HIDING IN THE TALL GRASS: SEARCHING FOR QUEER STORIES IN POKÉMON

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> "Even in the most kind of mainstream games, we're starting to see more sophisticated writing and writing that incorporates different perspectives." Colleen Macklin, Gaming in Color (Jones & Gil, 2014)

This quote from Colleen Macklin highlights a turn in the industry to introduce more diverse voices and stories in industry games. It is situated in a documentary that operates as an outcry of desire to have more representation of different perspectives in games, particularly in the big budget games of the gaming industry. Although, as Naomi Clark points out in the same documentary, independently developed games has made headway in this space, people of marginalized groups want to see this headway make it into the mainstream.

During a talk at the Queerness in Games Conference, Adrienne Shaw (2013) noted that a common argument given towards diversity in games is that if we have more diverse people making games we will get more diverse stories. She points out a key problem with this, that having diverse makers does not automatically mean we will get diverse games. We have to convince the people producing the games that diverse stories and

voices are viable. Working toward this, it is important to find examples of diverse perspectives and voices working in existing, mainstream, well-received games.

One of the more successful mainstream franchises today is *Pokémon* (Game Freak, 1996-2014). The series boasts over 260 million games sold worldwide (Lien, 2014), over the course of 18 years and 41 unique digital titles (1). This ignores various other media offshoots, such as the trading card game and animated show. Going back to Adrienne Shaw, during her talk she said, "Queer reading practices have always found alternative ways of being in the most normative of texts" (2013). Finding queer stories in this series of games would help to further entice the gaming industry to making games that feature more diverse voices and perspectives.

This essay aims to do just that, by providing close readings one particular game in the series, using the lens of queer theory provided by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Before that, though, I intend to give a brief overview of how games in the main series of *Pokémon* operate, and locate some blanket queer representations in one of the more recent games in the series. Following that, I will give a brief description of the theory provided by Halberstam, and use that lens to provide that close, queer reading of two characters from *Pokémon Black* (Game Freak, 2011). Finally, I'll give a brief look into queer ways of playing games in the *Pokémon* franchise, as an insight into more mechanical representation of queer ideals in gaming.

I want to start by making some caveats and an acknowledgment. I am specifically looking at the North American releases of the franchise, and specifically at *Pokémon Black*. Thus, my readings will be informed by the localization team that translated the Japanese games to English. This also means that I am dealing with problems of US censorship and whitewashing that tends to happen when games are so translated. So, when I talk about the gaming industry or mainstream games, I am clearly discussing the US gaming

industry and games in the US mainstream. This is also true of *Gaming in Color*, which this essay opened with, so the problems that this essay addresses are distinctly American ones. This doesn't mean that they are not applicable outside the US, but I would be remiss to not mention this caveat.

Also, I will not be considering media outside the games. The animated show has been going on for over 800 episodes and has a different storyline from the games. The same is true of the manga. Although many characters are shared between the various forms, this essay is only informed by the characters and situations as they appear in the games. With that said, let's discuss the structure of *Pokémon*.

Pokemon

As a franchise, *Pokémon* is structured by generations. At current, there are six generations (2), each with their own games. Within a generation, there are a set of games which all surround one particular region. Typically, two versions of the same game side-by-side, with a third game released later. The first two games are nearly identical, with only minor differences in content and flavor. The third game is similar, but often adds in some bonus content that hints at the next generation. In a deviation, Generation 5, where *Pokemon Black* is located, did not have the third carbon-copy game, but instead attempted to have a direct sequel pair of games.

The basic premise of each game is about finding and obtaining as many "pokémon" as possible. Pokémon are animal-like intelligent creatures that have special abilities that are indistinguishable from magic. The creatures grow and evolve through friendly battles which make up the backbone of the society of the game worlds.

The games follow a typical structure. Players receive a pokémon from a local professor and become pokémon trainers. They are tasked with finding as many pokémon as possible, while challenging gyms, training halls run by a gym leader. The player is often accompanied by one or more companions, one of which

is marked as the player's rival, usually a character who is obsessed with challenging the champion of the region. Along the way, the player will encounter a team of people who are cast as the antagonizing force. These teams are led by an individual who uses an ideology to better the world, usually with them as ruler. Over the course of the game, the player will alternate between challenging gym leaders and solving problems caused by the team. This eventually leads to defeating the team's leader and becoming the strongest trainer in the region. In recent games, the companion characters have had larger stories in the games, and there have been a larger cast of them.

