

Diversity and representation: exploring LGBTQIA+ controversy in the gaming industry

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ABSTRACT

The video game industry has attracted the attention of researchers for many years due to the ongoing debates and controversies that usually involve a large number of participants and actors. Such controversies associated with video games and being born in a digital environment require a special approach and method of analysis that would consider all the constituents, actors, and their opinions on emerging issues. One of the topics traditionally attracting public attention is the protection of the rights to freedom of speech and representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. For the past decades, video games were traditionally created and developed by straight white men for the same group of people, however, in recent years, as many studies show, this trend has started to change, and the gaming industry is becoming more diversified both among developers and players. However, not everyone is ready for such changes, which entails laws limiting the right to representation and other restrictions. Often such incidents are covered in social networks and other media. One such example is the controversy that arose after Electronic Arts refused to release The Sims 4 expansion pack in Russia in 2022, explaining this by the presence of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws in this country that go against the views and beliefs of the developer company. As a consequence, such a decision by Electronic Arts, as well as the development and adoption by Russia of a law on anti-propaganda of the LGBTQIA+ community, led to the emergence of a controversy, where the main actors and all interested figures were divided in their views. Using the method of discursive controversy mapping, it became possible to analyze this controversy, identify the central actors and their positions, as well as identify central issues and come to certain conclusions. As this controversy has shown, in recent years people in countries where their rights are being infringed have begun to assert their rights, however, this can be largely influenced by political structures, which can still exert pressure and influence on the video game industry. Nevertheless, video games industry can no longer be called just a way of entertainment because it begins to combine different components of human social life and transform into a structure that potentially reflects changes in society.

KEYWORDS: *Controversy, Video games industry, controversy mapping, LGBTQIA+ representation, Electronic Arts, The Sims 4*

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1. Introduction

1.1 The video games industry and its debates

Video games have been attracting close attention for many years, being one of the significant ways to influence people, their behavior and personality (Quwaider et al, 2019). This becomes especially important in the context of today's society, where more than ever people's awareness of representation and diversity is growing, along with this, a certain responsibility is placed on video game developers. Over the past years, the creators and designers have maintained the stereotype that the players are mostly white cisgender males (Bulut, 2020; Krobová et al., 2015; Lima, 2017), however, today this is already far from reality and players can be of any gender and sexual orientation. Games thus also have to change by constantly evolving and adapting to new realities, paying particular attention to the inclusion and representation of LGBTQIA+ community. In this regard, this paper explores diversity and representation through the analysis of LGBTQIA+ controversy in the video game industry. For this type of work, *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) is an interesting case to consider, which has long been famous for its considerable attempts to contribute to the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community (Fung, 2017). LGBTQIA+ controversy in this paper was explored through the method of controversy mapping, analyzing who are the main actors within the issues of shared concern and what they contribute to this topic. The choice of *The Sims 4* is also explained by it being one of the most recent examples of controversy after Electronic Arts' decision to cancel game add-on's release in Russia due to its anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation. Other actors also appear that influence the consideration of this topic, namely, the developing company Electronic Arts itself, journalists, Russian government, as well as fans who play an important role in mapping the controversy, which was chosen as the most appropriate method of work.

1.2 Societal and academic relevance

Given that there is currently a limited number of studies on the video game industry, there are even fewer analyzes regarding the controversy unfolding in the digital environment (Marres, 2015). As for academic relevance, this paper attempts to close a gap in the study of 'born-digital controversies' (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), as well as explore the dynamics of the unfolding controversy between game developers, consumers, and political figures. Game-publishers and everyone involved in video games industry will be able to better understand the topic of representation and avoid mistakes in the future if we start to address this scientific gap and study the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community through controversy mapping. Thus, trying to contribute to closing this gap, this paper outlined the following research question: *How do different actors concerning the gaming industry and The Sims 4 explore LGBTQIA+ controversy in Russia?*

As for social relevance, this analysis considers the problem of representation of the LGBTQIA+ community and its rights, which has recently attracted a lot of attention in the video game industry both among players and among many other related actors, for example, developing companies, which in recent years are trying to contribute to queer representation (Parshakov et al., 2022). This analysis also allows us

to consider situations where political elements can interfere with the gaming industry, in which case such incidents can gain a significant attention within media environment. It also illustrates that such controversies can go beyond the traditional framework of the gaming studies, manifesting itself in issues of human rights and freedom of speech. The controversy considered and analyzed in this paper also serves as an example of a tendency that nowadays companies have shown determination towards protecting the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community and advocating for social justice, representation, and inclusiveness.

1.3 Thesis structure

The structure of the paper is structured as follows: the next chapter contains basic theoretical frameworks required for the analysis of this type. The chapter provides a brief overview of the history of LGBTQIA+ in video games industry and its current dynamics and issues, which should be considered for a more complete and comprehensive analysis. The chapter also discusses the theoretical foundations of controversy mapping. In addition, the author gives a brief background on the problem of representation of the queer community in Russia, and also mentions theoretical sources that previously studied *The Sims* franchise.

The methodology chapter discusses the chosen method, namely discursive controversy mapping (Marres, 2015), along with an explanation of research design. The chapter also establishes the chosen methods and criteria for data collection, after which the author includes the main outlines of the operationalization of the analysis being carried out.

The results chapter is divided into two parts. In the first one, the actors mapped and the connections between them are described, and their stances are established and analyzed within the given controversy. The second part of the results considers the issues that led to the emergence of controversy where actors' stances and views differ. Identification of issues became possible using the theory and method of discursive controversy mapping (Marres, 2015). After that, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, the research questions are answered, the limitations are considered and suggestions for future research are given.

2. Theoretical Framework

The topic of this paper and the objects of analysis predetermined the main theoretical foundations that should be considered in the context of representation and diversity in the gaming industry. First, the theory of controversy mapping is considered, which serves as the basis for analysis and subsequently acts as a method for future work. Controversy mapping outlines the criteria for choosing the issue and its main actors. Then the controversy of LGBTQIA+ representation and the main features of diving in the digital industry are considered along with modern trends and challenges. As one of the actors of controversy, the Russian government will be considered, outlined by the latest laws regarding LGBTQIA+ representation, after which the author makes it clear why the game *The Sims 4* will serve as a case study and how this product of the gaming industry connects mentioned actors and the theoretical foundations used to analyze the chosen topic.

2.1. Controversy mapping

Controversy mapping was originally conceived by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and other scientists in the 1980s and 1990s as a research method in the context of Science, Technology, and Society studies (STS) and was used mostly as a pedagogical approach for engineering students (Vertesi & Ribes, 2019). Latour then tried to go beyond existing framework and integrated the method into the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), pursuing the goal of establishing the method to explore relationships between different sides of controversial matters (Marres & Moats, 2015; Venturini, 2010). Despite the conditions of its creation, this method also acts as a theoretical basis, which finds its application in various areas of social studies, and which in recent years has become more relevant. It is also important to consider that the theory of controversy mapping cannot, in essence, be a solution to any problem or debate, because it is aimed at conducting an analysis rather than at the desire to get rid of contradictions in general (Venturini et al., 2015).

Controversy mapping is mainly used to address social problems where a multilateral and complex analysis is required. Venturini (2010) saw controversies as the most complex phenomena that exist in society and about which people often disagree. They can also be viewed as manifestations of general uncertainty or situations and problems, the overall picture of which has not yet been stabilized or only one point of view on the situation has been established (Venturini, 2010). Such problems can be various phenomena of shared concern entailing discussions and disagreements on the part of the actors or figures involved, which can lead to a heated discussion in the media environment and in society as a whole (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Controversies persist and continue to live as long as the disagreement of the sides exists, and end when all the actors involved come to a consensus or a compromise (Venturini, 2010). Venturini (2010) also sees controversies as conflicts that do not result in the exertion of real force or serious threatening actions, but, however, lead to a clash of interests and opinions, which can often take a violent turn.

Problems or phenomena of uncertainty that cause disagreements between actors are defined within this theory as issues (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). It can be any topic, not

necessarily a vital issue (Venturini, 2010), that binds participants in controversy through their attitudes or views on matters of shared concern, which makes it possible and necessary to analyze controversy from many different angles (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). These days, any controversial topic fits into this category and can act as an issue, be it global warming, GMOs, or issues of gender and race (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Venturini, 2010; Venturini & Munk, 2021). Venturini (2010) also argues that in controversies the actors will always disagree about issues, which is why they cannot be resolved with just one one-sided answer. The emergence and growth of issues is also influenced by the fact that many of them are covered in digital media and remain in the public eye, which increases the involvement of various actors and their diversity (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres, 2015). As a rule, researchers analyze which statements and arguments are supported by certain actors in order to then identify which issues become central in controversies (Marres, 2015).

Actors in controversy mapping are understood as both human people and non-human figures - the latter can be portrayed as products, institutions, artifacts, and any other components of our life (Venturini, 2010). Actors appear in the context of the problem under consideration and can change over time, influencing the discourse and allowing it to be analyzed from different points of view and with different levels of depth (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Actors also tend to change in status and their opinions, depending on how the controversies develop over time (Venturini & Munk, 2021). It is also important to note that controversies are inseparable from the actors as far as they are the ones who make statements and contribute to a certain narrative from their point of view, opinion on the world challenges or accumulated experience (Venturini & Munk, 2021). Just as statements or opinions cannot be separated from the actors responsible for them, so actors cannot be separated from each other: they form alliances for or against each other, creating a special network where participants in controversy interact on issues and challenges (Venturini & Munk, 2021).

The fact that this theory has become more used in recent years can be explained by its convenient design and the notion that problems in the digital environment have become more important than ever (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Over the past 20 years, significant attempts have been made to transform and harmonize STS methods of controversy mapping in accordance with new developments in modern technologies and the global spread of the Internet in general (Marres, 2015). In this regard, many controversies have appeared in the digital environment that have attracted public attention. At the same time, those controversies that are directly related to social media and digital culture (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016) require special consideration, because they spread with a significant speed among society and are ubiquitous in modern media. According to Venturini and Munk (2021), nowadays it's impossible to open the news, flip through media apps or websites without bumping into controversy issues every now and then. This is also explained by the public nature of controversies, created and supported by the media environment and being open cases for everyone who is ready to observe and somehow contribute (Venturini & Munk, 2021). The Internet has also blurred the lines between the private and the public,

whereby virtually all controversies are seen in the context of the whole society and where actors tend to speak out and want to be heard (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Thus, media debates allow more people to participate, making controversy more democratic, but also more complex and easily manipulated (Benkler, 2006; Benkler et al., 2018, as cited in Venturini & Munk, 2016).

The emergence of social media applications has added a new dynamic to the theory of controversy mapping, with various debates appearing on blogs and other app in the web. The unfolding of controversies in social networks, now with “reply chains”, allows us to track the change in the actors’ opinions (Marres & Moats, 2015) and observe the overall dynamics of ongoing disputes. In addition, nowadays actors tend to use hashtags that separate parties or participants according to interests and accepted sides (Marres & Moats, 2015).

