

“I Wasn’t Alone in How I Am”: Psychological Inquiry into Players’ Experiences with Queer Representation in *Gone Home*

Perry A. Reed¹, Karen E. Dill-Shackleford¹, Tieranni Parquet¹, Stacy Griffin¹, Steven Bond¹,
Andreas Miles-Novelo¹

¹*School of Psychology, Fielding Graduate University*

While there has been an explosion of research around the psychological dynamics of video game play, comparatively little work has been done to explore the many divergent approaches video games take to create identification and connection within its players, especially around LGBTQ+ representation. In this qualitative study, we look at data collected from a short-answer survey, as well as from Steam reviews, to see how players discuss and reflect upon their experiences with *Gone Home*, one of the first high-profile narrative video games that centered a queer narrative. We tie our observations to the history of both gaming and identification research and demonstrate the need for further inquiry into the ways that video games interact with the diverse identities represented and the diverse audience that engages with them.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Fullbright Company released *Gone Home*, a first-person exploration video game set in an eerie, empty house. At first, the game appears to fall within the horror genre. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that its true focus is a deeply personal narrative: a queer¹ girl’s journey of self-discovery and relationship-building within the context of a flawed yet authentic family dynamic. In an online Steam review, one player shared that *Gone Home* “helped me understand that I wasn’t alone in how I am and that there was others like me.” This disclosure suggests the game’s potential to support identity development and belonging for players. In the present study, we investigate players’

¹ In this article, “queer” refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual individuals (see Rivera, 2022, p. 486, for a discussion of the term).

Author info: Correspondence should be sent to: Andreas Miles-Novelo
Email: amiles-novelo@fielding.edu

experiences with *Gone Home* as one of the first commercially successful indie video games to feature a queer narrative.

Using a qualitative approach, we aim to provide rich data on players' authentic experiences of the lesbian-centred storyline and what it meant to them. A key value of this approach is that these are real players' detailed, personal experiences of a game they chose to play in a research area (LGB representations in videogames) that is understudied (Conroy et al., 2023).

Minority Stress

According to minority stress theory (Meyer et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2014), social context is a strong and persistent factor in individual stress levels. For queer individuals, social forces such as judgments, threats, and the experience of derogation and discrimination add considerably to their stress levels compared with their straight counterparts. Additionally, constant exposure to discrimination creates so much stress that minority-identity individuals consistently experience worse health outcomes (Brandes, 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

This also occurs because some may feel a need to *conceal* their identity. Sexual orientation concealment imposes cognitive burdens (e.g., vigilance, risk assessment; Sylva et al., 2010), emotional burdens (e.g., fear, shame; Dees, 2025) and behavioural burdens (e.g., avoiding “slipping up”; Brennan et al., 2021; Huang & Chan, 2022). These burdens are associated with mental health issues including stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as social anxiety and drug and alcohol use (Pachankis et al., 2015; Brennan et al., 2021). Suffering from mental illness also predict lower life satisfaction, and the relationship is reciprocal: depression lowers life satisfaction, which, in turn, predicts future depression (Kase & Mohr, 2023). Queer youth are also more likely to ideate or attempt suicide (Bond, 2023).

Kaniuka et al. (2019) found that community connectedness was a protective factor to reduce the risk of adverse mental health outcomes for queer individuals. Research has found that video games and the gaming community can serve as a tool for coping and a place to find community (Zagorski, 2022).

So, authentic representations in media, experiences with video games, and gamer communities are all sources of support and coping for queer youth (Craig et al., 2015; The Trevor Project, 2022). It is understandable that greater and richer representation of LGB characters can make a difference in a queer individual's sense of the threat level of society. When individuals are physically surrounded by unsupportive family members, for example, the screen can “beam in” people who affirm minority identities and offer a counterpoint to negativity. Because of this differential social context, queer individuals are more likely to form parasocial relationships, or one-sided friendships, with fictional characters and with supportive celebrities (Bond, 2018; 2023; Vu et al., 2024). All of this adds up to solidarity, support and understanding, which changes the stressful social context and can make a real difference in a person's life.

The Importance of Representation

Media transmit social information and, in doing so, contribute stories that are part of the socialization process (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2017). For example, media depict social norms and schemas related to an individual's membership in social categories (e.g., race, gender identity, sexual orientation) and their intersections that contribute to an individual's identity and maintenance of cultural norms. Audiences seek out various forms of media, and the characters and interactions they see there contribute to their understanding of the interpersonal world. Media exposure can influence the way in which individuals view themselves (González Velázquez et al., 2020) and others (e.g., Dill & Burgess, 2013) and act on those views (e.g., Yao et al., 2010).

Research has shown that authentic, non-derogatory representations of queer media characters can reduce prejudice and increase pro-queer attitudes among non-queer individuals (Bond, 2018). Additionally, the non-stereotypical inclusion of queer characters and stories can be beneficial for those being represented, particularly those who may seek to augment their social support systems or who are at risk for self-harm (Bond, 2023; Conroy et al., 2023).

This is important because individuals who identify as queer, especially youth, are at a greater risk for victimization than their CIS normative peers and face a direct threat to their psychological and physical well-being (McInroy et al., 2024). Queer youth have reported living in homes or attending schools that are not identity-affirming (The Trevor Project, 2022) and thus are more likely to engage in identity concealment. Queer youth might conceal their identities for several reasons: to conform to heteronormativity or cishnormativity for safety (Beagan et al., 2022), to reduce the risk of family rejection (Salerno et al., 2020), and to avoid bullying (Kiperman et al., 2022). Additionally, local support, even from generally positive relationships with friends and family, may be weakened due to lack of specific support for an individual's sexual orientation. This highlights the need to see how queer individuals are responding to the representation they find in media – given research demonstrating the important role media plays in identity formation.

As mentioned earlier, queer audiences have less social support than their straight peers, so parasocial experiences with queer characters play a vital role in identity formation, validation, and feelings of belongingness (Bond, 2023). Queer representations, particularly those that are validating and humanizing, act as what Bond calls “socialization companions” (2023, p. 292). Bond (2015) found that sexual talk, depictions of sexual behavior, and validating references toward queer sexuality were more highly prevalent in gay- and lesbian-oriented media than elsewhere and suggested that these elements help affirm the social identities of queer individuals. Further, the social information and dynamics depicted in popular media can play a role in whether queer individuals feel they must conceal their identity to their larger social groups (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Consequently, queer representation in media has far-reaching consequences for the well-being of the community, as it can impact how other community members perceive and treat those who hold those identities.

