

inQuiry

Designing Proper Queer Representation in Video Games



What is inQuiry?

inQuiry is a narrative video game centered on Q, a young gay detective in 1980s New York City. He must balance his professional career with his personal life before the two eventually collide. Its intended users are queer people that need to feel empowered by representation and nonqueer people in order to learn about the gay experience.



Art mockups from *Darkside Detective*

What function does it serve?

Video games are not solely an art form—they fulfill the real function of simulating a different life, a different body. This means that queer representation—good *or* bad, has implications for how people embody being queer and therefore how they view it. inQuiry, then, has the allowance of simulating the life of a gay person and aims to teach about the gay experience by taking advantage of this.

Gameplay AND narrative

Video games with queer storylines often either focus on narrative at the cost of gameplay or have appealing gameplay but harmful representation. inQuiry aims to strike the balance between the two.



Video games often lack meaningful and healthy representation. Queer people are relegated to flat, supporting roles, and are often the villains. *GTA V*'s Trevor Phillips, for example, is at once bisexual, a kidnapper, and a drug smuggler.



The few healthy queer representations in video games depart from traditionally gamey elements—titles like *Dream Daddy* and *Butterfly Soup* focus on dialogue and narrative at the cost of being more visual novels than games.



What design challenges does inQuiry answer?

Telling a story ↔ VS ↔ Making a fun game

Creating multifaceted representation ↔ VS ↔ Representing the queer community coherently





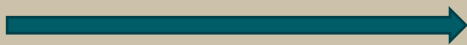
Narrative

Telling an authentic queer narrative.

inQuiry revolves around Q, a young, gay, closeted detective in 1980s New York City. The narrative is balanced around two subplots: Q's faltering relationship with his fiancé and the rise in activity of a notorious crime gang in the city.

It represents a balancing of his personal and professional lives, which by the end of the story he must combine if he wants to be fulfilled in both.

Personal life



Secrecy, desire, love

Secrecy, danger, pain



Professional life

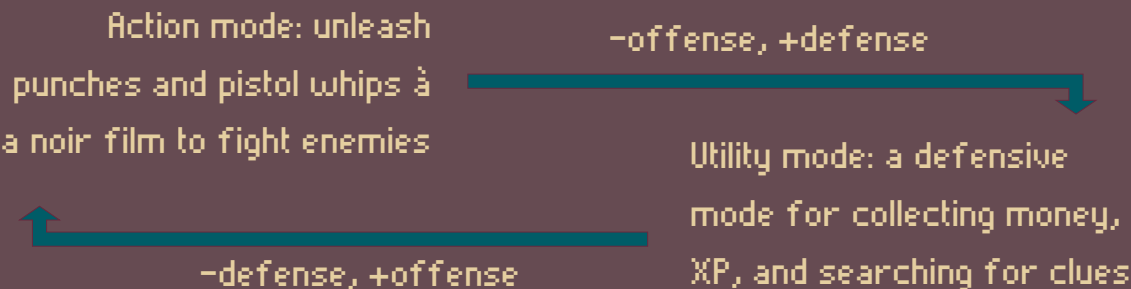
Conceptual model of the narrative.



Gameplay

Conceptual models of traditional elements of play.

Core gameplay loop: moment-to-moment decision-making



Overarching linear progression:

As Q collects resources in the core gameplay loop, he continues to unlock new innate capabilities.

Alongside this, the story progresses and battles get more difficult.

inquiry and the Queer Experience

Bridging the gap between gameplay elements and narrative significance.

Users will not only play as Q; they will embody him. Therefore, they are taught, through mechanics and dynamics, about aspects of being gay.

Homosexuality as offensive and defensive



Gay people must at once defend their sexuality and proudly assert it. This is reflected in the Q's dual-modes in the core gameplay loop.

Resilience



The forward progress of the gameplay's linear progression represents a common queer narrative: that "it gets better."

Homosexuality as an embodied experience

If video games are the ultimate design for embodiment, the act of playing as Q represents an ultimate form of representation.

More in the manifesto...

