Assassins’ Queer’d: 
Queerness represented by *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s* main characters

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1 Introduction

From dusky little arcades to the comfort one’s own home, in its over 40 years of existence gaming industry has revolutionised the fields of entertainment and pop culture. In the past few decades, gaming industry has risen from a small business to a global marketing power, one that has the capability to hugely influence other sectors of marketing. According ESA (Entertainment Software Association) video games produced over 22 billion USD in 2014 in United States alone and the estimated global net worth for the whole industry was around 90 billion USD that same year. The average video game player, often shortened to gamer, is a 35-year-old male and of the whole community 41 percent are female, a number that has been gradually risen annually due the ever-increasing supply for different types of gamers. But the supply is still heavily male and heterosexual dominant; according to an article in New Media & Society (Williams et al, 2009) 90 percent out of 8572 primary and secondary characters were male and if a female character did appear it was more likely that she was a secondary character rather than primary. The study of the presentations of genders in entertainment media is important as per Jeroen Jansz, previously made studies have shown a crucial link between people attributing certain aspects, for example, to their identity and the construction of meanings in everyday life (Jansz, 2007). According to Jansz, the problem of female presentation in videogames is their tendency to hypersexualise women and show them in a submissive position when contrasted to male characters in videogames. The distribution of games with strong LGBTQ nuances is even more scarce due the prejudices of the game development communities towards LGBTQ content and the fear of backlash from both the LGBTQ community itself and the more conservative video game players (Shaw, 2009.) Shaw also argues that only certain stakeholders publish games with LGBTQ characters, furthering the marginalisation of LGBTQ presence in games.
In recent years, traditional platforms for entertainment, namely cinema and television, and the currently booming streaming services like Netflix, have severely increased their production of material for queer audiences with notable or prominent LGBTQ presence, even making movies and series where queerness is the main theme, video game industry has yet to have its “queer boom”. But what is queer? Oxford Dictionary gives the following description “Denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.” This does not mean, that somebody needs to be a homosexual, bisexual or asexual to deviate the heterosexual norm; it means that the established identity, whatever the identity might be, is something that is against the common discourse and culture of heterosexuality. Although the presence of queer character is minimal in videogames, an accusation claiming video game industry has utterly and excluded the LGBTQ community would be complete nonsense, since from the mid 1980’s queer characters have started to appear in games, although usually stereotypical and often ridiculed side characters, the scene has started to switch where the either one of the main characters or even the game’s protagonist is either openly queer or is strongly hinted to be such. Role Playing Games (RPGs) are notable in this sense as they usually offer a so called open world concept where the player can influence the choices the character makes or even completely create a character that is queer. Mass Effect 3 (BioWare, 2012) and Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare, 2014) are good examples of this, since in both games the open world concept allows the main character pursue love interests based on the choices the actual player makes, making it possible for the player to pursue a non-heterosexual relationship with one of the side characters.

The representation of queer characters in narrative based games is often very limited due the pre-set story and environment where the player has little, if
any, influence on the life choices the character makes or due sheer fact that the whole game is set in a heteronormative perspective. But there are expectations where the character’s (‘) sexuality is either purposely or passively left ambiguous which, as quoted by Shaw (2009), leads to queer viewing; the ambiguousness of sexuality “...allows the queer audiences to destabilize the gender and sexuality normalising discourses in the text.” (p. 231) Assassin’s Creed Syndicate (Ubisoft, 2015) the sexuality of the main characters, Jacob and Evie Frye respectively, is purposely left ambiguous and it can be argued that both characters are queers in terms of their gender performativity contrasted to the heterosexual matrix as theorised by Judith Butler in Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990). The thesis of this bachelor’s is that Jacob and Evie Frye are in fact both queer characters due their non-traditional gender performativity. Thesis also aims to answer for the research question what actions in their gender performativity of the characters make them queer.
2. Background information: plot summary of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate (2015) is the ninth major instalment in the massively popular videogame franchise Assassin’s Creed. Like all of its predecessors and spin-offs, the game concentrates on the eternal, hidden conflict between the secret assassin order known as the Brotherhood and the knights of the Templar Order. The battle between the two opposing factions essentially comes to the question of freedom: The Brotherhood, bound together by their philosophy referred as the Creed, seeks to provide peace to the world and individuals by freedom of choice whereas the Templar Order believes freedom only to be achievable by blind obedience to their religious authority. Both factions also hunt for powerful relics left behind by an ancient and extinct culture known only as the Predecessors. These treasured artefacts hold hidden and dangerous powers for subjugating humanity to them, and the Brotherhood is willing to risk everything to prevent these items of power ending up in Templar hands.

