Transgender Emergence in Video Games
Intersections, Discourses, Directions

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, trans theory has conceptualised gender identity and bodily autonomy, advocating for self-exploration and political affirmation (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Stryker, 2017; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). This focus has resonated with game studies, which have examined video games as a medium for trans representation (Ruberg, 2020; Ruberg, 2022; Thach, 2021). This commentary explores the emergence of transgender identities in video games, outlining the state of the art of transgender representations and the experiences of trans players and designers. It highlights the significance of procedural elements such as character customisation, embodiment, and player-avatar relationship for transgender players. In doing so, it also suggests potential tensions and contradictions inherent in transgender emergence, arguing that while video games can provide positive and beneficial spaces for exploring gender identity, they may simultaneously perpetuate transphobia and exploit transgender experiences.

Keywords

Transgender; independent video games; character customisation; gender dysphoria; player-avatar relationship; embodiment; queerness

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The past few decades have seen the emergence of trans theory as a discipline, which has gradually moved from the strictly medical field to history, aesthetics, narratives and even politics of self-perception and affirmation (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Stryker, 2017; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In doing so, transgender[1] people have started

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[1] According to the American Psychological Association (APA), 'transgender' serves as an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or behavior differs from the sex assigned

to explore their political and social presence and to address the change they both perceive and wish for. Aside from the growth of the transgender discourse in academia and even in the public eye, this reflection has been mirrored in the media context, both in terms of quantifiable representations in films and TV and in terms of their critical reception (Billard, 2016; Cavalcante, 2017). From the 2010s onwards there has been a growing interest in LGBTQ+ themes also in the video game production and in the gaming community (Shaw, 2009; Shaw & Friesem, 2016).

Transgender emergence in video games

Different video games have showcased various approaches to portraying transgender presence: character creation options enabling a mismatch in secondary sex characteristics, scripted transgender characters, and representations of trans experiences through a critical use of the medium. This development underscores potential intersections between video games and transgender perspectives, particularly in the procedural dimensions of embodiment and player-avatar identification.

Character customisation options

In recent years, open-world video games have started to explore the possibilities offered by character customisation options in relation to transgender representation. Under the term 'character customisation' are intended a series of design practices that allow players to customise their avatar, personalising their name, gender, aesthetics, and/or statistics and skills. Games like *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020), *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), *The Sims 4* (Maxis, 2014, 2022 update), have provided players with the possibility of customising in detail one's own appearance, including secondary sex characteristics, gender identity indicators, hairstyle, makeup, clothing etc, even introducing the option of customising pronouns. This has sparked the debate both in the gaming and in the transgender community (Whitehouse et al., 2023), with the various strategies receiving mixed reactions from transgender players (Lacey, 2023; Liang et al., 2023).

Customisation practices play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between players and their avatar, which serve as the game unit that allows players to perform in-game actions (Banks & Bowman; Klevjer, 2022). Klevjer (2022) defines the avatar as a player's proxy—a tool that allow players to assume a fictional body and a fictional agency, offering new possibilities within the virtual world. Through the avatar, players are embodied in the game, and can interact with and inhabit the fictional dimension, which responds to their inputs (Klevjer, 2022). Waggoner (2009) has noted that

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at birth, including those who may identify as men, women, neither, or both (APA, 2011). In this commentary, the word 'cisgender' will be used to indicate someone who identifies with their sex assigned at birth.

the relationship between player and avatar is further strengthened when players engage in avatar creation and customisation, as this process fosters a deeper sense of connection and identification. Recent research, particularly by early career scholars, has begun to explore how this close player-avatar relationship affects transgender individuals (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna, 2024; Morgan et al., 2017; Whitehouse et al., 2023). These inquiries will be addressed later in this commentary.

