CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

M.A. Program in Gender Studies

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Pushing the game to its limits: trans literacies in video games

Diploma Thesis

Prague 2024

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Prague, 2023   Alex Andriushchenko, student ID 52386914

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way in which trans players of offline single-player video games interpret confirmed transgender characters and the characters with ambiguous gender identities, that might be interpreted on the trans spectrum by players and/or game developers. More specifically, the research examines how players engage with ludic elements related to those characters in conjunction with the game text, which includes dialogue and events depicted in cinematic cut scenes. Additionally, transmedia development and depictions of the characters in question might be analyzed. Theoretically, the study is grounded in and contributes to the nascent field of Queer Game Studies. It draws on the works of Adrienne Shaw, Alexander Galloway, and Jack Halberstam on game culture and queerness in games, such as queer representation, queer subversive readings of existing work, and countergaming, as well as Judith Butler's work on identity. Empirically, the research explores two existing panels with transgender developers, conducts semi-structured on-and offline interviews with transgender players of various ages, as well as autoethnography.

Key words: countergaming, transgender, video games, ludology

Introduction

Video games are one of the most popular mediums in the ever-changing media landscape that many people across the globe enjoy and participate in. No more are they a fleeting media of entertainment: video games are becoming a larger cultural phenomenon instead of the niche hobby it is still known as. They have captured many more people than could have been anticipated when they emerged in the 1980s. Video games, as Muriel and Crawford argue, are culture, and as any manifestation of culture, they have become an increasingly popular object of study for many academics (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 2). They are studied within the field of Game Studies, which is interested in the ways in which players and games interact, as well as how immersion is formed. More recently, the field of Queer Game Studies has emerged, that examines games through a critical feminist and queer lens. It questions how race, gender, sexuality, and ability change the way in which a player interacts with a game, what stereotypes games might reproduce or how they subvert them. Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg introduce Queer Game Studies as

> "open[ing] up possibilities for queer game play that is not about finding the "real" meaning of a game text, but playing between the lines with queer reading tactics. It considers gaming counterpublics as a space for reimagining whom games are for and who is for games [...] [Q]ueer game studies refers not so much to the specific topic of queerness in games as to the application of a set of critical tools derived from queer theory and queer thinking" (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, 10-12).

These tools include thinking about gender critically as a performance and/or a construct, which is a key focus of Judith Butler's (1989) work; assessing the assemblage which a character and its player become through Donna Haraway's (2010) concept of a cyborg as well as tackling the question of representation, which Shaw (2017) has extensively worked on. This begins to suggest that video games are not just solely a text or solely an experience; they are, as Chang (2018) proposes, "a constellation of textual, narrative, digital, mechanical, and cultural practices" (366), which allows them to be studied from multiple angles.

The popularity of video games as a product and as an object of study has risen since the 1980s as is evident in the number of annual video game sales and a growing body of scientific work dedicated to the medium. Neither its predicted decline nor its death have occurred, nor are they attractive only for a secluded minority. Rather, the video gaming

field includes people of different backgrounds, genders, sexualities, and classes. Studies and reports repeatedly show that cisgender males are no longer the biggest consumers of video games and some wonder whether they ever were. While the numbers in the surveys carried out by marketing companies, development teams, or individual researchers vary from year to year and are mostly US-centric, but generally they show that the percentage of those identifying as men and women who play games is almost evenly split around the world (IDGA 2019). These reports make clearly visible that the once male-dominated market presently is much more diverse. However, the data is also incomplete. While these reports show, for example, that professionals are most likely to play games and even give a number of queer people who are video game consumers, they do not seem to pay attention to transgender players. It is transgender players and their gaming practices and literacies that are the focal point of this thesis. More specifically, the research examines the ways in which transgender players can subvert video games through encoding characters as trans, especially as their experiences do not seem to be reflected by existing data. Since there are many potential reasons for the biases of existing data, as well as the misconception of the market audience, it is instructive to briefly (re)consider the history of video games and the formation of what is colloquially understood as a "gamer".

A brief history of video games and the myth of the cis-male gamer

Arcade machines, which were stand-alone gaming systems that required inserting quarters to play, predated video games as we know them now. In the era of Atari, named after the most popular arcade machine brand in the 1970s-80s, games were addressed to everyone as far as marketing was concerned. The market was wide: people of all genders and ages played it, and the genres ranged from shooters to platformers and Role-Playing Games (RPGs). However, 1983 became a turning point for the industry: an oversaturated console market, the loss of publishing control, and the abundance of fake game cartridges led to the loss of consumer trust while a rising competition with the emerging market of home computers led to a large-scale recession and bankruptcy of several large gaming companies. Dan Gutman, the founder of Video Games Player magazine, wrote in 1987, "Video games were officially dead and computers were hot" (Gutman, 1987, n.p.).

To revive the industry of video games and make them a desirable product, Nintendo, a Japanese video gaming company whose games were previously installed on the Atari consoles, decided to rebrand video games as a toy specifically for children,

mostly focusing on young boys as a player demographic. They also redesigned the consoles to look less like the familiar arcade machine and more like other devices one could find at home, supposedly to minimize negative associations with the arcades and rebuild the trust of consumers. Their marketing materials featured boys, and the game protagonists were designed to appeal to this demographic, which resulted in the public perception of gaming as an activity exclusive to boys and boyhood (Onion et al, 2021). While this marketing strategy might have revived the video game market from becoming obsolete, at the same time it contributed to the perception of video games as a male activity, with girls often being discouraged from playing what was seen as a typical boyish pastime and something that only "boys do".

One of the consequences of the 1983 video game crash and the subsequent Nintendo marketing that then was adopted by other emerging console manufacturers was that video games were perceived as a form of frivolous entertainment that solely boys and men own (Gutman, 1987; Shaw et al, 2015). This has led not only to video games being produced and written with the male audience in mind, but also to inter-player policing on who could play video games and what kind of video games were "real", as evident by what came to be known as GamerGate.

In 2014, GamerGate was an infamous event in the gaming community that involved feminist video game critics and developers and their mostly cisgender and heterosexual male opponents who were against the "politization" of video games. GamerGate started as backlash against the video game developer and journalist Zoe Quinn. It was started by their ex-boyfriend after Quinn published *Depression Quest*, an autobiographical game not only about depression but also dealing with the aftermath of an abusive relationship in which they found themself. Eron Gjoni, Quinn's ex-boyfriend made a series of blogposts suggesting that Quinn had had intimate relationships with other journalists, producers, and video game industry figures in order to boost the ratings of the game. What started as a personal attack against Quinn, based on false accusations, soon grew into a vocal online campaign directed against women working in the industry, "woke" games, the politics in games, and game reviewers and academics. They were criticized for not being objective when writing about bigotry or highlighting the lack of representation in games (Evans and Janish 2015, 125-150). While the so called "GamerGaters" claimed that they were rallying for objectivity in video game journalism, not only was their rhetoric speaking against that, their methods of supporting this point were also dangerous. They included doxing (publicly disclosing the address of a figure

who the aggressor wants to intimidate), issuing multiple threats ranging from sexual assault to murder, as well as smear campaigns and daily online harassment. They resulted in notable cases of three women having to escape their homes after their addresses had been published, multiple academics and video game journalists of marginalized identities quitting their work, and a highly publicized cancellation of a speech at Utah University by Anita Sarkesaan, an acclaimed feminist media critic, about her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series. While Sarkesaan's series was a massive success on Kickstarter, hitting their funding goal and more, as well as generating interest in academia and the gaming sphere, after the organisers received threats of a terrorist attack the event was cancelled. One of the aggressors associated with GamerGate said that he was inspired by the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal, an antifeminist shooting, to attempt his own bombing (CTVNews.ca, 2015).

GamerGate's decisive impact cannot be overstated. The event illuminated not only the contention of who is allowed in gaming space, but also who counts as a "gamer", and whose existence and voices get continuously erased. GamerGate made it clear that the male gamer stereotype does not hold up, and that a part of the self-proclaimed gamers could not handle that reality. The aftermath of GamerGate problematized the category of "gamer" and the idea of a "gaming community" as one single unit, making abundantly clear that players were no longer a homogeneous community (Evans and Janish 2015, Nielsen 2020).

GamerGate is also relevant for this study in a way that is less discussed: women were not the only victims of numerous verbal attacks and threats of physical harm. GamerGaters effectively lashed out at everyone whom they perceived as or claimed to be a feminist on the basis of a strict gender binary. As Evans and Janish put it, "[E]ither one is a true gamer (male, masculine, heterosexual), or one is a feminist woman trying to be a gamer" (Evans and Janish 2015, 126-127). While feminist women were the only legible identity for GamerGaters within a binary frame, the possibility of other complex, conflicting and intersecting identities was not even discussed or imagined in gaming spaces. Feminist women came to stand in for queerness in games, while queer and trans players were erased. GamerGaters attacked with particular vitriol those opposing them who pointed out the broadening and complex demographic of players: not only women but also queer men, People Of Colour, and transgender players. GamerGaters insisted on maintaining the image of what a "gamer" was as understood in their childhood to maintain

the sense of security: a white, cisgender, masculine man. They were, as game critic Leigh Alexander proposes, afraid that the games would be "taken away" from them.

> "This is hard for people who've drank the kool aid about how their identity depends on the aging cultural signposts of a rapidly-evolving, increasingly broad and complex medium. It's hard for them to hear they don't own anything, anymore, that they aren't the world's most special-est consumer demographic, that they have to share (video games)" (Alexander 2014, n.p).

GameGaters were afraid that their fun was taken away. But if GamerGaters had to "share" video games, which never belonged solely to this group to begin with, who are they sharing with?

The absent presence of transgender players

An emerging interest in transgender video game players, suggests that transgender people are a part of the player and developer demographic, although this fact, as well as their skills and the validity of their interest remain contested and not represented in the survey data (IGDA 2022; Nielsen 2020; The New York Times 2023). The data presented in most surveys, be it from within gaming spaces or marketing agencies, showcases the breakdown of the player demographic according to categories of race, gender, and age (Forbes 2021). While race and age are presented more complexly and are frequently determined on the basis of self-identification, gender is treated as a seemingly self-evident cis and binary category. Most surveys have only two categories, men and women, which do not provide any insight about binary transgender players as they are rendered invisible within the binary categories that describe them, and completely erase the experience and existence of nonbinary players. These surveys rely on an implicit assumption that men and women who participated in those surveys are either cis or their potential transness neither matters nor influences the results. This is, I argue, a type of erasure of transgender players.

According to Lima, "Videogames are simultaneously a site of consensus – with defined (yet implicit) rules about who can/should play, which forms of bodies are/should be represented – and a site of dissensus, as 'the police order' expectations are often challenged by the 'without part' who wish to create a welcoming space for themselves within videogames culture" (Lima 2017, 76). The rules of who can/should play and who can/should be represented are dictated by and for cis white men while also insisting that this policing is neither political nor silencing (77).

This is particularly interesting because while there is a claim that video games have nothing to do with reality, and exist purely for entertainment, and queer and transgender players are not considered an important part of the community, homophobia and transphobia in game writing actually do indicate that developers acknowledge queer people and their struggle – but in ways that are derogatory and seemingly affirming cis male identity. Homophobia and transphobia are portrayed as a joke. The first transgender character was introduced in video games in 1987 in *Leisure Suit Larry*. The character Shablee is a Black woman who is revealed to be transgender. When it is revealed that Shablee is not cis, the player character (PC) spits upon the ground in disgust and then it is implied that Shablee sexually assaults him (LGBTQ Video Game Archive 2015). Another example of transphobia in video games that is cast as humour is *Cyberpunk 2077* by Projekt Red. Not only are transgender people in the game reduced to the type of genitalia a PC can have, but the developers themselves have publicly posted many transphobic tweets, showing awareness of transgender people and trans players existing but not showing any respect (Antonelli 2018). Marketing departments of video game developing companies or publishers know that openly condemning the reactions of their right-wing fans puts them at risk of losing money and becoming a target for them to attack. According to Polygon, "the hard costs of media controversy can run into seven figures, as crisis management companies are called in, expensive monitoring software is deployed, and staff are required to respond to social media messages and online message boards" (Petit 2020, n.p).

I argue that the fact that queer players are often not included as a category in the marketing analysis of the data stems from the fear of alienating the "core audience" that many executives still see in the stereotypical way. If surveys do not show transgender players as a potential market or active audience, there is a plausible deniability that they do not need to be included in video gaming stories, development, and community engagement.

