Diversity in Utopian Futurism: Analyzing Queer Identity Construction Through Language in I was a Teenage Exocolonist
Gerrits, Marieke

Universiteit Leiden – Faculty of Humanities

Diversity in Utopian Futurism: Analyzing Queer Identity Construction Through Language in *I was a Teenage Exocolonist*

Master's Thesis

MA Linguistics
Language and Interaction
July 1, 2025

Marieke Gerrits
S1842749

Supervisor
Dr. E. Alves Vieira

Second Reader
Dr. J. E. Connor

Acknowledgement

Abstract

This study deals with identity construction through language in video games. Queer Game Studies is a relatively young field, and while queer representation in video games has been researched before (Látal, 2022; Pulos, 2013), less academic focus has been put on communicating characters' identities to the player through a game's writing. By taking a Queer approach to linguistic research, this study integrated contextuality and fluidity (Motschenbacher, 2011). It focused specifically on polyamory and other consensual non-monogamous (CNM) identities, as research on it is scarce, and only managed to detach itself from associations to infidelities and affairs in academics from the early 2000s (Barker and Landridge, 2010; Cardoso et al., 2021). This thesis aimed to answer the question: how does the writing of character interactions in the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* reflect the diversity of queer identities? It did so by analyzing two separate aspects: queer identity construction as portrayed through dateable characters by the game's writers, and players' interpretation of these. To analyze this topic, the current study combined the concepts of intersectionality, mononormativity, identity construction through language, and Tactics of Intersubjectivity as part of an interdisciplinary framework. Particular focus was put on polyamorous relationships and relationship negotiation among dateable characters, and how they communicate these to the player's character. The generated themes made apparent how the game's writers portrayed queer identities particularly through their relationship negotiations with other characters and the player's. In the case of polyamory relationships and identities on the asexual spectrum, both involved characters establish their queerness through relationship terms and boundaries. Most characters used the Tactic of Adequation to signal closeness with other characters' identities, or used the Tactic of Distinction to establish a boundary they expected would distance themselves from the other. Players of *Exocolonist* expressed mostly understanding of the queer identities in the game. However, as players drew on their lived experiences to formulate opinions, a clear mix was observed between mononormative expectations of in-game relationships by some, and associations with external queer identities by others. The results highlight that queer identities in *Exocolonist*

are mostly recognized if the player is already familiar with the identities expressed. This research aimed to establish a well-developed case that constructs the foundation for future research on different games and different identities. As the focus of this study was on internal validity, future research that analyzes external validity is recommended. Additionally, as the scope of the research only allowed for analysis of CNM relationships and asexual identities, further research on other aspects of intersectional identities, such as ethnicity and gender identities, is required.

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

1. Phases of thematic analysis, as developed and described by Braun & Clarke (2006)

Tables

1. Thematic framework and the generated themes

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations

QL   queer linguistics

QT   queer theory

CNM   consensual non-monogamy

SF   science fiction

QSF   queer science fiction

1   Introduction

As the scope and influence of video games have increased exponentially over the last twenty years, so too has their reach to groups of people that do not fall under the normative image of the white, straight, cisgender, male gamer (Ruberg, 2020, p. 2). However, with this growing reach, "games and the cultures that surround them have a long history of underrepresenting, misrepresenting, and at times fostering open hostility toward those who do not fit the [normative image]" (p. 2). These issues show to be intersectional, as underrepresentation and discrimination deeply affect people of varying backgrounds (p. 6). This and the fact that this is a yet under-researched field make for a valuable topic for linguistic research.

This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyze language as used to write queer characters in the video game *I was a Teenage Exocolonist* (Northway Games, 2022). Research that has been done on this topic focuses on the aspect of underrepresentation and misrepresentation (Látal, 2022), as well as on how major video game corporations approach the topic of inclusion in their games (Pulos, 2013). The current research, however, aims to look at how language in a video game can be used positively by an indie developer team to purposefully create characters with queer identities, as well as the relationship between the characters' intended identities and the interpretations of the game's players. Additionally, where the aforementioned research focuses on queer representation in relation to heteronormativity in video games (see Pulos, 2013), this thesis' scope focuses more specifically on CNM relationships and mononormativity, as well as how both sexual attraction and lack of it constitute queer identities. In order to analyze these aspects, the current research samples include both the game's dialogue and players' discussions of the game on a game-related forum. The main research question will therefore be as follows:

How does the language used across character interactions in the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* reflect the diversity of queer identities?

Due to the scope of the research, this question is further split into two sub-questions:

1. What language do romanceable characters in *Exocolonist* use to communicate their identity in dialogues?
2.   How does the aforementioned language affect the way players of *Exocolonist* interpret the queer identities?

Each question will be answered by analyzing a separate dataset. Sub-question one will be analyzed by sampling the game's dialogue script, whereas the second will be analyzed by sampling gamers' opinions on the relationships present in the game through Reddit posts (r/Exocolonist, n.d.).

From a Queer Linguistics (QL) perspective, we can ask "How are sexual identities linguistically constructed in particular contexts?" (Motschenbacher, 2011, p. 161). This research aims to answer this question in relation to written language, which adds another layer: the script of the game is written with a purpose. Each line written for a character is meant to further establish that character's identity. Furthermore, a Queer approach to linguistic research must involve contextuality and fluidity (p. 162): identities are constructed in context, and are constantly shifting. Through thematic analysis and tactics of intersubjectivity, this research will look at how queer identities are not only purposefully constructed, but also the specific language that the writers used to get players to identify their characters as queer. To see if the writer's intentions were recognized, the second part of the research involves analyzing players' thoughts on specific scenes in the game involving these characters. This approach connects to the idea that "identities are not just a matter of performing, they also have to be decoded and co-produced by the recipient side in order to be functional" (p. 162). This means that if the recipients of the games writing, the players, do not recognize the language as intended by the writers, these identities are not functional.

This research will maintain a reflexive and open approach to the research subject, as supported by internal validity (Miyahara, 2020). The aim of this research is not to present a

'final word', but instead to establish a well-developed and well-established case from which future research on different games and perhaps different identities can be done.

2   Theoretical Framework

To adequately analyze the queer language used in *I was a Teenage Exocolonist* (Northway Games, 2022, further referred to as *Exocolonist*), this thesis will explore the language used to refer to characters' preferred relationship styles. Although neither the game nor the characters use specific relationship terms such as monogamous or non-monogamous, it is possible to engage in different types of relationships with different characters. Depending on the character, these relationships are either strictly monogamous, strictly polyamorous, or only polyamorous with specific other characters. All of these possibilities are pre-coded into the game's data. The game's approach to relationships and dating will be discussed further in the next chapter. The current study will first discuss the theoretical frameworks that provide the basis for analyzing the way language is used in these relationships in-game.

The chosen approach to the theoretical framework is developed by compiling the concepts of mononormativity, identity construction through language, tactics of intersubjectivity, intersectionality, and performativity into one combined framework adjusted for the two main research questions. This is done to capture and highlight the complexity and specificity of the research questions. The frameworks are obtained from a wide range of fields that in one way or another touch on language, (sexual) identity expression, queer studies, and/or game studies. These concepts support the interdisciplinary approach of the thesis, while still maintaining a linguistic focus. Concepts such as mononormativity and identity construction through language play a central role in analyzing how queer identities are produced and perceived in writing. On the other hand, intersectionality and performativity are equally important, yet provide a more passive focus by connecting all other mentioned concepts. Each concept will be further expanded upon below.

QL and its academic development plays a central role in this thesis' approach to queer identities and identity formation. As a well-established but relatively recent academic paradigm, it connects Queer Theory (QT) and linguistics, and follows the former's

postmodernist and poststructuralist approach in rejecting a monolithic reading of identity and inclusion of various, often highly heterogeneous, approaches that are driven by a critical focus on heteronormativity (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013, p. 520). Additionally, QT, as a deconstructive strategy, aims to denaturalize heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them (Sullivan 2003, p. 81). Ql subsequently is described to take on an ideology-critical stance due to its motivation to challenge the heteronormative status quo (p. 522). Of particular use for the current research is QL's approach to language and identity, as it does not see identity as a stable, pre-discursive given (p. 522). Instead, speakers are thought to construct identities through language use, often in a fluid and temporary manner (p. 522). As such, QL is particularly useful to this thesis as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of non-normative identity expressions through language, especially across multiple conversations and performed by various characters who each uniquely express their identity.

2.1 Performing identity construction through language

Polyamory as an academic topic has been studied in different contexts, through different backgrounds, and using different frameworks. However, while sexually non-monogamous relationships are relatively common, the volume of research on the prevalence of polyamorous relationships is scarce (Cardoso et al., 2021, p. 1239). It was considered only of interest as part of infidelities and affairs up until a couple of decades ago; since the turn of the millennium, research has begun to also look at consensual or ethical non-monogamy (Barker and Landridge, 2010, p. 749). Additionally, whereas other non-normative identities and sexualities had already established academic traction in journals such as the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* and the *Journal of Bisexuality*, the roots of academic consideration of non-monogamy and polyamory only date back to the late 1990s (Benson, 2017, p. 26). This focus on what was called "gay and lesbian linguistics" shows how early work in language and sexuality studies was still driven by a motivation to put lesbian and gay male speakers on the sociolinguistic map, before anything else (Motschenbacher, 2011, p. 150). As QL was developed in response to these essentialized approaches, it purposefully adjusted its

5

approach to focus instead on all sexual identities and desires, and their discursive regimes (p. 150).

In the early 2000s the *Journal of Sexualities* released a special issue on polyamory, and its articles covered a range of research focuses spanning positionality and approaches to intersectionality (Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse, 2006), issues of diversity within progressive polyamory (Noël, 2006), the exploration of themes such as love, intimacy and friendship among practitioners of polyamory (Klesse, 2006), and more. This section will examine the variety of frameworks and research methods applied among these articles, as well as more recently published ones, and pay particular attention to the connection between sexual identity construction and language.

This thesis focuses on polyamory as part of consensual non-monogamies (CNM). Where other sub-communities like swinging focus more on sexual non-monogamy but still maintain emotional monogamy, among polyamorists it is generally considered possible, valid, and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or romantic relationships with more than one person (Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse, 2006, p. 518). More recent research describes the identity similarly, focusing on the possibility of multiple relationships being emotionally close and/or sexual in nature, and separates it within academic literature under the non-monogamies umbrella from swinging and gay open relationships (Barker and Landridge, 2010, p. 750). This thesis will follow this focus on polyamory specifically as part of ethical non-monogamy, as it aims to look at both sexual and emotional closeness in the portrayed relationships in the game. To differentiate between polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy, the latter will be referred to as CNM.

2.2 Mononormativity and language

The current research approaches hegemonies and power relations within queer studies by focusing on non-normative relationships. Similar to heteronormativity in that it portrays a position of hegemonic dominance, mononormativity refers to the dominant discourse of the language of monogamy and infidelity being the only ones available, leaving

out discourse on non-monogamy (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587). This occurs through representations that serve social functions, maintaining monogamy in a position of said hegemonic dominance (p. 587).

Mononormativity as a belief system portrays the monogamous couple as natural and morally superior and reinforces the dominant ideals of romantic love and intimate relations in Western society (Ferrer, 2018; Thompson, 2022). This, in turn, stigmatizes non-monogamous practices as unnatural and dysfunctional (Ferrer, 2018, p. 819). Barker and Landridge (2010) continue the discussion by stating it refers to dominant assumptions of normalcy and naturalness of monogamy, similar to those around heterosexuality and heteronormativity (p. 750). In Western culture, this representation and dominant version of relationships is of life-long or serial monogamy with 'the one' perfect partner, with jealousy being constructed as the 'natural' response to any threat to this relationship (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587).

Barker (2005) explains the dominant structure of sexuality in Western culture, and shows how heteronormativity and mononormativity overlap in its key elements: relationships should be (a) between a man and a woman, (b) monogamous, and (c) with the man active and the woman passive (p. 76). Where the existence of polyamory threatens (b), it also opposes the male/female and straight/gay binary constructs that form compulsory heterosexuality (pp. 76-77). CNM relationships oppose these normative expectations of relationships in three ways: through emerging alternative languages surrounding identities and relationship patterns, reimagining existing language associated with normative relationship patterns, and relationship negotiation.

Ritchie and Barker (2006) analyzed through online discussions, websites, and self-help books how polyamorous people construct their identities through language. They find that the identities, relationship practices, and emotions of polyamorous people face difficulties being described through the dominant language of monogamy (p. 596). This is due to self-expression being limited by conventional (and normative) language of

partnerships, infidelities, and jealousy, as well as either/or constructions such as friend/lover (Barker, 2005, p. 86). As a result, polyamorous people have been found to challenge mononormative understandings of relationships and emotions as they construct new identities and relationship patterns, as well as enable new ways of experiencing and expressing sexual stories, through emerging alternative languages (Barker, 2005; Ritchie and Barker, 2006, p. 597).

The aforementioned emerging alternative language can also surface in reclaiming words that are considered derogatory (such as the word "slut", like in the book "The Ethical Slut" by Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy from 1997), or coining new words that portray experiences from the community that do not yet have a word in hetero- and mononormative society (such as "compersion" and "frubbling" to describe positive versions of jealousy) (Barker, 2005, p. 86). By coining new words, polyamorous communities are actively rewriting their language of love, relationships, and emotion in a way that enables them to experience spoken and written language that better matches their lived experiences (Ritchie and Barker, 2006, p. 598). As such, language has become an important tool for differentiating a person's sexuality in terms of identity, philosophy, practices, and power structures as part of non-monogamous sub-identities (Thompson, 2022, p. 24).

A second way people in nonnormative relationships challenge mononormative relationship expectations is through communicating affection and commitment. Saying "I love you" has established itself in the Western world as a way to transform the relationship between speaker and addressee as the former communicates a specific romantic feeling for the latter (Keshav & Zimman, 2025, p. 6). This interpretation does not leave space for any type of partnership that diverges from normative expectations, including CNM relationships. Normative discourses about and practices surrounding *I love you* as such bolster the hypervalorization of romantic relationships and the naturalization of monogamy and normative Western family structures (p. 1). By expressing declarations of love in non-normative relationships and situations, non-monogamous people actively challenge these

normative discourses. One way this can occur is through what Kean (2018, p. 469) calls the ambiguity inherent in the figure of the friend. Depending on the type of CNM a person subscribes to, they might perceive friendships as a "friendly casual sex partner" or a "non-sexual-romantic partner". This ambiguity points to the mononormative underpinnings of distinctions between both sexual/non-sexual and loving/non-loving, which frame many interpretations of CNM (p. 469).

Among polyamorists, the notion of intimate friendship, both sexual and non-sexual, is fairly common in discourses related to their relationships and connections (Klesse, 2006, pp. 567-570). Additionally, friendship allows one to negotiate with each individual how their relationship may develop, as there is no 'fixed mould' according to the interviewed polyamorists, and utilizing this ambiguity of the boundaries between friendship, partnership, or lover relationship is an important aspect of polyamory (p. 570). Klesse concludes that polyamory appears to be a particularly friendship-centered discourse (p. 570). Astle et al.'s (2024, p. 725) research confirms this, as at least some polyamorist participants in their study stated that their relationship agreements did not need to include sexual and/or romantic connection as specified in the authors' survey definition. This finding further strengthens the polyamory discourse as nearly one-third of the participants in their study indicated that their relationship configuration involved a mix of CNM relationship types (p. 726). This establishes that polyamory discourse not only counters mononormativity through its friendship-centered approach but also does so through the emphasis on fluidity. This becomes evident as it seems people are using polyamory as an umbrella term to describe a range of practices, including emotionally focused relationships (p. 725). Ultimately, many people who practice polyamory do so because of the value polyamory resides in its endorsement of the fluidity and unpredictability of emotions and erotic desire (Klesse, 2014, p. 92).