2.2. LGBTQIA+ and the gaming industry

Researching this topic and forming a theoretical framework for the study, we should first consider the LGBTQIA+ community in the context of the video gaming industry and representation within it. Representation as a concept has a rather complex history, relating not only to sexuality, but also other personality traits that people want to make visible (Shaw, 2012). Representation of LGBTQ+ characters in particular has a relatively scarce history in gaming industry but nonetheless it has come a long way since its beginnings (Shaw & Persaud, 2020). In the early days of video games, representation was almost non-existent, but with the increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in society, this trend has changed. For many, video games have been a way to escape reality and explore personal characteristics, which might not have appeared or come to a surface without exposure of user’s personality to certain games (Ruberg, 2019a, 2019b).

2.2.1 History of LGBTQIA+ in gaming industry

Queer characters have been appearing in video games since at least the 1980s (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019; Utsch et al., 2017), and have been a part of digital culture for a long time already (Shaw et al, 2019). In recent years, more scientists in this field have begun to consider the topic of representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the context of the media environment and the gaming industry in particular, even though most experts still continue to consider only sexuality, neglecting the use of pronouns, non-binary and transgender characters (Shaw & Friesem, 2016).

Over the past years, especially judging on 2000s gaming industry's environment, LGBTQIA+ representation in video games was limited, and often reduced to stereotypical or to some extent offensive depictions (Dyer, 1999, as cited in Shaw et al., 2019; Utsch et al., 2017), such as certain clothing styles, speech patterns, or the presence of queer characters as sex workers (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In earlier years, the industry also could not display a high level of representation. The very first LGBTQIA+ character can be considered the transgender dinosaur Birdo from the game *Mario Bros. 2*, introduced back in 1988 by Nintendo (Ruberg, 2019a, 2019b). The character resembles a pink dinosaur with a red bow, and, over time, Birdo has changed slightly in appearance. Like Birdo, many

other queer characters appearing in games after the 1990s were mostly described, drawn, and created using common stereotypes that society would immediately identify as an LGBTQIA+ character. This includes certain dresses on male characters or other narrowly stereotyped items of clothing and cross-dressing (often used as part of a joke or humor), intonation, voice and manner of speaking, and mannerisms in general (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Thach, 2021). Until the mid-2010s, this trend continued, illustrating representation only through characters (Shaw et al., 2019), after which digital diversity began to go beyond already established frames, and features of the LGBTQIA+ community began to be assigned to in-game locations through coding that players could visit (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Despite this, the distribution of sexual orientations between playable and non-playable characters was still unequal – from 1985 to 2005, approximately 56 percent of characters in games released during this period were gay men, while other orientations made up a much smaller share of about 20-22 percent (Shaw et al., 2019).

The example of Birdo and later emergence of other similar characters could be perceived by the audience as the most primitive cases, reduced to the presence of some common features that the queer community itself did not always agree with. With new games and releases coming out after the 1980s, developers from triple-A companies and large corporations tried to contribute more to the representation, such as Intel, which over time began to donate a lot of finances to initiatives for increasing inclusivity in digital culture (Ruberg, 2019a, 2019b). Such attempts have not gone unnoticed but have failed to completely eradicate the homophobia or established anti-LGBTQIA+ campaigns that used to be ubiquitous in the gaming industry (Ruberg, 2017, 2019a, 2019b).

Despite the fact that LGBTQIA+ characters have been appearing in video games for a long time, it is important to note that until recently they were not the main characters, mostly flickering in the background as non-playable characters or NPCs (Shaw et al., 2019) illustrating their orientation only when the player interacted with such characters or through initiating an in-game dialogue (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Often, NPCs have also been depicted as romantic couples (Shaw et al., 2019). However, these characters for the most part did not affect the gameplay or story in any way, being just an interesting additional detail with no particular purpose behind them (Chang, 2015, as cited in Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In many games in the 1990s, the player could interact with, build a relationship with, or marry a queer NPC, which did not affect the plot and was only a pleasant and interesting addition (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019).

Analyzing representation and diversity in video games in terms of particular and separate orientations, some of them could be quite minimal and rare. As a rule, explicitly transgender male characters acted as just an additional part of the plot or side quest for the player, where the orientation of such a character was perceived as a problem or a task that the player had to deal with (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Thach, 2021). An example of this pattern is the game *Captain Rainbow* (Skip Ltd., 2008) released exclusively in Japan, where the player had to free the already mentioned character Birdo, imprisoned for using the wrong restroom (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). This can also exemplify differences in representation depending on localization and culture of different countries - at the time

of the *Captain Rainbow*'s release, citizens of Japan did not yet have the opportunity to enter into same-sex marriages and the situation with the representation of LGBTQIA+ people left much to be desired (Wallace, 2019). It also shows the connection between the representation of the queer community in games between cultural conventions, politics, and moral principles. Given that the LGBTQIA+ community has historically been portrayed in a hostile context in media products as a sign of dissent and distorted family values, many games have also featured queer characters as monsters or villains in stories (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Russo, 1987, as cited in Shaw et al., 2019). This trend, however, became less noticeable by the early 2000s (Shaw et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Current dynamics of LGBTQIA+ in gaming industry

For the past 20 years, there has been a push for greater representation and inclusivity in video games, which used to be characterized by pre-established standards and business models (Ruberg, 2019b). The more society and the queer community became politically and socially active, the more their voice and presence in the media and digital environment became louder and more visible (Ruberg, 2018; Shaw, 2010), because it is the gaming community that gives significant importance to representation in the context of popular culture and digital entertainment (Shaw, 2010, 2014). The concept of diversity also began to attract a lot of attention as players became focused on creating a more equal and inclusive digital environment (Bragança et al., 2016). Gaming culture has now begun to follow queer community, and not vice versa, constantly changing and adjusting to new realities (Shaw, 2010). The change in trends became noticeable when much more companies began to include LGBTQIA+ characters as playable ones or NPCs than in the past (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Initially, big companies showed little desire to pursue such a goal, however, they gradually began to get involved (Ruberg, 2019a, 2019b). The more there were queer games on the market, the faster the number of LGBTQIA+ players increased (Ruberg, 2019a; Zegura, 2020).

Today, digital culture and video games are one of the most significant and influential media formats, with billions of players and just anyone interested in video games industry (Zimmerman, 2013, as cited in Ruberg, 2019a). It is with such influence and responsibility that the need for games to respond to modern demands and needs of society, including the need for greater representation, is growing. Today, video games are more alive and adjustable to changes in established principles and they began to reflect on society and societal dynamics (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, as cited in Ruberg, 2019a; Utsch et al., 2017). Despite this, representation in video games remains uneven, and many LGBTQIA+ gamers continue to seek for even greater representation and diversity. Nonetheless, the increased visibility and representation of LGBTQIA+ characters and themes in video games is an important step forward, and the queer gaming community continues to grow and advocate for their rights and visibility (Utsch et al., 2017). Under these conditions, controversies associated with video games appear, when not everyone is ready or agrees with a sharply increased level of representation due to different cultural or other social norms.

The push for more representativeness and diversity, however, is not limited to content - in recent years we can also see this trend in the production side of video games. For many years, traditionally white heterosexual males have made up the majority of game creators and developers (Bulut, 2021), as the International Game Developers Association reports (Krobová et al., 2015; Lima, 2017) used to show. Related to this fact was the prejudice that video games were made for straight white men, although, this was not far from the truth - there used to be an opinion that such a group of developers simply created games for themselves (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000, as cited in Krobová et al., 2015; Süngü, 2020). However, as significant advances in LGBTQIA+ rights were gradually made and society became more diverse and open in its sexual orientations (Parshakov et al., 2022), consumers also began to advocate for more representative and inclusive content that they would relate to from their experience. The players no longer represented one homogenous group and it became increasingly impossible to view them through just one prism set in society (Boudreau, 2022; Krobová et al., 2015). This prompted companies to think about internal changes in their workforce, increasing the number of LGBTQIA+ employees, as far as several studies have shown that LGBTQIA+-inclusive corporations were able to attract more consumers and earn their positive attitude (Parshakov et al., 2022). This is also consistent with the fact that queer employees could bring new inclusive sides to content and games through which consumers could see or recognize themselves (Ruberg, 2019). In this regard, over the past years, the desire to increase diversity within developers has been of particular importance, which subsequently means that the more queer employees there are, the more games with LGBTQIA+ characters or stories can be created (Shaw, 2010; Utsch, 2017).

2.3. Russia and LGBTQIA+ controversy

Nowadays, it is especially important to consider and analyze such controversies where one of the actors can be the state and its structures which oppose diverse representation and the queer community. In the context of the already mentioned progressive changes, such examples may look like a step back and disregard society's interests and freedom of speech (Kozlovskaya, 2012; Verpoest, 2017). One example of such phenomena can be the state structures of the Russian Federation and its unacceptance of LGBTQIA+ community.

Back in the early 2010s, human rights advocates and all concerned parties began to be worried about the gradually deteriorating situation regarding protection of the LGBTQIA+ rights and for representation (Kochetkov, 2012). Historically, the Russian Orthodox Church, which is of great importance and influence on the government, condemned the signs and representatives of the queer community by saying that homosexuality goes against faith and distorts the moral and cultural values of society (Mikhailov, 2013; Sozayev, 2012). The situation took a sharply discriminatory and hostile turn when, in 2013, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin signed the Anti-propaganda Law, which prohibited any form of LGBTQIA+ expression to minors (Human Dignity Trust, 2014; Kochetkov, 2012; Sozayev, 2012). Despite the fact that at that time the law extended only in the context of affecting children, the indirect effects of the law manifested themselves in a broader sense,

namely the establishment of legal discrimination in any area of life in relation to the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as a sharp increase in violence against representatives of non-traditional sexual orientations and bullying of children and youth in schools, universities and any other educational institutions (Human Dignity Trust, 2014; Kochetkov, 2012; Kozlovskaya, 2012).

Discrimination, disrespect for the LGBTQIA+ community, censorship of any related media products and non-recognition by the government and the patriotic part of Russian society continued until November-December 2022, when a new law came into force, in fact expanding the influence of the previous one on minors (Andersson, 2022). The new law now prohibited any promotion of non-traditional sexual orientations and relationships to all adults in all areas of society, including cultural ones such as in films, advertisements, and any other forms of media and digital environment (Sauer, 2022). The new and revised law received great publicity by the world community, which condemned the actions of the Russian government as a violation of basic human rights and freedom of speech (Rescheto, 2023), however, this did not affect the current situation and the law continues to operate to this day.

In today's fast paced world, examples and cases like Russia get a lot of publicity in the media, attracting a lot of public attention. One such example is the Russian government's attempts to ban films and games containing features or any images and texts associated with LGBTQIA+ community (Andersson, 2022; Rescheto, 2023; Sauer, 2022). Russia is not the only country where there is discrimination and infringement of the rights of the queer community (Human Rights First, 2015), however, it is becoming visible in the media environment that such laws cannot force people to change their lives and sexual orientation. The LGBTQIA+ community continues to exist quietly and secretly even under such laws (Kondakov, 2016), and it becomes increasingly important for them to feel represented at in media products or digital environment (Jackson, 2022). One of the most recent and controversial examples in this context is the attempts by the Russian government to ban *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000–2023) games due to its gameplay, which allows the player to control characters where they can enter same-sex relationships and get married (Parrish, 2022; Partis, 2022; Regan, 2022). This phenomenon caused controversial reactions in the Russian gaming community, which wants to feel represented (Jackson, 2022), as well as the game developer Electronic Arts (EA), which does not intend to deprive its Russian audience of enjoying the game and violating human rights (Partis, 2022; Regan, 2022). A junction of interests become significantly noticeable, and it is important to consider such cases using the theory and method of controversy mapping, which analyzes the positions and views of actors and their opinions.