Syndicate is set, as per its predecessors, in one of the major turning points in the history of humanity: the height of industrial revolution in Victorian era London. The player takes control of a Helix Initiate, a modern-day assassin, who is tasked to go through the memories of the Frye twins through advanced technology and locate and find the mysterious Predecessor artefact known as Shroud of Eden. The Frye twins Jacob and Evie, both raised to be assassins by their late father, are contacted by Henry Green, an Indian assassin, as he seeks help to counter the Templar influence of London. The Brotherhood has lost majority of its members in London and its influence over London is crippling and the fate of the world is threatened by Templar Grand Master Crawford Starrick, whose goal is to diminish the power of the church and monarch within the British Empire by controlling and oppressing the working class of London by criminal gangs. Starrick’s devious plan is ultimately to subjugate the world to
Templar order by controlling the British Empire, as during the height of industrial revolution it consisted one third of the known world.

The game itself is divided into nine sequences, where player plays as both Evie and Jacob on their quest to liberate London from its Templar oppressors by forming their own criminal gang the Rooks, consisting of freed individuals of the working class of London and trying to locate the mysterious Shroud of Eden, that is said to grant its wearer an immortal life and a protection from all physical harm. The twins undermine the Templar influence by conquering the Templar ruled boroughs of London by assassinating, sabotaging and confronting the criminal gang the Blighters, which is controlled by the Templars. Jacob and Evie have a different approach on the liberating: Jacob, a hot-head, insists they take the fight directly to the Templars by forming their own gang whereas Evie, practical in mind, heavily demands and emphasises the importance of finding the Shroud of Eden before it is found by the Templar Order. With the help of Green and prominent historical figures, such as Karl Marx, Alexander Graham Bell and Queen Victoria, the twins start freeing London by capturing one borough at a time and seeking the Shroud of Eden, eventually overthrowing the rule of the Templar’s criminal gang the Blighters and locating the Shroud to have been hidden in Buckingham Palace and finally confronting Starrick, ultimately defeating him and claiming the Shroud for safekeeping to the Brotherhood and declaring London free of Templar influence.
3. Previous research, Theoretical frame and Methodology

3.1 Previous studies on gender presentation in video games

Researching videogames is relatively new as its status as a mass media distributor is rather contemporary too. The existing research has mainly concentrated on two factors in videogames: violence or gender and sexuality (Williams et al, 2009). The studies about the link of violence in videogames with increase of real life violence has not yielded any solid facts among the two but the study of gender and sexualities in videogames has, as cultural items they are seen to enforce certain cultural norms and aspects. According to Jeroen Jansz’s (2007) article in Sex Roles, the study of the presentations of genders in entertainment media is important as according to his article, previously made studies have shown a crucial link between people attributing certain aspects, for example, to their own identities and therefore, the construction of meanings in their everyday lives. It can be claimed then that videogames function as important mediums in portraying the values and desired individual characteristics in societies. But when it comes to portraying LGBTQ characters or non-whites, videogames clearly lack in this sense as their portrayal in games is often diminished to ridiculed side characters, often enforcing the Western stereotypes of both communities. As expected, this does not contribute positively to the LGBTQ community, who faces discrimination in nearly all fronts of life. This is the reason there so little, if any, studies of queer representations in videogames. Adrienne Shawn (2009) theorises this in her article for Culture and Games to be the consequence of fear of backlash from both the LBTGQ community and conservative, mostly heteronormative gaming community. She also points out that there are only few corporations inside the gaming industry, that actively invest in games that have LGBTQ nuances, like the previously mentioned Mass Effect 3 by Bioware.
or the Assassin’s Creed franchise by Ubisoft. It is falsifying to claim that there are no studies at all about the LGBTQ presence in videogames, but they seldom go beyond the point of summarising the amount of queer characters contrasted to heterosexual characters. This bachelor’s thesis aims to do just that: with Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble and its monumental claim of sex and gender theorised to be social constructs as the theory for the analysis and content analysis as the method of study, this paper aims to provide an interpretation of queerness manifested in Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s protagonists Jacob and Evie Frye. Queer theory, as theorised by Butler’s Gender Trouble, and content analysis in video games will be separately discussed in the next sections of this paper.