With narrative media, the social dynamics of the storyline can influence related attitudes and behaviors. For example, Tao et al. (2023) exposed participants to either a) a story where a waiter showed inclusive behavior towards a gay couple and was rewarded for that behavior, b) the same story where the waiter showed exclusive behavior towards the gay couple and was punished, or c) the same story modified as a control condition. Rewarding inclusive behavior to a gay couple led to the best results: increased support for gay equality and increased interest in interacting with the gay character. Furthermore, factors such as identification with the waiter and feelings towards a gay character mediated the abovementioned relationships (Tao et al., 2023).

Additionally, Bond (2014) reported that “heterosexuality is overrepresented and [queer identities] are underrepresented in media” (p. 98), further noting that media often does not include accurate depictions and dynamics of queer relationships. Historically, queer character representation has been “largely neutral or inconsequential” (p.1564), depicting individuals in roles that either exist as exceptions to more heteronormative standards or lack an authentic nuance (Shaw et al., 2019). This oversight can lead to harmful outcomes in perceptions of and interactions with these groups.

Social Representation in Video Games

Because of the lack of research on queer representation in video games, researchers need to draw from research on other social group representation in video games to get a better sense of how players may be reacting to what representations are (and are not) present. Ferchaud et al. (2020) explored the ability of the highly acclaimed video game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) to promote more positive conceptions around another marginalized social category: those suffering from mental illness. The researchers found that playing as a character with a mental health condition (psychosis) reduced stigma in participants by limiting their desire for social distance from the marginalized group. Further, the researchers concluded that this reduction was a result of the interactivity of gameplay, which promoted players' transportation into the game world, finally leading to greater identification with the player character. These findings imply that a uniformly positive characterization of marginalized groups is less important than a realistic representation of the character's unique experiences (Ferchaud et al., 2020).

Oliver et al. (2016) argued that video games can foster a broader set of entertainment experiences inclusive of fun and eudaimonic² appreciation—the latter correlated with game narrative and in-game relatedness (i.e., connecting with on-screen characters). Hemenover and Bowman (2018) expanded this discussion in recognition of video games' ability to trigger a range of affective reactions on the emotional circumplex, and Daneels et al. (2021) found more than 80 studies into eudaimonia and video games. Ruberg (2015) offered a more nuanced view of the emotional capacity of video games, discussing the unique communicative capacity of using a broad range of so-called “no-fun”

² Eudaimonic refers to a well-being drawn from growth and living as one's true self (Ryan & Deci, 2001)

emotional experiences designed intentionally to encourage players to encounter narratives and experiences in challenging and potentially self-relevant ways.

Queer Representation in Video Games

Though research on representation of social categories in media has been mostly focused on gender identity (e.g., Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019) and racial stereotypes (e.g., Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015), video games and online spaces continue to be important to those with queer identities to find stories and communities that they feel will be supportive (The Trevor Project, 2022). Despite this gap on the representation of sexual orientation within video games and the gaming community (Shaw et al., 2019; Conroy et al., 2023), some research has been done to get an initial assessment of the scope and impact of queer representation in gaming.

For instance, queer individuals reported a higher frequency of negative comments than positive ones regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in online gaming spaces (Gillen & Signorella, 2023), a trend that can lead to the normalization of negative behavior in those spaces (Cary et al., 2020). Queer identities in games have often been portrayed in harmful and stereotypical ways (Bragança et al., 2016), reflecting the prejudice and discrimination that queer individuals experience outside of video gaming.

These depictions unintentionally normalize and perpetuate violence against queer-identifying individuals. McInroy et al. (2022) pointed out a harmful trope prevalent within the gaming community known as “bury your Gays or dead lesbians” (p. 631). This historical trope sustains the idea that queer identities and relationships are destined to have tragic endings, thereby associating queerness with sadness and negativity. *Life Is Strange* (2015) provides a modern example in the gaming context, where players can choose a tragic ending for Chloe, a queer character. The storylines of queer characters are often “expendable for the sake of plot” (McInroy et al., 2022, p. 632), signifying that queer lives are expendable in media and life.

Another example of harmful gaming plot devices is the lack of exploration of queer identities. The characters’ queer identity is often revealed in background text and not through personal interactions with the character during gameplay. For example, Tracer’s identity in *Overwatch* (2016) is revealed in an external comic instead of being integrated into the game itself. These examples vividly illustrate how video games frequently distort, marginalize, and reinforce harmful stereotypes about queer individuals by potentially reaffirming that a queer identity should be “hidden.” It should be noted that video games are globally consumed medium, and global attitudes and norms around queer identity being depicted varies greatly. Some writers and developers may be wary of being too overt in their depiction of queer identities to avoid later controversy and censorship (Shaw, 2009; Eflsen, 2024).

While perceptions of video games with queer portrayals attempt to be favourable overall (Kohlburn et al., 2023), the presence of queer content has also been shown to negatively affect public reception of a game and game sales (Pithavadian & Battin, 2024). However, some of this is hard to parse apart as, in the case of *Overwatch*, some initial backlash and drop-

off in player engagement was seen but player counts eventually rose (Parshakov et al., 2022). Additionally, many games with positive and progressive queer representation fail commercially, but due to backlash over the game, not necessarily the queer content, though some sections of reactionary online communities may try to make that connection (Pithavadian & Battin, 2024). These reactions can strongly impact queer players and cultivate feelings of exclusion or alienation. Thus, queer players typically agree that greater positive representation is needed in video games, although they may disagree on what form representation should take (Kohlburn et al., 2023). Inclusivity and community discourse surrounding video games must be seriously considered since players find value in seeing parts of themselves represented in their media.

However, while there has been progress toward queer inclusion in gaming (Fantone, 2014), scholars continue to describe video games and the gaming community as heteronormative and, at times, homophobic (Krobová et al., 2015; Shaw, 2015). Shaw (2017) specifically highlights that video games behind other forms of media in their inclusivity of sexual orientation.