2.4. The Sims franchise

Today, unlike in the 90s or 2000s, representation in games has reached a new level, although it is not ubiquitous and does not always satisfy the needs of the gaming community. However, there are games that have managed to gain gamers' love and adoration precisely because of the inclusion of many non-traditional personality traits and orientations (Fung, 2017). One example of such notion is

The Sims (Electronic Arts, 2000–2023) series of games created by Electronic Arts and Maxis. In recent years, the latest version of *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts, 2014–2023) has received great popularity and online coverage in the media space by standing out from other predecessors with its level of representation of modern phenomena and challenges (Biscop et al., 2019; Krobová et al., 2015; Parrish, 2022; Partis, 2022). The design of the game itself offers players free choice of action, story, character design, and other elements of the game (Consalvo, 2003; Fung, 2017). This game is often compared to a constructed reality, where the players make their own decisions and try out various actions, drawing an analogy with real life and experiences (Biscop et al., 2019; Sicart, 2003).

Speaking in detail about diversity, the most recent updates to the game now allow the player to choose the pronouns, orientations, and sexual preferences of the characters they create, which the game designers emphasize in favor of the fact that players are now not limited in choices, gender stereotypes and boundaries (Biscop et al., 2019; Parrish, 2022; Partis, 2022). The game is often seen as a game for girls (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Wirman, 2011, as cited in Krobová et al., 2015), yet it offers a wide platform for experiments and opportunities for all players, regardless of gender (Krobová et al., 2015). In this regard, *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) stands out from the competitors since the gaming community is immersed in the game being active and creative (Nutt & Railton, 2003). This explains the choice of this game as a case study and scientific analysis in general, being a rich and lively platform (Nutt & Railton, 2003; Sicart, 2003), often subject to various controversies regarding its progressiveness.

According to Consalvo (2003), games mostly tend to focus more on gender or other personal characteristics, while the topic of sexuality is usually neglected in the context of analyzing the impact of computer games on users. However, in recent years, the problem of representation and diversity in video games has begun to be considered and analyzed in the works of many scientists who tend to distinguish *The Sims* (EA, 2000–2023) games as an example of presence of not only personality traits such as sexuality, but also other spectrums of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as being transgender or non-binary (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). According to Sicart (2003), since its release back in 2000, the game has usually attracted a lot of attention and controversy, being a simulation that mimics real life in many ways. *The Sims* is also an interesting example of exploring representation, giving players complete freedom of choice, and allowing them to decide what their created character will be like and how they will explore their preferences (Consalvo, 2003; Krobová et al., 2015). The game also separates gender and sexuality, and in some way undermines the prevailing opinions of identity in society, giving people the opportunity to explore it in the game rather than in the real world (Sihvonen, 2011). With such features, some researchers argue that *The Sims* games can act as a platform for a safe place to learn about social interactions of any kind (Krobová et al., 2015). Nowadays, some games explore personal characteristics and provide complete freedom, which makes them to be considered separately from other media products, as they can have a significant impact on players (Consalvo, 2003). In this regard, *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) has been attracting both researchers in the field of video games and digital space, and other actors involved in the topics considered in this game for many

years, which will allow us to analyze this game in the context of controversy with other opinions and disagreements.

3. Methodology

This chapter discusses the choices that were made in order to carry out an analysis of a given topic. To begin with, the general provisions of research design are given, where the author establishes the appropriate application of controversy mapping within the framework of the analysis. Then, the steps, and criteria for the sampling and data collection are described, along with explanations of specific choices regarding sources, time frames, and data collection methods. After that, the operationalization of the chosen method is discussed, as well as the outlines of validity and reliability, followed by a brief discussion of ethics in relation to the data collected and the analysis carried out.

3.1. Research design

As noted in the previous chapter, controversy mapping in this analysis was used both as a theoretical and methodological basis of this work. This can be explained by the fact that nowadays we can detect a new development leap in the context of representation in video games, where everyone, whether a player, creator, or any other scholar, brings his own meaning and new perspectives to the LGBTQIA+ representation (Parshakov et al., 2022). In this regard, controversy mapping was chosen as the most appropriate method for dealing with issues and topics of this type as far as this method allows the researcher to analyze and identify conflicting interests or views on the intended problem. The controversy mapping method is based on the process of identifying several variables, whether human or non-humans, whose opinions may differ on various social, cultural or any other topics (Venturini, 2010), since these variables or actors create their own for controversy meaning and understanding (Venturini & Munk, 2021). These positions are then analyzed using a discursive mapping method to achieve a more thorough understanding and identification of various concepts and contradictions.

Considering that the topic of this paper analyzes controversy created and directly related to the digital environment, the author used the example proposed by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016), who also analyzed a specific problem using social networks, observing how they can determine the dynamics development of the problem and change the course of the narrative. Thus, this paper consists of controversy mapping in the first stage, where, using this concept, the main actors involved in the issue under consideration were identified and what meaning they attach to it. In the second stage, their interpretations were analyzed as well as their ways of communicating with each other within the framework of controversy representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the video game industry.

The analysis of the chosen topic was carried out in two stages. First, several actors regarding the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the gaming environment were highlighted using controversy mapping. At the same time, some regularities were revealed in the opinions of the declared actors. Then, by focusing on how different actors are interconnected within the problem under consideration and by analyzing their stances, a discursive method was used to identify and analyze the emerging issues and to build the concept more fully. Thus, the discursive controversy

mapping method was used to identify the main figures within the topic under consideration, designate and analyze their position in relation to the problem and how they influenced the development of controversy in social networks and the digital environment in general.

3.2. Sample and data collection

Considering the controversy regarding diversity and representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in video games using the example of *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) in Russia, it should be noted that this game has been attracting public attention for many years due to its gameplay, where players are free to create queer characters and build same-sex relationships (Pettini, 2021). The game also caused controversy in many countries where any manifestation of the LGBTQIA+ community or its propaganda is prohibited at the legislative level. One such example is the Russian Federation, where in recent years laws have been adopted prohibiting the promotion of non-traditional relationships not only among minors, but in among the entire population. Similarly, The Sims games and all subsequent add-ons created controversies regarding LGBTQIA+ representation, where debating actors took different stances and opinions. However, at least two events can be singled out when the discussion between actors reached its peak and went beyond the previously existing framework, attracting public attention. The first such event was *The Sims 4* getting 18+ rating by the Russian government which subsequently led to a ban on the distribution of the game for children in May 2014 after a law was passed a year earlier in 2013 to ban propaganda of the LGBTQIA+ community among minors, which caused great publicity in the international community (Child Rights International Network, 2019; Elder, 2013; Rankin, 2017). Thus, the collected data regarding this event should not have been earlier than May 10, 2014, and not later than May 20, 2014. As the second peak of controversy, the author chose an unfolding debate regarding the decision of Electronic Arts not to release Expansion Pack *My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) in Russia in February 2022, explaining that there is an anti-LGBTQIA+ law that would violate views and beliefs of the company (Carpenter, 2022; Parrish, 2022). Thus, the collected data for the analysis of these events should not have been earlier than February 9, 2022 and not later than February 19, 2022. Such time frames were chosen to make the analysis and process more feasible. The main attention in this work was paid to the peak of the 2022 controversy, while the events of 2014 were used mainly for comparison and for tracking similar trends or underlying concepts within this controversy.

The objects for analysis were the actors involved in the above events within the controversy, as well as their texts, opinions, views, and the meanings they attached to the topics discussed (Venturini, 2010). In general, the related data was collected as comments and threads on social media websites such as Reddit, Twitter, as well as the official game forum on the Electronic Arts website. In addition, fans' YouTube videos and comments were used, as well as articles written by journalists and other video game experts, and official statements from Electronic Arts and its Maxis division. Since the data regarding this controversy had to be collected from various digital sources, it was not possible to use any specific software, so the data was collected manually by the researcher. The choice of the

mentioned social networks and sources can be explained by an attempt to identify the main actors involved, who tend to express their opinion mainly within the digital environment (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres, 2015).

In the process of collecting and analyzing data during the stage of mapping actors, twenty articles, six YouTube videos and thirty-six comments to them, thirty subreddit thread comments from seven reddit threads, and 134 tweet thread comments to 74 tweets were considered. In addition, 145 comments of 14 discussions on the official Sims 4 forum on the Electronic Arts website were used. The rather narrow nature of the controversy that have arisen and the nature of the topic led to the use of the purposive sampling method, which allows the researcher to collect the data that will be needed to analyze main issues (Sarstedt et al., 2018), which eliminates the possibility of dispersing attention to broader problems (Hoeber et al., 2017), and also allows the researcher to better navigate where the narrative and analysis will go (Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan et al., 2016). The type of the topic under consideration also predetermined the actors in the controversy mapping, as well as the ways of analyzing possible outcomes (Marres, 2015; Marres & Moats, 2015). However, this method of data gathering still allows the researcher to be flexible (Hoeber et al., 2017), which helps to better map the controversies. After the issue and the main actors were mapped, a number of additional sources were considered and analyzed. As a result, twenty-nine articles, eight YouTube videos and forty comments to them, thirty-five subreddit thread comments from seven reddit threads, 154 tweet thread comments to 86 tweets, and 188 comments to 14 discussions on the official Sims 4 forum were used to analyze this topic. Most of the data was collected between April and May 2023.

Table 1

Types and amount of data used for mapping and post-mapping phases

Types of data	Mapping stage, # of pieces analyzed	Post-mapping stage, # of pieces analyzed
Articles	20	29
YouTube videos	6	8
YouTube comments	36	40
Reddit threads	7	7
Subreddit thread comments	30	35
Tweets and Twitter threads	74	86
Twitter thread comments	134	154
Official Forum discussions	14	14
Comments to Official Forum discussions	145	188

As for criteria for collecting data using the purposive sampling method, it is important to highlight the relevance of data to the topic under consideration, which allows the researcher not to go beyond the established issue and filter only relevant comments, articles, threads, and other sources (Marres,

2015). The keywords for data collection were often online searches such as The Sims 4, Russia, My Wedding Stories, LGBTQIA+, Electronic Arts, Maxis, and Controversy.

3.3. Operationalization

As already noted in the previous subchapters, the chosen method played both a theoretical and methodological basis for the analysis. Controversy mapping in this work is a method for delineating and selecting the main actors, where their positions and texts are then analyzed in order to explore the topic from different points of view. Here it is also important to mention a vital component - the concept of issue, which is a problem or a matter, the position of the actors on which differs due to the meaning the actors attach to one or another topic (Marres, 2015; Venturini, 2010). Thus, the method for this paper aims to identify the number of variables that clash with opinions about various issues, highlight these issues and analyze the attitude of actors towards them. The topic at hand forces the actors to take certain positions through which we can view the differences and identify them (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). In this way they help to identify similar concepts and differences between actors and their positions. It seems important to analyze the attitudes of actors towards the LGBTQIA+ community in the context of video games through their opinion on controversy towards Russia and *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014).