This broader understanding of non-normative relationships is mirrored by Keshaw and Zimman (2025, p. 27), who argue for communicative practices as central to the discourse. Research on asexual and aromantic identities (people who experience no or little

sexual or romantic attraction, respectively) in relationships demonstrates that intimacy is not a singular aspect of relationality but a multi-dimensional construct; dimensions to which partners may have different orientations (pp 26-27).

The large variety of relationship interpretations as part of polyamory shows a need for relationship term negotiation. CNM relationships are not clearly distinguishable but rather negotiated in social interactions both within a relationship and with others, resulting in people forming specific agreements with their partner(s) (Andersson, 2022, p. 1925; Muise et al., 2019, p. 1918). Important aspects of relationship negotiation as part of CNM and polyamory include relationship consent, honesty, and communication (p. 1926). Communication forms the center of this hub-and-spoke structure, as lack of or poor communication affects all others and can lead to between-partner discrepancies in perceptions of relationship structures (Hangen et al., 2020, p. 438). Relationship consent can become evident in, for example, agreements on boundaries, which are subject to discussions and renegotiations as a polyamorous relationship develops (Muise et al., 2019, p. 1926). These boundary agreements depend on individual people's needs and will be unique to each relationship.

Another way boundaries and consent are related is in discussions surrounding infidelity. This is especially important in ambiguous relationship situations, as there is a higher chance for individuals involved to have different opinions of and expectations around (in)fidelity within a polyamorous relationship (Andersson, 2022, p. 1930). Relationships conforming to mononormative expectations involve less boundary negotiation as monogamous boundaries are often deemed fixed and universal, and therefore not verbalized (pp. 1927-1928). While boundary transgressions such as infidelity can occur equally in monogamous and CNM relationships, interviewed polyamorists seem to be more aware of the central role of ongoing boundary negotiation in relationships (p. 1928). This relates boundary construction directly to consent, as both need to be an ongoing negotiation, not just established at the start of a relationship (Barker, 2013, p. 904). This includes individuals on

the asexual spectrum: as people who experience no or little sexual attraction, they often negotiate with partners around intimacy needs (Glass, 2022, p. 347). In this case, the focus of their relationship negotiation is to achieve the forms of physical and emotional intimacy they seek (p. 347). This is especially true for people who identify as demisexual, as they experience little to no sexual attraction in the early stages of a relationship but may develop some as their emotional connection with their partner(s) becomes stronger (p. 345).

In summary, these communities of people with non-normative sexualities have found a way to use language to enable ways of experiencing and expressing that reject these dominant discourses. This is done particularly by polyamorous people coining new words for experiences that cannot be adequately described through a mononormative and heteronormative lens. This focus on communication within CNM, as well as continual negotiations, is seen as contributing to a relationship's success (Anapol, 1997).

2.3 Tactics of Intersubjectivity

An important aspect of this thesis is the relation between identity and language. The current research's definition of identity follows that of Bucholtz and Hall (2005): identity is the social positioning of self and other (p. 586). In order to analyze language in relation to identity construction, this thesis adopts the theory of Tactics of Intersubjectivity. Created by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), it combines the interaction of the semiotic processes of practice, indexicality, ideology, and performance and has been developed with gender and sexual identities in mind (Ogungbemi, 2025, p. 120). It offers a way to further specify how identity gets created and performed in interactions by combining and connecting multiple assumptions that constitute a methodological framework for considering how gender and sexual identities are produced in and through discourse (Kiesling, 2019, p. 51; Sauntson & Morrish, 2012, p. 155). These assumptions recognize that identities emerge in context, that they may be temporary and multiple, are discursively produced in localized contexts of interaction, and are negotiated with other social actors and in relation to structures of power (p. 155). Another aspect of this approach is that social meaning regarding identities is

complexly emergent from the stances and styles people engage in interactions with (Hall et al., 2013, p. 636). Additionally, the tactics function as tools that can be used to examine how belonging is claimed, justified, and challenged (Thissen, 2015, p. 199).

As the approach offers a structure to analyze identity formation in fictive interactions in movies, books and films as well, authors like Ogungbemi have used it to analyze how queer characters use language within the setting of the fiction to construct their identities in relation to institutions such as the family, religion, and workplace in the respective context (p. 120). In the case of Ogungbemi's work, analysis using this framework allows researchers to see how these institutions enable or constrain the construction of their queer identity (p. 120). Additionally, this framework has been further used to study boundary construction in language policy (Zavala, 2020), identity presentations (Sauntson & Morrish, 2012; Suzuki, 2023), and identity negotiation (Ito, 2021), among others.

The framework follows three pairs of tactics: adequation and distinction, authentication and denaturalization, and authorization and illegitimation (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, pp. 599-605). Within these pairs, it covers dimensions of similarity versus difference, language use as authenticating someone's 'natural' identity versus marking it as not authentic, and looks at the ways societies, cultures, and institutions allow certain categories of identity, and what people they allow in said categories (Kiesling, 2019, pp. 51-52).

The first pair, that of adequation and distinction, focuses on the demarcation of similarities and differences (Thissen, 2015, p. 199). Adequation emphasizes socially recognized similarity, without necessarily involving solidarity (Ito, 2021, p. 345; Suzuki, 2023, p. 3). On the contrary, distinction underscores differences (p. 345).

The second pair, authentication and denaturalization, focuses on the language and cultural resources that people perceive as necessary to belong to a place or group (p. 199). When analyzed in relation to sexual identity, this pair of tactics makes these 'credible' or intelligible, by highlighting those linguistic practices by which identities come to be verified or authenticated (Sauntson & Morrish, 2012, p. 155). These tactics involve the construction of

12

a genuine identity and the production of a non-genuine identity, respectively (Suzuki, 2023, p. 3). More specifically, where authentication is concerned with essentialist authenticities, denaturalization is about non-essentialism: the latter operates to destabilize the essential claims of the former and, as such, subverts the ideological expectations (Thissen, 2015, p. 199).

The final pair, authorization and illegitimation, reflects the attempt to legitimate an identity through an institution or other authority, or conversely, the effort to withhold or withdraw such structural power (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 386). Where authorization refers to people's efforts to appropriate authority to claim belonging to a particular place, illegitimation is used to judge or reject others' belonging (Thissen, 2015, p. 199).

An important aspect of the tactics of intersubjectivity is the notion that contextuality and fluidity are very much central, similar to the general Queer approach to sociolinguistics (Motschenbacher 2011, p. 162). They follow this up arguing that identities are not just a matter of performing; they also have to be decoded and co-produced by the recipient side to be functional, and that a central mechanism in this process of negotiation is the comparison of actual identity performances with normative identity discourses (p. 162).

2.4 Intersectionality, Performativity, and Identity Politics

The final three aspects that this section will highlight are the concept of intersectionality, performativity, and identity politics. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1998), intersectionality provides a way of understanding how social constructs such as gender, race, ethnicity and class (among others) affect the lives of people who identify with, and are identified with, those categories, as opposed to fragmenting them (Kiesling, 2019, p. 31). In practical terms, intersectionality explains how different types of discrimination interact with each other to compound the discrimination in unique ways, ultimately becoming more than the sum of the individual discriminations (p. 31).

Sexuality cannot be looked at in a vacuum: whether the person behind the identity is fictional or real, each identity holds many different parts, which cannot accurately be viewed

on their own or analyzed without taking into account these other parts. This is further affirmed by Hori et al. (2025), who, from an applied linguistics perspective on identity-related research, argue that over the past three decades, identity formation came to be conceptualized not as singular or fixed but instead as plural, fluid, and co-constructed (p. 1). This plurality concerned the relationship between language and other identity categories, similar to the aforementioned social constructs (p. 1). The authors also emphasize the acknowledgement among applied linguistics of the complexity of identity formation, and many of them have recognized the utility of the critical theory of intersectionality in unveiling the power structures that underlie the intersections of language and various other identity categories that are contextual as well as situational (p. 2). Even though an in-depth analysis of these other social constructs falls outside the scope of this thesis, the sexual identities analyzed will be done so through an intersectional lens.

Levon (2015) argues for three basic underlying tenets of an intersectionality theoretic approach: first, that *lived experience* is ultimately intersectional, meaning this intersectional complexity ought to be made central to linguistic analyses (p. 297). The second tenet states that intersections are *dynamic* and emerge in specific social, historical, and interactional configurations, meaning that it is impossible to describe a stable or universal condition indicated by certain social constructs (pp. 297-298). The third tenet states that these categories not only intersect but also *mutually constitute* one another, asserting that intersections are themselves formative of the categories of social constructs (p. 298).

Since the boom on polyamory-focused research in the 2000s, academic research on the topic has had an increased focus on intersectionality, drawing on black, postcolonial and anti-racist feminist theories, which emphasize the need to examine different axes of oppression, as interrelated rather than separate (Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse, 2006, p. 516). However, while this framework is still considered a useful tool for Queer Studies, other frameworks such as Sherene Razack's 'interlocking systems of oppression' are being considered as alternative ways of theorizing the aforementioned axes of oppression (p. 516).

While not the focus of this thesis, it establishes a discourse that acknowledges these axes of oppression to be interlocked and reinforce each other's oppression (Razack, 1998, p. 13). The referenced article concludes the section by admitting that while queer studies is also not blame-free of resisting expansion beyond the segregated sexuality of the most privileged gays, intersectionality still has an important place within the field as long as it is joined by positionality, to be able to ask important questions such as how the politics of difference and the body play themselves out in non-monogamous relationships (p. 517).

Performativity, subsequently, relates to how identities are recognized by others through repeated actions (Kiesling, 2019, p. 26). Performativity has mostly been associated with gender in academic research, however, academics like Hall (1995) and Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have created frameworks such as the aforementioned tactics of intersubjectivity to further specify how identity gets created and performed in interactions, including sexual identities (Kiesling, 2019, pp. 51-52). More recent work has been taking into consideration past critique on the assumption that people can "change identity categories as easily as they can change their clothes", and have begun to incorporate desires and feelings into theory without losing sight of how language is part of the performativity of the ideological categories that cultures build around language and sexuality (p. 53) (Jones, 2019, 2021; Zimman, 2014). Sullivan (2003) explains identities to be culturally and historically specific, meaning their intelligibility is context-specific, as is the value accorded to particular identities (p. 83). These values surface in society as norms, with 'unnatural' actions and identities that do not follow these norms being punished or stigmatized (p. 84). This ultimately functions to reaffirm or naturalize society and said norms considered 'normal', and shows how identity functions as a regulatory and regulating fiction (p. 84). By constructing the other as going against society's norms, it reaffirms the identity of the one who attacks the 'abnormal' identities as 'normal' or 'natural' (p. 84). This immediately links to the aforementioned tactics of intersubjectivity.

Following these two aspects of intersectionality and performativity, it becomes clear that through queer studies, video games and intersectionality are linked. Ruberg reaffirms

this by stating how queer games research includes a focus on intersectional concerns that connect queer experiences of discrimination to the marginalization of people of different non-normative backgrounds (Ruberg, 2018a, p. 545). This connects to Judith Butler's (1990) concept of the *heterosexual matrix,* with which she explains society to be perpetuating gender differences as natural through what she calls gender binarism. Since the model of identity that is integral to the heterosexual matrix is based on a stable and dichotomous notion of gender, Butler's framework of performativity allows for a discontinuity between sex, gender, and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003, p. 86). This *heterosexual matrix* and Crenshaw's (1998) intersectionality ultimately affect the kinds of queer experiences in video games players can have.

Identity politics, on the other hand, is argued to presume an internal coherence to identity groups and reinforces structures of power in the way it is deployed in both popular and academic discourse (Shaw, 2017, p. 70). Shaw's (2017) article relates the failure of an identity politics approach specifically to gaming representation: it argues that there is no coherent LGBTQ identity or community to be represented (p. 77). To reduce the experiences of queer games or 'gaymers' to exclusively homophobia ignores these experiences' intersection with those of sexism, transphobia, racism, classism and ethnocentrism, in ways that cannot be properly accounted for by a focus on sexuality (p. 77). This once again shows how an intersectional lens is central to creating a more complete view of (queer) identities, and highlights QT's attitude towards identity politics as a reductive approach (p. 77). This gets even more emphasized as intersectionality is understood as individuals being (self/other) positioned in more than one category simultaneously, which covers overarching identity aspects such as gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality (Angouri, 2021, pp. 5-6).

Identity politics are also brought up in polyamory-focused articles, as Noël (2006, p. 617) urges polyamorists to move beyond 20th-century identity politics to engage in challenging and critical work around systemic racial, economic, and other inequalities in order to challenge current systemic oppressions, further establishing identity politics and

intersectionality as mutually exclusive. Barker and Langdridge (2010, p. 752), however, mention how discourses of identity politics have increased the visibility of polyamory as people have claimed it as an identity label rather than a practice and have called for rights and responsibilities subsequently. Overall opinions across articles on QT, QL and polyamory though acknowledge the importance of increased awareness of intersectionality and those that acknowledge and refer to identity politics position it opposite of the framework (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Jones, 2021; Klesse, 2018; Motschenbacher, 2011; Noël, 2006; Shaw, 2017).

3   Contextualization

This chapter focuses on the contextualization of the video game *Exocolonist* (Northway Games, 2022). Northway Games (n.d.) describes *Exocolonist* as a "narrative Role-Playing Game (RPG) with card battles", as well as a narrative deckbuilding RPG with a time loop twist (Steam, n.d.). While the gameplay includes this aspect of cards and card collecting, this chapter will focus primarily on the game's narrative.

This chapter explores three aspects of the game: first, it expands on the story, the main character, and the narrative. Second, it explores the game's development and discusses how *Exocolonist*'s main developer and lead writer, Sarah Northway, used themes such as colonialism and environmentalism to tell her story, as well as how her decision to add a second writer allowed for more in-depth exploration of interpersonal relationships within the game. Finally, this chapter argues how queer science fiction (QSF) is central to the game's narrative through utopian futurity and making queer identities explicit and central to the narrative. While this thesis adopts a primarily linguistic approach to the research, it also analyzes the data through an interdisciplinary lens, incorporating intersectionality, performativity, and discourse on the normative understanding of relationships. Additionally, Science fiction (SF) as a genre is important to the game's development and narrative, and will therefore be used to analyze the writing in the analysis chapter. The current study bases its understanding of SF on media that make the world with which people are familiar seem strange, and make the strange world seem familiar through the introduction of a "novum": a technoscientific discovery or invention that distinguishes the secondary world of the SF story from real life (Suvin, 1979). QSF, subsequently, is understood to either be SF media produced by someone who identifies as queer, and/or it can represent the stories of primary, secondary, and tertiary characters who are queer, in an SF setting (Calvin, 2023). While various interpretations of QSF are available in academic discourse, the approach used in this thesis acknowledges queerness in both aspects of the SF production process: that of the writer producing the story, and the identities of the characters given shape by the writer in the process.

While SF may not appear to connect to queer identities immediately, the interpretation this thesis adopts supports the game's fantastical setting, as well as the technological futurism displayed in its world. The queer identities that exist in the game's story do so in a world that has normalized non-normative identities: medic bays which can heal most non-lethal injuries without the need of a surgeon, genetic enhancements like sharper vision or a stress-resistant mind parents can choose for their children when they are born (Northway Games, 2022). The normalization of queerness in the game's setting is supported by the scientific futurism that distinguishes the game's world from real life. QSF further strengthens the connection between SF, *Exocolonist* and this thesis as it acknowledges the positionality of (at least some of) the game's creators, as well as SF's historic connection with telling queer stories (Campbell, 2023). By including SF and QSF in the analysis of this thesis, more nuance can be given to narrative and writing choices made by the game's writers, as they will help put into context the analyzed dialogues and character interactions.

3.1 The Narrative

The game starts on a spaceship, with the player choosing the main character's name, gender identity, and future gender expression. Even though the player can name their character anything they wish, the character's canonical full name is Solanaceae. This is a nod towards the game's narrative setting, as Sol's parents (both working in agriculture) named their child after their favorite taxonomic family: the nightshades (Northway, 2020c). As "Sol" is used by many players to refer to the character, this thesis will continue to reference the main character as such for ease of understanding (Fantastic_Mister, 2023).

