THE STRANGE, DIFFICULT HISTORY OF QUEER CODING

Contributed by

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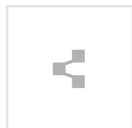
If you've been paying attention for the last couple years (or, really, for all of human history, but we'll get to that), then you're probably aware of a very specific concern among LGBTQ communities. The issue is in regard to the way certain characters are portrayed in film and television and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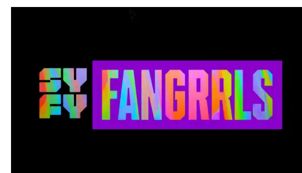
boils down to one of two main complaints:

1. Queerbaiting, a system by which creators depict an obviously queer relationship without acknowledging it.
2. A lovely new fad in which creators claim LGBTQ representation in their work without providing it in any concrete way.

For examples of the former, see pretty much any episode of *Supernatural* featuring both Dean Winchester and Castiel. For the latter, see the recent comments about **Lando Calrissian**, or any of the press for last year's *Beauty and the Beast* and ***Power Rangers***.

Both of these are major issues for the LGBTQ community, as they seek to, whether intentionally or otherwise, capitalize on this marginalized audience without running any of the risk that comes with true representation. They're a way to have



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their cake and eat it too, though queer audiences will likely tell you that the cake is becoming quite stale.

Both issues also stem from a very similar narrative device, one that, due to its prevalence at the core of negative LGBTQ representation, has been maligned of late. I'm speaking, of course, of the term "queer coding."

Much like many such devices, queer coding itself is neither positive nor negative. It has no motivations itself, and in fact can be both a tool used by content creators and one used by audiences in places the creators did not initially intend. The way that tool is used and applied, however, determines its positive or negative effects.

Queer coding, much as the name suggests, refers to a process by which characters in a piece of fictional media seem — or code — queer. This is usually determined by a series of

characteristics that are traditionally associated with queerness, such as more effeminate presentations by male characters or more masculine ones from female characters. These characters seem somehow less than straight, and so we associate those characters with queerness — even if their sexual orientation is never a part of their story.

Queer coding has its roots in a wide variety of places throughout American history, usually situated in the 1950s and '60s, when the U.S. government, along with a number of religious and conservative groups, became extremely concerned with the effect various forms of media were having on the public. It is in this time that the Comics Code Authority arose, banning overt sexuality of any kind from comics, and putting restrictions on the ways in which women could be depicted.

At the same time, depictions of LGBTQ characters were, while not outright banned, heavily discouraged in American cinema. This doesn't mean these characters were eliminated, but they were hidden in subtext. Directors would tell actors to play their characters as gay, even when those characters were not explicitly described as such within the confines of the film itself. Instead, those characters possessed certain characteristics — styles of dress, mannerisms, phrases, etc. — that would make them recognizable to other members of the community while maintaining a guise of straightness to the general public, and, more importantly, to the censors.

Even dangerous LGBTQ tropes rose out of this time period, as the depictions of pulp noir femme fatales and other deadly women rose in popularity. These women were usually written as promiscuous and sexually devious,

both with men and sometimes with women. They were also evil and usually met their end as a result of their sins. While depictions of LGBTQ characters were frowned upon, depictions of them in this specifically negative light were not. You were not endorsing an “alternative lifestyle” if your gay characters always met an untimely demise. Instead, they were merely paying for their poor choices. This trope would eventually give way to what we now refer to as “Bury Your Gays.”

As the years ticked on and the '60s gave way to the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, and, of course, the gay rights movement, these rules began to change. With LGBTQ audiences seen now as a market to be served, depictions of these characters were no longer banned. Unfortunately, many of the harmful tropes established during the previous era had done their damage, and despite the decades in

between, creators still have a hard time removing themselves from what can be considered "traditional" depictions of certain characters.

For this reason, many villains continue to code as gay, either intentionally or by accident. Consider villains from Disney movies, for example, who tend to fall into stereotypes on either side of the dichotomy. Male villains tend to be more effeminate than their hyper-masculine heroic counterparts (think Scar vs. Simba or Hades vs. Hercules), while female villains are devious and corrupting in comparison to their sweet, wholesome heroines (Maleficent, Ursula, the Wicked Stepmother, Mother Gothel, etc.). These villainous depictions are direct holdouts from the days when creators were encouraged to present queer women as corrupting influences and queer men as less than manly.