3.2 Theoretical framework: Queer theory and gender performativity

Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity is a revolutionary book in modern philosophy and it is considered to be the foundation epoch for queer studies, a discipline that has poststructuralist approach to gender and sex in woman studies and LGBTQ studies. The aim of queer theory is to inquire what is considered to be “normal” in terms of gender and identity and what are these supposedly deviant identity categories (gay, lesbian, bi, trans and etc.) and how do they deviate the set norms of being “normal”. It caused a great deal of controversy among feminist critics after its publication in 1990, as it was a direct critique towards feminism and its idea of “woman” as the subject. Gender Trouble draws much of its power from other disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology psychoanalysis and feminist theory and through this interdisciplinary work it tries to locate the basis of gender and sex: how are these terms constructed in political discourse. Butler (1999) argues in her book, that gender is not a natural fact, since not even the basis of “female” and “woman” as subjects are stable, therefore criticising feminism. By accepting
“female” as the subject of feminism, then the feminists accept the “otherness” of woman compared to men. This, according to Butler (1999), causes extreme contradiction inside the feminist criticism, as by accepting the “otherness” of women, they also subjugate themselves to the patriarchal norms and phallocentric world they try to abolish. Gender Trouble calls for a new form of criticism to be formed, one that does not accept the basis of “sex” and “gender” through feminism. Butler’s philosophy draws much from Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist thinking, as she adapts the questioning of fundamental believes about sex and gender through language and meaning. Gender Trouble attacks the notion of “gender” and “sex”, claiming them to both to be social and political structures upheld by the patriarchal society. Gender Trouble separates the terms “gender” from “sex”; the idea is to make a distinction between the behavioural content what is considered to be either masculine or feminine and the biological attributes that are associated with males and females. Butler’s Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999) goes as far as claiming, that even the biological attributes of male and female sexes are entirely born of social constructs and should not be taken for granted as something to designate one’s gender with. Gender Trouble argues that if sex and gender are separated from each other, they become performative and not fixed to one’s identity. According to Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999), genders are realised through discourse; the system of ideas, attitudes, languages, beliefs and practices inside the culture. This views is opposed to the idea of gender being a natural fact of essentialism and foundationalism, both which presume the view of gender being a naturalised set of attributes to one’s sex, claiming that one’s sex always determines the gender too. Gender Trouble therefore claims that these attributes that culture enforces upon one’s gender are performative in nature, which means that gender is in reality a set of beliefs, acts, attitudes and language that the person is enable to act and mimic, thus performing the gender rather than it being something that is internally
inscribed to everyone. As individuals are born into the dominant discourse, these individuals are also able to learn and repeat these parts of the discourse, and it is this performative side of genders that makes genders exist. This also has the effect of transferring the ideas, beliefs and attitudes from the previous generation to the next one, thus having the danger of transferring prejudices and discrimination among generations. Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999) takes special emphasis on language as a part of the discourse as according to Butler “neither grammar nor style are politically neutral”; this leads to Butler changing the grammatical function of the word “gender” from a verb to a noun, which means the word is no longer fixated and can have subversions (pp. xx-xxviii). Another example of language being a social constructor is that the word “straight” is associated with heterosexuality. The usage of these two words as overlapping synonyms therefore sets homosexuality and all other sexualities that are not hetero in nature to a secondary position, as something wrong and immoral.

A very crucial term from Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999) for this bachelor’s thesis is the “heterosexual matrix” (pp. 42-43). Butler uses this term in Gender Trouble (1999) as the framework of “cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, desires are naturalised.” (p.194) Through the heterosexual matrix, societies presume a compulsory and hierarchical heterosexual relation to other sexualities, pushing all the non-heterosexuals to the margins and diminishing them unequal in societies. The heterosexual matrix expects men to be powerful and strong, only engaging into activates that the society accepts as masculine; this greatly restricts the notion of being a heterosexual man, as almost everything feminine is considered restricted for men. Women, on the other hand, have more freedom inside the matrix, as they can engage into activities that are masculine or feminine without the fear of prejudice but women are also without a question expected to be weaker and more emotional than their male counterparts. It is precisely the prejudices, especially
intersecting prejudices (one or more prejudice towards a certain group), that keep the minorities inside the margins of society. According to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999), there must always be a stabilised notion of natural sex which is gender is attributed through. Thus, by deviating the heterosexual matrix, other sexualities are born and perceived as abnormalities in the eyes of society.

Essentially, Gender Trouble (Butler, 1999) offers a way to interpret cultural items through the lens of queer theory, gender performativity being the key term in examining the item, and rise to question the inequalities sexualities face in societies. As video games are a massive part of today’s popular culture, they also have the power to strengthen or diminish the stereotypical imagery of different sexualities. That is the reason queer theory is the theoretical framework for this thesis, as it deals with two characters who deviate the set heterosexual matrix of video game industry by their unusual gender performativity against heteronormativity in the game.

3.3 Content analysis: a method for analysing video games

The data used for this thesis consists of an analysis from YouTube video Assassin’s Creed Syndicate All Cut scenes (Game Movie) (2015) on RapidRetrospectiveGames’ channel. The video is labelled as a “game movie”; a video that consists of all the game’s in-game cinematics and the dialogue’s that take place in the cinematics as well as during the game play. This is a highly popular video type on games, as they include all the cinematics and dialog in a chronological order as they happen in the game’s world. The dialog is provided subtitles by the game itself, so transcribing the dialogue was not necessary. The main point of this thesis is to analyse the points in dialog and actions taken by the main characters Evie and Jacob Frye that, in terms of queer theory, are considered deviant against the heterosexual matrix and heteronormative
gender performativity, as theorised by Judith Butler (1999) in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. The content analysis proceeds in different stages (University of Leicester, 2009), first of them being the collecting of data. The data was collected by watching the video and writing down the needed dialogue from the cinematics and during gameplay. As mentioned, additional transcription was not needed due the in-game subtitles the game itself provided. The second step was to go through the collected data and categorise it under selected themes. In this thesis, the data was categorised in to three separate sections: firstly, to provide needed information of the heterosexual matrix inside the game and later contrasting the gathered evidence to Jacob’s deviation against the heterosexual matrix and heteronormative gender performance and Evie’s deviation against the same matrix and heteronormative gender performance. The third step was to analyse the findings and describe them, both of which will be presented in the fourth section of this thesis. The fifth and final step was to summarise the findings and contrast the findings with the tentative claim of both protagonists to be queer with and the previously set research question: what actions in their gender performativity make the characters of Jacob and Evie queer.
4 Analysis and findings