Once the player has established Sol's background, the story of the game starts, and the spaceship Sol grew up on finally lands on the alien planet of Vertumna, and a so-called exocolony is established. The word *exocolony* and its derivation *exocolonist* are used by the writers to signal its SF theme: as opposed to the player's understanding of a colony and its connection to Earth, this one is established on a different planet, hence the prefix *exo*. The game's goal is to play ten years of the character's life, from age ten to age twenty, growing up

and experiencing life in the colony on this alien planet. While Sol grows up, the player has to navigate them through both mundane and formative experiences, such as going to class and picking a part-time job, to picking a life goal and subsequent career. As the exocolony grows, and its inhabitants explore more and more of the planet, life grows increasingly perilous, making the player choose how to respond as Sol to a multitude of crises that occur throughout Sol's teen years. When Sol finally gets to celebrate their twentieth birthday, the game ends, and the player gets told how the life they created for their character continued in the decades after the game's timeframe. Any other characters the player and Sol got close to will be mentioned in the closing credits, as well as the relationship they had with each other. At this point, the main question the game asks the player is not what they have accomplished, but *who they have become* (Northway, 2020a), centering the RPG element of the game, which allows the player to shape their character's identity to their liking. This is not where the story ends, however.

Being inspired by SF and movies like *Groundhog Day* (1993)[1], the game makes it clear early on that the main character is stuck in a time loop and has to live through the same ten years over and over (Suttner et al., 2022). With each subsequent life, the player tries to learn new skills, get to know different people, and make better decisions to ultimately help prevent their colony's demise and stop whatever is causing their character's life to start over again and again. A big aspect of the game is its characters: the player is encouraged to get close to the people they are growing up alongside, but one playthrough is not enough time to experience each character's story and related questline. By replaying the game, the player gets the chance to create a new narrative for their character each time, choosing who to become friends with and who to date (if they want to date anyone at all). Exocolonist has eleven dateable characters, including one secret character, with whom the player can choose to become close. These eleven characters take on the embodiment of different character archetypes and tropes, giving the player a variety of types to pursue (Northway, 2023).

---

[1] The movie follows a narcissistic, self-centered weatherman (Bill Murray) who finds himself in a time loop on Groundhog Day, and has to find a way to break the one-day loop (IMDB, n.d.).

3.2 How the game started

Main developer Sarah Northway explained in a podcast interview (Suttner et al., 2022) that the main inspiration for her new game was taken from Japanese life simulators like *Princess Maker* (Gainax, 1991)[2]. These types of games involve time management, large amounts of time passing, and the player's responsibility of improving set in-game skills within a certain time limit. After discarding different ideas due to a lack of manageability, the developer settled on narrative being the major component of the game. From the start of the developing process, Northway expressed both a universal and personal approach to writing the narrative and its characters, stating that it is "her soapbox" to incorporate current global issues and themes in the game. These themes are explored through the proxy of Sol, who learns more and more about the reasons for the adults leaving Earth on a spaceship twenty years before the start of the game. Northway chose to incorporate themes of colonialism, expansionism, environmentalism, and climate change, among others, to tell the story of refugees in search of a better place, and for whom this new planet reflects their idealistic hopes and dreams (Suttner et al., 2022).

The Vertumna colony in the game is supposed to reflect a utopian commune, which allowed the development team to make it the kind of utopia they would like to see (Gavin, 2022). Northway used her progressive, multicultural community in Vancouver, Canada, as inspiration for this (Gavin, 2022). This approach to diversity shows in the development team's attempt to include as many diverse ethnicities and sexualities as they could and show the inclusion of diverse gender identities in out and accepted characters who have trans and trans nonbinary identities (Gavin, 2022). Furthermore, Northway emphasized that while political strife is a central theme to the game, gender or race are never the focus of conflict; she emphasized that there is little to no racism or homophobia in their society (Gavin, 2022; Nicholas, 2022).

---

[2] A Japanese game series set in an indefinite time period, in which the player assumes the role of a parent and is tasked with raising an orphan by deciding her weekly activities and helping her find a profession once she grows up (Addams, 2009).

The utopia-through-diversity approach can also be seen in the character creation, where the player uses sliders to select Sol's pronouns and appearance, and can be changed at any time during the playthrough. This fits the world narrative, Northway explains, where gender transitioning is common and accepted by everyone, especially for children in the process of discovering their identities (Nicholas, 2022). In a developer's blog on the game's official website, Northway shows how she decided early in development to create a political yet utopian society where gender, race, and sexuality are as inconsequential as possible (Northway, 2023). This led to the game's design moving away from darker political themes related to these topics, like forced childbearing as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985)[3]. Finally, as explained by the developer, another major theme as part of the narrative is that of exploration and discovery, where "the player can explore the possibilities of their character's life and identity as they grow up and decide who they will be" (Northway, 2022a).

All of these aspects of the game's narrative themes show identity and diversity being central to the game's development. As Northway continued creating the game's world and its stories, her aim was not just to make a cozy world but to create a world with many different kinds of views in it (Suttner et al., 2022). This aim for diversity and the deliberate choice to have the ten years of in-game time take place during the character's childhood, puberty, and early adolescence, influenced the game's development to focus increasingly on interpersonal relationships, and how these can change over time due to personal and world developments (Suttner et al., 2022).

Although the narrative still was a major focus in the development of the game, Northway only decided to hire an extra writer one and a half years into the development process. Lindsay Ishihiro became the lead Narrative Design and was subsequently

---

[3] A dystopian novel set in a reimagined, totalitarian theocratic future of the United States, centering a main character who is a Handmaid, forced to provide children by proxy for infertile women of a higher social status. Major themes covered in the story are biological determinism and misogyny (Newman, 2010).

responsible for writing most events, including those for character interactions (Suttner et al., 2022). With Lindsay joining the team, the events changed from bite-sized short ones to longer, more emotional, and more significant ones, where relationships between the main character and other characters would develop slowly over time (Suttner et al., 2022). Ishihiro's work added subtlety to interactions and a mature composition to the narrative (Lane, 2022). Said narrative, its stories, and events quickly expanded and became what Northway referred to as an octopus, flexible and interconnected, with a core narrative and many wriggling limbs, as opposed to that of a branching tree (Northway, 2022b). The final version of the game, according to Northway (2022), is a great balance between her writing style of blunt gameplay-oriented choices within the event and that of Ishihiro's romance and longer prose. Ishihiro frequents the online thread on the game, called r/exocolonist, to comment on players' thoughts and questions (Reddit, n.d.). They are open about being the main writer, as well as sharing their approaches to writing the different scenes. Their posts in the thread are useful to understand the writers' stance on specific scenes and their reasoning behind the design. They often take part in conversations to confirm a character's queer identity or expand on queer (sub)text in a dialogue (turkproof, 2025).

While the player spends a lot of time in any given playthrough exploring relationships with other characters, the game is not marketed as a "dating simulator". This is because Northway did not want to implement the same straightforward dating mechanics from the genre in her game, where players automatically unlock the option to date someone when they reach maximum affection with them, usually by giving them something they like to fill a love meter (Lane, 2022; Suttner, 2022). The game diverges from more common dating simulator mechanics in multiple ways. First, characters are not automatically "ready" to date the player's character, meaning it is possible they need to meet certain criteria unique to the character first before this can happen. For example, before the player can try to date the exocolony's scientist, they need to help her complete her research, as only then will she have time to spend on relationships. Second, each character has different relationship preferences regarding monogamous versus non-monogamous partnerships. While some are open to

relationships with multiple partners, others are not. This can result in two dateable characters already being in a monogamous relationship with each other, making it difficult for the player to date either without some form of intervention. Third, depending on the player's envisioned identity for their character, and making subsequent choices in dialogues based on that, certain characters become unavailable to date due to a misalignment of preferred relationship styles (Suttner, 2022).

Northway and Ishihiro intended to include polyamorous relationships from early on in the development process, but due to coding difficulties, they decided to limit this type of relationship to only certain characters (Suttner, 2022). Additionally, Northway and Ishihiro decided to allow the player to date any romanceable character regardless of their chosen gender identity, making the other characters "playersexual" (Lane, 2022). This is a term increasingly used among video game players on the Internet to refer to games where non-player characters are open to a relationship with player characters of any gender (Látal, 2022, p. 154). Although Látal (2022) concludes in their research that there is no unanimous opinion on the incorporation of playersexual characters in games, reviews of *Exocolonist* appreciate the fact that any character who is a similar age to that of the player can be romanced (Clark, 2022). Reviewers found the game's portrayal of intimacy "impressively nuanced", mentioning the inclusion of both amorous and platonic love (Clark, 2022).

The developers have a clear stance on the age of consent in the game: the player can only date characters who are the same age as Sol. Furthermore, while the player can let Sol flirt with these characters in specific instances from age fifteen, they can only choose to let Sol be physically intimate from age seventeen. The game's code includes age-based conditionals for these scenes, which will not trigger if Sol is currently not at the appropriate age (Northway Games, 2022).

Following the game's release on August 25, 2022, various platforms released their reviews as well as interviews with the development team regarding the game's development process. The press kit on *Exocolonist*'s official website contains links to a few of these, which,

while independent, reiterate the aforementioned main themes as discussed by the development team. The reviews appear to emphasize two aspects of the game that stand out to them.

the first aspect is that of simulating life. The game covers mature themes, including existential crises people are facing outside of the game, but the main way it differentiates itself from other games that cover similar topics is through displaying these themes through a cozy lens (Lane, 2022). Characters in the game live life alongside the main character and have their own experiences in the game's events that ultimately tie in with those of the player (Nicholas, 2022). A central aspect of the game's relationship building is watching the characters comprehend love and loss in similar ways to the player and their avatar, as they are all shaped by their environment (King, 2022; Warner, 2023). Clark (2022) describes the mix of lighter storylines and darker ones that involve one of the many content warnings shown in the game's start menu as being a spectrum of experiences that is core to *Exocolonist*, offering an infinite number of ways for the player to let their character live their life.

The second aspect is that of freedom, including to be oneself. This freedom shows in a lack of demonization of difference, as gender identity is fluid, and there is little to no racism or homophobia, and is therefore seen as the game's core message (Nicholas, 2022). More importantly for the focus of this thesis, is that this theme is portrayed both in the narrative and gameplay with an understanding of queer and social freedom, which is also described as having "impeccable inclusivity" (Ingram, 2022; Nicholas, 2022). Tying both the aspect of life and freedom together, the game is seen as being a "colorful, somewhat queer, optimistic vision of a challenging and harsh future" (Nicholas, 2022).

3.3 Queer Science-Fiction

Throughout *Exocolonist*'s development, SF remained central to the game's story and narrative. Northway found the best way for players to explore these complicated and vast themes was to do so across multiple playthroughs. This allows them to piece together bits of

information over time and analyze them from different perspectives, with the in-game reason for this being a perpetual time loop caused by a wormhole (Suttner et al., 2022). As such, SF became the main lens through which players would engage with the game's central themes.

Northway's reliance on SF as a genre is not surprising. In the aforementioned podcast interview with Suttner et al. (2022), she clearly states using it as a medium to touch on various global issues, such as colonialism. While Northway states her fascination with and fondness for the genre, its inclusion also makes sense in terms of the intersection of video games and SF in two ways. First of all, video games are inherently participatory in nature, requiring actual action from the player, and whose decisions depend on the understanding of the principles and rules of the gameworld (Frelik, 2018, pp. 635-636). This constitutes the very essence of SF, as the decisions allow for SF games to be spaces for speculation and extrapolation (p. 636). Second, video games allow players to engage directly with the ideas and structures associated with SF and provide frameworks which allow for "experiential and simulated testing of these ideas and concepts" (p. 636).

Exocolonist is not the first game that falls in the SF category: *Spacewar!* (1962), being one of the first video games, is also considered to be one of the first video games with a central SF theme (p. 636). In *Exocolonist*, life on the planet Vertumna is told to be a direct juxtaposition to life the people left on Earth. The player can learn more about Earth's and the colony's backstory by taking Social Studies classes in the colony's makeshift school, which Northway uses as an opportunity to explain how this new society is different: it has abandoned money, attempting to create an egalitarian society where people share their resources equitably (Northway, 2020d). Furthermore, it attempts to eradicate racial and cultural judgements by using gene-technology to scientifically mix the genes of all embryos in vitro, resulting in a society with not one particularly dominant culture or background (Northway, 2020d). In this way, *Exocolonist* follows an important aspect of SF: it allows for people to imagine possible futures, ones that can present better ways of living compared to our current existence, free from oppressive structures of the present (Campbell, 2023, p. 131).

26

This utopian futurity is especially present in *Exocolonist*, not only through its anti-racist approach, but also through its queerness. Campbell describes how "the desire for queer relationality that propels a utopian vision is both individual and collective", and that this relationality allows a re-orienting of queerness toward utopia (pp. 136-137).

In the context of video games (similar to novels), QSF provides space for players to imagine better worlds beyond the limitations of the present (p. 137). In the same volume, Calvin (2023) states how QSF represents a view from the margins, as it imagines a differently structured universe (p. 50). Looking at QSF in practice, they find that one of the three main story types within this genre covers queerness explicitly, as well as being central to the narrative (p. 50). From Calvin's examples this can mean a focus of the intersectionality of queer identity: a character's experiences cannot be isolated to one aspect such as gender identity (p. 54). It can also be expressed as complex, intersectional, and unflinchingly queer (p. 54). Finally, it can offer queer characters who reject many of the norms of Western society (p. 55). In Northway's developer notes (2020b), she explains how this divergence from Western norms is something she actively wanted to incorporate as part of the story's lore. She states that what the game's characters have in common is "their desire to get the hell away from Earth's problems and start over", while sheltering their children from the strict society of Earth (Northway, 2020b). The characters were supposed to be "pioneers, free thinkers, explorers, refugees, taken from all over the world with different cultures and ideas" (Northway, 2020b).

While the analysis chapter discusses the way the developers incorporated queerness in their writing of dateable characters, the queerness is clear from the start of the game. Northway and Ishihiro wrote queerness into *Exocolonist*, in both the narrative (as will be discussed in the analysis chapter) and the design of the game. This queerness is most easily recognizable in the main character, Sol. As previously mentioned, the player can choose Sol's gender identity as well as expression, and change these as often as they like throughout the game. Because of the nature of choice in video games, and the programming decisions from

the developers, the player is not obliged to assign Sol a queer identity. They could create a narrative that involves a cisgender, heterosexual Sol. However, the queerness in this case is created through letting the player choose, as they can actively queer Sol and their playthrough if they so wish. Even though Sol does not have a canonical gender identity, giving the player the choice allows for anyone who wishes to challenge binary gender norms.

Northway and Ishihiro, in creating the SF setting of the game's story, establish the boundaries of the game's conflicts. While the game's main conflicts are centered around colonialism and environmentalism, characters' gender and sexual identities are never brought up as the source of conflict. Instead, queerness is shown as central through character interactions and character-related storylines. The role of queerness as part of an SF narrative strengthens the connection between QT and SF. The game's fluid approach to bodies, genders, and sexualities, part of SF, embraces QT as an approach that celebrates said fluidity, liminality, and other radical tactics for deconstructing the rigidity of binary identity categories (Pearson, 2003, p. 157). Pearson also argues that the real aim of QT is to work towards a future that radically restructures society to invalidate fixed identities and deconstruct the Cartesian binarisms such as white being valued over black, male over female, and straight over gay (p. 157).

In summary, the inclusion of SF in *Exocolonist* makes sense due to the connection between the participatory nature of video games and speculation and extrapolation through decision-making in SF. Additionally, video games provide frameworks through which players can engage directly with the ideas and structures associated with SF. Northway's interpretation of SF centers around utopian futurity, as it allows players to imagine futures that differ from the present, directly connecting SF and QSF in the game following Calvin's (2023) interpretation of QSF. As Northway and Ishihiro integrated this queer approach to SF, the game deconstructs the rigidity of binary identity categories through its fluid approach to bodies, genders, and sexualities. This is part of a larger focus on QT as part of QSF, as it aims

both to reject and aim to move beyond the rigidity of identity politics, as discussed in the current study's theoretical framework (Pearson, 2003, p. 157).

