). Mia Consalvo outlines the important and necessary work in mapping the toxicity that still permeates videogame spaces (2012). Kishonna Gray's work on Xbox Live, explores online deviant behaviours and recognizes how internet anonymity opens avenues for racist, sexist, and heterosexist speech online (2014, p.39). Shira Chess emphasizes the importance of feminism in games, recognizing that, "play has power (…) by engaging in radical play we can work inside and outside of systems in creative ways that push at the margins" (2020, p.7). Nakamura's work on player generated campaigns against harassment highlight not only the prevalence of this issue but the resources that players use to record and respond to their negative experiences (2012, p.12). Nicholas Taylor and Randall Hammond's ethnographic study on a *League of Legends* club highlights the desire for marginalize players to find "safer spaces" when approaching the game's notable toxic reputation (2018, p.229). Adrienne Shaw outlines the tensions and frictions of gaming culture and self-identification, influenced by the ways that game producers tend to forget about the other voices that populate the market (2009, p.30). Representation in games is part of this issue, but "better representation" is by no means the sole solution to an ongoing and prevalent problem with gaming culture. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw both illustrate complex facets of representation in their respective books *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* and *Gaming at the Edge*, by exploring play strategies that engage with and impart the experience of queer players within games. (2015; 2018). This is not to say representation isn't important, but the non-representational forms of queer play are generative in reimagining gaming space and confronting toxicity.

Toxicity in gaming culture is not a new phenomenon and is intrinsically link to the meritocratic systems of games. When discussing the prevalent toxicity of gaming culture, Christopher Paul's book *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games* is a fruitful resource in exploring the ways hegemonic values are implemented and reinforced in games. Paul emphasizes the value in studying the culture around games, to reiterate the importance for games to change (2018, p.63). Using rhetorical analysis, Paul observes meritocracy as a symbolic system of game culture which reinforces hegemonic structures of play, "that regularly set players on a path to value power, overcoming obstacles, and victory over one's opponents." (p.64). The values of power and the emphasis on conquest is the same concern that Fron et al. discuss in their work (2009, p.66). Meritocracy can be used as an exclusionary tool, often using player skill as a determinate to manifest a normative gatekeeping practice (Paul, 2018, p.75). From a more ludic perspective, Paul expresses the ways mechanics normalize these assessments, for example, "Fairness as a game-design trope feeds into the idea of meritocracy by setting a baseline expectation that the game does not discriminate against potential players" (p.99). Hegemonic structures of play are incredibly deeply rooted in online multiplayer games, which makes it unsurprising how toxicity can manifest in these spaces, especially towards marginalized players.

Toxicity as a term is highly contentious, what is understood as toxic behaviour can very well be apparent, like harassment, or more ambiguous when discussing in-game actions. For the latter, toxicity can refer to disruptive play behaviours in games. In their work "Assessing Toxic Behaviour in Dead by Daylight" Patrick Deslauriers et al reference the work of Foo and Koivisto, describing toxic behaviour as violating the "rules" of online gaming on at least one of three levels: software and code-dependant rules, the company's explicit guidelines, or the community's implicit rules (2020). For example, griefing is the act of interrupting the usual

expected processes of the game, via strategies that exploit the games affordances. Griefing is a very noticeable act of disruption and has been explored by a variety of scholars (Deslauriers et al., 2020, Gironi, 2019; Gray, 2013). The act of griefing goes against the values of meritocracy as it is not associated with skill and is meant primarily as a harmful tactic. However, a study by Kishonna Gray explores the ways queer Women of Color use griefing strategies as a form of resistance (2013). The two groups that Gray interviews use these strategies to disrupt gameplay to bring to light the issues of toxicity that go unacknowledged in Xbox Live games. This active form of resistance transgresses the expected meritocratic forms of playing by both its "unskillfulness" and its effectiveness (Gray, 2013). Similar to how I didn't help D.Va, every moment where I could've healed her recalled back to my motivations to oppose homophobic messages in chat, messages that remained unanswered until my interventions. Returning to the work of Deslauriers et al, describing what toxic practices are in *Dead by Daylight* are ambiguous and require reading into minimal context clues that describe player intentions (2020). Deslauriers et al. analysed discussions on Reddit to explore how players experience and describe toxic play behaviours (2020). Their work recognizes the ways that metacommunication can foster a type of game literacy to better parse in-game social cues (2020). Similarly, transgressive strategies can employ an understanding and reapplication of game affordances and implicit rules to disrupt the play space, using similar paratext to inform them.

When Jenny Sundén did her ethnographic study on *World of Warcraft* players, she noted the ways that online games entangle the social and aesthetic dimensions of the game and, "the ways in which players are collectively imagining who 'the player' is, and how such fantasies are connected (or disconnected) with the politics of the interface" (2009, p.3). Sundén's exploration of the "fantasy" is important, that a divergence from the expectation of play risks opposition.

Similarly, Gray's interviewees were often met with anger or ambivalence for their actions in-game. This is the same rhetoric that fuels the "shut up and play" notion explored by Mahli-Ann Butt and Thomas Apperley (2018, p.46). "Shut up and play" refers to the expectations that issues in games should not be explored and is used primarily to silence marginalized voices (2018). Safety in play is never assured, there is always a potential for harmful interactions in games, which makes discussions and interventions that tackle toxicity in games significant.

Issues of harassment and forms of representation in online multiplayer games contribute to tensions surrounding visibility and identification in games. Paul describes online multiplayer games as a prime breeding ground for toxic behaviour, one that is not unknown to be taken to extremes (2018, p.71). It's important to note that these experiences are disproportionate to players with intersecting marginal identities and toxicity, "sets the terms on which players engage, giving stark advantage to those who are not targeted and retaining power for those who have already climbed the ladder" (Paul, 2018, p.77). Often official measures to stop harassment are inadequate and players must turn to their own solutions to create safer gaming spaces. To be clear, I believe that gaming culture has come a long way, and I would never wish to discredit the work of groups that address these issues. However, the reoccurring narratives and toxic meritocratic practices in gaming spaces show that there is still room for resistance. It is my belief that transgression as a strategy constantly puts in check the hegemony of play that has laid a foundation for toxic engagement. As a queer person myself, the form of transgression that I will be focusing on is queer play, and the non-normative, alternative, and radical possibilities that can occur from it.

## Queer Play and Possibility

My exploration of work on transgressive play and toxic hegemonic gaming spaces sets the groundwork to explore queer play and possibility. This section focuses on the alternative ways of being that queer play offers in contrast to hegemonic structures of play. This includes outlining the strategies and tensions that arise when "playing queer" and how this concept has developed over time. The following work will establish the main theoretical foundations of this project, touching on intersections of game studies and queer theory that Bo Ruberg describes as "resonance": a point of relationality in the ways structures of videogames echo queer thinking (2019, p.20). In the introductory chapter of *Queerness in Play*, Harper et. al describe games and queer theory as a natural fit, stating that they operate in two complimentary philosophical frames (2018). Blending these two lenses is generative for recognizing the future trajectories of games and how power structures are enacted and reproduced through play.

I feel it important to define my use of the word queer. Naturally queer can be used as an umbrella term for people who are part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Beyond that, I take inspiration from relevant work that frames queer as an alternative form of being. Krobova et al. describe queerness as a strategy, a radical questioning of cultural norms shaping gender and sexuality (2015, p.2). Bo Ruberg describes queerness as a way of being, "a way of living life otherwise […], reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world" (2019, p.7). In The *Queer Art of Failure* Jack Halberstam describes, "the queer […] as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock" (2013, p.29). T. Harper et al. describes queer theory by its often-adversarial relationship to existing power structures (2018, p.4). From these definitions, the transgressive

qualities of queerness are made apparent, and so I emphasize the importance of documenting and analysing these experiences.

Queer as an umbrella term covers a wide range of intersecting identities and experiences, which runs the risk of its usage being overstated. My exploration of queer fan appropriation is intentionally general, and the use of homogenizing language does impact how the analysis navigates a diverse range of identities and experiences. I bring this up to acknowledge a common pitfall of seeing queerness as an "imagined community," and obfuscating the complexity and depth of various intersecting identities and experiences (Shaw, 2015, p.16). Furthermore, queer players don't necessarily want to engage in transgressive play, this project is meant to discover transgressive possibilities that can arise from fan appropriation by queer people, exploring a variety of content and experiences under that massive umbrella. I expect these possibilities to be negotiated and contended, and I invite the generative quality of difference in these varied queer experiences.

All this said, it is still important to emphasize that there are collective qualities of queer experience, especially when discussing possibility spaces. I consider the work of sarah ahmed's "used paths" where, "collectivity can be acquired as direction; the more a path is traveled upon the clearer it becomes. A path can be cared for, kept clear, maintained" (2018). In videogames, this collective creation of a pathway applies to the various reoccurring play practices and strategies that are used by queer players. I believe that the recognition of these strategies can be a precursor for forming a queer counter public in games. My hope is for this project to add to an ongoing and important dialogue of that fosters and spotlights alternative and counter-hegemonic play possibilities in gaming spaces.

It is important to outline how queer play is defined in in scholarship. Krobova et al. describe queer play as an expansive concept with a variety of uses, usually pertaining to identity and identification, and specify that it contrasts heteronormative game culture (2015, p.5). For Ruberg, queer play is a process of finding alternative meaning in videogames, performing a version of T.L Taylors "transformative work" (2019, p.135). Edmond Chang's concept of "queergaming" as a variation of Alexander Galloway's "countergaming" is a fantastic exploration on generative quality of queer play to challenge normative structures. Chang also describes strategies for "queer remediation" where:

> "Queergaming takes up this idea of borrowing, appropriating, and repurposing to describe the strategies in which games and players take existing game titles, characters, stories, and worlds and queer them, remediate them to refashion and reimagine not only content and play but their very own relationship to ostensibly non-queer games and communities." (2015, p.20).

Chang's definition of queergaming touches on strategies observed by other queer game studies scholars and informs the elements I plan to observe within online fan-appropriation. Most commonly, queer play can include expressions of gender and sexuality within romantic or sexual contexts. Usually this is done using a game's affordances, however it simultaneously highlights issues in the ways games facilitate those narratives (Chang, 2017, p.19). Researchers have recognized that queer representation in games has historically been either non-existent, misrepresentative, or outright harmful (Evans, 2018, p.21; Krobova et. Al, 2015, p. 3; Macdonald, 2012; Ruberg, 2019, p.4; Shaw, 2009, p.233; Shaw, 2015, p. 18; The Game Theorists, 2014). This is not to say that queer representation in games have not improved in their representation of queer experiences and the exploration of non-heteronormative relationships

(e.g., *The Sims 3&4* (2000 & 2014), *The Last of Us* (2013), *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), *The Mass Effect Trilogy* (2007-2021), *Hades* (2020)), yet queerness is still often treated as an aesthetic function or a box to be checked off (Shaw, 2015, p. 34; Ruberg. 2019, p. 5; Chang, 2017 p.18).

Queer play recognizes non-normative ways of playing that are not limited explicitly sexual or romantic forms of queerness. An example that Chang refers to is a player character in *World of Warcraft* named Everbloom who maximized their level without killing a single character, forgoing the implied way of progression that the game promotes (2017, p.19). Bo Ruberg also offers a variety of queer(er) forms of play, one of which is a game designer's experience in *Halo* where she, along with her friends, ignored the usual deathmatch objective to "hike" and explore the game's landscape (2019, p. 207). Furthermore, Ruberg explores the presence of queer game mechanics, described as game affordances that directly or indirectly resonate with queer experiences (p.108, 2022). These alternative forms of being are what Fron et al. would consider as opposite to the hegemonic structures of play that normalize elements such as competition and violence (2007, p. 315). What's important is recognizing the vast potential that queer play can offer players in the face of limited game affordances.

In response to hegemonic structures of play and how they manifest, queer games studies scholarship focuses on player strategies that defy, challenge, change, or reread the affordances and limitations of a game space. Ruberg recognizes that games have not just become "queerer" but rather have always possessed queer potential that one discovers through the act of playing (2019, p. 16). In their book *Videogames Have Always Been Queer,* they use games such as *Octo-Dad* (2010) and *Portal* (2007) to explore queer interpretations of these game texts, highlighting the mechanic and aesthetic elements that resonate with queer experiences (2019). Play is an

important tool for players to reevaluate game text and its predetermined parameters. Discussing in-game affordances further crystalizes the elements of a game can be understood or read queerly, inviting transgression.

In her article "Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies," Adrienne Shaw develops on Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model of communication as it relates to new media technologies. In brief, affordances can be understood as the intended use of a media object as decided by its developer (2017, p.544). Hall's model suggests three main positions for decoding affordances: dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional (2017, p.596-597). Shaw's addition to this definition references the work of Peter Nagy and Gina Neff and their concept of "imagined affordances" which, "push[es] back on the assumption that affordances are rational and immutable while demonstrating that at their core they are about interpretation" (2017, p.596). Shaw recognizes that an affordance perspective is helpful to understand the reception of media technologies as defined by its use (2017, p.597). With oppositional use in mind Shaw further asserts the importance of recognizing the forms of power and resistance that exists in user technologies.

Of the three positions Shaw explores, oppositional readings are the most connected to queer play practices I have seen documented. Oppositional readings are user actions done in opposition to the intended affordances of the media object: "[It] might take advantage of hidden affordances or even attempt to turn false affordances into actual affordances" (2017, p. 598). Within this realm of possibility Shaw emphasizes that the interpretations of text cannot be done in any way, quoting the work of Costall and Richards to explain that affordances are not simply discovered, but negotiated (2017, p. 559). If we consider the ways that hegemonic play structures

are coded into games, queer play strategies can be seen as a form of oppositional readings to the ideal or implied forms of play.

In his chapter "Coding Meritocracy," Christopher Paul notes that videogames do recycle tropes that normalize hegemonic values in videogames (2018, p. 91). Returning to the meritocratic ideal of "fairness," Paul describes fairness as design element that emphasizes the value of success as proponent of individual skill and has become an expected element of game design (2018, p.102-103). One example is the player progression system of "leveling," which rewards players for their performance, allowing them to continuously buy-into to an imagined measure of skill (2018, p. 108). Leveling or rankings in online multiplayer games are a meritocratic system that can increase tensions in game when players aren't performing optimally. Similarly, "meta-gaming" is a common practice in online multiplayer games used to develop playstyles for better chances of success and are regularly discussed on online platforms. Recognizing the instantiation of hegemonic structures in games can outline how game affordances can be renegotiated for queer(er) ways of being.

The added layer of complexity to alternative readings of game affordances is understanding what can be considered as queer oppositional affordances. Are all non-normative forms of play inherently queer and, by that understanding, can anyone engage in queer play? This is a question that Ruberg addresses:

> "Playing queer is a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players—but which belongs, first and foremost, to those who live the joys, and the pain of their queer lives each day in the world beyond games as well as within them." (2019, p.19)

There is value in observing the ways players can pay queerly and furthermore how they document those experiences. Krobova et al. explore the potential applications within processes of "queer readings," whereby players can take advantages of "blind spots" or unclear aspects of characters to be filled in with their own narratives (2015, p.4). Krobova et al's ethnographic study of players based in Prague recognizes three emergent strategies of play: imaginative play, stylized performance, and queer roleplaying (p.7). Imaginative play is the one most closely relating to "oppositional" readings of game texts where players ascribe queer narratives to characters and exchanges in games (p.8).

This strategy echoes the concept of "disidentification" in media consumption as explored by José Munoz, a reading strategy that recognizes when the text is not coded to connect to the reader (Shaw, 2015, p.76). As described further by Shaw, "disidentification becomes a reading and a production practice, an act of reception that is also a performance" (2015, p.76). Stylized performance is described as a strategy where players will deliberately perform queerness using stereotypes that closely connect to the sexuality being performed (Krobova et al, 2015, p.8). Compared to the other proposed strategies, there is a clear divide: whereas imaginative play relies heavily on the reading strategies of the player, the latter two options specifically look at elements of the game that are co-opted to emphasize the queer experience of the player (Krobova et al, 2015, p. 8-9). What is interesting about imaginative play is the search for "hints," wherein an element can be interpreted queerly despite being hidden to most players (p.9). Krobova et al also remark this strategy as the most favored amongst their players, which is not surprising considering the issues players can have with representation options in games.

This project will focus on strategies like stylized performances because the online multiplayer games that this project explores often do not allow player experiences to contribute

to a continuous narrative. In a match-by-match form of play, players use customization options to represent themselves, either via character cosmetics or player profiles in game. Outlining the performance options in-game can be fruitful when engaging with the queer possibility of these kinds of online games. Muñoz describes the importance of performance in his work "Ephemera as Evidence" where "queer acts, like queer performances, and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities" (1996, p.6). To Muñoz, ephemera includes elements of real lived experiences and, touching on Raymond Williams "structures of feeling", ephemera is deeply connected with social experience (1996. p.10). As this project attempts to observe these ephemeral traces in *Dead by Daylight*, it's important to consider the forms that performance can take.

In the Fall of 2022, I presented my work at the Canadian Sexuality Research Forum (CSRF) annual meeting that addressed my experience in exploring the tensions and possibilities connected to an explicitly queer coded "skin"[1] from the popular MOBA game *Smite*. For context, in 2018, *Smite* released the first LGBTQ-themed skin for their character Chiron, modeled after the roman mythological figure of the same name. Chiron's character model without a skin is an armoured centaur with a large bow and arrow. With this skin, the centaur form becomes a unicorn centaur clad in pink glittery assless chaps, bright colours, and rainbows. This form is paired with a voice pack full of queer lexicology, sexual innuendos, and *Rupaul's Drag Race*[2] references. I expressed my qualms with the skin's overt use of LGBTQ+ stereotypes and conversely explored the ways the skin can be an avenue for disruption and queer performance. My main lens for this analysis was recognizing the disruptive potential of Camp as a form of

[1] Skin refers to a cosmetic option in game, players can select these options to change the appearance of characters.
[2] Rupaul's Drag Race (2009-present) is a reality competition show hosted by Rupaul, where drag performers compete to be, "America's next drag superstar."

queer performance that makes use of stereotypes and reclaims them through humor (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008, p. 22). Now defining what is and what is not considered Camp is complex, but its structure is rooted in disruptive potential (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008, p. 22). As David Halpern states, "Camp is about deflating pretension, dismantling hierarchy, and remembering that all queers are stigmatized and no one deserves the kind of dignity that comes at the expense of someone else's shame" (2018, p.207). Camp's reclamation of power through humor can be a form of self "disidentification" that plays with the disconnection of identity and space. In the case of Chiron, the overt play on stereotypes and the queer coded voice lines are ways for players to perform the campy qualities of this skin in response to toxic interactions in game. Chiron's skin does not encompass an in-depth representation of queer experience, the surface level queerness of its aesthetics is an active disruption of the "ideal" player. Camp is one avenue for self-identification one of which can be emulated in gaming spaces, exploring player strategies and interpretations rooted in similar concepts is a helpful launching point for thinking about queer identification and play in videogames.

Adrienne Shaw touches on similar processes of identification in her chapter, "He Could be a Bunny Rabbit for All I Care" which focuses on the aspect of games not specific to seeing similar identities on screen that still result in player identification (2015, p.98). Shaw's discussion with her interviewees reveals intersections of ludic and narrative elements in games that contribute to identification, while also recognizing that this process isn't always happening while playing (p.107). Importantly Shaw makes note that there are factors outside of the game text that influence these processes, highlighting in-person and online social interactions (p.113). Shaw observes how intertextual or paratextual associations can help develop depth in these processes by building on character narratives (p.133). Processes of identification can also be found in the

selection and customization of certain characters, and despite being inconsequential to the game, these decisions could be strategic for players (p.134). What this project examines is how players record and discuss these practices outside of the game text.

Material that exists outside of the game can be an important resource for players when the affordances of a game text cannot facilitate their preferred mode of play. In the chapter "What Happens in Goldshire, Stays in Goldshire," Lee Sherlock observes community practices of LGBTQIA2S+ players in the popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2013). Sherlock is interested in how players respond to an oppressive heteronormative space that simultaneously is marketed with the possibility of allowing them to be anything they want (p.161). Sherlock further develops the concept of "queer reading" beyond an individual private practice by observing the work of LGBTQ guilds, roleplaying practices, and fan content, all which points to possibilities of queerly rereading experiences in digital space (p.163 & 173).