In this section the findings of the analysis will be presented with the necessary extracts from the game’s dialog and other chosen extracts. The dialog extracted for the analysis was chosen on the base of deviation against heterosexual matrix and heteronormative gender performativity by Evie and Jacob respectively. The dialogue does not concentrate on dialog between Evia and Jacob solemnly but rather covers points of the dialog selected from various points in the game. This ensures that the deviation is not something that just once or occasionally happens in game but rather establishes it as a fully realised theme in the characters. Noteworthy is that in every dialog selected, either Jacob or Evie is a part of but the partner can change among the various characters in the game. Substantial info about the characters that appear will be given to insure minimal confusion in the analysis presented. The section will begin with an analysation an illustration of Evie and Jacob Frye which will be analysed through the lens of queer theory. The first chapter establishes the heterosexual matrix presented in the game and the following parts will discuss of Evie’s and Jacob’s deviation of the matrix respectively, including extracts of dialogue and analysis of their actions in cinematics.
4.1 Establishing the heterosexual matrix of Assassin’s Creed Syndicate

To be able to determine how the character deviate the heterosexual matrix, it must be first made visible. In Figure 1, both Evie (on the right) and Jacob (on the left) are illustrated as they are portrayed in the game. Both are wearing their assassin uniforms with their hoods on. A notable feature of the game is, that it is set in the Victorian era, hence the uniforms are highly influenced by Victorian era fashion as the game’s timeframe indicates but with alterations to ensure maximum movability in and out of combat. Whereas Jacob’s outfit would not cause any suspicions among Londoners of the Victorian era, it is notable in Evie’s outfit, however, that it is missing something very characteristic to a Victorian era dress: the massive skirt. The common belief during Victorian era was that woman’s place was at home, therefore woman’s outfits could be seen as restrictive in contemporary terms as the commonly had tremendous skirts and tight corsets attached to them. Although the player has the possibility to alter the uniforms by switching the colours, acquiring new gear found inside the game world or simply crafting from various materials, the overall appearance of Evie and Jacob’s outfits stays the same and throughout the game they do not switch into other outfits except in one cinematic that takes place nearly at the end of the game. When it comes to their physical
appearances, it is obvious that Jacob is portrayed as a typical male character as the appearance of the character is something associated with what are traditionally considered to be masculine attributes: broad shoulders, muscular body, deep voice and the Victorian era influenced men’s outfit. The same goes with Evie: the character is portrayed as a narrow waisted, elegant and over all slimmer and smaller figure than, for example, Jacob’s. All of the previously mentioned characteristics to Evie are attributes that are associated with traditional femininity. As the characters are being examined through the lens of queer theory, it can be claimed that these attributes given to these two characters are the manifestations of the heterosexual matrix that controls the game’s discourse. As was mentioned in section 3.2, physical and also biological attributes associated with one’s sex and gender are entirely a consequence of a dominant phallocentric culture. This means, that even if Evie’s or Jacob’s genital are, a sign phallocentric view deems as the most evident of one’s gender, were to be shown in the game or in its cinematics, it would not have any effect on their gender as even the biological attributes are considered as socially constructed. So, a conclusion can be drawn: the timeframe of the game, which is the Victorian era, functions as a part of the heterosexual matrix which dictates Evie’s appearance to a traditional female figure as well as Jacob’s appearance to be a traditional male figure. If the attributes would be randomised among Evie and Jacob, it would not have any effect on the gameplay itself, as Jacob and Evie share all the skills and mechanical game features. This further emphasises the heterosexual norm the game is set in. Another important factor that shows the heteronormativity of the game is the language used in the dialogues. At no point in the game does either Evie or Jacob refer to each other or to themselves with any nouns, pronouns, adjectives or verbs that would determine their genders. The characters themselves do not actively construct their own identity through the language they use but rather other characters, as well as the society as was discussed in
the previous paragraph, do so by referring to the characters of Evie and Jacob with female and male nouns. An example is when Jacob and Evie meet Alexander Graham Bell, who always refers to Evie as Miss Frye throughout the game:

Extract 1.