4 Methodology

4.1 Sampling

The current study's main research question is: How does the language used across character interactions in the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* reflect the diversity of queer identities? Following Miyahara (2020, p. 58), by focusing on a limited number of dialogues, this research approached the findings in relation to the context of the game's writing. It emphasized internal validity over external validity. The sampling for this study was done in a purposeful manner (p. 55).

Crucial attributes the study incorporated are (a) language that refers, overtly or covertly, to the characters' queer identities and experiences, (b) the contexts in the game in which this language appears, and (c) player's interpretation of this language in the game's provided context. Queer identities here are interpreted to mean those that deviate from a heteronormative, cisnormative, and/or monogamous approach to dominant structure of sexuality (Barker, 2005). This study aimed to look at the script in the game that mentions, through exposition or characters' dialogues, language that deviates from the aforementioned dominant structure of sexuality. This, for example, can include a description of a character interacting with other characters, mention certain desires, or talk about their gender identity. Exposition includes descriptions of a character's background and history, as well as their day-to-day activities. The current study attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What language do romanceable characters in *Exocolonist* use to communicate their identity in dialogues?

2. How does the aforementioned language affect the way players of *Exocolonist* interpret the queer identities?

For the second sub-question of the study, crucial attributes are people commenting (a) explicitly on the video game being studied, and (b) voicing their observations and interpretations of the game's characters.

The subsequent context that provides an appropriate environment for the study will therefore be as follows:

(a) To analyze the language referring to queer identities and experiences, this study sampled dialogue of three romanceable characters in *Exocolonist*. Since the language to be researched includes characters' sexual identity, it is these characters and the scripting related to them that are the most relevant.

(b) To analyze the players' comments, this study sampled written comments posted on the forum r/exocolonist by players of the game who share their views with other players and fans.

Reddit has been firmly established as a near-unlimited source of linguistic data and research opportunities for QL, as shown by published research on the representation of gendered social actors in a sexuality-based online community (Heritage & Koller, 2020) and on normative romance in metalinguistic commentary about *I love you* (Keshav & Zimman, 2025), among others.

4.2 Criteria for sampling

Inclusion criteria for dialogue script:

- it has to include language related to the character's sexual or gender identity, or their view on interpersonal relationships;
- it involves a friendship event between the romanceable character and the player, or;
- it involves one of the game's endings that is triggered when the player raises enough friendship with a character.

The characters chosen to be analyzed are Marz (she/her), Rex (he/him), and Nomi (they/them). These three characters were found to show relevant variety in the way their queer identities were expressed:

- monogamous versus polyamorous relationship styles
- sexually intimate relationships versus emotionally intimate relationships

31

- gender identities (cisgender woman, cisgender man, and non-binary person)

While the initial focus of the research included non-conforming gender identities, due to the scope of the thesis, the analysis instead focuses on the former two aspects.

The writing sampling did not have any clear exclusion criteria. No additional sampling was required to supplement the data, as its initial size was sufficient for analysis. The initial aim of the study was to collect a minimum of five relevant scripted scenes for each of the three romanceable characters. However, as many more were found to be relevant for the research question, this was increased to ten scenes for each. The total number of scene samples is thirty-three: nine for Marz, ten for Nomi, and fourteen for Rex.

For the second part of the study, the inclusion criteria were as follows:

- The posts must be made by players of *Exocolonist* (determined by checking whether a person mentions they played the game in their post);
- The posts must mention at least one of the romanceable characters, or;
- The post mentions writing related to someone's queer identity even if they are not a romanceable character, but stands out as queer to the player enough for them to mention it in a post.

For the second part of the study, the exclusion criteria were the following:
- Posts were excluded if their only purpose was to share fan-made art of the game;
- Posts were excluded if their only purpose was to share game-related merchandise;
- Posts were excluded if they had a question about the game's mechanics or how to trigger a desired ending unrelated to one of the romanceable characters.

The initial minimum sample size for this sub-question was ten, and the final sample size contains eleven posts. No additional sampling was required.

4.3 Data Sources

To collect the dialogue script, samples were extracted from the game's scripting files. Sarah Northway, cofounder of Northway Games, created a new scripting language for this

game to implement the game's storytelling system (Northway, 2022b). She has made all the dialogue in the game accessible in the game's files, organized by character, in-game job descriptions, and possible endings that the player can trigger. To analyze the writing in *Exocolonist*, these text files were accessed. Each romanceable character has their own text file, including all character-related dialogues and scenes. This means that for the sampling process, one character's dialogue was sampled at a time, until all three characters' relevant scenes had been collected. To streamline the data collecting process, the first round of sampling exclusively looked at friendship events with each character. Every romanceable character has ten friendship events that will trigger each time the player reaches a new friendship threshold. In-game, this constitutes a friendship bar ranging from zero to one hundred, with the friendship events triggering every ten points of friendship. This culminates in the ultimate friendship event at level one hundred, with most characters at this point being open to dating the main character. For the purpose of this study, the dating-related events that occur as part of the friendship events were analyzed as well.

As the research is purely qualitative, dialogue was uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to then be analyzed for themes (ATLAS.ti, n.d.). Because it is not possible to rely on a set of codes to find the relevant scenes, each scene had to be read and assessed individually. To analyze players' interpretations of the game's character identities, the relevant posts were sampled and scraped through the game's dedicated forum r/Exocolonist on the online platform Reddit. Following Brookes and Chałupnik's (2022, p. 3) approach to collecting data through Reddit, the current research used the website search function to identify and manually scrape ten threads, or sets of nested comments, containing mentions of the words *queer*, *poly*, and/or any of the names of the three relevant characters *Marz*, *Nomi*, and *Rex*. These words had to be mentioned either in the thread's title or be mentioned across the thread's constituent posts (p. 3).

Reddit is a free forum, used cross-globally, and used for both news and discussion purposes (Loosier et al., 2022, p. 1085). It is especially effective as a source for samples for

this study due to its highly interactive format, as well as users regularly posting personal anecdotes (Keshav & Zimman, 2025, p. 7). Although Reddit has not been the primary focus of research often yet (Record et al., 2018, p. 471), it is becoming increasingly popular as a medium through which to analyze the expressed identities and discourse representations of various communities (Heritage & Koller, 2020; Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022). This is at least partially due to its primary advantage: as opposed to other social media platforms, Reddit users can make posts up to 40.000 characters in length (Keshav & Zimman, 2025, p. 8). Additionally, posts may receive responses from other users in the form of comments, which may themselves garner responses as well (p. 8).

Even though multiple forums on Reddit mention *Exocolonist*, as r/Exocolonist is a dedicated forum to the game, players dive deeper into the story and characters, and thus are much more likely to mention writing that stood out to them. Once again, due to the nature of the language, posts were analyzed individually. Appropriate posts were scraped manually and analyzed in ATLAS.ti for themes.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

To make sure this research follows ethical considerations, the following steps have been taken. First of all, Universiteit Leiden's ethics committee stresses that MA students need not apply for an ethical review of their work, as the committee does not review work by students. The committee does provide a flowchart to check independently whether any additional action regarding ethical considerations is necessary (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.). The samples for the current study did not require human subjects, as all content is non-elicited. Additionally, no personal data was collected for the purpose of this study. This is determined by the committee to be any information that can be traced back to a person, such as "a name, address or location, but it could also be bank account numbers, telephone numbers or post codes with house numbers" (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.). As such, this study did not need to be presented to the ethics committee. The use of Reddit does not require disclosure of any personally identifying information, which is further reinforced by Reddit

users engaging with posts on r/Exocolonist using fictitious usernames (Loosier et al., 2022, p. 1085). Additionally, this specific forum has active moderators who ensure any posts containing personal information get deleted to protect the users' privacy and safety. It is important, however, especially looking into what De Costa (2020) refers to as a vulnerable population (p. 125), to treat the posts with caution. The British Association for Applied Linguistics (2021) echoes this sentiment about sampling online data (p. 9). It states that researchers "will need to have a good understanding of the research context, including its regulations, the way users interact with it, who users might be, and their expectations, in order to appreciate whether and how it is ethical, appropriate, and indeed legal, to use data sourced online" (p. 9). After consideration and following Keshav and Zimman's (2025) approach, this study replaced the original usernames with pseudonyms for the sake of additional anonymization.
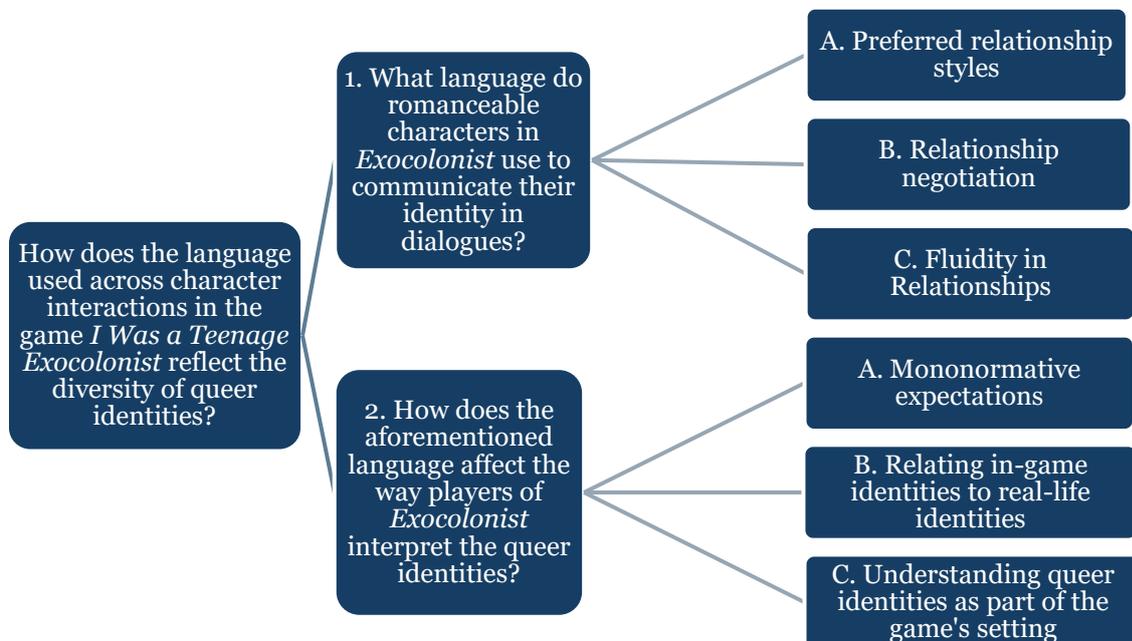
4.5 Methods of Analysis

To analyze the sampled data, this thesis used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This 6-step process helps identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data (p. 79). Table 1 below describes each step as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). A theme represents important connections between the data and the research question and represents *patterned* meaning within the data set (p. 82). While the methodology was originally designed to be used in psychology, it has since been adapted to study a wide range of topics such as asexual identity construction (Kelleher & Murphy, 2022), Intercultural communication values shared by preservice teachers (Cutting, 2020), and laypeople's definitions of polyamory (Cardoso et al., 2021). After following the first four steps, step five involves defining and naming themes. This thesis has found three themes for the first sub-question and three for the second, making a total of six themes to answer the main research question. As mentioned above, while data on gender diversity was found, this ultimately was left out of the analysis due to the limited scope of the research.

Table 1 Phases of thematic analysis, as developed and described by Braun & Clarke (2006)

Phase		Description of the process
1.	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2.	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3.	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4.	Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5.	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6.	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Figure 1 Thematic framework and the generated themes

How does the language used across character interactions in the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* reflect the diversity of queer identities?

1. What language do romanceable characters in *Exocolonist* use to communicate their identity in dialogues?

A. Preferred relationship styles

B. Relationship negotiation

C. Fluidity in Relationships

2. How does the aforementioned language affect the way players of *Exocolonist* interpret the queer identities?

A. Mononormative expectations

B. Relating in-game identities to real-life identities

C. Understanding queer identities as part of the game's setting

5 Analysis

The first sub-question examines how the language used by the writers of *Exocolonist* to express and incorporate queer identities. The following three themes were established: preferred relationship styles, relationship negotiation, and fluidity in relationships.

5.1 How do romanceable characters in *Exocolonist* communicate their identity in dialogues?

Theme A: preferred relationship styles

The first major theme examines the variety of approaches to relationships among several dateable characters in the game. As discussed above, relationship styles vary from person to person, as well as relationships, and depend on their wants and needs (Andersson, 2022). This theme highlights two different approaches that focus on different levels of sexuality in the relationship, the first expressing a preference for physical relationships and the second expressing a preference for mostly emotional ones. Relationship variety is a subtle yet noticeable way through which non-normative identities are expressed, as it allows people to break away from both hetero- and mononormative expectations, such as romantic and sexual exclusivity, as well as binary constructs (Baker, 2005).

Physical relationships

The first sub-theme emphasizes the primary focus of the relationship being on physical intimacy. Although normative relationships are expected to automatically include physical intimacy, people who only prefer this type of intimacy as opposed to emotional risk being shamed or even stigmatized (Ferrer, 2019, p. 819). In *Exocolonist*, Marz is the character who stands out the most in regards to her emphasis on physical intimacy in her preferred relationships. If the player decides to date Marz, the game offers a variety of ways to engage in physical intimacy with her. The following option will appear if you encounter her when she is upset:

1. * *"Do you wanna make out about it?"*

Marz removes her hands from her face with a considering look. "Huh... you know what? Yes. Yes, I do."[4]

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

Marz will bring up her attraction to other people in the colony as well, regardless of your relationship status with her. From age 16, in summer, the following scene can occur:

2. *Marz is sitting in a lounge chair, sipping a cold drink and watching people walk by. "This is my favorite season," she says. "Everyone wears as little clothing as possible. Marz _like!_" She gives you a conspiratorial wink and waggles her eyebrows.*

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

In dialogue 2, Marz uses the tactic of authentication to establish her appreciation of physical intimacy-focused relationships and sex without "strings attached" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). She comments on people's physical attributes and openly discusses her personal preferences. Her comments authenticate and validate her identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 499).

Another character that shows a preference for physical intimacy is Rex. As the story progresses and the characters grow older, similar to Marz, he becomes established as someone who is involved in multiple relationships at any given time, and he can have non-committal connections with people in the colony that do not involve emotional intimacy. At the same time, the opposite is also true for him: he appreciates physical intimacy but does not require it to experience meaningful connections. Each of his relationships is unique in that they are tailored to his and his individual partner's needs. He explains this difference when the player becomes friends with him:

---

[4] To explain the full depth of the game's dialogues, the relevant answers from the player's character are kept and are characterized by an asterisk in front of the sentence. Underscores surrounding a word or phrase make it appear emphasized in the game.

3. *"[those other people are] friendly to me, I guess, but it's... not the same as having friends. Not like you, or Nomi."*

   "It's fine, though," he says, shrugging dismissively. "You don't have to _like_ someone to hook up with them. I kind of like being the one everyone comes to if they just wanna have a good time."

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

If the player attempts to date Rex from the age of 18, most of the conversation branches culminate in the player agreeing to an open relationship with him. If the player is the one to initiate a friends-with-benefits relationship, the following exchange happens:

4. ** "Yes, but strictly as friends."*

   "Yeah, for sure!" Rex replies. "That's what I meant. I've got plenty of friends I do this kinda stuff with. If you ever want to do it again, you just let me know!"