Up to the time of writing, the only survey on Queer players that was available and also highly quoted was the survey of their gaming preferences done by Nielsen Games (2020), the results of which I will be briefly discuss below. This survey aimed to showcase gaming preferences of LGBTQ+ Americans, which included the answers of 2000 Americans self-identifying as LGBTQ over the age of 13 referring to simulation games, which Nielsen does not further define. According to the survey, those identifying as LGBTQ+ gamers played a variety of video game genres, from fighting games to RPGs and simulators, but the survey highlights the popularity of simulation games. Interestingly, the

survey does not define simulation games, which complicates the data since games that radically differ from each other can be conflated within the same genre. Throughout the survey the term "gamer" was used to describe the participants, which I will return to. Using the acronym LGBTQ+ requires further scrutiny.

Nielsen found that of the 2000 survey participants, 10% identified as LGBTQ+. Of these participants, 40% identified as either gay or lesbian, 50% reported to be bisexual, and 10% "identified as transgender or nonbinary." While it is remarkable that the survey includes trans people, it is not without flaws since the way in which the data is presented obfuscates the complexity of transgender identities and most likely unintentionally erases the experiences of many transgender players by presenting those identities both as rigid categories and as separate from sexuality.

First, the use of the term "gamer" is problematic since not everyone who plays games identifies as a gamer. Women tend to identify less as gamers and so do many queer players. Muriel and Crawford's (2018) research on video games as part of larger culture delves into the contentiousness of the label. Their participants refer not only to the stereotypes of who is and is not a gamer and who "counts" as one based on skill or the amount of time spent, but also name GamerGate as a contributing factor of the reluctance or refusal to adopt this label. As they point out,

> "The gamer figure is often associated, both literally and metaphorically, with adolescence and immaturity. This narrow representation of adolescence here shows the adolescent as a problematic, foolish, and lazy individual who does not 'care about personal hygiene' (Zelda). The hardcore-subcultural type of gamer is then linked to the video game as an object of consumption and, moreover, to particularly aggressive consumption practices. Hence, the hardcore gamer is often linked to immature and impulsive behaviours." (Muriel and Crawford 2018, 153)

The stereotypical image of an immature 30-something White man in sweatpants who lives alone or with his parents is shaped in part by GamerGate and the image of the type of people who participated in it. By using the term gamer, Nielson might have alienated a significant number of LGBTQ+ players they intended to include. Not everyone who plays video games is a gamer. The choice of Nielson to use the category is peculiar but can be explained not only by a colloquial use of the word (i.e. a gamer is anyone who plays games), but also by its use as a marketing tool to establish commonality.

Second, the way in which the gender and sexuality categories are presented demonstrates a simplistic and binary view of identity. A gamer can be only a lesbian *or* transgender according to the structure of the survey, but this means simplifying intersecting identities: players who are both lesbian and transgender, intersex players who have a complicated relationship with the concept of cis gender, nonbinary people, some of whom do consider themselves to be trans, for example, have no place to specify their identity in this survey. Conflating the categories of gender and sexuality, which can indeed influence each other and be connected but also can be conceived of as separate categories, is problematic.

Third, as can be seen from the data breakdown of game genres that LGBTQ+ gamers are interested in, we can see the same rigidity that is present in the gender binary: The survey draws attention to simulation games as LGBTQ+ players are considered the largest market for them, but I would like to point out that many of the games included cannot be easily classified, and all are focused on high budget triple A games from leading companies like Bioware or Fromsoft. A search of the term on Steam, a large online store for PC games, shows that simulation game as a category is assigned to very diverse games like *Formula 1*, which is a racing sim, *Coffee Talk*, which is a graphic novel type game with some dialogue and action choice options, and *Hades*, which is a rogue-like action game with dating sim elements in which the main character dies repeatedly to progress in the game. These three games could not be more different from each other: their gameplay, mechanics, and potential audience are impossible to compare. Yet, the survey presents them as one generic category, which, it suggests, is liked by the majority of LGBTQ+ participants.

What the structure of the data aims towards is a clear and easy outline of LGBTQ+ gamers as a market. As long as LGBTQ+ gamers are an easily identifiable category with clear identification markers and appear to invest more time and money into gaming of "simulation games" than their straight counterparts as the survey shows, they are considered a clearly defined untapped consumer group to which it is profitable to pander. As long as this group of LGBTQ+ gamers is comprehensible, developers can use formulas to create seemingly considerate inclusion – albeit without taking too many risks of alienating their cisheterosexual player base. This is supported by the lengthy description of the buying power of LGBTQ+ gamers as a group, stating that they both buy and play more games than their cisheterosexual counterparts.

It is no surprise that such stereotypical or reductionist perception of queer players and games appears to have created resistance, especially from transgender players, who often reject the gamer label and might reject the characters they are given as representation (Shaw 2017).

Anna Anthropy (2016), a video game critic, historian, and developer makes a striking claim in her talk "The Secret History Of Indie Games", drawing on her experience as a developer and a trans player: transgender women are the creators and players without whom indie games as a whole would not be able to exist in the form they do today. While their integral role in founding video games is forgotten or ignored, they themselves are pushed out of gaming spaces. She suggests that rather than arguing for more representation within triple A games, we need to pay attention to how transgender players create spaces for themselves *within* those games and create the games they want to see. It does not mean that the players want to *play* those games themselves, more so they want these games to *exist*. This is the subject that I will explore in this thesis around three key research questions: How do transgender players interact with and decode games? What kind of games are they drawn to? And what kind of video games and video game characters do they want to see?

In the next chapter I discuss the existing research on these topics, as well as its limitations.

Chapter 1.

Queer Gaming: The State Of The Art

1.1.   Gaming communities

While not much is known about the ways in which transgender players interact with games that are not MMORGs (Massively multiplayer online role-playing games) or indeed with characters and stories related to transness, there are some studies that focus on transgender identity and representation in video games, avatar creation, and countergaming practices. This chapter will read together the dispersed findings of this existing research to lay the foundation for the study presented in this thesis that is aiming to fill the knowledge gaps.

Importantly, video games are not an isolated medium that exists by itself; as with other popular cultural phenomena, it amasses a following and allows for community building and connection. This is most evident in players connecting with others in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORGs), on forums or subreddits (forum posts on Reddit) for a specific game. There is limited research on transgender players' interactions with one another and the way in which trans players benefit from those community interactions. While these studies mostly are sociological studies of the phenomenon of fandom, some focus on gaming communities as well. While playing as a trans person is often emotionally exhausting, daunting, and potentially unsafe, for many transgender people MMORGs and games overall are an easier way to connect and interact with each other, as well as find support in the face of possible social isolation or life difficulties (Baldwin 2018; Brown 2018; Evans 2019; Iacovides et al 2019). Many players find that connection by engaging in fandom of a particular game or game series. According to these existing studies, transgender players often discuss their favorite games together, analyze them on a meta-level, write their own stories in that universe or engage in transformative fiction and either create more representation for themselves or expand on already existing transgender characters in their game of choice (Scheuerman et al 2018, include another ref from list above). For many, fandom also ends up being a space for collective political activism: pointing out harmful representation, campaigning for more transgender storylines and characters, more trans voice actors, or fighting against transphobia in the video gaming industry (Lima 2017).

Other studies suggest that video games can be a unique way for transgender players to embody their lived experience or alternative embodiment and identify with or relate to different characters that might represent some of their life experiences, as well as be an active participant in a potentially queer narrative – or to queer the narrative that is presented. I will now elaborate on these themes in turn.

1.2. Queer game studies

Since the 1990s, studies have begun to suggest that there is a unique way of play in which queer people of various identities are engaged, as well as the way in which they engage with the plot and subvert or *queer* the gaming process overall. Sherry Turkle was one of the first researchers who studied identity construction in video games in the 1990s with early video games. She specifically investigated text-based RPG games called MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and described them as "identity workshops" (Turkle 1994, 158-167): in online gameplay users adopted multiple characters they would role-play as, that allowed for identity exploration not only in terms of choosing different appearances or genders, but also different behaviours and ways of being perceived by other users. She noted four major qualities of MUDs that allowed them to function as a place for identity exploration: they are ongoing and provide its users anonymity, invisibility, and potential multiplicity. Anonymity and potential multiplicity allowed players to explore certain parts of their identity they would be hesitant to express in "real life", possibly through having multiple characters.

Turkle also found it interesting that there were instances of gender swapping – players chose to embody a character of another gender. While not all instances of gender swapping indicated gender exploration, questioning, or engaging with an idea of transition, it is nonetheless notable. Gender swapping has been described as a common experience among transgender players that, as Laura Dale (2014) points out, can help people realize they are transgender and then help them feel more comfortable with their embodiment. Dale recounts her experience playing one of the biggest online MMORGs, World Of Warcraft, before she even knew she was transgender:

> "Maybe it was because I remembered the Runescape quest a few years before that forced male players to briefly present with a female avatar to complete a quest string. Maybe it was something else entirely. Whatever the reason, in that one area of my life I was willing to try out expressing myself as female. I picked a screen name that would indicate that I was a female player. I tried to relax and get into a

different role in my head and I went off on an adventure to see how I felt being treated as female." (Dale, 2014, n.p)

This begins to suggest that transgender people play games and often find them beneficial, contrary to the claims of GamerGate and the community of people who participated in it discussed in the introduction. They are involved in communities centered around games and participate in the wider video gaming culture. However, most of the research is concerned with online multiplayer games and discusses the questions of identification with the avatar, which is a player-created character that is supposed to represent the player in the story or in the online gameplay. Historically, in the field of Queer Game Studies, that has been the direction in which transgender experiences with gaming would be discussed.

1.2.1   Trans-gaming: trans character representation

There are multiple research studies that indicate that transgender players use character customization and avatar building to experiment with their gender presentation or match the identity of their character with their own to fight dysphoria (Aller 2018, Baldwin 2018, Lima 2017, Marciano 2014). In one of the studies of 36 players from around the world, about 83% of respondents agreed that they use character customization to experiment with their gender expression, more than 50% agreed that it helps them experiment with their gender identity in a safe space, and many agreed that they used character customization tools for dysphoria relief (Aller 2018). As Avi Marciano states in their paper, 'Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace', transgender players "manoeuver between online and offline worlds in order to negotiate their complicated gender identity and to overcome offline impediments" (Marciano 2014, 824).

Among Queer activists there has been a huge push for creating more diversity in media, based on the assumption that more representation of marginalized communities creates compassion and normalizes the existence of marginalized people (GLAAD 2021). Some argue that more representation can lead to more positive political action as well, so it is no wonder that representation has been such an important focus in Queer Game Studies as well. (Lima 2017, Shaw 2017).

Within the existing research, the issues of representation concern women's representation, which started this thematic field, the representation of People Of Colour, and Queer representation. Notably there has been a lot of discussion on whether the character Lara Croft and her hypersexualized body is positive or negative representation, the fact that violence in games disproportionately affects women and characters of colour

or otherwise racialized characters, and the current trend of including queer representation primarily as romance options that frequently lack depth and do not include transness either (Shaw 2017, T.L. Taylor 2006, Yang 2017, Chang 2015).

Examining the history and state of transgender representation in video games is somewhat depressing. According to the LGBTQ Video Games Archive (2015), that focuses on finding and documenting explicit and implicit queer representation in video games and was founded by US game studies scholar Adrienne Shaw, the earliest transgender character appears in 1987 in *Leisure Suit Larry* discussed in the introduction. The trope of "an angry and masculine but sexually attractive" transgender woman does not stop there: the characters Poison and Roxy in *Final Fight* (1989) and *Street Fighter* (2008) are described as aggressive and bossy, and their gender is a point of controversy. According to their entry in the archive, "reportedly, the characters were originally going to be women, but developers thought that this would lead the game to do poorly and be protested in America—the developers thought that Americans would find hitting women distasteful. Instead, the characters were described as transvestites, oddly enough to appease feminists" (LGBTQ Video Game Archive 2015, n.p.). The developers later stated that in America, Poison would be a post-op transgender woman but in general refused to take a stance on her and Roxy's gender, preferring the fans to "decide for themselves" (LGBTQ Video Game Archive 2016, n.p.).

Another popular type of transgender representation, especially in the early video game history, is non-human characters who are othered and bullied, such as Birdo (also known as Birdie or Birdetta) and Vivan, characters of the *Mario* series. Birdo was introduced in 1988 and in the English manual flavor text was described as "thinks he is a girl" and notes that the character would "rather be called 'Birdetta'". In later games any mention of Birdo being male was taken out, but in *Captain Rainbow* (2008)*, which was released only in Japan in date, she is depicted being arrested for entering the women's bathroom, which alludes to her transgender identity. The character of Vivan from *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* (2004), is described as a transgender woman only in the Japanese version of the game, which is not mentioned in the translated releases of the game in the US. Yet again, characters in the game bully her for using the correct bathroom and her gender, calling her a boy.