A Preliminary Case Study: *Gone Home*

The current study investigates players' experiences with *Gone Home* (2013), one of the first commercially visible and successful indie video games with a queer narrative. The game was first available only on the PC games market, but after some success, was quickly ported to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One (Quinlan, 2016). Moreover, *Gone Home*'s release corresponded with the rise in popularity of online streaming platforms such as Twitch (Martin, 2023), suggesting that this may have played a role in its notoriety. The game begins with the player avatar, 20-year-old Katie, arriving at her family's new house to find that no one is home. The player must piece together the story of Katie's family through environmental exploration and puzzle-solving with a focus on character building. The story plays out through written notes, recordings, and clues found within the house as well as periodic voice-over journals from Katie's sister, Sam. The player reconstructs Sam's story in which she meets a girl (Lonnie) at school, falls in love, and eventually leaves home to be with Lonnie. The romantic storyline subverts the horror themes that many gamers had expected.

The highly personal story gradually builds an intimate relationship between the player and characters. Great detail is given of Sam's life as a teenage girl to invite a more intimate understanding of her personality and choices. Sam's odd living situation in a large inherited estate causes her to feel like an outcast, the somewhat distant relationship between her mother and father begins to wear on her, and her budding romance with Lonnie sparks excitement to forge her own path. *Gone Home* depicts a young girl's journey of self-discovery by highlighting the context of her actions at every step, thus providing the player with an intimate level of relatability to a sexual orientation that, at the time of the game's 1990s setting, was still widely unaccepted by American society.

Gone Home won critical acclaim and commercial success, although scholars have debated whether the game adequately serves the queer community. Ruberg (2020) claims that the game undermines its

representative potential by employing heteronormative mechanics including the “on rails” storyline that pushes players towards completion and lessens the nuanced weight of the queer story elements. However, Pavlounis (2016) argues that the game’s interactive assets—diary entries, voiceovers, environmental storytelling—provide context vital to understanding the characters’ distinct experiences. To capture the important representative details of the story, it is reasonable to expect that the player should intimately understand the feelings, motivations, and choices of the characters. *Gone Home* is notable in its delivery of its story “in the service of raising awareness of the problems faced by marginalized groups within wider society” (Veale, 2017, p. 661). The game demonstrates the potential of digital games to engage players in compelling narratives and establish significant connections with the characters. It has played a role in the ongoing conversation about queer narratives in gaming, highlighting the complexity of queer representation within the medium.

In this study, we qualitatively examined the initial experiences of queer and non-queer gamers with *Gone Home*, focusing on their cognitive and affective responses to the game’s queer representation. Our goal was to capture players’ experiences and authentic reactions to the game’s storyline, particularly in the context of its subversion of horror genre expectations. *Gone Home* was mass marketed as a horror game, yet it unexpectedly features a deeply personal queer narrative, which we investigated for its potential to foster understanding and positive outcomes for both queer and non-queer players. Data included original written interviews with players collected via survey, as well as extant reviews of the game left on the Steam gaming platform. A thematic analysis was conducted to extract insights from these accounts, revealing how the game’s narrative and representation may serve as a source of understanding in a society where queer individuals often endure significant burdens. Additionally, we identified elements of *Gone Home* that demonstrate a foundation for improving queer representation in future video games.

METHOD

We conducted a thematic analysis of newly collected open-ended survey data ($N = 33$) and existing Steam reviews ($N = 424$) by adult players of the video game *Gone Home*. The study design was approved by the institutional review board at Fielding Graduate University.

Data Collection

Survey Interviews. We first conducted an online survey of adult players (age 18 or older) who had previously played *Gone Home*. Open-ended written interview questions for the survey are provided in Table 1. We recruited players from Twitch and Discord groups, including those dedicated to queer gamers and *Gone Home*. Notably, we encountered issues with bot data using generative AI to provide seemingly human answers to the interview questions³. After hand-reviewing all responses

³ Some of the authors on this paper are preparing a second paper dedicated to this specific issue and our strategies to identify and clean the

and scrubbing all potential bot activity, 33 participants were included in the sample. Reported participant ages ranged from 18 to 44 ($M = 29$, $SD = 5.5$) years old. For gender, 17 participants identified as female, 41 as male, and 2 as non-binary or other. For sexual orientation, 23 participants identified as straight, 4 as bisexual, 4 as gay or lesbian, and 1 as asexual. Participants could opt out of providing demographic data.

Steam Reviews. According to grounded theory, one way to determine how much data to collect for qualitative inquiry is the saturation point (Bowen, 2008). Saturation occurs when the researchers find that collecting new data is not providing new insights to the analysis process (e.g., Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Thus, as researchers, we needed to collect data until we had sufficient perspective to explore our research question—which our survey interviews did not fully provide.

To augment our survey responses, we extracted reviews from Steam, a popular online game platform that allows its users to leave reviews on games. We used the API provided by Steam to extract more than 13,000 reviews for *Gone Home* that were meta-tagged as English language. We filtered for reviews at least 50 characters in length and containing any of the following keywords: “gay,” “queer,” “same-sex,” and/or “LGBT(Q).” A total of 424 Steam reviews were included in the analysis. Within the sample, 61 players self-identified as queer within their Steam review. Because of Steam’s anonymous review submission process, data further identifying participant ages, gender, or sexual orientation was not available.

Data Analysis. We investigated the research questions using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This flexible approach emphasizes identifying patterns, or themes, within a data set. We created a hybrid codebook, developing “top-down” codes based on our literature review as well as “bottom-up” codes based on our data set. Data was coded using Dedoose content analysis software. After achieving inter-rater reliability ($kappa = 0.94$), two coders divided the remaining data and each coded half. Table 2 presents the frequency of codes applied to the data set.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Subverting Genre Expectations.

The Fullbright Company marketed *Gone Home* as a horror video game, set in an eerie, empty house. Players approached the mysterious atmosphere with the expectations set by traditional horror genre tropes—but as they went deeper into the game, it became apparent that it was not a typical haunted house tale. One player shared, “I was expecting a horror and got a slice of life.” Another elaborated, “As a horror nerd... my favorite thing might be the way this game plays on horror tropes with incredible subtlety, creating a palpable tension that leads you through the whole game.” These responses highlight how the game leveraged genre expectations to engage players before subverting them entirely.

data. Namely, we were able to use Qualtrics’s built-in report of how long the user took to complete the survey to identify responses that were not possible unless done by a programmed script (Barker et al., in preparation).