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

For dialogue 3, Rex relies on the tactic of distinction to refer to two aspects of his identity: that of someone who has casual sex with people whom he is not close to, as opposed to the part of his identity that he cares more about, namely, his friendships (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). When only referring to friendships in dialogue 4, he uses the tactic of adequation: he agrees with the player character on the shared value of friendship over a romantic relationship (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). He supports this by sharing that the player would not be the first person he has had this kind of relationship with. Rex describes people he is intimate with in two ways: they can be people he does not have an emotional connection with, or friends. Neither of these interpretations follows the mononormative expectations of distinctions between sexual/non-sexual and friend/lover (Kean, 2018, p. 469). In both dialogues, Rex actively diverges from mononormative expectations. In dialogue 3, he distances himself from the people he is physically intimate with: he does not refer to anyone by name, and even refers to them as one big group ("*everyone*"). This goes against the mononormative hypervalorization of romantic relationships in Western culture, where any

intimate partner is expected to not just be monogamous, but also central to the person's life as seen in normative Western family structures (Keshav & Zimman, 2025, pp. 1-6). This challenging of romantic hypervalorization continues in dialogue 4, as the way Rex describes his relationships by stating he has a lot of friends he is physically intimate with. By establishing these friendships as fluid and ambiguous, something which is fairly common in discourses surrounding CNM relationships and connections, Rex rejects mononormative relationship expectations (Kean, 2018, p. 469; Klesse, 2006, pp. 567-570).

Both Marz and Rex make an effort to set themselves apart from other people's presumed relationship preferences and approaches in that neither expresses the desire for emotional intimacy in their relationships. As both also prefer multiple simultaneous relationships over one monogamous one, the characters emphasize their non-normative identities.

Emotional relationships

The second subtheme establishes emotional intimacy as the focus of relationships. Among *Exocolonist*'s dateable characters, Nomi is the only one who is not open to physical intimacy if the player pursues a relationship with them. As the player increases their friendship with the character, it becomes clear that they identify as demisexual. When the player tries to make flirty jokes in the middle of a conversation, it is not well-received:

5. *[...] They sigh. "No matter what I try, someone is already _way_ better at it. So I just feel like... I just suck at everything."*
    * "You don't suck at looking _stellar_ hot."
   You wiggle your eyebrows suggestively. Nomi wrinkles their nose. "Euuuurgh, you sound like Rex!" they laugh, and give you a little push on the arm.

(Northway Games, 2022)

While the game's code acknowledges this as flirting, which with the other characters results in bonus friendship points, with Nomi, the player loses points. Nomi is only interested

in emotionally intimate relationships. In this context, they associate references of physical attraction with Rex ("*you sound like Rex*"). While the game makes the bond between Rex and Nomi clear, Nomi does not enjoy this type of language, which is made evident through their behavior: wrinkling their nose in displeasure and giving the player's character a little push. They do not directly say they do not want to be joked around in this way, but the non-verbal response is clear enough for the player to come to this conclusion, especially in the setting of a video game: while real-life conversations often contain non-verbal cues that go unnoticed, they are made to be noticed when included in a game's dialogue.

While Rex expressed he is open to pursuing physical intimacy with friends, Nomi does not: for them, any relationship they would engage in would not include a sexual connection, something which is not uncommon in CNM relationships, and a central part of demi- and asexual discourse (Astle et al., 2024, p. 726). From their comment in dialogue 6, Nomi acknowledges that other people make and enjoy similar jokes. While they do not appreciate these, they know other people might. The apparent ubiquity of these comments in the settlement underlines their role in the performativity of sexual identities, as the utterers' identities are recognized by their interlocutors as these comments are repeated (Kiesling, 2019, p. 26). Based on this understanding, Nomi uses the tactic of distinction and authentication to simultaneously distance themselves from people who enjoy physical intimacy and authenticate their identity, as they acknowledge that multiple people make these kinds of jokes (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This further confirms the demisexual experience, as Nomi is navigating conversations that emphasize physical intimacy and attraction (Glass, 2022, p. 345).

When the player reaches fifty friendship points with Nomi, a scene triggers where they play an online role-playing game together. As they defeat the antagonist, Nomi role-plays as their character and flirts with that of the player in the context of their game. Afterwards, the following dialogue appears as chat messages:

6. * *"So… wanna meet up and do that in-person?"*

41

WHAT omg [Name] NOOOOOOOOOO NOPE NOPER-ROONI hahahahaha don't take this the wrong way but I don't like ANYONE like that omg hahaha

sometimes it feels like everyone's just a big ball of HORMONES here!!!! like all of a sudden everyone cares about who's doing SMUTTY STUFF and i'm just sitting here like... _yeeeeeeeeeeeeuuuuuuuuuck!!!!_

* "Think you might be interested, someday?"

ok ok sometimes it's like... okay i MIGHT be interested in it some day??? but um

i think i'd REALLY have to like someone first, you know??

(Northway Games, 2022)

In this text message, Nomi reacts in a very flustered manner to suggestions of physical intimacy, referring to 'smutty stuff' not to have to spell out the particular actions. Nomi uses the tactic of distinction to express their demisexual identity by opposing themselves to "*everyone*", other people who "*care about who's doing smutty stuff*" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Similar to Barker's (2005) argument of using language to reject dominant discourses, including that of sexuality, Nomi rejects normative relationships that center sexual intimacy. As *Exocolonist*'s writers engaged in a fluid approach to genders and sexualities, characters can still struggle with society's implicit expectations. Finally, Nomi's explanation of their identity at the end of the exchange symbolizes what Pearson (2003) imagined to be a restructuring of society to invalidate fixed identities: Nomi does not know how they want to experience future relationships. They're open to the idea of change, while at the same time acknowledging that, at least for now, they are sure physical intimacy does not appeal to them.

Marz, Rex, and Nomi step away from normative relationship expectations by expressing their individual relationship preferences. By expressing these preferences as natural and authentic, they reject the normative belief system and its dominant ideals of romantic love and intimate relations: a successful relationship to them does not require both (Ferrer, 2018; Thompson, 2022).

Theme B: relationship negotiation

The second theme examines the way characters in *Exocolonist* negotiate the terms and boundaries of their relationship with the player's character. As discussed in the theoretical framework, good communication is considered central to relationships, and especially so for CNM types (Andersson, 2022; Muise et al., 2019). This theme contains three subthemes that revolve around non-normative relationship negotiation: intimacy boundaries, situation-dependent boundaries, and boundary renegotiation.

Intimacy boundaries

Marz's ideal relationship is an open one, which becomes clear when the player confesses their interest in her but only wishes to enter an exclusively emotional relationship.

7. ** "I'm not really into... physical stuff."*

   Marz wrinkles her nose. "What, really? No making out, no touching, nothing?"

   "Well... maybe we'd be better off being friends, then. No offense, [Name], I _totally_ respect you, and... all of that... but I am a physical girl with physical needs."

   (Northway Games, 2022)

Here, the player gets given agency over how their character expresses their identity and what that identity looks like. They can choose to kiss Marz or decline and say it is not something they enjoy. Which way they respond determines the outcome of the budding relationship, as Marz makes her relationship terms clear: she values physical intimacy and does not see the need for a relationship if it is absent.

In the previous theme, friendships were discussed as being central to the ambiguous nature of CNM relationships. However, Marz's approach to relationships acknowledges the wide variety of relationship types under this umbrella. By stating "*we'd be better off being friends, then"*, Marz acts on the assumption that being intimate and being friends are mutually exclusive types of relationships: for her, it is either one or the other. However, while this scene may not directly support the friendship-centered approach of CNM relationships, it does oppose hetero- and mononormative expectations. By expressing her desire for

exclusively physically intimate relationships and saying she is "*a physical girl with physical needs*", Marz takes on a more active role in her relationships, a role that in normative discourses is expected of men (Barker, 2005, p. 76). While not the focus of this thesis, the intersection between sexuality and gender is important to note, as women in hetero- and mononormative discourse are often expected to behave passively to men, both in pursuing relationships and during relationships themselves (p. 76; Crenshaw, 1998). Furthermore, this intersection is affected by what Judith Butler (1990) calls the *heterosexual matrix*, as the expected passiveness of women in relationships is naturalized in heteronormative societies.

Marz does not shy away from expressing her needs, using the tactic of authentication to make her expectations appear as common sense, while simultaneously distancing herself from the player's character's supposed emotional needs by using the tactic of distinction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Additionally, this dialogue focuses on the aspect of relationship negotiation as part of CNM relationships, as Marz expresses her relationship boundaries (Muise et al., 2019, p. 1926). As no boundary agreement can be reached with Marz and the player's character expressing opposite boundaries, the relationship does not get established.

These relationship terms are inverted for Nomi. Where Marz requires the presence of physical intimacy, Nomi requires its absence. When the player confesses they like Nomi, Nomi establishes their relationship terms:

8. *Nomi touches the tips of their index fingers together and looks troubled. "You could probably have anyone in the colony that you wanted. Someone who wants to... _do stuff_ with you. I might not ever want to _do stuff_. Is that okay?"*

(Northway Games, 2022)

If the player has not discussed being demisexual or asexual with Nomi before, Nomi assumes the player's character expects physical intimacy from a relationship. Once again, Nomi avoids talking about specific physical acts by lumping them all together as 'doing stuff'. Here, the player can choose to agree to Nomi's terms and have an exclusively emotionally intimate relationship, or say the following:

9. *_"Oh, hmm... well..."_

    Nomi's face falls at your hesitation. "I-it's okay!" they say, blinking rapidly. "Like I

    _said! I figured that would be _game over_ for you, so I never even thought about it!"_

    They gather up their things and stand up. "So, you know, no big!!" they say, sunnily.

    [...] They beat a hasty retreat from the lounge.

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

The player can establish their boundaries here, which may clash with Nomi's. Part of mononormative relationship structures is the supposed shared understanding partners are expected to have in terms of how they should and should not behave in a relationship. In polyamorist discourse, this shared understanding brings specific certainties, such as living together and being romantically and sexually exclusive (Gusmano, 2019, p. 670). When breaking away from these certainties, every step of the relationship becomes a space for negotiation, centering cooperation and aiming for mutual benefits (p. 670). Nomi is aware of potential assumptions regarding intimate relationships and checks boundary compatibility with the player's character by negotiating the degree of physical intimacy before they develop their relationship further. As it becomes clear there is no mutual benefit for either the presence or absence of this intimacy, Nomi decides to turn down the player's character.

The language Nomi uses here is based on the tactic of authentication: the way they cover up their disappointment in the player's response shows how they expected the player's character to want physical intimacy, regardless, as that would be much more likely than them being okay with an exclusively emotional relationship (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). It authenticates the normative expectations of relationships, following the expected presence of intimate relations (Thompson, 2022, p. 2). This shows an interesting but not uncommon clash: the setting of the game seems to allow for the player to break away from heteronormative and mononormative expectations regarding relationships, but characters can still hold onto those same expectations due to past experiences or insecurities. Nomi knows they are one of the few people in the colony who are on the asexual spectrum, and

shows that realization in the way they communicate their boundaries to the player. Even though the aforementioned hetero- and mononormative relationship certainties are most likely detrimental to Nomi because they include physical intimacy, they still struggle to view relationships and interpersonal connections through a different lens, as they have had little exposure to non-sexual approaches to relationships (Gusman, 2019, p. 670).

Situation-dependent boundaries

While Marz and Nomi both focus on the role of physical intimacy in a relationship, Rex communicates a wider array of boundaries when the player wants to date him. He and Nomi are childhood best friends, and Rex makes it clear throughout the game that their friendship is incredibly important to him. If the player wants to date Rex, one of his relationship terms is that the player understands the role of this friendship in his life, as he describes Nomi in a conversation with the player as his platonic soulmate. If the player's character opposes this, it results in Rex refusing to date them:

10. ** "I want to be your only soulmate!"*

    Rex releases your hands and takes a step back. "Really?" he says, confused. "But... Nomi is my best friend," he says, firmly. He looks disappointed in you, which is... something you've never seen before. The effect is alarming. "There's nothing wrong about loving lots of people, [Name]. There's as many kinds of love as there are people. I like you, I really do, but maybe dating isn't a good idea for us if you don't understand that."

                                                                (Northway Games, 2022)

Rex uses the tactic of authentication as well as that of distinction to communicate his boundaries. He constructs his platonic relationship with Nomi as authentic, as something that will exist naturally. By stating *"There's as many kinds of love as there are people"*, Rex constructs his queer identity by negating mononormative identity. The way he does this is by challenging its system, specifically by going against relational hierarchies, as his approach to relationships blurs the boundaries between friends and lovers (Gusmano, 2019, p. 676).

46

While in both hetero- and mononormative relationships the lover is expected to be prioritized above anyone else, Rex makes it clear to the player's character that he can only be engaged in a romantic or sexual relationship if the other person is willing to accept the central part his close friends play in his life. He rejects the dominant ideals of romantic love and intimate relations that are prevalent in Western society by centering his platonic love for Nomi (Ferrer, 2018; Thompson, 2022). This is further strengthened by his deploying the tactic of distinction to set himself and his authentic relationships apart from the player's character's view (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Another way Rex simultaneously negotiates his relationship with the player's character and sets relationship boundaries is if the player tries to date Rex when they are in a monogamous relationship with someone else already. Rex turns them down in the following way:

11. *Rex frowns. "I dunno, [Name]... that seems really unfair to [the person the player is dating]," he says. He makes quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "Even though _I_ don't really understand the whole _dating only one person_ thing, it doesn't make it right for you to go behind their back." Rex nudges you with his elbow. "But, hey, no hard feelings? Just get back to me when you're single again, okay?"*

(Northway Games, 2022)

Rex engages in various polyamorous relationships throughout the story, both with named characters like Marz and unnamed background ones. If the player is already in an open relationship with Marz, they can date Rex without any issues. However, if the player is already in a monogamous relationship, Rex turns them down, as seen in dialogue 11. Rex's response focuses on the essential difference between CNM relationships and cheating: mutual consent. Gusmano (2019, p. 663) emphasizes negotiated consent between all involved parties for a non-monogamous relationship to be considered consensual. Not just that, successful CNM relationships require transparent communication with all partners, aimed at

sharing needs and vulnerabilities (p. 671). Neither requirement appears to be met in this situation, which appears to be the result of a lack of communication before the confession, leading to a discrepancy in perception of the expected relationship structure (Andersson, 2022, p. 1929; Hangen et al., 2020, p. 438).

Different types of boundaries have different effects on relationship negotiation, and how CNM relationships are negotiated through social interaction both within a relationship and with others (Andersson, 2022, p. 1925; Muise et al., 2019, p. 1918). In dialogue 11, this can be seen through Rex being open to dating the player's character in the future, as long as they are no longer violating his boundary of not wanting to be involved in infidelity. The situation-dependent boundaries are also upheld if the player starts a monogamous relationship with another character *after* having started dating Rex. In this case, Rex expresses well-wishes to the player's character, and subsequently breaks up with them as he does not wish to violate relationship boundaries of either himself or other people. While he follows mononormative relationship expectations for the other relationship, he does uphold his personal boundaries regarding infidelity: he understands the other relationship's monogamous implications and acts accordingly (Andersson, 2022, p. 1926).

Boundary renegotiation

Rex and Marz are on and off involved in an open relationship during the duration of the game, which can become relevant if the player decides to date either of them. If the player's character wants to date Rex and knows of his involvement with Marz, they can ask him to break up with her:

12. * *"Aren't you dating Marz?"*

    Rex's eyes widen. "Oh! Me and _Marz?_ Nah, she's cool with it! And you know Marz... she's totally the boss here." "She doesn't really want to get distracted with, like, _love_ and stuff, so we just, you know... _hang out_," he adds, wiggling his eyebrows. "So..." Rex says, giving you a crooked smile. "If you're okay with me and Marz..."

"No, stop 'hanging out' with Marz."

"Done!" Rex says, firmly. "Well, okay, not _literally_ done; I still gotta tell her about it." He squeezes your hands. "She'll be fine, though. Don't worry. We're not like that with each other."