In order to subsequently answer the main and subsidiary research questions, it was necessary to establish how the actors form their texts, which are subsequently used in this method and help to identify a common ground or differences within the topic under consideration. An analysis was made of certain points in the texts of the actors, which were then considered when establishing shared matters of concern. This helped to understand exactly how actors explore the topic of representation in video games with regards to discriminatory laws.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis carried out in this work consisted of two stages, as noted above. The first step was to identify potential figures who are somehow involved in the unfolding controversy and what contribution they make to this topic (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres, 2015; Vertesi & Ribes, 2019). At this stage, it was also important to analyze the texts of the actors, and then to identify the connections between objects or parties, which was greatly helped by the descriptive nature of discursive controversy mapping (Marres, 2015). Considering this method in the context of the designated topic, namely LGBTQIA+ representation in the gaming industry, and considering the case on the example of which the analysis was made, namely *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) game and its in-game functions regarding the LGBTQIA+ community and self-identification, several potential actors came to the fore.

It was important to consider the company Electronic Arts and its division Maxis, which are both responsible for creating, developing, and maintaining *The Sims* (EA, 2000–2023) game series. Given how much the triple-A companies are targeting the audience and trying to gain public attention (Keogh, 2015; Söngü, 2017), it is wrong to think that they neglect representation and diversity with a large fan base, thus

users/fans/gamers formed another actor in this topic. Users proved to be the most interested in worthy representation and to be the target audience of major video game developers (Süngü, 2020). Mixed reactions from players also one way or another changed the course of a company's strategy and helped to achieve certain solutions to several representational issues. In this vein, it was interesting to consider the case of the refusal of the Electronic Arts company to release *The Sims 4 Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) Expansion Pack in Russia in 2022, arguing that there are laws against LGBTQIA+ propaganda in the state. Thereby, another actor was identified as the Russian government. Of particular importance were also journalists and writers who covered this topic in their online magazines and publications. Thus, for controversy mapping, several types of main actors were identified and put on a visual map (see Appendix B), where they had different views on the topic under consideration and gave it different meanings depending on their goals and beliefs, which proved the suitability of using method of controversy mapping for the analysis of representation in the gaming industry. It is also important to note that for a more complete analysis, the matter of Russian government choosing to assign the game an 18+ rating and ban its distribution to children in 2014 was also chosen within this controversy, where, it is worth pointing out, the actors turned out to be the same as in the situation regarding LGBTQIA+ representation in *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) in Russia in 2022.

Given that the stances of actors play an important role in controversy mapping, the actors identified in the first stage were then analyzed in terms of their statements, opinions, and the meanings they attach to the topic under consideration (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). This was done through in-depth analysis of their texts, which revealed underlying concepts and subsequently brought to light issues within the controversy. Thus, the stances of actors were given a central place in the second stage of the analysis, which was due to the exploratory nature of discursive controversy mapping (Marres, 2015). The nature and characteristics of the identified actors played an important role during the analysis stage because they helped to establish hidden concepts and identify overlapping issues between the actors involved in the controversy. The in-depth analysis was carried out by reviewing the collected data, after which the author of this work tried to, given the discursive nature of controversy mapping, to identify issues that connected the main actors. As an additional step, a textual analysis of the statements and texts of the actors was carried out, which for the most part helped to identify the main codes and, on their basis, group the actors and determine the main issues that are central to this controversy.

3.5. Validity & reliability

The considered controversy, being created, and deployed in the online environment, led to some biased consideration of issues and stances of actors, where it was sometimes difficult to track the dynamics of texts and points of view of the main figures involved. At the same time, the digital environment causes the dispersal of the debate environment on other issues, platforms, and the wider it grows, the more participants it attracts (Marres, 2015). However, in order to establish the validity of this research, the main focus has been set on stances and texts of actors, rather than on the dynamics of the emergence and course of controversy over time. Here, discursive controversy mapping has shown

its reliability and suitable application, which has made it possible to concentrate directly on the texts of the actors. Also, in order to obtain comprehensive results, the creation and development of a reliable research design along with the formulation of feasible research questions was of paramount importance at the initial stage. It also turned out to be important to consider methodological transparency, which would indicate clear guidelines for collecting data and criteria for their selection (Silverman, 2011). To some extent, the validity of this work can also be supported by the work of Marta Nowak (2021), who also used the discursive controversy mapping method to analyze born-digital controversy. The existence of the aforementioned work and the successful implementation of controversy mapping as a method for considering LGBTQ+ centered controversy in the video games industry proved the reliability and validity of this work.

To establish the reliability of the research, it was determined that the method of controversy mapping should be applied to exclude any possibility for biased results, and the data should be reliable, transparent, and accessible (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, as cited in Silverman, 2011). At the same time, given the features of discursive controversy mapping and the different ways in which the collected data can be interpreted, namely texts and stances of actors, it was important to establish and maintain the objectivity of research in order to achieve the most truthful and accurate results (Silverman, 2011).

3.6. Ethics

The peculiarity of the born-digital controversies and their active growth on the Internet (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016) causes consideration of ethics with caution. The fact that virtual controversies take place on the Internet has attracted many figures who could speak their minds anonymously or behind usernames without fear of being judged or saying things that, under normal circumstances in real life, would attract a certain level of backlash (Suler, 2004, as cited in Fu, 2019). However, the fact that users consciously chose to express their opinion online meant that the data could then be collected and used for conducting various research papers, including this one. The peculiarity of digital controversy also forces us not to pay special attention to issues of privacy or plagiarism, since users, when publishing their online comments, make their opinions public. In addition, during the data collection phase, it was found that many users of Twitter, online forums, as well as journalists and writers intentionally use their personal accounts and real names, which also indicates that ethical issues in the conducting research process differ from other ethical outlines where the controversies are not digital.

4. Results

This chapter will further present the main findings obtained during and after the analysis of controversy, as well as the process of analysis as such. The first stage of the work consisted in designating the main actors and identifying the connections between them, after which the stances of the main figures were analyzed and considered in a broader light, considering the connections between the actors and their characteristics or peculiarities. In some cases, other papers by various researchers writing on similar topics were also used for a more thorough and complete analysis in the field of game and social studies.

At first, main actors involved in the considered controversy were identified, which made it possible to answer the sub-research question “*Who are the different actors within The Sims 4 controversy in Russia?*”. The following subchapters also contain the results of the research obtained during the discursive controversy mapping, which consisted in analyzing the positions or stances taken by the actors and identifying the issues that led to the emergence of divergence of opinions and views. This segment was vital for answering the main research question “*How do different actors concerning the gaming industry and The Sims 4 explore LGBTQIA+ controversy in Russia?*”.

This chapter also contains correlations of the results found with previous studies in the designated area, which made it possible to establish a connection between theory and practice, as well as to trace how controversies can be associated with similar ambiguous situations in past years. It also helps to get a more complete picture and outline the controversy considered in this paper in the overall picture of game studies. In addition, with the help of discursive controversy mapping, it became possible to consider the publishing company Electronic Arts and its activities in the media environment, which can sometimes be influenced by cultural and ideological differences.

4.1. The controversy publics mapped

Considering the nature of the controversy being analyzed and its important stages, several actors were initially hypothetically identified that could play an important role in the unfolding controversy regarding the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the gaming industry in Russia. In addition, these actors were representatives of various groups of society and the digital environment, which would largely predetermine the diversity of views on controversy and the presence of more different and diverse points of view. Such actors were identified as *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) developer company Electronic Arts, the Russian government, which to some extent played an important role in creating the prerequisites for controversy, fans and players expressing their opinions on the Internet both openly and anonymously, and journalists and writers covering this topic in social networks and the media environment in general. Carrying out the first stage of analysis and mapping as such, which included the analysis of several suitable sources, only confirmed the suitability of the chosen actors. After that, the main figures were identified within the found actors, who established connections between themselves and deployed the controversy more fully through different views and beliefs on the created issue.

Given that the controversy unfolded mostly on the Internet, because it was on the official website of EA that the company's decision was published, this inevitably led to the fact that the issue began to be actively discussed on the network. As such, this controversy is “born-digital” (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), where actors and their texts were brought to the fore by various manifestations of digital media. In addition, the digital component played an important role because representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community involved in the controversy could freely express their opinions on the Internet both anonymously and using nicknames, which allowed this group of actors not to be afraid of harassment, bullying and to become heard. At the same time, this applies to any figure who, one way or another, was involved in the discussion and controversy in general.

Within this method, it became possible to create a visual map (see Appendix B1) that shows the connections between actors within the controversy. For clarity, various actors are highlighted in different colors, which made it possible to distinguish various figures, as well as to trace the connections between them. *The Sims 4* developer and publisher Electronic Arts, together with all its divisions and figures resulting from it, are a group in purple. Game journalists and writers are highlighted in green, along with a mention of the main journalists that made it possible to establish connections between other actors. Video games community, as the actor that showed the most connections with other figures and actors, is marked in crimson color. The Russian government, which has no other actors behind it, but is connected to other figures in one way or another, is marked in blue. The creation of the map also made it possible to mention actors that were not singled out in a separate group within the framework of this work, however, which showed the presence of connections with other figures. Among such actors, the map shows the Russian LGBTQIA+ community in pink, as well as human rights organizations of the queer community in yellow.

4.1.1 *Electronic Arts*

The first and one of the most important actors, to a certain extent responsible for the emergence and change of the controversy, is the company Electronic Arts (1982–present), which has been publishing *The Sims* series for 23 years. Its subsidiary and significant game developer division is Maxis, acquired by EA in 1997 (Reuters, 1997). Both companies have advocated since their inception to establish and maintain diversity and representation in video games per se, and the gaming industry in general, with a vision to enable all of their players to express themselves and have complete freedom of choice in the creation of their in-game stories (Ring, 2023). To some extent, this position can be explained by the fact that a fairly large part of the gaming audience of *The Sims* (EA, 2000–2023) series, namely 43 percent of the players, are representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community, as shown by a survey of 18,000 players conducted by Maxis in 2022 (Ring, 2023). Considering such statistics and respecting its audience, the company continues to improve the game, supporting the queer community through its developments, additions, updates. For example, since 2016, *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) players have had complete freedom of choice in the appearance of their created Sims, whether it is clothing, physique, walking style, or even voice tone (Bragança et al., 2016), which only

proved the intentions of Maxis and Electronic Arts to support the LGBTQIA+ community and to contribute to the development of progressiveness in the video game industry (Biscop, 2019). One of the latest updates also continues this tradition - in the summer of 2022, the game was expanded to allow players to choose the sexual orientation and romantic preferences of in-game characters, and even make them asexual (Parrish, 2022). Along with this, the developers have repeatedly emphasized that the newly added feature will not be possible to disable, referring to the fact that LGBTQIA+ identities in real life are an established and unchangeable fact that cannot be simply turned on or off, as in the game (Parrish, 2022). During the announcement of these new features, Jessica Croft, alias @SimGuruJessica on Twitter, who is Senior Designer and Lead Designer in EA on *The Sims 4* and who later became one of the actors in the controversy, emphasized that additions are just “just steps in a journey” that the company is still mapping out (Parrish, 2022). All of the above decisions showed the intention and desire of Electronic Arts and Maxis to live up to their vision, which is that, as their website states, play shapes reality (Electronic Arts, 2023). Developers attach great importance to diversity and representation, believing that through games people can learn to be more tolerant, respectful, and empathic, which then goes beyond the digital environment and resonates in changing the behavior of players for the better by shifting realities (Maxis, 2023). The company is also confident that members of the queer community, seeing themselves on the screen of their monitors, become more empowered as ever, which in turn inspires developers to follow the path of maintaining and increasing representation.