One example of such a reading is the unofficial queer friendly Proudmore server where fans perform intimacy in both erotic and non-erotic forms (2013, p.168). Fan-generated content affects roleplaying possibilities by creating a form of queer literacy wherein "the activity defined as 'roleplaying' although often assumed to be 'centered' as in-game interaction—is fluid, moving through various genres and spaces, and these interactions add up to a complex, intertextual, multimodal picture" (p.169). This can refer to coopting game elements as queer. For example, Blood Elves are a popular playable race for queer players as the male character models are seen as "effeminate", this is a form of stylized play (Sherlock, 2013, p. 166; Sivhonen & Stenros, 2018, p. 178; Sundén, 2009, p.1). Sherlock outlines how these player-driven strategies can cultivate affinity groups, comparable to what Michael Warner (2020, p.119) defines as a counterpublic (p.170).

In Sherlock's case, a counterpublic emerges through the recognition of queer player practices as a "transgressive menace" to the implied dominant framework of the game space (2013, p.170). Importantly, Sherlock recognizes that not all these groups operate on an equal playing field and that their power dynamics must also be accounted for (p.170). They touch on important aspects of negotiation when observing fan-created content, noting that even within counterhegemonic spaces, there are still notable power structures.

In their chapter "Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ roleplay," Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros expand the queer possibilities that exists within a variety of roleplaying games (RPGs) (2018). The common element of queer play in their analysis is players contributing to a game beyond its "urtext," which is described as the text written without the player's involvement (p.169). Summarizing their findings, the authors write that "the emergence of queer play necessitates the affordances of the urtext of the game, each player's unique approach to play, and the core player group or online community in which the play is situated" (p.178). To Sihvonen and Stenros, queer play practices don't require much encouragement: though they may remain hidden, they can also be incredibly popular strategies that may even be facilitated by the ur-text (2018, p.178). Roleplay is an important element in these practices even in its subtler forms, and queer players have developed strategies that account a variety of game elements to facilitate their desired form of identification.

Just as it crucial to understand processes of queer play in-game, there is meaningful research in the ways that players can support each other outside of the gaming space. In their chapter "Outside the Lanes: Supporting a Non-normative *League of Legends* community," Nicholas Taylor and Randall Hammond do an ethnographic study of a student run League of Legends club at North Carolina State University who came together with the goal to promote

inclusivity (2018, p. 226). What made this club interesting to the pair was their, “deliberate de-emphasis on competition and progression, and its elevation of other forms of participation with the game, as central to their attempts to make a more welcoming space for non-normative gaming bodies” (p. 227). Taylor and Hammond note that the club is dedicated to providing a “safer space” for League players in response to the game’s reputation for toxic interactions. This reiterates that toxicity can envelope the culture of a game by creating expectations for the kinds of interactions that should or should not happen.

Kishonna Gray’s study on queer Women of Colour’s use of griefing strategies as a form of in-game activism, is another form of collective action and support (2013, p.1). Part of this process includes documenting experiences of harassment on gaming forums for greater reach and reception (p.18). Gray emphasizes the important power of resistance in play in that “the act of resistance can be both individual and collective leading to the empowering of others in similar settings, thus leading to possible social change within particular arenas” (p.18). Similarly, Lisa Nakamura explores the ways fan-produced online forums can be “safer spaces” to discuss toxic in-game experiences, “Such safe spaces are necessary, because critics of game cultures open themselves up to the ire of other fans when they call out racism, sexism, and homophobia” (2012, p.5). Videogames and play experiences are more than just isolated moments, they are a part of larger social experiences that are documented and shared outside of the game text.

## Paratext

A recurring element in work relating to queer readings and queer play is the focus on player-generated material. The process of incorporating fan-content to the analysis of game texts is not a new assessment, while game studies have traditionally viewed games in isolation, many

scholars have considered the importance of player participation. T.L. Taylor, describes this an "assemblage of play", shifting perspective to view games as a "lived object" that considers the relationality between games and play (2009, p.332). Paul uses assemblage to emphasize how multiple elements of interaction can be at work during play when considering toxicity (2018, p.66). Paul also explores assemblage to describe the co-creative process of games between producers and players, and the clear "feedback loop" in game-design (2018, p.67). Adrienne Shaw also outlines the ways process of meaning-making and reception can be a communal experience in-play, through play, and discussed outside of play (2015, p.52).

The use of assemblage in these contexts refers to the concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which has been adapted to consider processes of play and interaction (1987). When considering narrative frameworks in game text, Souvik Mukerjee explores assemblage in his book *Videogames and Storytelling*, to analysis the interconnected processes of the literary machine (2015, p.117). Mukuerjee describes the theory of assemblage in relation to videogames as a set of interlocking and shifting elements that form a whole, "The video game assemblage necessarily includes the changes in movements relative to the gameplay and to other people who might be around, and the words spoken during gameplay. (2015, p.17). To T.L. Taylor, the emphasis on viewing games as assemblages considers that play is imperative to the contextual analysis of games, considering them like Bowker and Star's "boundary objects" (2009, p.333). When we consider the emergence of online play in games, especially online multiplayer games, the presence of other players is not only influential to the development of the game text, but also necessary.

The user/producer exchanges apparent in online multiplayer games' production practices are a defining quality of the genre because of the open discussion of in-game issues and desired

content. One element that is commonly discussed is “balancing”, referring to adjusting power levels of characters to be fairer in game space, a process that is integral to the meritocracy of these games (Paul, 2018, p.96). Balancing is a central aspect to game design, it ensures that skill and effort are at the forefront of the game process, without a game can be “broken” and therefore unsuitable to measure skill (Paul, 2018, p.97). Mukherjee considers these engagements for multiplayer games specifically when exploring the ways game texts can have viewed as rhizomatic qualities (2015, p.42). The importance of Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” for Mukerjee’s analysis of the literary machine is to recognize that the book is not an image of the world but rather is in relation to it via a process of transformation, “the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorialises itself in the world” (p.34). Using the example of MMOs, Mukherjee recognizes the social elements of the game text as a form of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that these games have with the external world, a transformative relationship that is enacted through play (p.42). For Mukerjee, paratexts have always been integral to the storytelling process stating that, “to analyse the video game-story, one needs to consider both the material (such as the CD or DVD, the code, maps, manuals, and other things that are packaged with the game) and the experiential aspects (obtainable from player journals, reviews and commentaries)” (p.104 -106). For this project specifically, the focus on paratext and fan-generated content explores not only the production feedback loop, but the ways games are interpreted by players. Online multiplayer games like DbD are not static texts, their story-like qualities come from the transformative relationship between game space and player. The above work that discusses toxicity and hegemonic structures asserts that these elements form a part of the of the game’s process. This thesis argues that a story “written” both for and by the “ideal

player" is challenged by its reinterpretation and reappropriation by queer players of the game story.

This process requires a literacy in the types of player documentation that is present in paratexts, and the way this documentation contributes the experience of a text. Mukherjee presents, After Action Reports (AARs), Walkthrough, and Let's Plays as examples of how players add additional stories based on their experiences (2015, p.110). Videogame text can be understood in its instances rather than its essence and these instances can be analyzed further by paratextual content (Mukherjee, 2015, p.116). Recognizing play as "instances" is important to this project as *Dead by Daylight*, like many online multiplayer games are experienced via a string of matches which creates a disjointed play experience. As Mukherjee stresses the importance of paratextual assemblages, I am encouraged to further develop the ways paratextual media alter the experience of the main text via a queer lens.

Within the understanding of paratext, scholarship has usually placed the game as central to the content that surrounds it. Mia Consalvo in her text, "When paratexts become texts: de-centering the game-as-text", highlights the important academic focus on paratextual media but outlines, "the danger in 'fixing' any texts as central and others as peripheral" (2017, p.178). Consalvo expands the realm of possibility for understanding what constitutes as game text by arguing for further flexibility when discussing the relationship of text and paratext. Consalvo draws from examples of streaming and modding, and highlights the ways that players revaluate game through alternative perspectives. Like Mukherjee, Consalvo's exploration of paratextual media recognizes that the textual experience of games can be altered if not completely replaced by alternative forms of experience. These processes of meaning-making are not new to game studies and exist in many forms.

Concepts of cross-media readings go back to the work of Henry Jenkins and his piece on *Convergence Culture*, in which he emphasises the present participatory culture in media, detailing emergent strategies of media consumption and the circulation of grassroots cultural production (2006, p.3). Participatory culture describes as a style of consumption where consumers are active in the transformation of media text (Jenkins, 2006, p.5). For Jenkins, fan culture represents a form of participatory culture that questions the ideologies of mass culture (2006, p. 6). When we consider videogame paratextual media, T.L, Taylor explores similar tensions between fan-produced content and game producers (2007, p. 121). Taylor's works, like many others, detail the conflicts centered around authorship and game production, which though not the focus of the project, emphasizes the impact of fan-generated content outside of the initial game text (T.L Taylor, 2007, p. 121; Postigo, 2008, p.71). The exploration of paratextual media highlights the avenues and formations of meaning making that surround a text, cataloguing, "the messy relationships between systems, producers, and users—to understand the assemblage that is games and play." (Taylor, 2007, p. 124). This project explores the assemblages of play that surround *Dead by Daylight* and recognize how queer paratextual media is integral to the game's analysis and renegotiation.

Work that emphasizes the power and importance of play recognize player experience both in and outside of the game as intrinsically linked, even in single player games. Adrienne Shaw stresses the importance of audience study to help parse the ways that meaning develops even after their preliminary construction (2014, p. 63). What is important is recognizing where and how meaning making practices happen. Tombleson and Wolf reference the "circuit of culture" developed by the Open University cultural studies team, that "[extends] the creation of meaning to five moments: regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity work

together to ‘create a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified and recreated’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; p.38)” (2017, p.15). Tombleson and Wolf expand the circuit of culture to include the impact of social media in redefining cross-cultural communication (2017, p.24). As the subject of focus for this project is observing fan-production on online platforms, it’s also imperative to incorporate the strengths and limitations of platforms in this process.

Examining the structure and limitations of online platforms that players engage with on helps to account for varying layer of participation. This project uses the popular social media platform TikTok for its data collection of fan-generated content focusing on the platform’s emphasis on remediation. Since it’s development, TikTok as a platform has become a new and emergent site for cultural research (Zeng, 2021, p.3164). With theoretical foundations in platform studies, researchers have explored the application’s unique mode of communication and content creation. Recently Crystal Abidin and Dr. D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye have created the TikTok Syllabus to aid upcoming research on the platform (2021). TikTok research includes perspectives directly linked to tracking the technical aspects of the platform and the growing amount of content within in. Developing on this research is important when considering the cultural implications of content creation or as Jean Burgess describes as, “vernacular creativity” which, “highlights the creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions” (2006, p.206). Platform studies are important when we consider the role of paratext, as demonstrated by Apperley and Paikka in their work, “Platform Studies’ Epistemic Threshold” (2009). Scholarship on TikTok has extensively documented the platform’s construction and proliferation, its importance is not understated when we consider the platform’s global success during the 2020 Global Pandemic (Zeng, 2021).

In that vein, “Algorithmic Folk Theories” by Karizat et. al, highlights the coproduction of identity and resistance as it connects to the algorithm of TikTok (2021, p. 305:2). Algorithmic folk theories can be defined as user perceptions of their experiences on social media and the systems that curate their content (Karizat et al, 2021, p.305:4). Within the varied user ecosystems of TikTok, the perceptions of the algorithm’s mediation of content highlight a content’s targeted user base (Karizat et al, 2021, p.305:5; Schellewald, 2020, p.1140). These “user bases” within the TikTok ecosystem, manifest into “sides” of TikTok, groupings of users based on their viewed content, for example: Straight TikTok and Alt TikTok (Lorenz, 2020). In the case of this project a meme edit of gameplay could not be tagged as queer however employs comedic references that are commonly associated to a “queer side” of TikTok as catered by an algorithm (Karizat et. al, 2021, p.305:6). What is important about TikTok sides is that these are not defined by the platform but are ascribed by the platform’s users. This can spark tensions with content creator’s gaining reception from a different user base and wanting to “go back” to their side by asking for engagement from users of the group (Lorenz, 2020). Platform algorithms provide an added layer to queer reading, echoing a form of identification based on emergent communities. This project seeks to follow this thread of engagement and link them in ways they impact the culture of the game, what is the most interesting and difficult task of this project is to document an ephemeral process of meaning-making.

As a popular application, Andreas Schellewald notes that there is a small growing body of research on the platform but there remains a lack of interest in exploring the platform as an important communicative environment (2021, p.1438). Schellewald’s exploration of TikTok’s meaning-making practices seeks to establish how these short videos are cultural artifacts (2021, p.1439). The short form of TikTok’s videos is a generative source of user paratext because of

their ephemerality. Schellewald's states that despite the ephemeral nature of TikTok videos which is a point of critique for the platform, they can create meaningful communicative interactions (2021, p.1440). By adapting approaches of studying ephemeral media, Schellewald specifically highlights the ways that the algorithmic "for you" page, mediates the dynamics that unfold on the app (2021, p.1440). Ephemerality as a conceptualization for communicative modalities is an important thread when we consider the importance of ephemera in queer experience.

To explore ephemerality, Jose Munoz' work on ephemera helps to concretise my observations on queer experiences and their potential for transgression. In the chapter "Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling" Munoz explores the complex relationship between queerness and evidence when documenting queer pasts, presents, and futures (2009, p.65). Munoz thus offers ephemera to suture this distant relationship focusing on what connects community and individual practice, and I believe this process opens an important point of inquiry in relation to videogame spaces. The role of evidence is important, and this work develops on Munoz' earlier observations that studying ephemera is not to understand what queer acts mean but rather what they do (1996, p. 12). Using queer ephemera as a lens is helpful in informing this project's analysis, recognizing the queer experience in action and the ways it connects players in *Dead by Daylight*. For Munoz, ephemera is communicated through queer performance, where deliberate movements and references highlight personal experience. Queer performance and its use of in-game affordance is a process explored in a variety of works by queer games scholars (Korbova et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2018; Shaw, 2015). I focus on ephemera when considering the queer relationality of player and text, player and producer, and player and player. Ephemera in this project seeks to highlight negotiations of identity and transgressive possibility even in it's subtler and unspoken forms.

Narrowing in more on Munoz' exploration of queer movements, an example for how movement can be interpreted queerly in a game text is Bo Ruberg's chapter "Queer Movements" for *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (2018). In this chapter Ruberg describes queer movements in relation to games' "chrono normativity" where playing within the temporal possibilities of videogames can reveal alternative forms of desires (2018, p.186). The concept of "chrono normativity" relates to the expected hegemonic forms of progression that is often tied to games, as explored in the above sections. Ruberg's observations on speed running and walkthrough, explore two distinct queer alternative temporalities of the game space that oppose chrono normativity. The next chapter will discuss the role of alternative temporalities in fostering transgressive queer player using the game's possibly unlimited time-space. Importantly Ruberg's recognition of the community practices behind speed running such as player usages of metagaming to perfect their art, poses a similar process of communication that this project seeks to explore.

When we consider the queer potentialities of movement and performance, it's imperative to understand the role of gesture in encouraging these alternative temporalities. We can expand on forms of non-verbal dialogue and use Munoz' gesture analysis to map forms of digital communication, and how gesture expressed in these expansive and varying spaces. Gesture analysis refers to observing specific physical acts that can convey meaning and how they are interpreted within the space they're enacted. In this case Munoz proposes a gesture analysis to examine what queer movements seek to perform in space and what they can communicate to others (2019, p.67). This project will conduct a similar analysis in *Dead by Daylight's* digital space with the movement of player avatars. This continues dialogues regarding how communication possibilities exist in digital mediums for queer users both within games and

online platforms. Regarding digital connectedness, Matilda Tudor in their article "A queer kind of dwelling: Digital thrownness and existential security among sexual minorities in Russia," outlines the possibility of queer spaces using online platforms. Tudor's ethnographic study of sexual minorities in Russia introduces concepts of what they call "queer disposition" and how it can inform a type of "queer habituation" (2022, p. 2). Tudor's ethnographic study of the digital lives of queer Russian men, describes digital spaces a valuable resource for queer habituation as in line with process of queer orientation defined by sara ahmed (2022). That platforms become a realm of possibility to discuss, express, and concretised queer experiences and feelings (Tudor, 2022).

Where it may not be one to one, TikTok's processes of engagement, its user generated notions of sides, and its potential for remediation conducts similar processes and positions it as a unique platform of inquiry for this project. The importance of ephemera in this project is the recognition that traces of queer experience can be discovered and recognized within game spaces. Ephemera recognizes that the experiences and documentation of user experiences are an essential part of play process. However ambiguous and contentious these processes are, recognizing that they are discussed encourages further readings and development of queerer spaces in games.

In ways that affordances aren't created, I don't believe paratext creates queer ephemera, but rather the experiences of queer players give context to the gestures and actions in *Dead by Daylight.* This project seeks to document play possibilities in games that are positioned in opposition to the "ideal player". My analysis of queer fan appropriation in *Dead by Daylight* is meant to outline the ways of thinking and being that are being discussed and observed in game text by fans. The relevant work that I have reviewed not only presents ways of reading and

discussing queer play but recognizes that videogames spaces still need these player interventions. The following chapter employs the first methodological approach for this project, exploring the queer potentials of DbD and incorporating the considerations highlighted by the literature I've explored.

# Chapter 2: Characters, Chases, and Cosmetics – A Media-Specific Analysis

*Dead by Daylight* (DbD) is a game ripe with narrative and interactive potential with each match offering opportunities for players to renegotiate the play space. By employing a media-specific analysis (MSA) of the game text, this chapter will outline the initial sites for queer potentialities that can emerge through play. An MSA recognizes that the materiality of the game text contributes to its narrative experience and considers its assemblage qualities beyond the interactions of player and text. *Dead by Daylight* does not follow a traditional narrative framework; therefore, this section argues that each game session can be considered as narrative experiences created through player interactions and interpretations. These resulting narratives can therefore allow for queer interpretations of the game text that can be informed by player-created content. In this chapter I will first outline the use of the MSA framework and its generative qualities for reading game text and the methodological approach of this analysis. Then I will provide an overview of *Dead by Daylight* and highlight its meritocratic elements, followed by an in-depth reading of communication in game and how it contributes to transgressive play strategies. Then I will apply a queer reading of the game's structure and affordances and lay the groundwork for how fan created content on TikTok can be considered in this process in the forthcoming chapter.

Developed by Katherine Hayles in her article, "Print is Flat, Code is Deep," a media-specific analysis is an adaptive reading practice that engages with the semiotic quality of text as it relates to its material form (2005, p.73). Hayles proposed this methodology to expand literary criticism and theory spotlighting how the materiality of the text's form contributes to its interpretations. As stated by Hayles, "In this view of materiality, it is not merely an inert

collection of physical properties but a dynamic quality that emerges from the interplay between the text as a physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers." (Hayles, 2004, p.72). Hayles' media-specific analysis, accounts for the presence of electronic hypertext, defining nine distinct qualities to consider for analyzing this medium, and furthermore reimagining the material qualities of print media.

Keeping materiality in mind while observing possible play practices highlights the "complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts" (Hayles, 2004, p.71). Of the nine points offered by Hayles, number 7 which refers to spatial navigation is an integral part of this project as it focuses on meaning-making possibilities from the interrelation of the text's navigational functionalities beyond the written narrative elements (Hayles, 2044, p.83). This relates specifically to the interface of the hypertext in the way that the cursor is used to explore it, but for this project's case study we can adapt this approach to consider the ways virtual avatars occupy space and interact with the world around them. The affordances of *Dead by Daylight* inform the openings and limitations for how narratives are created, negotiated, and interpreted. Importantly the narrative process of the game is not an isolated experience but rather requires the presence and input of other players. This thesis also engages with the case study's assemblage qualities, drawing from the work of Souvik Mukherjee and his description of the rhizomatic qualities of the literary machine and, "The paratextual assemblages in video games, in turn, [that] connect to a wide network of narratives, rules and media-specific experiences" (2015, p.117 & 118).

For the data collection of this analysis, I recorded a gameplay log as explored in the Game Analysis Toolkit first developed by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006). The

gameplay log is specific to understanding the dynamic elements of the game text, in other words the “look and feel” of the game (2006). This thesis approaches the gameplay log in an alternative manner as the original toolkit is primarily designed for single player games. I committed myself to logging my in-game sessions focusing on player-to-player actions, chats, my feelings while playing, and the aesthetics and mechanics of the game.