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

Reversely, if the player wants to date Marz, knows about her involvement with Rex, and asks her to break up with him, she is much less amicable about it:

13. *"Aren't you dating Rex?"*

    "Oh, him?" Marz says, then shrugs. "I mean, I guess. We hook up sometimes. Why, are you interested in him too?"
    "I can't date you if you're with Rex."
    Marz stifles a laugh. "O-M-G, [Name], you're so _dramatic_ sometimes. It's adorable, but I do _not_ need more drama in my life."

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

In dialogue 12, Rex makes use of the tactic of distinction when referring to Marz and her relationship style, and the relationship the two of them have (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). When he says "*we're not like that with each other*", Rex opposes his relationship with Marz to the normative (and therefore assumed) relationship of emotional and romantic exclusivity (Thompson, 2022). He further confirms this by stating that to Marz, "*_love_ and stuff*" is not central to her relationships, and as such, argues that the player does not have to be worried about conflicting interests. Marz uses the same tactic of distinction in dialogue 14 to describe the relationship from her point of view, but tones down the level of commitment even further, and equates it to her relationship with the player: both relationships equally exclude emotional or romantic exclusivity as well as intimacy, as expressed in "*we hook up sometimes*" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In this way, Rex and Marz rely on relationship type distinction to explain the boundaries of their relationship with each other (Andersson, 2022, p. 1925). While the practice of questioning fidelity is something that occurs often in real-life

social interactions between people in CNM relationships and strangers, it is equally common between the former and their potential partners, as the latter oftentimes have a lack of knowledge on the difference between CNM and infidelity (p. 1929).

Furthermore, while Rex and Marz have a similar response to the player's questioning of their relationship, the reasoning behind each response is different due to different relationship terms. In Rex's case, as his boundaries are fairly flexible, he agrees to the player's character's renegotiated conditions of relationship consent: limiting his number of partners to just them (p. 1928). Marz's terms and boundaries, however, are not, and she will turn down the player's request. In her case, she refuses to associate dating multiple people with infidelity. Within CNM communities, there are different ways to address negative attitudes towards it, which often rest on an idea that the relationships are affairs masquerading as CNM relationships (p. 1929). Marz's inflexible boundaries appear to lead her to decide that instead of negotiating and reformulating the other's moral opinions on dating multiple people, she shuts down the conversation, as seen in her exclaiming "*I do _not_ need more drama in my life*" (p. 1929). Marz's refusal employs the tactic of denaturalization, as she appears to disregard the player's concerns and relationship boundaries (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

The three analyzed characters appear to be aware of mononormative relationship boundaries and expectations, yet challenge these in their relationships as they negotiate the terms and boundaries. The variety of the characters' identities and personalities reflects the non-normative relationship diversity as present in real life: Nomi does not adjust their boundaries to accommodate a potential partner, but does expect them to want a relationship that follows hetero-and mononormative expectations. Marz similarly does not adjust her boundaries, but instead does not acknowledge other interpretations of relationships if they do not align with hers. Rex expresses his boundaries clearly but is comfortable with adjusting the terms of the relationship to better suit those of his partner. As such, the language used by

these characters as they negotiate relationships reflects that of negotiating CNM relationships (Andersson, 2022, p. 1926).

Theme C: fluidity in relationships

The third and final theme of the first sub-question examines the way individual relationships show fluidity through changing relationship terms and boundaries over time. As opposed to mononormative relationship structures, which depend on fixed boundaries, CNM relationships emphasize ongoing negotiation (Andersson, 2022; Barker, 2013). This theme is made up of three subthemes: changing the number of partners in one relationship, renegotiating the terms of an individual relationship over time, and diversity of relationship values within a relationship.

Changing the number of partners in one relationship

The first subtheme expresses the fluidity in the number of partners involved in one relationship. In *Exocolonist*, the player can enter a relationship with two characters at once as long as relationship boundaries are not violated. As both Rex and Marz prefer open relationships, this is easiest to achieve while dating them. Adjusting the relationship composition can happen while the player is already in a non-monogamous relationship with either Rex or Marz, and can become an option as the player navigates one of multiple possible friendship events for either.

If the player starts dating Marz first, they can bring her up to Rex once they become close:

14. *"Well... I'm dating Marz!"*

"I know!" Rex exclaims. "Don't be weird, but, um... I actually already talked to Marz about it?" [Rex calls up Marz so she can explain] "Please feel free to do whatever your sordid little minds can come up with. I expect you to entertain me with the details. But I'm _busy_ right now." Rex [...] looks to you with a charmingly crooked smile. "She said it nicer, when I asked," he laughs. "So, what do you say? Do you wanna date me an' Marz at the same time?"

If the player starts dating Rex first, the player can initiate a similar conversation with Marz:

15. *"Well... I'm kind of dating Rex."*

Marz laughs. "I _know_, [Name]. _Everyone_ knows. But Rex won't mind sharing you with me, will he?"

For both characters, involving the other will result in a casual relationship focused mostly on physical intimacy. What becomes clear from dialogues 14 and 15 is that each character is already aware of the relationship the player has with the other. While the player's dialogue comes across as confessing to crossing a boundary or even infidelity, it is not taken as such by either of the characters. The way they respond, however, shows their individual approaches to CNM relationships. Rex shows valuing mutual understanding and openness by letting Marz explain her point of view as well as his own, thus involving everyone in the boundary negotiation (Andersson, 2022, p. 1928). Marz, on the other hand, assumes Rex's consent to the player dating someone else, focusing less on clear communication with the player's character (p. 1926). Rex also clarifies at the end of dialogue 14 whether this is something the player still wants to be involved in. Rex's character shows a valued approach to CNM relationships, which is a heavy focus on communication and continual negotiations (Anapol, 1997).

Renegotiating the terms of a relationship

The second subtheme expresses the way an individual relationship can change over time by people renegotiating their relationship boundaries, or even the relationship definition altogether. In *Exocolonist*, this becomes apparent if the player starts dating Rex. As can be seen in earlier dialogues, Rex is a character who explicitly asks the player about their expectations and boundaries regarding their relationship. Furthermore, he is the only

character where the player can renegotiate the relationship definition without it resulting in them breaking up immediately. However, if the player asks Rex to change their open relationship to a monogamous one, the following exchange takes place:

16. *"Can we talk about our relationship?"*

Rex smiles. "Yeah, of course! What's up?"

* "Can we be exclusive?"

Rex's face goes serious, and he seems to give this a lot of thought. "Well, sure," he says, slowly. "I don't mind!" "But, you know..." Rex continues, scratching behind his ear. "I don't really think that's a forever-thing for me? I really like you, but... I really like other people, too... not more or less, but _different._ We can give it a go and see what happens!"

(Northway Games, 2022)

In dialogue 16, Rex accepts the player's offer to change their relationship into a romantically and sexually exclusive one. However, he lets the player know the relationship will not last forever. As he expresses his concerns, Rex uses the tactic of authentication and distinction: he authenticates the relationship he and the player have (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). At the same time, by saying "*I really like other people, too ... not more or less, but _different_*", he opposes himself to the monogamous expectation of romantic and sexual exclusivity (Barker, 2005, pp. 76-77). However, as he expresses care for the player, he is willing to change the relationship terms to fit the player's needs and desires, at least for a certain time. Rex's approach to the player's character's suggestion shows how boundary agreements depend on individual people's needs, and can change when said needs shift (Andersson, 2022, p. 1926).

Renegotiating the terms of a relationship, while usually done as partners deem it necessary, can also be done well before this change is expected to take place. Nomi navigates their demisexual identity with both the player and Rex by establishing its fluidity. In Nomi's friendship event, where they and the player play a game together, the

player has the option to ponder the reason why Nomi does not currently feel sexual desire towards anyone:

17. * *"Maybe you haven't met the right person."*

    omg RUDE!!!

    wow [Name] you can't just say that to someone, that's not how it works

    just because SURE okay i MIGHT like someone in the future doesn't mean my feelings aren't valid NOW

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

In dialogue 17, Nomi uses the tactic of authentication to validate their demisexual identity: they do not experience sexual attraction to anyone right now, but at the same time, might feel sexually attracted to someone in the future (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). By establishing that these two ideas are not mutually exclusive, Nomi authenticates their identity. While their identity would not change, the way they approach sexual intimacy would, showing Nomi's fluid interpretation of relationships and intimacy (Glass, 2022, p. 345).

Dialogues 16 and 17 show the renegotiation of a relationship's terms, both current and future. Both Rex and Nomi show confidence in their identity and relationship boundaries. Where they differ, however, is their expectations of the future: Rex expresses certainty that the monogamous relationship the player has established with him will end at a certain point. Nomi, on the other hand, does not know if or when their feelings towards sexual attraction might change.

fluidity of relationship values

The final subtheme expresses the possibility of people in a relationship expressing different relationship values. While partners may not experience similar values for all aspects of a relationship, this does not mean the relationship cannot be successful.

As the player gets closer to Nomi during their playthrough, they can support the character in deepening their relationship with Rex. Both the player and Rex are aware at this point that Nomi identifies as demisexual, and this, in combination with Rex's usual type of relationship being very much sexual, creates suspense as Nomi tries to navigate both their own and Rex's assumed relationship boundaries. The following conversation between Rex and Nomi takes place as Nomi confesses their feelings to Rex:

18. *"Sure!" Rex answers, easily. "I love you, and we're gonna be together a long time. I wanna do stuff with you that makes us both happy. That's _all_ I want." Nomi purses their lips. "I... I wanna try to understand you too. I know you... um... you really like doing things I don't like doing. So, um, if you want to keep doing that with other people..." They take a deep breath. "I'd be okay with that." Nomi stands up a little taller and looks Rex right in his mismatched eyes. "And, um. It might not ever happen, but... maybe someday... if _I_ wanted to do..." Their voice drops to a whisper: "..._sex stuff_...?"*

<div align="right">(Northway Games, 2022)</div>

This conversation denotes the start of Rex and Nomi's relationship, and both acknowledge the dynamicity of its terms. Multiple aspects of this short dialogue are of interest to the current theme of fluidity. First, as mentioned before, Nomi's sexual identity is emphasized as not being fixed or constant: "*it might not ever happen, but ... someday*". Nomi also acknowledges that their identity appears to contradict that of Rex in terms of sexual desire and the preferred number of concurrent partners. Not only does this oppose normative assumptions of romantic relationships, as it opposes the core assumption of being in a sexually and romantically exclusive partnership, but it simultaneously allows these two seemingly opposing identities to connect through their love for each other (Glass, 2022, p. 347). Nomi negotiates their budding relationship with Rex by establishing boundaries regarding expectations and behavior, something that demisexual people often are required to do as their partner(s) usually experience different degrees of sexual or romantic attraction

than they do (pp. 345-347). Important to note is that the player understands Nomi feels uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about sexual intimacy as they avoid bringing up the topic explicitly "*doing things*", "*doing that*"), which further emphasizes the different relationship boundaries Nomi and Rex have.

Finally, Nomi tells Rex that they might want to do "*sex stuff*" someday, establishing a foundation of ongoing relationship negotiation that will continue after the start of the relationship (Barker, 2013, p. 904). This ongoing relationship negotiation is central to CNM relationships, as people practicing polyamory and other forms of CNM relationships seem to be more aware of its central role than people in monogamous relationships (Andersson, 2022, p. 1928). Central to Nomi's confession is their emphasis on mutual boundaries and desires, and as the confession progresses and boundaries are set, Nomi co-constructs their identity with Rex through their use of language, emphasizing its fluidity and dynamicity (Hori et al., 2025, p. 1; Levon, 2015, pp. 297-298).

A second aspect that should be acknowledged is the way love is expressed between these two characters. Rex tells Nomi multiple times in the conversation that he loves them, something that Keshav and Zimman (2025) explain is a speech act that in normative situations initiates a monogamous relationship, and is considered exclusively romantic (p. 6). After analyzing the various dialogues involving both Rex and Nomi, it becomes clear that the relationship, as written by Ishihiro, focuses on not just romantic but also on platonic love. By not exclusively stating romantic love in the words "*I love you*", Rex breaks away from hetero- and mononormative expectations, as well as from naturalized, mostly Western societal norms that condemn 'unnatural', non-monogamous identities (Sullivan, 2003, p. 84).

Once again, *Exocolonist* shows characters diverging from Western hetero- and mononormative relationship norms, following Calvin's (2023) examples of QSF. Northway and Ishihiro, in writing *Exocolonist*'s script, purposefully chose not to include characters' sexual identities as a source of conflict (Gavin, 2022). This can be seen in the above dialogue,

as Rex and Nomi's differences do not constitute an unsolvable issue, but instead something that requires tactful navigation, respecting both of their relationship boundaries. Nomi acknowledges Rex's desire for multiple simultaneous partnerships, and while Nomi will not partake in CNM relationships themselves, they express consent to Rex to *"keep doing [things] with other people"*.

The first research question attempted to answer how characters in *Exocolonist* express their non-normative identities. This was found to be centered around preferred relationship styles, relationship negotiation, and fluidity in relationships. The three analyzed characters of Marz, Nomi, and Rex express their complex and intersectional identities in dialogues with the player's character (Calvin, 2023, p. 54). This further underscored QSF's approach to storytelling through offering queer characters who reject many of the norms of Western society (p. 55).

5.2 How do players of *Exocolonist* interpret the queer identities?

The second sub-question examines how players of *Exocolonist* react to the interactions between the analyzed characters in the game. The following three themes were established: mononormative expectations, relating in-game identities to real-life identities, and understanding queer identities as part of the game's setting.

Theme A: Mononormative expectations

The first theme examines how players of *Exocolonist* express subconscious mononormative expectations when discussing relationships with dateable characters. These players can visit the subreddit to discuss their thoughts on the game with fellow players. One outstanding aspect of posts concerning discussions of romanceable characters is players' discussion of whether they like or dislike how their interactions and romance scenes were written. As players do so, some discuss their frustrations with a romanceable character's response to specific scenes:

1. *"Did I just mess up my relationship with Marz by becoming governor instead of her? Suddenly she's openly flirting with the soldiers every time I talk to her. [I] tried dumping her, and she... didn't care?? She was just like "oh okay whatever??" Suddenly she's back to being my best friend and schmoozing with [...] me like it's no big deal??"*

(RainyDay, 2025)

In this extract, the commenter expresses frustration about Marz's seeming lack of care towards being broken up with by the player's character ("*she didn't care"* and "*like it's no big deal*"). The player also comments on how they find it strange that while they are in a relationship, she openly flirts with other people. While they are most likely unaware of it, the commenter uses the tactic of distinction to separate their relationship behavior from that of Marz (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The player expresses frustration with Marz not following mononormative expectations of relationships, including romantic exclusivity, and feeling

distraught when broken up with. As such, the player shows to value mononormative actions above other types of behavior, as they frame Marz's actions as unexpected and unnatural while simultaneously reaffirming their own normative identity (Sullivan, 2003, p. 84). By constructing Marz's behavior as going against their expectations of committed relationships, the player reaffirms her sexual identity as 'abnormal' (p. 84). This ultimately reinforces the dominant ideals of love and intimate relations in Western society (Thompson, 2022, p. 2).

