How video games give players the opportunity to explore gender

by Thalia Johnson

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science (Research) in Computing Sciences

under the supervision of Dr. Jaime Garcia
and co-supervision of Associate Professor William Raffe
and Dr. Luke Mathieson

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Thalia Rae Johnson, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Science (Research) in Computing Sciences, in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

With how video games are becoming an increasing part of many people's lives, many transgender people are using video games to help with figuring out their gender and how they want to live. The purpose of this thesis is to find out what role do video games have in transgender gamers' exploration of gender. A literature review was researched to find background information into the topic and to assist with the investigation. A study was then conducted that gathered the thoughts and experiences of transgender people in a survey and interviews, analysing the common themes to determine how video games give people a space for gender exploration. The study found that mental health benefits, social interactions, character creation, and representation all played a part in helping transgender people explore gender. This has all culminated in a framework that game designers can incorporate into their games to create a game that is more inclusive of transgender people and more welcoming of people exploring and experimenting with their gender.

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Terms and Definitions

- **Gender**
  - A part of a person's identity, a who you are (e.g. Man or male, woman or female, non-binary, agender, genderqueer, etc) (TransHub, 2021).
- **Transgender/Gender diverse**
  - Umbrella terms to describe someone whose gender it different to that assigned at birth (TransHub, 2021).
- **Cisgender**
  - Somone whose gender is the same as what was assigned at birth (TransHub, 2021).
- **Non-Binary**
  - Umbrella term for the genders that exist outside of the binary of male and female. This can include gender identities such as genderfluid, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender, bigender, etc. (TransHub, 2021).
- **LGBTQIA+**
  - An acronym standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, + other gender and sexual identities. Regularly shortened to just LGBT.
- **Genderfluid**
  - Someone whose gender is dynamic, constantly changing between male, female, and other non-binary identities (Gender Spectrum, 2019).
- **Gender Dysphoria**
  - The distress caused in people the mismatch of how they perceive themselves & their body, as well as how other people view them & their gender. Not all transgender people experience gender dysphoria. It is not a requirement to be transgender. Having gender dysphoria does not mean that a person is transgender (TransHub, 2021).
- **Transition/Transitioning**
  - Transition can mean different things to different transgender people. Typically, it refers to the steps that a transgender person takes to align themselves with their gender. This can include things like medical transition (taking hormones, surgeries), social transition (coming out to other people, being out as your gender), legal transition (legally changing name and gender markers), etc. For some people, this is a process that has an endpoint, for others, it is an ongoing process to build and align with their gender identity (Gender Spectrum, 2019).
- **"Come Out"**
  - Slang term for the act of telling people that you are transgender or gay (TransHub, 2021).
- **"Pass"**
  - Slang term for appearing to be a cisgender person of your gender to others, without them knowing that you are transgender (TransHub, 2021).

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Video games are a major part of our culture and a core part in many people's lives. They have become a way that many people escape their lives and have the freedom to do what they want. Many transgender people suffer from gender dysphoria, where distress is caused by the mismatch of how they perceive themselves & their body, and how other people view them & their gender (TransHub, 2021). This can also further develop into mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression (Health Direct, 2022). Video games give them an escape, they can immerse themselves into a world where they have the body that they wish, helping relieve their gender dysphoria, while also giving them the opportunity to explore their identity (Griffiths et al., 2016; Koscieza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019).

1.2 Research Questions

The research question for this project is:

1. What role do video games have in transgender gamers' exploration of gender?

This is divided into sub-questions:

1. How do transgender players use video games to help cope with mental health struggles and gender dysphoria?
2. How does interacting socially in video games and online affect transgender players' exploration of gender?
3. How does playing as and creating video game avatars affect transgender players' exploration of gender?

1.3 Objectives

1. Conduct a traditional literature review to find out what research has been conducted into how video games improve mental health and encourage exploration of gender.
2. Analyse the literature review and create sets of questions for interviewing and surveying people.
3. Conduct surveys and interviews with transgender players using the questions created and gather the experiences of these people. The answers gathered will help find first person accounts on how video games helped the participants explore gender and how they feel about the current representation of transgender people in video games.
4. Analyse the answers to the survey and interviews find common patterns and themes to answer the research question.
5. Develop a framework that can be used to help game designers with creating video games that are better suited towards positive transgender representation and experiences.

1.4 Significance

Through the preliminary literature review, the researcher found that there has not been much research conducted into how video games help explore gender. Furthermore, not a lot of research has been done into transgender people and their experiences. This project would help expand research into how transgender people use video games, and how video games can help with exploration of gender.

Additionally, previous projects into how transgender people use video games to explore gender would often focus on one category of either mental health (Griffiths et al., 2016; Strauss et al., 2019), social (Kosciesza, 2023), or avatar creation (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020). This project would expand on prior research by touching upon each of these different aspects together, gaining more insight into each of these categories and they can interconnect.

Most of the research that has already been conducted does not have a wide variety of participants, often having transgender men as the majority of participants, with a few transgender women. Often non-binary people are in the minority for these studies, and additionally very rarely have gender fluid participants. This was similarly found by McKenna et al. (2024), where studies like Baldwin (2018), Morgan et al. (2020) and Strauss et al. (2019) mainly included transgender men, and Griffiths et al. (2016) only had binary identities (though also gave insight into gender questioning people). This study would try to go for a broader target, trying to include more non-binary people.

Game designers may use the framework to create games that will be better tailored towards transgender and gender questioning people. The framework would help in creating spaces that allow for the exploration of gender and for better representation of transgender people, helping the transgender players with their mental health and normalising the existence of transgender people both for themselves and to cisgender people. Furthermore, better representation in video games may also encourage people to explore their own feelings about gender.

This research aims to be seen by other transgender, non-binary and gender questioning people, helping give them a better understanding of who they are and why they play video games. Additionally, this project will help spread awareness of transgender people's experiences and help people become more aware of transgender people. By spreading awareness, it will help educate people and therefore lessen discrimination against transgender people.

1.5 Researcher Position

Thalia Johnson is a master's by research student studying at UTS. Her research is also being funded by her scholarship, the "Australian Government Research Training Program Stipend". Thalia Johnson is a transgender woman, and decided to pursue this topic as video games helped her with exploring gender and wished to know more about why that is the case. Being transgender may also help with the study due to her own experiences with exploring gender and her ability to relate to the participants. It is additionally worth noting that as a part of her Bachelor's course, Thalia took the "Games and Graphics Project" subject. For the subject, Thalia did a small study about "how video games give players the opportunity to explore gender". She interviewed three transgender people and surveyed 26 people (half cisgender people and half transgender people). She used thematic analysis and found that the answers fit within themes of using video games for: Realisation and Acceptance, Socializing, Characters and Creation, Representation, Immersion, and Mental Health. The project concluded that video games do help with exploring gender but requires more participants to draw better conclusions and confirm validity.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1

Introduces the study. This includes detailing the research problem & questions, the objectives for this study, the significance of this study about why it should be undertaken, the position of the researcher

for transparency as well as why the researcher started this study, and finally this thesis structure to understand how this paper is structured and presented.

Chapter 2

The literature review that establishes the background research for the study. The review aimed to explore the works written into how video games give players the opportunity to explore gender. This is separated into three categories: Mental health, Social, and Avatar and the Game World. Mental health explores video games affect the players mental health, writing about improvements with critical thinking, the ability for video games to affect the player both negatively and positively with mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, and finally about the possible use of video games as a therapeutic tool. Social explores how players can connect to others and make friends, which can become support networks that the player can use for help, but also how it could push the player to growing distant from real life and encountering transphobia and homophobia. Finally, Avatar and the Game World talks about the use of the video game avatar and playing in the game world to create identity, linking to the theory of gender as a performance, that the player uses to create and explore a sense of self. This ends with writing about what representation in video games looks like for transgender people.

Chapter 3

This chapter details the preliminary study's methods and results into how video games give players the opportunity to explore gender. It describes a survey that was sent out to transgender people to gather their thoughts and experiences with playing video games. This was done to support the interviews and to further help with understanding the patterns and themes that form.

Chapter 4

This chapter details the deeper dive into how video games give players the opportunity to explore gender, using semi-structured interviews to gather transgender people's thoughts and experiences with playing video games. This chapter includes both the methodology for the interviews, as well as its results in the form of a thematic analysis, split into the categories of Social, Mental Health, Character Creation, and Representation.

Chapter 5

The discussion chapter brings everything together, discussing the results from both the survey and interviews while referencing previous studies for support, as well as to show how they may differ. This culminates in a proposed framework for creating games. This goes over game design aspects, such as within character creation and socialising, that encourage exploration of gender and help in creating games better tailored towards transgender people.

Chapter 6

This chapter describes the conclusions the paper comes to, as well as highlighting where more research is needed and any limitations this study had.

Chapter 7

References used throughout paper, including any video games that were mentioned. Uses UTS APA 7th style.

Chapter 8

Appendices, which include the questions asked in survey and interviews and their justifications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This is a traditional literature review, created to find and analyse the literature related to how video games give players the opportunity to explore gender. This focused on transgender people's experiences while giving some baseline information on cisgender people. Literature was found by access through the University of Technology, Sydney's library and Google Scholar. This literature review was then used to help in the construction of the interview and survey questions. This review will explore the literature created within three categories: mental health, social, and the avatar and the game world. Mental health benefits help give the player critical thinking, as well as creating an escape to relieve stress and help with depression and anxiety. Games further allow for more social interaction, giving transgender people support, while also allowing some to come out and socially transition within a safe environment. Finally, researchers have found that video games help give players the ability to create an avatar to represent themselves, which transgender and non-binary people use to help figure out their gender identity and expression.

2.2 Background

Many people across the world play video games, it has become a major part of many people's lives. Players will play not just to entertain themselves but also to socialise, connecting with friends and family while meeting new people and making new friends and even family. Others will use video games as an escape, to have the freedom to do what they want in a virtual world without consequences and in the process, find out a bit more about themselves (Koles & Nagy, 2016; Marques et al., 2023; Nardi, 2010).

Many transgender and non-binary people go throughout their lives living with discomfort about their gender, about how people perceive them and how they perceive themselves. Gender dysphoria is the term used to describe this dissonance between the person's perceived gender and the gender that they are. This is opposed to gender euphoria, the experiences of comfort from sense of self and gender (TransHub, 2021). Dysphoria can often progress further into mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression without any support (Health Direct, 2022).

Transgender and non-binary people may turn to video games to help with this. Due to the virtual worlds and characters that video games make and the player controls, it may become the perfect place for people to explore themselves, especially for transgender and non-binary people exploring their gender identity and expression. Furthermore, video games may help with alleviating transgender and nonbinary people's symptoms of depression and anxiety due to video games giving them a temporary escape from their situation (Griffiths et al., 2016; Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al. 2019).

This report will be a review of the literature that relates to transgender and non-binary people using video games to explore gender. It will go into detail about how and why people play video games while exploring the research that has been written about transgender and non-binary people using video games to explore gender. This will also explore how generally video games are used by cisgender players to explore parts of themselves. Furthermore, this review will also talk about the mental health implications of playing video games, while relating them to transgender and non-binary people's mental health. This report will also touch upon aspects such as representation and using video games as a therapeutic tool.

2 .3 Mental Health

Mental health research has been a serious topic for many years, and more recently, transgender mental health has become an increasing focus. Transgender people are likely to have negative mental health and face harassment, especially in comparison to cisgender people (Pascale & DeVita, 2022; Pinna et al., 2022; Tordoff et. al., 2022). Transgender people who have explored their gender and taken steps towards transitioning have been reported to have more positive mental health (Connolly et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2014; Thoma et al., 2023; Tordoff et. al., 2022). However, transgender mental health research is lacking in comparison to cisgender mental health, even in comparison to other LGBTQIA+ groups (Pascale & DeVita, 2022). Video games have been shown to have numerous effects on mental health, but similarly not a lot of research has been done, many focusing on any possible negative effects (Granic et al., 2014). Research into the positive effects of video games on mental health, and how transgender people play video games in relation to their mental health, may give insights into how transgender people use video games to help with their exploration of gender.

2.3.1 Critical thinking

Video games have been shown to have a positive effect on the player's ability to think and understand. Granic et al.'s (2014) review summarises many of the positive effects on cognitive skills, concluding that video games enhance many of the player's cognitive abilities that can be translated into real world scenarios. Increased cognitive skills may be due to many video games having 3-D environments that the player must navigate while also requiring fast decisions and attention to detail. However, they argue that a more research is needed to be done into the positive effects of video games, especially due to the media's usual portrayal of violent video games and lazy gamers. Adachi and Willoughby (2013) found that over the course of four years, adolescents who played strategy games showed a higher ability to problem solve compared to those who did not. The study also showed a link between playing strategy video games and higher academic marks. Griffiths et al.'s (2017) review further found that video games helped with numerous cognitive benefits such as memory, attention, creativity, and spatial cognition. Perrot et al. (2019) also compared the effects of a cognitive training game (Kawashima Brain Training (Nintendo SPD, 2005)) and an action game (Super Mario Bros (Nintendo EAD, 2006)) on the player's cognitive skills to compare the results of the two genres. Even though the group that played Brain Training scored higher than the group that played Mario, both groups had a significant increase in cognitive ability compared to the control group. It was also found that both games focused on different cognitive abilities, with the group that played Brain training having higher cognitive flexibility and attention span while the group that played Mario had higher processing speed and spatial reasoning.

As video games result in higher cognitive skills, even games that do not focus on cognitive abilities, players will develop better problem solving and critical thinking skills. Hypothetically, this may also in turn cause the player to think more critically about themselves and the problems that they are facing within their own lives. This would be especially important for transgender people. Critically thinking about themselves and the problems they are facing in their life could help with starting and continuing their gender exploration and other mental health problems.