The binary transgender representation in more recent video games has gotten less stereotypical than the traditional perception of transgender people as aggressive, monstrous, predatory, or disgusting, but is not without flaws and problematic elements,

sometimes even transphobia. The character Serendipity in *Dragon Age II* (2011) is a sex worker who according to a now deleted Bioware post was supposed to be a drag queen but was depicted so poorly that many players argued that she actually was a binary trans woman (LGBTQ Video Game Archive 2016). Later in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2015), Bioware introduced Cremicius "Krem" Aclassi, who is a transgender man. He is a complex character, probably one of the more successful trans characters written in triple-A games. Yet in order for a PC to progress his story arc and find out more about his past, players have to ask transphobic questions about his transition and gender identity. Bioware's other successful series, *Mass Effect*, has a character, Hainly Abrams, who in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), shares her transgender identity and her deadname with the PC. This was followed by a lot of criticism and disappointment from the trans gaming community for the dialogue being insensitive, unrealistic, and the character herself being tokenistic (Polo 2017, Chalk 2017). This dialog tree was later rewritten to exclude the mention of the deadname.

An interesting case is the character Madeline from *Celeste* (2018). The original game included many hints to Madeline being transgender, even though there was no canonical confirmation, or even a statement from the developers Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry. Yet later Thorson came out as transgender, stating in a blogpost on her website that "This feels painfully obvious to a lot of (mostly trans) people, and likewise it feels painfully obvious to me too, in retrospect" (2020, n.p.). She stated that she was writing Madeline while being a closeted transgender person herself and did not pick up on it initially.

> "I mentioned earlier that I didn't know that Madeline was trans during the development of Celeste, and that I had a hunch when we made Farewell. [...] As time went on post-launch, my personal understanding of Madeline shifted from "maybe she's trans" to "okay she's definitely trans". We discussed this when writing Farewell, and our conclusion was that we wanted to afford Madeline privacy." (Thorson 2020, n.p.).

Even though Thorson has confirmed Madeline's identity only later, the character is deeply ingrained in the story itself and also is connected to the creator's own gender exploration and realization. In my review of transgender representation, I consider Madeline one of the best transgender characters in modern video games.

And yet, addressing the issue of representation is not sufficient. Adrienne Shaw, one of the most prominent researchers in the field of Queer Games Studies, argues that

"Games research on the representation of marginalized groups tends to approach the issue by addressing gender, race, and sexuality as discrete and stable categories of analysis. <…> Such researchers also assume that representation of these identifiers in game texts is the end goal for audiences and producers who are members of these specific marginalized groups." (Shaw 2015, 14-15).

Previous research assumes that gender is a stable category, that representation is important to all marginalized players, and pays little attention to the creative readings of the characters and the narrative. Much of the existing research treats the video game narrative as a product that marginalized players interact with but do not change. It examines "good" or "bad" representations of existing transgender characters or transphobic tropes without looking at the creative potential for subversive readings or the ways in which various "bad" characters, i.e. exhibiting some stereotypes or written while heavily relying on transphobic tropes, cannot be the characters trans players identify with or relate to. Shaw argues that representation might not be as important to marginalized players for many reasons. Well-written, relatable characters and an engaging story, however, were valued by the majority of her North American research participants with whom she had conducted two semi-structured interviews while playing games together (Shaw 2015).

While this is valuable research, not much attention has been paid to offline single-player games and the ways in which transgender players subvert the narrative and its characters, creating possible representation where it was not necessarily present. Partially this oversight might be because online games allow for avatar creation, and there are not many canonical transgender characters in offline games, and partially because of the dominant focus on representation and the paradigmatic view of identity categories as easily defined.

As Shaw and many other researchers have found, players often interact with games or their characters in ways that might not be predictable or expected by the developers, designers, and publishers in the industry (Shaw 2015, 73). With the kind of representation that exists and the complicated feelings around it, queer and transgender people do something that I examine in my research: they develop/exhibit a specific kind of literacy to create trans representation where it perhaps was not intended through tactics that Galloway and Chang (2018) describe as "countergaming" and Jack Halberstam (2017) as "hacking".

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1.2.2. Queer trans literacies

Scholars of Queer Game Studies suggest that video games are a complex kind of text that includes not only the dialogue and the actual writing, but also gameplay elements, tropes of the genre, or even certain designs of the coded moveset that a gamer needs to be "literate" in to be successful in the game. According to Stuart Hall's (1973) model of communication, the audience actively participates in the decoding of the message that, in the example used for this theory, TV writers encode within the media. The decoded message does not always correspond with the message that was encoded within the text (visual or literary) as the audience relies on their social context(s), often leading to diverging interpretations that include decoding of both verbal and non-verbal parts of the media with which the audience interacts. While video games as a medium did not exist in Hall's time, the theory is still applicable as video games are literally an encoded, i.e. coded medium that players then decode, either working with the code directly in the case of modding or relying on the visual and literary text of the game. Rebecca W. Black notes that

> "...while new technologies enable greater media saturation and widespread dissemination of the symbolic materials contained therein, technological advances also facilitate the creation of contexts in which consumers play an active role in interpreting and recontextualizing media" (Black 2009, 398).

Vibrant fan communities within the gaming culture show that the ways in which players decode characters is indeed a certain kind of literacy, which Jonathan Alexander supports:

> "Indeed, at the most basic level, gaming involves complex use of multiple modes of writing and a need to develop a sense of how text and visuals interact; many games provide a rich environment in which gamers are developing and (pardon the pun) playing with a variety of complex literacy skills" (Alexander 2009, 36).

By these literacy skills Alexander means interactions with the game, so knowledge of the ludic elements (structural, such as rules, movement, interactions, or code and glitches), as well as in-game communication. Just as in Hall's model, Alexander points out that, in order to be "fluent" in a game, the understanding of both verbal and non-verbal cues is needed. Jesper Juul suggests in his book *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005) that within a video game, there are at least two storylines that we can define and that happen simultaneously: one is the internal narrative of the game, which

includes the text and the ludic elements supporting the text. Another is the storyline that the player creates by playing and interacting with the game. According to Juul, it includes the emotions that the player experiences during the gameplay, the "piecing together" of the narrative, and the player's individual interpretation of it.

Shaw suggests that the meaning a character has is formed in the way they are read, possibly across media texts related to the original video game, and that is in turn informed by the way the character is literally coded within the game and coded through narrative, dialogue, or ludic elements like available skills or types of movement (Shaw 2015, 22). We might argue then that decoding characters as trans is a certain kind of literacy as well, that might be specific to video games as this decoding requires going against the code of the game that determines what is possible within the gameplay, the narrative, and design. What differs here from the media that Hall was more familiar with is that this type of decoding is, I would argue, more active and allows for more agency: while more traditional media can be decoded in ways that diverge from the original encoding message TV writers had in mind, video games introduce a mode of countergaming that involves active choices by the player and requires deeper interaction with the language of the medium. Iin his discussion of what he defines as countergaming Alexander Galloway argues that

> "[c]onventional gamic form relies on a notion of purposeful interactivity based on a coherent set of game rules. Narrative and form are smoothly joined. But countergaming often has no interactive narrative at all and little gameplay supported by few game rules, if any. In this sense, countergaming replaces play with aesthetics, or perhaps something like the play of signification." (Galloway 2004, 30)

Building on what Lisa Nakamura calls "disruptive moments of recognition and misrecognition" (Nakamura 2002, 144), as well as Galloway's definition of countergaming, Chang offers *queergaming* as a term that he signifies as something that "in a sense queers countergaming to change, challenge, or reimagine the normativity of game", offering it queer potential and encoding the game in a queer way (Chang 2015, 9).

Jack Halberstam contributes to the discussion of this phenomenon in his essay 'Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, And Going Turbo':

> "Queer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter. Since the world as we know it was not designed for queer subjects, then queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life, and desire." (Halberstam 2017, 187).

What we consider to be a gaming text, i.e. dialogue options, narrative, and character arcs, is as bound within the code as movesets, skill trees, or sound and visual design. In order to imagine beyond what the code dictates, gamers figuratively and literally hack the code not only by "modding" games, which would mean literal rewriting of the code, but by encoding characters differently and countergaming against the cisheterosexual narrative of most games and their tokenism.

> "Building on my own experience and feeling limited in the game by the multiple regulations that function in the real, we could ask how much "free" space there is ever in a game to change the rules of the game. And in a related question, Is there space within the game to "go wild"?' (Halberstam 2017, 90).

What he is really asking here is how, under what conditions, and how heteronormativity manifests within the game and whether it is possible for a player to go beyond the code. Halberstam references such artists as Zach Blas and Micha Cárdenaswho have collaboratively invented the idea of "queer code" that combines art and technology with the ultimate goal of connecting queer bodies despite the physical distance between them. Blas is also known for the concept of "queer bombs", which are "detonating concepts that can be dropped into discourse to create explosive reactions." (193) For Blas, theory, especially queer theory, is code, so to (re)write it is not unlike using a coding language. There are rules that can be rewritten and the system is hackable, making it possible to move past strictly cisheterosexual society and language. Drawing on this language of code, Halberstam proposes to work with the ideas of glitch and hacking.

A glitch is used in its more or less literal form: as a mistake or bug in the code that can be exploited for queer possibilities. Halberstam (2017) uses an example from a movie *Wreckl-It Ralph*, in which the main protagonist can find a way for alternative existence outside of his coded narrative through a glitch in the game in which he resides. Hacking for Halberstam is not unlike countergaming. Hacking becomes an act of resistance against the code in order to explore the possibility of queer/trans narrative and play that might contradict the code or the goal of the game. While within this understanding of hacking it can be applied to modding (modifying the game's code or visual assets) or speedrunning (playing a given game in a way that would bring the player to the end the fastest), it also can be applied to countergaming and decoding characters in a way that was not necessarily intended by the coded narrative of games. However, it is important to note that for Halberstam, hacking and queer gameplay is strongly linked with the queer

conception/affirmation of failure that he does not deem to be negative; instead, it is a failure to comply with cisheteronormative society, a failure to achieve success in a game, or a failure to play it "correctly". Halberstam embraces and encourages this kind of failure instead of using it as a means to render success more impactful, something that Juul argues for.

The question is then, how do transgender players do it? What do trans literacies in decoding a character as transgender include? We find that this question cannot be answered without taking into account not just the narrative aspects of video games, which most research is concerned about, but also by paying attention and dissecting the structural, ludic elements of games as well.

1.2.3. Narrative VS Ludology: false division

Generally speaking, video games can be understood as a combination of narrative and structural elements, which include code, movesets, visual assets, etc. Narrative includes dialogue, the plot of a given game, dialogue tree options if they are available, and other elements that are written and are relevant to the story, such as, for instance, cutscenes - cinematic scenes which are played as a result of a certain action. They act as a narrative cinematic experience, during which the player's choice is limited if it is present at all. Meanwhile structural elements are no less important. They are often called ludic elements, as in "elements of gameplay". While traditionally in Game Studies researchers focus on the narrative, which would include issues of representation, the types of characters that are present within the story, and the potential problematic or subversive elements of a plot, there is a problematization of a relationship between narrative and ludic elements of games.

Some scholars like Frans Mäyrä state that "we can distinguish between core gameplay and representation when looking at games but that we must recognize the dialectical relationship between them" (Mäyrä 2012, n.p.). What he is arguing for is that it is possible to completely separate the two while recognizing that both narrative and ludology have an impact on each other. This approach is based on the assumption that gameplay and story are functionally different and therefore we can study them separately. For example, if one wants to study transgender representation in video games, it would be enough to study the way in which those characters are written and how they correlate with positive or negative stereotypes of trans people.

Some scholars working in Queer Game Studies, such as Derek A. Burrill, instead insist that

> "[o]ften, narrative in games is assumed to be constructed from discrete units both modal and thematic, with tacit acknowledgment of player and designer exegesis. A queer understanding of narratology would necessarily focus on difference as a functional epistemology and praxis, moving beyond the binaries of plot/story, or histoire/discours." (Burrill 2017, 27)

Researchers like Burrill explicitly acknowledge that as scholars, we have to examine the ludic and structural elements as well if we want to understand the way in which participants connect with and experience games. There is a false dichotomy, Burrill insists, between ludology and narrative. Video games are not the sum of their parts with ludology and narrative being easily separated; quite the opposite. This links to Halberstam, Chang, and Galloway's conceptions of counter/queergaming and hacking: stories are programmed, and ludic elements not only help tell that story but also define what kind of story can be told or what kind of interpretation is available or expected. This suggests that if we want to examine the literacies of decoding transgender characters by transgender players, we will have to pay attention to the ludic elements that are actually encoded within those characters. Put differently, It is impossible to separate a class of a character (rogue, warrior, mage, etc), their move set (spells, attacks, speed with which they move), visual assets that I consider to be on an intersection of narrative and ludic elements (how that character looks like), and the narrative or the role they play in a larger game plot.