Now, Pokémon has some problems with representation. Only four of the series' major characters are non-white, with only one being in the top-seat of power. The player was always white prior to Generation 6, when a racially diverse option was first presented. Women are surprisingly present in places of power, though the top-seat of power has only twice been filled with a woman. Only one of the professors, who start the game's journey, is female. Gender is also very binary and performative in the games. From *Pokemon Crystal* onward, games begin with the question "Are you a boy or a girl" (Game Freak, 2001). Previously, the player was always male. In Generation 6, *X* (Game Freak, 2013) included a fashion element for the player, but the clothing available to the player was determined by the gender they chose, disallowing any cross-dressing.

Despite these problems, occasionally we find some sparse bits of queer representation. In Generation 2, we find a trainer in a gym who, like all the other trainers in the gym dress up like Janine, the gym leader. Camper Barry remarks after you defeat him, "That's right, I'm a boy! What's wrong with a boy dressing up as Janine" (Game Freak, 2001). Further, in Generation 6, we have evidence of a handful of queer characters. In one instance, a male waiter at a cafe daydreams out loud, saying "I want to work with a handsome manager" (Game Freak, 2013). In another instance, two men are eating at an expensive restaurant. One of

them says, "So we're having a meal together as men. Nothing wrong with that" (Game Freak, 2013). Even one of the player's companions, Shauna, could be analyzed as seeking a relationship with the player's character regardless of gender. Back in Generation 5, there is a couples-only Ferris wheel in one of the cities. Here, you can occasionally battle trainers who will then ride the Ferris wheel with the player. Of the four trainers available, one is the same gender as the player. Interestingly, one of the major characters in *Black* and *White*, N, forces the player to ride the Ferris wheel with him, where he reveals his status as the king of the generation's team. With some inference, one could also say that N admires the player character, just as Shauna does in the next generation, and I would argue that there is more evidence to suggest a romantic plot in this case. Still, this verges on wishful thinking, and would require close analysis of romantic tropes to be made seriously.

These are really just nods to representation. They're in the games, but they aren't foregrounded and generally not a part of the main plot. Further, they take plenty of interpretation to recognize. While it's good that they exist, this essay seeks to find more up-front representations of queer stories in the *Pokémon* franchise. I believe that two such representations are found in Generation 5. To better understand what is going on in my analysis below, I will provide a brief explanation of the events that occur in *Pokémon Black*.

The player is accompanied by two neighborhood friends, Cheren and Bianca, through the Unova region. Cheren is driven by a desire to get stronger and Bianca has no clear objective for going on the journey. Early on, the player is forced to watch a rally, introducing Team Plasma and one of the darker plots in the *Pokémon* franchise. The rally argues that pokémon trainers are essentially slave-owners and that the citizens should liberate themselves of their pokémon.

Through a number of events, the player discovers that the leader of Team Plasma, N, aims to revive a legendary pokémon

in order to liberate every pokémon by force. The player is eventually tasked with using a counterpart pokémon to stop this from happening. The game apologizes for the apparent slave narrative of the pokémon games by suggesting that the pokémon are truly happy with their trainers, which is a thin explanation that allows the series to continue on despite this valid criticism. This plot is eventually ignored when it is discovered that N is only a puppet king for another whose real goal is to rule over the region.

This is only the barest sketch of the plot of the game. Some details are left out entirely, and others will be described below when discussing two major characters' plots as queer stories. First, though, I want to take a detour to the theory that I will be using to make these claims.

Failure

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam (2011) proposes a way of queer reading that identifies success and plots queerness on the side of those who embrace failure. In a talk at Queerness in Games 2013, Halberstam stated that "some of us actually want to fail because we're so dissatisfied with that particular social context" (Juul & Halberstam, 2013). He went on to give the example of capitalism, suggesting that if success in capitalism is making money, then those people who live life not making money are on the queer side of the situation.

Extending this to more traditional queer roles, he says that "the queer fails to be straight, quite literally, the butch fails to be a woman, the sissy boy fails to be a man, the queer adult fails to get married and have children, fails in their socially prescribed role" (Juul & Halberstam, 2014). This is a way for queer people to challenge the hegemony of their society, by embracing that which the society does not value. In the book, Halberstam quotes James C. Scott, suggesting that failure constitutes Scott's "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1987; quoted in Halberstam, 2011). He explains, "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never

total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88). Thus, people who seek or lead nonconformist lives, who are unproductive and unsuccessful are pointing out that they find a flaw in the power structure of the system in which they live. By accepting failure, they are refusing the system from operating, announcing that the prescribed outcome isn't for them, and rewriting the system to better include their outcomes (Juul and Halberstam, 2013).