2.3.2 Escaping difficulties

Video games elicit many different emotions within the player, just like other media. Researchers have found that video games have a positive impact on the player's emotions and emotional development (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018). Russoniello et al. (2009) found that playing puzzle games, such as

Bejeweled II (PopCap Games, 2004), corresponded with increased positive mood and reduced stress. They compared playing video games to meditation and further conclude that similar games could be used to help combat the effects of depression on the player. Granic et al. (2014) also suggest that due to the everchanging challenges created within video games force the player to adapt and relearn new strategies, possibly causing anxiety and frustration but also likely enforcing players to fluidly change between emotional states and help them deal with anxiety and frustration. Koles and Nagy's (2016) participants said that they would use video games to help with anxieties and stress, an escape from the difficulties in their lives. Using video games as an escape from mental health difficulties was also mentioned by Nardi (2010). She wrote about the concept of the "Magic Circle"[a] that video games create, that outside the circle it's hard to see what the video game is like, but within the circle it becomes a magical world that the player escapes to. Similar to Koles and Nagy, many of Nardi's interviewees talked about using video games as this escape, to help relieve stress and anxieties from the real world. This escape from difficulties can then manifest itself into both positive and negative outcomes, with Marques et. al's (2023) systematic review highlighting this. They found that escapism is a driving motivation for many people to play video games. However, there is link between this and problematic gaming behaviour, like addiction in the form of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) which may push players to become detached from real life. Furthermore, they mentioned that players who have difficulties in real life are more likely to turn to escapism in video games. However, escapism can also give the means to realise more about their life, like the freedom within video games to express and interact with others as they wish, and to experience what they could not in real life.

Studies found that transgender people's mental health was much lower compared to cisgender people, including more often being diagnosed with anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression and schizophrenia (Pascale & DeVita, 2022; Pinna et al., 2022; Tordoff et. al., 2022). Additionally, transgender people were significantly more likely to have self-harmed or attempted suicide in the past year. This was also addressed within Griffiths et al.'s (2016) study, that their participants had a history of self-harm and suicide. However, the participants turned to playing video games instead, using them to help with their mental health and reduce their self-harming. This points to video games being used by transgender players as a crutch, something to lean on to help with their mental health struggles, and to help develop good mental health coping skills. Jones' et al. (2023) further explored the mental health effects on young transgender people. They explained how younger transgender people were often much more vulnerable, particularly due to dysphoria, transphobia and often had higher levels of anxiety and depression. This study focused on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that forced many of the participants to move back home and being around parents that may not be supportive and losing support networks that they had pre-pandemic. They also lost access to mental health services and medical treatment due to social distancing and as a result had a negative impact on many of the participants mental health. However, due to social distancing many people had lessened social anxiety, while also have more time to work on themselves. Anonymity with online services was also a positive for many people with social anxiety, which was also found with video games' anonymity helping with transition (Griffiths et al., 2016; Morgan et al. 2020).

Video games were also frequently cited by papers as a way for transgender gamers to help deal with anxiety and stress. Strauss et al. (2019) found that their participants would use diversionary activities like playing video games, browsing social media, or watching online media whenever they felt distressed. They did this to help take their minds off real-life concerns and stress. Furthermore, escaping into magic circle video games created became a way for transgender people to try and escape gender dysphoria. Baldwin (2018) and McKenna et. al. (2024) found that some participants would use their video game avatar to try to immerse themselves within the game and to escape who their body

a. Attributed to Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens, 1938 but was first coined and popularised for digital games by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen in Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, 2003.

is in real life, and further to for gender affirmation and euphoria. However, Strauss et al. (2019) also found that navigating social online spaces like within video games and social media would negatively affect their mental health due to transphobic and homophobic experiences. An interviewee noted,

> *"Instagram I find, and a few the same with games, you have people deliberately go out to say horrible things, people who go out of their way to be, you know, just horrible people."* (Strauss et al., 2019, p. 5)

Conversely, Griffiths et al. (2016) noted that online spaces and video games could become an inhibitor for the people that are looking for a safe environment. They would instead stay within the environments of online spaces and not develop any mental health management strategies for the real world. In either case, not a lot of research has been done into transgender mental health in general and especially into transgender people's mental health experiences in video games to definitively conclude either result.

This did still come with video game addiction being a concern around transgender people, with Griffiths et al. (2016) reasoning that transgender players may become too reliant on the safe and secure environment created by video games, and in turn becoming addicted to video games and not wanting to return to the real world. Addiction was then further explored in a study by Arcelus et al. (2017). Interestingly, less than 1% had scores that pointed to Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). This is a much lower prevalence of IGD compared to other studies with cisgender people. Though those surveyed in this study were those that could prioritise the need to access a health service, researchers hypothesised that transgender gamers wishing to transition may use online gaming in a less problematic way compared to cisgender players because of them using video games to explore gender. They further found that transgender video game players were more likely to socially transition compared to participants who did not play video games. However, they did find a correlation between problematic gaming behaviour and mental health issues like depression and concluded that this would affect transition. They further suggest that games that are designed to help transgender people manage mental health issues would both be received well and help positively affect transition.

Overall, transgender people are more likely to be affected by mental health issues compared to cisgender people, and additionally more likely to self-harm and have thoughts of suicide. This is likely due to both dysphoria, but also due to experiences of transphobia. Transgender people are also very vulnerable to loss of mental health services, like during the Covid-19 pandemic. Video games may then be a good option to remedy this, as video games have been shown to improve mood and help with mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Online social services, like within video games, are a good way to help people with social anxiety and reach out during times of stress. Additionally, video games are used to help escape from problems that players are facing in real life, like helping with managing stress as well as depression and anxiety, which transgender people would use to great effect. Finally, transgender players may use video games in less problematic way compared to cisgender people, but additionally it is important for them to manage mental health issues to help with transition. This can possibly be helped with video games designed for mental health help.

2.3.3 Video games as a therapeutic tool

As an additional aside, video games have been studied in their use as therapeutic tools. SPARX (Smart, Positive, Active, Realistic, X-factor thoughts) is a video game designed to help adolescents for the treatment of depression. Merry et al. (2012) studied the effects of the game on the participants symptoms of depression and anxiety. SPARX was effective on relieving the participants symptoms of

anxiety and depression and appeared to work on par or even better than regular therapy treatment. Most of the participants enjoyed the treatment and would recommend it to other people. The researchers conclude that SPARX could be used as an effective treatment, especially as it would be cheaper and easier for the patient to access. It could further help in circumstances where there are long waiting list times as well as help for people who cannot afford more expensive treatments. Using video games to help with depression was also explored by Anguera, Gunning and Areán (2016) on older participants (60+ years old). They instead used another game called Project: EVO (Based on NeuroRacer) that focused on cognitive intervention. The researchers found that the participants had improved mood and cognitive symptoms, which helped with the participants depression symptoms. It was additionally comparable to improvements from Problem Solving Therapy (PST). They also found similar results to Merry et al. (2012), where participants were open to video gaming interventions, showing high retention and consistent use of the game more so than what was expected of them. They further concluded the benefits of using video games over traditional treatments included ease of use and portability due to the game being played on an iPad.

Strauss et al. (2019) explored the feasibility of using video games as therapy for transgender people. They collected the thoughts and experiences of transgender people using video games and how they may adapt SPARX for transgender people. Similar to other studies, many of the participants were positive about using video games for mental health. Furthermore, some of the participants were already using video games for help, like teaching mental health management skills such as health coping mechanisms through mindfulness, grounding and breathing exercises as well as promoting self-care. The researchers additionally listed things needed for these teaching tools to do well, like the need for LGBTQIA+ people to be a part of the creation process, marketed through trusted resources like therapists or peers, exclusion of violence and positive affirmation.

Additionally, video games as a therapy tool were not just limited to games specifically created for that use. Malberg (2011) used the game Halo (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001) (and eventually other games) to connect with her patient, occasionally playing together but mostly using the patients love of Master Chief (the game's main protagonist) to explore his feelings and help with their emotional turmoil and anger. Rivera (2022) used video games to reach out and help her transgender patient with their anxiety and depression in therapy. Rivera was able to help change the patient's view of themselves, encouraging experimentation through The Sim's (Maxis, 2000) character creator and helping with her anxiety and depression.

Video games have been shown to help with mental health both as a tool by therapists, and as specifically created games for people to play and be taught mental health strategies. This is especially good for people who cannot access mental health services due to reasons like cost and waiting lists. This could also resolve issues with distance, like social distancing during the Covid Pandemic but also people with disabilities that can make it hard to leave home.

2.4 Social Effects

With the advent of online video games, many players are now connected to each other in ways that could not have been foreseen beforehand. People are playing video games and making friends with other players all over the world. Some are finding lifelong partners while some are strengthening the ties that they already have, keeping in touch with friends, and families making game nights between parents and children. Social support networks have also been improving. People are communicating, and finding people within games that players may not be able to find in real life while also having people that the player can lean on when times get rough (Koles & Nagy, 2016; Nardi, 2010).

Transgender people are finding other people like themselves, socialising in a safe and secure environment, experimenting with gender with friends, and experiencing gender euphoria. This does unfortunately also open the possibility of more exposure to hate speech and finding people that are not accepting of who they are (Griffiths et al., 2016; Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019).

2.4.1 Connection to others

Nardi (2010) found that many World of Warcraft (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) players that she interviewed would play to be social. WoW exists as a part of players' social life by being able to play with friends and family but will also expand it, gaining new friends and significant others. Families would play together as family activities to get closer to each other. Communities would form around the game, allowing players to meet others online and then continue to meet and interact offline. Koles and Nagy (2016) found through their interviews that despite not having many friends offline, players they interviewed may have many more friends online, becoming close enough to view them like family and eventually meeting them in-person. Furthermore, by participating in the gaming community interviewees received a lot of social support which they in turn used to try and better themselves. Communities would form around these games, with players actively taking part in coming together and socialising. Some forming around different characteristics, from location-based to professional colleagues to LGBTQIA+ communities. However, many players would just find themselves within communities of a mix between these. This would end up bringing together many different people of many different social classes and situations. Nardi commented on this stating,

> *"One player was a military wife whose husband had been to Iraq three times on the front lines. Another lived on what he called a "hamburger farm," raising cattle in Missouri. Many players worked weekend or late-night shifts. One would logon telling us he smelled of grease from working in his brother's restaurant. A player who had been fired from Home Depot complained that his manager did not appreciate him even though he "did all the heavy lifting."* (Nardi, 2010, p. 24)

Video games are becoming a core way for some people to connect with each other, gaining new friends and loved ones, while also becoming an activity for existing friends and family. Communities form around video games, connecting people with similar interests while also mixing social classes. People are meeting each other that they may never have met in person.

2.4.2 Support networks

Video games created a safe environment for the player, forming relationships and close bonds. Transgender players would often use these spaces as a part of their support network (Griffiths et al., 2016; Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019). These spaces were some of the first places transgender gamers would interact with other players as their preferred gender and receiving affirmations of their gender. Some would explore their gender without realising it, interacting, and roleplaying with others as another gender before even thinking about the possibility that they were transgender just because it felt right to them (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al, 2016; Marciano, 2014; Morgan et al., 2020). Players would often "come out" to others within video games first, a perceived safe environment. These experiences, both good and bad, would then help them with gradually coming out in real life. Due to the mixing of social classes, players would end up meeting other LGBTQIA+ people, some coming together to form communities (Nardi, 2010). Griffiths et al. (2016) also found through their interviews that meeting transgender people online and through video games

helped their participants start their journey to explore their gender. These social contacts became a great support network for transgender people, and Strauss et al. (2019) stressed the importance of this. Online video games and gaming forums became key places for finding other transgender people and further jumping points to meeting transgender people elsewhere online and in real life. Digital friendships were also said to be more easily navigable and easier to confide in than compared to in-person relationships. This is especially helpful for people with social anxiety, which many transgender people have (Griffiths et al, 2016; Jones et al., 2023; Morgan et al., 2020; Pascale & Devita, 2022). An interviewee said,

> "I've kind of noticed that I can't really talk to people about how I'm feeling face-to-face, like, yeah, it's just so difficult, but I can message my friend or just like, post something on Instagram to like close friends, so I know that two people see it, but it's out there. That's a lot easier than talking to someone." (Strauss et al., 2019, p. 5)

This access to international communities of people with similar experiences became vital resources of support, information, and even therapeutic purposes like help with anxiety, depression and dysphoria. This is especially good for transgender people who do not have supportive friends and family in real life, there are people online that they can talk to and get support from that is missing from their life. Furthermore, online support networks are more resistant to social distancing changes, like during the Covid pandemic. Many support groups and networks were forced to move online due to the quarantine measures put in place, but some people due to already having their support networks online, like through video games, did not see much change other than there being even more resources available online (Jones et al., 2023).

Research has shown that video game players receive social support from each other, allowing people to talk to each other about their problems and receive advice (Koles & Nagy, 2016; Nardi, 2010). This leads to creating a safe environment for the players, especially for transgender people needing this support (Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019). Transgender players use these support networks to find other transgender people and receive help for things like dysphoria, anxiety, and depression, as well as receiving gender euphoria. Transgender people would also often use video games to roleplay with other people and experimenting with friends in this safe environment (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al, 2016; Marciano, 2014; Morgan et al., 2020). Finally, online support networks are also more resistant to social distancing changes and allow transgender people to still receive support if face to face support becomes unavailable (Jones et al., 2023).

2.4.3 Negative socialising

This all also came with many concerns about withdrawing from the real world into the game world. Koles and Nagy's (2016) participants would miss out on spending time with friends and family offline or continuing their education. However, the participants were not very concerned about this, especially as they would be replacing offline social events for online. Nardi (2010) additionally found many examples of this, but also concluded that instead of a simple withdrawal into video games, it became an,

> "…extrusion of the games into ordinary life as family and friends play together, as players gather in Internet cafes, and as they meet and socialize with others online." (Nardi, 2010, p. 26).

She further found that many video game players are able to self-regulate their game time, suspending accounts when their education started to slip, or other real-world events needed their focus. This

would then often be met with sympathy and encouragement from the other players. This was also found in transgender people and further explored by Griffiths et al. (2016). Participants would often grow distant from real life and play video games more and more. Nevertheless, participants would also say that this was a good thing, that video games provided them with an escape from their life and that their gaming pushed them to want to continue living.

However, there are also concerns that the social environments in video games create are not all safe. Nardi (2010) found that video games would foster an environment of casual homophobic and transphobic language and slurs, as well very sexualised and harsh language.

> *"The term gay was a generically derisive (and liberally invoked) adjective. Males called players fag, faggot, or homo if displeased or as a joke. Male players sometimes taunted other males by referring to them as "little girls."* (Nardi, 2010, p. 153)

People would refuse to play due to the environment created and may possibly push transgender and other queer people away from gender and sexual exploration. On the other hand, Nardi also found in some communities in World of Warcraft were this was not the norm and where even the effect of heterosexuality on the community was lessened by casually mock flirting with other players of the same gender and crossdressing in the form of playing as an avatar of the opposite gender. This may in turn even create an environment that makes people more comfortable to come out (either as gay or transgender) due to this normalisation.