A related element that needs to be considered within Queer Game Studies research is the way in which the body of a player is involved not only in the game experience, but also in the process of sense-making during gameplay. Burrill date brings to our attention that the body has been neglected in favor of "the virtual self". This is the case even though a focus on embodiment is one of the central figures of research in queer theory, which informs a lot of paradigmatic differences between Game Theory and Queer Game Theory, such as the investment of the latter in discursive and disruptive practices, but also is a key element of production and consumption of various video games. He emphasizes the fact that VR (virtual reality) devices that are used for games increasingly more often, are "being inscribed on and within the body" (Burrill 2017, 28). Burrill asserts that we cannot completely disregard the body from the sense-making and game studies:

> "Fundamentally, the risk is the potential erasure or disembodiment of the real body and its signifying and representative power in virtual space; hence, bodies of

difference face deletion, while a corporatist, homogenous, objectified, and universal body that fits all systems (regardless of how many "choices" of avatar the user is afforded) continues its steady ascendance" (2017, 29).

While the distinction between real and virtual self might be questionable, I would add that the physicality of gameplay is incredibly important. One of the decisive factors players might consider when deciding whether to play a game is how it *feels* to play. Controls are often described as "tight" if the control of the movement is snappy and precise, "fluid" if it is easy to carry the momentum, etc. Feeling depends on the player's ability, the type of a controller used, and whether there are any accessibility options within the game, so the physical body reacts with any given game just as much as the mind does.

Many researchers conduct their studies by watching their participants play, like the study that Shaw carried out, interviewing her research participants in their homes while they were playing video games, sometimes with her, and noticing the way in which their physicality of gameplay changed depending on the game, the character, or the day. Another way researchers examine the role of embodiment is to conduct autoethnographic studies. For example, Muriel and Crawford date noted the ways in which their bodies would respond to the games they were playing, the differing physical reactions they would have when winning or losing or engaging with the in-game environment that took part in the sense-making.

One of the examples of a game in which the physicality of gameplay is important is *Dark Souls* (2011-2018). The game is originally designed to be hostile to the player: it gives few options for saving the game and does not allow the player to rest, the save points, and there is no way to pause the game while traversing or being engaged in a battle. The battles themselves are one of the most distinguishing features of the franchise. They are punishing, incredibly difficult with reliance on changing patterns of boss (by which we mean the hardest enemy of the zone) movesets, hidden "tells", and getting more difficult the more a player tries to do what. In video games, "tells" communicate specific signs, either subtle or exaggerated, that a certain kind of attack is coming, which allows an experienced player to react in time. In *Dark Souls,* these tells are both subtle and changeable to frustrate the player and make the experience of playing the game physically engaging and tense. This is a game that requires quick reaction time on top of an expert knowledge of the game and literacy of the genre. It also demands constant attention from the player, not allowing a second of rest, so the physical body of the player is as engaged

as the mind. The way in which thew body is engaged has an affect not only on the gameplay but on the experience of the story where the ludic elements (such as a frustrating, physically and mentally difficult gameplay) corresponds with content (a game about a cruel world on a brink of the end, full of corruption and violence).

Importantly, if transgender players often play to alleviate dysphoria and "create" their ideal physical self in the virtual world of games, this research suggests that their physical body is nevertheless engaged within the gameplay.

To conclude, Queer Game Studies have opened the field beyond the representation of characters, pointing to counter-and queergaming, hacking in game narratives, as well as the interconnectedness of plot and ludology. And yet within the Queer Video Game Studies, there remains a gap of knowledge about the ways in which transgender players decode characters as trans and engage in countergaming sense-making while playing. This gap exists partially because of the previous focus on representation within video games and the erasure of transgender players as a player demographic as a result of transphobia and GamerGate-related pushback.

In the following chapter, I will be defining my methods, sources, and the design of my research.

Chapter 2. Methodology

2.1. Research questions

In this chapter I will discuss the research design and methodology. I will present my key research questions and how they inform the design of my study, its methods and the sample. I also examine my own positionality as a feminist trans researcher which is crucial for accounting for the research findings and what Haraway (1988) calls embodied objectivity.

My research poses the following research questions:

What are key elements of the game literacy practices of transgender players? How do they transform decode characters or motifs in games as transgender? If their literacy practices are transformative and subversive, then in what ways? Finally, where and how do they include ludic elements of games into their readings or rely primarily on narrative as the source for their decoding?

These questions are best addressed by a qualitative research design and methods that is capacious enough to attend to literacy practices of transgender players that are often based on personal experiences. I have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews and autoethnography and analysis of existing interviews with people who identify as trans video game players (and developers). I define a player as anyone either actively playing video games or watching them as a pastime activity and who considered gaming as one of their interests. For this purpose, the length of time spent on gaming, skill, or the number of games played does not carry significance; emotional investment does. While some researchers include casual gamers who play idle games within the scope of the term, I am excluding this demographic as idle games are not story-focused and generally do not have well-developed characters, in addition to their purpose being to fill the time instead of engaging in an experience.

At the same time, a player in my definition includes someone who watches other people play "letsplays" or "playthroughs" - recording of gameplay, often with commentary either focused more on the lore and the story or entertaining banter. This decision is motivated by the fact that some games are inaccessible either financially or in terms of accessibility of gameplay, i.e. first-person games, flashing images, or games that require a

higher level of skill. By watching playthroughs, these players still engage with the medium, form their conclusions, and even understand the mechanics of the game without either spending money or putting their health at risk. As Shaw (2017) has argued, passive gaming is also a gaming experience, and a very common one, that cannot be overstated, especially at the time when some games require more modern hardware to be run on in order to be functional, and the price of major high budget games keeps rising.

2.2. Sample and methods

Based on these considerations, I decided to combine the analysis of data produced in semi-structured interviews and autoethnography with an analysis of two existing interviews and panels with transgender video game developers. My reasoning behind the inclusion of autoethnography is that I as a researcher am also a transgender player with years of being involved within the community, and that due to COVID-19 complications and my disability the sample of interviewees is quite limited. Additionally, there is little current research focusing on the analysis of the process of transgender developers writing and coding their games with their experience of transness being at the forefront of it, which I referred to in chapter 1, which helps understand countergaming literacy practices. All developers are also players themselves and are familiar with gaming literacies I describe in chapters 3 and 4. The way in which they make games might illuminate trans literacies in terms of not only character encoding from their end during the writing process, but also their approach of video games as a medium in a broader sense and their approach to how they imagine a possibility of gaming which has queerness from the coding structure of it. The semi-structured interviews were conducted first to eliminate any possible bias that might have formed after having done the autoethnographic analysis and the discourse analysis.

2.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

This study uses the method of in-person and online-conducted semi-structured interviews that focused on the participants' experiences with video games. The method allows us to touch on the key topics while having an opportunity to broaden the conversation. The sample consisted of six transgender players of age from 22 to 30 recruited by the snowball method within the gaming community using recommendations from acquaintances in Prague and a post calling for participation on a Discord server of a gaming content creator Haelian.

Four of these six interviews had to be conducted online as the participants lived abroad. One of the online interviews was conducted via text on Discord, an instant messaging platform, as the participant requested some additional time to think through their answers and be able to articulate their thoughts better. The other three interviews were conducted via Skype. While this facilitated access, conducting an interview on Skype or via messaging platforms might have a restricting effect on the participants. In three of the four interviews we were able to see each other, for some participants it might have felt more formal because of the distance. Although the text-based interviews did not allow me to notice changes in voice or body language, a substantial positive effect of such interviews is that the participants had time to think their answers through and ask for more clarification if needed. The two interviews that were held in person were conducted in coffee shops as those can be considered neutral territory, which would not feel intruding into personal space and instead offered a relaxing atmosphere, creating a more informal setting. The interviews held in person were recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed for analysis. While one of the concerns of this setting was me as a deaf person not being able to hear the answers properly or not being able to transcribe the interviews later on to make sure no information was missed, it was successful, and I did not need to use transcription services.

Participant	In-person/ Online	Identity	Race	Country of Origin
Rash	in-person	Nonbinary (they/them)	Lebanese	Lebanon
Jana	In-person	Nonbinary woman (she/her)	White	Czech Republic
Eli	Online	(Trans man, he/ him)	White	Austria
Matt	Online	(Nonbinary, they/them)	White	Germany
Vee	Online	(Nonbinary, they/them)	White	The USA
Brett	Online (text)	(Nonbinary, they/them)	Asian-American	The USA

Table 1. Interview sample

The interview questions were grouped into three thematic fields: Gaming Trajectories which describe how the participants developed an interest in video games, what kind of games they enjoyed growing up, and how their interest in video games impacted them socially; Gaming Experiences which describe the genres, characters, and plots that the participants are drawn to, the mechanics or characters they decode as queer or transgender-related, as well as the ways in which they think these gaming experiences could be different; and Evaluation or Changes which focuses on the stereotypes in games, their evaluation of the video game market, and their personal recommendations. The questions were formulated quite loosely to encourage the natural flow of the conversation and they were aimed to crystalize the video gaming literacies transgender people have by focusing on the ways in which they experience video games, interact with them, and decode them, therefore making any video game genre readable.

As the questions were not strictly defined, I do not have a list of questions I provided to the participants. Instead, I had defined key analytical points that were relevant to the study within each thematic field, and I have outlined them in the previous chapter as well.

All interviews were conducted in English, were audio-recorded, and the participants were made aware of informed consent.

Informed consent: The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, were informed of their right to decline their participation or not answer the questions that could make them uncomfortable. The participants were also informed about their right for anonymity, so the names of the participants are replaced with pseudonyms for their anonymity.

2.2.2. Autoethnography
I used a method of autoethnography to analyze my own gameplay, both active play of video games that I own and passive play via watching playthroughs recorded by other video game players and content creators on Youtube or broadcast on Twitch, a livestreaming website. The reason for inclusion of passive gameplay is that, as Crawford and Shaw date argue, passive play is also sense-making and engaging with the medium. I argue that passive play also requires video gaming literacy in order to understand the gameplay, its mechanics and its implications, as well as to participate in the sense-making of the game by analyzing and interacting with the plot. It is especially important in this study considering that I as a disabled person have limited opportunities to play in part due

to the limitations induced by the hardware that I own but especially because a significant portion of my analysis was done while I was first sick and then recovering from, as well as dealing with complications from COVID-19.

My choice of autoethnography as a method is motivated by it being a feminist method of study that requires a researcher to be analytical of their own experience while also taking the researcher's background into consideration. As a method, it bases itself within critical theory and postmodernism, requiring the researcher to view their own personal experiences in the context of a larger cultural environment. Autoethnography rejects "grand narratives which claim objectivity, authority and researcher neutrality in the study of social and cultural life" (Grant et al. 2013, 3). Instead, it allows one to work with "interpretations of personal 'truths' and speaking about oneself to transform into narrative representations of political responsibility" (Ettorre, 2010, 3). Since transgender people are frequently excluded from customer demographic polls, as well as studies, this method is also used in existing literature by other transgender researchers and writers, especially in the topic that is as underresearched as transgender gaming experiences that do not focus on identity exploration in online MMORGs (Muriel and Crawford 2018, Shaw 2015, Ruberg 2017, Harper 2017, Dale 2014), like this study.

Considering that the method itself requires a researcher to work with their "personal truths", it is instrumental to introduce my background with which I had to work while conducting autoethnography of gaming. As I analyzed my interactions with the games I had already all of the games were familiar to me and were completed multiple times throughout the years. The autoethnographic research was focused largely on the same three thematic fields as the interviews did. However, I was paying additional attention to the way in which I interacted with the games: how I physically played them, how I interacted with any given mechanics, what I gravitated towards in video games, and what kinds of decodings I had with the games and their characters. I was also interested in the possibility of the ludic elements influencing my decodings. I did not record my gameplay when it was active; instead, I wrote notes on my phone after each gaming session and after each game I watched the playthrough of.

2.2.3. Discourse analysis
Finally, I analyzed existing media, which was conference talks with two transgender game developers. As a method, it involves analysis of speech or text in relation to its social context. This method was chosen as the sample of active participants was limited and the perspective of transgender game developers is relevant to the understanding of gaming

literacies. Specifically I chose Anna Anthropy's *NOW WE HAVE VOICES* given at IndieCade in 2016 and Mattie Brice's *Diva ex Machina - A Perspective on Games* given at AlterConf in 2015. I chose Anthropy's talk as she is one of the most influential developers in the indie gaming scene, transgender or otherwise, and Mattie Brice's talk as she offers a unique perspective on game design from someone who, as she describes, has quit the field while still developing games. Anna Anthropy is a White transgender woman known for her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, many independent video games including *dys4ria*, as well as her prominence as a video game historian and a university Game Designer in Residence at DePaul. Mattie Brice is a Black transgender woman most known for her game *Mainichi*, a TedTalk *Using Play for Everyday Activism* given at Middlebury, her career as a game critic for publications like Kotaku, a known gaming news and criticism web publication, and currently being an instructor at University of New York. I chose these developers as both are influential figures in both video game criticism and video game development. As Anthropy is White, it was necessary to introduce a perspective that not only acknowledged race but also provided personal experience that Anthropy does not have. While both of these creators have given many talks in the past, they have never been formally analyzed.