This normative lens extends to situations where players do acknowledge certain non-normative identities. One such situation is players discussing Rex and Nomi's relationship if the player sets them up:

2. *"Is anyone else confused about Nomi & Rex's compatibility? I know you can play matchmaker for them, but how would that ever work out? [Nomi] is monogamous and Rex is very dedicated to not being so. I don't see him giving that up for Nomi, but also it feels like his promiscuous lifestyle would really hurt their feelings? So I'm a little confused about how that would ever work."*

(managing_misadventure, 2024)

While the player acknowledges Rex being polyamorous, saying he is "*very dedicated to not being [monogamous]*", they do not see how two people with differing expectations towards relationship boundaries could be in a successful relationship. As established earlier in this chapter, romanceable characters do have relationship boundaries that they express towards the player. Depending on the conversational choices the player makes, this can lead to the character breaking up with the player or not engaging in a relationship at all due to misaligned boundaries (Muise et al., 2019). However, another player adds to the conversation by correcting Nomi's assumed identity:

3. *"Nomi is ace/demi and doesn't require monogamy from Rex while being monogamous themselves. They love each other and Nomi is okay with Rex being in sexual relationships with others because they don't necessarily want that part of a relationship."*

In this instance, the first player acknowledges queer identities in extract 2, however they do not acknowledge it through an intersectional lens, as they do not recognize how Nomi's intersected aspects of their identity are dynamic and emerge in specific interactional configurations (Levon, 2015, pp. 297-298). Additionally, it reflects an Identity Politics approach, even if subconsciously, as it juxtaposes Nomi's an Rex's queer identities: they are a poor match because Nomi's demisexual identity and Rex's preference for physical intimacy do not overlap in any way (Shaw, 2017, p. 70). The second player, however, acknowledges not only monogamous and non-monogamous identities, but also sexual and non-sexual relationships. This is further reinforced when incorporating the tactics of intersubjectivity: the first player uses the tactic of distinction to separate Nomi's identity from Rex's, while the second player uses the tactic of adequation to find the common ground instead (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Additionally, the player in abstract 3 uses the tactic of authentication as they acknowledge both Nomi's and Rex's identities as valid, which follows Levon's (2015) claim that identity categories like romantic and sexual identities mutually constitute one another (p. 298; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In the case of Nomi and Rex, a CNM relationship emerges where perhaps Nomi would have otherwise been in a monogamous relationship, because of the intersectional approach the two characters take to their relationship boundaries and subsequent terms (Jones, 2019, 2021; Zimman, 2014).

A final example is a player discussing Rex's relationship ending in the epilogue. In the post, they ask if Rex always breaks up with the player in the epilogue (Faery_, 2022). Two responses are of note:

4. *"Sadly, I think he'll always break up with you. I asked him to be exclusive while dating, he agreed but let me know it's temporary. So in the epilogue I was happily living/dating him, but at the end he still broke up with me."*

This comment contrasts with the following:

5. *"As long as you choose "I want to keep it casual" and never ask to close things off, he'll stay with you in a really cool, unique way."*

<div align="right">(LongWord, 2022)</div>

Two players appear to have differing experiences relating to dating Rex. The poster in excerpt 4 is aware that the player has an option between a monogamous and non-monogamous relationship (*"I asked him to be exclusive while dating"*), yet assumes all instances of dating Rex result in a break-up as they view their experience through a mononormative lens. Penguin_Dance uses the tactic of distinction: they were in a happy relationship, but Rex still decided to break up with them (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). On the other hand, LongWord in excerpt 5 uses the tactic of adequation to show how the relationship between Rex and the player can still continue, be it in a way that may be unexpected to the player (i.e., being in a CNM relationship)(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The two different interpretations seem to stem from a differing interpretation of relationship expectations, where the player in excerpt 4 views the relationship through a mononormative lens: the characters appear happy in a monogamous relationship, and as such are expected to be together for the rest of their lives (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587). The player in excerpt 5 instead rejects these normative assumptions and suggests a non-normative lens through which to view the same scene, consequently blurring the distinctions between loving and non-loving, which is a central theme in CNM relationships (Kean, 2018, p. 469).

Theme B: Relating in-game identities to real-life identities

Players of *Exocolonist* engage with the character writing in another way: by relating the in-game identities to real-life identities. These real-life identities can be based on the player's own, or their understanding of queer identities and intersectionality. When analyzing the Reddit posts, the latter becomes prevalent, as can be seen in the following excerpt, which responds to a player asking how to romance Nomi (TheGoat23, 2024):

6. *"[Nomi] is written as asexual aromantic (or at the very least demisexual); they're just not open to anything, including dating unless they're already incredibly close*

with to Sol. Their only other potential squish is Rex (again due to the close
relationship) but Nomi also finds it difficult to reconcile the idea of taking things
slow with someone who's so sexually active and liberated."

(Keith_87, 2024)

This player refers to Rex as Nomi's 'other squish', using squish as a term from the aromantic community to refer to platonic infatuation (Aro_Pride, 2023). In this extract, the player not only uses the term squish to refer to a specific experience, but also uses it to legitimize the character's experience as they are said to experience something associated with people who identify as aromantic (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 598). This way, the player relates Nomi's in-game identity to real-life ones with their own terminology and common experiences, such as squishes, referring explicitly to non-normative expressions of affection (Barker, 2005, p. 86). Keith_87 in excerpt 6 uses the tactic of authentication to validate Nomi's demisexual identity, justifying their approach to relationships by explaining Nomi's feelings towards Sol and Rex (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

The Subreddit as a whole appears to acknowledge queer identities. In the same thread, one of the forum's moderators commented on a now-deleted post, asking the poster if they 'could remove the quote marks around "their", as "it could read as invalidating for some members here" (Mod_Manager, 2024). As this thread is specifically concerned with Nomi's identity, the player presumably referred to Nomi's gender-neutral pronouns. As the moderator asks the poster to change their language, they connect in-game identities to real-life ones, as "some members" may feel invalidated by the poster likely questioning Nomi's gender-neutral pronouns. This is in line with the Subreddit's number one rule created by the moderators, which requires anyone who engages with the forum to "not spam, harass, insult, or use hate-speech at any time towards other users, even if it is in a jokingly manner", and includes racism, homophobia and transphobia (r/exocolonist, n.d.). The seemingly consistent presence of moderators in the Subreddit's threads and the forum's anti-harassment rules make it unlikely to see players actively rejecting the queer identities in

Exocolonist, as the moderators would address these invalidating comments. In doing so, the forum linguistically authorizes non-normative identities regardless of whether they are digital or real-life (Thompson, 2022, p. 25). It establishes that even when players are talking about fictional characters, their writing can impact real-life people who join the discussion. More specifically, it can impact people who identify similarly to the game's characters. By moderating the language used on the r/exocolonist threads, the moderators challenge normative language that refers to non-normative identities (Barker, 2005, p. 86).

Finally, players make a direct connection between real life and the game by connecting real-life experiences and identities to those portrayed in *Exocolonist*:

7. *She isn't stated to be aromantic though- in her epilogue it says that she's "not as frigid as she once said". She just doesn't want a long term relationship lmao. [...] Even outside of Tang there are many people who don't date to marry, or [aromantic] people who do date/pursue sexual relationships.*

<div align="right">(MeritMay, 2023)</div>

This player refers to Tang, one of the other romanceable characters in the game, in response to a player complaining about their perceived lack of relatable romanceable characters (ArtisticBagel, 2023). While the commenter in excerpt 7 denies Tang's suggested aromantic identity, they provide a more nuanced interpretation instead. As the commenter relies on the game's writing in the epilogue, they argue that the character's approach to relationships is something that also exists in real life. By doing so, the commenter acknowledges Tang's intersectional identity: while she engages in sexual relationships and does not pursue long-lasting partnerships, her character cannot be limited to aromanticism alone (Hoti et al., 2025, p. 1). MeritMay does not denaturalize aromantic identities. Quite the opposite: by stating 'there are many [aromantic] people who do date/pursue sexual relationships', they acknowledge the diversity within a non-normative identity, and emphasize the intersectional complexity of lived experience, even with video game characters

(Levon, 2015, p. 297). They use the tactic of authentication to argue for Tang's queer and intersectional identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Theme C: Understanding queer identities as part of the game's setting

The final theme examines the way players frame characters' queer identities as part of the game's setting. Players engaging with the game's character writing this way appear to use the game's world as an argument for the logical existence of the discussed identities. However, another way players can engage with the writing this way is through expectations *because* of the game's utopian, futuristic world and the player's subsequent expectations of identities that might appear in it. One such player expresses disappointment that the game does not allow for a larger variety of CNM relationships, as only certain combinations of characters are permitted. They state the lack of options feels limiting, "especially in a future setting" (BiggestAlly_69, 2023). In this case, the player understands the SF setting of the game and concludes that the current number of CNM relationships available to the player is lower than they would expect or enjoy. According to their understanding, a futuristic setting means there would be a higher variety of CNM relationships than monogamous ones. In response to this complaint, another player puts the low variety in perspective:

8. *"It'd be nice. Not all the characters are open to [non-monogamy], and that's fine. As much as I'd like to date more than one of the monogamous characters at once, they are their own characters, so it makes sense to have them have their own preferences, so it's not your place."*

(Fantastic_Mister, 2023)

The commenter acknowledges the writers' approach to characters' preferences and identities, arguing that as each character is unique, some might still prefer to be in monogamous relationships. The writer argues for more presence of CNM relationships due to the game's SF setting, ultimately stating that this approach to relationships could apply equally to all people regardless of their individual, intersected identities (Barker &

Langdridge, 2020, p. 755). Instead, the commenter acknowledges the intersectional identities of these characters and gives examples, emphasizing their individuality. They also do not mind the relationship boundaries the writers have set for them, even though they seem to be in contrast with their preferences ("*dating more than one of the monogamous characters at once*"). Through this, Fantastic_Mister authenticates the preferred relationship styles of the discussed characters (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This establishes the specific approach to intersectional and non-normative identities as taken by QSF: it distinguishes itself in SF discourse by deconstructing the rigidity of binary identity categories (Pearson, 2003, p. 157). *Exocolonist* incorporates this by acknowledging the large variety of non-normative identities instead of writing each character to express identical 'futuristic' identities. QSF does not just represent a flipped norm from present-day life; it imagines a differently structured universe (Calvin, 2023, p. 50).

Finally, a player comments on the place of polyamory in the game's world in the following way, responding to another player's complaint regarding the game's display of relationships (Pinetree_Nature, 2025):

9. *The world has normalized polyamory (which is wonderful) and celebrates diversity. It also celebrates monogamy ([Sol's parents] are seemingly [monogamous], Cal expressly says he supports his parents' polyamory, but he prefers monogamy). This is sort of akin to a complaint that it's set on another planet; That's the world it's in.*

(Perfect_Craft, 2025)

In this excerpt, the player appreciates the game for normalizing and celebrating various non-normative identities such as polyamory. According to the player, the source of the normalization is the world itself. This reiterates the developers' focus on the main narrative, which avoids sexuality-related political strife through the game world's utopian society (Gavin, 2022). Additionally, as Northway aimed to create a political yet utopian society where sexuality, among other things, is as inconsequential as possible, this connects with the commenter's reasoning in excerpt 9. The commenter concludes their post by arguing

that the established relationships are normalized because the world is designed the way it is, using the tactic of authorization as legitimation is derived by referring to the world's social structures (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Ogungbemi, 2025).

The second sub-question analyzed how players of *Exocolonist* interpreted the characters' identities as portrayed through the game's language. The analyzed Reddit posts and comments showed players expressing mononormative expectations, relating in-game identities to real-life identities, and understanding queer identities as part of the game's setting. This shows how people's lived experiences influence the way they perceive and interact with other people's expressed identities. Additionally, if players do not expect a character to have a certain identity, they were found to assign them a different one to explain ambiguous scenes, further establishing identities being culturally and historically specific, and their intelligibility being context-specific (Sullivan, 2003, p. 83).

6   Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how language in video game writing can be used to portray and communicate queer identities and to what extent this is recognized by players. This was done by applying thematic analysis to analyze the dialogue writing in the game *I was a Teenage Exocolonist* (Northway Games, 2022) and analyze players' reactions to relationships in the game on the dedicated forum r/Exocolonist (Reddit, n.d.). Previous research on identity construction through language already focused on queer identities, however focused either on strictly heteronormative discourse, or on identity construction in spoken conversations (Pulos, 2013). The current study added an interdisciplinary focus on mononormative discourse to appropriately analyze the multitude of CNM relationships portrayed in *Exocolonist*. The study's results show that the focus on portraying queer identities becomes apparent in its variety of relationship styles, negotiation of relationship terms and fluidity within relationships. Particularly of note are the intersection of polyamorist identities and cross-spectrum (a)sexual identities. Across the generated themes, the analyzed dateable characters rely frequently on the tactic of adequation to communicate understanding and respect for the other character's identity, even if it does not fully overlap with their own. On the other hand, in the case of relationship expectations, the tactic of distinction is used by the character to distance themselves from the (sometimes assumed) expectations of the other. The tactic of authentication is used less frequently, but appears to be used in scenes where characters explicitly establish their identity to the player's character, usually during a disagreement.

While the writers appeared to take great care in finding a balance among the different dateable characters in regards to variation in identities, not all players interpreted the relationships in the same way. Most confusion regarding relationships in *Exocolonist* was found to stem from mononormative expectations of relationships, including exclusive romantic and sexual intimacy, and feeling distraught when broken up with. This further reinforces the idea that identities involve not just their performance, but also require being

67

decoded and co-produced by the recipient side to be functional (Motschenbacher, 2011, p. 162). Additionally, players who recognized the various queer identities and relationships appeared to have a broader understanding of queer identities outside of the game than those who did not recognize them. These players also used terminology associated with certain queer identities that was not used in the game, such as *squish*. Both the usage of external terminology and mononormative discourse show how each player makes sense of the game's writing through their individual lived experiences.

Due to the scope of this study, certain aspects that emerged during sampling and initial analysis could not be analyzed thoroughly. While the current research approached the data through an intersectional lens, aspects such as ethnicity and gender identity could not be appropriately examined. This creates the opportunity for future research to analyze these aspects of intersectionality properly, especially in the environment of video games, as it is seen to lack progressive representation as compared to other forms of media (Shaw, 2014, p. 6). Finally, as the current research focused on internal validity as opposed to external validity, future research can replicate the study with different video games. Polyamory and other varieties of CNM relationships are still relatively understudied, which allows for any potential continued research on the topic in regards to identity formation to fill the current academic gap.

Bibliography

Addams, S. (2009, June 19). Princess Maker – Legend of Another World Review [Review of

the game *Princess Maker – Legend of Another World* by Gainax]. *Nintendo Life*.

https://www.nintendolife.com/reviews/2009/06/princess_maker_legend_of_anoth

er_world_retro

Anapol, D. M. (1997). *Polyamory: The new love without limits* (revised ed.). San Rafael, CA:
IntiNet Resource Center.

Andersson, C. (2022). Drawing the line at infidelity: Negotiating relationship morality in a

Swedish context of consensual non-monogamy. *Journal of Social and Personal*

Relationships, 39(7), 1917–1933. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211070556

Angouri, J. (2021). Introduction. In J. Angouri & J. Baxter (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook*

of language, gender, and sexuality (1st ed., pp. 1-21). Routledge.

Aro_Pride. (2023, April 25). What is a squish? [Online forum post]. *Reddit*.

https://www.reddit.com/r/aromantic/comments/12y23xf/what_is_a_squish/

ArtisticBagel. (2023, December 10). Am I the only one who hates all the ros? [Online forum

post]. *Reddit*.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/18et8ds/am_i_the_only_one_wh

o_hates_all_the_ros/

Astle, S., Langin, K., Anderson, J. R., & Moors, A. C. (2024). Understanding Relationship

Labels: A Content Analysis of Consensual Non-monogamous Relationship

Agreements. *Sexuality & Culture, 28*(2), 710–732. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-

023-10141-8

Atwood, M. (1985). *The handmaid's tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

BAAL. (2021). *Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics*. 4th Edition.

Available at www.baal.org.uk

Barker, M. (2005). This Is My Partner, And This Is My … Partner's Partner: Constructing A

    Polyamorous Identity In A Monogamous World. *Journal of Constructivist*

    Psychology, *18*(1), 75–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530590523107

Barker M. (2013). Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in Fifty

    Shades of Grey and on the BDSM blogosphere. *Sexualities 16*(8): 896–914.

Barker, M., & Langdridge, D. (2010). Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical

    reflections on recent research and theory. *Sexualities*, *13*(6), 748–772.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460710384645

Benson, K. L. (2017). Tensions of subjectivity: The instability of queer polyamorous identity

    and community. *Sexualities, 20*(1–2), 24–40.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716642154

BiggestAlly_69. (2023, July 31). Needs More Poly Options. [Online forum post]. *Reddit*.

    https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/15eib3n/needs_more_poly_optio

    ns/

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research*

    in Psychology, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brookes, G., & Chałupnik, M. (2022). 'Real men grill vegetables, not dead animals': Discourse

    representations of men in an online vegan community. *Discourse, Context & Media*,

    49, 100640. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100640

Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2004). Theorizing identity in language and sexuality research.