This was however from a 2010 study, and with the ever-changing nature of the internet and online video games, this may have changed in the meantime. This is especially true when compared to Griffiths et al. (2016), who believed that the video game social environment may be too safe. They were concerned that players may want to stay within the secure and safe environment of video games and not come back out into the reality. Similar to Nardi (2010) however, Strauss et al. (2019) and Koscieza (2023) found the opposite of this, that transgender people were facing transphobia and homophobia within the social settings of online video games and other online media. This would negatively affect their mental health and may even push transgender people back into the closet. It should also be noted that transgender people do still face transphobia in-person as well as online and may unfortunately be representative of society, not just within video games. However, online anonymity is also a part of this, while helping transgender people to experiment safely, it may also possibly empowering transphobes in their bigotry without consequences. Online video game moderation is therefore a high priority with transgender people when playing video games. Additionally, Strauss et al. (2019) also explained that due to the connectedness of these online spaces, and the inexperience in navigating these spaces, many transgender people were encountering other transgender people with internalised transphobia. They were finding these people who were like themselves but were promoting very negative and transphobic ideas. Some would be finding communities of people who would also be glorifying behaviours like self-harming and eating disorders, which would negatively affect their mental health and possibly push them into copying those behaviours. Koscieza (2023) further wrote about how some transgender people feel the need to employ strategies to try and limit the transphobia that they face in video games and prevent being misgendered. This included changing the way they type and purposeful customisation to signal their gender. Voice chat was also an issue, with some feeling the need to push their voice to be gendered correctly and to further not be seen as transgender, as well as some choosing to rarely talk at all. This was further pushed with how even when transgender women were gendered correctly, they may still face harassment for being a woman.

Taking both the unsafe and safe sides of video game social environments into account, transgender people seem to try and find safe social groups within video games, while trying to avoid the unsafe and discriminatory spaces. This may help prepare the player for the harsh reality of how homophobic and transphobic some people can be in the real world, while giving also giving them the skills to identify and avoid those kinds of people. However, this still means being incredibly careful with the people that you meet and interact with online and highlights the need for people learn how to navigate these environments. Even with those careful interactions though, moderation becomes especially necessary to try and create a safe environment for transgender people, as well as all people playing video games.

2.5 The Avatar and the Game World

The video game avatar is the way that the player interacts with the majority of game worlds, it is the representation of the player that we use to explore and interact with the game. Through their avatar, players may end up finding out more about themselves. This is found to be especially true for transgender people, who may use their video game avatar to experiment with how they look and act, while finding out more about themselves and their gender (Griffiths et al., 2016; Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019; Rivera, 2022). Representation within video games and other media is also a very important part of this (Kosciesza, 2023; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019; Rivera, 2022). This is not just so that the player can create an avatar that looks like themselves, but also to see themselves in the characters around them and to feel validated in themselves.

2.5.1 Identity and performance

Nardi (2010) wrote that video games brought forth worlds of imagination and wonder which the player could escape into through their avatar. Through this, and within the virtual worlds, video games allow players to have gender neutral play. Activities that are usually stereotypically gendered, like "masculine" skills like blacksmithing and "feminine" skills like cooking, become available for anyone to participate in regardless of gender. Nardi writes,

> "Within the game, the activities were an aspect of the gender-neutral performative activity of improving a character. The covertness of the gender inflections released players from obvious reflections on gender while allowing them to perform, in play, cross-gender activities. WoW was, then, quietly subversive in its gender dynamics, enabling the unremarked enactment of cross-gender activities as an aspect of character development." (Nardi, 2010, p. 172)

Nardi further explains that participation in these worlds was not a simulation but a performance, taking place in a theatre in which the audience and the performers are the player. These performances become a part of ourselves, give meaning to how we play and discover parts of ourselves in our most honest moments. Interestingly, these descriptions of play as a performance are very similar to works by Judith Butler. Butler (1988) writes,

> "…gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be under-stood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." (Butler, 1988, p. 519)

Butler describes gender as a performance, a constant construction and representation of who we are. In relation to how we play video games, a freedom to explore gendered activities without judgement may push the player to construct their own sense of self and of gender. This may lead to the player coming to understand more about themselves and relieve their own biases around gender. The video game avatar itself further becomes an extension of our identity, a performance, that the player is constantly evolving and changing to be themselves. This is supported with Marciano (2014), who argues that the online, virtual world was a place that ran parallel to real world. Online users are maintaining a constant identity that they create, rather than one that is forced upon them, that transgender people use to experience what they cannot in the real world. Though there are boundaries that can separate the experiences of the real world and the virtual world, these virtual identities still reflect and are subjected to the real world.

2.5.2 Avatar to find sense of self

Koles and Nagy's (2016) found that their participants used their avatars to explore and eventually represent their who they wish to be.

> *"Although I know that 'me' and Banshee have several differences, I feel like my character is somehow similar to me. I spent lots of hours on perfecting Banshee and making him a unique character that can be easily distinguished from other avatars."*
> (Koles & Nagy, 2016, p. 287)

They perceived it as a persistent part of themselves which they could use to help gain support through both social aspects and understanding themselves. The authors wrote that for the participants, the game world and their avatars became a transitional space for them, a way to connect the virtual world to their reality. Their avatars then acted as a push for self-development and then develop more skills through social interaction. By taking advantage of the video game world and customising their avatar, the player is free to explore their fantasy and imagination. Interestingly, their second participant instead used their avatar as a way to collect items, treating their avatar like a collector of "virtual antiquarians". This echoed their real-life family business that the participant was having conflicted feelings about. By using his avatar as an extension of himself, the participant was able to address their inner conflicts. This was also explored by Malberg (2011) through her treatment of a patient with anger issues. Despite not being a customisable avatar (at least not to the extent of games like WoW), Malberg was able to use the video game avatar of Master Chief from the video game "Halo" to create a transitional space similar to what Koles and Nagy found. For the patient, Master Chief represented their ideal self that the patient could use to explore themselves and finally talk about their thoughts and feelings.

As an interesting aside, Nardi (2010) found that many male players would play as female characters to act out their own desire to gaze at a female character. Male interviewees when questioned about playing as a female character would often answer,

> *"Why not?"* and *"If I have to look at a someone's ass for three hours, it's going to be a girl's."* (Nardi, 2010, p. 159)

These players were playing with their avatars not just as a representation of themselves, but for their own want to see that character on screen, for aesthetic reasons. To rectify this non-representative play, Goetz (2017) argues that it is not the avatar that gives us a connection to the game, instead it is the "home base" that gives this connection. He writes that video games help simulate the tensions and conflicts in our own life, while creating a secure home base like building a house in Minecraft (Mojang

Studios, 2011), or the bonfires in Dark Souls (FromSoftware, 2011), giving comfort and stress relief and relating it to our own internal secure home base. Goetz writes,

> *"Players do not simply identify with the body or image of the avatar (à la the VW [virtual world] perspective) but rather with the comfort that comes with the connection to home base, with the very act of tracing the boundaries of this home, with the oscillation between exploratory departures and refueling returns—in short, the experience of being the "here" to a "there."* (Goetz, 2017, p. 110)

This is an interesting theory into how players connect to the game as an alternative to the avatar. However, in doing so he is minimising the impact of the avatar on some players, focusing more on the activity of playing. This is especially in contrast to Malberg (2011) connecting to their patient using the avatar of Master Chief as the focal point, rather than the world of Halo (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001) in general. This is also backed up by Koles and Nagy (2016), who wrote that for the participants, the avatar acted as a connection, a transitional object between real life and the virtual world and served as an anchor tying the player to the "home-like virtual place". Instead, it may be that different players may be connecting to the game in different ways, some connecting to the avatar itself, and some connecting to the game world as the home-base. Therefore, for those players the avatar is not needed to be representative of themselves and may not be using the avatar to explore their ideal self.

2.5.3 Transgender exploration

The concept of the transgender people using video games to explore their ideal self was explored through Baldwin's (2018) interviews with transgender people. He found that over two thirds of the participants had used avatars to experiment with their presentation. They would often use avatars to explore their identity as a precursor to coming out outside of video games. Other studies also backed this up, where creating avatars that more closely related to their gender identity helped transgender people understand what they were going through (McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Rivera, 2022; van Aller, 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2023). For some, it was their first, formative step in acknowledging their gender identity in a space that was both safe and anonymous in preparation for a more public coming out and true representation of self. Creating video game avatars were the only outlet that some participants had for affirming their gender expression for coming out, pointing to a therapeutic role the avatar had on the player during an emotionally challenging period. Morgan et al.'s participants noted that just the creation of the avatar was often a therapeutic task for them, to help ease their negative feelings without even further intent to play the game. Often, players would create avatars that were a mix of their current appearance and what they wished to appear like, especially early on in their gender exploration. Rivera (2022) also found this when they used video game avatars as a part of their patient's therapeutic process during a difficult transition. Using the game The Sims (Electronic Arts, 2000), the patient created an ideal version of herself, saying that to be her avatar felt "really good. Kinda freeing, even." Eventually, she would start coming to sessions wearing the clothes that she had initially experimented with and tried out on her avatar. Baldwin additionally found that participants would create avatars that emphasised stereotypical attributes of their gender, like having a shirt-less, muscled character for trans men. They gave their avatars traits that they wished they had outside of the video game.

Morgan et al. (2020) and Strauss et al. (2019) wrote where just playing as an avatar of their gender helped with feelings of dysphoria and helped with the transition process while also helping to identify and connect with the game. Koscieza (2023) wrote further that the avatar (as well as the other ways that transgender people present themselves online like with chatting with others and online profile

customisation) was not just a way for transgender people to see themselves in the game, but further to signal their gender to others. Simply being accepted and acknowledged as their gender through either in-game dialogue or by other players online was related to positive emotions (Kosciesza, 2023; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019; Whitehouse et al., 2023). Baldwin (2018) also mentioned this with an interviewee saying,

> *"I remember Professor Birch of Pokémon Sapphire fondly for being the first person to ask me 'Are you a boy or a girl?' and then accepting my answer without objections."*
> (Baldwin, 2018, p. 15)

Morgan et al. (2020) further mentioned that just experiencing life from a different perspective would also help in some cases facilitate their exploration of gender identity. However, participants of their study did also mention that not having customisable characters would often lead to a lack of connection with their avatar and feeling excluded from the game, especially if the characters were exclusively binary avatars.

Baldwin (2018) also found that when some participants were experiencing dysphoria badly, they would imagine their body as their avatar's body to help. Furthermore, the immersion that games give allowed the participant to forget about what they are currently experiencing outside the game. Interestingly, Baldwin found that that transgender people who had been transitioning for multiple years and had started to pass more regularly, would begin to feel comfortable playing as a character of a different gender as they felt more comfortable with themselves. This was to the point that participants would even have some of the same answers as the people interviewed by Nardi (2010) and seemingly playing as a character for aesthetic reasons rather than directly as themselves.

Rivera (2022) found in addition to using the Sims' (Electronic Arts, 2000) customisable avatar, Link from the video game Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo EPD, 2017) was used to connect with their patient in therapy. Link is shown in the games as androgynous, who even at one point in the game must cross dress to enter a town where only women are allowed. The patient remarked that they felt empowered playing them, especially due to the subversion of gender norms, which then helped her with her own transition. This is very similar to Nardi's (2010) writing about video games giving space for cross-gender activities. This also contrasts with Morgan et. al. (2020), where participants noted that not having customisable characters would usually lead to feeling disconnected from the game. Rather, this points to the need of the avatar being representative of the player.

The video game avatar is a way for players to represent themselves and to explore their ideal self, while also further acting as a push for players to better themselves (McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Rivera, 2022; van Aller, 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2023). Players have used avatars to reconcile conflicting feelings within themselves and by using the avatar as an extension of themselves, creates a transitional space to change themselves in real life. Furthermore, video game worlds and avatars allow for gender neutral play, giving freedom for players to do what they want without judgement (Nardi, 2010). However, not all players seem to do this, and some just use avatars for aesthetic purposes rather than a representation of themselves. Possibly, players are connecting to the game through the game world rather than the avatar (Goetz, 2017). Overall, though, video game avatars for transgender people have been shown to be very important. Many transgender people were found to have used avatars to experiment with their gender and presentation, and to experience gender euphoria. It was often a first step before coming out and continued to be a therapeutic process to help them consolidate their identity. Dysphoria was often eased through this process. However, avatars still

needed to have proper representation, especially with the strict confines of gender that many video games box themselves into.

2.5.4 Representation

Strauss et al. (2019) remarked that their focus groups wanted some sort of representation of their gender, that often not being represented contributed to their mental health difficulties. This includes having genuine LGBTQIA+ representation that does not fall into stereotypes, often people would stop playing the game due this. These players wanted LGBTQIA+ people to be included in the process of creating the game to help alleviate this problem and help create genuine characters that represented them. Representation of non-binary people was also a major concern, where customisation options were largely gendered but also a general lack of representation of non-binary characters (Kosciesza, 2023; Morgan et al. 2020). Non-binary gamers found it hard to create a character that represented themselves in a game that only allowed for binary options and would feel alienated from the game. Often, they would resort to (or already enjoyed) creating characters that pushed the limits on the avatar creator (Baldwin, 2018; Kosciesza, 2023). Whitehouse et al. (2023) highlighted the need for the avatar to represent the player and their gender identity. Players would play and create avatars that were "gender-aligning" to represent themselves. They further stressed how players will find and meaningfully represent their gender through their avatars even without typically gendered presentation. Non-human avatars are one aspect of this, which was also identified as a way for non-binary players to represent themselves. Morgan et al.'s (2020) interviewees also voiced their concerns with their school life, where virtual avatars are used as a part of their online learning and assigned as their birth sex by the school. Participants again felt dysphoric and alienated by their avatars, both non-binary and binary transgender students. Additionally, similar to what Nardi (2010) found with the male gaze, Baldwin (2018) found that many transgender women felt like they were playing as characters that were made for men in mind, and therefore they would have to try hard to actively create characters for themselves where they could just be women, instead of just as a sexualised character.