Ultimately, *Gone Home* delivered a completely different experience, with its unexpected focus on a queer romantic storyline disarming players in a way that proved transformative. As one player explained, “This game is NOT so much about mystery and clue-solving as it is about guiding players into experiencing 2 gay girls’ secret love.” This narrative twist became pivotal to the game’s unique appeal. One player described the game as “slow, quiet, atmospheric, beautiful, and so very, very queer.” The surprising shift in narrative aligns with expectancy theory, which posits that players’ initial expectations are key in shaping their overall experiences (Elson et al., 2014). In the case of *Gone Home*, the game subverts its horror setup by gradually revealing a heartfelt queer romantic storyline, contrasting sharply with the suspenseful horror elements players initially anticipated.

Many layers praised the game’s narrative structure, with one player writing, “The game compels you to keep exploring through intrigue and curiosity alone...It’s up to you to choose your pace and to make connections between the pieces of information you discover.” Another player expanded on this, sharing that *Gone Home* is “often dismissed as a ‘walking simulator,’ but fully deserves the more descriptive title ‘environmental narrative game.’” The player further shared, “While the surface appearance may put the player in mind of a horror game, this brief...experience instead provides a humanizing and sympathetic look into a family and its reaction to trials and tribulations.”

For many queer players, the game resonated on a deeply personal level. Player sentiments captured how *Gone Home* became more than just a narrative experience; it served as a representation of queer voices in gaming. One reviewer wrote, “*Gone Home* is a game that means a lot to me. As a lesbian, I find it so nice that the story is about queer characters.” The emotional weight of the game was not lost on other players, who found themselves captivated by the overall execution. As one player explained, “the art, the voice acting, the way the environment makes you feel and how the story unfolds, the mystery and drama, the love put into this game can probably be felt by anyone who plays it.” Such reflections underscore the game’s ability to balance its emotional and narrative depth with its subversion of expectations, creating an impactful and lasting impression on its audience.

Immersion through Spatial Presence and ‘90s Nostalgia.

Immersion was central to the *Gone Home* experience, drawing players deeply into its world through its atmosphere, design, and storytelling. One player encapsulated the game’s multifaceted appeal, saying, “The music, the ambiance, the atmosphere, the story, the queer representation—I love everything about this game.” Such reflections highlight the game’s ability to create a believable and engaging environment that resonated with its audience. Another emphasized how the game’s realism and narrative depth enhanced their connection: “The atmosphere, music, and exploration are all pretty cool.”

Through clever design choices, *Gone Home* subverted genre expectations while immersing players in a story world rich with detail and emotion. The spatial layout of the Greenbriar house invited exploration, allowing players to piece together the narrative room by room. This

environmental storytelling was praised by players, with one player noting that the “mundane yet meticulously crafted details of the house added depth to the characters' lives.” This attention to detail not only grounded the story in realism but also fostered a sense of physical presence in the game's setting. Another player observed, “You get to learn about the entire family just by snooping through their stuff.”

Many players consistently highlighted how the immersive atmosphere heightened their connection to the narrative. One player shared:

The atmosphere is also great, the ambient sounds really help with the realism. Feels a bit creepy at times and almost tricks you into thinking ‘wait, was this a horror game and I didn’t realise it?’ but I can promise there are no jump scares...Just go with the flow and follow along with the story. I really connected with Sam’s character, and the ending was beautiful.

These accounts emphasize how spatial presence and subtle environmental cues drew players into the unfolding story, creating a deeply engaging and personal experience.

The game's 1990s setting added another layer of immersion, particularly for players who grew up during that era. Nostalgia—a longing for meaningful past experiences—played a significant role in enhancing players' emotional engagement with the narrative (Naidu et al., 2024). The *Gone Home* soundtrack, featuring grunge and alternative music, transported players back to a time when female rockers were at their peak. One player described the experience as “a wonderful interactive storytelling experience filled with nostalgia, and best of all, relatable queer female characters.” Another reflected on how the setting allowed them to “explore a family home and gain insight into the challenges faced by an LGBTQ+ teenager.” This nostalgic connection deepened the emotional impact of the game, as players found themselves not just engaging with a story but reliving a slice of '90s culture.

Connections through Transportation and Identification

The inclusion of a queer storyline in *Gone Home* enabled many players to form profound emotional bonds with the characters and the evolving narrative. This connection aligns with the principles of narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000), which posits that immersion in a story world fosters empathy and emotional engagement with its characters. One player validated this impact, sharing, “[This is the most emotional I’ve ever been while playing a game. In fact, I think it’s the only time a game has made me cry.](#)”

Narrative transportation often serves as a precursor to character identification, which involves vicarious cognitive perspective-taking, emotional empathy, and motivational goal-sharing with the character while absorbed in the story world (Cohen, 2001). In our sample, many players demonstrated strong identification with Katie, the player avatar, as well as with the other key characters. One player recounted, “[I felt real, physical relief that ‘my’ family were okay... Then I felt somewhat annoyed at Sam for running away like that, and also worried about her.](#)” Another remarked that the game is a “[celebration of queer love and explores the many thought processes of the characters experiencing it.](#)”

Players tracked the motivations and goals of the romantic couple Sam and Lonnie, empathizing with their decisions and struggles. One reviewer wrote, “The story portrays the couple in a way that makes you root for them.” Through this lens, players were able to understand the reasoning behind Sam’s choices—including running away from home—and felt her actions were justified. As one player explained, “Hearing Sam’s disappointment in her parents’ reaction and how she didn’t feel validated was very moving. And then of course there’s a worry she might be sent to a conversion camp... It makes the rashness of her later actions understandable.” These emotional connections created a deep sense of empathy, allowing players to relate to the challenges faced by Sam and Lonnie, as well as to their triumphs. One player summed up this emotional journey, sharing, “By the end I was tearing up, and I am a sucker for games that can make you feel something.” Another expressed the lasting emotional impact of the game, stating, *Gone Home* will “serve as a game people can look back on with empathy.”