The focus in their talks in terms of analysis was the ways in which their experience as transgender people with other intersecting marginalized identities influenced the ways in which they make and design games, as well as the approaches they have for play, both their personal play, as well as the play of the players which would be engaging with the games. Their insight on the way in which transgender game designers develop games and build in their trans experience into or within them illuminated not only the question of transgender literacies in games, but also of development of independent games that use many approaches traditional video game developers and publishers do not consider or actively avoid.

2.2.4 Researcher positionality

I am a binary transgender man of 28 years of age coming from Siberia, Russia. I am White, neurodivergent, and disabled, both physically and mentally. Those factors affect which games I could sample for playing as, for instance, I experience pain and epilepsy-like sensations from flashing images and cannot play games that require quick and precise movements. I am a writer and a poet, used to teach English, and was unemployed during

the process of conducting the study, as well as during writing the thesis. While conducting autoethnography, I got infected with COVID-19, which worsened the physical symptoms of my disabilities and limited my ability to play in general, as well as some mental symptoms like brain fog and mental exhaustion. These limitations made me expand the scope of games to include passive play in my analysis as well.

Chapter 3. Thematic elements of trans literacies

3.1 Gaming trajectories: sociality and the importance of player choices

In this subchapter, I am presenting my analysis of the semi-structured interviews around the key research questions. The analysis is divided into three sections that refer to Gaming Trajectories, Gaming Experiences, and Evaluation/Changes that structured the topic guide to delineate crucial elements of literacies.

To start the conversation with my research participants, both to make them feel more comfortable and to gather data on any relevant facts in terms of the participants' involvement with games, I had asked them how they got interested in video games and how it became a lasting interest in their lives. In five cases out of six the participants grew up with video games and were introduced to either a specific video game by their peers or by marketing. They also considered gaming to be an acceptable pastime by a family member. Only one of the participants did not have gaming experience as a child themself and got interested in video games as an adult after watching a playthrough of *Dishonored* online. All of the six participants noted the difficulty of access to games either due to location, such as a village in Lebanon (Rash), or outdated hardware. Five of six participants did not have the financial means to have modern gaming consoles or a fast PC (Personal Computer) growing up and one of them still does not have the access to faster gaming technology, which made them more interested in indie games developed by small teams or counterfeit consoles and gaming cartridges. Jana, 28, who grew up in the Czech Republic, describes her experience as such:

> "I watched a Youtuber play Warcraft, and then he started using his channel to show off a bunch of up-and-coming video games, a lot of them were smaller indie games that just started getting popular on Steam, and I ended up playing a lot of them cause my computer was older" (Jana).

Both of the transfeminine participants explained that one of the reasons for their interest in video games was the fact that it was deemed to be an acceptable boy interest. Jana also told me that

> "I think that being perceived as a guy and having a lot of friends that were guys, video games seemed as an acceptable guy past time or interest, almost expected past time really. I had a friend in high school who was into video games and we'd

hang out and play World of Warcraft. I played it for a long time with him and other

friends because I didn't have good enough hardware."

All of the participants included experience of passive or "second-hand" or passive gaming,.

Contrary to the general belief that gaming has to be active, much of the research, as well as

anecdotal experiences of the participants, indicated that passive gaming is as important and

as much of a gaming experience as active gaming. This seems to be not only a reflection of

the social component of gaming, especially offline single-player games, but also a way of

interacting with games themselves. Matt, 25, who grew up in Germany, said,

"I enjoyed watching others play because it's like collaborative TV. I can give input

to my friend who plays, like helping with navigating the environment without

having a risk of playing it and failing."

For Matt, many video games felt too risky as a child but watching someone else gave them

the satisfaction of participating without the fear of losing. Matt's observation echoes Juul's

(2017) argument that video games can be a safe way to experience failure.

The medium attracted the participants by being a social, fun, and engaging activity

in their childhood but remained or, in Matt's case, developed into an interest in adulthood

thanks to the unique way in which video games tell stories. The two features of video

games that separate them from films or books, to which the medium is frequently likened,

are their interactivity and the importance of a player's agency. As the participant who

considered "video games [as] interactive TV" added, "I enjoy exploring a lot, exploring

the world, which is something films don't allow for." What Matt is saying here is that

video games allow them to be not just a witness of an environment but an active

participant, uncovering more of it by in-game actions, which cinematography does not

allow for. Another participant, Rash, 22, defines the uniqueness of video games as such:

"The uniqueness is in your input while you don't always have the choice. In video

games you *are* the character but you can also not be the character and the game is

the only medium that puts you in the boots of the character and have your choices

being the driving force of the plot, even if they are kind of predetermined. You

can't explore these things in movies, or at least not effectively. Even when the

game is fairly straightforward, your choices as a player, like what to explore or

what dialogue option to take, define the medium." (grammar by the participant,

emphasis added by me).

While the existing research is engaged in a debate about whether the players' choices are

truly the defining feature of video games, or even a unique one, it seems to be rather

important for the participants. Choices refer to the ability to influence the outcome of an interaction or even the ending of a game.

In terms of the types of games that the participants were and are interested in, all of them listed story-rich games as their favourite. This is not a genre per se, as they themselves noted: games of various genres can have deep and expansive plots, not just RPGs. The genres included strategy games, platformers, RPGs, simulator games, and even MMORGs, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Destiny 2*.

Gaming Experiences: decoding characters, modding, and pushing games to the limits

In this thematic field I was looking for the plots, characters, and mods that the participants were drawn to or criticized. This thematic field is also key to discovering their en/decoding of trans characters as such, as well as their relationship with representation and understanding of transness as a concept.

Vee, 26, put it this way:

> "I like a little more of a political intrigue like in Skyrim, Dragon Age, Assassin's Creed, like, interpersonal conflict. Political intrigue is more interesting to me because that's where there's a merge between interpersonal drama and the social implications, and world building. I like having an amount of agency and having an impact on the story, and those plots allow for it more."

However, games with a different level of plot complexity were mentioned. According to Vee, "it depends on what I want from a game, you know? Do I want to be intellectually stimulated or unwind?" That points to situationality and the varying purpose of games, as Iacovides et al (2019) outline. Plots are not the only important parts of video games, a plot-driven game usually relies on characters to attract the audience. RPGs try to establish their characters well, sometimes successfully, sometimes receiving criticism for their portrayal instead. Other genres establish characters well, too. The participants included a variety of different types of characters from very different games, both in style and in terms of gameplay, that felt attractive to them. Eli, 28 who grew up in Austria, said that he did not enjoy character creation where the character is a premade part of the world, such as characters in MMORGs. As he explained to me,

> "you don't exist because you don't have a personality. Like, Hawke in Dragon Age has presets of personality, has a family in the city, you know, comes with a life. Who am I in WoW or Skyrim? No one."

In contrast, Vee actually found character creation a very attractive aspect of video games. "I'm not that interested in characters like a premade person, I love character creation. I like getting to play myself inserted in the world inserted a lot of the time." They, however, added,

> "I tend to like the ones, you know, who are withholding things cause I wanna figure out what's going on with that character. I enjoy characters I agree with but I'm also interested in characters who do not align with my cause and can be my opponent. In Portal GladOS – she's an opponent I gotta beat, she's smart and is a challenge. In *Dragon Age 2* – Anders is right but also he blew up the city, you know! There should be a lot of nuance to the character for me to like them."

Overall, the participants did not like characters that were self-righteous, one-dimensional, or that seem to be a "representation character". Eli gives the example of Hainly Abrams in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. As outlined in the introduction, this particular character was widely criticized by the transgender gaming community. Even though this dialogue tree was later rewritten, the character was mentioned by all of my participants as one of the worst recent attempts at trans inclusion:

> "Look! There's representation! It completely misses the point by not giving the character any depth and being just like "I just need to tick off these boxes!" If you try to represent society as it is, by default you'll have representation in your stories but they instead think in labels and marketing" (Eli).

This sentiment reflects the existing research. Matt expressed a similar disinterest and dislike of many characters that are supposed to represent a marginalized group: it is often a character lacking depth that does not have a key role in the plot and "is just there to be trans" (Matt). Shaw (2017) has argued that this opposition or disinterest in "representation characters" is an act of defiance against capitalist label marketing and being seen as a label instead of a complex person. She develops this idea further, insisting that tactics like expressing disinterest in representation or, as Halberstam date proposes, "hacking the narrative" by using mods, glitches are the tactics of resistance against neoliberal label-based marketing and representation that falls short. That leads me to discussing the use of mods by the participants.

Modding, short for "modification", is an act of altering aspects of a game by players to change the way the game looks or behaves. These changes can range from small

tweaks to adding entire characters and storylines, new move sets or maps, depending on the genre of the game. Some mods are premade by other players, but all mods can be written through code. Poor (2013) discovered that professional motivation is actually not a factor that modders consider the driving force behind their fan labor. Instead, they focus on fun, community, and making the game better. The use of mods is supported across the whole sample, and Three of the participants have used mods before. As Eli put it,

> "[M]ods are a good thing because it takes away the power away from the big studios and you can have a creative expression in these games. You can express yourself and create the story you wanted or to just straight up make it better."

While he used premade mods for adding romance options or mods that change the cosmetic look of the game, he never used trans mods:

> "I never felt the need to mod my games in this way. I am trans outside of the games, you know, it's hard enough. Let me be not trans in my games and just exist!"

This once again directs attention away from issues of identity and representation to the joy in transformations, agency, and creativity.

Jana actively used mods not only to modify the cosmetics or the "quality of life" mods that improve the overall performance of the game or make it easier to navigate, she also used trans mods specifically during the early stages of her transition to alleviate dysphoria.

> "When I played *WoW*, I had dysphoria about my previous character who was a male undead rogue. At the time, once you made a character, you couldn't change it on the server, and the server was private, so I couldn't make a new character on the same server and play with the same people. I installed a mod to change him into a female Night Elf, but the character would appear normal to everyone on the server. I had mods for other games where a base game is not the most fleshed out, and the mods do that pretty well, like expanding on the base game when it kind of sucks on its own."

This highlights the situationality – sometimes mods are necessary to have a better quality of real life, such as Jana's example of Wow, and sometimes they are helpful to make the game itself more enjoyable.

One of the mods, or rather a group of mods, that all participants mentioned was the modding culture around *Fall Out: New Vegas*. It was jokingly considered to be a trans game, but looking at the reddit communities, one can see a prolific modding group of transfeminine gamers specifically. While the reason for the love of this specific game by

transfeminine people and trans women stems from the negative online discourse of GamerGate few people remember, the mods that this community has produced include not just quality-of-life patches but entire new storylines and characters being included into the base game, some of which are transgender.

Another use of mods that my participants were interested in were mods that appear silly but are trying to essentially break the game or change the physics of the game in a strange way.

> "I'll watch these ridiculous, silly mods like replacing your weapon as a vegetable or jailbreak skyrim mods so you can actually affect the world. So, I like the mods that are pushing the game to its limits cause I get a lot of glee from seeing how far you can push the structural integrity of the game until you make the game go haywire. Stripping back a lot of outward facing layers and seeing the physics and coding behind it is cool and can be fun or a big fuck you to the developers." (Vee)

Modding is seen as helpful and fun by all participants. This emphasis conforms mirrors the conclusions of Poor (2013) to have mods as an element of self-expression, but it also exceeds that motivation: modding, my data shows, is used or seen by trans players as a way to "break" the game and find a place in it for themselves.

When I asked the participants what characters they see as transgender or if they remember any canonical trans characters, all participants mentioned Madeline from *Celeste* as one of the key trans characters. Other mentions included Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), Venus from *We Know The Devil* (2016), Hainly Abrams from *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), Mindy from *Dishonored 2* (2016), Chaos from *Hades* (2020), and the protagonist from *Undertale* (2015). Out of these seven canonical transgender characters, one belongs to the genre of a platformer, one – roguelike, meaning the protagonist repeatedly dies in order to progress in the game, three from RPGs (even though *Dishonored* can also be classified as a stealth game), and one from an indie visual novel. Only two of these games are indie, and the rest are run by a major publisher. Three of the characters are protagonists, the rest are NPCs (non-playable characters). All of these characters are confirmed to be transgender by the publishers with the exception of the Undertale protagonist who is referred to by they/them pronouns in the game text.

