LGBTQ+ gayming community also battles online discrimination

Amy Chen
ARTS REPORTER

Right at the intersection of Church and Wellesley Streets across from the delicious brew of Davids TEA and nestled between food fit for heroes and a bar that adores Absolut Vodka, is the Glad Day Bookshop.

Every other week, a group of geeks and gamers of all stripes gather at the bookstore as if it's their hearth and home.

Samson Romero is one of them. He helped evolve the location into a safe space for people to express their passion for geek and gaming culture and play board games, trading card games and video games. Final Fantasy and World of Warcraft — with a bit of favouritism for the Alliance — are crowd favourites.

LGBTQ+ gamers are at war with mental health issues as they fight against discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation in video games.

Important aspects of positive mental health and wellbeing are social inclusion and freedom from discrimination and violence, and Toronto Gayming has set the bar high by becoming a space where LGBTQ+ gamers can freely be who they are without fear of discrimination.

For example, Toronto Gayming has had booths at Anime North, Fan Expo in order to increase outreach.

"We started doing conventions during World Pride back in 2014," Romero said. "It means a lot, because sometimes people don't use Facebook, social media, or go to the village.

"And that's okay," he said.

Yet outside of Toronto Gayming, there are gamers who get a constant barrage of verbal abuse from online gamers, which hurts their mental health and causes issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and even PTSD.

Young Kim, a McMaster University graduate, enjoys playing strategy role playing games and series like Final Fantasy, Divinity Original Sin and Dota 2. Although some of these games are on the social side, he likes to play alone in order to not encounter discrimination that would affect his mental well-being.

"I like offline games, usually, unless I'm on a team with people I know," Kim said.

Kenny Dawkins, the event and resource assistant at Humber's LGBTQ+ Resource Centre, relates to this.

The beauty of indie games is the rise of a lot of new, creative developers. Before, it was just the trope of saving the princess."

Samson Romero
TORONTO GAYMERS

"I think the most online games I play is like Mario Kart or like Watchdogs. The only difference is that I don't usually go on the chats," they said.

"I don't play super a lot of online, and part of it is also just kinda like to avoid that sort of negativity, too," Dawkins said.

Romero hopes that alternative outreach strategies would reach gamers like Kim and Dawkins. For example, Discord has played an integral role in communication and the organization of LGBTQ+ gamers, and since the outcome of the application are safe places in cyberspace, Romero wants to champion it.

Discord is an application designed for gaming communities and features communication via text and speech.

"There's a group called Rough Trade gamers, which is based on online for Final Fantasy 14, World of Warcraft — it's okay if you're the Horde — or even other online games," Romero said.

"For Final Fantasy 14 specifically, Discord is a lot of their support, because they don't live in big cities," he said. "They come from all over, and not just North America. These are LGBTQ+ gamers in Asia, Russia, Africa, Europe — everywhere."

Kim, a game programmer, wants to develop games where it should not even matter if the player is LGBTQ+ or not.

While Romero is proud of new indie game developers trying to make their mark in the world, he believes in the opposite and sees value in Kim's experience as an LGBTQ+ individual.

This is because when an LGBTQ+ gamer is a person of colour, issues of mental health are amplified. The lack of representation within popular games create low self-esteem and perpetuates a problematic status quo.

"The best way to challenge it is making sure new ideas and voice represents them. An LGBTQ+ gamer may be developing a game, and they don't represent the whole community, but they show a point of view that may have not appeared before," Romero said.

"A cisgender (someone who's gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth) or a trans person show different ideas, and they all put a bit of themselves in there," he said. "The beauty of indie games is the rise of a lot of new, creative developers. Before, it was just the trope of saving the princess."

When Romero was growing up, gaming was not always okay and was seen as childish thing. During high school, he felt that there was no real representation of the LGBTQ+ community at all, and mental health resources were not up to par.

"You know, it was tough, because

Avid gamer Young Kim would rather play offline to avoid discrimination.

back when I was in high school, a long, long time ago, resources were very much focused on mental health support groups. I felt like a medical model where it was like you come out and this is it," he said.

"The creation of communities is important for mental health," Romero said. "It's not just 'you have a problem, l let's diagnose it.' There's more to it for a holistic model."

Humber offers such a holistic model with counselling services, to which every student has access, Dawkins said.

"We also have spaces that are intended for diverse students," they said.

"So, we have the LGBTQ+ Resource Centre, we have BASE, which is a black success program run by Student Life and we have all these separate groups and spaces that these diverse students are able to go to and like sort of have that support in their communities," Dawkins said.

Kim, for example, wants to develop games where the sexuality and gender of the player should not matter, as well as avoid confronting issues of misogyny and homophobia.

"If you're female sounding or even slightly effeminate, you're called two things that are classified as negative. You're called a girl and gay, which are not bad things, but we say it's because it's not masculine enough," Romero said.

"It's toxic masculinity when we reinforce patriarchy, white supremacy and ableism," he said. "Masculinity and femininity are very fluid and are not negative or positive. Living in a patriarchal society, we just put them that way."

Romero advises LGBTQ+ gamers of all spaces that challenging assumptions and questioning behaviours that affect mental health are all right, especially when LGBTQ+ youth are committing suicide due to mental health issues that stem from a lack of community and a sense of belonging.

"Creating another space, being resistance, being political is hard," he said. "It's scary, because it is. No one wants to do it, but you have to sometimes. You have to when push comes to shove," Romero said.

Doc explores the shades of prejudice in racialized communities

Frederique Ndatirwa
NEWS REPORTER

A Canadian filmmaker explored the nuances of skin colour and the effects it has within racialized communities around the world.

The documentary Shadeism: Digging Deeper by Nayani Thiyagarajah looks at shadeism, or colourism. She defined it as "a form of mistreatment or favouritism within a community of colonized people of colour based on their skin tones."

Thiyagarajah sat down and talked with students in an event collaboration with Humber's L Space gallery and the Black Academic Success and Engagement (BASE) at Humber's Lakeshore campus on March 28.

"It is important to have people of colour in institutions who create the dialogue that our communities really need," she said. "We need to keep having these conversations within our communities."

The 58-minute documentary released in 2015 was screened to an audience of about 20 people, who also had the chance to engage with Thiyagarajah about the unique stories of the different women portrayed in her work and the effects it had on their own lives as people of colour.

The event provided students at BASE, formerly known as The Bridge, the opportunity to engage on the topic of shadeism within the coloured community.

"The event was really eye-opening and it just answered a lot of questions that I had about the difference between racism and shadeism and how people in the same community, being people of colour can actually be discriminatory towards each other," said Zion Olubummo, a second-year University of Guelph-Humber media student.

She said there is a need to understand that everyone has different ex-

periences and despite being people of colour, different shades still mean different things in the society.

"Our different experiences provide us with different spaces where we are able to express achievement and different things such as grief, and should learn to respect each other's spaces while making sure that shadeism is being consciously eradicated," Olubummo said.

The thought provoking documentary explored women of colour and their lives as products of standards of beauty that were establish through colonial practices. The students present were left with hunger to continue to speak against colonial ideals of beauty still found within their communities.

"Shadeism is not a part of our mainstream conversation and it has made it difficult for us to have substantial societal change," Thiyagarajah said. "We need to be able to have these very difficult conversations and

Documentary filmmaker Nayani Thiyagarajah talks to Humber students.

start to have spaces of solidarity."

The film premiered in Nigeria and Brazil and has been screened in schools and institutions across Canada. Thiyagarajah hopes the documentary will be available on Vimeo later this spring for public viewing in North America.