Remember, when we say "code" we do not necessarily mean that they are meant to *be* gay, or even that they are meant to appear that way. Coding does not need to be an intentional act. It is as much a part of the relationship between the work and the audience as it is part of the relationship between the creator and audience (or even the creator and their work). Our understanding of these characters as queer is equally related to our learned understanding of queer behavior through the media we have consumed as the creators. Devious women are less inhibited, for example, therefore more sexual and, by extension, more likely to enjoy the company of the same sex. Gay men, meanwhile, in our limited, stereotypical understanding of them, are less masculine, therefore we see less masculine men as being gay.

Queer coding, though, does not always work against the LGBTQ community. Many entries in the canon of queer

heroes are such because of this coding. Take, for example, Xena, a character who was not, necessarily, canonically queer, but whose more masculine interests and demeanor, coupled with her general disinterest in the company of men (or anyone, really) and her intensely close relationship with her sidekick Gabrielle, turned her into one of the preeminent queer female heroes of the '90s. Despite not being, inherently, a lesbian, Xena has been claimed by the queer community.

Queer coding can also be, and is perhaps most interesting when it is, entirely neutral. It is, after all, more of an academic tool than anything, an area of study meant to help cultural critics discuss depictions of gender and sexuality in a nuanced way. There are, therefore, whole aspects of academic work that focus not on the debate as to whether queer coding is

good or bad but instead on the aspects of a character that serve to code them as queer outside of simple masculine and feminine binaries. In fact, in her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway discusses queerness as existing outside of that binary entirely. More to the point, it considers that queerness is state of being that exists outside of all binaries: male and female, gay and straight, and, using Haraway’s central example, biological and synthetic.

In the article, Haraway describes this state of being by utilizing the science fiction illustration of the cyborg. Cyborgs, according to Haraway, exist in a liminal space between human and machine. By using Haraway’s argument, you can begin to understand queer coding as being less about masculine vs. feminine and gay vs. straight and more about a specific worldview. They are of both worlds and of neither, and by extension, they see

the truths of each.

Consider, if you will, actual cyborg or android characters in science fiction. A character like Samantha, the artificial intelligence in Spike Jonze's *Her*, or Ava, the humanoid robot in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, or any number of synthetic intelligences throughout the genre. Many, if not all, of these characters have a different, less inhibited way of seeing the world. They exist outside the binary of humanity and, in many ways, outside the binary of human sexuality. Samantha develops relationships with hundreds of people, likely both male and female, while Ava utilizes her feminine appearance to manipulate the men who consider themselves her superior.

Credit: Universal Pictures

Once you begin to understand

queerness, at least narrative queerness, in terms more along the lines of Haraway's argument, depictions of queer coded characters begin to open up. We don't just understand Disney villains and Xena and angels to be queer characters because of their style of dress or their mannerisms, but because of the space they occupy between the lines of society, and the role they play in uncovering the truth of the narrative. Villains have nothing to lose by speaking that truth, by shining a light into the deep dark corners of the world and showing the seedy underbelly of the world for what it is. Neither do some heroes.

Modern depictions of characters who would have been, at other points in history, simply queer coded are now sometimes actually becoming straight-up queer characters as creators listen to their audiences and begin to understand the ways in which they

read queerness in those characters. A perfect recent example of this is in a character like Cheryl Blossom on The CW's *Riverdale*. The character began, as many queer women do, as a villain in the show's first season, but over the course of her time on the air has changed into a character who, due to her position and her characterization, could easily be read as queer. She does, after all, occupy a space in between. She is both part of the core group of Archie and his friends and outside of it. She is both of her family and harboring a deep-seated hatred of it.

When the showrunners decided to introduce some additional queer characters to the series for Season 2, Cheryl became a perfect choice, and her coming-out arc and subsequent relationship with Toni Topaz took her from queer coded to out-and-proud queer.

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Queer coding has a strange and difficult history in the universe of American narrative fiction, but it is important to note that it is not always a negative thing. Queer coded characters have served to offer representation where there otherwise would be none, and has brought with it some of the biggest heroes (and greatest villains) in science fiction and fantasy. As with all things, it comes down to the intention of the creators, for it is in those intentions that queer coding can turn into queerbaiting, or whatever it is we're calling what they did to Lando.