Transgender scripted characters

Another way in which transgender presence has emerged in video games is through scripted characters in narrative based games. Thach (2021) proposes a taxonomy of transgender characters, identifying common traits and associated tropes. The analysis highlights four main trends: dysphoria (distress experienced by transgender individuals when their bodies do not align with their gender), depictions of mentally ill killers, trans shock (the revelation of unexpected gender markers), and ambiguity (Thach, 2021, p. 20). This study is based on characters entries registered as transgender in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, an ongoing project cataloguing LGBTQ+ characters and themes in video games. Thach identifies 63 transgender and gender-ambiguous characters appearing between the 1980s and 2010s, acknowledging that transgender representations have become increasingly detailed over time. However, Thach also notes a recurring association of transgender characters with mental illness and trauma, confining trans identities to reductive tropes.

Kosciesza (2023) brings forward such discourse, analysing the role of transgender non-playable characters (NPCs) in *Watch Dogs 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), and *The Last of Us: Part Two* (Naughty Dog, 2022). Drawing inspiration from the idea of the idea of the 'magical Negro' (stereotypical black helper in fiction), Kosciesza proposes the use of the term 'magical transness' to describe the "unique role of transgender supporting characters whose victimisation provides the opportunity for cisgender protagonists to act heroically" (p. 190, 2023). While the introduction of more diverse characters is commendable, such depictions risks flattening transgender narratives, in turn promoting stereotypes that might harm transgender communities. Kosciesza points out that it is important to reflect on the narrative possibilities that might be opened by trans NPCs, that at the time of the analysis are rather limited.

To summarise, at the time of writing transgender characters' narratives are rather scarce. While gender ambiguous characters or even races are not absent in video games, explicit transgender characters not only are still rare, but are rarely portrayed as integral part of video games narratives. Moreover, their introduction is often combined with tropes that flatten transgender identities and often come from heteronormative assumptions, as the overrepresentation of traumatic experiences. Such assumptions risk perpetuating a superficial engagement with transgender experiences and exploiting their narratives in favour of a facade of diversity that ultimately lacks depth and authenticity.

Transgender game design

Transgender emergence in video games further explored through the concept of transgender game design (Ruberg, 2022; Gass, 2024), following the existing scholarship on queer games design and its meaning (Chang, 2017; Ruberg, 2019a; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Chang (2017) describes 'queergaming', as an activity that challenges technonormative ideologies by incorporating glitches, inefficiency, unconventional rules, and alternative goals to embrace the experience of failure. Similarly, Ruberg (2019a) explores the potential to view the video game medium itself as queer, highlighting its capacity to be navigated in a subversive and non-normative manner. In 2022, Ruberg has expanded their reflection on queer games, suggesting a possibility for trans games, and emphasising transgender embodiment as a form of meaning-making (2022).

Other authors have focused on specific case studies that embody what transgender games design mean. McPhail (2024) analyses the video game *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games, 2018), as a representation of the experience of becoming and surpassing adversities, which can be interpreted as an allegory of being transgender and transitioning. In this, McPhail highlights the reception of *Celeste*, showing that players had discussed the possibility of Madeline as a transgender woman long before it was confirmed by the game designer. Therefore, *Celeste* conveys the experience of being trans beyond character representation.

Gass (2024) has observed the role of glitches in games by transgender and queer independent designer. A glitch is an interaction with a piece of technology that is perceived as unexpected and that is not always possible to explain (Gass, p. 7, 2024). Gass shows that the glitch might be "a desired state ... necessary for self-expression, creativity, ... and survival" (p. 19). It renders visible the violence and unexpectancy with which events happen in transgender life, which scripted narratives "struggle to communicate" (p. 19).

The discourse around transgender procedural design appears therefore complex. Examining trans games in contrast to linear and techno-normative frameworks surely helps mapping the ways in which transgender designers and players interact with the medium. However, this approach carries potential risks. Defining terms like 'trans' or 'queer' in broad, abstract ways allows for expansive exploration, but it may also overlook the lived experiences of transgender individuals, rendering these concepts vague or inaccessible. Further research is arguably required to explore the definition of trans and queer games, and most importantly how these can contribute to understanding how transgender players and designers engage with game spaces.