This continues with the representation of transgender characters in general being largely ignored, as shown by Shaw & Friesem (2016), as well as Thach's (2021) analysis on video games from the LGBTQ game archive. Transgender representation in video games is very lacking, even when compared to trans representation in film and television, with television representation being even less than other minorities, and film saw no transgender character featured in major releases between 2017-2020. Even when there is representation, binary transgender women are the focus with transgender men and non-binary characters are left out for the majority. Furthermore, transgender representation usually revolves around suffering and violence, with a focus on their dysphoria and the pain they endure. It usually follows the "Wrong body model", or transnormativity that promotes the medicalisation of being transgender and reinforces the idea that transgender bodies must adhere to cisgender aesthetics to be perceived as normal. This was further written about by Kosciesza (2023), where some transgender characters fall into the trope of just being a victim for the cisgender protagonist to save. This does not realistically show a transgender character as being more than just being transgender. Unfortunately, these are usually on the better end of representation, as many games and other media will depict transgender people as monstrous or villainous beings who are psychotic crossdressers or are an unstable character because of their gender identity (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Thach, 2021). This can be very upsetting for transgender people, as backed up by Strauss et al. (2019) and Travers et al. (2022). Their participants voiced concerns about violence against LGBTQIA+ characters usually being the receiver of significantly more violence compared to straight or cisgender characters. This was often quite triggering for players as they have faced and still face violence and

discrimination in their own lives and do not want to be reminded of that. In some cases, participants stated that seeing these representations online would glorify this misery, encouraging poor mental health through depictions of self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. On the other hand, positive representation of transgender people can open discussions between transgender people to share their stories, as well as being able to show cisgender people the lives of transgender people, and overall normalising the existence of transgender people (Travers et al., 2022).

LGBTQIA+ indie games and developers should also be noted for their efforts in trying to help improve diversity and representation in video games. However, as written by Ruberg (2019), these games still require immense amounts of work, especially with the need to navigate the negativity received from homophobic, transphobic and other discriminatory people. Furthermore, Ruberg writes how games companies may be exploiting these marginalised developers and their stories, further leaving LGBTQIA+ people without real representation of and from queer people.

So overall, more, and better representation is needed for transgender people in general, but especially in video games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Thach, 2021). This would help transgender people to see positive representation of themselves but also to show cisgender people that they are not just some "other". This representation should not always focus on the misery and violence that transgender and other LGBTQIA+ can go through due to the real life occurrences that many of these people go through, as well as this being disproportionately done to these characters (Strauss et al., 2019; Travers et al., 2022). All transgender body types should be shown as positive to encourage the freedom for people to look how they wish to look like, without the pressure of "looking different". Customisation also plays a part in this representation. Being able to create a character that looks like yourself is very important to transgender players, but especially so with non-binary characters and the need to not have customisation that is locked between the binary of male and female (Baldwin, 2018; Kosciesza, 2023; Morgan et al. 2020; Whitehouse et al., 2023). Finally, these games need to have LGBTQIA+ people involved in the development, both for creating realistic representation and to let these people tell their own stories (Ruberg, 2019; Strauss et al., 2019; Travers et al., 2022).

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, video games help players explore gender in numerous ways. Mental health benefits from playing video games help with critical thinking, while also helping deal with other mental disorders like depression and anxiety that may prevent exploration and transition. They further help relieve stress by giving the player a temporary escape from problems. This is all especially good for transgender people, who are much more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety as well as self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

Video games create online social networks that help connect people from all around the world, while giving people the support they need, meeting other transgender people and may help encourage other people to explore gender. However, this does mean facing transphobic people, and therefore moderation in online video games is a much, while also needing to learn how to properly interact and use online gaming. This further may help prepare transgender people in their in-person encounters with transphobic people.

Finally, video game avatars are also incredibly important with the way that some transgender people explore and experiment with gender, further helping with mental health and transition. They become a way that people visualise their ideal self, while also acting as a therapeutic outlet in transgender

people consolidating their gender identity and expression. However, representation is very important to have, and can negatively affect the player when good representation is not met.

However, there is unfortunately little research done into transgender people, and more specifically how transgender people play video games. This is further found with many of the studies on transgender people having had very little participants and therefore do not have complete research data, especially as some the studies had less than ten participants. Furthermore, many of the studies had mostly transgender men participating, while also lacking in non-binary participants. However, due to small sample sizes in most studies, any participation is needed. So, overall video games do appear to help and give transgender people the opportunity to explore their gender, but more research is needed into these experiences and how in turn what video games can do to further help transgender people with their gender exploration.

3. Understanding how video game can help explore gender: A preliminary study

3.1 Introduction

This study is separated into two approaches, a survey and semi-structured interviews, to gather the thoughts and experiences of transgender people to help determine how video games give people a space for gender exploration. This chapter details the survey, and its results, about how video games can help transgender explore gender. A survey was conducted due to time constraints on this study, and so that more participants could be found. Some information can be found through quantitative research that a survey can more easily provide compared to interviews; like what games transgender people are playing and favourite games & genres. Qualitative data, like long-form questions asking about game design systems and their experiences, was further found through these surveys. This data helped to inform the researcher further of the patterns and themes that form to support the analysis within the discussion section, as well as to helped guide the interviews.

3.2 Method

Ethics approval was sought out for this study, with the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) HREC Ethics Application Number: ETH23-8199.

3.2.1 Data collection

Links to the survey were sent out in digital flyers (see **Appendix A**) between December 2023 and February 2024. The survey took approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. The survey was conducted anonymously through the online survey service REDCap (Vanderbilt University, 2004), created through UTS. The completed surveys were transcribed into a digital spreadsheet and stored within UTS's OneDrive (Microsoft, 2007). The survey contained a mix of both quantitative data due to multiple-choice questions asked about the participant and their gaming habits, as well as qualitative data due to short and long-form questions about their feelings and experiences (phenomenology). Relevant quantitative data was converted into graphs to analyse the differences in answers. The literature review was used to help compare answer to other studies, as well as referring to the games mentioned to help derive meaning. Qualitative data was content analysed by identifying the themes within the answers. These were sorted into categories, and with the frequency of these categories also being marked. Due to the nature of these responses, each could be sorted into multiple categories. Questions 14 and 15 were also analysed together after being analysed individually. Due to the similarity of the two questions, analysing them together allowed for a deeper insight into the participants thoughts.

3.2.2 Participants

Participants for the survey were volunteers found through social media sites, with a majority found through Discord. Permission was also gained from the social media group admins to be allowed to search for participants in these groups. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on if they are transgender and play or have played video games while they were transitioning. This meant that answers were directly from transgender people who have explored their gender and have played enough video games for it to have impacted their life in some way, like with affecting their transition. There were 45 responses to the survey. 25 of the participants being transgender women, 14 were non-binary, 5 were transgender men and 1 answered other. The answer for 'other' was genderfluid. Most

of the participants were transgender women, which may have been due to how the main researcher found participants, as many of the Discord servers that she was able to access were servers that she as a transgender woman were able to join. Furthermore, many of the servers that have a large population and variety of transgender people did not give permission to search for participants due to moderation rules. Unfortunately, this may mean that the results are more indicative of transgender women and non-binary people. 17 participants were from Australia, 12 from the United States of America, 2 from the United Kingdom, 1 from France, 1 from New Zealand, 1 from the Netherlands. 12 were left blank due to technical issues with the survey.

3.2.3 Questions

The literature review was used to support the creation of the survey questions. These questions were in four sections. The first section was introductory questions to better understand the participants. These were quantitative questions, asking about the participant and their gaming habits. Patterns may form if there are similarities between what games and genres transgender people play, gaining insight into what video games may encourage exploration of gender. The second section was about the participants social interactions in video games. Transgender people may use video games to connect with other people. They can use video games to help find other transgender people, helping them and themselves with exploring gender and help with their mental health (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Strauss et al., 2019). Gathering information about this may help gain insight into the social environments that video games create, and how that may affect transgender people's exploration of gender. These questions were mostly quantitative, ending with two qualitative questions asking the participant to write about social features in video games. The third section was about video game avatars and characters. Many transgender players use their video game avatar, both by creating it and by using it, to explore what they want to look like and who they want to be (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019). This section is quantitative, asking the participant about if they experimented with gender in video games through their avatar, as well as asking about their preferences in avatar creation and selection. The final section asks about the participants thoughts on representation, as well as giving them the space to write about how video games have impacted themselves. Questions 1 and 2 were not included in the results due to being included in the Participants section. See Appendix **B** for more details.

3.3 Results

3. How long have you known that you are transgender?
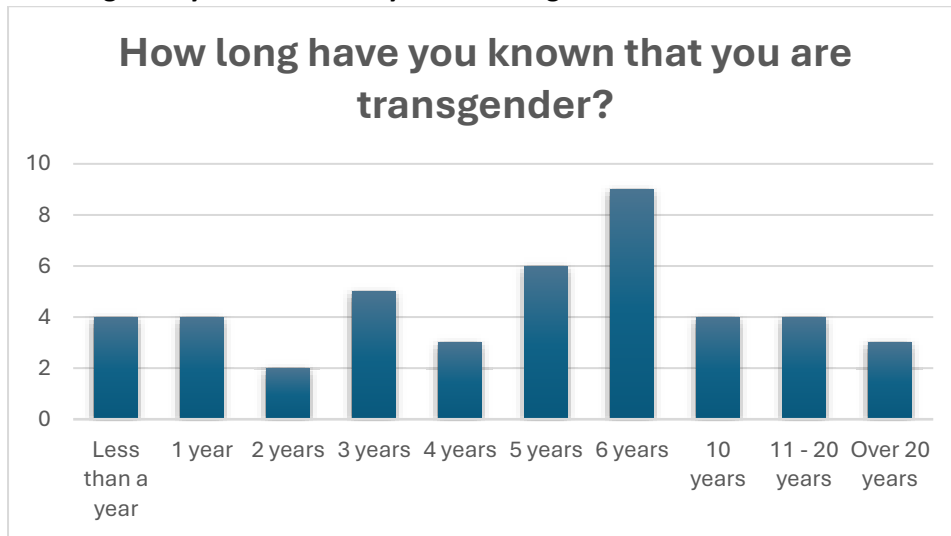
Figure 3.1: How long survey participants have known they are transgender

As shown in Figure 3.1, the survey had a wide range of participants, from people who have not known for long, to people who have known for over 10 years. The most common answer was 6 years. 1 did not answer.

4. How long have you been transitioning/'out of the closet' for?
   a. In other words, how long since you've started any sort of transition other than just knowing, e.g like social, medical
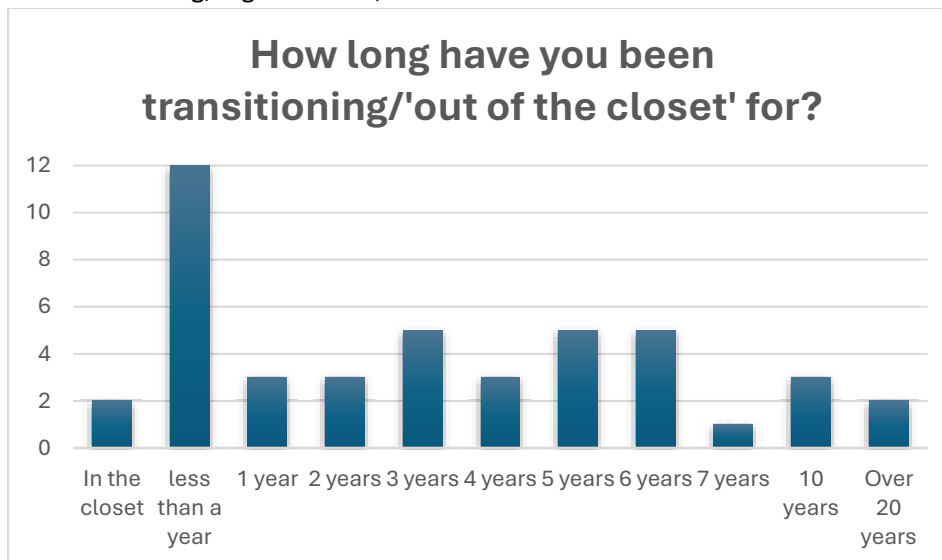
Figure 3.2: How long survey participants have been transitioning for

Though there is a wide range of transitioning times, the majority of people have only started transitioning within the past year (See Figure 3.2). 1 did not answer.

5. How frequently do you play games?

How frequently do you play games?

Categories: Everyday (18), Every other day (17), Once a week (5), Once a fortnight (2), Other (3)
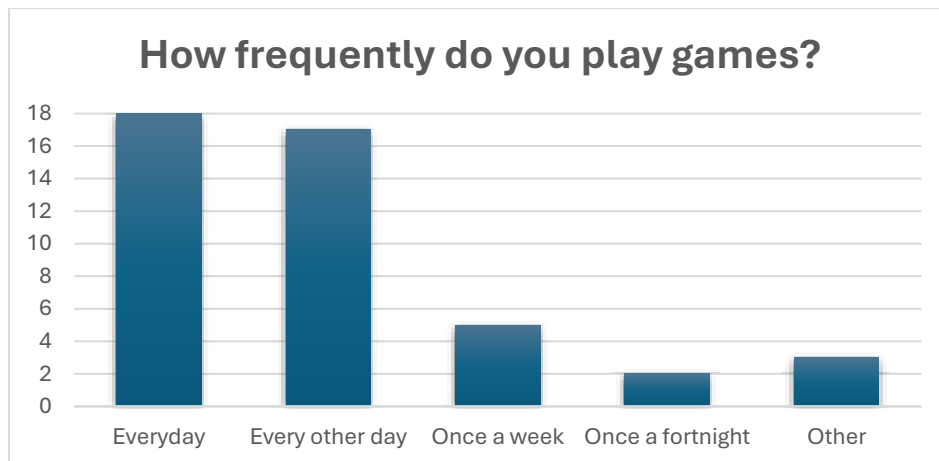
Figure 3.3: How frequently survey participants play games

Shown in Figure 3.3, most participants either played every day or every other day. Participants who selected Other would play games when they have time to, or when they have a good game to play. Both this question and the next say "games" in the question, not "video games". Contextually, participants may gather that this question was asking specifically about video games, both because the survey is asking about video games and that all the answers in the next question are video games. However, this is still a limitation of the specificity of the survey that may have confused participants.