In the following sections, I will be examining two characters that deal with failure in different ways, Bianca and N, who are thus cast as queer characters. They are both major characters in Generation 5, and the two characters' narratives are deeply embedded into the overall plot arc of the game. This is put up against a third major character (the player's companion Cheren) who represents what the expectation of success is in this society. Cheren models the player's prescribed role, and essentially becomes the player's voice, since player characters in the *Pokémon* games are silent protagonists.

The player is required to succeed. There is no state in the game where the player fails. There is no way to "lose" a *Pokémon* game. There is no game over. Thus the player is forced into the normative role, against which these queer stories emerge. As the player is the central character in the games, the other characters all essentially have various narratives of failure, some more prominent than others. Even Cheren fails at his quest to become stronger. For now, though, I want to focus on the other of the player's companions in Generation 5: Bianca.

Bianca

In the opening scene of the game, the player and Cheren are waiting in the player's bedroom for Bianca to show up, in order to distribute three gifted pokémon from professor Juniper. When Bianca arrives, Cheren scolds her for being late. After selecting, Bianca suggests having their first battle, for which Cheren scolds her again, but she does it anyway. Predictably, the battle makes

a mess of the player's bedroom, but Bianca is too preoccupied with her pokémonto notice. Cheren points the mess out to her, and Bianca finally realizes what happened and apologizes. After the apology, Cheren interrupts and tells Bianca, "You…are completely hopeless." This is just the beginning of the many insults Bianca is forced to bear for being different.

Bianca is described as flighty, forgetful, incompetent, in her own world, without direction, weak and irresponsible. In essence, Biance is a failure. She performs it spectacularly. She is everything that Cheren is not, and since Cheren operates as the model of success, this pits Bianca as the model for failure. Even mechanically, Bianca is designed for failure, always choosing the pokémon that is at a disadvantage to the player's own.

In addition to being scolded by Cheren's compass of success, Bianca is also at odds with her father. In a required scene before the journey has begun, we see Bianca's father telling her that she cannot go on a journey through the region because she knows nothing of the world. To Bianca, this journey is an escape from authority, a chance to prove that her way of life is valid.

Throughout the game, Bianca will be portrayed as not taking things seriously, will battle haphazardly and without much attention to the battle itself. She has a severe lack of confidence in battling. In some events, she is told to hang back and wait. In others, she needs a bodyguard. At a certain point in the game, Bianca will begin traveling with a local professor and start on her path towards being a pokémon researcher, essentially failing at being a successful trainer. Up to that point, she never understood her role in life and was constantly worried that she would amount to nothing.

In a pivotal moment in the middle of the game, Bianca is confronted by her father and told to go home where she belongs. After trying to express that where she belongs was different from where her father thought, a gym leader, Elesa, steps in to make a moving speech about the importance of accepting difference:

    "My name is Elesa. I'm this town's Gym Leader. I also

happen to be a model. You know, there are many people in this world. There are people whose way of thinking may be completely different from yours. Sometimes, this means you may get hurt.[…]But it's important to keep trying to learn about the differences between yourself and others… To learn that being different is OK. And you shouldn't worry. Trainers always have Pokemon at their side. Pokemon are wonderful. It's not only how cute they can be, but also how much you can depend on them…" (Game Freak, 2011)

This is a turning point for Bianca, when she starts accepting herself, flaws and all. She embraces failure and chooses to live her life the way she is oriented. In his examination of children's films, Halberstam notes that many of these films center around characters who are unsuccessful in the eyes of society (2011). He describes examples of these kinds of queer narratives: "princes turn into frogs rather than vice versa, ogres refuse to become beautiful, and characters regularly choose collectivity over domesticity" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 119). He goes on to say "Each 'disabled' hero has to fight off or compete with a counterpart who represents wealth, health, success, and perfection" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 120), much like Bianca must do with Cheren, or worse, the player, who can enact no failure.

For Halberstam, it isn't enough for these queer fairy tales to offer a "tidy moral lesson about learning to accept" oneself, but they should tie "the struggle of the rejected individual to larger struggles of the dispossessed" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 120). Near the end of the game, during a critical moment, Bianca is curiously missing and her absence is mentioned by Cheren and very obvious. Although Bianca is missing, the player later discovers that she did not abandon the player. By traveling to each town and rallying the gym leaders, she prevented a roadblock for the player. This shows Bianca discovering what she is capable of, even though it is not the traditional role expected of her.