    Language in Society, *33*(4), 469–515. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404504334020

Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach.

    Discourse Studies, *7*(4-5), 585–614. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (10th

    anniversary ed.). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203902752

Calvin, R. (2023). Queer SF. In *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction* (1st ed., pp. 49–56). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082934-9

Campbell, P. (2023). Queer Science Fiction, Queer Relationality, and Utopian Insurgency. In *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction* (1st ed., pp. 131–137). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082934-21

Cardoso, D., Pascoal, P. M., & Maiochi, F. H. (2021). Defining Polyamory: A Thematic Analysis of Lay People's Definitions. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *50*(4), 1239–1252. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02002-y

Clark, N. (2022, November 4). The best time loop game of 2022 is a teen sci-fi gem [Review of the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* by Northway Games]. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/reviews/23435089/best-time-loop-game-i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist-review

Crenshaw, K. (1998). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. In *Feminism and Politics*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016

Cutting, J. (2020). A Thematic Linguistic Analysis of TESOL Students' Commitment to Intercultural Communication Values. *TESOL Quarterly*, *54*(4), 846–869. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.559

De Costa, P. I., Lee, J., Rawal, H., Li, W., & Rose, H. (2020). Ethics in Applied Linguistics Research. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (1st ed., pp. 122-130). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367824471-11

Faery_. (2022, September 12). Question about romancing Rex. [Online forum post]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/xcms3b/question_about_romancing_rex/

Fantastic_Mister. (2023, August 2). It'd be nice. Not all the characters are open to that, and

    that's fine. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit.*

    https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/15eib3n/needs_more_poly_optio

    ns/

Fantastic_Mister. (2023, November 7). What are your headcannons for what happens to Sol

    and the rest of Vertumna? [Online forum post]. *Reddit.*

    https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/17pjfwu/what_are_your_headcan

    nons_for_what_happens_to_sol/

Ferrer, J. N. (2018). Mononormativity, Polypride, and the "Mono–Poly Wars." *Sexuality &*

    Culture, *22*(3), 817–836. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9494-y

Frelik, P. (2019). Video Games and Virtual Lives: Science Fiction Gaming from the 1980s to

    the 2010s. In *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (pp. 632–646). Cambridge

    University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316694374.041

Gainax. (1991). *Princess Maker* (Windows version) [Video game]. (1991).

Glass, V. Q. (2022). Queering Relationships: Exploring Phenomena of Asexual Identified

    Persons in Relationships. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 44*(4), 344–359.

    https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-022-09650-9

Hall, K. (1995). Lip Service on the Fantasy Lines. In K. Hall. K. & M. Bucholtz (Eds.), *Gender*

    articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self (pp. 183-216). Routledge,

    New York, NY.

Hall, K., Motschenbacher, H., & Stegu, M. (2013). Commentary I: 'It's a hijra!' Queer

    linguistics revisited. *Discourse & Society*, *24*(5), 634–642.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513490321

Hangen, F., Crasta, D., & Rogge, R. D. (2020). Delineating the Boundaries Between

    Nonmonogamy and Infidelity: Bringing Consent Back Into Definitions of Consensual

    Nonmonogamy With Latent Profile Analysis. *The Journal of Sex Research, 57*(4),

    438–457. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1669133

Haritaworn, J., Lin, C., & Klesse, C. (2006). Poly/logue: A Critical Introduction to Polyamory. *Sexualities*, *9*(5), 515–529. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069963

Heritage, F., & Koller, V. (2020). Incels, in-groups, and ideologies: The representation of gendered social actors in a sexuality-based online community. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *9*(2), 152–178. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.19014.he

Hori, Y., Sugihara, Y., & Wei, L. (2024). Liquid Crystals: A Phenomenological Approach to Complexity of University Students' Identity Formation Through Translanguaging Perspective. *Applied Linguistics*, *46*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amae005

IMDB. (n.d.). *Groundhog Day*. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107048/

Ingram, R. (2022, August 25). I Was A Teenage Exocolonist Review [Review of the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* by Northway Games]. *Nintendo Life*. https://www.nintendolife.com/reviews/switch-eshop/i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist

Ito, R. (2021). Not a white girl and speaking English with slang: Negotiating Hmong American identities in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. *Multilingua*, *40*(3), 339–366. https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2019-0082

Jones, L. (2019). Discourses of transnormativity in vloggers' identity construction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *2019*(256), 85–101. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2018-2013

Jones, L. (2021). Queer linguistics and identity: The past decade. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *10*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.00010.jon

Kean, J. J. (2018). Sex/love skirmishes: "swinging," "polyamory," and the politics of naming. *Feminist Media Studies,* *18*(3), 458–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1393760

Keith_87. (2024, July 6). Nomi-Nomi is written as asexual aromantic (or at the very least demisexual); they're just not open to anything, including dating unless they're already

incredibly close with Sol. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1dw9iru/how_the_hell_do_you_
romance_nominomi/

Kelleher, S., & Murphy, M. (2024). Asexual identity development and internalisation:
a thematic analysis. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *39*(3), 865–893.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2022.2091127

Keshav, A. and Zimman, L. (2025). "That 3-word-ultimatum": The relationship escalator and
normative romance in metalinguistic commentary about I love you. *Journal of
Language and Sexuality, 14*(1), 1-30. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.22008.kes

Kiesling, S. F. (2019). *Language, gender, and sexuality: An introduction*. Routledge.

King, J. (2022, August 25). I Was A Teenage Exocolonist Review: Prepare For Blue Hair And
Pronouns [Review of the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* by Northway Games]. *The
Gamer*. https://www.thegamer.com/i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist-review/

Klesse, C. (2006). Polyamory and its 'Others': Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy.
Sexualities, 9(5), 565–583. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069986

Klesse, C. (2014). Polyamory: Intimate practice, identity or sexual orientation? *Sexualities,
17*(1–2), 81–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713511096

Klesse, C. (2018). Theorizing multi-partner relationships and sexualities – Recent work on
non-monogamy and polyamory [Review of *Theorizing multi-partner relationships
and sexualities – Recent work on non-monogamy and polyamory*]. *Sexualities,
21*(7), 1109–1124. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717701691

Lane, G. (2022, August 15). Feature: "I Wanted The Player To Feel Stunned And Powerless" -
Death And Memory In Finji's Deckbuilding Timeloop RPG. *Nintendo Life*.
https://www.nintendolife.com/features/i-wanted-the-player-to-feel-stunned-and-
powerless-death-and-memory-in-finjis-deckbuilding-timeloop-rpg

Látal, M. (2022). LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games through the Eyes of the Queer Community. *Illuminace*, 34(3), 139-163. https://doi.org/10.58193/ilu.1742

Levon, E. (2015). Integrating Intersectionality in Language, Gender, and Sexuality Research. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 9(7), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12147

LongWord. (2022, September 20). You don't need to be at 100. As long as you choose "I want to keep it casual" and never ask to close things off, he'll stay with you in a really cool, unique way. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/xcms3b/question_about_romancing_rex/

Loosier, P. S., Renfro, K., Carry, M., Williams, S. P., Hogben, M., & Aral, S. (2022). Reddit on PrEP: Posts About Pre-exposure Prophylaxis for HIV from Reddit Users, 2014–2019. *AIDS and Behavior*, 26(4), 1084–1094. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-021-03463-x

Managing_misadventure. (2024, February 8). Rex/Nomi compatibility [Online forum post]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1am1va8/rexnomi_compatibility/

MeritMay. (2023, December 10). She isn't stated to be aromantic, though- in her epilogue it says that she's "not as frigid as she once said". [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/18et8ds/am_i_the_only_one_who_hates_all_the_ros/

Miyahara, M. (2020). Sampling: Problematizing the Issue. In J. McKinley & H. Rose (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (1st ed., pp. 52-62). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367824471-5

Mod_Manager. (2024, July 6). Could you remove the quotation marks around "their?" It could be read as invalidating for some members here. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1dw9iru/how_the_hell_do_you_romance_nominomi/

Motschenbacher, H. (2011). Taking Queer Linguistics Further: Sociolinguistics and Critical Heteronormativity Research. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *2011*(212), 149-179. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2011.050

Motschenbacher, H., & Stegu, M. (2013). Queer Linguistic approaches to discourse. *Discourse & Society*, *24*(5), 519–535. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513486069

MrsAnn. (2024, February 8). Nomi is ace/demi and doesn't require monogamy from Rex while being monogamous themselves. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1am1va8/rexnomi_compatibility/

Muise, A., Laughton, A. K., Moors, A., & Impett, E. A. (2019). Sexual need fulfillment and satisfaction in consensually nonmonogamous relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36*(7), 1917–1938. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518774638

Newman, C. (2010, September 2010). The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood [Review of the book *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood]. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/26/the-handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood

Nicholas, J. A. (2022, August 23). Preview | I Was A Teenage Exocolonist - Time For Growing Up [Review of the game *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* by Northway Games]. *Startmenu*. https://www.startmenu.co.uk/home/teenage-exocolonist-preview/

Noël, M. J. (2006). Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity. *Sexualities*, *9*(5), 602–620. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706070003

Northway Games. (2022). *I was a Teenage Exocolonist* (Windows version) [Video game]. Finji.

Northway, S. (2020a, January 6). Growing Up in Exocolonist. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/7/

Northway, S. (2020b, January 23). Exocolonist Character design. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/7/

Northway, S. (2020c, February 4). Sol was a Teenage Exocolonist. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/7/

Northway, S. (2020d, March 26). The Skillful Exocolonist. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/7/

Northway, S. (2022a, August 25). The art of I Was a Teenage Exocolonist, Coming to Steam and PlayStation on August 25th, 2022. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/3/

Northway, S. (2022b, August 31). Deep Dive: Using Exoscript to tame the "Narrative Octopus" of I Was a Teenage Exocolonist. *Game Developer*. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/programming/deep-dive-the-narrative-octopus-of-i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist

Northway, S. (2023, August 25). Exocolonist's Original Design Docs. *Northway Games*. https://northwaygames.com/page/2/

Ogungbemi, O. (2025). Centering the margins: Queer sexuality, identity construction and rights advocacy in Jude Dibia's Walking with Shadows. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *14*(1), 115–136. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.00043.ogu

Pearson, W. (2003). Science fiction and queer theory. In *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (pp. 149–160). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521816262.011

Penguin_Dance. (2022, September 13). Sadly, I think he'll always break up with you. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/xcms3b/question_about_romancing_rex/

Perfect_Craft. (2025, April 28). The world has normalized polyamory (which is wonderful) and celebrates diversity. [Online forum comment]. *Reddit*.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1k9fl4e/love_the_game_but_not
_happy_with_surprise/

Pinetree_Nature. (2025, April 27). Love the game, but not happy with surprise polyamory.
[Online forum post]. *Reddit.*

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1k9fl4e/love_the_game_but_not
_happy_with_surprise/

Pulos, A. (2013). Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse
Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, *8*(2), 77-97.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013478688

r/Exocolonist. (n.d.) *Reddit.* Retrieved March 23, 2025, from
https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/

RainyDay. (2025, March 14). Did I just mess up my relationship with Marz by… [Online
forum post]. *Reddit.*

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1jazz7i/did_i_just_mess_up_my
_relationship_with_marz_by/

Ramis, H. (Director). (1993). *Groundhog Day* [Film]. *Columbia Pictures.*

Razack, S. (1998). *Looking white people in the eye: Gender, race, and culture in courtrooms
and classrooms*. University of Toronto Press.
https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442670204

Reddit. (n.d.). *r/exocolonist*. Retrieved May 2, 2025, from

https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/

Ritchie, A., & Barker, M. (2006). 'There Aren't Words for What We Do or How We Feel So
We Have To Make Them Up': Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of
Compulsory Monogamy. *Sexualities*, *9*(5), 584–601.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706069987

Ruberg, B. (2018). Queerness and Video Games: Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives

    through Play. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *24*(4), 543-555.

    https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-6957940

Ruberg, B. (2020). T*he Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LBGTQ Game Makers Are*

    Reimagining the Medium of Video Games. Duke University Press.

    https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478007302

Sauntson, H., & Morrish, L. (2012). How gay is football this year? Identity and

    intersubjectivity in a women's sports team. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *1*(2),

    151–178. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.1.2.02sau

Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer*

    Culture. University of Minnesota Press.

    https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816693153.001.0001

Shaw, A. (2017). Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media

    Representation. *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture, 9*(1), 67-89.

    https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.150

Steam. (n.d.) *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist*. *Steampowered*. Retrieved December 15, 2024,

    from

    https://store.steampowered.com/app/1148760/I_Was_a_Teenage_Exocolonist/

Sullivan, N. (2003). Performance, Performativity, Parody, and Politics. In *A Critical*

    Introduction to Queer Theory (pp. 81–98). Edinburgh University Press.

    https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474472944-006

Suttner, N. et al. (host). (2022, September 16). Charting the Future with Sarah Northway (I

    Was a Teenage Exocolonist) (no. 99) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Eggplant: The Secret*

    Lives of Games. https://eggplant.show/99-charting-the-future-with-sarah-northway-

    i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist

Suvin, D. (1979). *Metamorphoses of science fiction: On the poetics and history of a literary*

    genre. Yale University Press.

Suzuki, S. (2023). Identity Presentations of L1-Japanese Female Professors in the United States. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *24*(3), 584–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2022.2160724

TheGoat23. (2024, July 5). How the hell do you romance Nomi-Nomi? [Online forum post]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1dw9iru/how_the_hell_do_you_romance_nominomi/

Thissen, L. (2015). "Because here we live in the Netherlands": Languagecultural politics of belonging in a supermarket. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *6*(2), 195–216. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2015-0010

Thompson, R. (2022). More than the selfie: Online dating, non-monogamy, normativity, and linked profiles on OkCupid. *Journal of Language and Sexuality, 11*(1), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.20005.tho

Turkproof. (2025, February 18). Like someone else commented, Tangent and Utopia have a dialogue about it when Utopia breaks her leg. They talk about [Comment on the post "Vace's Augmentation"]. *Reddit*. https://www.reddit.com/r/Exocolonist/comments/1irkxpm/comment/mdd721b/?context=3

Universiteit Leiden. (n.d.). Flowchart Checklist Ethics Committee. (n.d.). Ethics Committee Faculty. Retrieved March 25, 2025, from https://www.organisatiegids.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/geesteswetenschappen/commissies/flowchart-checklist-ethics-committee.pdf

Universiteit Leiden. (n.d.). Personal Data. Retrieved March 25, 2025, from https://www.staff.universiteitleiden.nl/ict/privacy-and-data-protection/personal-data/personal-data/humanities?cf=humanities

Warner, Noelle. (2023, January 28). Review: I Was a Teenage Exocolonist [Review of the game

    I Was a Teenage Exocolonist by Northway Games]. *Destructoid.*

    https://www.destructoid.com/reviews/review-i-was-a-teenage-exocolonist/

Zavala, V. (2020). Tactics of Intersubjectivity and Boundary Construction in Language

    Policy: An Andean Case. *Journal of Language, Identity, & Education 19*(2), 95-110.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1649982

Zimman, L. (2014). The Discursive Construction of Sex. In Davis, J., Raclaw, J. & Zimman, L.

    (Eds.), *Queer Excursions* (pp. 13-34). Oxford University Press.

    https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937295.003.0002 ATLAS.ti. (n.d.). *A*

    better and faster way to academic research results. Accessed March 30, 2025, on

    https://atlasti.com/students-and-

    education?_gl=1*1deitty*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTI4NzEzNzY5Ny4xNzQzNTAzMTQo*_ga

    _K459D5HY8F*MTcoMzUwMzEoNC4xLjEuMTcoMzUwMzE2My4wLjAuMA