Evie: “Mr. Bell, allow me to help you with your fuses.”
Alexander: “Oh you will not find me too proud to accept, Miss Frye!”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 0:36:24)

In Sequence 3; Mission Freedom of the Press, where this meeting takes place, Evie offers help to Alexander to fix fuses that are set around the Houses of Parliament. The aim is to establish a free telegraph line to counter Starrick’s corrupt ones. They proceed to Big Ben, where Evie starts the repairs. After completing the mission, they once again meet with.

Extract 2.

Alexander: “Thank you very much, Miss Frye. I will be able to continue my installation of the new line.”
Evie: “If there is anything else I can do to help-“
Alexander: “Certainly! Please do come and visit.”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 0:36:52)

Worth noting in the scene of Extract 2 is that as Alexander utters the second line, he leans forward to Evie and there is a considerable shift in the tone of Alexander’s speech. Graham Bell gets almost intimate with, implying his
fondness over Evie. Graham Bell’s affection towards Evie serves as a sign of compulsory heterosexual norm, where male is attracted to a female; a norm Evie is forced in. Jacob’s gender is constructed in a very similar way. This firstly manifests as Jacob encounters Charles Darwin for the first time and forms a partnership with him in sequence 4’s first mission:

Extract 3.

Charles: “You should not go about frightening respectable gentlemen, young man.”
Jacob: “I didn’t realise snooping around was considered gentlemanly.”
Charles: “Snooping? Sir, I assure you- “

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 0:44:24)

Darwin’s line is interrupted by approaching Blighters and both Jacob and Darwin escape inside the factory they came to spy on. The factory is later revealed to be a medicine factory run by Starrick, whom with his opiate containing medicine keeps the masses of London at bay. As the story advances, Jacob too is given a compulsory heterosexual affiliation with a character named Pearl Attaway in sequence 5. The affiliation, however, is only left on a level of making it appear as the two characters might be more than just allies but it is later revealed as just a business partnership. Jacob helps Attaway to become the sole conductor of bus services in London by sabotaging Attaway’s competitors in the business. Reluctant to help after their first encounter, Jacob quickly falls under Attaway’s compelling charisma. She is very intelligent and demanding and is not afraid to use brutal moves to achieve her goals, traits that lure Jacob under her sway. Later, however, it is revealed that Attaway is working with Crawford Starrick is in fact a Templar and a cousin of Starrick’s.
Frustrated and furious of the news, this later leads to the assassination of Pearl Attaway by Jacob.

And it is not just Graham Bell or Darwin’s language that constitutes Evie as a female and Jacob as a male. After the Frye twins have caused enough havoc to Starrick’s businesses around London, a meeting takes place in the Templar Grand Master’s mansion.

Extract 4.

Starrick: “And what of his sister I’ve heard of? Miss Frye?”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 0:58:57)

Not only does Starrick refer to Evie as Miss Frye and sister, the his is an obvious reference to Jacob, another sign their genders are constructed by the language used by others, both allies and foes. It is a constant theme in the game that Evie is almost at all times referred as Miss, whereas Jacob is mostly referred to by his name, almost never with a title such as mister or sir.

It has become evident that although neither Jacob and Evie do not construct their genders by themselves, the game’s discourse does. As gaming community is predominantly heterosexual and male dominated, it comes as no surprise that the characters are set represent seemingly heterosexual protagonists so the game would please its targeted audience. Jacob and Evie maybe set in a heteronormative game but they cannot be claimed to be heterosexuals due to their gender performativity that deviates the norms of traditional masculinity and femininity.
4.2 Jacob and the deviating against heterosexual gender performativity

Now that the subtle but evident heterosexual matrix of the game has been established, it is easier to pinpoint when and how Jacob deviates the matrix and begins to shatter the pristine image of a heterosexual male figure. From the very first moments with playing as Jacob’s character it gradually becomes visible that the player is dealing with a character with strong emotions. Jacob can be described as extremely reckless. In Sequence 1 Jacob is tasked to infiltrate an Templar run factory and sabotage it. Rather than plan anything, like a suitable entrance or a safe exit, Jacob sneak his way inside the factory premises. After assassinating a Templar named Rupert Ferris, Jacob escapes the scene but not in a manner of assassins. He directly runs to the nearby train and is caught doing so by the Blighters in defence of Ferris’ factory. The train sets off and is immediately pursued by Jacob’s enemies. Then the following happens:

Extract 5.

Jacob: “Lost your bottle (nerve), boys?”

*train gets derailed by the Blighters*

Jacob: “Oh, no…”

RabidRetrospectiveGames (2015, 0:08:39)

The pursuers derail the train Jacob is on, and obviously devastated after realising what is bound to happen, Jacob tries to escape but the train already starts to descend into a pit, Jacob narrowly escaping by running towards the edge. This is but a first example of Jacob’s reckless behaviour in the game.
Jacob is often critiquing Evie for planning carefully in which ever Evie is engaged to, often belittling that Evie’s planning and hunting for the Shroud of Eden only diminishes precious time from getting the task done:

Extract 6.