6. What games were you playing when you first started transitioning (if you're out of the closet)?

What games were you playing when you first started transitioning?

Warframe — 2
Undertale — 2
The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim — 4
Terraria — 5
Team Fortress 2 — 3
Stardew Valley — 4
Splatoon Series — 3
Pokémon Series — 6
Overwatch — 4
Night in the Woods — 2
Minecraft — 10
Mass Effect Series — 3
Mario Kart Series — 2
League of Legends — 3
Kingdom Hearts Series — 2
Hades — 2
Fire Emblem Series — 2
Final Fantasy XIV — 2
Fallout Series — 4
Dragon age: Origins — 2
Dark Souls Series — 2
Cyperpunk 2077 — 2
Celeste — 4
Borderlands Series — 2
BeamNG.Drive — 2
Animal Crossing Series — 2

Figure 3.4: Games that the survey participants were playing when they first started transitioning

References in order shown in Figure 3.4: (Digital Extremes, 2013), (Toby Fox, 2015), (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), (Re-Logic, 2011), (Valve, 2007), (ConcernedApe, 2016), (Nintendo EAD, 2015), (Game Freak, 1996), (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), (Infinite Fall & Secret Lab, 2017), (Mojang Studios, 2011), (BioWare, 2007), (Nintendo EAD, 1992), (Riot Games, 2009), (Square, 2002), (Supergiant Games, 2020), (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo R&D1, 1990), (Square Enix Business Division 5, 2013), (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), (Bioware, 2009), (CD Projekt Red, 2020), (Maddy Makes Games, 2018), (Gearbox Software, 2009), (BeamNG GmbH, 2015) & (Nintendo EAD, 2001).

To keep the graph shown in Figure 3.4 smaller and neater, 62 game series with only one mention were not included in the graph. Additionally, games that are in the same series were grouped as a series. However, games that are significantly different in gameplay were kept separate (eg. Pokémon [Game Freak, 1996] [the mainline series being RPGs[a]] and Pokémon Go [Niantic, 2016] [an augmented reality game[b]]). These games that were excluded, reduced to series, as well as the full graph showing all the games series can be found in Appendix **C**. Due to the number of games that were mentioned by participants, as well as the variable number of games between participants, this question would have benefited from instead asking for the 3 most played games. Some participants would also only write the series name, rather than specifying a specific game or specifying the series itself (eg. Writing Pokémon, a specific game in the Pokémon series, or writing the Pokémon series). This question would have benefited from either asking the participant to specify the series, or a specific game in the series, as that would have allowed for a more specific analysis of each of the games in the series. Additionally for the question itself, out of the closet should not have been added to this question, as transitioning was specified to the participant better in question 4. This may have been confusing to some participants and is a limitation of this question.

Minecraft was the most popular video game mentioned. This does correlate with how Minecraft is currently the best-selling video game of all time ("List of best-selling video games," 2025) and therefore would be high up on this list. The Pokémon series was the second most popular game mentioned, which correlates with Pokémon as a franchise being the highest grossing media franchise ("List of highest-grossing media franchises," 2025). Terraria was the third most popular game mentioned, similarly being one of the best-selling video games of all time ("List of best-selling video games," 2025). Overall, the participants' answers to this question were very varied and did not appear to have many solid patterns in the answers other than most of the games included were popular games. However, many of the games answered did have some level of player expression and character customisation. Minecraft is a Sandbox[c] game which allows for high amounts of player expression and customisation through building and editing their player's skin[d]. The mainline series of Pokémon games are RPGs with customisable team composition in the Pokémon the player uses and later games in the series (from Pokémon X & Y onwards) have included some level of player customisation. Furthermore, many of the games mentioned were RPGs, which as a genre allows for a good amount of player expression. Of note, Celeste was tying for forth most popular video game mentioned. It is a Platformer[e] game following the story of Madeline, a transgender woman. This game's story may have been relatable to participants by showing a transgender woman's story. Furthermore, due to participants playing this game when they first started transitioning, this game likely had an impact on their transition, helping them come to terms with being transgender. Many of the other games also featured LGBTQIA+ characters or had the ability for the player to be LGBTQIA+.

7. What are your favourite video games?

To keep the graph shown in Figure 3.5 smaller and neater, 94 games with only one mention were not included in the graph. Additionally, games that are in the same series were grouped as a series. However, games that are significantly different in gameplay were kept separate (eg. Final Fantasy [Majority of games being singleplayer RPGs] and Final Fantasy XIV [an MMORPG]). These games that were excluded, reduced to series, as well as the full graph showing all the games series can be found in Appendix **D**. Similar to the previous question, due to the number of games that were mentioned by participants, as well as the variable number of games between participants, this question would have

a. Role-Playing Game
b. Game that incorporates the real world into game
c. Game that provides a metaphorical sandbox, a space with no set goal that encourages player-driven gameplay and creativity
d. A customisation for a player avatar. For Minecraft, the player can edit the "skin" on a base model, changing its appearance through pixel art
e. Game that heavily involves the player character moving and jumping

benefited from instead asking for the participants top 3 favourite games. This question would also have benefited from either asking the participant to specify the series, or a specific game in the series.
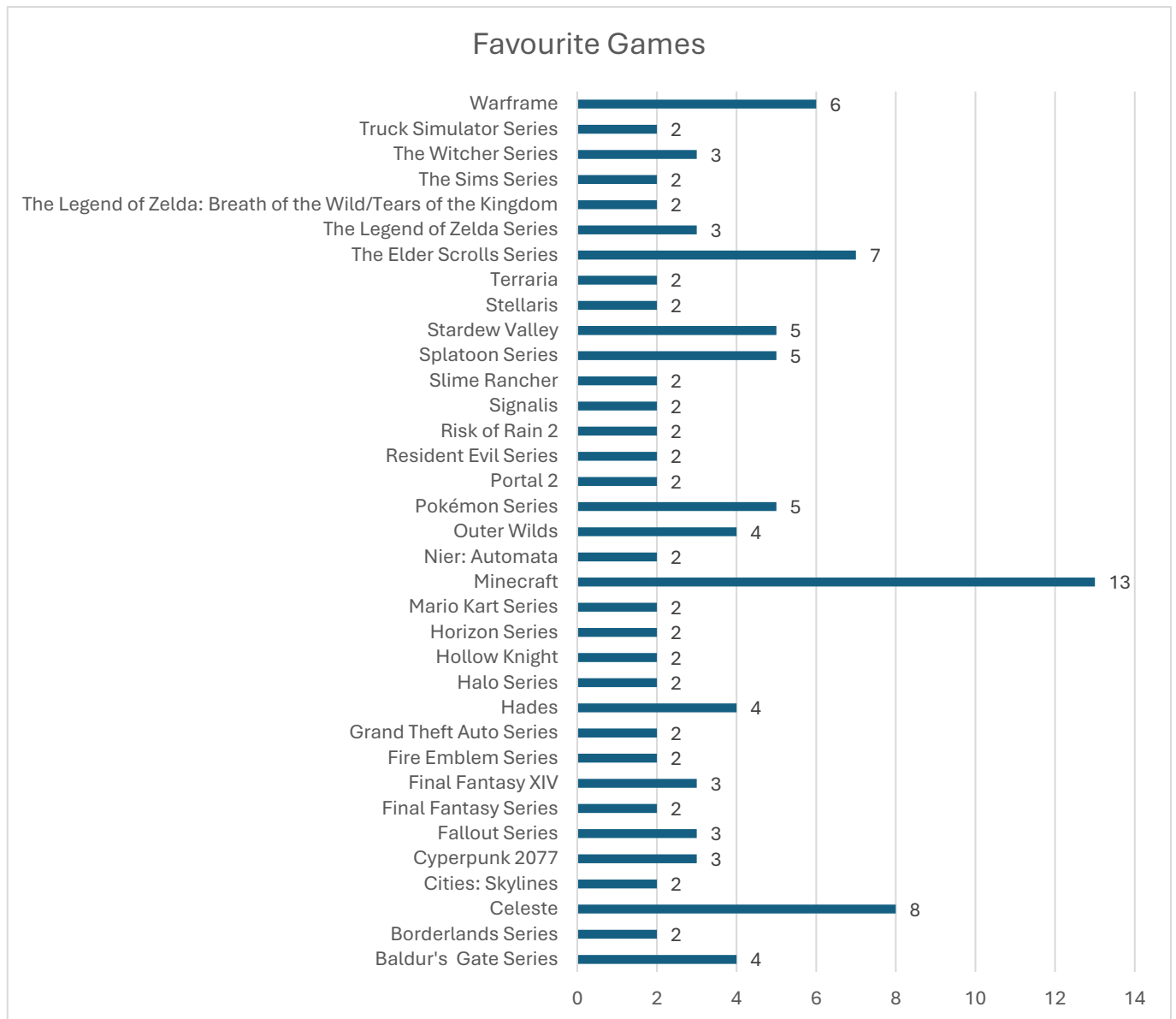
Figure 3.5: The survey participants favourite video games

Shown in Figure 3.5, most of the answers were popular games without solid patterns. However, many of the answers to this question were the same games that were answered in the last question, with 50 out of the 90 game series being mentioned again. Minecraft was again the most popular video game, and Celeste is now the second most popular video game. Again, this shows the strong connection that Celeste had to transgender players by showing and exploring a transgender character. The Elder Scrolls series also rose in popularity for this question. The Elder Scrolls is a very popular fantasy RPG series, boasting the ability to go anywhere you want in a large open world, a great character creator, and a large modding community. Again, player customisation was a large part of many of the games mentioned.

References in order shown in Figure 3.5: (Digital Extremes, 2013), (SCS Software, 2008), (CD Projekt Red, 2007), (Maxis, 2000), (Nintendo EPD, 2017)/(Nintendo EPD, 2023), (Nintendo R&D4, 1986), (Bethesda Softworks, 1994), (Re-Logic, 2011), (Paradox Development Studio, 2016), (ConcernedApe, 2016), (Nintendo EAD, 2015), (Monomi Park, 2017), (rose-engine, 2022), (Hopoo Games & Gearbox Software, 2020), (Capcom, 1996), (Valve, 2011), (Game Freak, 1996), (Mobius Digital, 2019), (PlatinumGames, 2017), (Mojang Studios, 2011), (Nintendo EAD, 1992), (Guerrilla Games, 2017), (Team Cherry, 2017), (Bungie, 2001), (Supergiant Games, 2020), (Rockstar North, 2001), (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo R&D1, 1990), (Square Enix Business Division 5, 2013), (Square, 1987), (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), (CD Projekt Red, 2020), (Colossal Order & Tantalus Media, 2015), (Maddy Makes Games, 2018), (Gearbox Software, 2009), & (Larian Studios, 2023).

8. What are your favourite genres of video games?
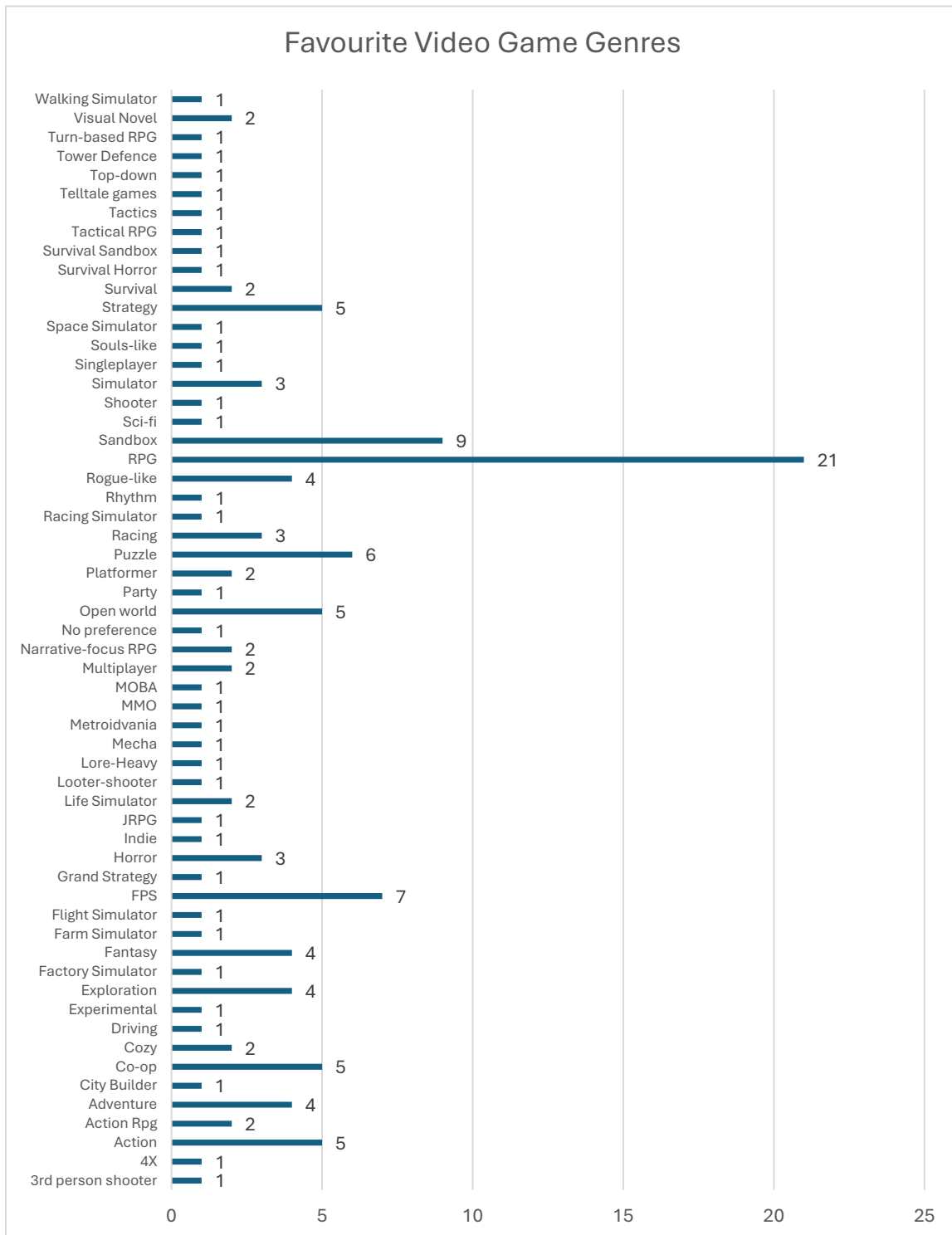
Figure 3.6: The survey participants favourite video game genres

Though the answers shown in Figure 3.6 included a variety of genres, a majority of them included some form of RPG. RPG's are a genre of games where the player roleplays as a character within the game. Player customization is therefore a high priority for these games to allow the player to create

and be a character that they wish to be. For transgender players, RPGs can offer a space to experiment with their gender and presentation and therefore is likely why these games are popular. Sandbox games were also very popular. These games place the player in a "sandbox" world, a world where the player has a large degree of control over that allows them to be creative. With Minecraft being the most popular game for the previous two questions, the sandbox genre would likely be popular because of it. However, sandboxes do allow for large amounts of player expression that transgender players may be able to take advantage of to explore their gender and gender expression. FPS was the third most popular genre. These are shooter games that take place in the first-person perspective, allowing the player to embody the character that they are playing as. This gives a degree of immersion to the player that not all genres can create, and transgender players may be using it to help immerse themselves into the character that they are playing. See Appendix **E** for the definitions of the genres shown in the graph.