Biancs's success in aiding the player is at odds with her

performance of failure, especially when it leads to safeguarding the society that ostracizes her. In a way, this could be seen as a turning point in the society, that, instead, society is beginning to value the necessary role that Bianca played in the events of the game. Without Bianca's societal failure, the player, the one who cannot fail, would have indeed failed. This societal turn can be seen reflected in *Version 2*, where Bianca is happily settled into her role as a pokémon researcher, and no longer suffers any scorn from her peers (even Cheren has nothing but cheerful words for her). Further, many more people in that game talk about accepting difference as positive.

Now let's turn to another major character, the main antagonist of Generation 5, Team Plasma's king: N.

N

Natural Harmonia Gropius, usually called N, is first introduced during the rally in the early game. Here, he reveals to the player that he can speak to pokémon and is deeply affected by what the player's pokémon say. N is portrayed as socially awkward, speaks rapidly and ignores people he isn't interested in. N is set up as the main villain of the game early on, often spouting ideology about separating pokémon from people so that the pokémon will be happy and people will stop relying on the creatures. The standard societal response is that doing so will instead make both people and pokémon unhappy.

Towards the end of the game, the player starts getting the impression that not everything is quite clear about N and his role in the narrative as it stands. N's doctrine seems to stem from a genuine concern for pokémon, and a broad distrust for people that is broken by the player. N constantly makes confused remarks about the happiness of the player's pokémon, and as the game goes on, N's philosophy seems to unwind. At the very end, we get information about N, from two characters up to then unknown to the player. One says that N is too blinded by his childhood to acknowledge that humans and pokémon are happy together. The other character informs the player that

N's situation was manufactured by Ghetsis, the character who delivered the rally speech at the beginning of the game. N is described as innocent and a product of abuse.

There is a curious trend with N. The second time the player meets N, he informs the player of his intention to resurrect a legendary pokémon. There is no reason for N to tell the player this, but it allows the player to be sent forward in the game to gather more information from a specialist. The next time the player meets N, N leads the player to the couples-only Ferris wheel mentioned before, under the pretense of searching for Team Plasma. N takes the player up on the Ferris wheel and in the privacy there, N confesses that he is the king of Team Plasma, information that is again not required of him. N also voices some dissent. When the ride is over, a group of Team Plasma members have appeared, ready to confront the player. N talks doublespeak to save the player from being overwhelmed while convincing the grunts that he is letting them get away. In short, N is protecting the player without losing his status.

This is interesting, because the player is the character who cannot fail. Regardless of what happens, the player will succeed, but N wants to make sure that the player is able to have the chance. In addition, N wants to make the player's success easier. Throughout the game, N finds a way to aid the player's journey, which he knows will eventually lead to taking himself down. N telegraphs how the player should defeat him, tells the player where he is going to be, and even heals the player's pokémon after a fight that is sure to leave the player in a weakened state.

In short, N wields his own failure. He effects his own failure on purpose, because he no longer wholly believes in the society that is being prescribed by Ghetsis. N wants the player to succeed because he knows that if the player succeeds, then the player will free him from the terrible grasp that Ghetsis has over N. It is a short jump to Scott's "weapons of the weak" from here (Scott 1987; quoted in Halberstam, 2011). Even moreso than Bianca, N represents a person who is trying to embrace and use failure as

a way to change a society. In N's case, the society he wants to change is the only one he knows, the one that was crafted for him by the manipulation and abuse of Ghetsis. Even after Ghetsis is removed, N removes himself from society entirely, despite spending much of the game befriending the player. N chooses to remain a failure in society, and will do so until the resolution of the sequel. While Bianca's queerness fades as society changes to include her, N chooses to remain queer, partly because it is all he has ever known.

In this discussion of Bianca and N, there were some casual nods to the mechanics that help preface their queerness. I want to talk next about how mechanics can help inform queer play, and how some people use the mechanics of the game to play in different ways.

Queer Play

In a workshop led by merritt kopas, she called for a movement beyond simple representation of queerness in games (kopas, 2014). I want to second that call, although I know I am one of many standing in that line. This is not to say that representation and queer readings are not important. As I mentioned above, this kind of work can help provide leverage to change a system. merritt, similarly states, "Representation matters, but a focus on what games look like risks missing what games *do*" (kopas, 2014, p. 3). She calls out the need to think of queer mechanics and play, rather than just images.

Pokémon does not have much in the way of queer mechanics, although, recall earlier how, mechanically, Bianca is set up to be a failure by the pokémon she is forced to select. Consequently, the player is always set up with a disadvantage towards Cheren. There are many opportunities for queer play, however.