For my journal, I played and recorded a total of 100 games. Starting with the survivor role I changed roles every 25 games and every 5 games I switched characters. For certain challenges I kept with the same character until completion, meaning that the final roster of characters played is not an even 10/10 split. To give some feeling of progression I worked to complete challenges of the most current Tome, I prioritized the challenges specific to the role I was occupying at the time, and I also focused on completing challenges that offered lore fragments. I started with characters and perk builds that I was familiar with and then changed according to the challenges as needed and prioritized using the base cast of characters available to all players. My hope was to take a casual approach to the game, getting a feel for the different characters, learning and relearning aspects of the game. The skins I used were not meant to evoke a specific reaction but were skins that I would typically use as I played the game. The total play time averaged to about 35 hours of total gameplay on top of the 250 hours I have already committed to game as recorded by Steam. Games were played on my personal PC. The characters I played are as follows:

Survivors

- Felix Ritcher (Grand Planner)
- Vittorio Toscano (Arcane Notes)
- Steve Harrington (Scoops Ahoy Uniform)

- Mikaela Reid (Magical Top)
- Bill Overbeck (Holiday Sweater)
- Dwight Fairfield (Love Hurts/Valentine Outfit)
- Meg Thomas (Zipper Hoodie/Rolled Up Jeans)
- Jake Park (Studded Jacket)

Killers

- Huntress (Medvedista collection)
- Legion (Frosted Eyes)
- Trickster (Frosted Eyes)
- Trapper (Ornate Mask)
- Nurse (Frosted Eyes)
- Hillbilly (Frosted Eyes)
- Demogorgon
- Pyramid Head

Notes were taken before, during (whenever stationary) and after the game and were focused primarily on observing non-normative in-game actions and notable interactions. This strategy was also difficult as I attempted to recall events, take quick observations, and attempted to quickly collect screenshots. However, the goal was not to develop a mastery of the game but rather get reacquainted with the text and record interactions with other players as they happened in-game.

## The Campfire: Introducing Dead by Daylight

When players load into *Dead by Daylight*, they are introduced to the campfire, a quiet and eerie scene as four survivors huddle close to a warm fire. All the while a killer - back turned to the player- looks onward from a distance. From there the player can navigate through the different windows of the game (e.g. The Archives, the store, tutorials) or jump into the Trial Grounds by selecting their preferred role. From there, players select their character via a loadout screen and proceed to create a build which includes: deciding cosmetics, items, and perks depending on the chosen role.

Items are specific to survivors and can be either be selected from the loadout screen or found and/or crafted while in-game (crafting items are related to specific perks). Powers are abilities unique to each individual killer and cannot be changed or shared. Cosmetic items are available to every character and include skins which change the appear of the in-game avatar or charms which are collectable items that appear on the belt of survivors or the hooks of killers, depending on the player's chosen role. Perks are unlockable abilities that can be equipped to a character before each match (See Figure 1) and are available to each role. Each character has a unique set of perks that can become shareable between characters of the same role if players increase their level using in-game currency called bloodpoints. Players are graded at the end of each match based on their performance which earns them experience points and bloodpoints. These grades contribute to a pip-system, where a player receives a certain number of "pips" (0-2) per match, if enough pips are earned cumulatively from matches, the player grade increases. Performance is measured based on how effective survivors and killers can complete their in-game objectives. These elements result in a gameplay experience that mirrors the cat and mouse

dynamic of horror movies, with killers seeking to massacre the entire group of survivors who try to hide and keep each other alive so they can complete objectives and escape.


*Figure 1: The pre-game match screen and my loadout for the survivor Steve Harrington.*

As an online multiplayer game, we can view *Dead by Daylight* as a process of assemblage, an interconnected story that goes beyond the match-by-match game experience (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 117; Paul, 2018, p. 67; Taylor, 2009, p. 332). There is an overarching narrative in *Dead by Daylight*, however, it plays a background role during matches and only manifests as character descriptions and unlockable content in-game. DbD's story justifies how these characters from different worlds came into contact and offers background information on each character. There are narrative aspects of the game that are unlockable in the Archives when players complete specific challenges, however they do not directly affect how each match is played. Challenges refer to goals that are situated on a progression track, each challenge must be completed in-game,

and they award players with auric cells, bloodpoints, and sometimes cosmetics to customize the look of in-game avatars. The core of the game is the way that players develop mastery over each position and character to rise in player rankings, repeating the same tasks and objectives every match, developing in-game characters, and collecting rewards (See Figure 2).

When playing alone, each match of *Dead by Daylight* will involve new groupings of players. This structure allows players to inhabit and interact with different characters and maps in seemingly endless combinations, a process which continues to develop as Behaviour releases updates and new content for the game. The expectations of the game text paired with its interactive potential contributes to how players experience matches, what Souvik Mukerjee describes as the ephemeral nature of the game (2015, p.106). These experiences are co-creative both between player and developer, and between players within each match. The focus of this chapter is to highlight the narrative potential that emerges from these entanglements, focusing mainly on interactions between players.


*Figure 2: The endgame screen and the grading system for survivors.*

The relationship between player and developer manifests primarily in *Dead by Daylight's* meritocratic elements, which set the tone for player interaction within each game. Outlining the role of the meritocratic elements in-game is helpful to understand how transgression can take shape. For online multiplayer games, these elements can feed problematic behaviour (Paul, 2018, p.63). This behaviour disproportionately targets players from marginalized communities and is a common occurrence in these games that can be taken to extremes (Nakamura, 2013; Paul, 2018). Primarily, meritocratic elements in game manifest as systems that reward competitive play, and create the illusion that players are on the same playing field (Paul, 2018). *Dead by Daylight* is no different as it incentivizes players to perform mastery over their position and earn high grades using currency and rank systems to track their overall progress. Player level and role grades are

ways for players to gauge their abilities, with the addition of the Archives and the Rift that reward continuous play and the completion of skill-related challenges.

There are two progression systems that are particularly important: player level and role grades. Player level is cumulative level of the player from their total time with the game, players receive iridescent shards when they level-up as currency to unlock unique perks and cosmetics. Role grades are especially important as they are attributed to each role and reset on the 13th of each month. These grades reveal how much time players have committed during each month period. Furthermore, players will receive an amount of bloodpoints based on their rank. The game's in-game currency is the primary resource used to develop characters and unlock shared perks between characters of the same role. However, the asymmetrical composition of the game as well as the pip system makes this process challenging and players often debate about whether the game's elements benefit the position of survivor or killer players. These debates are an important part of online multiplayer games, often imbalances occur as the game is updated and it therefore becomes paramount to attempt to keep things mechanically fair through their updates.

Online multiplayer games like *Dead by Daylight* will add more content and characters as time goes on, these additions undoubtedly will change the game. Balancing refers to altering items, perks, and abilities so they do not overpower games, this is especially important with the introduction of new abilities. "Balancing" is a game element that which highlights the assemblage quality of the game and is a continuous process that involves input from player communities. This is because players will engage in a process of metagaming to discuss play strategies that are optimal for success, which include the use of specific characters and abilities (Paul, 2018, p.95). These discussions can reveal abilities and characters that are favorable or that drastically affect the process of a game. This process is co-creative in the way that player

feedback can influence production practices, where play strategies evolve and are shared between players which can then inform future developments for the game (Mukherjee, 2015, p.153). Balancing is a production practice that maintains what Christopher Paul describes as the "illusion of fairness" that players buy into as they compete in each match (2018, p. 99). The structure of the game is therefore constantly evolving because of this developer/player relationship. As new characters and abilities are added to the game, player feedback becomes paramount.

Metagaming is an essential part of online multiplayer games, as "metas" change, with perks and characters falling in and out of favor during updates. However, metagaming as a process encompasses various ways to interact with game text beyond its meritocratic elements. Consider the work of Stephanie Bolluck and Patrick LeMieux in their book *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames,* where they describe metagaming as, "[Attempting] to uncover alternate histories of play defined not by code, commerce, and computation but by the diverse practices and material discontinuities that emerge between the human experience of playing videogames and their nonhuman operations." (2017, p.4). Their work on metagaming goes beyond considering ways for players to achieve victory but rather a process of play that encompasses various forms of interaction in, out, and around games. Metagaming is a communal practice that can be found in channels that exist outside of the game. As an online multiplayer game, paratextual practices are instrumental to the metagaming process in the way that players are in conversation with each other and share their experiences. We can consider the earlier example of whether the game benefits survivors or killers as a metagaming process that considers the effectiveness of Behaviour's balancing. These conversations can go beyond game mechanics and include other content such as skins and

characters. These factors are important for how players represent themselves and maneuver the game space. These considerations will be explored later in this chapter to illuminate opportunities for queer play in-game. *Dead by Daylight*, as with many online games, evolves and changes quite rapidly whether from large-scale updates to temporary in-game elements and thus metagaming becomes a necessary practice.

Temporary in-game elements are visible ways that game developers prompt engagement from their players as it often adds new ways to experience the game space. Behaviour will host events that provide temporary in-game content such as: event-specific tomes, objectives, and cosmetics that players can progress through and earn for a limited time. Reoccurring events are seasonal and include Halloween, Bone Chill (winter event), Chinese New Year, and the game's Anniversary. During these events the Trial Grounds change, introducing new aesthetic choices to match the season, items, and mechanics. For example, during the 2022-2023 Bone Chill event, inflatable snowmen were introduced to the Trial Grounds allowing players to jump in and traverse the space in costume. The snowmen were pitched as a way for survivors to hide and for killers to sneak around as they muffled the terror radius[3]. Players can also high-five each other in the snowman costume which triggers a frost effect (See Figure 3). During one of my bouts as killer I caught several snowmen hiding out in the basement high fiving each other repeatedly. I joined their impromptu holiday party for a moment, before killing them all. Like the Bone Chill event, some events include community challenges that introduce objectives to be completed as a collective player base. These moments open possibilities for players to work together to complete challenges and collect the in-game rewards exclusive for the event period.

[3] The terror radius is an audio cue of a heartbeat that survivors hear when a killer is at a certain distance from a survivor. The closer the killer is, the louder the heartbeat.


*Figure 3: Two snowmen high fiving in the basement during the Bone Chill event, while I play the killer, The Trickster.*

*Dead by Daylight's* story is established such that these aspects of development and celebration are a diegetic part of the game world. The primary focus of both the game and this project are the ways these elements contribute to player experience. Rules and expectations are both starting points for these discussions, as explored by Mukherjee, they are part of the community play practice (2015, p. 93). Regarding the materiality of the game, I draw from Hayles' definition of a hypertext to understand online multiplayer games as a process rather than an object (2004, p.79). Recognizing the varying shapes that *DbD* takes with each update from Behaviour contributes to its narrative possibilities. These narrative possibilities are developed by the decisions players make in-game as they attempt to complete objectives, or not.

In-game decisions during a match of *Dead by Daylight* are what give each match their narrative shape. Mechanically DbD invites players to form communal interpretations of the game

space and player intentions. As players play with and master the affordances of the game, they slowly develop an in-depth understand of the game and its expectations, this is where metagame knowledge forms (Bolluk et LeMieux, 2017). This metagame can be considered a type of literacy of the game text that informs player interpretations of the actions their fellow players make. This can include which actions are acceptable and not acceptable in the game space which helps foreground discussions of toxic actions in-game. Furthermore, this process can prompt players to look beyond the expected process of the game and inform transgressive play strategies. Viewing this process within a narrative framework recognizes that there are reoccurring elements that players engage with during play. When we consider queer possibilities, every match in DbD allows players to renegotiate the affordances of the game text, and thus the narrative of the game. Players can then create opportunities for alternative forms of being and non-normative desires to emerge in each match.

## Into the Fog: Movement and Performance

*Dead by Daylight's* asymmetrical composition offers two different ways to experience that game as both killer and survivor, and these positions offer diverse ways for players to be in conversation with each other. With no timer or NPC characters (e.g., lane minions) to urge the game forward, DbD opens possibilities for renegotiation of the play space. An important element of this process is time which is measured by players primarily through chases. Killers spend most of the match patrolling generators and chasing down survivors to eventually catch them to be put on hooks. During chases, survivors will either attempt to escape or occupy the killer long enough for their teammates to complete objectives (See Figure 4). Players must read each other's movements to outmaneuver the other, using their perks and abilities as best they can. These chases are meant to be a marker for progression, the length of chases indicates how efficient the

killer is (or isn't) at capturing survivors. Short chases are often marked by killer quickly capturing survivors or losing their prey, while longer chases often mean that survivors are successfully occupying the killer. Furthermore, this exchange invites players to use their avatars to engage in a type of non-verbal dialogue. This dialogue makes use of the varying mechanics unique to each position. For example, survivors can bring down pallets and vault through windows to escape the killer who needs to anticipate these actions and act accordingly. Players spend the entire game maneuvering around each other, learning each others' strategies as they go, and each role demands different expectations in this regard.


*Figure 4: While playing as Steve Harrington I get stuck at wooden box during a chase with Pyramid Head.*

Killers are the main antagonist of each match; bound to do the Entity's bidding they are armed with map awareness and unique abilities to apply pressure to survivors. Killers maneuver the map via a first-person perspective and can see available hooks and generators to plan out

their strategy of attack (See Figure 5). When survivors fail a skill check, complete a generator, unhook an ally, cleanse a hex totem, or perform a “rush action” such as vaulting or entering and exiting lockers at fast speed, killers are given visual cues to help them find the survivors and continue to apply pressure.


*Figure 5: Stalking a survivor who is completing a generator while playing the Wraith, other generators are highlighted in red in the background.*

Killers have two primary modes of attack called an M1 and M2 ability attached to the player’s left and right mouse button respectively (if playing on mouse and keyboard). M1 is a basic slash available to all killers that damages survivors and can be charged to leap forward to clear distances. The M2 ability is unique to each killer ranging from projectiles, movement abilities, summoning abilities, stealth abilities, and setting up traps. Playing a killer requires use of map awareness and their unique abilities to succeed. Killers can see survivors and their items

in the pre-game lobby, but survivors are unable to see the killer until they encounter them in-game.

Survivors are a direct contrast to the role of the killer, with little to no map awareness (unless certain perks are equipped), survivors see the map via a third person perspective (See Figure 6). Unlike the killer who uses a special ability, survivors have access to a variety of items that they can use to traverse the Trial Grounds and complete their objectives (e.g., flashlights, medkits, toolboxes). Furthermore, survivors can interact with various facets of the game's environment: vaulting over windows, taking down pallets, cleansing and blessing totems, opening boxes for items. Like the game cues available to the killers, survivors can see the status of their fellow teammates on their user interface. This can tell players if their teammates are being chased, if they're downed or on a hook, and if they've died (via hook or by the killer's own hand) or escaped. Recently Behaviour has also added an additional feature that allows survivors to see the actions their teammates are engaged in. Arguably the most important resource that a survivor has in the Trial Grounds are their fellow survivors, as they rely on each other to complete their task.


*Figure 6: Fleeing through the exit gates away from an angry Bubba. The HUD on the left shows one teammate "downed."*

The affordances offered by these two roles offer variations for how players experience the game's environment. Despite being on two opposing sides, both killer and survivor are responsible for each other's experiences. Without a non-player entity to propel the game forward or an in-game timer to increase tension, the game's pace is entirely player-directed. Consequently, communicating intention becomes important.

*Dead by Daylight* has no built in communication options for matches, such as an in-game chat or voice channels. Survivor players can use third-party software to communicate if they choose to "Survive with Friends", a practice also known as SWFing. However, the lack of communication is meant to level the playing field in-game, as survivors can track the killer's movements better and set up counterplays if they receive quick information from their teammates. Without third party communication, survivors can only communicate to each other

via gestures: crouching, pointing and a “come-here” movement. Each of these gestures can be used in diverse ways to communicate intentions not just to fellow survivors but to killers as well (See Figure 7). Killers are not afforded similar methods of communication, rather their position as the main antagonist allows more control over the game space.

DbD does employ atmospheric horror, however the main source of horror in each match naturally comes from the killer. From a gameplay perspective if a killer underperforms or cannot match the skill level of the survivor then it saps the game of its horror. Killers can directly affect the game experience for survivors if they forgo their tasks or “focus” on one survivor to make the match difficult for that player. Similarly, survivors can use their gestures to taunt killers or use their items to focus on distracting the killer instead of completing their objectives. Using and interpreting player gestures becomes an integral part of the play experience, and it affirms or shakes up the expectations for how a match should go. Reading gestures can be an extremely ambiguous process however and it heavily impacts the pace of the game. These moments allow for a renegotiation of the space reshaping the narrative quality of the match.


*Figure 7: Ada Wong crouching in front of me as the game ends before she heads out the gate with her fellow survivors.*

On my 24th game during the analysis period, I played as Mikaela, attempting to complete a challenge to unlock a part of her lore. The game was against a formidable player using the Hillbilly killer and, by chance, I was the last remaining survivor. In the middle of a chase that would decide the match, I realized that all hope was lost, and I stopped moving to signal that I accepted my defeat. The killer decided to not kill me immediately but rather moved to a generator and hit it, gesturing me to complete it. Even as I pointed to hooks and crouched in front of him, asking him to hook me, they refused. The Hillbilly watched me fix generators and open the exit gate before he downed me and hooked me (See Figure 8 & 9). Both of us were fulfilling objectives to maximize our bloodpoints together rather than acquiring them via competition. This process is called "farming," where both sides allow the other to complete actions that generate bloodpoints without (yet) triggering a win state to maximise the amount earned in that round.

Actions like this can go on indefinitely almost stopping time in the match. The act of farming gets mixed reactions from players especially when considered the proper etiquette to its proposition. However, the shift from “killing and surviving” to “farming” is important: it forgoes the meritocratic process of winning the game to become a communal action.


*Figure 8: The Hillbilly watching me (Mikaela) complete a generator.*


*Figure 9: The Hillbilly revving their chainsaw for encouragement to complete generators.*

Farming is one of many ways players can engage in transgressive play practices and open possibilities for queerer experiences. The act of "farming" can be considered an oppositional affordance of the game by exploiting the indefinite time of each match and repurposing the game's mechanics (Shaw, 2017, p.598). In recognition of my concession of the match by halting my movement mid-chase, the Hillbilly decided to help me farm, "ending" the competitive aspect of the game and allowing me more bloodpoints. Moving away from the violent process of the game to "farm" is transgressive to the implied expectations of the game space (Aarseth, 2014). It also pushes against hegemonic play structures that prioritize meritocracy as a game experience (Fron et al., 2007; Paul, 2018). This is not necessarily the type of game people want, in fact any action of "stopping" can be dismissed entirely or even abused by other players. Gauging when

and how these actions are received is part of a strategy of interpretation discussed by players outside of the game.

Mechanics can also be used conversely to hurt other players. In the way that the game can be "stopped", players also have ability to stop the game for other players. For example, killers could "tunnel", focusing on one player to remove them from the game early, an especially upsetting outcome for anyone SWFing. Killers could also "hook camp" which is when the killer guards a hooked survivor making it difficult for their teammates to help them escape. This is another form of renegotiation that seeks to create a negative experience for one player. This strategy is not one that is promoted to lead to success as it allows the other players to complete objectives. The strategy is viewed widely as unsportsmanlike and meant to hurt a particular player (Bonenfant. 2020). The downside to a game that is primarily player driven are the ways that toxic practices can be more effective in taking away from a player experience, and it can be done from either side.

During one match while playing the killer, the Huntress, I found the game to be rather odd. Instead of hiding from me and focusing on generators the group of survivors swarmed around me. I would down one and then get blinded by their teammates, or I would hook one only to watch them be unhooked moments later, unphased by any retaliation I could muster. I would be blinded by flashlights or be blocked from hooks only to have them be sabotaged[4]. The aggression that I felt in that game was unlike any I'd experienced before. It wasn't until the end of the game when I saw their perks that I realized that these players capitalized on perks that would make hooking them or picking them up difficult. The aggressive tactic did work as one

[4] Sabotaging is an action done by survivors with a toolbox; Survivors can sabotage hooks making them unusable for a few seconds.

survivor managed to escape, and maybe that was the goal[5]. Perhaps this group saw victory as being able to be aggressive while still having one member escape. This could be a case of Caillois', "nihilist" who throws away the rules and the conventions of the game as meaningless (2001, p.7). We could also consider this is as case of Huizinga's "spoilsport" (1995). The context of "spoilsport" behaviour is important, in my experience I felt the actions to be unwarranted but that's not always the case.