Jacob: “We need to reclaim London from Starrick. Who are my targets?”
Evie: “It’s not time for that yet!”
Jacob: “I didn’t come to London to hunt curious!”
Evie: “First understand the dance, only then become the dancer”
Jacob: “Oh? So you are taking over where Father left off?”
Evie: “Someone has to.”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 0:38:48)

This scene happens right after completing Sequence 3. Jacob, Evie and Henry meet and Evie decided it is time to start hunting the Shroud of Eden before the Templars have it. Jacob is clearly not pleased with her solution and states that he did not come to London to hunt curious but to free London from Starrick’s grip. Evie then quotes their father, which startle Jacob even more, mocking Evie for pursuing what their father did in London before his death. Every time Jacob hears of his father, he gets angry and reluctant. Jacob bursts with anger after assassinating Maxwell Roth, a character Jacob had romantic feelings towards, and is confronted by Evie for her carefree and reckless behaviour at their meeting place one again. This implies that Jacob has hard time accepting the rules and norms set by their father and that his denial of his bisexuality causes him to be unable to process his feelings, as according to the Creed,
assassins must always suppress their feelings. This will be discussed later in this section.

Another extremely reckless action done by Jacob is the murdering The Bank of England’s governor, Templar Philip Twopenny. After acquiring knowledge of the mysterious bank robberies in the Bank of England, Jacob learns that the person orchestrating all of the heists in the bank come from inside, as it is done in systematic order and without any traces ever left behind. Jacob and Sergeant Abberline, a police officer whom Jacob helps to counter the Templar influence of London, forage a plan to infiltrate inside the Bank of England to assassinate Twopenny. Jacob manages in his assassination task but is later confronted by Evie of his carefree and unplanned execution at the Bank of England:

Extract 7.

Evie: “Your indiscretion at the Bank of England caused British Currency nearly to collapse.”

RapidRetrospectiveGames (2015, 1:35:01)

To which Jacob sarcastically replies:

Extract 8.

Jacob: “Nearly being the operative word. Speaking of collapses, what of the key you found that unlocks very little?”

RabidRetrospectiveGames (2015, 1:35:05)

Jacob is critiquing Evie yet again for her hunt for the curio, emphasising that Jacob truly is a person of reckless action rather than careful planner. But the
fact that Jacob’s most notable deviation against the heterosexual matrix is the encounter in Sequence 8 when the character of Maxwell Roth is introduced to the game. Maxwell Roth is a flamboyant and unstable actor, who works for Starrick and his one of his henchmen. He prefers a more anarchist and eclectic life style and decides to betray Starrick and invited Jacob to his theatre. With the help of Jacob, they set to sabotage Starrick businesses across London. When they first meet, Jacob questions Roth’s motives:

Extract 9.

Jacob: “What do YOU get out of this?”
Maxwell: “The chance to have a little fun with the bravest man in London.”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 1:53:06)

Jacob reaction to Roth’s sayings is a bashful, insecure smile and a sigh. A first of its kind the player gets to see on Jacob’s face. Whereas Jacob is usually seen with a reckless, carefree attitude, it raises the doubt with the insecurity. This is a sign Jacob is entering an unexplored territory in his feelings, that is coming in terms with who he really is. Jacob quickly falls under Roth’s sway and throughout the cinematics they are in together, Jacob is seen giving admiring glares and shy smiles at Roth with verbal compliments. It is also notable that Roth refers to Jacob as “darling” and “my dear”, revealing that the feelings might be mutual. However, Jacob soon realises that Roth’s unstable nature is far too dangerous to work with as he is ready to explode one of Starrick’s factories up. The workers of the factory mainly consist of children and as soon as Jacob realises
this he stops Roth from igniting the explosives. Jacob stops Roth and Roth flees to his theatre where him and Jacob have their final confrontation. Inside the theatre, unwary spectators are watching Roth perform when he sets the whole stage ablaze, taunting Jacob to get him. Jacob fights his way through the fire and assassinates Roth and questions him, clearly angered and feeling betrayed:

Extract 10.

Jacob: “Why did you do it? All of it?”

Roth replies in a cryptic way, saying he does what he has always done: “why not?”. As Roth draws his final breath, the kisses Jacob on the lips and dies in his arms. Jacob’s reaction to Roth’s kiss is not disgusted nor angry, but confused. Jacob, without saying a word, departures and escapes the flaming theatre. The fact that he does not feel any repulsion towards the kiss they shared with Roth tells about connection Roth and Jacob shared. In their nature, they are similar as they are both the epitome of reckless lifestyle, not bound by any common rules.

