



Lesbians / WLW

Best practice guidelines

Content warning

Homophobia is referenced.

Definitions

Lesbians are usually women who experience romantic, physical, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to other women. It is most commonly used by women who exclusively feel attraction to other women; however, the term is also frequently used and claimed by bisexual, pansexual, and queer women and non-binary individuals who feel attracted to women.

Gay can describe a person of any gender who experiences romantic, physical, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to people of the same gender. A partnership between people of the same gender can also be referred to as gay, regardless of the actual orientation of the people within that relationship.

'**WLW**' stands for '**women (who) love women**' or '**women loving women**'. It's a useful term to refer to women who are attracted to women specifically, whether exclusively or otherwise. WLW can include lesbians and gay women, as well as bisexual, pansexual, and otherwise queer women.

Language

Although 'gay' can be used to specifically describe individuals who are attracted to the same gender, it is also used by some people in the LGBTQ+ community as an umbrella term for all non-straight people. This is similar to the word '**queer**'. Although some communities and cultures have reclaimed the terms 'gay' and 'queer', they have both previously been used as a homophobic insult, synonymous with 'bad'.

In some cultures, 'gay' refers to a culture, an identity, a fashion choice, and/or a political point of view, not just a romantic or sexual attraction. For example, in Mexico and Egypt, the word 'gay' is still associated with flamboyance, effeminacy, sexual deviancy, AIDs, pedophilia, cowardice, and being a social outcast.



Because the connotations of terminology differ from place to place, consultation is necessary when localising texts that refer to gay or homosexual men, or the queer community more broadly.

Representation in media

Stereotypes and tokenism

There are many **stereotypes** surrounding women who love women that you must be mindful of when creating WLW characters. Perpetuating harmful stereotypes can be reductive and reinforce the idea that all lesbians or WLW must be or act a certain way.

Some WLW may want to create characters that lean into existing stereotypes—and that's okay! Sometimes stereotypes become stereotypes for a reason. But if you are not a lesbian or queer woman, you should not assume this is okay for you to do.

Creating multifaceted characters that do not adhere to stereotypes is one way to avoid **tokenistic** representation. Tokenism refers to the act of inserting diverse characters into media for the sake of seeming inclusive or 'ticking the box' without actually putting in the effort required to make these representations meaningful and authentic.

Some suggestions for including authentic representations of WLW characters include:

- Give WLW characters a **more diverse range of traits and aspirations than just their sexuality**, conveying them as complex human beings just like anyone else.
- Give **WLW writers and creators** the chance to portray their own feelings and experiences with the WLW characters in your game.
- **Have more than one WLW character** to reflect the diversity amongst women who love women. Ideally, this will apply to both playable characters and NPCs.
- Be conscious of existing **stereotypes** (even those you might see as positive) about WLW and whether you are perpetuating them or letting them go unaddressed in your game.
- **Consult WLW** on your depictions (and compensate them for their time).
- Be careful about **perpetuating harmful stereotypes about a certain marginalised people or culture** being homophobic, bigoted, or ignorant; consider getting someone who also exists at the intersection of those identities to write or look over your writing.



- Make WLW characters **consequential to the story**, rather than superficial bonus content or tokenism designed purely to appease queer players—particularly in the case of romance routes.

Avoid

- Insinuating that sexuality is a choice
- Insinuating that sexuality can be ‘corrected’ or ‘fixed’, or that it needs to be
- Depicting WLW in stereotypical and one-dimensional ways
- Killing all of your queer characters (see: Bury Your Gays trope)

WLW are commonly represented in media in fetishised ways. These representations are often directed towards a straight cis male audience, rather than acting as genuine or authentic representation of lesbians or WLW. Such portrayals can be offensive to both straight and queer women, as they present women as purely sexual objects and present lesbian relationships as being sexual interactions that exist solely for the pleasure of others, rather than the individuals in the relationship itself.

In reality, relationships between women can be purely sexual, and any individual—regardless of gender—could choose to perform sex acts for the enjoyment of a onlooker. While these practices are completely acceptable, depicting these interactions as the ‘norm’ for WLW is reductive and dangerous. Overall, media needs to show the multifaceted ways that WLW participate in romantic and sexual relationships and, until this occurs, it’s important that individual pieces of media avoid perpetuating oversimplified and harmful stereotypes.

Queerbaiting and retconning

Queerbaiting is a term that first appeared on the Internet in the 2010s to describe a marketing technique in which a same-gender romance or other queer representation is **hinted at but not made explicit** by the creators of a text. This is technique is used to draw in a queer or ally audience without explicitly representing or supporting queer people, or alienating a homophobic/transphobic audience.