To summarise, recent years have seen diverse approaches to transgender representation in video games and game studies, including character customisation, scripted characters, and trans-centred game design and mechanics. However, creative and

academic practices concerning transgender identities are still evolving, with hope-
fully more and more diverse representations and discussions expected in the near
future.

The following sections outline the current research on transgender players and de-
signers, focusing particularly on character customisation options and avatar identi-
fication and on the potential of game design for self-expression.

Transgender players

Scholarship on transgender players is rapidly growing, highlighting how medium
specific aspects of video games, as embodiment or player-avatar relationship, im-
pact transgender individuals in game worlds and often allow for gender identity ex-
ploration, easing feelings of discomfort and dysphoria.

Griffith et al. have observed how playing among individuals with gender dysphoria
has positive psychological effects (2016). Furthermore, Morgan et al (2017) have at-
tested the positive impact of gaming in improving the mental health of transgender
youth. Baldwin (2018) has shown how transmasculine players create an idealised
version of themselves and employ the video game environment to explore their gen-
der identity.

Drawing from these studies, Whitehouse et al. (2023) have analysed the experience
of transgender players with avatars and gender alignment. The study focuses on 40
transgender participants and asks in which way they experience their gender iden-
tity within the game This analysis goes beyond character creation, demonstrating
how transgender players not only identify with their avatar in the customisation pro-
cess, but also during the gameplay, particularly in the interactions with other players
or NPCs. The authors note that transgender players find comfort in the anonymity
provided by video games, where both NPCs and other players are unable to ques-
tion their gender identity, or to 'deadname' them-that is to say, using their previous
name. As the authors note, "gaming worlds were viewed as a place where they
[transgender players] could express and experience their gender identity in a safe
manner" (p. 9). For transgender players, gaming thus becomes a positive experience
of recognition. However, Whitehouse et al. (2023) observe that players identifying as
male or female benefit more from character customisation, as non-binary options
are often harder to find.

McKenna et al (2024) investigate further how transgender players employ avatar
creation, aligning their findings to Whitehouse et al. (2023). The authors find that
"self-representation in video games through the customisation of avatars allowed
them [trans players] to present as their affirmed gender without being questioned
by others" (p. 39). For some players the aesthetic customisation of the avatar corre-
sponds to an ideal version of themselves, while in other cases it comprises a goal

for medical and physical transition. The authors notice that: "the experience of avatar creation allows the individual to position themselves socially within a virtual setting in a way that is most authentic to the self and affords players the opportunity to explore their own gender and interact with a virtual world as that affirmed gender" (p. 42). In so doing, video games actively contribute to the formation of gender identity, to its exploration both in terms of aesthetics and intersubjective relationships, and ultimately to its consolidation.

Other studies have reported that players' engagement with transgender representation might result in negative experiences. Liang et al. (2023) have investigated on the experience of dysphoria of transgender players when confronted with transgender representations in games. As possibly expected, players experience feelings of dysphoria when exposed to stereotypical or non-informed representations. This brings the authors to a call for action "in avoiding remediating gender dysphoria triggers in contexts where they would amount to trans-exclusionary content" (p. 388:25).

Studies on the relationship between character customisation options and avatar identification among transgender players suggest significant differences compared to cisgender players. While both groups develop meaningful connections to their avatars, the experience often holds deeper significance for transgender individuals. Video games allow transgender players to embody their ideal self, or experiment with their identities, a process that is vital for gender exploration and affirmation. Moreover, video games offer the possibility of being perceived as their gender within the game world—an experience that is often denied to trans players in their physical lives.