It is clear, that even though the discourse of the game with his Victorian era setting and language constitutes Jacob as a masculine character, it is his raw emotionality and supressed feelings with their outburst that together deviate the heterosexual matrix. Emotional behaviour is something strongly associated with femininity but in Jacob’s case it is disguised underneath a reckless and childish behaviour, which in game make him appear as masculine but has an equal amount of femininity in it. It has been later revealed in an interview with
Jeffrey Yohalem, (The Assassin’s Den – ft. Jeffrey Yohalem (Assassin’s Creed Syndicate Lead Writer), 2015) the lead content writer of the game, that Jacob was purposely left without a love interest in the game and that he is definitely drawn to Roth by his personality, also claiming that the kiss was not just one sided, as it might be interpreted. This canonically, meaning according to the official game storyline, marks Jacob as a queer character on an official level. It is also true, that in an official downloadable content for the game, the player takes control of Jacob’s granddaughter, implying Jacob has had a relationship with a female but this does not mean Jacob cannot be queer: it is precisely Jacob’s emotional suffrage and encounter with Roth that deviate the set masculine heteronormative construct he is by the game’s discourse. It is Jacob’s actions that make him queer.

4.3 Evie and the switch of traditional gender roles

Evie’s deviation is easier to detect than Jacob’s. Evie is a character that on a very basis deviates against the heterosexual matrix and traditional femininity. Whereas the majority of female characters take a submissive, damsel-in-distress type of role, Evie is no stranger to actions that are considered masculine. Evie is a master assassin who displays an impressive repertoire of non-traditional feminine characteristics: she is strong, intelligent and extremely focused on what ever she is doing, often carefully planning her moves. As was mentioned in section 4.1, the game’s discourse constructs her as a female character but her actions and performativity make her queer, as they do not correspond the set idea of traditional femininity and gender roles. Whereas females are usually set to side-roles, not participating in the action, Evie is more than eager face the challenge and execute it in a sophisticated manner.
The entire game is full of showcases displaying Evie’s capabilities as a person. In sequence 3, as Evie sets on a mission to help Alexander Graham Bell with his telegraph line, Evie is able to climb across the rooftops of the Houses of Parliament and fix electric fuses. She is able to infiltrate into various highly guarded premises, using her assassin skills to stay undetected. If it comes to combat, Evie strikes out with the fury of any of her male counterparts, displaying she is as capable in combat as any other character, especially the male ones who are usually depicted as the ones with the upper hand in physical activities. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that Evie engages into various traditional masculine activates and, whereas Jacob’s deviation against the heterosexual matrix mostly relies on the subtext of situations, Evie’s masculinity is manifested in everything she engages to. However, the most apparent deviation of the matrix occurs in the discourse of Evie with the twin’s mentor; Henry Green. Henry Green is an Indian British Assassin, who oversees the Assassins of London, helping Evie and Jacob in their quest to overthrow Starrick’s Templar rule. During the course of the game, the traditional feminine role of staying as the side character personifies in Henry whereas the masculine architype of the hero is manifests in Evie. There is a slight change, however, as Evie is able to persuade Henry to accompany her to a mission:

Extract 11.

Evie: “Are you coming?”

Henry: “Fieldwork is not really my speciality.”

Evie: “We found a clue to a Precursor object – don’t you want to follow it?”

Henry: “Put that way, one can hardly resist.”
Prior to the dialogue that takes place in Extract 11., Henry mainly stays in the background, providing useful intel for both Twins but this is the first time Henry directly takes action in the game. With Evie, they head to a mansion to investigate hints for the Precursor artefact known as the Shroud of Eden. In the game as the mission proceeds, Henry mainly just follows Evie and lets her do much of the action. Overtime, Evie and Henry work closer together and grow feelings for each other. The first indication of this is Jacob’s observation of the situation. The following sequence takes place after Evie and Henry found more clues of the shroud at the mansion:

Extract 12.

Jacob: “Well, since Henry is not here, I thought you might enjoy the company.”
Evie: “I don’t require any company. And Mr. Green is following up on some leads of his own.”
Jacob: “‘Oh, yes, Mr. Green. That’s a fascinating idea. Oh, please Mr. Green, come and take a look at this book and stand oh-so-close to me, Mr. Green’”
Evie: “I do not – Well, perhaps you have nothing better to do, but I’m busy protecting the Assassins.”
Jacob: “Are you really? What is it Father used to say…”
Evie: “‘Don’t allow personal feelings to compromise the mission.’”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 1:04:41)

This is the first time Evie actually admits her feelings towards Henry. As Jacob mockingly questions Evie for her leads on the Shroud of Eden and the close
relationship between her and Henry, Evie gets visibly frustrated and angry. The remark Jacob makes of their father’s sayings is what tells the player about Evie’s true feelings: The Creed prohibits assassins’ personal feelings interfering with the mission. Evie is clearly in contradiction with this, as to her The Creed and her father’s teaching have always been the highest norms in life. Another sign of Evie’s deep feelings towards Henry occur as they discover clues of the Shroud’s possible whereabouts inside the Tower of London:

Extract 13.