The player-driven progression of *Dead by Daylight*'s game is also one that lends itself to very toxic behaviour if we consider how players can be targeted and harassed in game. The greatest strength of the game that allows for non-verbal communication also allows for difficult play experiences should the skill levels of the players be unbalanced. When we consider the prevalence of toxic behaviours in online games, it's important to consider player actions that push against these behaviours. This can include using the actions above, when we consider the work of Kishonna Gray and Bo Ruberg, "toxic" or "spoilsport" behaviours can actively disrupt hegemonic structures in game (2013, 2019). It with these considerations that we can understand the value of transgressive play strategies, such as queer play. Queer play strategies manifest in the ways that players actively renegotiate the space to include their desired experiences even if it conflicts the expected game process. Furthermore, these play strategies can directly oppose the toxic gaming culture that has become associated with online multiplayer games (Paul, 2018).

By exploring alternative player desires as trajectories for queerer play, we can observe the ways that meritocratic game elements are measured in game. *Dead by Daylight*'s lack of explicit in-game success allows for players to form their own goals during play. When players finish a

[5] Even if players do not complete generators or power the exit gates, players can escape via the "hatch" a small trap-door exit that reveals itself in a random part of the Trial Grounds, if only one survivor is remaining.

match, there is no screen indicating whether they've won or lost. Rather players are given an indicator of their performance and still receive bloodpoints regardless of how the match ends. This means that players can have varying ideas of what success or failure means to them. For example, if a player is a survivor and they die on the hook to ensure the rest of their team escapes that could feel like a success. Or if a killer manages to sacrifice a particularly troublesome survivor, even if the other survivors escape, that can feel like a success. If we specifically consider the killer's position, the act of killing an entire team can be so difficult that it feels more like an achievement than an expected goal of the game. Online multiplayer games ask players to push to complete specific goals, therefore the ways these goals manifest for players allows them explore forms of desire within the game. In many ways matches are spaces where intention, expectation, and the desires of players are in discourse with each other. These elements can either come together, or clash, and that is what creates the narrative experiences in game. These narratives are concretized by the literacy that players develop as they experience each match, it is the answer to the question: what game are we going to play? *Dead by Daylight's* emphasis on time, movement, gesture, and interpretation allow for co-creative play experiences that reveal possibilities for queer alternative forms of being.

## Hooks and Generators: Gestures and Queer(er) Narratives

The mechanics and objectives that are involved in the game and its potentials for subversion are important to think about when discussing queer play possibilities. Furthermore, the interplay between developer and player and between players that create the game experience in each match add another layer of complexity to these interactions. Scholarship on queer play observes game texts as possibility spaces that allow for such practices to come forward. These strategies happen at the boundaries of the text in the way they go against expected processes (Ruberg,

2019, p. 159; Harper et al, 2018, p.5). This is primarily because games either do not include possibilities for queer narratives or the in-game narratives are not representative of nuanced queer experiences. Online multiplayers like *Dead by Daylight* have similar issues, they rarely give room for queerer experiences and queer play strategies as the game is tunnel visioned into the completion of specific goals.

Even when a character is canonically queer in-game that does not mean that their sexuality has an impact or presence in the process of match. For example, David King, one of the game's original characters, was recently revealed to be a gay man by Behaviour on their social media. This is a welcomed addition to the game, being the first openly queer character, whose sexuality is explored as part of the Archives. However, David King's sexuality is not referenced or engaged with during matches and may be missed entirely in game if it's not unlocked by a player in the Archives. Some online multiplayer games employ references to a player's sexuality in-game such as *Apex Legends* (2019), a game praised for its roster of LGBTQ+ characters, where some characters have voice lines that reference their sexuality. Although the queerness of a character may not be directly engaged with in-game that doesn't mean that queer play strategies are unable to be enacted in space. As an online multiplayer game, it's important to explore the elements and mechanics than can be co-opted and queered by players.

*Dead by Daylight*'s potentially endless time space works as a type of "queer game mechanic" (Ruberg, 2022). Ruberg describes queer game mechanics as, "interactive elements of games, either digital or analog, that resonate with non-heteronormative experiences of sexuality or gender." (2022, p.108). In their work, "Hungry Holes and Insatiable Balls", they explore the queer game mechanics that highlight how the act of consumption is read and interpreted as a queerer experience in *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) and *Donut County* (Annapurna

Interactive, 2018) (2022). Taking inspiration from the work of Berlant and Probyn, Ruberg explores the relationship between sex and eating as a process in which surfaces come into contact with other surfaces, exploring the intimacy of the actions of consumption in both games. I argue that a similar intimacy develops between players in *Dead by Daylight*, and farming provides a salient example of this process.

The strategy of "farming" shifts the progression of a *Dead by Daylight* game and resonates as a queer(er) experience in the way it subverts the hegemonic ideals of progression and production. Drawing from the work of Jack Halberstam, we can understand the ability for players to renegotiate the indefinite time of the game as failure to conform to its system (2011, p.89). Farming is a practice that engages with an oppositional affordance of the game, that therefore pushes the boundary of its system. It is an action that must be completed by both killer and survivor and requires a moment of recognition between players. In doing so players cultivate a type of intimacy and closeness that develops in the stalled time of the game.

Regarding intimacy, "farming" not only forgoes the meritocratic process of game, but it also establishes contact between players in game and their avatars. One way to farm is with generator progression. Survivors must commit a specific amount of time to fixing generators, the time to complete this action depends on the perks being used and how many survivors are working on the same generator. Killers are meant to hit generators to remove the progress done by survivors which puts the generator into a state of regression where it slowly loses progress until a survivor returns to complete it. To "farm" this process one or more survivors will begin to work on a generator then stop and allow the killer to hit it. Killers cannot hit generators if a survivor is actively working on it and survivors can be easily picked up by killers if they're grabbed from a generator. Therefore, this action involves both patience and trust from both sides.

The gestures that are involved are simple: the killer can use their M1 movement to motion to a generator or survivors can point at the generators to communicate their intention. These moves can allow players to continue to keep track of each other during this process. Killers can even use their M1 to motion to a generator to be done by a survivor, who can then step back to give space allowing the killer to step forward to kick it. In this process the killer is stuck in this moment, doing nothing while survivors must commit to the same tedious task. What is important is the way these bodies allow space for each other, each party inches closer to each other until there is a point of comfortability that allows for "farming" to begin.

This intimate connection becomes even more apparent when considering another farming strategy: downing and healing survivors. In DbD*,* before survivors are dead, they must go through three different health states: each survivor starts off in the healed state, then once hit by a killer they are "injured", if they are hit another time they are "downed". Once a survivor is downed, the killer can pick them up and carry them to a hook to place them on. When being picked up a survivor can attempt to wiggle out of a killer's grasp and if they're successful they will be able to run away in the injured state. During this process the killer gains points for each successful state that they put survivors through, and survivors gain points for healing each other and escaping. To farm for points players can essentially loop this process by injuring, downing, then picking up a survivor only to have them wiggle out and start the process again. If there are other survivors involved, then they can heal each other and even unhook each other (for a maximum of twice per survivor before triggering a death state). Like generator progression, this process requires a lot of trust as survivors are at risk of dying at any point in this process should the killer decide to follow through on hooking and killing a survivor.

The added layer to this practice is the closeness that happens between the virtual bodies of survivors and killers. Going back to Ruberg's work, we can understand this as a situation where surfaces come into contact with other surfaces (2020). The virtual bodies are inflicting consensual harm on each other for mutual benefit and there is a trust involved that must be affirmed during this process. Furthermore, the audiovisual elements of the game also add to this experience, considering that survivors get picked up and carried by the killer and when survivors are injured, the in-game avatars exclaim with moans of pain (see Figure 10). The closeness followed by the moans exhibit almost a sexual nature to the interaction. In one of my game sessions, a fellow survivor and I were downed by a killer and were placed on top of each other. In that moment I was playing a shirtless Vittorio and as a player I paused for a moment as the avatars moved and moaned on top of each other, neither of us crawling away from each other and waiting to be picked up by the killer. These moments of closeness are important to emphasize the ways that intimacy can develop. Paired with the ambiguous nature of the game and lack of explicit in-game communication, these moments prompt queerer interpretations of the text.


*Figure 10: Me as Steve Harrington being picked up by a Pyramid Head.*

Returning to the work of Krobova et al and Adrienne Shaw, in-game characters and avatars are often deliberate choices that resonate with the player and can offer avenues for queer representations (2015; 2015). If we consider strategies of imaginative play and stylized performance observed by Krobova et al., players can use cosmetic game elements to support queerer narratives. Stylized performance can encompass character selection and customization options such as: skins, usernames, and charms. For example, I often play as Vittorio in his shirtless skin because I find it to be very attractive, and I also play Mikaela because she is a witch and that resonates with my experiences growing up watching shows like *Charmed* (1998-2006) and seeing queer witches on *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Since perks can be shared amongst all survivor characters, character selection is more cosmetic than mechanically important. Charms are also another avenue for performance. Pride charms, for example, are a

very explicit form queer identification and they can used to show support. Recently Behaviour has added new pride flag charms to incorporate more queer identities. Usernames could also be an avenue to denote a specific gender or sexual identity to fellow player. When observing these player decisions especially imaginative play, we must consider how characters are interpreted by players, with one way to observe those interpretations found through fan-generated content (Sherlock, 2013). This is another reason why exploring fan-created content is important when discussing possible player practices and queerer interpretations. Although there are explicit elements that allow for queer performance such as charms and usernames, there are also important nuances to explore between player interactions. Going back to the earlier subject of metagaming, and the work of Adrienne Shaw, representation and queer play strategies can be informed by experiences outside of the game text and therefore resonate with players (Shaw, 2015).

We can consider the work of Munoz, who notes the power and the importance of gestures that invite communication and reception (2017). Munoz's work recounts that gestures are important not only in the way they feel liberating when enacted but in how those gestures resonate with viewers (2017). I believe that this translates into digital spaces not only in the ways player move but how they represent themselves. These practices are recognizable because they are informed by community paratexts. In many ways these practices are not just personal and isolated moments, but rather they echo communal sentiments. This is a process that I would like to call the queer metagame. Inspired by the meritocratic processes of players in online multiplayer games, a queer metagame functions in a similar yet "queer-er" way. To recap, A queer meta-game is not a guide on the correct ways to be queer but is rather a recognition of transgressive possibility, an applicable reading strategy. This process extends queer play beyond

the individual acts of play and into online community spaces. When these moments are documented and shared it sparks discourse for how DbD can be experienced. In this vein we can consider practices such as modding and streaming as an important avenue for queerer narratives. Consider the work of Nathan Thompson, who observes the use of erotic modding to alter the space and characters in a game as a form of queer empowerment (2018). Although modding is outside the scope of this project, it still points to avenues for players to reimagine the game space and share those experiences on other platforms. When we consider what queer metagaming means for queer play possibilities in online multiplayer games, there's a vast amount of content that can explored (Bolluck, 2017). Drawing from Munoz's gestures or sara ahmed's "used paths", I argue that there are reoccurring practices, gestures, and interpretations that are recognizable by communities at large because they tap into a fundamental experience shared by people (2019, 2019). Analysis of paratexts is important in the ways it captures these moments and informs in-game practices. Paratexts can extend narrative or become texts within themselves, and player generated content offers necessary perspectives on the impact and reach of queer play practices (Mukerjee, 2015; Consalvo, 2017).

## The Exit Gates: Expanding Player Interpretation

DbD involves an in-depth understanding of the game text that includes paratextual practice to not only glean the ambiguous actions by players but to unpack community sentiments. This process was observed by Bonenfant et al. in their analysis on DbD Reddit forums that highlight how "toxic" actions are perceived by players (2020). In their study, Bonenfant et al. point to factors such as ambiguous conceptualization of victory, task repetition, and rigidity of norms as primary sources for the game's toxicity (2020). These are common meritocratic tropes that feed into the need to develop skill (Paul, 2018). The same elements that

can allow for unique interactive moments are also the ones that can evoke frustrating and toxic situations. Recognizing that each *Dead by Daylight* match is an ever-shifting agreement between players means that a type of etiquette forms while playing the game (Bonenfant et al., 2020). DbD player etiquette comes from a diverse list of factors that are discussed on online platforms. While the game's mechanics can be appropriated to engage non-normative actions as described above, they can also be engaged by players to create toxic environments. Behaviour has recognized these factors and has made public statements declaring their intent for more inclusive gaming practices. They have also made changes to perks and have announced new game features and an improved system for reporting players. Although production is helpful in recognizing the needs of a player base, it does not remove the prevalent issues that remain in gaming culture. These sentiments can be seen within paratextual media, players have long since been documenting their experiences with games, especially toxic experiences (Nakamura, 2013). The same can be said for queerer experiences which can transgress the expectations of the game's system and player culture.

Paratextual practices offer insight into the expectations and intentions of players as well as new ways to experience the game text. From a narrative perspective, the expectations of the game as seen from fan documented material can therefore point to the kinds of stories players tell through play. Paratext is a part of storytelling, and academic work has pointed to its role and more than an extension of the main text but rather assuming a life of its own (Consalvo, 2017, p.178 Mukerjee, 2015, p.104). Those experiences are then documented and discussed outside of the game text offering new interpretations of the text.

The process of recognizing the relationship between the in-game and paratextual considerations are what Ruberg describes as an "assemblage of queer meaning" (2022, p.117).

Adapted from the work of T.L. Taylor, assemblages of queer meaning include, “mechanics and representational elements, along with related considerations of the games’ receptions” (2022, p.117). *Dead by Daylight* is ripe with queer potential in the way it cultivates an intimate experience based on the desires of the players. These desires can either align or collide during the process of killing and surviving, as we answer the question of how and why. This negotiation of desires is what fosters queer possibility spaces. Queer play involves recognizing and providing spaces to explore non-normative desire, and we can consider the act of killing in *Dead by Daylight* as an intimate process (see Figure 11) (Ruberg, 2019, p.11). Desire plays out in the cat-and-mouse moments, there is pleasure in the chase. However, if that process does not meet the expectations of the player, then it could lead to frustration, and for some that may be the intent. Players will naturally engage in the meritocratic aspect of *Dead by Daylight,* but there is so much potential to transgress those expectations.


*Figure 11: Ghostface straddles me during his mori as he lands the finishing blow.*

The use of game mechanics and customization options can offer insight to players about who is occupying the game space and whether they would be receptive to communications in game. As it will be explored in the following chapter, queer players often "claim" characters and costumes as queer coded, connected them to their own experiences; this would be a form of imaginative play. These in-game performances will not automatically promote forms of non-normative play however like the Proudmore server and Goldshire in *World of Warcraft*, these actions carve out spaces that invite queer experiences (Sherlock, 2013). For example, I loaded into a *Dead by Daylight* game by myself as a shirtless Vittorio and doing so prompted two of my teammates to change their characters to match (see Figure 12). It's also important to note their names referred to positive feelings about men's chests. I unfortunately don't have the chats captured from this moment, but it was notable to get such an interaction from strangers. One of

my teammates called this game “blessed” for its representation of shirtless men. I felt very seen and comfortable in that moment and the game that followed was very enjoyable. Whether staring at the chiseled abs of Vittorio or wearing a flag with pride, DbD players can find ways to reappropriate these elements for their own experiences or to create community. These are starting points for discussion, that through paratext, can create a new type of literacy for the game. This literacy can encourage player interactions that expand the isolated experience of play into one informed by community.


*Figure 12: A DbD lobby in which players including myself are playing as shirtless or partly shirtless men.*

## Back to the Campfire: A Conclusion

As an online multiplayer game, *Dead by Daylight* invites players to create narratives via their play experiences through an intimate co-creative process. Its main narrative structure sets the scene for an interconnected story experience that draws from various elements within and outside of the game text. This structure is unique as the experience of the game relies on an understanding between all players for its desired process. Each role offers players different ways to engage with the space and each other. Specifically, players rely on interpreting each other's movements and gestures to recognize intention. This process has the potential to transgress the implied affordances of the game space to varying degrees. The desires of the players have the potential to align, and when they do not, can provoke feelings of frustration. Conversely, we can consider the ways that players occupy space together and how they move with and around each other can develop a form of intimacy in-game. "Farming" is a prime example of the ways players can not only transgress the expected progression of the game but cultivate a closeness to each other in the space. Furthermore, cosmetic elements of the game offer avenues for queerer expression and can contribute to the ways player communicate to each other in-game. Paratext is often used as a guide for these interactions, and thus is where we can document and encourage queer experiences. Research on queer play and paratext have only begun to bridge the gap between both practices and consider them as actions that are in conversation. A queer metagame, like Munoz' gesture analysis, recognizes the elements and interpretations that have endured and resonate with a community at large. Where toxic meritocracy remains an issue in these gaming spaces, queer interpretations can offer new perspectives and possibilities for ways of being in the game space.

# Chapter 3: Rollin with the LGBT – Queer Discourse on TikTok

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the potentials for *Dead by Daylight* to foster queer narratives and desires within its game space. The ambiguous nature of its in-game communication paired with the player's ability to halt the progression of gameplay provides room for these potentials to be explored and negotiated. As an online multiplayer game, we can read these queerer actions as transgressive to the meritocratic expectations of the game text. Furthermore, these actions require - in some part - communication between players to manifest these moments. In recognizing the transgressive potential of *Dead by Daylight*, this chapter will further explore these possibilities by considering the role of queer fan-created content on online platforms. Using TikTok as the platform for my dataset, this analysis explores topics of discussion by queer content creators about *Dead by Daylight*. As a platform, TikTok is populated with short form video content from its users and provides a variety of features that allows for co-creative discourse. This platform is fruitful in the way it provides short gameplay moments by content creators to be analyzed. This project will use the below observations to forward the term, queer metagaming to describe the relationship of fan-generated online content to the main game text. This term is meant to define applicable reading strategies by players that encourage queer transgressive play.

## TikToks by the Numbers

For my discourse analysis, my data collection consisted of 200 TikToks posted between 2021-2023. I collected this sample over the month of May of 2023. This falls just after the release of the Tools of Torment Chapter, a game update that introduced a new killer, The Skull Merchant and two new survivors, Thalia, and Renato Lyra. This period was also before the Pride and Anniversary events and was therefore outside any major game events which could have affected the subject matter viewed, in hopes to capture content of the "everyday." I created a new TikTok account for the purpose of my research and videos were collected using the search function and the hashtags #DbD and #LGBTQ and by scanning the top-most videos that emerged[6]. My usage of those two hashtags were specifically to aim for *Dead by Daylight* content by queer content creators and/or for queer viewers. From my dataset, 37 videos were from 2021, 75 videos were from 2022, and 86 videos were from 2023. Almost all the videos collected were from different content creators, with a few exceptions being from the same creators. There were 2 videos from 2020 but the sample is so small that I consider them outliers. My analysis of this data will be focused on how these TikToks explore queer play strategies and readings of the initial game text. This chapter will reference 40 of the 200 videos I've collected, these videos are ones that I feel exemplify the queer metagame in practice and offer a clearer image of the queer DbD TikTok community. This analysis is focused on both the form that these videos take and recurring subjects that are in discourse with fans. This analysis overviews not only the ways these content creators experience or discuss the game text but also how they use the tools of the platform. One main point of interest from this data collection is the ways that content creators

[6] "Top-most" in this context does not refer to views but rather the top recommended videos for that search option for me.

use their knowledge of both the platform and the game to create their videos. It makes the videos of the moment and highlights the elements that not only resonate with viewers but that are important to content creators. The goal of this analysis is to take a snapshot of a community and the ways players cultivate transgressive play strategies through their experiences.

## Ethical Considerations for Analysis and Screenshots

Although this project does not include interviews and personal testimonies of content creators on TikTok it is still important to consider the ethical considerations of analysing, discussing, and using visual material of the content in this dataset. My analysis operates under the context that these videos and associated profiles are publicly available and can be altered or removed at the user's discretion as outlined in TikTok's privacy policy. It is important to consider steps for protection and care regarding the privacy of these users, and for guidance I have consulted the Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (2019). This is especially important as this project discusses content by and for LGBTQIA2S+ users and considers the above recognition of toxicity in gaming space. The analysis regarding the content of theses videos is specific to the details, information, and visual elements provided in the video and does not reveal user information that they have not already posted publicly, and I made no effort to find personal or private details that were not mentioned in the accompanying video. I reference content creators only by their TikTok usernames which are publicly available, can be modified at any time by the associated user, and only references personal information if the user so chooses.

