

**A Second Reader's Review Report of Alex Andriushchenko's Master's Thesis**  
***Pushing the Game to its Limits: Trans Literacies in Video Games***

Never have I reviewed a master's thesis that concludes with such a powerful and simultaneously fitting "mic drop". The final paragraph presents a radical and yet sensitive emancipatory vision that trans literacy can yield in interpretation of video games, manifestations of which are centered in Alex's research project. The paragraphs concurrently answers Alex's research questions, demonstrates their ability to de-hierarchize the researcher/researched duality by including their self in the research without going native thereby confirming the student's good command of feminist research methods.

Alex's master's thesis is an outstanding piece of well-informed academic writing that investigates how transgender players interact with video games and their narratives, plot lines, character constructions, gaming mechanics and generally their ludic elements while performing – what was termed by Stuart Hall for a different genre – decoding of the cultural material. The underlying factor of the investigation is that a gamer/player – both active and passive one – has mastered a sort of gaming literacy, a form of competence that makes critical decoding and/or "hacking" of the gaming system possible. It follows that trans literacy is yet another critical epistemological layer that can generate more diverse, subversive and rebellious actions trans players can experience, think and enact while/upon playing selected video games.

In order to shed light on what trans literacy in video games is and more importantly what it does to trans players, Alex draws on queer game studies that focus on counter gaming strategies invite counterhegemonic stances in queering and/or "transing" narrative plot lines as well as game characters' and players' identities. Further, queer gaming studies also center the profit-oriented strategies of the gaming industry and its market which predominantly cater to cis hetero male dominant gamer group thereby either ignoring or senselessly misrepresenting queer and trans characters, plots, and imaginations. Employing Halberstam, Burill, Juul, Galloway and others, Alex uses a wide array of theoretical approaches to explain what constitutes trans literacy of/in videogames and also pointedly shows that developer/player duality – very analogous to author/reader binary – is not only culturally constructed, but consciously exploded in trans contexts. This is illustrated in what Alex terms as discursive analysis (but I would label it as mere close reading) of trans game developer's Anna Anthropy's and Mattie Brice's talks on their self-reflective work with their trans identity and its inclusion in and influence on the games they generate. This discourse analysis is, nevertheless, just a minority method Alex uses in his multi-methodological project.

The core methods are 6 semi-structured interviews with trans video games players aimed to explore their playing experience, claiming agency through playing and hacking games and critical reading of the structures that make a game possible and open to trans literacy. What is laudable is the diverse sample the student was able to secure for their project. The interviews are accompanied by Alex's almost 3-year long autoethnography of their own active and passive gaming. Parts that radically stand out in their quality and ingenuity are the student's repeated self-reflection on their positionality and the insights on how physicality can be part of both active and passive playing of video games for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, I wish to highly acknowledge that positionality in the thesis is grasped as a dynamics: Alex tells us what their positionality does to the research presented and why. The student does not merely list their categories of identities and belongings as often is the case in students' texts.

Alex's thesis is a dense, academic text of outstanding quality. It is nuanced, inventive, insightful

and excellent in how thought-through it is. It is eloquent and persuasive in its presentation, clear in its argumentation and written with some healthy confidence; last but not least it is enlightening and thought provoking, especially for a person, like myself, that approaches the text with expertise in literary theory. The commonalities and shared theoretical backgrounds are intriguing as they demonstrate the interconnectedness of cultural genres per se, the art discipline notwithstanding.

There are, however, some critical points that I would like to list here. I view them as suggestions and recommendation for improvement of the text, should Alex opt for publishing some critical parts of the research, especially the ones that arise from the combination of interviews and autoethnography.

The thesis runs on the minimum pages count; this is, nevertheless, made up for by the quality of the text. A more critical point is the lacking number of references in the empirical part of the thesis where interviews and autoethnography are dissected. It is clear that Alex draws on theoretical concepts introduced in the theoretical chapter of the thesis and makes traceable links between theory and analysis, references, however, go almost missing which is a formal aspect that I do not think justifiable. Also, on a number of pages throughout the text the word “date” appears after an author’s name. I assume it was to be replaced with a publication year, but this never materialized (see eg. pg. 26, 31, 38). While research questions are explained in detail on page 28, they are also briefly introduced on page 14 with a slightly different focus. This is confusing and a bit misleading. Personally, I find the theoretical, autoethnographic and concluding chapters the most engaging, less so Anthropy’s and Brices’s talks analysis. Interviewee’s quotes might warrant a more detailed contextualization of games mentioned. In summary, these are minor lapses that do not affect my general positive evaluation of the thesis.

During the defense, I would invite Alex to elaborate on the following: 1) Sometimes gaming is seen as an escapist past time where one can experiment with their identities, characteristics etc. Some interviews confirm this, but Eli strongly resists the notion of having to be a trans character in the game. How does this stance expand the notion of simulation, reality and/or escape and pastime/leisure? 2) What links can be made between trans subversion of narrative plotlines and queer and feminist theories in terms of life/narrative trajectories? This is a part that is analytically engaging in the thesis and I would love to hear more about Alex’s interpretations here. 3) Character age as an ignored category (besides others) in representation; what diversity and subversive potential does age as a category pose for game developers and the gaming industry? Thank you for responding to these questions.

In conclusion, I view the thesis as a highly competent academic text conveying nuanced analyses, displaying superb sensitivity in employing feminist and queer methodologies and epistemologies. It is with great pleasure that **I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest it be grades as “excellent”**

Prague, January 26, 2024

Mgr. et Mgr. Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová, Ph.D.