When asked about characters that could be trans, though, the participants gave much more varied answers. They started off in every conversation by listing the characters and then talked about larger themes, design elements, text cues, and the ludic elements of

gameplay that would support those characters' transgender identity and aspects of character embodiment. As Matt says,

> "I do think there's a good idea of Daud as trans because he is an outcast but in a self-chosen way, and he spent a lot of time to get where he is so there's a combination of unusual relation to society and his little group of outlaws. A very nontraditional way of building community and chosen fatherhood. Daud also hasn't been seen for a long time, a lot of people know him only by a nickname. He has this weird mix of physicality and non-physicality. In *high chaos* it's a very physical game because you do all the killing and he is scarred, but in low chaos you don't get noticed, there's a certain bodilessness of it. He's there but he isn't, especially with the blink."

Matt describes several layers upon which they base their encoding of the character as transgender. They look at the game text, which presents the character of Daud in *Dishonored: The Knife Of Dunwall* (2013) not just as a leader but a father figure to a group of assassins. That game text also shows that not many people know his name, and it is not clear whether the name Daud itself is given by his mother or chosen. Then they describe the physical appearance of the character, which I would categorize as a design element. Daud is presented as a covered from neck to boot man with visible scars that get more prominent if a player has an aggressive playstyle. Finally, Matt delves into the ludic element of the game, which in this case consists of two mechanics: stealth and "blink", which in the Dishonored universe means teleportation from one place to another that is unique for everyone who possesses this ability. In the case of Daud, his blink stops time, so from the outside view, he stops existing in one place and instantly appears in another. When I asked Matt to talk about it more, they said,

> "I feel like it's something a lot of trans people experience, this like…you're in your body but you're not. Dissociation almost. It is sort of like that, you know, you're in a place and then you're somewhere else. Also, often no one really sees you, whether that is your intention or not."

It shows the interconnectedness between the ludic and narrative elements of the game. It is impossible to separate the mechanic of blink (teleportation) specific to this character and the story of a grizzled assassin hiding from everyone.

All of the participants brought up specific text, design, and ludic mechanics that they encode as trans: transformative mechanics, such as shapeshifting or lycantropy, change of weapon aspects in *Hades* (2020) that entirely change the way the weapon is played,

monstrosity or being on the fringe of society, and being a shapeless or covered body. Some of these mechanics such as robots as nonbinary characters are considered to be a stereotype that can be done badly, but as Eli put it,

> "A lot of the times when it's not an intentional thing, it's cool. But if they were creating an evil AI as trans, I would take a problem with that, you know, like you didn't think hard enough. When that's the only representation that you're getting, that's bad, that's the same issue that I have with label characters. Diversity wins – sarcastically. You didn't do enough homework to write a fully-formed character and leaned into the stereotype instead."

As Eli alludes to and what other participants mentioned too, rather than being perceived as enemies, fleshed out AI and robot characters are often encoded as transgender by the players themselves, especially those who are nonbinary. Another character that my participants brought up is Link from the Nintendo gaming series (1986-present). Link has been jokingly called "trans culture" by all of my participants. Jana said, "Well, Link is a lazy example really, of course Link is trans. Gotta be more creative." The most intriguing part of Link's encoding is that he historically has been encoded both as a transmasculine and transfeminine person. Link's gender has been a point of contention for decades, to a degree that the series producer has responded:

> "Back during the *Ocarina of Time* days, I wanted Link to be gender neutral. I wanted the player to think 'Maybe Link is a boy or a girl.' If you saw Link as a guy, he'd have more of a feminine touch. Or vice versa, if you related to Link as a girl, it was with more of a masculine aspect. I really wanted the designer to encompass more of a gender-neutral figure" (Time 2016, n.p.).

While Link is decidedly androgynous in his design, wearing long tunics that are essentially dresses and tights, with his lithe frame and soft facial features, with a flat chest and a profound absence of nipples that will be familiar to those who have undergone top surgery, it is also important to note that the game mechanics support the ambiguity as well, allowing the players to encode Link as transgender in multitude of ways. *Legend of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* presents the player with a quest during which Link must get into the city of Gerudo Town in order to get help for the upcoming fight with the villain Thunderblight Ganon. The tricky part is, the city is populated exclusively by women, so in order to get there, Link must present as a woman and is helped to acquire the traditional clothes by a character who is revealed as a transgender woman herself. In the duration of the quest, Link shows shyness only when complimented on his beautiful looks, but what is

most interesting is that after the quest is done, the clothes stay in the inventory and can be equipped again, pointing to the ambiguity of his gender. Link has been designed to support transgender interpretations of any kind, and both his non-violent masculinity and unabashed femininity in text, design, and skills lead to that.

However, some of my participants went further than transing a character. Instead, they mentioned the entire mechanics on which a game is based or a plot. Jana, for example, brought up a popular video game series *Dark Souls* (2013-present). As described in chapter 1, *Dark Souls* is characterized by difficult, player-unfriendly combat, long and complicated boss battles, and the mechanic of bonfires that makes it difficult to save the game. Its popularity is such that the series has spawned an entire genre, souls-like. An important feature of the game that persists in text, design, and actual game mechanics, is known as "hollowing".

"Hollowing" acts akin to turning into a zombie after the player character dies in their human form. In human form, the PC can look the way that the player has originally created them, have more health and access to receiving aid from other players. However, when the character inevitably dies and gets respawned, the physical form of their body deteriorates, they lose the extra health, and are cut off from other players' worlds. Lorewise, the state of hollowing makes the character lose sight of who you are, eventually becoming an empty husk that aimlessly wanders the world. The only way to reverse the hollowing and "restore your humanity" is to either defeat a boss or consume a limited consumable called Human Effigy, which is implied to be the essence of another human being. While this mechanic sounded quite dehumanizing to me, Jana explained that she did not see it this way.

> "It's quite an interesting metaphor. It is a dehumanizing force, sure, but I feel like it is an effective reflection of dysphoria/transphobia, because it's imposed onto humanity by the fact that Lord Gwyn (who began the Age of Fire) is afraid of letting the world move on into the Age of Dark, artificially extending human lifespans but at the cost of their humanity. It's essentially a curse actively perpetuated by the current ruling system and *DS3* [Dark Souls III], a really beautiful ending where you and your Firekeeper decide to end the Age of Fire and have the world progress into the unknown Age of Dark. So, the dark is not a bad thing, and the hollowing is not avoidable until you embrace the feared darkness."

Vee gave an example of *Celeste* (2018) and another game, *Spiritfarer* (2020), that is classified as "an indie management sim and sandbox action game".

"I think *Celeste* and *Spiritfarer* are both trans narratives because both are focusing on some kind of a disconnect with the world. Celeste as a depression narrative for example, and many inward-pointing, depression pointing narratives are trans-coded because you often lose so much and struggle to find your footing, struggle to find confidence or friendships, or family even. Being trans, there are a lot of little deaths happening in your life no matter how joyful your journey is, so *Spiritfarer* is undeniably trans to me, even if the main character isn't, I don't remember if they are. Reintegrating into the world or finding meaning in it again is so hard, right, and there's a lot of care in *Spiritfarer* through this connecting in a more caring way even as something dies or someone leaves" (Vee).

The main mechanic of the game is twofold: one is managing the ship on which the main character, The Spiritfarer, guides the spirits to the afterlife, making sure that the guests are comfortable and have everything they need. Another is the discovery of items or other characters and interactions with them on various islands by steering the ship and exploring the islands as they come into view. The main emphasis on care and loss, the androgynous-looking protagonist, and the softness with which death is presented can be decoded as a trans narrative. Trans people get reborn in a way and die in the eyes of some that we cared about.

The way in which both Vee and Jana insist that narratives themselves can be trans mirrors the thoughts and considerations many transgender video game developers have when designing their games. In 2013, Polygon, a website dedicated to video game content, presented a feature about transgender game developers who would be presenting at a panel together that same year (Keogh 2013). Some of the people they interviewed included Anna Anthropy, one of the key trans game developers, merrit k, and Mattie Brice. All three women are crucially important for the rise of indie video game development, as well as pushing the boundaries of what even constitutes a game to begin with. All three women also base their games on personal experiences that would be difficult to communicate otherwise.

Changes

I asked the participants what games they would recommend to their friends and what games they would recommend to their transgender friends. Their answers were surprising. All of the participants mentioned the same games they had earlier in our discussions but

with a caveat: it would depend on what kind of experience their trans friends would be looking for. As Jana put it,

> "It depends if they are trying to unwind and relax, have fun, or maybe interact with a meaningful story. Like, trans or not, you aren't always in the mental space for *Dys4ria* or *Dark Souls*, sometimes you just gotta play a raid with friends in *Destiny 2*."

Finally, the participants and I discussed the stereotypes in writing of transgender characters that they wished would no longer be used, as well as what video game writers and developers should pay attention to when creating a transgender character for their game. Most of the negative stereotypes have been already mentioned in the previous section of this analysis such as evil transgender AIs. All participants mentioned that the issue of representation and stereotyping is not always limited to specific characters themselves. More important is that this characterization might be the only representation we get in video games. Trans characters and, by proxy, trans players, get either the storyline of suffering and pain or the storyline which vilifies them.

Therefore, what the participants wanted to see is more diversity of representation. Matt was excited to tell me that they would want more older trans characters and older characters in general. "I want to see us grow old. I want to see the lack of ability but also a life still being there." What Matt points at is that the majority of video game protagonists in general and all transgender characters that are officially encoded as such by the creators, are young. While it comes from an ageist assumption that old people are less capable, more boring as protagonists, or do not have a desire to have an adventure, as well as assumptions of old people not having a desire for play, this lack is also reflected in statistical data. Transgender people face higher risk of being killed than their cisgender counterparts, and, while the statistics vary, their average life expectancy tends to be lower as well (The Human Rights Campaign 2023). If one of the goals of video games is to show the world that is possible, why not give the spotlight to an old transgender person as the main protagonist? Why not show the possibility of transgender people aging and living long lives?

Another crucial point raised by the participants, which aligns with what the transgender game developers like Anna Anthropy are arguing, is that they would, in Vee's words,

> "love to see more games like *Celeste* that are coming from trans creators, and I wanna see more of us in the industry. There's a joke about all the Twitch streamers

being trans women and all indie devs being trans women. I wanna see more of our

stories being told by us and stories that do not necessarily center transness."

Eli agrees, saying "Let us exist, damn it, I've already come out in my life, I don't wanna do

that in games, too." In our discussions of the possible information that video game

developers should keep in mind when writing a transgender character, two primary things

emerged: first the necessity of including actual transgender people into the creation of the

character and showing transness in its complexity. Many of the participants echoed my

own frustration that video game developers seem to think of trans players as a market and

seem to care more about appearing inclusive while being able to sell their games both to

queer players and ultra-conservatives, without doing transgender justice. if a developer's

desire for inclusion is genuine, more work should be done. As Matt put it,

> "They should talk to trans people, hire trans writers, work with their fanbase, but
> also should know of gender deconstruction and performativity and how they go
> hand in hand. A lot of the time there are several steps of realizing where you are on
> the trans spectrum, where you fall exactly, how you articulate your identity. If a
> game spans over a longer time period, you should depict that. The journey rather
> than the destination."

In conclusion, the data analysis of the semi-structured interviews with trans video game

players show that they view existing trans characters with skepticism, prefer indie games,

and have certain visual and ludic cues as a possibility for trans decoding that range from

categories of motion, class, moveset, or visual design such as shapelessness,

monstrousness, and unique ways of character embodiment. In particular they consider

modding to be a way to make space for themselves within the games they love or push the

boundaries of what games can do. This sample of transgender players decode not only

characters but also entire narrative as trans through thematic and ludic cues, such as

repeated death and/or rebirth. Finally, they do not consider a certain style of games to be

trans-specific. All noted that they would recommend games to their trans friends

depending on their interests and not characters present.

3.2. Autoethnography: play trajectories

In this chapter I am presenting and discussing the results of autoethnography.

Autoethnography was carried out from September 2020 to April 2023. During that time I

played the games I had already owned and played passively by watching playthroughs of

other players on Twitch and YouTube, such as haelian and FrozenFoxy. The questions I

asked myself were similar to those I asked to the participants in the interviews but I had an advantage of also noticing the physicality aspects of my gameplay.

First, I thought about the circumstances that made me interested in gaming. When I was growing up in the late 1990s in Siberia, personal computers, laptops, or gaming consoles were not easily accessible: they were expensive, unapproachable in their complexity, and as many people had just gotten a landline like my own household, that kind of tech seemed almost too futuristic. My single-parent mother could not afford getting me such entertainment, so I am not sure whether I even was aware video games were popular.