Regarding screenshots, all screenshots in my project are taken directly from the associated videos. In consideration of protecting users' private information, I have removed screenshots

from videos that are no longer publicly available, provided that the video was removed before the final deposit date of this thesis to Spectrum Concordia: July 11th, 2024.

## Capturing the Ephemeral, Platform Affordances and Communication

Before diving into the content analysis of queer players on TikTok, it is important to recognize how the structure of the platform contributes to its literacy. If we consider the work of Stefanie Duguay and Andre Brock (2018; 2022), users specifically can use platforms to form communities with other users of similar identities through recognizable actions. Brock in their work on Black Twitter describes the online phenomenon of "signifyin' as, "a marker of Black cultural identity operating through articulations and performances of shared referents, and most importantly for the study, a stylistic format of invention and delivery" (2018, p.1017). Drawing from Brock's work, Stefanie Duguay in their book *Personal Not Private* (2022) follows a similar trajectory when examining identity representations of queer women on social media. Duguay explores the process of collective identity work and how these practices form types of digital publics using online performance strategies that resonate with other queer women (2022, p.81-82). Their work introduces the concept of identity modulation which is employed to adjust the "salience" of posts to capture community response (2022, p.83). Importantly these strategies are relevant within their cultural context and for the communities in conversation, that both use and are complicated by the technological affordances of the platform (Duguay, 2022, p. 109).

Brock's Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) is the main framework this project employs when analyzing TikTok content. The CTDA, "combines analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology users in situ"

(2018, p.1013). Brock's CTDA recognizes the was that cultural identity is imbued within technological practice, that these practices resonate and are recognizable to users of similar cultural identity. As an analysis it requires an extensive look into the nature of the technology being observed (i.e. TikTok) and the nuances that pertain to a specific cultural group, for this project it's LGBTQIA2S+ *Dead by Daylight* players (p.1017). What makes the CTDA an apt methodological framework for this thesis is that a, "CTDA is specific to inquiries into computer/digital mediation of discourse, focusing on structure, meaning, interaction, and cultural/social behavior" (p.1017). A CTDA requires extensive knowledge of both the group being observed and a familiarity with the platform being observed. My commitment to conducting a CTDA stems from my positionality as a queer game studies researcher, an avid TikTok user, and a learned player of *Dead by Daylight*. That being said, it's important to recognize both the broadness of the community I'm observing and my own identity as a cis-white masculine presenting individual, which are notable biases and limitations to my practice. My approach in this analysis is not to make major claims about what the queer DbD community is but rather follow the threads of discourse that are connect through the ephemeral moments captured on TikTok despite its narrow scope.

TikTok as a platform is unique in its ability to document the ephemeral experiences of players. Many scholars have documented the communication potential of TikTok as a short form video platform with a variety of content, contributing to both its reach and success (Kaye et. al, 2022). With videos ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes, creators have a lot of wiggle room for the types of videos they share. As a cultural successor to Vine and its original release as the app Musical.ly, TikTok videos are formatted for short narratives and musical compatibility

(Kaye et. al, 2022). Many types of content creators[7] use their accounts to share their work with a larger audience to interact with, tailoring the content to fit the platform's format.

Two of the most well-known tools for TikTok are the "duet"and the "stitch" function which allows users to add onto each others' videos. The additional video appears either side by side with the original or intercutting the video into the original, respectively. Some TikTok videos have become so popular that they create trends, which refers to a style of content that is repeated and recreated by users. For example, a popular trend on TikTok is dance videos, where creators make choreography to popular songs that other creators learn and post their own version. This trend was fostered by the functionality of "sounds" which are audio components that can be attached to videos. Sounds come in a large variety (e.g., music, voice recordings, sound effects) and often originate from the audio of other TikTok videos. Sounds can be attached to any number of videos, when a video uses a sound, they are added to a small archive with every video that has used it. The ability to directly comment and "stitch" creators and the use of sounds encourages user to engage with each other in a co-creative process. Furthermore, there is a layering effect that happens with videos as trends and sounds gain more context with each use.

The audio-visual components of the platform mean that users must be familiar with the various levels of context that are in play within videos. The video in the dataset engages with both the context of the game and of surrounding paratext within the platform. Furthermore, TikTok provides a type of sampling plate for many kinds of video content and forms of engagement with DbD that queer players can document. These videos are threaded together by

[7] My use of content creator in this analysis refers to any user who creates content on the platform.

the collective experiences and contexts to provide queerer interpretations of *Dead by Daylight,* and this is where we see the queer metagame at work, or rather, at play.

Recognizing how audiovisual elements are utilized in each video is important when interpreting its content. As a platform that supports visual media, content creators make specific considerations for what to put in and around frames. First are written sections that accompany each video called descriptions, found at the bottom of the screen, descriptions are used to give further context to the video. This is where you'll find hashtags, which can be used as a classification system for the content to reach specific viewers. Secondly are captions which refer to on-screen text that can be used to title videos, label specific subjects in frame, or caption dialogue. Lastly are sounds, audio components that creators can add to their videos that are visible at the bottom right of the screen. Sounds can also be muted, meaning that the audio component isn't present, but the video will appear in the archive when users search the sound. Sounds have potential to expand the reach of a video and ground them in context for viewers. One element that will not be considered in detail for this dataset is the comment section. Comments are important as they allow viewers to directly interact with creators and their work. Content creators can also use the comment section to respond to viewers and add further information. Some videos are made in direct response to viewer comments, the comment appearing on the screen with the video. However, due to feasibility and scope, comment sections will only be mentioned to provide additional clarity to the videos when necessary. An analysis of the comment section for videogame related TikTok videos is a topic that should be considered for future research.

Within my dataset, how the game is positioned in the content is important for this analysis. In many examples the game is central, however the game is often either referenced or a

backdrop, even without the presence of gameplay, these videos contribute to the threads of context between videos. Regarding this project, the discourse that emerges from TikTok occupies both the game text and the platform. This chapter will examine how players occupy these two spaces and the ways it can be interpreted by an audience. In doing so, we can better understand how queer metagaming contributes to these interpretations as an ever-changing process.

## Reading Queer Signifying Strategies on TikTok

On the map Cold Wind Farms, t0xicgamergirl1 is playing the survivor, Yun-Jin Lee, clad in a green outfit and with her red hair in a bun (Figure 13). She approaches one of the killer's hooks and uses her flashlight to point at the multiple pride flags that adorn it. As she does, a sound plays in the background, "I just wanna say that I am part of the LGBTQ community and this is my best friend Valentina, she's an ally. Talk Valentina!". Around the tail end of that line, the killer, The Oni, clad in a dark minotaur costume sees the survivor's flashlight signaling and approaches the hook. There is a moment of pause from the Oni as they look at the hook before nodding with Yun-Jin in agreement. The sound finishes with a different voice saying, "Ally." The video was posted with the description, "Oni is rolling with the lgbt," a clear reference to the song LGBT by Cupcakke, a popular rap artist known for her catchy and sexually explicit lyrics. During the exchange, captions flash on-screen to denote a conversation between the two.

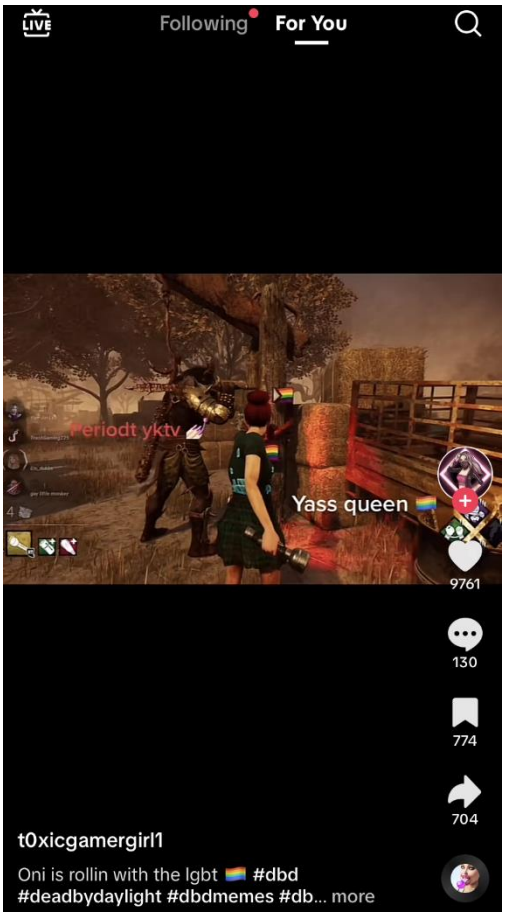


*Figure 13: Yun-Jin Lee and The Oni make contact.*

This 8 second video by t0xicgamergirl1, is a great example of the varying levels of interpretation regarding TikTok content by queer players in DbD. The initial gesture presented by the in-game content is re-interpreted by the content creator within the framework of the TikTok format. Although not all the content viewed in this project employs the same strategies, this video showcases a queerer interpretation of an in-game moment and engages with multiple audio-visual elements to portray it. To ground the framework for interpretation, allow me to analyze this video further.

From observing the game interactions, the gestures can be broken down into a clear order: survivor stops at the hook, survivor flashes the flashlight at the Pride charms, killer stops at the hook, the two nod together in agreement. In this moment the game action pauses, the survivor actively attracts the killer to show their approval of the killer's support for the LGBTQ+ community. The killer recognizes the survivor's positive stance as well and approves ceasing to act in the interest of their position in the game. These actions are further contextualized with the addition of the audio-visual elements from the content creator. Notably the sound that this creator uses to which I will name, "Talk Valentina," positions the two in-game characters in dialogue about allyship. On screen the creator of this video places additional audio cues to reinforce the possible non-verbal communication that is happening between the two players. Interestingly the Oni in this context is classified as an ally in relation to Yu-Jin Lee's queerness. Yun-Jin's queerness is reinforced by the identity of the content creator; in this moment the character is a proxy for the player in this exchange. Using these specific audio-visual choices, t0xicgamergirl1 interweaves their understanding of this moment and the literacy of the platform to document their interpretation.

This video falls into one of three main categories of strategies that I've noted during my data collection which include: Commentary, Gameplay/Performance, and Edits. These categories offer a clearer idea of the position of the game within these documented player moments. Commentary is a more direct category where the content creator is specifically giving their opinion on a subject in video format. This usually refers to the game's development, aesthetic, and updates rather than commenting on specific gameplay moments. Commentary can also be humorous in nature, taking elements of Performance and Edits for the purpose of its intended message. Some videos also do not discuss the game directly but rather have it as a

background. Gameplay/Performance refers to TikTok videos where gameplay of *Dead by Daylight* is the central focus of the content. These videos show in-game moments with content creators' real-time reactions, usually in service to an audience. Edits can often include gameplay, but this category is more focused on the use of video editing techniques to remediate elements of the game to change its context. Edits when used for gameplay videos often punctuate the feel of specific moments with its audio-visual components. Edits can also refer to compilation videos or videos that don't specifically include gameplay. Although I have neatly placed my data into three categories, dissecting the elements of these videos is not so simple as their qualities tend to overlap, drawing elements from each other to fit the platform's expected formatting.

The overlapping of each category adds complexity to the analysis but also points to how the knowledge of the game text and platform is employed. With the above example, at a first watch we could consider this an Edit from its emphasis on the TikTok audio and the captions to narrate the in-game moment. However, we could also consider this a Gameplay/Performance in the way the gameplay moment is so central to the video's focus. For this analysis, I believe these three categories are good guidelines to work with, however these categories naturally begin to bleed into each other. This can be both throughout the video but at times the video can change in its approach partway. What's important is the way that LGBTQIA2S+ *Dead by Daylight* content uses the platform to reimagine the space of the game for a viewer and its linkage to other videos via its reoccurring elements and themes.

## "Did they make them hot as fuck or did we?", Commentary and Callouts

While loading into DbD as the killer, the Dredge, streamer aaron_duke answers a question from a viewer. The streamer's camera is positioned on top of the gameplay in a split screen as he reads the chat. On-screen text subtitles his words as he states that DbD players are very horny theorizing that it's because most of the player base is LGBTQ+ and apart from the asexuals, LGBTQ+ people are known to be very horny. In response a viewer says, "It's DbD's fault for making the killers hot as fuck", to which aaron_duke replies, "Did they make them hot or did we make them hot as fuck" (Figure 14). He takes a moment to stare at the camera after finishing his statement. In this video aaron_duke's gameplay is not the foreground but rather he is unpacking his own experience with the game with his audience. His statement is interesting in the way it addresses the feedback loop of online multiplayer games discussed in the previous chapter. Instead of mechanics or competitive meta, aaron_duke talks about the culture of the game and the ways that Behaviour may be responding with their updates. This is the tension that this project seeks to explore, the ways that queer DBD players reappropriate game elements and its possible effects on the game at large. The use of the term "we" echoes the collective signaling that this section seeks to observe.


*Figure 14: aaron_duke theorizes about the DbD player community.*

As a video in the Commentary category, the specific gameplay moment takes a backseat to explicit recounting of personal experiences, perspectives, and opinions about the game and a variety of other topics. These videos are a more explicit representation of fan discourse surrounding the game and help ground this analysis by exploring recurring subjects of inquiry within this data set. This video from aaron_duke speaks to a theory that many content creators have, that DbD is a game with a massive and vibrant LGBTQ+ player base. Whether or not his theory is simply in jest, this statement resonates both with his viewers and with my own experience of the game as well. The discussions and interpretations of the game that are happening on TikTok point create an image of the game and its fan base highlighting their queer qualities.

Within this category as with the others, there are subtypes that came about during my review of the videos. These subtypes point to other formatting options for player commentary which are utilize for effectiveness and reception on the platform, learning how to parse these formats for TikTok and other platforms is important to the queer metagame. Of the various subtypes of videos in this category there is one whose structure is very indicative of the platform: POVs. POVs -short for point of view- are a style of TikTok video where content creators roleplay situations as a type of simulation for the viewer. POVs in this context range from either taking a first-person view of a situation to immerse the viewer or by having the content creator act as proxy for the viewer. The primary use is to create situations that the viewer can resonate with the subject, which is introduced with the same onscreen titling, "POV you [*Insert Situation Here*]."

In a TikTok by streamer and drag artist chorlie_baba entitled, "POV, you're playing DbD with the LGBT", shows them cosplaying as their interpretation of a queer survivor in the Trial Grounds (see Figure 15). As they look to their fellow survivors (represented in image form) for advice, they reassure chorlie_baba that they'll be fine so long as they don't fall for the killers' antics. Moments later killers emerge and proceed to lure chorlie_baba to their doom by playing on their attraction to them. While this happens an audio of a Silent Hill Cupcakke remix sings, "Smack my ass…suck my pussy." Despite its structure which feels more of a Performance than a Commentary, the POV video is doing a similar thing to aaron-duke's video by commenting on the phenomenon that queer DBD players are often horny and furthermore are attracted to the in-game characters. My classification for this video focuses on its content rather than form and showcases the way that subjects of discourse are formatted for TikTok.

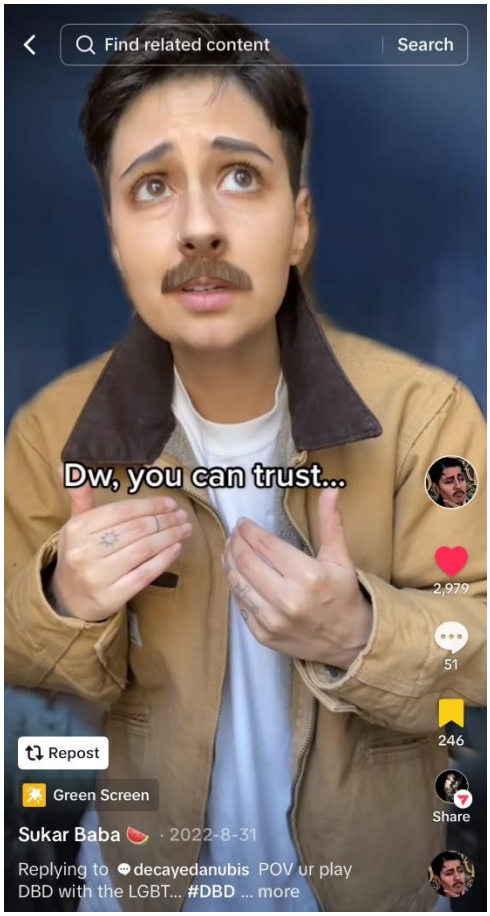


*Figure 15: chorlie_baba reassures his teammates he won't fall for the killers' antics.*

Another video by suki.66 has similar theming as their video is entitled, “POV you’re a gay/bisexual maining[8] Leon in dbd for NO ‘specific reason’.” The video shows the content creator in their room with cat-ear headphones staring intensely at a screen as a soft melody plays. While playing the survivor Leon Kennedy, Leon is injured and begins to moan in pain, all the while suki.66 stares at him (see Figure 16). This combination of elements implies that Leon’s moans sound sexual in nature, and is a quality that they find attractive, which is the reason he is their “main”. This is only further confirmed by the wink the content creator does at the end.

[8] “Maining” refers to a player’s preferred character to play in a videogame. This character is therefore considered that player’s “main”.

Although there is gameplay footage involved, the focus is not on the gameplay rather the reaction of the player to the game's character exploring their attraction towards characters which informed their decision to main them. suki.66 further frames it as a community sentiment about Leon, that his moans are a quality specific to him that makes him desirable. suki.66's use of TikTok shares this experience online to get engagement from other players and to connect with this sentiment. The ways that players use the platform to relate to each other about the game is part of the co-creative process regarding online multiplayer games.

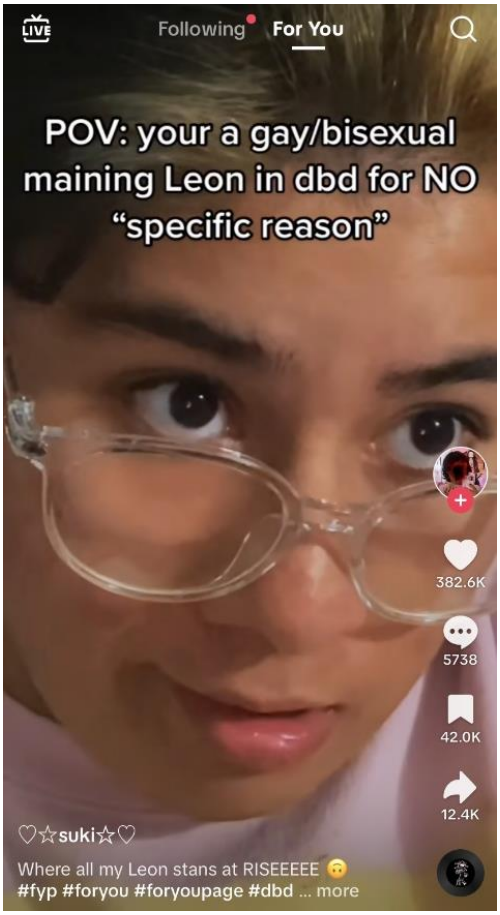


*Figure 16: suki.66 staring intensely at their screen while Leon moans.*

The roleplaying quality of the POV trend continues in other videos that are not explicitly labeled as POV. Some content creators roleplay scenarios in-game or record videos of themselves in cosplay. In their video, mozziesimps cosplays as the Legion (killer), specifically in masculine presenting cosplay. The sound that plays is, “Garfield the cable is out”, taken from the animated Garfield show where Jon is trying to tell his cat Garfield that the reason the TV remote doesn’t work is because the cable is out, needing to repeat the statement several times before Garfield listens. The content creator roleplays the killer character The Legion as if having a mental conversation with themselves about figuring out their sexuality, resubbing the dialogue from the sound (Figure 17). The focus is not a literal retelling of cat attempting to access cable on a TV, but rather mozziesimps is using the repetition in the audio and the back and forth between the two voices to emphasize Legion’s queer realization. This strategy is a common practice on TikTok where creators will use an audio that emphasizes a specific feeling but will reinterpret the content of the dialogue to fit the subject of their video. In a more comedic route, going back to the dance trends of TikTok, a video by v6ness9 makes a joke about the gestures in DbD. The description for this video is, “when you get pushed into the dance circle, but you play DbD,” as they roleplay being pushed into a dance circle and proceeding to do all the main survivor gestures. This video is meant to be ridiculous and is a version of many other dance circle videos that are archived under that sound. This is a commentary about the obsessive nature of DbD players that they would act-out in-game gestures in real life scenarios. Importantly these two videos use two separate popular sounds to express their opinions of the game in a way that is specific to the platform’s audiovisual affordances.