The above updates to the game, however, were not the last ones - other developments were released in the following months, for example, in February 2023, physical attributes of gender change for transgenders, such as scars and chest binders, were added to the in-game character creation editor mode (Orie, 2023), which, caused a strong negative online reaction from parents and adults (Fox News, 2023). Updates proved the company's desire to live up to its views on representation, however, the company set such a goal from the very beginning of this series - the creation of same-sex relationships was available since the first edition of *The Sims* (2000); however, in-game characters were limited to be registered in the same-sex marriages (The Huffington Post UK, 2014). *The Sims 2* (2004) already provided this option, although these marriages were divided into “Joined Union” between lesbians and gays, and “Marriage” between straight couples (BBC News, 2014). *The Sims 3* (2009) fully allowed any manifestations of non-traditional relationships and marriages (BBC News, 2014; The Huffington Post UK, 2014), nevertheless, all these games in the series did not have any features regarding the external attributes of LGBTQIA+ characters, such as voices, clothes and appearance in general, and the addition of these expansions to the latest version of *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014–2023) series was a real breakthrough.

Due to its progressiveness, over the past years, the game has often attracted the attention of both the public and the governments of some countries, whose legislation could to some extent limit Electronic Arts or *The Sims 4* in their freedom of representation. One example of such countries is the Russian Federation, as noted in previous chapters, which adopted in 2013 the Anti-propaganda Law,

which prohibited any form of LGBTQIA+ expression to minors (Elder, 2013). This law did not affect the previous *Sims* games in any way (De Graaf, 2014; Lewis, 2014), however, it affected the release of *The Sims 4* in Russia in 2014, when the government wanted to cancel the release of the game initially, explaining the stance that the game contains manifestations of non-traditional sexual relations and orientations. The game was released, but the official Russian Twitter account of the game announced that the game had gotten the 18+ mark and was banned for children (Hing, 2014), as well as all expansions of the game since then. This caused controversy among players, both Russian and the rest of the gaming community and journalists, who did not understand why, for example, *The Sims 3* (EA, 2009) did not fall under the anti-propaganda law, if the gameplay in both games is exactly the same with regards to LGBTQIA+ manifestations (Hing, 2014). It should also be noted that *The Sims 3* still has an age limit of 12+ in Russia, however, in 2022, attempts were already made by Russian officials to ban the game in the country. The developing company EA, regarding the above events, only once in 2014 expressed a sharp criticism of Russian laws and established that the game will not be altered or cut to lower the age limit (Lewis, 2014), which largely caused the gaming community to be divided in opinions and attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ laws in Russia and games from Electronic Arts (BBC News, 2014). Many fans expressed their dissatisfaction on Twitter (BBC News, 2014), which then led to the establishment of this social network as one of the main platforms for deploying controversy both in 2014 after the news of the age rating and in subsequent issues.

The controversy regarding the LGBTQIA+ community in Russia and the gaming industry peaked in February 2022, when EA, in an official statement on their website, released a letter to the players, where they stated that the company was refusing to release *The Sims 4 My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) expansion in Russia, explaining that Russian legislation and the infringement of LGBTQIA+ rights are contrary to the principles that EA and Maxis pursue. In many ways, the decision of the developer was influenced by the fact that this expansion pack contained a storyline with a same-sex couple in the game itself, on the cover and in the trailer, which, according to Electronic Arts, could lead to censorship or a altering the storyline in the Russian version. This decision immediately caused a mixed reaction among game fans (Parrish, 2022), Russian-speaking players and LGBTQIA+ activists, as well as game journalists, while opinions were divided into several sides. However, it is worth noting that all previous add-ons and advertising campaigns have not been changed when released in Russia, for example, the trailer for *The Sims 4 Cats & Dogs* (EA, 2017), contained images of a same-sex couple, which, surprisingly, has not caused any condemnation or problems from the Russian government or the gaming community. Following its announcement of the decision not to release *My Wedding Stories*, no representatives from EA or Maxis ever reached out to the players or LGBTQIA+ community, and the official decision letter did not mention only one person responsible for the decision. However, during the peak of the controversy from 10th to 16th of February 2022 in Twitter, many developers and designers with nicknames like @SimGuru<Name> reposted EA's official statement on their Twitter accounts and also resorted to saying that they are proud of their company that stands by its values. Tweets of EA and Maxis employees attracted great

attention of fans who behaved quite toxic towards the developers, which led to the emergence of another issue within controversy, namely the toxic game community.

After the backlash in social media, EA listened to the fans who accused the company of neglecting Russian simmers, reconsidered their decision and on February 16, 2022, nevertheless announced the release of *My Wedding Stories* on February 23, 2022, worldwide, including the Russian market, without any changes in gameplay or design. Thus, the controversy around *The Sims 4*, the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community and the Russian laws attracted a lot of public attention, where Electronic Arts and Maxis played a significant role as a big network that influenced the emergence and deployment of controversy, and as a link between other actors contributing to this controversial issue. In many ways, EA became a key actor because their decision tied the gaming community and the Russian government together. Another connecting actor was game journalists and writers, who, in turn, became involved in one-way or two-way connections with other figures and actors. For example, one of these figures was The Verge reporter Ash Parrish, who covers business, culture, and communities of video games. In her articles regarding LGBTQIA+ representation in *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014), she often referred to the statements of developers or designers of the game, which helped to identify them as potential actors, which, in turn, led to the discovery of a large network within Electronic Arts and Maxis. However, EA's interactions with other actors within the controversy have been inherently one-sided, given that staff members posting on Twitter have not responded to fans, nor have company representatives commented on social media or the media in general.

4.1.2 Game journalists & writers

It can be assumed that in most of the controversies that arise in our time, journalists, writers, bloggers play an important role, covering ambiguous issues in the media environment and educating many users who, under other circumstances, might not be aware of the unfolding disputes and clashes of interests. Journalists also come forward in many ways as the figures who are able and willing to advocate for change, using their platforms, connections, and position in literary and scientific circles (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005). In the age of digital technologies, writers also have the power to change the opinions of society in a certain direction and raise the issue of the need for reforms in society (Williams & Stroud, 2020). At the same time, journalists are still called upon to remain as impartial as possible, considering that their opinions and narrative can act as a perspective or guidance for society (Jost & Koehler, 2018; Stocking & Gross, 1989). Nevertheless, the choice is up to the latter, which side of the conflict to take, in what vein to analyze the information on the network and what opinion to form about the growing controversy.

The controversy regarding the representation of the queer community and Russian legislation is no exception - this topic was actively discussed by a fairly large number of not only game writers and analysts interested in *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014–2023) series, but also by a wide number of journalists in general. However, despite the need for writers to be impartial, the journalistic community has been divided into several factions based on their personal views on representation, the queer community,

and anti-LGBTQIA+ laws. In a controversy like this one, the stances that the journalists outside of Russian media were taking should be emphasized. From the very beginning, when news about the age limit of *The Sims 4* in Russia was released in 2014, when in fact children under 18 were forbidden to buy or play this game, the majority of journalists took the side of condemning the new Russian law on LGBTQIA+ propaganda (Farid-ul-Haq, 2014). In their articles, writers have repeatedly compared the age limits of the game in other countries, for example, many articles mentioned that in the countries of the European Union children can play *The Sims 4* from the age of 12 (Lewis, 2014; Orland, 2014), and from 13 in USA (Orland, 2014). Along with such comparisons, journalists expressed misunderstanding and condemnation of the law, also in some posts openly calling it homophobic and discriminatory (Farid-ul-Haq, 2014; Orland, 2014). In addition, articles from that period included EA spokesperson Deborah Coster's statements about the company's refusal to change the gameplay in order to comply with Russian laws (Hing, 2014; Lewis, 2014), which made it possible to establish a connection between Electronic Arts and journalists as actors in this issue.

Analyzing the peak of controversy and heated discussions about the release of *My Wedding Stories* expansion pack in Russia, it is necessary to mention how this topic divided the Russian and non-Russian journalistic community in a similar way and affected the media coverage of this issue. Most journalists, covering this topic in Russian, tried to remain impartial, simply stating the facts and avoiding emotionally charged words that could show the personal attitude of the writers to the problem (Atroshchenko, 2022; Mamikonyan, 2022; Sosenkova, 2022; Stavitsky, 2022). However, the articles and posts of a significant part of gaming journalists outside of Russia contained condemnation of discrimination against the Russian queer community. Writers were also calling for justice and support for inclusivity, because LGBTQIA+ representatives in Russia "have long faced harassment and discrimination" (Carpenter, 2022) and it is time to change it. In articles and posts, writers also expressed features of criticism and condemnation of "prejudiced laws" (Rowley, 2022) while saying that the game's characters of the new expansion "would have fallen foul of Russia's anarchic laws" (Chapman, 2022). However, according to observers, these laws, particularly the Anti-propaganda law among minors of 2013, go far beyond ordinary video games, violating the rights of Russian LGBTQIA+ people of free speech and putting their lives at risk (Rowley, 2022). Some journalists also mentioned the big picture regarding this law, claiming increased discrimination and violence towards representatives of non-traditional relationships (Chapman, 2022), so writers through their platforms called on all those who are not indifferent to the fight for the rights of the queer community.

Some journalist actors also chose not to stand aside and openly supported Electronic Arts and Maxis, praising their intention and aspiration to defend their views and beliefs. For example, Njiemoun (2022) believes that the decision to ban *My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) in Russia is "good for Maxis, good for EA, and a huge win for humanity over greed". It also shows the desire of journalists to advocate for change using their platform and expressing their personal opinion, calling on game companies, the audience and all those who care to start fighting discrimination and advocating for the establishment of new rules in the gaming industry that protect the queer community

and make the media environment more inclusive. In this regard, in many online articles one could find links to companies or public organizations dedicated to protecting the queer community and defending their rights to a safe life and representation. Here, the connections of journalists with other actors within controversy began to be noticed, in this case, the analysis of game journalists and writers' stances led to the establishment of links between this group, Human Rights Watch and the European Court of Human Rights (Carpenter, 2022; Riedel, 2022), which the writers referred to when highlighting the problem of representation and infringement of the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. However, such a connection between the figures was one-sided as the journalists in their articles mainly mentioned how these organizations address the Russian government's discrimination against queer representatives, however, no statements by these organization regarding *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) and this controversy were found.

Journalists, while calling for societal change and shifts, also tended to include the stances of the gaming community by quoting messages from Internet users. For the most part, it has made it possible to establish a connection between game writers and fans as actors, mainly through mentioning or quoting twitter threads by journalists in their articles. Such communication can be called two-way, given that through such a peculiar exchange of information, journalists had the opportunity to fully present the news and cover the topic with the help of insider information from fans, who, in turn, were happy to be heard and noticed. In addition, it is very important to note that Russian simmers were generally unable to directly defend their rights and speak out openly about infringement of their rights, fearing for their lives and safety, so they expressed their position through tweets and posts in English. Thus, journalists, by including the position of players, including Russians, in their articles, linked together several sides and their attitude towards controversy, as well as provided a platform where representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community could share their experiences. This is, in many ways, skyrocketed awareness of this issue by other parts of society, which expanded the controversy between the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in video games and Russia.