In 2000, I got introduced to some of my first video games by my stepdad with whom I spent a lot of time and who allowed me to indulge in what my mother and grandparents perceived to be "masculine" hobbies like video games. We played together: I played some games with his guidance or watched others as he played more complex games. As he worked in the IT industry, I suddenly had more access to games and was almost encouraged to play. My parents did not veto the games I would be playing but I was not attracted to violent games anyway. To this day, it remains a genre I fundamentally do not enjoy, together with horror games.

So, to me video games were a way to connect to my parent, but I also used them as training for my lacking social skills as in RPGs a player would pick dialogue options to progress the story which would often be labeled with the tone of the message. I found it helpful as an autistic person who massively struggled with communication with peers.

Later my laptop would not be able to run most of the games I was interested in, so I would play indie and old games. In a way it was formative to the way I think about video games now as I am less interested in high resolution graphics and pay more attention to the game mechanics and the plot. However, as I was brought up by a graphic designer since my stepfather worked in design as well, I was taught early on about the importance of visuals in conveying a message.

My next question to myself was, "How do I play?". It fits within the thematic field "Gaming Experiences". My objective was to pay attention to the types of games I play and how I play them, the types of characters I am drawn to, and why, and the types of decoding I do as I play. I am generally drawn to RPGs and indie games that are smaller and therefore have a higher chance of being possible to play on the laptop that I have. I enjoy character- and plot-heavy stories, but also games that are a possible but difficult challenge for myself, such as *Celeste* or *Hades*. I played both of these games extensively during the process of

my autoethnography and I continue playing *Hades* now because both of the games are quite challenging: *Celeste* requires quick but precise movements while *Hades* is fast-paced and requires quick thinking to beat the climbing system of difficulty. While I physically struggle to play *Celeste* specifically as it is so precise, I find it manageable because of its accessibility options. Surprisingly, I also realized that both games are so attractive to me because the protagonist dies a lot. In *Celeste*, death means just restarting the level from the savepoint, but in *Hades* death is a plot device that is utilized to carry the story and meta-progression forward. It was a genuine discovery: as a transgender mentally ill person who has a strained relationship with his family, every change feels like dying in a way, leaving some things or even a previous version of myself behind. It does not feel sad to me, however, and I definitely seem to seek out stories that feature repeated death, be it as a story device or a game mechanic.

Another game I played a lot was *Dragon Age 2*. This game is known to be my comfort game, and I often turn it on when stressed just to run around the streets of fictional Kirkwall purely by memory from years and years of playing as Hawke. This game, however, is important to me and my transness as not only has it been a source of comfort, but it also was the first game through which I could play out queerness.

Four characters that can be romantic interests can be pursued regardless of the gender of the protagonist, and I would argue that some aspects of the romance go beyond the pursuit, showing some challenges along the way. That being said, the two characters I gravitated towards were Anders and Fenris.

Anders is a magic user, a mage in this universe, who is a fugitive sharing his body with a spirit of Justice. He is portrayed to be a revolutionary, whose past lover Karl was abused and killed by the anti-mage system. He first appeared in a downloadable content from the first game in the *Dragon Age* series, and I felt affinity to him as he was mentally ill, possibly bipolar, and unapologetically queer. The mechanics of his gameplay are interesting: despite being a bleeding heart revolutionary who dreams of the world in which mages are free, he is a support character playing the role of a healer. He does not have many offensive spells aside from the basic ones offered by the class and some that are specific to him focus on, surprisingly, psychic damage, making his body literally a walking bomb of sorts. The mechanics of offence twist what it means to attach: in Anders' case it is his entire being that acts as a weapon, which is quite often how queer people are perceived and how he is perceived for being a mage and housing a spirit.

I code the use of magic to be queer, as my participants did. Magic is transformative and in many storylines puts characters on the fringes of society, but also it gives them the power to use or change nature, which is, in my opinion, a great transgender allegory. While Anders is more obvious as an example, Fenris is more complicated. This character is a warrior coming with a traditional warrior moveset that I as a player could expect from the class up until a certain point in the character upgrade, during which novel movesets start being integrated that are atypical. Fenris, while being a warrior, is also physically infused with a magical substance, lyrium, that gives him some skills that are more traditionally applied in the mage class. His skills such as Lyrium Ghost and Spirit Pulse are the moves that grant the character the appearance of a ghost making him difficult for the enemies to track and evict Spirit and Elemental Force damage, which normally is a mage ability. I encode Fenris as transgender not only, or maybe primarily, not because of the text of the game and the character arc of the character, even though the text supports this encoding as well as Fenris takes a new name and completely physically changes, leaving his old life behind as a result of the use of magic on him, but through the ludic element of the skillset. The skills make him trans-class, a mage and a warrior at once, which I would argue is an active implementation of binary transgression. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why I picked to play as Fenris during battle not less often than my own protagonist. His attacks also felt expansive and quite different from tighter mage or rogue movesets that I normally would go for.

A big part of the research was done as I was battling COVID-19. I got every side effect possible but thankfully did not need to be hospitalized. However, as I had a fever for the entire first two weeks of the illness and developed constant dislocations of my fingers that did not stabilize until a few months ago from the moment of me submitting the thesis, playing games became difficult. I decided that, since I had the modern version of the plague, watching *Dishonored* with its accompanying DLCs (Downloadable Content) would be fitting.

The playthrough I chose was low-chaos, meaning that the player had to be stealthy and avoid active combat or lethal options, which in game meant that he was trying to hold on to his humanity and dignity. This choice was imperative to me: I like stealth games that require thinking and feel hyperempathetic towards characters, meaning that my feeling of empathy towards characters can extend to me feeling actual physical pain for them. I did not want to stress myself out while very ill, and a more cerebral playstyle is always exciting to me. The mechanics deal with monstrousness, disembodiment of sort through

teleportation, and not being seen, which I recognized as a trans mechanic: we are also not seen and often intend not to be, are perceived as disfigured or monstrous creatures, and to transmasculine individuals, the rhetoric of tainting yourself is very prevalent. I was more than familiar with that, so the game's embrace of these anti-societal ways of embodiment and power felt liberating.

I was also attracted to the way in which the main character never shows his face and never speaks either, allowing him to be a blank canvas for projection, but also as a mechanic, masks or shapelessness and voicelessness are reminiscent of my experiences as a trans person as well, be it an inability to have my voice heard in a group, come out, or a feeling of dysphoria over my body that often made me want to not have a body when I was younger.

What I was intrigued by as I was writing this section, was that even through passive play I was able to get a feel of the movement, as well as recognize visual design choices that were used to unsettle and guide the player. I had had enough experience with video games of different kinds to be able to spot the right way to a quest (or be mislead by the game that used this trick, intentionally guiding the player away), and how environments were also a character design, such as Dunwall, falling apart and suffering with disease, for which the protagonist was fighting, not less plagued in his own way.

Finally, in the thematic field of Evaluation/Changes, I thought of what I did not like or would change in video games. The first thing I thought of was the fact that in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* it is impossible to progress in a dialogue with an NPC (Non-Playable Character) Krem, who is canonically transgender, unless the player asks him transphobic questions, such as "So are you really a woman?". It was not a game I was able to play but I think about every day and that means a lot to me. Krem was an important character to me, with whom the writers had obviously had a more thought-out approach, so this moment hurt that much more and continues to do so. It felt like a betrayal because the effort was clearly there, transgender people were consulted in the process of writing Krem, and yet the writers were not able to avoid transphobia.

Another evaluation of mine was that I wish more games took risks in mechanics, the ludic element of gameplay, to convey something about a character or a narrative, be it trans or otherwise different. Triple-A games use lore as a crutch, I would argue, and do not pay enough attention to how the play happens. They seem to divorce the mechanics and the plot, forgetting the body of the player and the physicality of play, making both feel less

engaging and more boring. Surprisingly, Fenris continues to be a more successful trans character in video games to me despite not being transgender officially: the trans-classness of play is what I would want to see more of.

Chapter 4. Situating Life Experiences and Repurposing Game Development Tools: The Perspective of Transgender Video Game Developers

This chapter extends the elements of trans literacies identified in chapter 3 to attend to the perspectives of two prominent trans video developers in the wake of GamerGate. The analysis is based on two presentations by transgender video game developers Anna Anthropy and Mattie Brice. This analysis is focused on the ways in which these transgender video game developers design games informed by their life experiences and their transness, what concept of games they have, and how they perceive their players.

4.1. Now We Have Voices

This talk was presented by Anna Anthropy at IndieCade, an international festival of indie video games, in 2016. Anthropy started her presentation with a statement "QUEER GAMES ARE IMPORTANT". While this statement outlined the topic of the talk in terms of marginalized experiences, not focused just on transgender perspectives but on queerness overall, she emphasized her own experiences, the experiences of other transgender developers, some of whom were in the room during the talk. In her introduction of the presentation, Anthropy referenced some queer independent games and game-makers that were invited to the conference as their games were deemed to be some of the most important games of 2012. She explained that most queer games are independent as the "dominant industry model does not allow for them", that is for games that have queerness at the forefront. This dominant model, discussed in chapter 1, is a cycle of

> "straight White male developers making the games that straight White journalists market to straight white male games, some of whom will be recruited to be the next generation of straight White developers" (1:30-1:34).

As she points out, this industry model privileges a very narrow group of people with little experience of oppression and does not allow for art that "comes from a wider range of human experiences" or taking creative risks. This allows at most tokenism: including a character who *is* their identity and nothing else or whose queerness/transness does not change or influence the story in any major way. The actual lived experience of queer people is messy and complicated, which often is totally different from what token

characters offer. She quoted Mattie Brice who writes about the trope of "the pursuit": mainstream games stop being interested in queer romance once you successfully finished the interactions with another character to romance them, which ends in a supposedly happy relationship. In comparison, queer games are interested in the actual dynamics that happen within a relationship, not just the leadup to it.

Since the mainstream video game industry does not have the place for video games made from marginalized perspectives, queer, disabled, trans, female developers have created their own communities and repurposed the existing tools for their use. One such tool is Twine which was originally created to make hyperlink stories. Twine "doesn't involve coding or creating the additional assets, graphics, and sound, it's free. If you can type in a short story, you can make a Twine game." (5:58-6:04). Twine is an open access tool that is easy to use for those who have been discouraged from coding like women and queer people. Anthropy described her findings from keeping an ongoing list of currently existing Twine games. Most of them were made by queer, trans, genderqueer authors with unique perspectives. Those perspectives deal with different subjects, the ones one normally would not see in a mainstream video game, and make video games look completely different as well. The decentralization of the means to create video games has led to the option for the minority to get their foot in the door.

One of the games Anthopy takes as an example of a creative use of Twine, a tool that was informed by the developer's perspective, was *Lim* by merrit k. This game reminded her how violence in video games can be harrowing, can make the player feel and be connected to their own experiences and struggles. *Lim* is quite a simple game. In this game, the player is a colour-changing square in a game world populated by squares with a stable blue or brown colour that react aggressively if the player square does not match in colour with the blue squares more so than the brown ones. In order for the player to move through the stages, they have to hold down a button to keep the colour the same as the surrounding squares, but it becomes progressively more and more difficult. Anthopy compared this to her experience of transness and passing, the dysphoria while trying to conform that is comparable to the shaking screen when the player is holding the shift button. Using different game making tools made by a transgender developer this game would not be possible within the mainstream model.

While independent games by transgender developers like k.'s *Lim* are often simple by design, the life experience of the developers is its foundation: many transgender artists

showcase their experiences in a more abstract form to distill its nature from the form or body in an objectified of dysphoric form to impact. Mainstream games relying on tokenisation or trope of the pursuit, as well as aiming for financial success, find the games with a unique and often uncomfortable perspective financially risky.

4.2. Diva Ex Machina: Not Just A Girl With A Gun
The second talk I analyzed is the talk by Mattie Brice at AlterConf in San Francisco in 2015, *Diva Ex Machina - A Perspective on Games*. Brice started by saying that she had left the industry and would no longer contribute to it while still making and developing games, as well as talking about them. She noted that she could be perceived to be particularly dismal about the industry because her Journey had ended and was disappointing. Brice considered her perspective towards video games to be divergent and interdisciplinary since she had various working experiences, as well as multiple intersecting marginalized identities, such as her being transgender, Black, and female. At the same time, she acknowledged that she spoke for herself and not for an entire group of people she might be associated with.

The first part of her talk was dedicated to the ways in which the field would be able to increase diversity within video game development. She contrasted her opinion with how the mainstream video gaming industry model approaches this issue. Some of her suggestions are also related to the subject of this thesis: how transgender developers' gaming literacy and life experience influence the ways in which the games they produce have their transness encoded within. This starting point is similar to Anthropy's: there needs to be a wider definition of what video games could be, and that would not always line up with the perception that the dominant video gaming model has or with an idea of safe financial success. "The solution is needing more weird, personal, accessible game-making tools." Brice insisted on the importance of games that do something other than fun made by marginalized people using those tools. According to her, those different, "weird little" tools would broaden what games could be and how they could function.