Transgender autobiographies and labour exploitation

Another interesting aspect of the relationship between transgender emergence and video games is the work of independent transgender game designers, often focused on their own experience with transitioning. Even in this case, procedural developments have greatly impacted creative practices. At the end of the 2000s, the emergence of software as Adobe Flash, Twine, Ren'Py, and the growth of independent game design allowed transgender designers to explore their experience of transition through the medium of video game. Among those, one of the most important examples is the one provided by Anna Anthropy, in her video game *Dys4ia* (2012). *Dys4ia* explores Anthropy's medical transition, sharing vulnerable and intimate challenges, as bodily changes with hormone replacement therapy, and the difficulty in social relationships while changing. Other examples are the works of Maddy Thorson, npckc, Taylor McCue. All these authors have put in pixels the experience of transitioning and existing as a transgender person. This suggests that video games play a crucial role as political terrain for transgender advocacy and affirmation.

However, such affirmation often comes with a cost. Ruberg (2019b) observes how, while transgender and queer designers had the merit to introduce transgender narratives in the medium of video games, they gain very little benefit out of it. The author discusses trans designers' work as precarious, often complex and comprised of both physical and emotional labour, and most importantly exploited. Drawing from interviews with queer designers, Ruberg argues that while queer indie games inspire mainstream studios, the profits generated by these influences rarely benefit the queer creators themselves. The article challenges readers to recognise the industry's systemic exploitation and calls for greater acknowledgment and support for the labour behind queer indie games. Further research is essential to explore how transgender representations in mainstream video games are shaped by the lived experiences of transgender designers, and how the industry can recognise their contribution and support their voices.

Discourses, tensions, contradictions

This commentary has provided an overview of the state of the art of transgender emergence in video games, and of the relationship between transgender players, designers, and the video game medium. All the above leads to the suggestion that video games already comprise a safe space for the expression of transgender perspectives and identities and could become a crucial political terrain for trans affirmation. Yet, transgender representation emerges within a hegemonically cisgendered industry that largely stifles or merely appropriates and commodifies this emancipatory potential (Ruberg, 2019b). Trans-emancipatory narratives are opposed to the ones of mainstream video games, where trans characters have often been portrayed as oddities, subjected to stereotyping, or consigned to the role of supporting characters (Kosciesza, 2023; Thach, 2021).

Trans emergence in video games suggests therefore tensions and contradictions between distinct but intersecting areas of production, which raise questions about transgender ownership and affirmation in the mainstream and independent sector. This commentary suggests three main contradictions that emerge from this analysis:

1. It is widely accepted that video games provide spaces for self-exploration and recognition to transgender players (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024; Whitehouse et al., 2023). However, this suggests that players have a positive experience of recognition only as long as they *keep it quiet*. The positive euphoria of being unquestionably oneself comes with a cost: hiding one's trans identity to avoid scrutiny or harassment. This concealment erases visibility, possibly leading other players to assume transgender players are instead cisgender.

2. It is relevant to note that the close relationship between transgender players and avatars predates the introduction of explicitly transgender customisation options (as in *Cyberpunk 2077*). This raises the question of how customising secondary sex characteristics is relevant for transgender players, and why such amount of detail was introduced in the first place. Most importantly, as Liang et al. (2023) caution, the emphasis on sexual attributes risks objectifying transgender individuals, provoking feelings of dysphoria, and ultimately excluding precisely transgender players.

3. While game design offers a powerful medium for transgender creators to express themselves, it also poses risks of labour exploitation (Ruberg, 2019b) and identity tourism (Liang, 2023). These issues can undermine the contributions of transgender designers, turning what should be empowering creative spaces into environments of marginalization.

Therefore, it emerges that medium specific aspects of games can serve as a powerful tool for inclusion and self-expression, but also carry risks of exploitation and misrepresentation, potentially harming the transgender community, already under significant scrutiny in the current sociopolitical climate (Butler, 2024).

The tension between empowerment and marginalisation within both game design and player experiences underscores the need for continued critical engagement with the medium both in academia and in the gaming industry, striving towards a space of trans affirmation rather than one of harm and erasure.

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