At the same time, it was also important that in their articles or posts, journalists considered not only the cancellation of the release of the game add-on in Russia due to the anti-propaganda law, but also connected the situation with other precedents regarding the queer community. For example, Orland (2022) also mentions that a previous game *The Sims 3* (EA, 2009) allowed players to have their Sims enter a same-sex relationship and refer to same-sex partners as husbands or wives, which, interestingly, became possible in the game 6 years before same-sex marriages were officially recognized by the US Government. The author also briefly mentioned issues related to *The Sims 4*, namely the fact that the players won in their fight for a new addition that would add customizable pronouns to the game. Approximately 22 thousand fans of the game achieved the release of such an expansion by creating and participating in an online petition on Change.org in May 2021 (Orland, 2022). It is interesting to note that in February 2022, during the controversy, fans also created a petition called "We want *The Sims 4 My Wedding Stories* in Russia", which was signed by more than 10 thousand people. Thus, journalists in their articles linked certain topics that somehow contributed to

the controversy or made it possible to look at the issue from the side of a more complete and broader consideration and analysis.

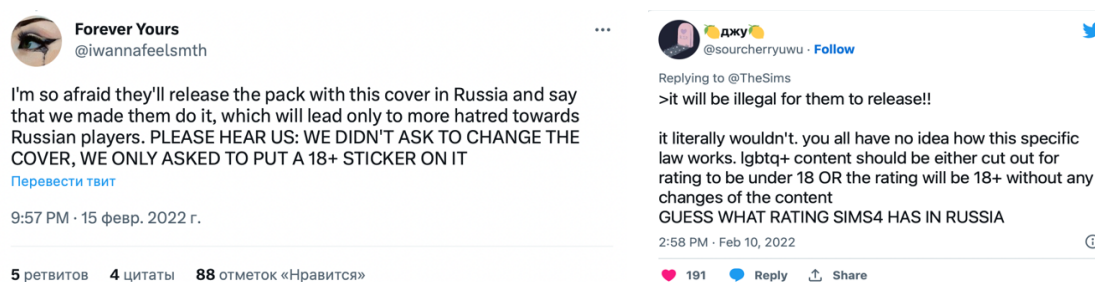
4.1.3 Video games community

During the analysis of the controversy and the stances of the actors, it became noticeable that the community of players and fans stands out quite strongly from other figures, at least because they constitute the target audience for *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014), publishers and developers in Electronic Arts and Maxis and the gaming industry as a whole. As prime consumers and at the center of a gaming culture that has recently shifted more and more towards a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, as cited in Muriel & Crawford, 2018), gamers can influence the success or development of game franchises by expressing their opinions. Through this phenomenon, fans also consciously or unconsciously take part in the creation, construction and modification of media and video content (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). The fan community's participatory culture of recent years and other controversial events continue to show that players are becoming more vocal about the issues that concern them, especially regarding media coverage of issues important to consumers such as representation and diversity (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018). Thus, video games subsequently reflect the problems and trends of modern life (Muriel & Crawford, 2018), and the merit of the gaming community is of no small importance in this.

At the stage of selecting media resources for data collection, Reddit was initially chosen as a central source due to its popularity among gaming community, which would help establish major connections with other actors and because fans could express their opinions anonymously in this social network, not fearing of judgment or persecution. However, during the data collection and the mapping of the actors, it turned out that among the main platforms where the debate unfolded and where the fans exchanged their opinions were *The Sims 4* forum on the official website of Electronic Arts, as well as the social media websites such as Twitter and YouTube. In particular, it was Reddit, the official forum, and online articles that during the mapping step helped to establish Twitter as the main platform for this analysis. Twitter played an important role in fans' attempts to change EA's decision, where Russian-speaking fans posted tweets in English, shedding light on the situation with Russia's anti-propaganda law and providing to the rest of the gaming community first-hand information and their experiences, which subsequently attracted a very large part of the fans from other countries. This allowed the controversy to go beyond the established framework and gain greater media coverage, after which this topic began to be covered in journalistic circles. Many writers also often included individual tweets and threads in their work, which to some extent began to connect several actors within the controversy and beyond. Thus, the main part of the fans condemning the EA decision, especially the Russian-speaking part of the gaming community, was concentrated on Twitter, when, as supporters of the EA decision, users mainly resorted to expressing their opinion on Reddit. As for the official *The Sims 4* forum on the Electronic Arts website, where a significant part of the data was also collected, opinions were almost evenly divided there.

Figure 1

Examples of Russian-speaking fans' tweets aimed for English-speaking users



The video games community, as an actor of controversy, was divided into several groups, whose opinions were sometimes radically different, and it seemed that they would never be able to come to one stance. It is also worth noting that in order to analyze this topic and come to certain conclusions it was precisely those groups' stances that were clearly expressed positively or negatively that were used. Some players, as the discussion unfolded, also changed their minds as new facts or views of other participants in the dispute were exposed, however, there were always at least two opposition parties - players disappointed with the decision of Electronic Arts and Maxis and those who supported developers in canceling the release of *My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) in Russia. There were also groups that, for example, did not clearly express their agreement or disagreement. People paid special attention to the statements of Russian fans, especially LGBTQIA+ people, who immediately began to actively advocate for EA to change its mind, fighting for their rights and the right to representation in particular.

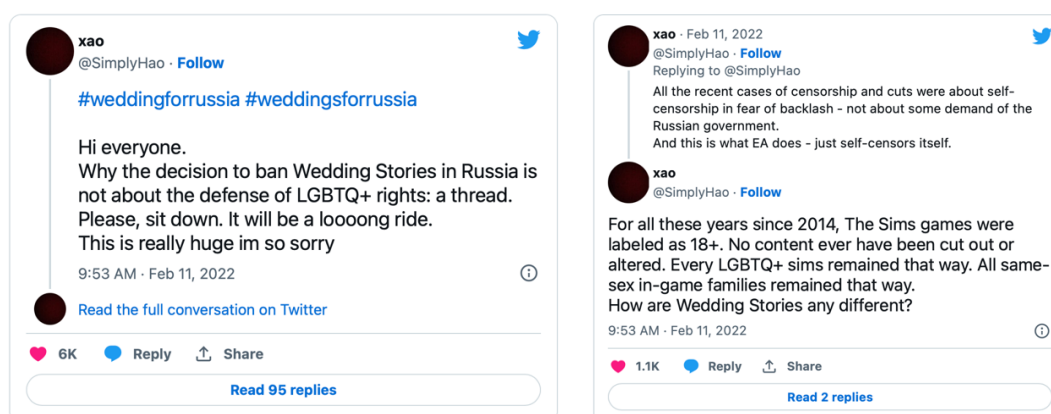
While considering the video game community as an actor, it became noticeable that the group of fans and players who condemned the decision of EA and Maxis not to release the *My Wedding Stories* expansion pack in Russia most vehemently defended their position. According to users, this decision of the companies was nothing more than discrimination against Russian players, especially representatives of the queer community, who cannot openly demonstrate their belonging to non-traditional sexualities, but who could escape into the virtual world, where they were free in their choices and preferences. Users on the official *The Sims 4* forum also expressed sympathy for Russian players who were excluded from the game due to laws and decisions that they cannot even change. Russian-speaking fans, on the other hand, complained that they felt excluded and disrespected, since EA's position was radically different from their actions. The developer company traditionally declared support for the LGBTQIA+ community, however, did nothing to support the Russian part of the fans. According to one of the users, this was a big blow for the players, because the queer community in Russia has been fighting for their rights for many years, and media products like *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) show them that they are not alone, they are accepted and heard.

At the same time, the number of people who supported EA in their decision increased, explaining that it coincides with the main position of the company regarding the LGBTQIA+ community - to support them and share their queer stories. This group advocated, in some way, to

teach the Russian government a lesson and punish society for discrimination against LGBTQIA+ representatives. In addition, several racist statements against the Russians were traced, after which Russian players began to go online to clarify the situation, mostly on Twitter. The thread of the Russian user @SimplyHao deserves special attention. In 37 sub-threads in English, she condemned EA's position and told in more detail that the company could simply give the game a rating of 18+, which to some extent would have prevented the unfolding controversy and heated disputes. The thread gathered a significant number of likes, reposts, and replies, with English-speaking users thanking the user for providing information that helped to “open their eyes to what was really happening”. Subsequently, this tweet in particular was mentioned in many articles and posts by journalists who wrote on this topic. There is also a connection between video games journalists and fans as actors, which also includes references to the Russian government as an actor and its position regarding the issue.

Figure 2

A Twitter thread by a Russian user @SimplyHao that achieved a lot of publicity and was often mentioned by video game journalists



In addition, one more group could be distinguished within the gaming community on the official *The Sims 4* forum - a larger number of users saw the decision of EA as a common PR move that would increase the popularity and presales of the game. In such statements and comments, people suspected that the marketing and PR division of Electronic Arts was behind the controversy, while it was originally going to release the add-on in Russia, but, according to users, used the country with anti-LGBTQIA+ laws as an excuse to increase the hype before the release. With the help of such comments, where the players expressed the opinion that this could simply be a PR stunt, as far as EA did not have legal grounds for its decision (Regan, 2022), it was possible to identify an additional figure within the actor of Electronic Arts and Maxis, namely the marketing department of the mentioned companies.

4.1.4 Russian government

Analyzing the stances of the actors in this controversy, it is worth saying that the Russian government has not openly commented on the issue of the release of *The Sims 4*, its 18+ age limit, or the incident with the EA's refusal to release *My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022). However, as already mentioned in previous chapters, this actor was an important object of controversy by initially creating and enforcing a law prohibiting non-traditional sexual relationships to minors (Human Dignity Trust, 2014; Kochetkov, 2012; Sozayev, 2012). To a certain extent, this was one of the reasons/prerequisites for the controversy that arose around the representation of the LGBTQIA+ communities in *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) in Russia. In addition, the Russian government has been referenced as an actor by other actors such as Electronic Arts, gaming journalists and writers, and more so by the gaming community. The majority of the aforementioned figures, however, have come forward to criticize and condemn the law that discriminates against the queer community. In any case, at the data collection stage, it was found that there were no public comments or statements from Russian government officials, which indicates that this actor did not openly express its opinion on this topic in any way. However, this does not allow us to establish what position the Russian government adheres to, namely, whether it supported any of the decisions of Electronic Arts regarding the non-release and localization of the game in Russia.

4.2. The issues within the controversy

The method of discursive controversy mapping made it possible to analyze the stances of the actors involved in controversy, after which two main issues were revealed, the opinions of the actors about which were divided. Issues, in turn, revealed different subtexts and subgroups, which helped to address the controversy around the representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) in Russia. It is worth noting that the issues found can also be considered in the context of other controversies. However, in this work they were identified considering the specifics of this particular controversy and its features. The issues mentioned in the following subchapters can also be considered in other contexts regarding the gaming community, as well as analyzed from the perspective of other actors and their texts.