Research by Przybylski et al. (2012) further supports the concept of players forming strong connections with game characters through the lens of their ideal selves. The emotional resonance experienced by players in *Gone Home*, particularly within the queer community, demonstrates the game’s capacity to enable players to connect with characters who align with their internal identities. This ideal self-identification fosters a stronger emotional connection and highlights the game’s effectiveness as a storytelling medium. One player described their experience, sharing:

I had my cry out while playing this game and it was pretty cathartic in a way. The lines and parallels were pretty on point so, I felt an emotional connection to the character as she speak. Because I know exactly what she’s going through and saw myself on my own situations related to specific people in my life.”

Many players reflected on how their emotional connections with Katie and Sam extended beyond the game, encouraging self-reflection. One player, who had a deeply personal experience with the game, shared:

Played it before I knew I was a gay gal, and it made me cry and feel things I couldn’t describe. Played it again now, with about 8 years more context and life experience, and I cried even more—this game is so beautiful and Sam is such a relatable (and perfectly voice acted) character, it just cuts deep.”

While some queer players questioned whether non-queer players could share the same emotional experience, many acknowledged the potential for identification across different lived experiences. One reviewer reflected, “The game was an emotional trip that made me connect with the characters and feel their sadness and happiness,” but suggested that “non-gays may not receive the same experience.” Despite this claim, through the processes of identification, non-queer players were able to adopt the cognitive, emotional, and motivational perspectives of the characters, allowing them to “think and explore important themes such as family, love, and gender.”

The emotional resonance and capacity for identification in *Gone Home* demonstrate its unique ability to foster empathy and self-reflection in its players. By creating a narrative space where players could connect with

and even assume the roles of its characters, the game offered an experience that resonated deeply across diverse audiences.

Affirmation and Belonging

A sense of belonging is fundamental to human well-being. Research indicates that community connectedness acts as a protective factor against mental health challenges, offering resilience in the face of adversity (Kaniuka et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many individuals within the queer community experience feelings of disconnection, both from themselves and from others. Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir (2018) refers to this experience as a “sense of unbelonging” (p. 32). *Gone Home* poignantly addresses these themes, highlighting the challenges faced by queer individuals, not only in society but within the familial context as well. The game’s portrayal of exclusion and lack of acceptance within family structures elicited strong emotional responses from players. As one player expressed, “So many people have [gone] through what Sam has gone through—including myself; it feels awful when one of your closest people just downright ignores who you really are.”

The game’s authentic representation of queer characters allowed many players to feel affirmed, empowered, and celebrated. One reviewer reflected, “At the end of the day the story was essentially affirming the two women.” While *Gone Home* did not shy away from depicting Sam’s struggles with her family, it also presented her relationship with Lonnie as a source of belonging and support. This narrative balance proved uplifting for many queer players. One player noted, “As a member of the LGBT community, it’s very uplifting.” For these players, Sam’s journey from rejection to finding love and affirmation mirrored their own experiences, offering both solace and inspiration.

The impact of this representation extended beyond individual players, fostering broader reflections on the importance of queer narratives in media. One player shared, “I’m so glad to see increasing LGBTQ representation in video games, and the love story...is achingly sweet. This is a game I return to every so often as I would a favorite movie. Ultimately: a rewarding experience.” Such reflections underscore the significance of authentic representation in fostering belonging and validating the experiences of marginalized groups.

Beyond individual affirmation, *Gone Home* also contributed to advancing conversations around diversity and inclusion in the gaming industry. One player highlighted this potential, stating, *Gone Home* “expands the possibilities of games as a storytelling medium and helps promote diversity and inclusion in the industry.” Through its nuanced portrayal of queer characters and their relationships, the game demonstrated how video games can serve as a powerful platform for representation, empathy, and connection.

For many queer players, the experience of Sam’s journey—from isolation and rejection to love and affirmation—served as a mirror to their own lives, allowing them to process both their struggles and triumphs. This duality of representation, balancing the hardships of exclusion with the joy of belonging, made *Gone Home* a uniquely impactful narrative experience. It not only affirmed the identities of queer players but also contributed to a broader cultural understanding of the importance of inclusion in media.

Negative Responses

While our investigation primarily focused on the positive impacts of authentic queer representation in video games, *Gone Home* elicited mixed reactions, with some responding negatively to the game's queer storyline and subversion of traditional gaming expectations. This aligns with previous research by Liu (2016), which found that unmet expectations in online games can lead to dissatisfaction among players. Similarly, some *Gone Home* players expressed frustration, disappointment, or even a sense of deception when the game deviated from the traditional horror or puzzle-based experience they had anticipated. One player commented, "You think it's going to be creepy... turns out your sister is a lezbo and ran off with her gay partner."

For others, the frustration stemmed from a perception that the game prioritized a social or political agenda over gameplay. One reviewer shared, "I thought this would be a murder mystery but got woke propaganda about LGBT and smashing the patriarchy instead." Another remarked, "This game could have been good if it was about mystery or ghosts or something... instead it exists only to further push the gay agenda down our throats." These reactions highlight the resistance that some players felt toward the game's narrative focus and its departure from traditional gaming norms.

In response to such criticisms, other players emphasized the game's focus on fostering empathy and understanding. As one reviewer argued, "This game is about empathy. You do not have to kill anyone or save the world. You just have to imagine yourself a 17-year-old queer girl, and it seems like it's very hard for some people." This defence underscores the broader purpose of *Gone Home* as a storytelling experience that challenges players to connect with perspectives different from their own. However, for some players, this emotional and narrative approach was insufficient to outweigh their disappointment with the gameplay itself. These players found the plot to be underwhelming, describing it as "typical angsty gay teenage drama" or simply "boring." One player stated bluntly, "Just because a game promotes LGBT stuff doesn't mean it's good."

Another source of frustration for some players was the game's short duration, which may have amplified their unmet expectations. As a narrative-focused game that can be completed in just a few hours, *Gone Home* likely diverged from the expectations of players seeking a more intricate or extended gaming experience. According to Elson et al. (2014), narrative mechanics and the context in which a game is framed play a critical role in shaping players' reactions. For some, the unexpected storyline in *Gone Home* felt like a bait-and-switch, leaving them feeling "tricked" into engaging with a narrative they hadn't signed up for.