Evie: “Henry!”
Evie: “Mr. Green. This is it!”

RabidRetrospectGames (2015, 1:20:53)

For a brief moment, Evie loses her ever present calmness out of excitement. It also visible in the cinematic that she takes physical contact with Henry, poking him in the process. This comes as a surprise to Henry but both quickly dismiss the happening and proceed to discuss of their next move. It is also notable that for the first time, Evie uses Henry’s first name. She usually refers to everyone by their title rather than name, implying once again Evie’s emotional attachment to Henry. After Evie completes her mission inside the Tower of London, Henry once again accompanies Evie to a new mission. The roles are the usual ones: Henry provides help from the background while Evie does the more demanding activities. During the mission, Henry gets captures and Evie is forced to save her. Henry is also injured in the process, and this angers Evie, thus she demands Henry stays completely outside the missions before something more severe happens to him. It can be claimed that Evie is in love with him which explains her sudden urge to protect Henry from all harm and
presuming the dominant role. The final seal to their romance happens right after Crawford Starrick is defeated. Both Jacob and Evie assassinate Starrick after a long and gruesome battle, during which Henry also takes part and is incapacitated unconscious by Starrick. After the battle, Evie rushes to Henry:

Extract 14.

Henry: “I came as soon as I could. Do not worry. I’ll – I’ll head back to the train. Did I... Did I jeopardize the mission?”
Evie: “Henry, you saved it.”
Evie: “I think you belong to the field. With me.”

During this scene, Evie and Henry share a kiss. This is the culmination of their relationship, as they both decide to come in terms with it and acknowledge their feelings for each other. Overall, their relationship is something that deviates the heterosexual matrix, as Henry, who is depicted as a man, presumes the submissive side character role that is usually the role for female characters in game whereas Evie, a character that is portrayed as a woman, presumes the role of the dominant main character; a role usually saved for males. It is this switching of traditional gender norms with Evie’s masculine actions that together establish her status as a queer character, although she evidently has a heterosexual relationship with Henry. But that is not the point of queerness. As was mentioned in section 1, queerness refers to denoting to sex and gender that does not correspond with the established norms, usually heterosexual. Thus, Evie’s heterosexual relationship becomes a secondary
characteristic as her masculine gender performativity and its deviation against the heterosexual matrix make her queer.

5 Conclusion

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s characters presents a respectable variety of different sexualities, genders and people of colours. The game’s protagonists, Evie and Jacob Frye, are curiosities that through the lens provided by Butler’s queer theory present ground-breaking characters to the gaming world: queer protagonists. Whereas at first glance both of them might appear as a typical male and female character, their performativity inside traditional feminine and masculine norms deviate this. Although the game world’s discourse construct their genders to inside the heterosexual matrix, the discourse these characters themselves have and with their associated actions they construct their genders quite differently than first expected. Jacob Frye is an impulsive character, driven by his suppressed emotion. In Victorian era London, he feels free of his father’s restraints and enters uncharted territories in his personal life, eventually leading him to experiment with his sexuality. Evie Frye, a charismatic young woman, who acts like no ordinary woman. Her skills in and out of combat as an assassin quickly bear evident her hidden masculinity and with assassin Henry Green, the switch of traditional gender norms establish Evie as a dominant figure in the relationship, constructing a character that breaks the norms of femininity.

Previous studies in the field have mainly concentrated on portrayal of women alone, and if LGBTQ characters were being examined, the studies usually concentrated on the quantitative side rather than looking into qualitative side. Queer theory offers a tool for examining how LGBTQ characters are being portrayed and to what extent. The problem is, that unfortunately there is not that many queer characters to examine yet, as the gaming industry is a
prominently heterosexual dominated field and its yet waiting its boom in LGBTQ content. Whereas more traditional forms of mass media, like TV and cinema, already have a strong display of queer characters, there might be more queer characters in games as well, since gaming industry is relatively new business and neither TV nor cinema included openly queer characters at first due to the fear of backlash from society. Nonetheless, the portrayal of queer characters is equally as important, as it has been researched that mass media plays an important role in constructing meanings and identities in contemporary life. LGBTQ issues are also important to raise to discussion, as mass media is effective enforcing and reducing harmful stereotypes, a thing the LGBTQ community is still to date harshly a victim of. Future studies of LGBTQ characters in games could concentrate on a variety of games, as this research merely scratched the surface by selecting one game and its protagonists for study. Identities and their constructions is a process that depends on a multitude of factors; there is no just one type of a character as there is no just one type of identities. However, future studies are still considerably dependant of the material provided but in time it is more than possible for more and more queer characters emerge as the norms of heterosexuality loosen its grip over societies.
6 References

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Figure 1. Retrieved August 3, 2017 from https://fi.pinterest.com/pin/523684262910376471/

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