Creators should avoid queerbaiting and instead make the choice to explicitly show their intent and support for queer representation. This means queer representation within a text should be undeniable and unavoidable. Note that this doesn’t mean queer characters need to engage in sexual or romantic pursuits; queer identities manifest in a range of ways in a person’s day-to-day life. Consultancy with members of the queer community can assist with specific storylines for a project.



Similar to queerbaiting, **retconning** refers to the act of creators retroactively making claims about their creations—in this case, we refer explicitly to issues of creators claiming after-the-fact that the characters in a text are queer (or have another non-normative identity). Generally the creator claims the character always had that identity, despite it not being made canon in the original text. The character's identity is often revealed in supplementary material with the creator, like interviews or social media posts. A well-known example of retconning MLM characters is Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* series.

Lesbian/WLW romance options

Queer romance options in games can allow players to feel represented in the content they consume or engage in lived experiences unlike their own, while simultaneously increasing narrative and character depth.

Here are some tips for writing WLW player characters and romance options:

- Avoid implying that a female player-character will or should have relationships with men, so the player may play their character as a lesbian if they wish.
- Include references to lesbian/WLW identities in **unavoidable branching dialogue options** so that players can't miss them.
- Use **visual clues, items, and backstory** to reveal more about characters' lesbian/WLW identities. Consultation with lesbians or WLW can help you to find queer-coded objects that suit your specific project.
- Avoid **playersexuality** where possible, in favour of more explicit representation options.
- Avoid immediately and explicitly suggesting a character's sexuality, such as 'Hi, I'm ____ and I love women'. Aim to create realistic dialogue and 'reveal' information about a character in a believable way.
- Have female romance options with **explicit sexualities**. For example, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, a male character will not be able to pursue a romance with Sera because she is only attracted to women, making her an explicitly lesbian character.

Violence and death

Representation of lesbians or lesbian couples in popular media have often been problematically linked to storylines about death and/or traumatic experiences. It is often used for shock value or to stir empathy in



a heterosexual audience, and it can be seen as particularly tragic when queer characters are hurt or die because they are already fighting and surviving the oppression of homophobia.

Sometimes death of a queer character is linked to homophobia but often characters are blocked from experiencing happy endings for an array of reasons otherwise unrelated to their sexuality. When gay characters die in media or are otherwise blocked from having a happy ending, this trend is referred to as the 'Bury Your Gays' trope.

The prevalence of the 'Bury Your Gays' trope sparked a backlash against this pattern, and the use of the trope seems to be decreasing as a result of a promise made by a number of creators to reverse this trend (known as The Lexa Pledge)—but it still remains an issue.

Consider your queer audience when you write storylines where lesbian/WLW characters suffer or die.

- Is it reminiscent of the homophobia they likely face day to day, and therefore a **potential trigger of trauma**? Is a **trigger warning or content warning** necessary?
- Is the aim of your game to provide **escapism or catharsis** for your audience, and would your portrayal of violence towards lesbian or WLW characters undermine this for queer players?
- If there is suffering of lesbian or WLW characters in your game—especially if it is homophobic—consider the impact of a **hopeful** ending or resolution for those characters as opposed to a **tragic** one.

There is no one perfect way to represent women who love women in games or other media, as they are diverse humans with different individual experiences. Just remember to consider your portrayal's impact on players carefully, consult with queer people, and uplift queer writers to tell their own stories where possible.

Creating safe spaces

Do not make assumptions about someone's sexuality. For example:

- Don't assume your married female coworker has a husband.
- Don't assume that having a husband automatically means a female coworker is straight.
- Don't assume that having a wife automatically means a female coworker is a lesbian.



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Ensure **accountability, consequences, and apologies** for homophobic comments, writing, and actions committed by staff, streamers, developers, or anyone in your gaming community.

Do not allow 'gay', 'queer', or homophobic slurs to be used as insults in physical and online spaces.

Make sure any employee benefits for couples also apply to same-gender couples.

Resources

LGBT Fans Deserve Better: The Lexa Pledge

<https://lgbtfansdeservebetter.com/pledge/>

Information about The Lexa Pledge, what it is, and why people are signing up for it.

Represent Me: Avoiding the Avoidable

<https://representme.charity/projects/intersectional/blog/avoiding-the-avoidable>

Article about playersexuality, why it's used, and how it can be harmful to bisexual representation.

TV Tropes: Bury Your Gays

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>

Information about the 'Bury Your Gays' trope common in media.

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