These polarized responses illustrate the challenges and complexities of creating games that prioritize authentic representation while subverting traditional genre conventions. While *Gone Home* succeeded in resonating deeply with many players, its narrative and thematic focus were not universally appreciated, particularly among those who entered the game with different expectations or preferences for gameplay and storytelling.

Authentic Representation

The queer representation in *Gone Home* is presented through a non-stereotypical lens, providing both queer and non-queer gamers with an authentic and nuanced portrayal of the lived experiences of Sam and Lonnie. This approach avoids reductive or overly idealized depictions of queer characters, instead embracing complexity and realism. As one player noted, “If you are not sure what it is like to go through being a gay teen, this perfectly encapsulates it.” This statement underscores the game’s ability to convey the emotional and social realities of being a queer teenager, particularly during a time when acceptance was less common.

Our thematic analysis reveals that “positive representation” does not necessarily equate to a storyline where everything is easy or ideal for the characters. Instead, it involves portraying characters and their journeys with verisimilitude—balancing struggles and triumphs in ways that feel genuine. Sam and Lonnie’s relationship exemplifies this authenticity, offering players a window into the challenges and joys faced by queer individuals in the 1990s. The story’s grounding in this specific cultural and historical context enhances its impact, making it both relatable and thought-provoking.

The portrayal of Sam and Lonnie invites players to engage with the broader challenges experienced by queer individuals navigating societal and familial rejection. However, it also highlights the resilience and connection that can be found in affirming relationships. This duality makes the narrative not only relatable but also emotionally resonant for players. By depicting both the hardships and the meaningful connections in Sam and Lonnie’s lives, *Gone Home* delivers a portrayal of queer identities that feels deeply human.

CONCLUSION

Media representation has the potential to provide validation, increase feelings of belongingness, and bolster the identity development of queer audiences—a group vulnerable to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral burdens as well as many mental health challenges. Yet, compared to other mediums, research is only beginning to explore the psychological benefits of queer representation in video games. To begin addressing this gap, we conducted a thematic analysis of newly collected survey responses and extant Steam reviews to understand players’ thoughts and feelings around *Gone Home*, which is noted for subverting expectations as a horror, puzzle-based game to deliver a queer romantic storyline. Our findings indicate that these subverted expectations can either disarm players and allow them to engage more deeply, or frustrate them.

For many players, the unexpected queer storyline created an empathetic emotional experience, as they were able to identify with the characters and storylines. The walking simulator gameplay and the nostalgia of the ‘90s setting—particularly the music—gave players a sense of spatial presence that enhanced the immersive nature of the game and allowed them to be transported into the story world. For other players, the queer storyline felt like a bait-and-switch or hidden “agenda” to other players who were expecting a horror-themed, puzzle-based game. However, many players’ frustrations were due to the short nature of the game for its price point. Additionally, some reviews expressed frustration or prejudice towards the game’s queer themes and characters, and often

used complaints about the games' design, gameplay, and aesthetics, as a vessel to express those prejudicial attitudes.

Through our qualitative analysis, we found evidence that queer representation in a video game can help players feel "seen" by either reflecting their own sense of identity or helping them develop a better understanding of it. Furthermore, many players evaluated the queer characters and storyline in terms of authenticity and verisimilitude. In relation to *Gone Home*'s emphasis on belonging and support within a family unit, players tended to elaborate on the sister bond between Katie, the playable avatar, and her sister Sam whose queer storyline is revealed throughout the game.

As we continue to learn more about the importance of representation and diversity of perspectives in media, it is also important to note that consumers consistently report the importance of feeling seen and having their experiences validated in their fictional media. Our results based on *Gone Home* are consistent with previous research on these social issues. These results also further extend our understanding of the social, developmental, and individual-level impacts that inclusive media portrayals can evoke.

This research will hopefully spark further inquiries into the affirmative and positive psychological impact of queer representation within video games. Future studies could quantitatively test the causality, directionality, and correlational relationships between the main constructs of interest such as authentic representation, nostalgia, and identification. Isolating these effects would create a more holistic understanding of the importance and impact of representation on players' immersion and enjoyment of video games with queer themes, characters, and narratives. Future research could also identify the individual differences, attitudes, and beliefs that intersect with why some reviews were hostile, prejudiced, and negative towards the game's queer themes. Finally, future research should consider titles with transgender representation, another group within the LGBTQ+ community that was not addressed within our study on *Gone Home*.

We hope this research contributes to the growing conversation around what representation in media can look like for various social groups, and the communities and stories that emerge as we consciously create more inclusive and representative media. We also encourage more social scientists, developers, artists, and consumers to be thoughtful about the importance of diversification and representation in media, both to help improve individual psychological experiences of playing games but also grow the accessibility and potential audience for interactive media.

REFERENCES

- Beagan, B. L., Bizzeth, S. R., Pride, T. M., & Sibbald, K. R. (2022). LGBTQ+ identity concealment and disclosure within the (heteronormative) health professions: "Do I? Do I not? And what are the potential consequences?" *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, 2, 100114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100114>
- Blackburn, G., & Scharrer, E. (2019). Video Game Playing and Beliefs about Masculinity Among Male and Female Emerging Adults. *Sex Roles*, 80(5–6), 310–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0934-4>