*Figure 17: mozzie roleplaying as the Legion figuring out their sexuality.*

Some content creators use TikTok to promote their other channels or to find other players to play with. For example, Ayteej, in one of their videos promotes their Twitch channel explaining that there is not enough representation of black trans-masc streamers like himself. Content creators, elicobb4 and xdsc4rlet both take to TikTok to share that they can't find other queer people to play *Dead by Daylight* with and are hoping to find potential teammates on the platform. Here we can see the use of the platform to form community by making connections with users who could both be queer and play *Dead by Daylight*. In this way TikTok does the similar work of many text-focused online platforms like Reddit or Twitter focusing on simple

video structure and text. The use of hashtags and carefully curated subject matter is in hopes to extend the reach of these videos to a specific digital public on the platform.

Many videos in this category specifically refer to the game's updates and announcements. While watching a video about a DbD update during their live stream, thejustryan, watches with excitement as Behavior announces the new anti-face camping update. "Face camping" or "hook camping" as explored in the previous chapter is when killers will hook a survivor and stay at the hook to make it difficult for the survivor to be saved, an action deemed to be very toxic amongst players of DbD (Bonenfant et al, 2020). The update which has now since been implemented would allow for players to unhook themselves if a killer was to camp for too long. Thejustryan is happy about the change as he believes it's a persistent problem in game, and praises Behaviour for implementing it. Considering previous research about toxicity and games, updates that may ameliorate these actions to a degree are important.

Conversely, aaron_duke, during a stream, goes over a chapter update of *Dead by Daylight* and shows disappointment for a new skin for the survivor, Feng Min. He states that Behaviour puts too much energy into making skins for this very popular character. The implication is that Behaviour has a habit of focusing specific characters for cosmetics over others who may not be played as regularly, which can be frustrating for people who main those characters. As an interesting side note videos that specifically reference Feng Min in my dataset are often quite negative towards the character and it may be possible that she is not highly favoured among queer players. The emphasis on her cosmetics by Behaviour could be an important recognition of that. Concerning in-game skins, itspebbly shows upset at DbD not having cross-progression and them losing their skins when switching from console to PC. Cross-progression refers to the ability to play the game on one platform and continue that progress on another, this includes the

transfer of cosmetics. Like many platforms, creators on TikTok discuss the games elements and updates that affect their experience with the game using a different and more visual format. This invites interaction from viewers to these channels, building a rapport with the online TikTok community.

Regarding announcements from Behaviour about *Dead by Daylight,* there are two recurring topics of discussion in this category: the inclusion of Pride charms in the game and the reveal of David King's queer sexuality. Many videos demonstrate how players can get the old and newer version of the Pride charm, and at the time this data was collected, newer Pride charms for different identities of the LGBTQ+ community were announced. dragtrashly, a drag performer and streamer, posts a video where she explains the process of getting a pride charm for DbD. iihuggs shows their excitement for Pride month in DbD with a meme edit of a *Stranger Things* (2016) clip. The video uses a scene from the show, where the main character named Eleven wakes up in Hawkins Laboratory and is visibly scared and upset. This meme edits labels Eleven with the caption "killers" and places images of pride flags with the caption "survivors" on the wall that Eleven looks at in the scene. The format is meant to highlight the fear that Eleven is experiencing, to joke about how toxic killer players would be upset about all the Pride charms they would see from survivors (Figure 18). The use of *Stranger Things* could be deliberate considering *Dead by Daylight* has characters and a map based on the *Stranger Things* franchise. The formats are different, but these videos are quite consistent in the excitement for Pride and how that can be showcased in the game space.

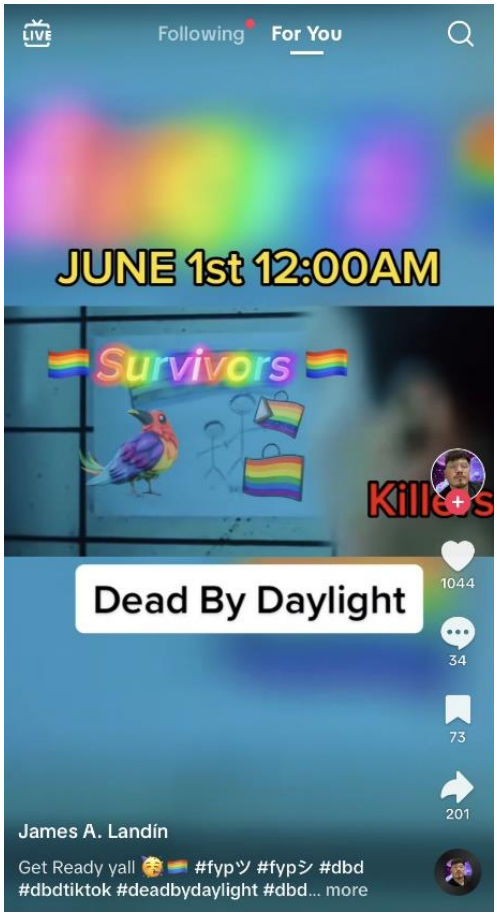


*Figure 18: A Stranger Things edit for the DbD Pride event.*

A similar amount of excitement was also shown for Behaviour's announcement of David King being the first openly gay character in-game. olliedreamer and ayteej both post videos about David King's sexuality and showing the official statement made on Twitter by Behaviour in their videos. Xmidnight_reign_ shows his excitement in a more explicit way, with a video of just the top of his head blocking the bottom half of a shirtless David King on screen. The sound for this video is a voice describing how eager they are to give oral sex to someone, showing their attraction for this character. From the many examples we've seen above, sex and attraction are common points of engagement for fans to connect with characters of the game. David King is one such character, who is not only openly gay but is very muscular, even having cosmetics where he is partially or completely shirtless. Sex and attraction from players are a type of

positive feedback and more importantly are ways for players to engage with elements and details of the game in a non-normative way.

On a more negative note, some videos showcase the dangers of being an outwardly queer player in *Dead by Daylight*. Content creators show concerns for players being targets for toxic behavior if they would play as David King or use the Pride charm. A video by _retroman_ is a short and simple one with an image of David King holding a Pride flag as captions pop on screen. Captions express the concern that players will be targeted for playing David, specifically by killers who would employ tactics like tunneling or hook camping. The video ends with a call to action as _retroman_ asks that if anyone sees a David player getting targeted in-game that they would do their best to help them. This is interesting when we consider the types of movement that is possible in the game space, that there are actionable ways for players to combat toxic behaviours. A different video by dwights_top is a direct response to a homophobic comment about using the pride charm. The video is a cinematic of David King hiding in a locker, there is an abrupt cut as it ends with a hand sensually touching David. An on-screen caption reads, "imagine crying over a pride charm," as a response to a comment that reads, "anyone put g3y charm is loser." The use of the sexual material is meant to mock and provoke the negative commentor while the video simultaneously makes a joke about David King being in the closet. These videos recognize the prevalent issues in online multiplayer games and show interesting ways that players use the TikTok platform to address and push back against anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments.

These videos are true to form in the way that players talk about specific elements of the game that resonate with them. However, the game is not always central in this discussion, some content creators like Hazlanz, making videos about non-game related topics while the game is in

the background. In one video, while in a queue for a match, Hazlanz takes a moment to discuss the types of butts he likes, preferring hairier ones over smooth shaven ones. In another video, Vtuber[9], joshskellingtonvt, gets made fun of by their chat for pronouncing Lady Gaga's first name incorrectly. The video goes through a change in form, starting as a commentary before transforming into a meme edit as they show embarrassment for their mistake. It's all in jest and is another example of how *Dead by Daylight* players don't always make videos relating specifically to the game. The presence of the game is meant to attract a specific audience and the commentary expresses the queerness of the content creator and the space they occupy on the platform. Streamers create community with their viewership, Hazlanz and joshskellingtonvt create content in service of queer viewers, discussing topics and making jokes that resonate with them. The videos explored demonstrate a lot of variation in format for commentary videos which lay the foundation for how to read the videos in the following categories. Many of these videos employ similar topics of discussion that can be further adapted in different styles and forms.

## "Playing in a God-Honoring Way", Gameplay and Performance

"Amori Amen!" is the description for this video as drag performer dragtrashly loads up a game of *Dead by Daylight.* On camera, dragtrashly wears big bright pink hair, a black sequined bodysuit and smoky blue eye makeup as she sets up her character in the lobby. She chooses the Oni in their *Attack on Titan*[10] skin and proceeds to select load-out options that specifically reference blood to, "be bathed in the blood of Jesus Christ." As she plays, hitting and hooking survivors dragtrashly speaks in a southern accent, performing out a satirical sermon as she laughs

[9] VTuber is a term short for virtual Youtuber which are content creators who use virtual avatars to stream content on platforms.
[10] *Attack on Titan or Shingeki no Kyojin* is a japanese manga and animated series. *Dead by Daylight* partnered with the IP in 2022 to create a line of character cosmetics.

and plays to her audience. The Oni having blood powers is a purposeful choice for dragtrashly's theming as she goes, "tunneling for Christ." She prompts the chat's involvement asking them to write, "amen for hits, hallelujah for hooks," and remarks the "satanic," nature of the survivors' attempts to evade her hits (see Figure 19). This 3 minute and 22 second clip recorded from a livestream offers a queerer interpretation of a *Dead by Daylight* game with the performance of a fervorous sermon in contrast to a drag artist on screen. This video is the starting point for how we'll talk about the role of Gameplay/Performance when we consider queerer interpretations of *Dead by Daylight* on TikTok.

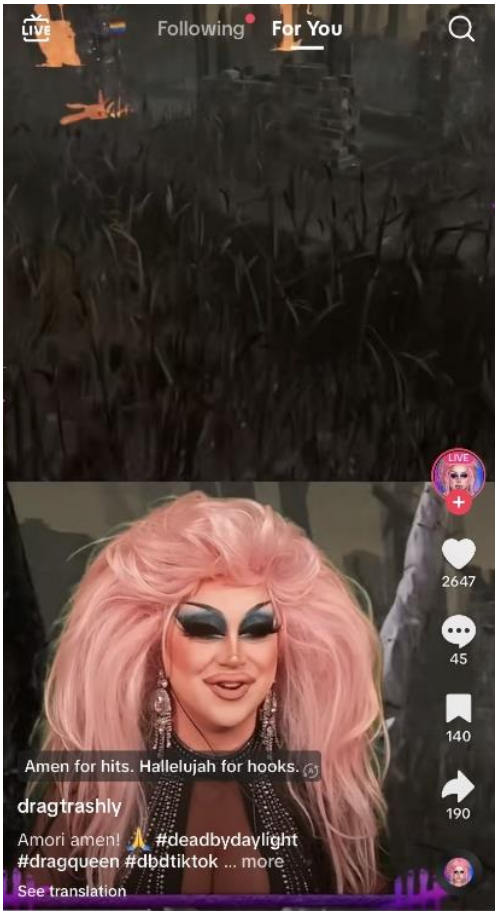


*Figure 19: dragtrashly goes, "tunneling for christ."*

This section covers most of my data set and focuses on the content creator's experience with the game as they're playing it. This category engages with a variety of performances, Twitch streamers represent a majority of the category, with videos that showcase parts of their live streams. These snippets offer insights into the experiences and interpretations of queer players, offering personal in-game moments that are posted online and resonate with their audience. Take for example a clip by ayteej, a black trans-masc streamer who while playing in-game sees a fellow survivor point at a pride charm. They are led by a survivor towards one of the hooks and they take a moment to interpret this interaction and show appreciation for the support. While playing survivor, ihunnysenpai, encounters a similar interaction with someone playing the Gunslinger. The Gunslinger while chasing them, "downs them", then pauses for a moment to look intently at the pride charm on ihunnysenpai's avatar and nodding. Afterwards the Gunslinger points to their own hook in a show of mutual support, the description of the video reads, "we love friendly killers," encouraging the positive action in-game. It's possible that the person playing the Gunslinger is queer themselves and that this moment was meant to form connection between both players. These examples showcase the in-game connections between players, in these two cases specifically, the Pride charm is the inciting element. These connections halt gameplay and are moments of recognition that players in the game support LGBTQ+ players.

In recognizing one of the transgressive potentials of *Dead by Daylight*, I've described how players learn to read each other's intentions and communicate in-game. Several videos capture those moments and incorporate queerer readings, like falsegodbig who while playing the survivor Cheryl, develops a small attraction to a fellow survivor playing Zarina. The two spend most of the game assisting each other using gestures to communicate intentions to run and heal.

Considering these interactions, falsegodbig takes to the end-game chat and the two players begin a flirty exchange (Figure 20). The description of the video is, “lesbian recognizes lesbian and that zarina was looking REAL familiar …” In the video they explain how Zarina is a type of sapphic figure in-game, which encouraged their exchange. This gameplay moment offers insight into falsegodbig’s interpretation of her teammate’s actions and the reading strategy she employs to understand Zarina’s intentions. This suggests a queer interpretation of Zarina as a character who exhibits elements that resonate with the lesbian community. This interpretation is solidified by both the interactions of the players in the video and furthermore by the comments. Similarly, a video by sealburn shows another in-game chat interaction where they make similar connections with other players via the endgame chat. Their description is, “making (gay) friends in post-game chat is my fav pastime," as they employ similar reading strategies to falsegodbig, to inform their choice to reach out. These interactions showcase real time engagements in-game between queer players. Type of signposting they experienced in game being connected to actions and characters.

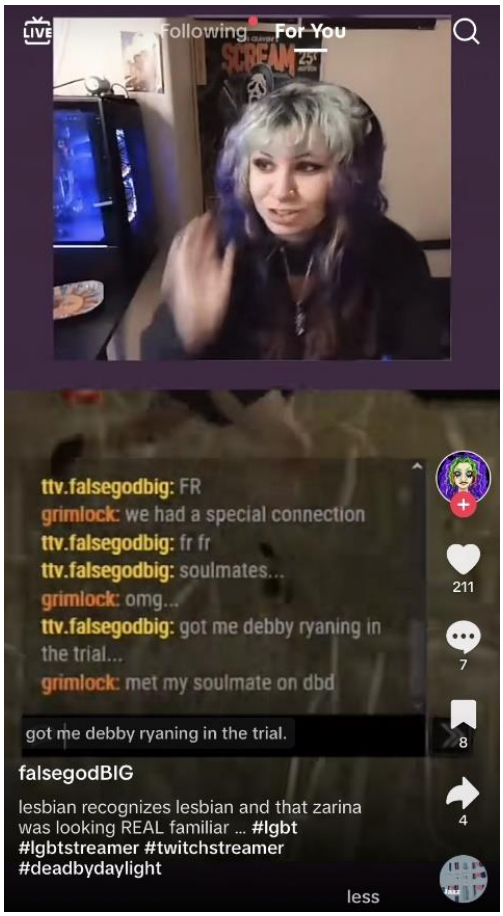


*Figure 20: falsegodbig flirts with their teammate in the post-game chat.*

Many streamers showcase more collective experiences of the game by documenting play sessions with their friends and other streamers. A SWF (survive with friends) video by sadjinxy shows us the tense moment at the end of a match, with the exit gate open, sadjinxy and the other two survivors go to unhook their friend to save them. They are successful and one proceeds to take a hit from the killer to assure everyone's survival. As they approach the exit gate knowing they succeeded, a chorus of voices all proceed to giggle as they leave the Trial Grounds. The caption reads, "Playing dbd with the lgbt community" and according to the comments the laugh is a reference to the TikTok personality Peaches. The laughter is meant to mock the killer as the

entire group escapes, even taking a moment to teabag[11] before leaving, the video description also explains, “Plsss we are sooo toxic”. Despite the reference to toxic actions, the moment is rather playful and invites the viewer to be part of the group. The moment of victory followed by the group laughter is meant to invoke a collective moment, inviting viewers to share in the victory and in part the toxicity. A quick look at the comments is an indicator of this as many of the top comments understand the references being made and the comedic quality of the group’s toxicity. Interestingly this video is without context about the events prior to the escape, it could be possible that this action was in response to the killer’s earlier actions in game. We could speculate about what might have happened but that’s not the point of the video, rather it’s the comedic elements and references that are employed and meant to resonate.

Another group of players are the stars of a video by lil_lexity who while playing against the killer, The Executioner, gets put into a cage via the killer’s ability teleporting them into a tight and closed room. The streamer states to their friends that they’ve been put, “back into the closet,” to which they all jokingly discuss the homophobic nature of the game’s actions in response. These examples of in-game moments reference issues like toxicity and homophobia, that commonly affect LGBTQ+ players, in a comedic way. The performance in each video paired with relevant references resonate with audience experiences. The flirtatious nature prompted by gestures, the playing on toxicity to celebrate in-game success, or the joking nature of being put in the closet; all these subjects are meant to form connections with viewers as a type of community building.

[11] “Tea-bagging” is the act of rapidly and repeatedly crouching one’s avatar on the corpse of another player. (Lajeunesse, 2023)

Gameplay/Performance videos also include a large range of drag performers who play *Dead by Daylight.* As seen with the above example of dragtrashly's video, drag as an art form is a queer expression of gender, and these content creators engage with the game text through their personas. Interestingly, not all videos of drag performers include satirical sermons, many videos just show their experience of the game while in drag. A video by deardeere shows them spectating their teammate during a game, who's character model glitches and freezes while moving. With a full face of makeup and a blond wig, they watch and laugh as their fellow survivor gets picked up by the killer, Trapper, and the glitch in the game makes it look like they're being carried like a backpack. While perusing the in-game store lawriebird, another performer, looks for a particular skin of Steve Harrington that is rumored to have a pronounced bulge. Upon discovery, they take a moment to examine the skin, playing up their interest before buying it. These videos are transgressive in the way that drag is presented in the space, it offers up newer perspectives on who is playing this game. Drag is a performance that pushes against norms and in these contexts the videos push against heteronormative expectations in videogame culture and the "ideal player" (Sunden, 2007).

In a video entitled, "im a petty bitch," redivvyy_ttv a drag artist clad in an ice queen inspired outfit, prepares themselves for a standoff against a Trapper. While attempting to hide in a locker, instead of grabbing them out the Trapper places a trap in front of the door. By exiting the locker redivvyyy would fall into the trap but if the Trapper were to attempt to grab them from the locker, they would step into the trap themselves allowing redivvyy_ttv to escape. Recognizing the rudeness in the Trapper's action their response is to wait patiently, keeping their player avatar in the locker. After a short SpongeBob transition to emphasize the time that has passed they end the video still in the locker (see Figure 21 & 22). Drag streamers provide a type

of layered performance with their personas as they perform the game to a viewer. Like the discussion of camp in Chapter 1 and gesture in Chapter 2, these layered performances change the context of the in-game actions. The important part is their visibility, they invite viewers into a queer space with their performance.