Among the issues found, the paper further considers the two, namely the issue of LGBTQIA+ representation and the issue of toxic video game culture. These issues helped to consider the analyzed controversy more fully, and later linked together all the actors and broader topics, namely the LGBTQIA + community, game culture and the media studies as a whole.

4.2.1. The issue of LGBTQIA+ representation

After analyzing the data and the texts of all the actors, one way or another involved in this controversy, it could be noticed that all the figures in the controversy were connected and grouped within the same problem - the problem of "representation". Controversy mapping made it possible to reveal connections between the actors within this issue, which under other circumstances would be hardly noticeable, however, it is worth noting that although the texts of the actors mentioned

representation, they gave it different meaning and importance. In a sense, the actors' texts regarding representation could be divided into several subgroups, the first of which is discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community in video games industry and in the media environment in general. Within this subgroup, the majority of players expressing their opinions on Twitter, especially Russian players, as well as some journalists and writers, together with the developer Electronic Arts, argued that the existing anti-propaganda laws constitute a fact of discrimination and restrictions on the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community to freedom of speech and representation. For comparison, a similar trend can be traced when analyzing the texts of the players in 2014, when the news about 18+ rating for *The Sims 4* in Russia was released - at that time, the majority of users on the official forum of the game, where the main debate unfolded, sharply criticized Russian laws, calling them “silly” and “ridiculous”. At the same time, fans stood up for the developer company because, according to them, the publisher did an excellent job in supporting and representing the queer community, without canceling the release of the game and without changing the internal gameplay, even in those territories with the discriminatory LGBTQIA+ laws, which illustrated the full support of queer representatives by Electronic Arts.

During the peak of controversy in 2022, Twitter became the platform of the most heated debates regarding this issue and where the stance of video games community was most clearly reflected. With its help, it was possible to trace another view on discrimination - Russian fans, who initially believed that the game would be inaccessible to them, considered EA's decision as discrimination against LGBTQIA+ players based on their place of residence or nationality. According to Russian YouTuber JPluiy, the Twitter riot “is due to the fact that *The Sims* (EA, 2000–2023) team, by limiting the sale of new content, is ready to discriminate against the Russian-speaking audience” (Regan, 2022). A similar stance was seen in other online messages, tweets, and posts by many players, where words such as “excluded”, “abandoned”, “discriminated” and “offended” appeared. Players no longer felt like they were part of a larger sim-gaming community by a company that had traditionally supported LGBTQIA+ rights and inclusion (Jackson, 2022). The attitude of the fans who started and shared hashtag #weddingsforrussia asking EA to reconsider was characterized by the fact that players, through the game and virtual reality, feel represented in a game where same-sex relationships and other manifestations of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum are non-replaceable and accepted. Their messages and tweets also contained the narrative that the game provides validation for stigmatized and marginalized people (Utsch, 2017), helping them to escape their problems and plunge into the virtual world, where they can explore themselves with aspects of gender, sexuality, identities, and relationships between personalities as a whole (Ruberg, 2019).

Within this issue, it was also possible to identify another subgroup of users, in whose texts the problems of representing the LGBTQIA+ community and censorship were closely connected, which in many respects also has political overtones. Here, the positions of actors were also divided - some users advocated the forced use of censorship in order for LGBTQIA+ content to be curtailed, which would later mean the release of the game for Russian users, while another side, together with

journalists and the developer company, opposed altering the game in any way. Currently, many characters or games that are connected to the LGBTQIA+ spectrum in one way or another are censored in those countries where the laws differ from the values imposed by Western corporations. This also echoes Paul's (2018) claims that video games contain ideologies of the corporations that create them. These hidden ideologies, in turn, lead consumers to explore political, social, and cultural values (Bogost, 2007; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). The analysis shows that both online users and journalists reasoned about the extent to which queer content should be censored if, according to the players, sexuality other than heteronormative is a normal and well-established fact these days. This also correlates with views that society is shifting towards new patterns and realities (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Regan, 2022), where queerness is now at the center of the agenda (Ruberg, 2019). There is also a dynamic in that people are becoming less geographically bound, which leads to the growth of the online queer community (Drushel, 2017), and it is through video games as a central product of the digital age that people can cope with the ongoing crucial shifts (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). As reality shows, not everyone is ready for such changes yet, so companies that release games containing LGBTQIA+ content are at risk being criticized or involved in controversy (Parshakov et al., 2022), which happened in the case of Electronic Arts. However, in the company's stance, as well as in the texts of other actors, there is disagreement with the need to censor content depicting modern human relationships and manifestations of love. The question, however, remains the same, namely, to what extent LGBTQIA+ content can be cut or altered in accordance with the views of other actors, namely countries where the legislation does not recognize any parts of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

Moreover, one more subgroup in the LGBTQIA+ representation issue becomes visible, namely fans and writers who have raised the problem of mixing politics and censorship and the impact of politics on the localization of video games. In the age of globalization and the active exchange of media content, digital products, especially games, which are now strongly associated with politics (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018), are undergoing changes through localization, considering the different legislations and traditions of certain territories and countries. Chandler and Deming (2011), exploring this topic, argue that the creation of localized versions is a priority for some games due to long-standing cultural differences and clashes, while localization helps to avoid marketing and sales disasters. To do this, development companies traditionally create and maintain legal and development teams and units that carefully review the laws and market features of other countries (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). However, in the stance of many fans there was an assumption that Electronic Arts did not rely on the verification of the local Russian market's laws. This indicates that in the messages of the players there was a call to localize the version of *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) for the Russian audience, however, without changing the game itself, but its package and advertising campaign. In particular, many users and journalists shared a tweet by the already mentioned user @Simplyhao calling for simply tagging *My Wedding Stories* as an 18+ content, as it has been done with all of the previous expansion packs since the game launched in 2014. Considering this factor from a broader perspective, many users concluded that the whole situation with the release of *My Wedding Stories*

(EA, 2022) in Russia is nothing more than a “geo-political mess”, in which the main impact or hit falls on ordinary players and fans. This, however, showed that video games can no longer be called an ordinary product of entertainment (Ruberg, 2019), because they can now contain both ideologies and political features, which can lead to cultural clashes in the gaming community and society as a whole.

4.2.2. *The issue of toxic video game culture*

The positions taken by the actors, as well as the connections between them, revealed another issue within this controversy – the issue of toxic gaming community. The existence and problematic nature of toxic play environments, unfortunately, are not new phenomena – there are a number of works that have extensively studied this topic (Condis, 2018; Consalvo, 2012; Paul, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2018), where, however, toxicity is mainly considered as an umbrella term for hateful, hostile, or disrespectful behavior towards various marginalized groups or subcultures (Wartna, 2023), which entails anger and frustration on the part of the offended (Souza et al., 2021). In recent years, inclusivity, diversity, and the pursuit of gender equality have most often led to online harassment of women in the video game industry, the queer community, and developers who add LGBTQIA+-coded characters or stories to their games. The largest proportion of toxicity in the gaming community, as studies show, occurs in the online games (Fu, 2019; Maher, 2016). However, within the framework of the analysis of the mentioned controversy, fans’ toxic behavior was expressed in other ways, somewhat different from those that are most often encountered nowadays in the gaming industry.

In the case under consideration, the toxicity of gaming culture could be divided into several kinds, the most dangerous and offensive of which was the hostile attitude of the gaming community towards game developers. After EA’s decision not to release *My Wedding Stories* (EA, 2022) in Russia became public, the developers, who also call themselves SimGurus, faced a huge number of vicious and toxic tweets from players who blamed the developers for this situation. It is worth noting that angry tweets were directed at the accounts of designers, content makers and producers of the game, which for the most part had nothing to do with the problem of not releasing the game due to anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation and localization. The sharp negative feedback from the gaming community led the official EA account on Twitter to issue a statement asking the fans to respect the employees and to soften their narrative towards them. This incident was mentioned in many online articles by journalists and gaming bloggers, which strengthened the links between the main actors of controversy, such as the EA publisher, the gaming community, and journalists as such.

The toxic behavior of the gaming community was also clearly expressed in the second subgroup of fans who supported the decision of EA, however, sharply condemning Russian laws, after which their hatred often transferred to the Russian players, which later was expressed in racist statements. For comparison, a similar trend was observed in 2014 on the official forum of the game, where users openly wrote negative comments like “so happy I don’t live there” or “what is wrong with Russia”. In comments like this, as in 2022, fans used to blur the line between the Russian government and players who ended up being bullied online. However, these days the gaming community has started reshaping

boundaries and limits of acceptable behavior – unlike in 2014, Russian gamers are now openly opposing online harassment (Boudreau, 2022). As posts and tweets from the Russian part of the game fans expressing their personal feelings about online bullying increased, users from other countries changed their minds, apologizing to Russian players and redirecting their dissatisfaction directly to Russian legislation, which they believe is guilty of the current controversy. This is where the connection between toxicity and the online environment becomes noticeable, in which users tend to use hurtful and offensive statements that under normal circumstances they would not dare to voice, because on the Internet people are free in their opinions and most often do not care about the feelings of other users (Suler, 2004, as cited in Fu, 2019). In this case, as soon as foreign fans started receiving feedback from Russian players with their personal stories after negative comments, it humanized the gaming community and users softened in their narrative (Fu, 2019). Compared to 2014, last year's controversy also shows that marginalized gamers or those who have been attacked by online toxicity are now more defensive in response, asserting their boundaries and reshaping the gaming community towards a more understanding and hate-free society (Boudreau, 2022).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summarizing the main findings

The main purpose of this work was to review and analyze the recent controversy that has occurred in the online environment with regards to the video game industry. Analysis and results were made possible by the method of discursive controversy mapping, which was chosen due to its convenient and suitable design for dealing with such conflicts of interests. In order to study the controversy regarding LGBTQIA+ representation in video games in Russia, certain steps were taken, namely, data collection, mapping of potential actors, as well as analyzing their stances and identifying subtle trends between them.

In this work, discursive controversy mapping helped to find and establish answers to sub-research questions, namely “*Who are different actors within The Sims 4 controversy in Russia?*” and “*How do different stances taken by actors as a reaction to controversy construct the issue of LGBTQIA+ representation in Russia?*”. Four groups of actors were identified as the main ones: Electronic Arts, fans and gamers, journalists and writers, and the Russian government. Within their groups, the figures were also subdivided into various sides regarding their views on representation and what meaning they attached to it with regards to the unfolding controversy. The positions of the actors could also be defined as sharply positive, sharply negative, neutral, or mixed. There were also groups of actors whose stances could change over time or overlap with the views of other actors.

Gradually, the previous steps led to the found answers to the main research question: “*How do different actors concerning the gaming industry and The Sims 4 explore LGBTQIA+ controversy in Russia?*”. As shown by the analysis of controversy and *The Sims 4* (EA, 2014) as a case study, the author of this paper concludes that each actor involved in the consideration of LGBTQIA+ representation in video games in Russia continues to have different views on this problem, and cultural and political differences between ideologies and societies continue to persist. However, it is the video game industry and the problem of representation that makes it possible to find unexpected connections between seemingly completely different cultures (Kordyaka et al., 2023). These days, many see the problem of representation in Russia as open discrimination against the queer community, especially in the video game industry. Ordinary people continue to try to assert their rights to freedom of speech and representation, which are so important for modern society, and video games offer ways of resistance to help them in this (Ruberg & Philipps, 2018). The analysis of this issue also showed that the gaming community is not just one group of straight white men, but more of a diverse community, which is why it is becoming increasingly important to view it through various social lenses (Boudreau, 2022).