The next question she discussed was how to increase the diversity within the industry. In the industry, she answered, there are two ways to do inclusion: if marginalized people are victims of abuse or they are rich. She focused on women in games and so she highlighted how reporters wanted to know about the abuse from the industry or in private she had gone through the year prior due to GamerGate. The dominant industry model allows marginalized people to have space only if they are abused and are then become tokens

themselves, interestingly only on the basis of their identity and not their work or whether they fit the idea of success. That model of engagement does not allow for intersectionality: if she is known as a woman in games, she cannot be acknowledged as a trans Black woman in games, that is an intersectional identity that is too complicated, uncomfortable, and unmarketable. Instead, her solution was to focus on local identity instead of "an abstract thing for a field" (17:30-17:37). Local communities are often more different from one another than larger identities, and therefore they actually focus on the issues and demands within the community. Brice's counteroffer to larger conferences was to organize an anticonference, during which anyone who followed the safe space rules was welcome to speak. As a result, the exchange of information was full of new perspectives.

Finally, Brice discussed the question of what diverse games are. How are they different from the highly budget triple-A games? Again, she compared her perspective to the perspective of the mainstream model of the video game industry. According to this model, diverse games mean putting a female character to a "usual slot that a man usually is in" (20:56). Brice's example is *The Last Of Us (*Naughty Dog 2013*)*: the Main protagonist is a girl who is Queer and has a gun. In this case, the idea of what the game is does not change: it is the same zombie apocalypse game players are used to, just with a girl as a protagonist. For the mainstream, tokenism is diversity. Yet, when the narrative itself does not change, there is no actual difference other than seeing different people, which is not enough.

Finally, Brice outlined what she thinks would help change what we think games can be. She called it "Death of the Player", similarly to Death of The Author. What it means is, that players have certain expectations of games: their rules, procedures, a certain colonial quality as game plots expectations are connected to expansion, conquest, solving, and individuality at the expense of the world.

> "To me, this is not my experience of the world as a marginalized person, I don't get to have those feelings. You're never going to get my experience if these are the things that need to be in games" (22:19-22:25).

With this mindset, a video game designer or developer would have to approach game design completely differently. Brice used her game *Mainichi* that has been described in chapter 3 in more detail as an example. She had made this game for her friend to help her understand how the daily interactions that Brice had with strangers on her way to the Coffee Shop affected her as a Black trans woman. She described her intentions and design process: the physicality of the actions such as what outfit to wear, not having a clear choice

of what to do and how to "progress", no winning state to begin with. Brice argued that diversity in games would not necessarily help achieve social justice because it relies on consumer video game design like gamification. Instead, she introduced the idea of situating games in real life. This resonates with the game design from marginalized indie developers or actual real life games such as her game *Mission*, which is a bar crawl with a set of rules that would allow the participant to see how gentrification affects eating out spaces.

To sum up, both talks highlight the difference in game design of independent games made by marginalized video game developers, and both presenters refer to their own experience in design specific to their identity. For the purposes of this study, I focused on their experiences as transgender women. Both Anthropy and Brice outline the institutional difficulty of accessing traditional coding tools. That is why "weird", no-traditional tools like Twine have become so popular among transgender developers. Twine as a tool was not originally built as a video gaming development tool: indie developers, many of whom are transgender, use the program differently to creating engaging games with visuals instead of simple hyperlink stories. Moreover, according to Anthropy and Brice and other research, trans-developed independent games, whether they use Twine or a different tool, diverge from mainstream games in their design. The games are often experimental, going beyond what the mainstream video gaming model considers to be a game. They delve into topics that are considered unmarketable, often have their goal to make the player experience something other than fun, and, while simple, do not seem to focus on what kind of experience a player might want to have and what kind of a game they expect.

Instead, these games as my analysis shows incorporate the developer's lived experience as a trans person, intersecting with their other identities, at the level of code and design. The two are in fact inseparable: as both Anthropy and Brice point out, the mainstream model does not have space for trans stories that go beyond the pursuit or go beyond the classic story model. Trans lived experience, however, is often uncomfortable, non-linear, difficult to fit into traditional expectations. The indie video gaming scene provides space for those experiences through non-traditional tools that allow for that experience to be coded into the game, and the developers do so intentionally.

In terms of ludic elements, the games Anthropy and Brice discuss often use mechanics that are not traditionally employed. For example, *Lim* employs such mechanics like keeping a button pressed at all time to be able to go through a level, which increases in difficulty, to effectively show dysphoria; *Mainichi* uses mundane actions that provide no satisfaction or

evident and predictable victory to show the microaggressions a trans person might experience. As in many other games these diverging transgender experiences are integrated literally on the level of design.

Conclusions

My research substantially expanded past my initial interest in the decoding of characters. All participants noted some of the aspects of code that lead them into decoding a character as transgender. They include monstrousness, lycanthropy (turning into a wolf) or turning into another animal, shapelessness of the character, such as covering clothes or masks; magic usage, movesets that cross over classes, and use of stealth mechanics. However, as my research progressed, it became clear that my participants and I actually went further into decoding entire video games as transgender, going beyond just a character or an arc. The examples of such decoding included games focusing on death and rebirth, loss, drastic change, especially change of form through corruption or what is perceived as such within a part of the narrative. I propose that it proves the point many of the participants voiced, that token transgender characters included in triple-A storylines is not enough: the entire storylines themselves can be trans-coded on a literal level, including game mechanics and a plot.

I now wand to return to my guiding proposition that there is a type of transgender literacy that helps transgender developers (and players) to encode characters as transgender and help them interact with those characters and entire games differently. Emerging from the interviews, my own autoethnographic experience, and the analysis of video game developers' posts and panels, there are indeed indications that transgender players interact with video games characters differently. In response to the guiding question of what constitutes trans literacy, my analysis suggests four key components of trans literacies: Trope and mechanics awareness; Gender awareness; Transing the plot and Embrace of failure. In conclusion, I briefly discuss these in turn.

Trope awareness

The first aspect of trans literacy is more general and, I would argue, one that applies to a wide group of players as Alexander (2009) also explores in his work: trope awareness. All participants showcase a deep understanding of how any given game or genre is supposed to work, and what kind of character arcs they can expect. As Rash noted in their example of *Spec Ops The Line*, which is a shooter with a twist, even when the game did not provide any instructions, "the game tells you 'you've played war games before, here you go, buddy'". Additionally, in my own example of Fenris, a warrior character from *Dragon Age*

2 who has mage-like abilities, I as a player pay attention to the way in which a character is played, being able then to use that information as a sort of text in my decoding of them as trans.

Gender awareness

When discussing gender with my participants, all echoed the notion that they had to be extremely self-reflective in order to understand their own gender and be able to articulate it. They do not take gender as a given in games either. An understanding that gender is malleable and subject to change, as well as the awareness that they as trans players are not included in gaming spaces or stories, present an opportunity for them to "hack the narrative" (Halberstam 2017) and encode a character as trans, because why not? *Mainichi*, an autobiographical game by a transgender developer, would not be possible without that awareness. The trans developers whose positions I analysed are hyperaware of their marginalized identities, the ways in which they perform gender, and the ways in which the industry treats them. They are conscious of how gender is played within games, too, as evident by Brice's examples of tokenism and Anthropy's example of gender in indie games. Through my own experience of gender, I see shapelessness, magic, and monstrousness as connected to gender and use those connections in my decoding of, for example, *Dishonored* and its protagonist Corvo.

Transing the plot

Trans literacies, however, go beyond individual gender experiences. As Eli expressed the sentiment that is echoed by the video game developers, "It goes to the understanding of systems, not just gender." By recognizing the systems of oppression, daily interactions, and capitalist marketing, transgender players are able to "trans the plot". This is a larger type of hacking than what Halberstam (2017) conceived, one that allows players to look at *Spiritfarer* and decode it as a trans game in its entirety, not just the player character, or consider *Dark Souls* as a transgender metaphor. The mechanics of the game, the plot of the game, which is concerned with guiding the dead to the afterlife and making them comfortable on their journey is deeply connected with "a million little deaths and rebirths" (Vee) that transgender people have to go through in our own journey. Transing the plot, I argue, is a form of hacking or countergaming that allows transgender players to engage with games contextually within their lives, decoding them in relation to oppression they experience as transgender people, romantic struggles, or familial estrangement they might

go through. These experiences do not have a space pre-coded within mainstream games, but through transing the plot, transgender players break that code.

Embrace of failure

Finally, trans players embrace failure. Both Juul (2017) and Halberstam (2017) discuss failure in games at length: trans players embrace games as a safe way to fail and is a medium which embraces failure. This includes different types of failure: failure of a game that is broken and bugged invites for modding like *Fallout: New Vegas*, failure of a character being not fleshed out allows for more interpretation and open-endedness, a failure of a player themself is often welcome and expected like in the iconic *Celeste*, which forces the player to die over and over or in *Dark Souls*, where "hollowing" is not considered to be a failure - just a choice one can make. It is also the failure of indie games developed by trans developers to be mainstream, as well as the failure of trans players themselves to be an easy market. What is more, from my analysis of the two talks with Mattie Brice and Anna Anthropy, these transgender literacies are considered by transgender on the level of code: their games are built with transness in mind and are unable to be played without consideration for their experience.

Importantly, these four components of literacies, Trope and mechanics awareness, Gender awareness, Transing the plot, and Embrace of failure are performed with an awareness of the code of any given game: its ludic and narrative elements that are interwoven and interconnected, be it the plot or the movesets, graphic design elements, dialogue trees, and many other aspects.

One example was *Spiritfarer* from an indie developer and another was *Dark Souls*, which is quite unusual for a triple-A game. Additionally, all participants reacted positively towards modding as the existing games often either did not have any place for them to have their experiences reflected or there was a joy in pushing a game's boundaries beyond what it was supposed to do and how it was supposed to play like. Interestingly, all noted the difficulty of getting video games and inaccessibility of high-performing hardware or licensed consoles, which aligns with my own experience and the experience of the two video game developers the talks of which I analyzed. If my participants could decode entire stories as transgender and wanted complex characters that would be different, transgender video game developers and designers code games with their transness as the

base for the code, acting as if a fulfillment of that desire that they themselves have. I argue that according to the analysis of their talks, Anna Anthropy and Mattie Brice both discuss indie video games that are coded with trans literacy but not expecting players to share this literacy. As Brice noted, the "death of the player" is important to tell a story they want to tell while leading the player towards empathy through teaching them the mechanics they are unfamiliar with and unexpecting of. At the same time, this disregard of the player and the market research of what players want lends these games to resonate with transgender players on a deeper level.

Transgender video gaming literacies have not been studied before, and this research contributes to the field this knowledge of unique decoding strategies trans players use in video games. Additionally, strategies of video game design by transgender developers have not been extensively studied in a formal way, especially with their connection to the transgender video game literacies I analyzed in my research. However, there are also some limits of my the study. My interview sample was quite small due to the nature of my disabilities and the research having been conducted during the pandemic, which might lead to a narrower scope of perspectives. Additionally, since I recruited the participants by snowball method through friends and messages on video game-related websites, it might have also led to an unintentional similarity within the sample. All of the participants fall into the same age range, similar class background, and all of them have at least a Bachelor level of education. Only two of the participants were transgender People Of Colour, which also implies a narrow racial diversity. A study with a larger sample might extend and nuance the findings presented here, as would an extension of the talks I analyzed that while insightful were limited to the two transgender women. There is potential of wider discourse analysis of the strategies and literacies transgender video game developers employ for their games, including transgender men, nonbinary people, and genderqueer or gender-diverse developers.

My autoethnography was complicated by the COVID-19 infection and a long period of recovery, which impacted what games I could play, what I could pay attention to, and how much mental and physical energy I had in general. Undoubtedly, it could have been more thorough if not for the circumstances in which I worked. Moreover, while I conducted the analysis of autoethnography after the interviews with the participants to minimize possible

bias and before I analyzed the videos, I might have been impacted by the insights my participants shared with me. While I do not think it is a detriment, it is important to note.

These limits not withstanding, what my research shows is that transgender players are a group of players who rebel against tokenization. Instead of asking for games with transgender characters in them, which will likely disappoint us, we make space for ourselves with creativity. We break the games we love, test their limits and go beyond them, mod them, hack them, take ownership of stories and worlds, and make games no one could conceive of before as an act of rebellion and political action in the face of trans erasure not just in the gaming scene, but beyond.

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