Additionally, this question would have benefited further by limiting the number of genres that the participants could answer, asking for only one or their top 3, as participants answers were varied in the amount they answered. Participants would also answer with genres more specifically compared to others which may have affected the results. For example, Survival[a] is a large genre encompassing many games. Survival Horror is a genre that is within Survival, but it incorporates more horror elements. These were kept separately due to the nuances within genres, but it means that survival as a generic genre may be smaller in popularity than it should be. Conversely, RPG is also a very large genre, but again it is made up of many smaller genres like Tactical RPG[b] and Turn-based RPG[c]. This may mean that participants just answered with the more generic genre, rather than the specific genre that they enjoy.

9. **Do you feel like you are playing more, less or the same amount of video games after beginning transitioning?**
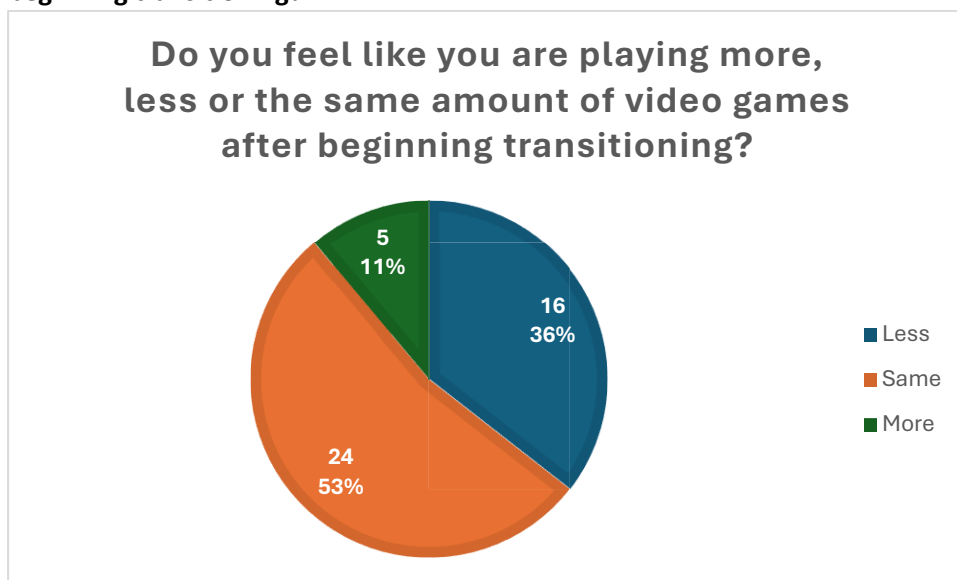
Figure 3.7: Amount of games survey participants play after transitioning

Shown in Figure 3.7, 24 (53%) participants have been playing the same amount of video games after beginning transitioning, 16 (36%) are playing less, and 5 (11%) are playing more. As most participants were playing less after beginning transitioning, some participants may have been using video games more so to have a place to experiment and help with their mental health struggles. Once they started

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a. Game set within a world that the player must survive in, building and collecting resources
b. Mix between RPG and Tactics games, RPGs focusing on strategy
c. Mix between RPG and Turn-based games, RPGs involving gameplay where each character takes turns

transitioning, they then did not need to play as much due to lessened struggles and feeling more confident within their real-life body. However, this is not a strong connection as most participants are playing the same amount, and that people play video games for a variety of reasons that may have coincidently affected how much they play after beginning transitioning. More specific questioning into this may have provided stronger insights into this.

10. Have you met any transgender people while playing video games?

Most participants have met transgender people while playing video games, with 32 (71%) of the responses saying yes, and 13 (29%) saying no. This shows that transgender players are reaching out and finding other transgender people through video games.

a. If you answered yes to the last question, have you ever asked for help from transgender people you've met online, like help with transitioning or mental health?
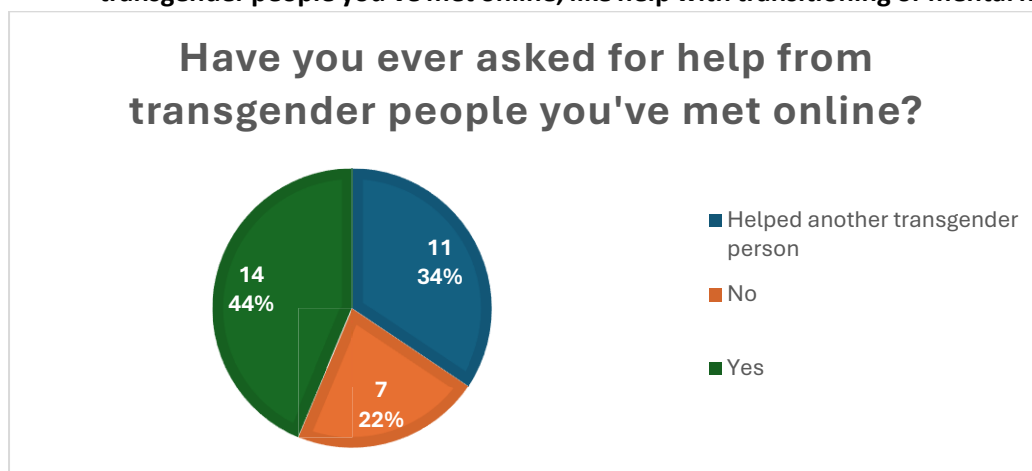
Figure 3.8: Have survey participants helped or received help from other transgender people online

Out of the 32 yes responses to the last questions, 14 (44%) have sought out help from transgender people they have met online, 11 (34%) have helped another transgender person, and 7 (22%) have not done either (see Figure 3.8). As the majority have helped or been helped by transgender people they have meet, this further shows that transgender people are creating and joining online social support networks.

11. Did you use video games to help come out to people?

30 (67%) of the participants did not use video games to help come out to people, 15 (33%) saying yes. Though not consistently shown, some participants have used video games to help come out to people like studies by Baldwin (2018) and Griffiths et al. (2016).

12. Did you interact with people as your preferred gender before coming out (like roleplaying as your preferred gender in a video game)?

Most of the participants did interact with other people as their preferred gender in video games before coming out, with 34 (76%) answering yes and 11 (24%) answering no. These answers show how video games were a part of most of the participants experimentation with gender socially, likely also having a part in helping participants realise that they are transgender.

13. Have you ever had any negative interactions with people in video games to do with you being transgender?

27 (60%) of the participants have not had any negative interactions with people in video games to do with being transgender, while 18 (40%) have had negative interactions. Comparing these results to TransActual's (2021) survey, this is a much lower rate of transphobia compared to non-gaming spaces. This is especially shown in comparison to social media, which reported that 99% of their participants have experienced transphobia in social media. This question's results may be due to how transgender people create social support networks in video games that help lower the how many people face transphobic people, as well as better moderation.

a. If you answered yes to the last question, have you stopped playing a game because of these interactions?

Out of the 18 who answered yes to the last question, 11 (61%) have not stopped playing a game because of these interactions, while 7 (39%) have stopped. This shows that different participants will react to transphobia in video games differently, where for some it affects their enjoyment of the games to the point of not playing anymore. Different video games will also likely have different social environments. A game that has more prevalent transphobia will likely impact the player more than other games that rarely have transphobia shown. For more conclusive results though, a deeper dive into transphobia in video games is needed.

14. What social features do you most want in video games?
15. What social features do you least like in video games?

The results to these two questions will be shown together.

There were several different answers for this, especially due to how broad the question was. 22 (49%) of the answers to q14, and 31 (69%) for q15, were to do with the ways that players directly chat and communicate with other players. Being able to chat with others in-game was seen as a positive by participants, being able to find community and how being able to talk to others was a benefit to their mental health. Participants further highlighted the need for non-verbal communication, not just voice chat. Having other communication options like text chat, emotes (both character and text emotes), and the ability to ping different things in game to communicate to other people were a need for participants. Mandatory voice chat was seen as a negative by many participants, especially forced interactions with other people like through content that can only be done with other players. Answers about guilds and in-game communities were also similar. Participants appreciated the ability to find in-game communities that they could join and then play with other people. However, again, it was a negative when these interactions were forced.

Answers directly to do with moderation made up 5 (11%) of the answers to q14, and 8 (18%) for q15. They wrote about the need for a healthy community and banning people that are transphobic. Additionally, the player needs the ability to protect themselves from other people, like being able to block, mute and report other players. Swear and Slur filters were also a need to be able to customise the content that the player can see. A lack of these features was seen as very negative, especially as it would let transphobic content and "Trolling"[a] to run unaccounted for within games. A further 18 (40%) answers to q15 were mentioning chatting with other people online, with 15 (33%) specifically mentioning voice chat. Though these were not always expanded on by the participants, in context with the other answers these are likely to do with moderation and the worries about facing transphobia

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[a.] A troll is internet slang for someone who deliberately tries to upset other people online

and toxicity. 5 (11%) participants further disliked any sort of communication with opponents in competitive games due to it possibly leading to more toxicity. Voice dysphoria was also mentioned by one of the participants, which may further be a reason why voice chat was seen as a negative by many.

Character customisation for socialising was also mentioned by 16 (36%) of the participants. The freedom to express themselves towards other players was something that many participants valued. Additionally, having the freedom to easily change how they present in-game (especially for genderfluid players), and a wide variety of body-types and customisation were a need, and not just having male or female. 6 (13%) of the participants further answered that it was a negative when customisation was limited, especially with locking options to gender. Pronoun customisation was also brought up by 2 (4%) participants. This was not just for NPCs (Non-Player Characters) correctly gendering the player, but to be able to show other players what the correct pronouns are for the player.

9 (20%) of the participants were indifferent to social features or just did not use any of the social features. Most were due to not playing online games often, with a preference for single player games or only playing games in-person with friends. However, one participant wrote about anxiety and transphobia being a reason for not interacting online. This further aligns with other participants talking about transphobia but also highlights how these interactions may push transgender people to stop playing a game.

16. Is your favourite video game character one that you made yourself?
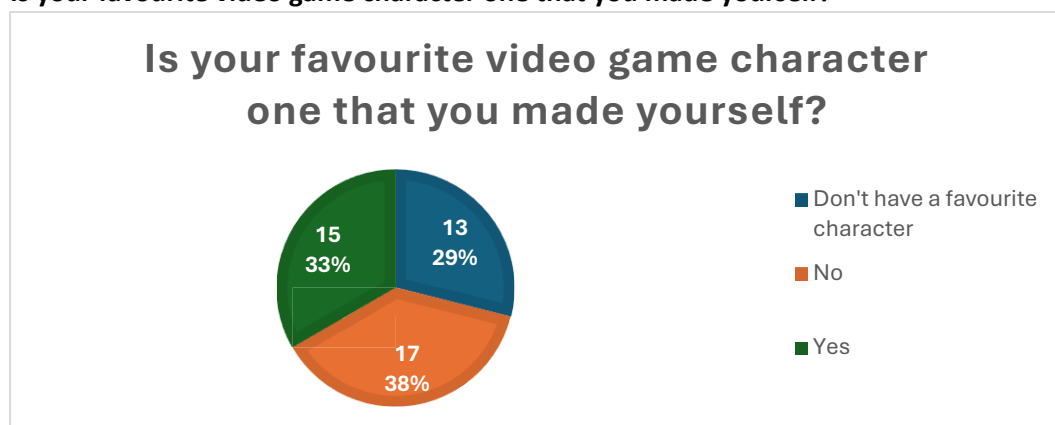
Figure 3.9: Are the survey participants' favourite video game character one they made themselves

This question was somewhat evenly answered between the three choices with 15 (33%) saying yes, 17 (38%) saying no, and 13 (29%) said they did not have a favourite character (see Figure 3.9). As such, there is no strong evidence for a transgender person's favourite video game character to be one that they made themselves.

17. Did you play as a character of your preferred gender before you realised that you are transgender?

A majority at 36 (80%) of the participants played as a character of their preferred gender before they realised that they are transgender. 9 (20%) had not, with one leaving blank. This further strengthens how transgender players will experiment with gender and presentation within video games, and shows that video games may have been a key part in them figuring out that they are transgender.

18. When you make a character, do you mostly try and make them look like yourself or someone that you want to be?

When you make a character, do you mostly try to make them look like yourself or someone that you want to be?