Manifesto

Embodiment as an affordance; progress as a conceptual model:

Queer representation in video games too often villainizes and pathologizes homosexuality. Queerness is reserved for supporting characters and is often not explicitly represented—leaving an audience with ambiguity about a character’s sexuality. In these cases they will always be assumed to be straight. The trope of trans people as prostitutes is pervasive in high crime simulation games and gay people have otherwise been represented as rapists, villains, and violent criminals.

On the other hand, the few healthy representations of queer people in video games depart from traditionally “gamey” elements and often are experienced more as visual novels (VNs) than games. In these visual novels, the extent of gameplay is often solely selecting dialogue options, sacrificing the richness of embodiment, of movement and action and reaction, in order to focus on storytelling.

If video games are the ultimate form of embodiment, harmful representation has the capability of embodying queerness *incorrectly*, either by being too gameplay-focused or too narrative-focused.

inQuiry aims to strike a balance between the two, deconstructing the duality between narrative and gameplay. It aims to tell a story centered on a gay character while not departing from the medium—instead, using gameplay mechanics as an opportunity to communicate the queer experience. It embraces the affordance of embodiment lent by the video game medium and uses it to place the user in the shoes of a heroic gay protagonist whose struggles to balance his secret fiancé and his life as a detective are sympathetic.

As a designed object, it relies on embodiment as its primary affordance. Its target users are first and foremost queer people, for whom representation can translate into social and political empowerment. Secondly, it could be used to casually introduce nonqueer people to queer narratives, and thereby combat homophobia, at least on the level of exposure.

Manifesto

Here are outlined some of the relations between gameplay elements and narrative messages:

On resilience: Throughout the game, as enemies get more difficult, Q only gets stronger. The player continues to unlock Q's innate abilities as the game progresses, representing his growth into accepting himself and being more powerful for it. This overall, linear conceptual model of the game becomes a statement about the resilience of coming to terms with one's sexuality.

On duality: In the core gameplay loop, the balance between offense and defensive gameplay modes represents the balance between Q's professional life as a detective and his personal life as a closeted gay man (with a fiancé, no less). There is both beauty and pain in the gay community as well, and in that an offensiveness and defensiveness. These, as well, are represented by the dual gameplay modes.

Narrative and Gameplay

inQuiry must serve as both a good *game* and a good *story*. On the first front, it aims to keep the player in the flow state, diagrammed in a conceptual model on page 4. It has a core gameplay loop that is repeated in the moment: at a fundamental level, the game is about switching between modes for action (offensive, defeating enemies) and utility (defensive, collecting resources, searching bodies for evidence). This loop follows an overarching progression of getting harder and harder to maintain as the game progresses and player skill goes up. In this way, skill matches difficulty, and the player stays engaged, i.e., in a *flow* state.

On the second objective of being a good story, it is written with two simultaneous plots that mirror each other: both entrenched in secrecy. Detective work, then, becomes an analogue for being gay and closeted, and one that Q must navigate. 1980s New York City was the center of the AIDS epidemic, a powerful and emotional setting for the queer community and a haunting backdrop for the story. inQuiry and its eponymous protagonist echo "queer."

Manifesto

The pitfalls of representation

inQuiry does, however, face some challenges in its final goal of empowering queer people. Any act of simplifying a community's experience into one storyline by nature misses out on some of the richness of that community. Q is, after all, a cisgendered gay man who, as a closeted gay man, passes for straight. This by no means represents the wholeness of the queer experience.

Also, there is some disconnect between fiction and reality. While the game may be a good form of representation, does it really translate into real-world change in opinion? Does it distract from more realistic queer problems by fictionalizing queer issues into a detective story?

Despite these possible dangers, inQuiry attempts to be a step in the right direction for queer representation in video games: one that tells an authentic queer story but does so while fully embracing the medium: affording empowerment through affording embodiment. It is, at the highest level, an attempt at clarifying human connection and at allowing queer people to be seen as they are. This, being communicated through the embodiment of a queer person, represents an intimately unique affordance offered by the video game medium. It aims towards *eudaimonia* in allowing a person to achieve functional excellence: the primary function of a human being to experience the human condition in all of its richness.