The analysis also makes it possible to state that political disagreements and clashes on a cultural and ideological basis continue to exist to this day in the media industry. In particular video games as a separate and rapidly changing category also encounters manifestations of political phenomena, figures, laws, and attitudes, and it will be interesting to see how political structures can influence the video game industry in the future and whether this will continue to generate controversies involving a large

number of people and actors, both human and non-human. This analysis also made it clear that in recent times, people in those countries where human rights are infringed in one way or another by virtue of adopted and existing laws have taken the path of readiness to defend their rights to freedom of speech and representation. As the analysis showed, if the controversy of 2014 did not show the eagerness of the Russian gaming community to fight for the rights of the queer community, then the events of 2022 are already proof of the desire of Russian players, and players from other countries in general, to fight injustice, gaining more confidence and fearlessness.

Nevertheless, manifestations of toxicity, violent behavior, as well as racism and homophobia continue to persist in human relationships, and the gaming industry is an example of this. However, as the considered controversy around representation in *The Sims 4* in Russia showed, society is moving along the path of changing and pushing forward social norms, rules, and boundaries, and is also beginning to strive for a more inclusive future. Heated disputes around the representation of the queer community in Russia have shown that people are starting to assert their rights and freedoms more and more recently, even in those parts of the world where their opportunities for representation have traditionally been infringed. Controversies like these also prove once again that the video game industry has long been not just leisure and entertainment products, but social constructs that reflect changes in society (Ruberg, 2020). In any way, the controversy discussed here is not the first or the last, the clashes in the public will continue to occur, especially in such a vibrant industry as video games and the media environment in general.

5.2. Limitations and future research

Discursive controversy mapping made it possible to identify actors, analyze their stances and reveal underlying concepts referred to as issues (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres, 2015). However, using this method, the researcher, in a sense, reduced the survey area and the width of the data collection methods. This is explained by discursive controversy mapping implying purposive sampling, and as a result, the researcher may have overlooked additional data that may have shed new light on the problem. Another limitation is that the controversy in question happened not so long ago, and it is highly likely that the consequences of the clash of interests can be seen later. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that despite all the above limitations of the analysis, the work still proved to be possible and revealed certain conclusions and results.

As for suggestions for future research, the collected data could be supplemented with texts from other actors not mentioned in this paper. This includes, for instance, human rights organizations, which are not the focus of this work. In addition, future research may be expanded to include more in-depth analysis of historically emerged cultural and ideological differences that, to some degree, have led to the controversy. Moreover, the data collected for this analysis can be applied to other works with different research questions and hypotheses. Other researchers in their future work can take as a basis the dataset used for this paper, formed from online texts, posts, messages, videos, comments, and on its basis develop an existing topic and go beyond it, or delve into other topics and issues within

controversies where actors and their texts still seemed to be central to the analysis. As one of the possible outcomes, such future studies with this dataset will both increase the validity of other researchers' works and prove the validity and reliability of the results of this work and its main findings. Furthermore, as noted in previous chapters, this work echoes a similar study of born-digital controversy presented by Nowak (2021) using the method of discursive controversy mapping. Therefore, future researchers may take these studies of digital controversies as a template and conduct their own studies based on the methods used in this and the aforementioned work.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Examples of posts and comments used for data collection and mapping

Twitter thread	<i>In the subject of Sims, I see some mentions. There is a lot of nuance on deciding to pull a pack from a territory for whatever reason. However, I hope people understand that it is not a win for anybody. Unfortunately the players are the most affected in that territory. A thread.</i>
Subtwitter thread comment	<i>Just to know. I'm your fan since 2002. I lived for your game. And now you tell me that I'll never play with new content because of country I live and because of president I have? Really? Take revenge on the authorities. Don't drag fans through the mud.</i>
Single tweet	<i>It's not funny. In Russia, I can not arrange a wedding with my girlfriend. And now I can't even by myself in The Sims. #weddingsforrussia</i>
Reddit thread	<p><i>these are just my thoughts</i></p> <p><i>okay so let's just do a little timeline</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>game pack announcement (good community reaction)</i> • <i>sims team announces no wedding pack for russia (initially a good reaction)</i> • <i>hour or so later we have #weddingsforrussia</i> • <i>now the pack is being released in russia with an edited cover</i> <p><i>okay so many other have pointed out that something seems off about the entire thing and i think they're right.</i></p> <p><i>russian simmers brought up that lgbtq+ representation is allowed, just has to be 18+ and that ea is purposely denying russian simmers of said representation</i></p> <p><i>which is fair enough</i></p> <p><i>i was reading through their original letter again and it seems kinda like the sims team is implying that they had been told by russia that the pack couldn't be released in the current state</i></p> <p><i>if ea could simply release it with an 18+ sticker, we know those money lovers would, i think they genuinely had no other option.</i></p>

	<p><i>just my thoughts.</i></p> <p><i>and now it looks like the pack is going to be released in russia, with the couple taken off the pack.</i></p> <p><i>i'm glad they didn't replace dom & cam with a straight couple</i></p> <p><i>but the community is now angry that russia doesn't have the gay representation anymore.</i></p> <p><i>everyone in the situation was stuck but simmers bullying sim gurus was kinda childish</i></p> <p><i>share your thoughts n opinions</i></p> <p><i>just think about it pls <3</i></p>
Subreddit thread comment	<p><i>I guarantee you someone who previously posted #weddingsforrussia will now accuse EA for being greedy and being homophobic for changing the cover. I feel bad for the people in charge of the decision, no matter what they do they can't win.</i></p>
YouTube comment	<p><i>Thanks for the support! The Russian Sims community has been pretty exhausted over the past 6 days, everyone is very tired. To be honest, I have never received so much hate in my entire life (and I am 32) in an attempt to tell how things really are in Russia (I am a polite person, I always treat my interlocutor with respect). I'm very upset and don't want to buy this pack even if it gets released. Everything that is happening now, in my opinion, is a black PR that EA planned from the very beginning. It hurts so much for all the Russian players and for our LGBTQ+ people. Why does everyone hate us so much? But I'm glad that there are people who support us, it warms my soul. Thank you for trying to understand the situation and form your own opinion. I am sending you rays of goodness from Russia! (Sorry for the mistakes, I'm using google translate).</i></p>
Official Forum discussion	<p><i>As much as I think this is a good cause on paper and it seems like the thought is in the right place, I don't think the execution is right at all.. This is a pack about wedding stories. They say they want to support the LGBT community, but by doing this they are actively stopping LGBT Russians from being able to tell their wedding stories. They already have their government stopping it in real life so why can't they at least do it in a game?</i></p>

	<i>If it was the gameplay that was the issue, then fair enough I'd agree with what they're doing. But it's not, the issue is that they don't want to change the cover art.. The cover art does not matter. Myself and I think most others don't care who's on the box. The representation these players could've got from playing the game is far more important than the representation they can get from looking at a picture on a box</i>
Official Forum discussion comment	<i>Why does it always seem like there is a huge controversy whenever EA releases or promotes something? Not just regular game talk but always a huge argument or divide?</i>

Table A2

Overview of game journalist articles used for mapping, which have also revealed further connections to tweets posted by actors

Title	Source of publication	Name of writer	Date published
Russian fans of The Sims can't play My Wedding Stories expansion pack because of anti-gay law	The Verge	Ash Parrish	10 February 2022
EA banned My Wedding Stories in Russia for the wrong reasons	Sims Community	Jovan Jović	12 February 2022
EA won't sell The Sims 4 wedding pack in Russia due to homophobic laws	Polygon	Nicole Carpenter	10 February 2022
"Gay propaganda" law keeps Sims 4 wedding expansion out of Russia	Ars Technica	Kyle Orland	10 February 2022
The Sims 4's Attempt At Allyship Has Excluded Many LGBTQ+ Players	GameSpot	Jessica Howard	11 February 2022
The Sims 4's latest Game Pack is banned in Russia	Sims Community	Jovan Jović	10 February 2022
EA announces it won't sell The Sims 4 My Wedding Stories DLC in Russia	ForTheWin	Moises Taveras	10 February 2022

Anti-Gay Laws Ban Sims 4 Expansion in Russia	GGRcon	Tom Chapman	10 February 2022
New The Sims wedding pack pulled from Russia over anti-LGBTQ+ censorship	PinkNews	Lily Wakefield	10 February 2022
The Newest Sims Expansion Causes Controversy On Twitter	Medium	Jade Hadfield	14 February 2022
#WeddingsForRussia: The Sims 4 Wedding Stories Controversy Explained	Extra Time Media	Antoinette Muller	11 February 2022
Your Sims Lesbians Still Can't Get Married in Russia	Them	Samantha Riedel	10 February 2022
How Russia's LGBT 'Propaganda' Law Turned the Sims Community Against Itself	Vice	Gita Jackson	18 February 2022
Sims 4 Game Pack Featuring Gay Characters Will Be Released in Russia Amid Chaos	Vice	Gita Jackson	16 February 2022
The Sims 4 wedding pack delayed, but will come to Russia after all	Polygon	Nicole Carpenter	16 February 2022
The Sims 4 Wedding Stories Launching in Russia Without LGBT Censorship	GameByte	Oisin Kuhnke	17 February 2022
Sims 4's same-sex wedding stories expansion will come to Russia after all	Ars Technica	Kyle Orland	16 February 2022
The Sims 4's super queer expansion pack to be released 'unchanged' in Russia: 'Love is love!'	PinkNews	Maggie Baska	17 February 2022

The Sims 4 reverses decision over weddings pack release following fan backlash	Digital Spy	Jess Lee	16 February 2022
The Sims 4 Wedding Stories Will Now Launch In Russia, Without LGBT Censorship	TheGamer	Rhiannon Bevan	16 February 2022
Gay weddings for Russia: How The Sims became a battleground for the LGBTQ+ community	The Guardian	Tom Regan	22 February 2022
Скандалное дополнение для The Sims 4 все же выйдет в России (18+) [The scandalous add-on for The Sims 4 will still be released in Russia (18+)]	Player One	Vitaly Belousov	16 February 2022
Russia bans children from playing Sims 4 because of gay relationships	Yahoo! News	Rebecca Lewis	13 May 2014
The Sims 4 rated 'mature' in Russia	BBC News	-	12 May 2014
Russia hangs adults-only rating on The Sims 4	Ars Technica	Kyle Orland	9 May 2014
Russia: Sims game rated 'adults only' over same-sex relationships	PinkNews	Nick Duffy	9 May 2014
Russia Bans Children From 'The Sims 4' Because Gay Relationships Are 'Damaging To Youth'	HuffPost	The Huffington Post UK	13 May 2014
В России The Sims 4 присвоили рейтинг "18+" [In Russia, The Sims 4 was rated "18+"]	3D News	Yuri Shelest	13 May 2014
Россия запретила детям играть в Sims 4 – она	GameWay	-	11 May 2014

“мешает развиваться” [Russia banned children from playing Sims 4 - it "interferes with their development"]			
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Appendix B

Appendix B1: Controversy map including the actors and main publics together with their interactions visualized through linked connections and colors