- Make them look like what you want to be
- Make them look like yourself
- Depends on the game
- Create a unique character

3 7%
5 11%
6 13%
31 69%
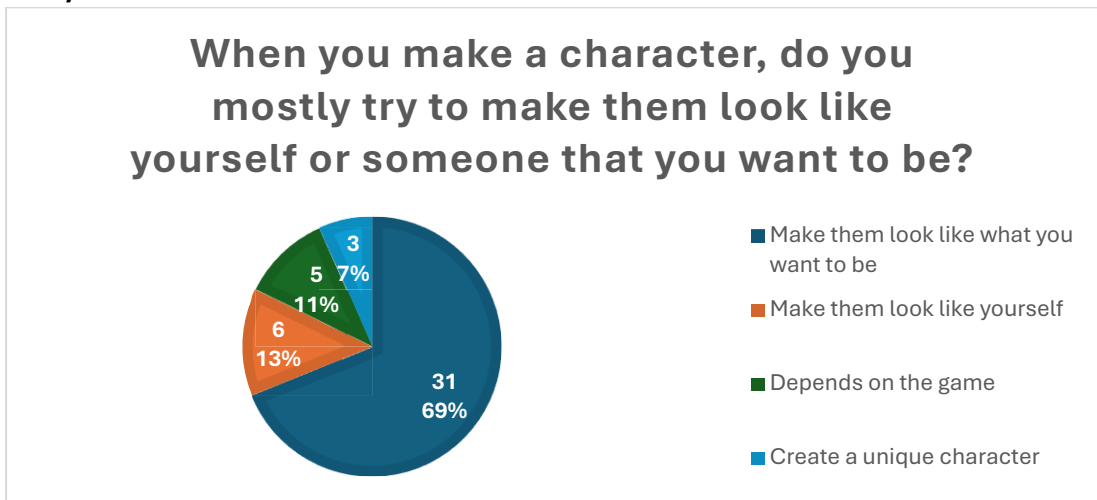
Figure 3.10: Do survey participants make a character look like themselves

For this question, 11 participants answered "Other". These were sorted into which answer category best fit. This made it necessary to create two more categories. Participants in "Create a unique character" would create a character that was separate and not based on themselves. Participants within "Depends on the game" were those that created a character differently game to game, depending on the games style, character limitation, or what they felt like doing for that game. This could be either a character that looked themselves, wanted to look like, or a unique character. Most participants at 31 (69%) made characters that look like what they want to be, while 5 (11%) created characters that look like themselves, with one not answering (see Figure 3.7). Furthermore, comparing the participants' answers to how long they have been transitioning for, there was no correlation found between the two, with a wide variety of times for each answer. This is somewhat contradictory to Baldwin (2018), who found that participants who had been transitioning for longer were more comfortable playing as characters different from themselves. However, this does not fully contradict as though participants had preferences, this does not mean that they were averse to playing as or creating a character differently from themselves.

19. Do you prefer to play as a character you have made yourself, or one that the game gives you?

A vast majority at 40 (89%) of the participants prefer to play as a character that they made themselves, while 5 (11%) preferred one that the game gives you. This is likely due to how creating a character allows the player to play as a character that they wish to. For transgender people, this means that they can create a character that aligns with themselves and their gender.

a. If you prefer a character you made yourself, do you feel worse if you can't make your own character?

Out of the 40 participants who preferred to play as a character that they made themselves, 28 (70%) are not put off by not being able to create their own character, while 12 (30%) are. This shows that this preference is not a strong need, that most transgender players will still play and enjoy a game when they cannot create a character that perfectly represents themselves. Again, comparing to how long participants had been transitioning for, there was no solid pattern with a wide variety of time for each answer.

20. Have you ever felt like you haven't been represented by the characters in a video game in relation to gender?

A majority at 35 (83%) of the participants have felt like they have not been represented by the characters in a video game in relation to gender. 7 (17%) answered no, and 3 left this blank. These answers show that many of the participants have played games that do not have a representation of themselves. As the majority of the participants were transgender women, this is likely showing how many video games will only have a male character to play as, with women being in the minority. However, this question would have benefitted from more specificity, asking about those instances of misrepresentation which could have allowed for more nuanced discussion on negative representation. This is especially with how representation wants could be different between participants, and how within the context of transgender people answering this question, it could further be more specifically about the lack of transgender representation in video games.

21. What do you feel makes for good character representation?

26 participants wanted games to have more realistic transgender characters. Having a transgender character that is fleshed out and not just ticking boxes goes a long way for making good representation. 12 of these participants wanted someone who is just a character in the game, who also happens to be transgender. Though not as many, 3 other participants wanted more clear representation of the transgender experience and showing the challenges and struggles of being transgender or queer. Either way, participants want a character that feels like a person and is fleshed out, not just token or stereotyped representation. Furthermore, having someone of the same identity that the character is as a part of the creation process was also a want by a participant, and is a good way with making a character feel like an actual person. This additionally has the benefit of giving the space for people of marginalised identities to tell their own stories.

Like some of the answers for social features, 19 participants mentioned having a diverse range of customisation options that the player can choose from helps with being able to represent the player. Furthermore, showing and being able to create characters that were not bound to the gender binary was included as positive by 12 participants. This includes a range of physical features and clothing options that are not gender locked, and voice options that are not just high voice for female & low voice for male. 6 participants further added that pronoun options would be a positive, especially the inclusion of more than just she/her or he/him. For games that do not have a character that the player can customise, 12 mentioned having a diverse cast to select from, or being able to interact with helps with the player feeling represented.

22. Do you believe that video games have helped you with your life in any way, including with mental health, presentation of yourself or just with figuring out things?

There were many different answers to this question, and all but two people believing that video games have helped them in some way. 22 of the participants' answers to this question were about exploration, with 20 participants also mentioning the ability to express themselves. Video games were a space that participants could be who they are. These were some of the first places that some participants started figuring out that they were transgender or were a space that further helped them along that path. Some also said that character customisation helped to influence their own style in real life. The ability to play as someone else and follow characters stories were also mentioned as a part of this exploration, especially with the appreciation of video game stories being more immersive and interactive compared to other media. Furthermore, representation was also directly mentioned by 4 people as helping them by seeing characters that are like them going through the same struggles.

Confidence was mentioned by 8 participants, with video games helping some participants being more confident in being transgender and helping build positive body image. This was all especially helpful for participants that did not have any other options in real life for exploring their gender.

A 22 of the participants' answers were about how video games also helped in different ways with their mental health. Exploration and expression played a part in this, with video games giving them a safe space to be themselves. 10 participants mentioned escapism, helping the participants disconnect from their struggles so they do not have to be constantly battling against what they are facing in real life. Helping to deal with stress, anxiety, anger, and depression were all brought up by participants, with 9 participants additionally writing about how video games became a way to relax and to help enjoy life. 3 participants additionally believe that video games were a way that helped them continue to live.

12 participants included how social interactions were important for them. Friend groups were made through video games and further became places to meet other transgender people. These groups further became places of gender exploration and experimentation. Additionally, social interactions were further places of mental health help, both being helped and helping others.

There were two people who did not say yes to this question, one just saying no, and the other saying that they were not sure.

3.4 Conclusion

Overall, the survey had 45 participants, with participants skewing towards transgender women and non-binary people, being from Australia or the United States of America, having known they were transgender for 6 years, and having started transitioning in the past year. Participants answers to their favourite games and genres were very varied, mainly just popular video games. Additionally, participants after transitioning usually were playing the same amount of video games, or less. Most participants had met other transgender people through video games and have asked for or provided help to them. Most participants had also interacted with other people as their preferred gender in video games before coming out, though most did not use video games to come out to others. A slight majority of participants had not had any negative interactions in video games to do with being transgender, but for half of those that have had stopped playing those games due to those interactions. Participants answers to social features were varied, with answers including online communication, worries about transphobia and character customisation. Participants usually created characters that look like what they want to be. Most of the participants have felt like they have not been represented by the characters in a video game in relation to gender. Representation needed to not be stereotyped, but different participants wanted different things. Some wanting a character that just happens to be transgender, and others wanting more clearer representation of the experience of being transgender. All but two participants believed that video games have helped them in some way. Answers included the freedom that video games give, mental health relief and social interactions.

4. Understanding how video game can help explore gender: A deeper dive into people's experiences

4.1 Introduction

To reiterate, this study is separated into two approaches, semi-structured interviews and a survey, to gather the thoughts and experiences of transgender people to help determine how video games give people a space for gender exploration. This chapter details the interviews, and their results, about how video games can help transgender people explore gender. In contrast to the survey, semi-structured interviews were used so that we could have a set of questions that would be asked but can add more or change questions depending on what the participant answers so that we could get deeper, personal experiences. This allows for gathering of more qualitative data, like about the participants' experiences playing video games, to come to a deeper understanding of how and why transgender people use video games to explore gender. A thematic analysis was further done on the interview responses that is separated under the themes of Social, Mental health, Character Creation, and Representation.

4.2 Method

Ethics approval was sought out for this study, with the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) HREC Ethics Application Number: ETH23-8199.

4.2.1 Data collection

Invitations to an interview were sent out to potential participants who volunteered by email or on Discord, through a digital flyer (see **Appendix A**). The interviews were then conducted online through VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) services Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, 2011) and Discord (Discord Inc., 2015), between January 2024 and February 2024. The interview took approximately 60-90 minutes. Audio was recorded in these interviews and was then transcribed into digital documents. These documents were stored within UTS's OneDrive (Microsoft, 2007) with identifiable information removed. Data collected was qualitative, focusing on phenomenology to gather the participants thoughts and experiences on video games. The interview documents were then examined using an inductive approach through Miles & Huberman's (1984) model of thematic analysis to find themes and patterns to determine what video games do to help transgender players explore gender. This is a cyclical approach, where the researcher collects data and then continuously performs data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions throughout the study. Data reduction involves reducing and focusing the data collected through coding and theme identification. This leads to ideas on what data to display within a coding table, which can further lead to more data reduction. As this occurs, preliminary conclusions are drawn, which can then inform further data reduction and data display. Coding the data was done in line with Saldana (2009). This involved becoming familiar with the interview script, noting key phrases and repeated ideas. The scripts then went through first cycle coding, searching through the script to find and highlight passages and adding codes to the coding table. As this was occurring, tentative categories, themes, and conclusions were found. This further allowed for subsequent interviews to have follow-up questions prepared for more data collection. Each of the interview scripts were coded separately, before the codes were refined further and then coded together for second cycle coding. Codes were continually refined and grouped into categories, with themes and theories emerging from them. Coding table can be seen in Table **4.2**.

4.2.2 Participants

Participants for interviews were found through social media sites, with a majority found through Discord. It was useful as it is a platform that both focuses on gaming and is a service where interviews can be conducted easily. Permission was also gained from the social media group admins to be allowed to search for participants in these groups. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on if they are transgender and play or have played video games while they were transitioning. This is so that examples could be found directly from transgender people who have explored their gender and have played enough video games for it to have impacted their life in some way, like with affecting their transition. There were 8 interview participants with 3 transgender women, 2 non-binary transgender women, 2 non-binary people and 1 genderfluid person. 6 are from Australia and 2 from the United States of America. Participants were all at varying times for how long they've known they are transgender, between 1 – 10 years.

4.2.3 Questions

This is a semi-structured interview, with questions that the interviewer asked the participants, while left open enough to give the participant space to answer as they wish, and for follow-up questions to be asked based on their answers. Follow-up questions were also written to predict what the responses would be like and to keep the flow of the interview, but ultimately the participant would dictate where the interview went. Questions were similar to what was asked in the survey, with more added that could receive more in-depth answers. Therefore, reasoning for asking these questions is similar to the survey questions. The interview questions were divided into 6 sections, though questions asked were not necessarily always in order. The interviews started with introduction/general questions. These were mostly quantitative questions which are shown in the results section separately in Table **4.1**. These questions were asked to better understand the participants and their gaming habits. Social questions were questions that asked about the participant's social interactions in video games. Transgender people may use video games to help find and connect to other people, including other transgender people (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Nardi, 2010; Strauss et al., 2019). This can help with transgender people understanding themselves, and further get help with transition, gender experimentation, and mental health. However, transphobia from these interactions may also affect them. The Avatar/Character section were questions asking about the participant's use and creation of video game avatars. Transgender people may use video game avatars to help experiment with gender and explore who they wish to be (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019). The fourth section asked about the participant's thoughts on representation in video games. Seeing different people represented in video games helps normalise their existence to others. Seeing yourself represented in a video game helps not just with connecting with the game but also normalises your own existence to yourself, helping yourself come to terms with who you are (Baldwin, 2018; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019). The participant is also asked about their mental health experiences with video games. The participant may have used video games to help with any of their mental health struggles, and some video game features may be highlighted that help. Finally, the interview wraps up with asking about any additional things that they wish to talk about that they may not have mentioned earlier. See Appendix **F** for more details.

4.3 Results

Questions > Participants v	1. Identity	2. Transition time	3. Gaming frequency	4. Gaming growing up	5. Favourite game device or console	6. Favourite Games	7. Favourite genres	8. Feelings while playing	9. Memorable Experience	10. Gaming at start of transition	11. Gaming amount after transition
1	Non-binary transgender woman	Known for 10 years, transitioning for 6 years	Daily	Retro consoles of the time, like Atari and NES. First 'New' console was GameCube	PC	The Outer Wilds[1], Sayonara Wild Hearts[2], No Man's Sky[3], Signalis[4], Shadow of the Colossus[5]	Walking sim[a]/story-based, Sci-fi[b]	Escapism	Social interactions, Multiplayer	Gone Home[6], Team Fortress 2[7]	Same
2	Non-binary	Known for 1 year, transitioning soon after	Daily	Wii, DS and PC	PC	Truck Simulator[8], Minecraft[9], Terraria[10], GTAV[11], Beat Saber[12]	Sandbox, Open world[c], Simulator[d]	Immersion, Bliss	Solo game experience where story and game mechanics intertwined (Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons[13])	Beat Saber, Truck Simulator	More
3	Transgender woman	Known for 3 years, social transition over next year, medical transition for a year	Daily	SNES, N64, PS1, PS2	PC, Steam Deck, Switch	Warframe[14], Mindustry[15], Oxygen Not Included[16], Dwarf Fortress[17], Factorio[18]	Management games[e], ARPG[f]	Happiness, Immersion, Escapism, Out of body experience	Social interactions, Family interactions	Warframe	Same
4	Non-binary	Transitioning for 6 months	Daily	Wii, DS	PC, Switch	Minecraft, Apex Legends[19], Splatoon[20]	First-person games[g]	Fun, Enjoyment, Distraction, Customasation	Character customisation (Splatoon)	Splatoon	Same
5	Genderfluid	Transitioning for about 9 years	Daily	N64, Game Boy Advance, DS	PC	RPGs	RPG, Roguelikes[h]	Joy, Ecstatic, Engaged	Social interactions, Multiplayer, Representation	World of Warcraft[21]	Same
6	Non-binary transgender woman	Known for 7 years, started transitioning 6 months later	Daily	PC (DOS), Game Boy, N64	PC, Emulation	Dark Souls games[22]	Souls-likes[i], RPGs, Racing[j]	Intellectually and Mentally stimulated, Customisation	Accomplishment	Payday 2[23], Garry's Mod[24]	Slightly less
7	Transgender woman	Known for 6 years, transitioning 6 months later	Daily	Game Boy Colour, N64	PS4, Mobile/Tablet	Destiny[25], Cyberpunk 2077[26], Ark Knights[27], Yakuza 7[28]	FPS[k], Tower Defence[l], Narrative focused RPG	Escapism	Accomplishment	Destiny, Apex Legends, Overwatch[29], Pokemon[30]	More
8	Transgender woman	Known for 6 years, transitioning 8 months later	Every other day	PS1, PS2, Xbox 360	PC, Switch	Spyro[31], Age of Empires 2[32], Black Desert Online[33]	Strategy[m], Arcade[n], Indie[o]	Relax, Escapism, Accomplishment	Social Interactions, Multiplayer	Age of Empires 2, Garry's Mod	Same