One such way to do this is in the naming of the player's pokémon. By naming the player and pokémon with themed names, the player can create additional narratives that exist on top of the prescribed narrative. Denis Farr's Pokédrag project (2011) imposed the idea of a drag queen trainer hosting a troupe

of fierce pokémon drag performers. By simply using a themed naming scheme, Farr was able to tell a story that expanded on the (somewhat light) story of *Pokémon Fire Red* (Game Freak, 2004). In particular, this naming scheme subverts the societal traditions of naming and challenges them. Farr's choice to fail to use a normative naming scheme highlights the queerness of his play, on top of the fact that he is attempting to create a narrative that includes queer characters.

Another alternative, queer mode of play imposes restrictions on the player's pokémon team. Players are able to take six pokémon with them on their journey and store many others for later retrieval. Typically, the goal is to create the best team for the player's play style, and this can take many hours of hunting for just the right pokémon to round out the team. In styles of play like Nuzlocke, players' control over their teams is restricted (Nuzlocke, 2010). In Nuzlocke play, players have two restrictions. First, players may only catch the first pokémon they encounter in each area. This removes the ability to hunt for specific team members and develop the "perfect" team. Instead, the player is left with the imperfect team that must rise up to tackle the game.

The second rule, relevant to this essay's conversation, is that if a pokémon ever faints, the player must release that pokémon. Normally, pokémon that faint in battle can simply be revived in a town or with a readily available item. This rule removes the ability to do that, and instead says that when a pokémon faints in battle, it is removed from the team. This harnesses the mechanic of releasing pokémon for a new, queer purpose. One point behind this is to create more of an emphatic link with the creatures, mimicking a more realistic, nurturing situation. When death is no longer a trivial thing, players can put a lot more weight on the survival and care of their pokémon. A side effect of this rule is that it adds something to the game which is completely inaccessible. Nuzlocke adds a way to fail. If the player loses their last pokémon, the game is over. Some people

will start over, and others will accept the failure and abandon the Nuzlocke. Either way, they willfully add a mode that leads towards Halberstam's arguments about failure.

Conclusion

By examining games in the *Pokémon* franchise, I was able to find a number of queer stories, some hiding in plain sight, others a bit below the surface. This essay could have gone into many other examinations, including the romantic analyses of N and Shauna's character mentioned earlier, identifying pokémon as an other, the tranformative properties of certain pokémon evolutions like Gardevoir and Gallade. Queer examinations can be had all over the games.

This isn't to say that *Pokémon* is well represented, or that it represents a queer game. As I said before, *Pokémon* has a lot of problems with representation. The franchise is popular and mainstream, and by finding queer stories in such games, the industry can be shown that these stories can already be found. This does not mean that we should be happy with what we have already. The level of queerness I have uncovered is far overshadowed by the non-queer stories in the games. My mode of analysis, searching for ways in which characters embrace failure, is impossible for the player to enact in these games. As I've said many times, the player is the one character who cannot fail, and the games hinge on this. We still need more diverse voices.

We need more diverse ways of playing. By and large, the irony of my argument is that by showing how some characters in this popular franchise embrace and wield failure, I am showing that queer stories can succeed in mainstream games. They're there, hiding in the tall grass. Run in and catch them.

Endnotes

(1)   The game count does not include version differences or remakes, though these are reflected in the statistic for number of games sold across the franchise.

(2)   Generation 1 includes *Pokémon Red*, *Pokémon Blue*, and

Pokémon Yellow. Generation 2 includes *Pokémon Gold*, *Pokémon Silver*, and *Pokémon Crystal*. Generation 3 includes *Pokémon Ruby*, *Pokémon Sapphire*, and *Pokémon Emerald,* as well as the Generation 1 remakes *Pokémon Fire Red* and *Pokémon Leaf Green*. Generation 4 includes *Pokémon Diamond*, *Pokémon Pearl*, and *Pokémon Platinum,* as well as the Generation 2 remakes *Pokémon HeartGold* and *Pokémon SoulSilver*. Generation 5 includes *Pokémon White*, *Pokémon Black*, *Pokémon White Version 2,* and *Pokémon Black Version 2.* Generation 6 includes *Pokémon X*, and *Pokémon Y,* as well as the Generation 3 remakes *Pokémon Omega Ruby* and *Pokémon Alpha Sapphire*. A third main game has not been announced for Generation 6 at the time of this writing. When I reference a generation in this text, I am never talking about the remakes found in that generation. When I need to talk about a remake, I will write the name out, rather than referring to generation. Additionally, when talking about Generation 5, I mean *Pokémon Black* and *White*, and will refer to the sequels as *Version 2.*

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