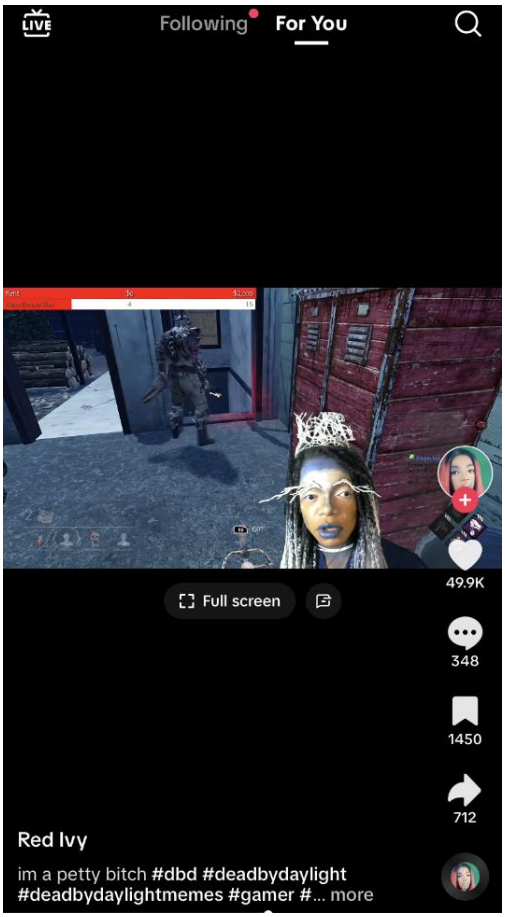


*Figure 21: Red Ivy (redivvy_ttv) gets petty while playing against a Trapper*

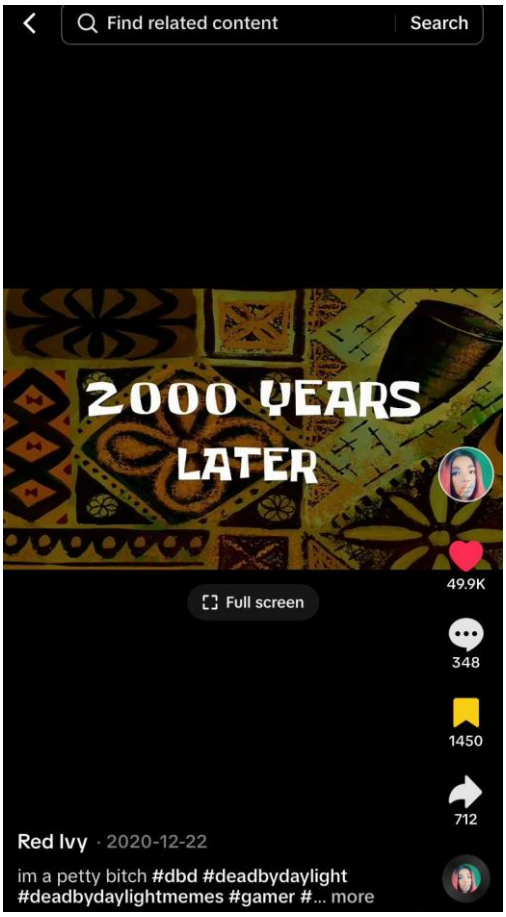


*Figure 22: A SpongeBob transition emphasizes how long they've been waiting in the locker.*

Many videos, like the one by redivvyy_ttv also incorporate editing techniques and meme elements to emphasize in-game moments. A compilation by witchybellattv provides a great example of this. Their video is composed of cut together moments from their stream with added audio-visual edits to punctuate specific moments, such as mistakes during play. In one part they

are picked up by the femme cyborg killer, the Skull Merchant and witchybellattv lets out a groan. At the same time an image of Patrick Star from the animated show Spongebob, licking the air, pops up on screen as they exclaim, “stomp on me,” and remarks how much the killer sways her hips as they carry them to the hook (see Figure 23 & 24). Like the earlier videos about Zarina and David King, attraction is used as a connection to the game elements that are important to a player. These performances like POVs invite viewers to see themselves in the content creator, connecting with mutual desires and interpretations.

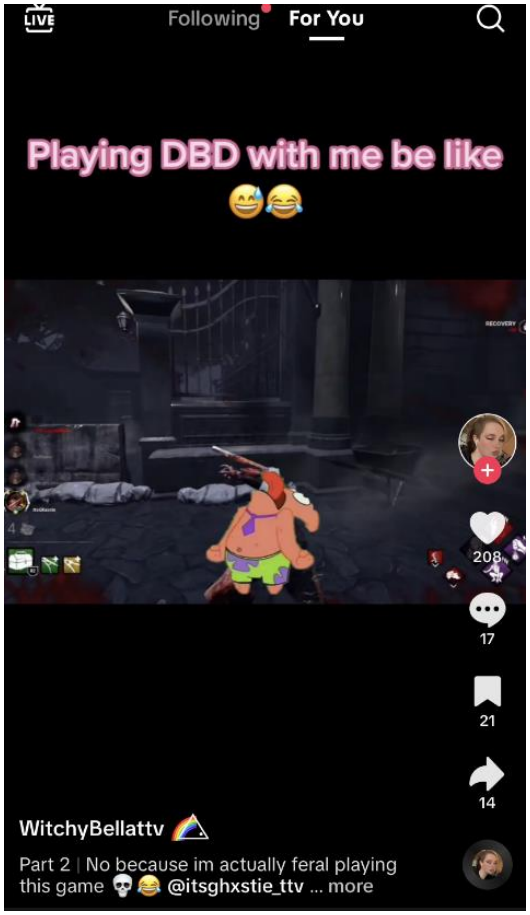


*Figure 23: WitchyBellattv uses Patrick Star to emphasize their attraction.*

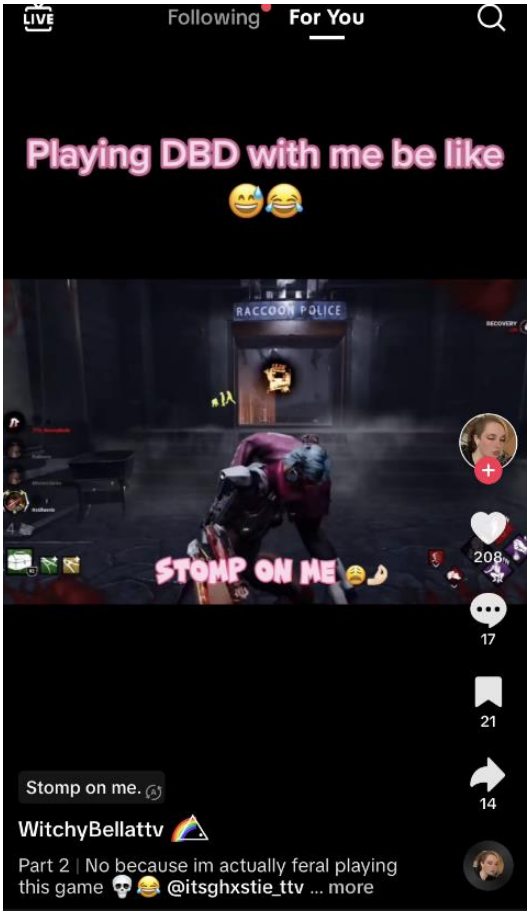


*Figure 24: WitchyBellattv wants the Skull Merchant to step on them.*

Compilations are a common form of edited Gameplay Performance, but I don't consider them Edits because of how central the game is to the video. In a similar yet different way to Drag streamers, these videos layer different meanings and context with their meme choices and comedic timing. The editing techniques employed in these videos vary and each content creator develops their own style. A content creator who uses meme editing techniques frequently in their videos is theinsomniaq, shifting the attention of the viewer from him to the gameplay. In one of his videos, while being chased by a Trapper, theinsomniaq watches the killer attempt to walk backward behind a wall to mislead their direction. This movement is known by many *Dead by Daylight* players as "moonwalking", referring to the dance move by Michael Jackson of the same name. During this moment in the video theinsomniaq zooms into the killer, editing a black fedora on the killer's head and playing the vocal audio of Michael Jackson going "hee-hee" as they fail to mislead him. This video shows the usage of editing techniques in TikTok videos to punctuate specific moments and the layered meaning in the references being used. In these editing techniques there is a clear interplay of both game and platform knowledge within the references employed, it is a queerer way to interpret the game even if the references are not explicitly queer, they still appeal to a queer audience.

These videos provide queerer gameplay interpretations by content creators through their various forms of performance. Importantly they show how communication manifests in-game and these interpretations clarify how players approach transgressive play styles. An intimate moment with the killer, Wesker, is captured by hex.thick_thighs while they play Jane Romero. During the video hex.thick_thighs is shown simulating sexual intercourse with Wesker, specifically with their use of the perk "Any Means Necessary," which allows survivors to reset a pallet that's been pulled down. Pallets are wooden interactable objects in the game environment

that start the game up-right. During a match, survivors can pull down pallets to obstruct the killer's path. If the killer is close to an up-right pallet survivors can pull it down to stun the killer, allowing them some time to run away. Resetting a pallet is when a survivor returns a pallet to an upright position allowing it to be used again. This video shows hex.thick_thighs as Jane, beginning to and stopping to reset a pallet with Wesker behind them, the movement they make against the pallet looks like a thrusting motion (see Figure 25). By using the perk "Any Means Necessary" and with Wesker tilting his head up and down, the two players simulate sex. This video is played with a filter of glowing heart and a caption that reads, "we did this for 20 mins instead of playing the game". The audio is an upbeat rap song with sexual lyrics that sing, "bend it over and arch my back".


*Figure 25: Wesker and Jane simulate sex on top of a pallet.*

There are also videos that show how players experience and deal with LGBTQ-phobic issues in game. While playing killer, a7feverdream shows them tunneling a Bill (survivor) player with a homophobic gamer tag. Using TikTok's voice over function, the content creator is rightfully angry at the Bill player and are galvanized to punish them. Here we see the ways that toxic game actions are used in opposition to harmful sentiments from other players. The also shows how they get help from the other survivors who blocked entryways so that a7feverdream has an easier time to put Bill on a hook. Another video by thatanarchpunk shows a survivor player, Feng Min, stuck on a hook while the content creator watches, the description of the video is, "DONT be homophobic in a majority LGBTQ game 😘". Again, we see the sentiment that

this game has a large LGBTQ+ fanbase but specifically in response to common issues of toxicity experienced in-game. Gameplay/Performance videos show not only how queer players foster connections and space but also shows the ways they defend that space and support each other against opposition (see Figure 26 & 27).

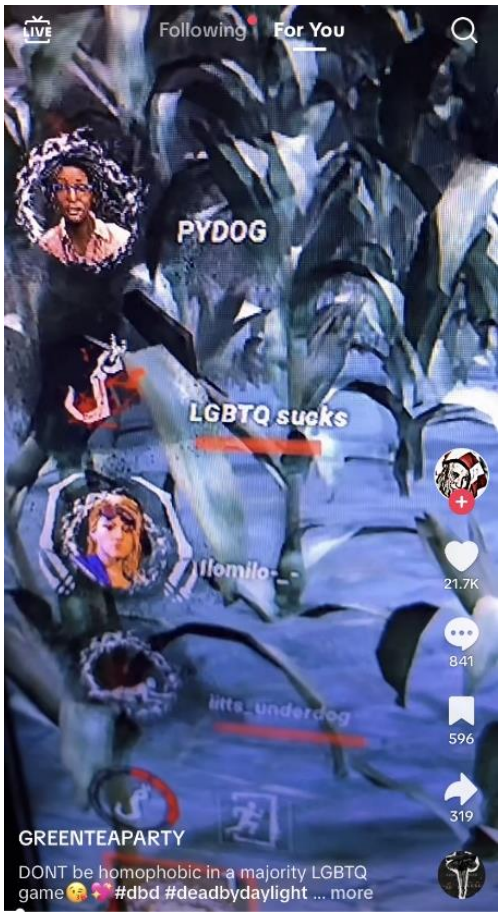


*Figure 26: The HUD showing Feng Min's offensive username*

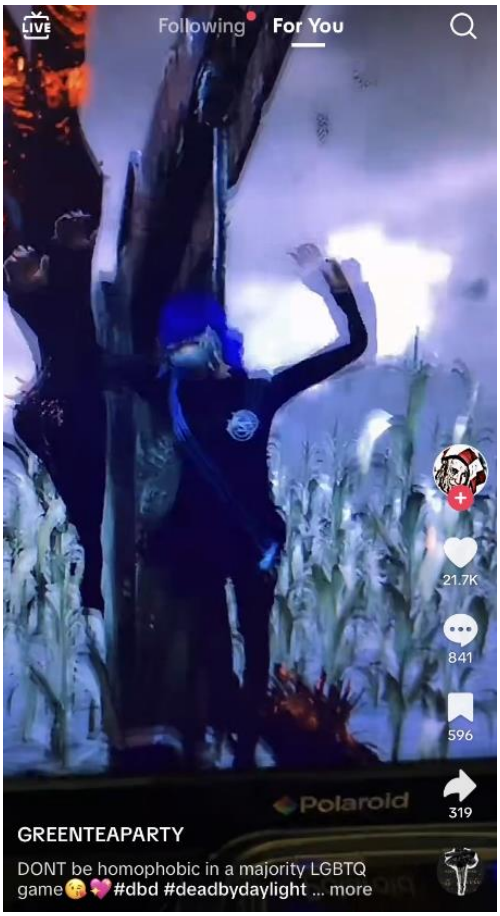


*Figure 27: Feng Min is face camped because of their offensive username*

The Gameplay/Performance strategies employed by these creators on TikTok recognize how queer experiences and interpretations can manifest in gameplay. The interpretations are transgressive in their queer visibility via their reinterpretation of the game text. Going back to the work of Mia Consalvo and paratexts, streamers offer new ways to interpret games as the

performance becomes a more central aspect to the gameplay experience (2017, p.182). In these moments there's an exchange happening where experiences of the game point to new strategies of interpretation to be picked up by the viewer. This is especially important when the game stops its usual progression as players make contact with each other. A notable part of these interactions is the way that explicit queer elements of the game (i.e., Pride charms, David King), encourage players to signal to each other and affirm their queer identities or their support for the LGBTQ+ community. This reading strategy can also be more ambiguous as players feel each other out, picking up cues from each other. Tiktok videos by queer DbD players recognize the literacy of the game and platform that is employed in performance to recontextualize these gameplay moments.

## "Slay *Explosion* Slay": Meme Edits and Layering Meaning

Right from the jump this TikTok is inundated with text: "Sophie Tragique: Dead by Daylight the Flop Edit; The Queen of DBD is Back at it Again". According to the description, this video is a "MASTERPIECE," and as the game loads in, the camera immediately zooms on the survivor avatar wearing two pride charms, sparkles fill the frame as an audio sings, "Be who you areee." What follows is a two-act narrative, the first part of the video is sophietragique imagining what the killer is thinking playing against them and the second is how they feel playing against the killer. The first part is a cacophony of layering, with screaming and heavy bass boosted music that underscores gifs of panicked people over a sped-up version of gameplay. The second is much calmer, a Mario-remix of an Azealia Banks song plays as the captions contemplate ordering pizza, showing how little of a challenge this game is for sophietragique. At one-point sophietraqgique stuns the killer twice, with each flashlight stun, the video cuts to explosions with a sparkle filter, the on-screen caption reading "slay" (see Figure 28 & 29), then another stun and

explosion goes off, “double slay”. The video ends with them escaping as a gif of drag artist Jasmine Masters laughing plays.


*Figure 28: A cacophony of edits layered on top of each other by sophietragique*


*Figure 29: A sparkly explosion with the caption "slay.”*

My description of this video, I will admit, does not do it justice. The amount of sheer content that is crammed in this 1 minute and 48 second video could take its own thesis to parse. What is important is the intentional choices of these audio-visual edits and how they’re meant to resonate with a queer audience. The masterpiece created by sophietragique is less about the gameplay itself, rather the use of references and editing techniques to tell a story. Contrary to the videos above, the edits do not just punctuate gameplay moments: they are the focal point of the video.

This formatting requires both an in-depth understanding of the game and of the platform's public in its maximal form. Any viewer can find the cacophonous video funny for its insanity however only with sufficient knowledge of context can viewers follow the threads and the layering process that is happening. This video by sophietragique situates itself within a specific TikTok digital public that would be able to decipher its deeper meaning and follow the references.

Meme Edits are at the core of this category, where the language of the content is comedic and in touch with multiple threads of references aimed at a target audience. In an article by Constance Iloh, they recognize a lack of clarity with the definition of the term meme but that, "The internet meme is frequently considered a joke that gains attention through its digital dissemination (Marwick, 2013)" (2021). Iloh expresses how ingrained memes are in culture and in discourse, expanding further on Richard Dawkins' original definition to further explore their formatting and impact as forms of communication (2021). Considering what has been discussed in this chapter, memes in this context are another editing style on the platform but they also do so much more. The use of memes and comedic references showcase the threads that connect each video and the public they occupy. Their effectiveness and relevance call back to queer experiences and desires, developing the queer metagame through their proliferation.

This project cannot do an in-depth analysis on the structure of memes, but this category specifically observes the use of editing techniques used for comedic effect. These techniques overlay audiovisual components on top of gameplay videos and are recognizable for the references they employ. Like the example above, gameplay moments are a common subject but that isn't a restriction. Consider trorrio's meme edit of the Dredge, a killer with the ability to teleport into lockers. This video plays off the announcement of David King being the first confirmed LGBTQ+ character, by joking that the Dredge is a new LGBTQ+ character due to

their ability to “come out” of lockers (Figure 29). This video uses the promotional material for the Dredge and even employs the same audio as sophietragique as the Dredge’s appearance is punctuated by “be who you areeee.” The use of this sound in both videos shows the type of formatting memes take within the bounds of the platform and how references can thread different videos together. trorrio narrates what is happening through on-screen text and graphics as they jokingly talk about the character’s sexual identity. The use of the same audio connects these two videos on the platform and further highlights their shared references.

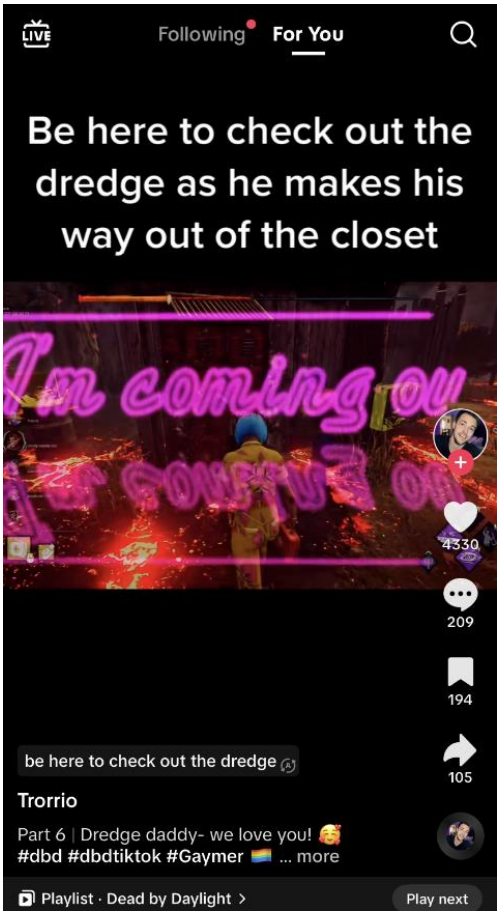


*Figure 30: trorrio edits an announcement for the Dredge’s “coming out.”*

The exploration of characters' sexual identity is seen again in a video by yoichiisbussy (the username a possible reference to the DbD character Yoichi), who creates a meme edit of the Trickster describing him as a gay man. Promotional material by Behaviour of the Trickster is overlayed with the MLM Pride flag as a lighthearted instrumental play. Contrastingly, c0v_v_v presents an edit of Yun-Jin Lee, describing her as a "homophobic queen", using an image where Yun-Jin Lee is scowling at the killer, the Trickster. This video directly references the Trickster's lore who, before becoming a killer, was a K-pop star under Yun-Jin Lee's record label and went on a murder spree killing her in the process. The video is a comedic recounting of this fact, and simultaneously describes the Trickster as a gay man. The video starts with an audio clip taken from popular artist Doja Cat where she goes, "Stop being a faggot, thank you." before various clips of Yun-Jin looking displeased at the Trickster play. Many of these clips are edited, one with Yun-Jin Lee burning a Pride flag and another of her edited to look like she's holding a gun (See Figure 31). The creator in the comments confirm this is meant to be a joke and it's such a ridiculous video that it sparks a myriad of reactions some comments even stating that Yun-Jin Lee herself is a queer icon. Here we can see the different ways that people interact with a meme edit's layered meaning as some comments understand the nuance of the term "homophobic queen" while others are utterly confused. The editing style amplifies the satirical nature of Yun-Jin's homophobia as a type of queer resonance and is another example of how content creators' joke about genuine issues of homophobia and toxicity.