- Barker, S; Miles-Novelo, A; Shackelford, K; Reed, P & Bond, S. (In Preparation). Beyond Click Farms: AI Bots and the Future of Qualitative Inquiry.
- Bond, B. J. (2014). Sex and Sexuality in Entertainment Media Popular With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Mass Communication and Society*, 17(1), 98–120.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2013.816739>
- Bond, B. J. (2015). The Mediating Role of Self-Discrepancies in the Relationship Between Media Exposure and Well-Being Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 18(1), 51–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2014.917591>
- Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae: Why They Matter and How They Differ Among Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 21(3), 457–485.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1416295>
- Bond, B. J. (2023). PS and identity among LGBTQ media users. In R. Tukachinsky Forster (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Parasocial Experiences* (pp. 291–308). Oxford University Press.
- Bowen, G. A. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 137–152.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107085301>
- Bragança, L., Mota, R., & Fantini, E. (2016). *Twine Game Narrative and discussion about LGBTQ representation*. Proceedings of SBGames, 937-946.
- Brandes, A. (2014). The negative effect of stigma, discrimination, and the health care system on the health of gender and sexual minorities. *Tulane Journal of Law & Sexuality*, 23, 155. ISSN 2688-5786.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Cary, L. A., Axt, J., & Chasteen, A. L. (2020). The interplay of individual differences, norms, and group identification in predicting prejudiced behavior in online video game interactions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 50(11), e12700. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12700>
- Craig, S. L., McInroy, L., McCready, L. T., & Alaggia, R. (2015). Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(3), 254–275.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193>
- Cohen, J. (2001). Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters. *Mass Communication and Society*, 4(3), 245–264.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01
- Conroy, M., Cassese, E., Duckert, L., Espinoza, C., Meyer, M., Reay, E., Shackelford, K., & Urban, D. (2023). Changing the narrative: Why representation in video games matters [White Paper]. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. <https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-GDI-Gaming-Report-v2.pdf>
- Crombie, Z. (2018, May 12). *From bad to better: A brief history of LGBT+ video game characters*. Affinity Magazine.
<https://culture.affinitymagazine.us/from-bad-to-better-a-brief-history-of-lgbt-video-game-characters/>
- Daneels, R., Bowman, N. D., Possler, D., & Mekler, E. D. (2021). The ‘Eudaimonic Experience’: A Scoping Review of the Concept in Digital Games Research. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 178–190.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3824>

- Darling-Hammond, S., Michaels, E. K., Allen, A. M., Chae, D. H., Thomas, M. D., Nguyen, T. T., Mujahid, M. M., & Johnson, R. C. (2020). After "The China Virus" Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans. *Health Education & Behavior*, 47(6), 870–879. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120957949>
- Dees, T. B. (2025). *The silent struggle: Exploring depression, anxiety, and emotion dysregulation in sexual identity concealment and disclosure during emerging adulthood* [Master's thesis, Texas Tech University]. Texas Tech University Repository. <https://hdl.handle.net/2346/102294>
- Dill, K. E., & Burgess, M. C. R. (2013). Influence of Black Masculinity Game Exemplars on Social Judgments. *Simulation & Gaming*, 44(4), 562–585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878112449958>
- Dill-Shackleford, K. E., Ramasubramanian, S., Behm-Morawitz, E., Scharrer, E., Burgess, M. C. R., & Lemish, D. (2017). Social Group Stories in the Media and Child Development. *Paediatrics*, 140(Supplement_2), S157–S161. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1758W>
- Ellefsen, U. (2024). Censorship in Video Game Localisation. In *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Censorship* (pp. 505–518). Routledge.
- Elson, M., Breuer, J., Ivory, J. D., & Quandt, T. (2014). More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context in Digital Games. *Journal of Communication*, 64(3), 521–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12096>
- Fantone, L. (2014). Video games and queerness in California. *Digital Creativity*, 25(4), 357–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2014.906918>
- Ferchaud, A., Seibert, J., Sellers, N., & Escobar Salazar, N. (2020). Reducing Mental Health Stigma Through Identification With Video Game Avatars With Mental Illness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2240. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02240>
- Fusch, P., & Ness, L. (2015). Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2281>
- The Fullbright Company (2013). *Gone Home*. The Fullbright Company.
- Gillin, L. E., & Signorella, M. L. (2023). Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Online Multiplayer Gaming Spaces. *Psychological Reports*, 0(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941231153798>
- González-Velázquez, C. A., Shackleford, K. E., Keller, L. N., Vinney, C., & Drake, L. M. (2020). Watching Black Panther with racially diverse youth: Relationships between film viewing, ethnicity, ethnic identity, empowerment, and wellbeing. *Review of Communication*, 20(3), 250–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2020.1778067>
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Hemenover, S. H., & Bowman, N. D. (2018). Video games, emotion, and emotion regulation: Expanding the scope. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42(2), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2018.1442239>

- Huang, Y.-T., & Chan, R. C. H. (2022). Effects of sexual orientation concealment on well-being among sexual minorities: How and when does concealment hurt? *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 69(5), 630–641. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000623>
- Kaniuka, A., Pugh, K. C., Jordan, M., Brooks, B., Dodd, J., Mann, A. K., Williams, S. L., & Hirsch, J. K. (2019). Stigma and suicide risk among the LGBTQ population: Are anxiety and depression to blame and can connectedness to the LGBTQ community help? *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 23(2), 205–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2018.1560385>
- Kiperman, S., Schacter, H. L., Judge, M., & DeLong, G. (2022). LGBTQ+ Youth's Identity Development in the Context of Peer Victimization: A Mixed Methods Investigation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(7), 3921. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19073921>
- Beth D. Kivel, Douglas A. Kleiber. (2000). Leisure in the Identity Formation of Lesbian/Gay Youth: Personal, but Not Social. *Leisure Sciences*, 22(4), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490409950202276>
- Kohlburn, J., Cho, H., & Moore, H. (2023). Players' perceptions of sexuality and gender-inclusive video games a pragmatic content analysis of steam reviews. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 29(2), 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221137481>
- Krobová, T., Moravec, O., & Švelch, J. (2015). Dressing Commander Shepard in pink: Queer playing in a heteronormative game culture. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-3-3>
- Liu, C.-C. (2016). Understanding player behavior in online games: The role of gender. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 111, 265–274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2016.07.018>
- Martin, R. (2023, November 15). [Updated 2024, October 14]. *Twitch: American video service*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Twitch-service>
- McInroy, L. B., Beer, O. W. J., Scheadler, T. R., Craig, S. L., & Eaton, A. D. (2024). Exploring the psychological and physiological impacts of digital microaggressions and hostile online climates on LGBTQ + youth. *Current Psychology*, 43(3), 2586–2596. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04435-1>
- McInroy, L. B., Zapcic, I., & Beer, O. W. (2022). Online fandom communities as networked counterpublics: LGBTQ+ youths' perceptions of representation and community climate. *Convergence (London, England)*, 28(3), 629–647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211032377>
- Naidu, E., Gabriel, S., Wildschut, T., & Sedikides, C. (2024). Reliving the Good Old Days: Nostalgia Increases Psychological Wellbeing Through Collective Effervescence. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 15(1), 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221149813>
- Oliver, M. B., Bowman, N. D., Woolley, J. K., Rogers, R., Sherrick, B. I., & Chung, M.-Y. (2016). Video games as meaningful entertainment experiences. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 5(4), 390–405. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000066>
- Pachankis, J. E., Cochran, S. D., & Mays, V. M. (2015). The mental health of sexual minority adults in and out of the closet: A population-based

- study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 83(5), 890–901. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000047>
- Parshakov, P., Naidenova, I., Gomez-Gonzalez, C., & Nessler, C. (2022). Do LGBTQ-Supportive Corporate Policies Affect Consumer Behavior? Evidence from the Video Game Industry. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 187, 421–432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05137-7>
- Pavlounis, D. (2016). Straightening Up the Archive: Queer Historiography, Queer Play, and the Archival Politics of Gone Home. *Television & New Media*, 17(7), 579–594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416631627>
- Pithavadian, R. & Battin, J. (2024). The Profitable Use of Whiteness in the Videogaming Industry. In: Ravulo, J., Olcoñ, K., Dune, T., Workman, A., Liamputtong, P. (eds) *Handbook of Critical Whiteness*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1612-0_35-1
- Przybylski, A. K., Weinstein, N., Murayama, K., Lynch, M. F., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). The Ideal Self at Play: The Appeal of Video Games That Let You Be All You Can Be. *Psychological Science*, 23(1), 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611418676>
- Quinlan, E. (2016, April 6). “Gone home” is still queer, finally here for PS4 and Xbox. Autostraddle. <https://www.autostraddle.com/gone-home-is-still-queer-finally-here-for-ps4-and-xbox-332064/>
- Rivera, S. (2022). From Battleground to Playground: The Video Game Avatar as Transitional Phenomenon for a Transgender Patient. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 70(3), 485–510. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651221104487>
- Ruberg, B. (2015). No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2(2), 108–124. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0108>
- Ruberg, B. (2020). Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in Gone Home. *Games and Culture*, 15(6), 632–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019826746>
- Salerno, J. P., Devadas, J., Pease, M., Nketia, B., & Fish, J. N. (2020). Sexual and Gender Minority Stress Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for LGBTQ Young Persons’ Mental Health and Well-Being. *Public Health Reports*, 135(6), 721–727. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354920954511>
- Scharrer, E., & Ramasubramanian, S. (2015). Intervening in the Media’s Influence on Stereotypes of Race and Ethnicity: The Role of Media Literacy Education. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71(1), 171–185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12103>
- Shaw, A. (2009). Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games. *Games and Culture*, 4(3), 228–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339729>
- Shaw, A. (2015). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Shaw, A., Lauteria, E. W., Hocheol Yang, Persaud, C. J., & Cole, A. M. (2019). Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985–2005. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 1544–1569.
- Sólveigar- Guðmundsdóttir, L. (2018). Exclusionary moments: Queer desires and migrants’ sense of (un)belonging. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 28, 32–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.06.003>

- Sylva, D., Rieger, G., Linsenmeier, J.A.W. et al. Concealment of Sexual Orientation. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39, 141–152 (2010).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9466-2>
- Tao, R., Nguyen, N., Lu, L., Sun, L., Gill, H., Christy, K., & Riddle, K. (2023). Learning Through Rewards: Priming and Identification as Psychological Mechanisms of the Effects of LGBTQ+ Narratives on Inclusive Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions. *Media Psychology*, 27(2), 186–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2023.2229233>
- The Trevor Project. (2022). *2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>
- Veale, K. (2017). Gone Home, and the power of affective nostalgia. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23(7), 654–666.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1262447>
- Vu, A. H., Amoah, E., & Reis, H. T. (2024) Icons and Idols: Parasocial Relationship Development and Implications for Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Individuals. *The Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*, 11, 45-55.
- Yao, M. Z., Mahood, C., & Linz, D. (2010). Sexual Priming, Gender Stereotyping, and Likelihood to Sexually Harass: Examining the Cognitive Effects of Playing a Sexually-Explicit Video Game. *Sex Roles*, 62(1–2), 77–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9695-4>
- Zagorski, N. (2022). For LGBTQ+ Individuals, Video Games Offer Community, Escape. *Psychiatric News*, 57(12),
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.pn.2022.12.12.38>

Appendix

Table 1. Interview Questions

Q1	Where did you hear about GONE HOME for the first time?
Q2	Did you know anything about GONE HOME prior to playing it yourself? If so, what did you know?
Q3	What are some things that you remember most about the game GONE HOME from when you played it?
Q4	Did you think the story line was generally supportive of the two young women who were the couple at the center of the story? Why or why not?
Q5	Did you find the game shows support and empathy for queer community members? Why or why not?
Q6	Do you have any thoughts about the game being set in the 1990s in terms of the family's reaction to the teen daughter?
Q7	What do you think the legacy of GONE HOME is in the history of video games?
Q8	What do you think of GONE HOME as a video game and as a story? E.g., is the game better, is the story better, or neither?
Q9	Are there other games featuring queer storylines that you think are worthy of mention? Comments on what the "best" queer related games are?
Q10	What did you think about the ending of the game?
Q11	In a typical week, about how often do you play video games?

Table 2. Codes by frequency

Code	Definition	Total
Diary (Plot Realization)	Player has cognitive or emotional response to learning about the queer narrative, via Sam's diary.	75
Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation	Players reacts to Sam embracing her gender expression, identity, and sexual orientation while navigating a difficult family environment.	57
Spatial Presence	Sense of being present in the mediated environment.	44
ID: Perspective-taking	Player feels they understand a character and the motivations for their behavior.	36
ID: Empathy	Player shares the feelings of a character.	24
Parasocial Experience	Player expresses sense of familiarity and intimacy with a character.	23
Physical Home	Player feels a connection to the physical home (e.g., house, photos of the biological family, and the environment).	20
Family	Player responds to how the family enforced the family history, societal norms and constructs on Sam to conform.	19
Nostalgia	Sentimental longingness to return to a meaningful place, time, or person—fictional or real—that makes you feel hedonic	19

	(pleasure/enjoyment) or eudemonic (meaning/purpose) happiness.	
Emotional Home	Player reacts to Sam finding her "emotional home" in her relationship with Lonnie.	14
ID: Goal Sharing	Player internalizes and shares the goals of a character.	1