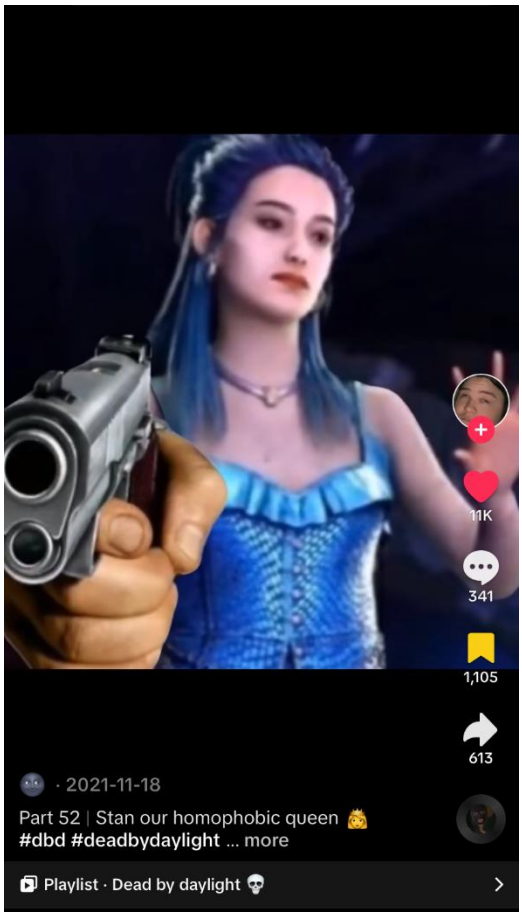


*Figure 31: Yun-Jin Lee holds a gun while checking her nails.*

A large part of using comedic edits often instills a queer feeling into different elements of the game, in the above cases this refers to the characters specifically, expressing their potential queer identities. This process is a reappropriation of the game, developing these queer identities by analyzing the aesthetics of the character. This echoes the practices observed by Lee Sherlock regarding queer fanfiction of World of Warcraft NPCs (2013). This can be done more explicitly with head canons, which are videos that express the queer identities a content creator would assign to each specific character. An example by watsson.l0ver, shows a slideshow of the queer identities they interpret a group of DbD characters to have. The video is detailed in its coverage and though the comment section is small, many of the commentors are critical of the video, some

disagreeing with choices themselves and others for the chose to even attach identities to the characters in the first place. In this small data set, posts with more ambiguous or comedic expressions of character's imagined queer identities are better received than explicit readings. This could be for several reasons, but I suggest that the issue was in the formatting of the video, in that it didn't appeal to the audience it was targeting. I also believe that more ambiguous readings of characters offer room for interpretation which resonates more with the experience of viewers. Regardless of format, players develop relationships and connections to the game text and offer up those moments to be affirmed by other queer players on the platform.

This develops further when players discuss their attraction to specific characters, with a category of video I would describe as thirst edits. Thirst comes from the word thirsty which is defined as showing an intense desire or attraction to something. The videos employ similar techniques to their comedic counterparts but instead punctuate moments that they find attractive about their subject. A thirst edit by cursedlesbianttv, shows the killer, The Huntress, killing a survivor with their mori[12] over the song "Unholy" by Sam Smith ft Kim Petras (Figure 32). This edit is meant to add an erotic feel to the killer's brutal actions. If cursedlesbianttv's name is any indication, their attraction to the Huntress is sapphic and the video's description remarks on their desire to also be picked up by the axe wielding killer. Similarly blue_blur_42 takes a clip from Skull Merchant's promotion video, zooming in on the motion of her hips as she walks shifting the perception of an imposing killer into a desirable one. Positioning *Dead by Daylight* killers as sexually attractive touches on what I discuss in the previous chapter regarding the intimacy that is felt via in-game actions. Thes videos focus less on the brutality of the act and reinterpret the

[12] Mori refers to the act of a killer character killing a survivor by their own hand instead of hooking them. This action is unlockable by using the offering "Momento Mori" and is shown via a cut scene in game.

acts of hitting, downing, and picking up as intimate because of the closeness that is had with the killer.

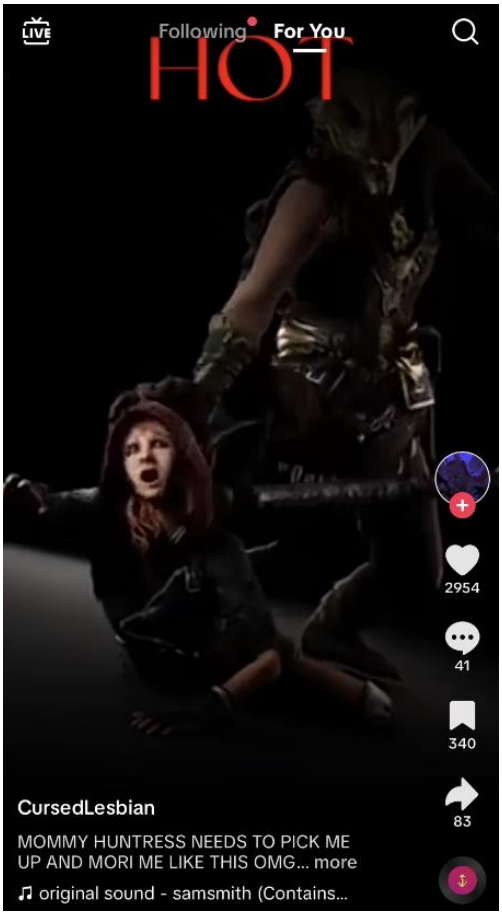


*Figure 32: A thirst edit for the Huntress' mori.*

TikTok edits are very different from the explicit performance of a player to an audience, and they rely on the layering context of the material being interpreted. The references employed by comedic edits are meant to reimagine the game space. Drawing from their own experiences, content creators utilize the audio-visual affordances of the platform, keeping in mind trends, to resonate with their audience. Head cannons and thirst edits develop the relationship between

content creators and the game's characters, reinterpreting elements as queer which then spark discussion with a viewing audience.

Edits as a category are the most in-depth and complex form of game reinterpretation because of their layered meaning. Furthermore, as time passes these contexts will change, new memes and trends will develop and reading strategies will be adapted. Edits are an intimate reading of the game text that encourages a call and response from its viewers. The way that viewers can parse the various details of each video, points to the kind of queer collective understanding that this project seeks to outlines.

## Collective Queer-er Reading Strategies

This analysis only begins to scratch the surface of the content that populates TikTok, this snapshot provides insight into queer(er) interpretations of *Dead by Daylight* by players. Each of the categories presented above explores this process by recognizing the dual literacy of the game text and the platform that players implement when creating and viewing content. More importantly, these short and ephemeral moments captured on the platform are meant to present aspects of the game that are not only meaningful to these content creators but that are made to resonate with viewers. In both form and content, each category draws from each other providing queerer interpretations of *Dead by Daylight* drawing from common threads and practices that overlap each other.

Commentary, being the more direct of the three categories, provides a starting point for analyzing discourse. Content creators take to the video format to spotlight aspects of the game providing their experiences and input. Here we see discussion on pride updates, the representation of characters, and of the player community at large. Gameplay/Performance

provides a similar experience with gameplay moments. These videos offer a communal experience of gameplay moments, showcasing strategies, commentary, and transgressive moments. Here the performance becomes an integral part of the game experience and reimagines the digital space. Edits provide the strongest example of this dual literacy at work where editing practices draws from references and context made to resonate with a specific digital public. Meme Edits and Thirst Edits draw from the context of the platform, using audiovisual queues to reinterpret elements of the game, develop queerer desires, and remediate moments through humor. Each of the strategies are unique due to their presence on TikTok as a platform.

Collectively these videos create a type of "queer feeling" that can manifest as a sort of digital public, or more specifically a "side" of TikTok (Duguay, 2022; Lorenz, 2020). Part of that phenomenon has to do with the shared digital identity formed by players through their interpretation of the algorithm (Karizat et al, 2021, p.305:5). In this case this side of TikTok would appeal to queer players *of Dead by Daylight*. Content creators would therefore make content that is meant to resonate with viewers of that public by including reoccurring strategies, motifs, and subject matter. We can consider TikTok as a type of stage for queer play and performance where each of these videos occupy a specific part of that space. In that vein it's important to think about who is on stage at what time, who is the focal point at what moment, and this does not specifically mean the content creators but rather the type of content that is available on the platform.

It is important to note that while I've "taken a snapshot" there is still the issue of who gets to be a subject in frame. Discourses are an important part of queer paratextual practices but there are always structures of power that exist within these processes (Shaw, 2014; Sherlock, 2013). Algorithms make this more complicated as well and in many ways the strategies that are

employed by content creators may be influenced by what is considered popular by the platform at certain points in time. As an online multiplayer game, *Dead by Daylight* is consistently changing and evolving. As new characters and updates become available different aspects of the game will come into focus over others. This means that if we want to think about collective reading strategies, we must ground that work in reoccurring concepts, but remain aware that just as there can be multiple reading strategies for a single video, among a collection of similar videos, for gameplay, and of game elements which form a constantly shifting basis from which to draw.

I'd like to return to the concept of "used paths" by sara ahmed where, "Collectivity can be acquired as direction; the more a path is traveled upon the clearer it becomes. A path can be cared for, kept clear, maintained" (2018). From these examples alone we can remark on the continued presence of: David King, Pride charms, memes, drag performers, topics of sex and intimacy, queer interpretations of characters. What makes this work more expansive and at times overwhelming is how these videos both call back to each other and branch out into other forms and topics of discussion. Yet this work points to not only the importance of paratextual practices in relation to the game space but also encourages observations on how discourse takes shape in emergent platforms like TikTok. Queer metagaming concretises the relationship between platform and queer paratextual practice, mapping these collective paths despite their ever-branching and ever-changing nature.

Queer metagaming creates the threads that cut through both the amount of content and their ambiguity. It is a process that recognizes the signaling in both the platform and the game, it is a process that requires players to understand both the shape of the game text and the language that is used in the platforms that are outside of it. Queer metagaming points to opportunities for

queer interpretation and expression in a game that is restrictive to those practices and these strategies can be understood and recognized in game. Earlier this chapter highlighted gameplay moments where players recognize the signifying strategies of their fellow players and prompt them to make contact. In my own experience, I remember a moment where I loaded into a *Dead by Daylight* game as Mikaela, the witch survivor, and my teammates who were all strangers to me also were playing Mikaela. As we waited for the queue to finish, with many of us swapping out cosmetics for our characters I felt I was in the presence of queer players, and I took to the chat. I was correct in my assessment and after a lovely exchange I proceeded to have a fun and comforting game, ending with some lovely goodbyes. Queer metagaming is not the end all of toxicity, but rather is a reminder of the ways that signs and gestures can cultivate queer spaces in videogames. It is a collective reading process that emerges despite the normalized toxic spaces of online multiplayers and looks towards utopic futures of queer desires and play. Most importantly it continues the work of documenting player experience and the discourses that surround not only the games that queer people play, but how they play it.

# Conclusion: Queer Metagaming

Over the course of the past four chapters, this thesis sought to expand on a personal experience I had with *Dead by Daylight* during the pandemic lockdown in 2020. The concept I developed over the previous chapters, the queer metagame, is my way of bringing a name to the queer feeling I had while scrolling through TikTok videos in between match queues. Queer metagaming draws from various disciplines to illuminate how queer play can manifest as a communal practice in online multiplayer games. As a case study, *Dead by Daylight's* vibrant queer player base, paired with its player driven game process is generative in observing this concept which is embedded in the relationship between fan-generated content and game text. Online multiplayer games like DbD do not afford the same capabilities for queer play as more narrative-centric games like MMORPGs. However queer play practices are still possible by taking forms that require nuanced context and interpretations fostered by online. With online multiplayer games being notable for prevalent issues of toxicity, transgressive play strategies allow for player communities to carve out space for themselves. This thesis continues the important work of studying the role of queer play as a transgressive strategy that opposes hegemonic play structures. The form and impact of these practices is what cemented this project's primary research question:

How can LGBTQIA2S+ fan appropriation of multiplayer videogames on online platforms informs the way that these players challenge hegemonic games cultures through transgressive queer play?

The relationship between fan-generated content and queer play recognizes developing strategies of representation and alternative forms of being that are rooted in elements of the game

text that resonate with players. A closer look into the content players publish illuminates relevant interpretations that not only encourage queer perspectives and desires but are indicative of communication strategies for connection and community on the platforms they occupy. The queer metagame considers both the affordances of the game and fan-generated content on surrounding platforms as a symbiotic and evolving practice. As with the everchanging nature of online games and online platforms, this practice includes contexts and references both new and old. Furthermore, queer metagaming recognizes the active role of players in developing recognizable queer play practices, expanding them from solitary experiences to community wide sentiments.

This thesis grounded itself with scholarship relating to game studies, queer studies, and platform studies in Chapter 1, reviewing relevant literature that touches on the subjects of: toxicity, transgressive play, queer play, and paratextual analysis. Regarding toxicity, hegemonic play structures in online multiplayer games contributes to toxic interactions that disproportionately affects marginalized players. Games like *Dead by Daylight* (2016), *Overwatch/Overwatch 2* (2016/2022), and *League of Legends* (2009) continue to reinforce meritocratic values that facilitate this behaviour by valuing certain play strategies and players over others while simultaneously creating an illusion of "fair play" (Paul, 2018). As a deep-rooted aspect of game culture, these experiences are normalized, yet despite this, many of these games have burgeoning and vibrant queer player communities. Player-generated content on online platforms is important in documenting those players' experiences (Nakamura, 2012). Transgressive play strategies, like queer play, allow players to oppose these structures, this is what scholarship on queer play documents by outlining important play strategies that explore queerer narratives and desires that extend beyond representation. However, work on queer play

primarily focuses on either single player games or MMORPGs, which though incredibly valuable, reveal a gap when we consider games that are more restrictive to those practices. My observations of *Dead by Daylight* speak to queer game studies scholarship in exploring the affordances for transgressive play with the additional and necessary perspectives drawn from paratextual practices. This is the theoretical foundation of the queer metagaming which builds from work that has documented queer play strategies and includes new considerations for more nuanced and adaptable readings of online multiplayer games. Fan-generated content is integral to this process by threading a variety of experiences and discourses that explore queer alternative ways of being in videogames. This documentation of fan-generated content becomes an archive that players can draw from for their own experiences and interpretations of the game text. For this case study the focus is on elements of *Dead by Daylight* that resonate with queer players, a process which facilitates a type of feedback loop between fan-content and the text.

In consideration of *Dead by Daylight's* restrictive and ever-changing nature, the media-specific analysis in Chapter 2 is a queer reading of the texts that focuses on its material qualities – specifically its affordances and possible player interactions that point to transgressive possibilities. Drawing from the work of Katherine Hayles and Souvik Mukherjee, this chapter argues that each individual match of *Dead by Daylight* is its own narrative experience connected by reoccurring elements and processes (2004; 2015). Player actions taken during each match create this narrative, non-verbal dialogue manifests through the cat and mouse process of the game. These dialogues are given further context via the interpretations of the player. This is mainly due to the game's possibly unlimited time-space, allowing players more freedom to break from their expected roles and make contact with each other. Practices such as farming and gesturing are the two main examples of how players interpret in-game actions and intentions,

fostering moments of intimacy that actively oppose the meritocratic process of the game. Farming is especially important, not just in its refusal of the game's expected process but also when we consider the closeness between players paired and the consensual affliction of pain on digital bodies. The use of gestures in-game develops a closeness between players through their interpretations. Though existing in isolated game moments when we consider the assemblage qualities of the game these interpretations are given further context player paratext. Elements that encourage queer play strategies and interpretation such as movement/gesture, character options, and cosmetics, develop meaning and impact via player discussions on online platforms. As a living object where players are in conversation with each other, paratextual media such as Let's Plays, streams, commentary, and memes are important to navigate the games' consistent updates and in tandem develops queer interpretations by compiling player experiences and queer references. Paratextual media are not simply additions to the game text - they are a crucial part of its narrative (Mukerjee, 2014). For this project, the focus was LGBTQIA2S+ centered fan-generated content on TikTok and how it showcases game-specific elements that become recognizable in-game by players.

Chapter 3 developed further on queer play possibilities in DbD by exploring the impact of fan-generated content and highlighting aspects of the game text that resonate with players. TikTok was chosen as the platform for this analysis both because of its connection with my own personal experience and its widescale popularity. As a platform focused on short form video content, TikTok encourages co-creative discourse between its users on a massive scale. Tools for sharing and commenting on posts such as stitches and duets and its proliferation of trends and sounds, allow for various forms of interaction and develops an archive of videos based on re-occurring elements and subjects. *Dead by Daylight* related TikTok videos include a wide array of

content that captures the ephemeral experiences of users. This chapter's discourse analysis both documents these moments and their feedback on the game text. This chapter observes a small dataset of videos that are made by and/or meant for queer DbD players and are grouped into three loose categories: Commentary, Gameplay/Performance, and Edits. Commentary refers to videos that discuss experiences and opinions related to the game text. Gameplay/Performance observes gameplay moments or reenactments of gameplay and are primarily populated by streamers. Edits refer to videos that rely on editing techniques to reinterpret the game text. Each of these categories build on each other and the reoccurring elements and interpretations explored by content creators thread the disjointed experience of *Dead by Daylight* matches. This thesis committed itself to following theses threads and highlights several recurring elements in conversation: sex, attraction, queerphobia, toxicity, drag performance, cosmetics, and character preferences. These videos not only highlight moments of queer play and interpretations, but they also allow opportunities for players to connect with each other. The videos discussed in this chapter, without directly responding to each other, develop a literacy of both the platform and the game that can be taken to future matches, this relationship is what defines the queer metagame.

Before continuing to future trajectories of the queer metagame it's important to consider the limitations to this project when we consider the collection of the TikTok dataset and its analysis. Despite collecting and studying 200 videos, these videos were found using only two hashtags (i.e. #LGBTQ #DbD). This was done to maintain consistency, but it does provide a very limited perspective of the queer DbD community on TikTok. Using more or other hashtags in future studies could reveal other videos and therefore other points of discussion that would be generative to explore. These videos were also found using the search function and do not accurately represent the experience of the "For You Page" nor does it account how frequently

these videos are seen via the algorithm. TikTok's algorithm is an important aspect of its user experience and by not engaging with that element there lacks both a currentness to the videos observed and leaves room to inquire about the limits and pitfalls of using TikTok as a platform for discourse. This dataset does not capture the whole of videos that queer content creators submit to the platform. This snapshot of a community means that there are many other videos that are left unexplored. Different strategies to amend this can include focusing on certain types of videos (e.g. streams, meme edits) or selecting a group of content creators and exploring their work in-depth. Furthermore, this project does not include testimonies from content creators, which then omits from consideration the personal experiences and reflections of those creators. These limitations are important to note and are qualities to consider for future work.

These 200 videos, published over 3 years, were recorded, and personally analyzed by me. Yet fitting with the platform's ephemeral nature, 10% of these videos are no longer available to be viewed from their original links. By the time you read this, it's possible that the number of videos that have disappeared has increased. Despite that, the relationship between players and DbD that is highlighted in this data set showcases the foundations of the queer metagame. These videos are engaged in an ever-changing dialogue, drawing from experiences and references that cultivate each video's aesthetic and narrative choices. This can be noted by two important results of my research:

1. Online multiplayer games are generative locations for exploring queer play as a communal practice and should be further analyzed to consider the affordances and elements that facilitate these practices.
2. Paratextual analysis informs queer play and documented player experiences not only lay the groundwork for these practices but make them recognizable to players in-game.

Furthermore, recognizing the ways that players operate on these platforms is important to the queer metagaming process.

The relationship between players and game text and its entanglements with online platforms are an important subject for future research. The concept of queer metagaming should be expanded to more platforms, more games, and include interviews with content creators and players where relevant. The queer metagame as a concept can be expanded with future projects by conducting a comparative analysis of multiple games of the same genre (e.g. MOBAs) but on the same platform or vice versa. The relationship that is formed by players with each other and with the chosen game change based on the community and the game text being observed. Considering Boluk and LeMieux's work on metagaming we can extend this further to the ways that players discuss single player games on online platforms and its affect on solitary play sessions (Boluk, 2017). The queer metagame is adaptable and always in flux, this thesis lays the foundation for thinking about queer play as a communal process and its various forms in and out of the game text.

Returning to the beginning, to the article by Behaviour Interactive, "Finding a Home and Horror" and the sentiment that DbD has a majority queer player base, I wondered if those player practices had the potential to affect the culture of a game. And if so, could this be recreated in other games? To rephrase the words of aaron_duke, "Did Behaviour make *Dead by Daylight* queer as fuck, or did we?" I would like to note that Behaviour is not passive in their support of their LGBTQAI2S+ player base, as they have consistently shown their support through their in-game updates and by hosting annual Pride events. It's important for game developers and studios to be mindful and support the diversity of their players which includes being attentive to paratextual practice. It's important to consider how queer players imprinted a brand-new way to

understand and experience games and how this process is fostered over time. I can't confirm or deny the queerness of DbD but rather I think about who I was four years ago, scrolling through TikTok between match queues, seeing drag queens and meme edits and players just being queerly themselves. I remember the comfort that gave me as I played game after game, it inspired me to be more myself, and to do this work. And that's important, that is meaningful, and I hope this thesis inspires more people to do the same.

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