Table 4.1: Summary of interview participants' answers to introduction questions

a. Adventure games mainly involving walk around, e.g. Gone Home. b. Science fiction games e.g. No Man's Sky   c. Game that involves a large, non-linear world e.g. GTAV   d. Game that simulates something e.g. Truck simulator

e. Game where you need to manage something e.g. Mindustry   f. Action Role-Playing Game e.g. Warframe   g. Game that takes place from a first-person perspective, the perspective the player's character e.g. Minecraft

h. Games based on the game Rogue (A.I. Design, 1980), typically must navigate a randomly generated level with permanent death   i. Games based on the Dark Souls series, typically an ARPG with high difficulty

j. Game where the goal is racing your opponents in a competition   k. First-Person Shooter, a game in first-person perspective, that involves shooting others e.g. Destiny   l. Games where you must defend some sort of point from enemies, using defensive structures e.g. Ark Knights

m. Game that involves strategy e.g. Age of Empires 2   n. Games that focus on recreating the feeling of an arcade game, designed to be played in short intervals   o. games created by independent (indie) developers

1. Mobius Digital (2019)   2. Simogo (2019)   3. Hello Games (2016)   4. rose-engine (2022)   5. Japan Studio (2005)   6. The Fullbright Company (2013)   7. Valve (2007)   8. SCS Software (2008)   9. Mojang Studios (2011)   10. Re-Logic (2011)
11. Rockstar North (2013)   12. Oculus Development Team (2019)   13. Starbreeze Studios (2013)   14. Digital Extremes (2013)   15. Anuken (2017)   16. Klei Entertainment (2019)   17. Bay 12 Games (2006)   18. Wube Software (2020)   19. Respawn Entertainment (2019)
20. Nintendo EPD (2022)   21. Blizzard Entertainment (2004)   22. FromSoftware (2011)   23. Overkill Software (2013)   24. Facepunch Studios (2006)   25. Bungie (2017)   26. CD Projekt Red (2020)   27. Hypergryph (2019)   28. Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio (2020)   29. Blizzard Entertainment (2016)
30. Game Freak (1996)   31. Insomniac Games (1998)   32. Ensemble Studios (1999)   33. Pearl Abyss (2015)

Themes	Categories	Codes	Descriptions
Social	- Finding Relationships - Gaining Support - Negative Interactions	- Friends - Playing with others - Social affirmation - Online social groups - Coming out - Customisation to find others - Transition advice - Influencers - Social dysphoria - In-game communication - Social anxiety - Transphobia - Moderation	- Individual friends made online - About playing games with other people - Affirmation of gender through social interactions - Groups found online, like through in-game spaces and social platforms like Discord - Telling others about being transgender - Using customisation to show they are transgender - Advice about being transgender and transition related support - Seeing other people playing video games, and additionally finding community - Dysphoria caused through interactions with other people - About the different ways people communicated in-game, like voice chat and text chat - Anxiety through interaction with others - Encountering and experiencing transphobia - About moderation and moderation methods, like reporting
Mental Health	- Receiving Support - Gaming as Support	- Support for mental health - Giving help for mental health - Relaxation - Gender dysphoria - Relieving dysphoria - Depression - Anxiety - Immersion - Escape	- Finding support for mental health difficulties - Giving help to other people for mental health difficulties - Using video games to help relax and relieve stress - Dysphoria relating to gender - About relieving gender dysphoria - About experiences of depression - About experiences of anxiety - About how people immersed themselves into video games - Using video games to escape real life
Player Character and Customisation	- Gender Exploration - Creator Limitations - No Creator	- Gender affirmation - Experimentation - Help with dysphoria - Worsening dysphoria - Influence on appearance - Creating self - Playing as self - Creating someone else - Character immersion - Aesthetic creator options - Pronoun customisation - Silent protagonists - Preset characters	- Affirmation of gender through playing as a character of their gender - Experimenting with gender through the player's character - Helping gender dysphoria through character creation - Gender dysphoria becoming worse through character creation - The influence of the player's character on appearance - Creating a player character that is a reflection of themselves - Playing as a player character that is a reflection of themselves - Creating a player character that is not a reflection of themselves - Finding immersion through the player character - About player character aesthetic customisation options - About customising the player's pronouns - About and playing as a silent protagonist - About and playing as a preset character
Representation	- Seeing themselves - Representation of Transgender people - Creating Representation - Non-transgender Representation	- Normalising transgender people - Affirmation of self - Character story - Character personality - Character aesthetics - Negative representation - Positive representation - Representation wants - Created character representation - Pride customisation - Modding - Representation of women - Representation of sexuality	- Normalising transgender people to self and to other people - Affirming the player through representation - About a character's story - About a character's personality - About a character's aesthetics - Transgender representation that is negative - Transgender representation that is positive - What is wanted for transgender representation - Creating a character for representation of self - Pride customisation options, like pride flags and colours - Modding a game for better representation - Representation of women in video games - Representation of sexuality in video games

Table 4.2: Coding table for thematic analysis

4.3.1 Social

Finding Relationships

Video games were a place where all the participants had socialised with other people. Some met other people through the video games themselves, connecting with others in online video games. Others met people in real life and then continued to interact and play with them online, strengthening their friendships. Some had met their significant others through video games. Being able to meet up and socialise with transgender communities and people online became a part of daily life for some participants. However, not many had met transgender people online before coming out. Some had met transgender people in real life, and for others they had only met cisgender queer people online. Most would only seek out other transgender people after realising that they were transgender.

Video games would further allow for bits of customisation to show that the player is transgender. Some of the participants would use that to show that they are transgender online, customising their character and profile to show transgender or other pride flags. They would then use that to find other transgender and queer people online, both showing that themselves are transgender and looking for others that do the same.

In addition to playing video games with people, some would stream the game for others. Participant 1 talked about streaming Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) for her friends,

> *"The one that comes to mind is playing Spiritfarer for people in that Discord server. I streamed every minute of my playthrough of that and coming to the end was just this whole catharsis of difficult emotions and we all kind of shared in that, it was intimate and nice."*

Not just playing together but experiencing and talking about video games became a way to socialise and become closer with other people. Professional streamers and other influencers also played a part in some participants finding communities to join online, especially with streamers that are transgender themselves or transgender and queer positive.

Gaining Support

Some of the first places that participants interacted with others as their preferred gender was in video games. Playing as a character of their preferred gender online was met with small bits of gender euphoria from being referred to as their correct gender from other people. For some, this further went to roleplaying as their gender with others. This would all go on to becoming instrumental for some participants realising they were transgender, as well as continued affirmation of their gender. Video games were some of the earliest times that some participants came out to people and gained support. For some it was through the game giving them the space for a quiet moment while playing and talking with others and mentioning that they are transgender. For others it was a quick profile picture and name change, and other people noticed.

Online social circles would become support networks for participants, nearly all the participants had either given or received advice and help from these communities. Participant 7 talked about asking for help about medically transitioning,

> *"Figuring out, you know, how to practically go about transitioning. How do I, how do I get on hormones? How do I talk to my doctor about transitioning? What sorts of things*

should I know going into it? And even in the aftermath, like is, you know, drug X or Y going to help or not? Should I bother with this particular medication or not?"

Advice would further be about non-medical things like clothing, wigs and other ways for gender affirmation and help with being transgender. This was especially helpful for people pretransition, trying to figure out if they were transgender, and for people who had only just started transitioning, trying to figure out what to do.

Negative Interactions

However, interactions online were not always positive. Being openly transgender online has caused some of the participants to face transphobia from the people that they have met. Participants had to face many kinds of transphobia, from direct hate of transgender people and purposeful misgendering, to "chasers"[a] fetishising transgender people, and direct ignorance about being transgender. And so, many participants are not openly transgender online, having anxieties and fears surrounding it. Many do not talk online in public lobbies ever. This is partially related to dysphoria and being misgendered, and partially fearing being "clocked"[b], people realising that they are transgender and then saying hurtful things because of that. Participant 5 talked about her anxiety being misgendered online, specifically in Heroes of the Storm (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015),

> *"I think there's been moments, like individual singular moments, where we've not spoken up because we've not wanted people to hear a non-fem presenting voice and assume. We've definitely had moments like that in Heroes of the Storm, where we've just kept off microphone to avoid people from clocking us."*

This all made it so moderation within video games was a concern for many of the participants. Coming up against transphobia was awful, and so having competent moderators that weren't biasedly transphobic was a must. Additionally, being able to easily block and report people is important, and some participants would not play games that had poor moderation that let bigotry go unchecked. Interestingly, as some of the participants would not communicate much online and were not openly transgender, some participants did not really consider moderation, saying that it just has not affected them much. However, they still wanted moderation and still wanted that safety net of interacting online. This all was especially necessary in video games that had multiplayer required content, like through guilds. Joining and playing with guilds and other video game communities needed moderation for transgender participants to feel safe engaging with the games content. Some additionally needed to have guild in game to be able to communicate online, as the player did not have to go through the process of finding other non-transphobic people and could just join a transgender positive group. Multiplayer required content was further a problem with some participants just not wanting to have to talk with people. Non-verbal communication became a must for some, not just text chat but being able to emote and ping what they wanted to communicate without requiring the need to chat with people.

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a. Slang term for someone who is attracted to transgender people solely for the fact that they are transgender
b. Slang term for when someone realises that another person is transgender

4.3.2 Mental health

Receiving Support

All the interview participants have had some sought of struggle with mental health. This includes anxiety about talking with others and how they present themselves, and depression and thoughts of suicide. The interviewees had then in turn used video games in some way in relating to their mental health struggles. Social support networks became an important part of many participants mental health help. Being able to talk to others gave some participants the opportunity to ask for advice. In some cases, participants were also the ones giving out advice and helping out others with their mental health. Participant 2 talked about their experience helping someone in a Discord server,

> *"There was someone saying that they weren't sure what their gender was, and it was causing them a lot of sort of anxiety, and so I sort of just shared my own experiences with it, and my conclusion, which is that the exact label kind of doesn't matter as long as you're you,"*

Being able to share experiences with other transgender people has helped many of the participants, as well as other transgender people that they have met, with their mental health. Participant 4 also talked about the game Kind Words (Popcannibal, 2019), a game built around anonymity and being able to ask for help and get responses from other people also playing the game. This participant mentions that being able to do this has helped and had a positive effect on them[a].

Gaming as Support

Consistently participants talked about how when they are feeling down or overwhelmed by life, they use video games to help escape, giving them the opportunity to rest from their turmoil. Participant 3 talks about her experience while playing The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006) during her mental health struggles,

> *"…the whole time I was playing Oblivion and thinking about suicide, I was processing something. I came out on the other side of that fine. So all of the thinking I was doing was processing. What Oblivion did is it offered me one way that my brain would be like, okay, I can take a break from the processing."*

Escapism in video games helped this participant, as well as other participants, facilitate the process of bettering their own mental health. This facilitation can also be seen in the processing of many of the participants' gender exploration. Some participants would use video games to take a break from thinking about their gender, which can also become an escape from gender dysphoria. Participant 1 mentions,

> *"If for nothing else, then escapism, to give myself some distance between my problems in the real world and problems that are solvable, because they're programmed to be solvable."*

Apart of her escapism is how video games present something that can be worked through, blurring the line between how escapism pushes the player to escape their own problems, and how immersion pushes the player to think through the problems presented by the game. Virtual reality (VR) games were also mentioned as being incredibly potent in blurring this line. VR as a technology engages more of the player's senses than other gaming platforms, dramatically helping the player with escaping from

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a. As I feel like I would not be doing my duty as a researcher, here is a link to the developer of Kind Words talking about moderation: https://steamcommunity.com/app/1070710/discussions/0/2552901289735473635/

real life and immersing themselves into a game. Participant 2 talks about their experience playing the VR game Beat Saber (Oculus Development Team, 2019),

> *"…even when you are no character, like in Beat Saber, you're just a pair of floating lightsabres, you kind of embody a spirit of nothingness. It's not like you are yourself controlling lightsabres. You are nothing. You are no one. You are the lightsabres. There is no character. There's no body. There's no gender. You're kind of nothingness. And that is like weirdly alluring, I guess. I guess it's just like ultimate escapism."*

This further relates to how participants talked about the headspace that video games can put you in. The act of playing something that you enjoy, the flow state that you can get into when doing something that you are good at, and the relaxation that some games can give you, all were related to positively affecting participants' mental state, especially during bad mental health episodes.

However, for some participants playing video games pulled them away from real life, that the only life they really had was in video games and online. Participant 6 talked about her gaming habits pretransition,

> *"Because I was starting to ignore the real world and give a higher level of importance to being online than certain commitments that I had (which were ultimately good for) like, going outside… There wasn't an alternative, I don't believe. I later transitioned or kept transitioning and became a lot happier with myself and met other people and started having a life in person. That was preferable, but at the time I didn't have that option, so this was the best thing I had. So I don't blame myself for anything like that, but it wasn't great."*

Though video games did lead to some participants ignoring real life, for many participants this was the best thing that they had at the time. Video games were used to push the participants to continue to live, or at the very least, to get out of bed and do something, and eventually to help themselves.

Additionally of note, participant 6 also talked about using a voice changer while talking online while playing video games. She would set the changer to a setting that she wanted her voice to sound like and played it through her headphones while she talked online while playing video games. She would try to match the voice with her real voice, and slowly over time she would dial the settings down so that eventually her voice matched the original settings. This participant essentially trained her voice while playing video games and talking to others, using a voice changer, helping lessen her dysphoria with her voice.

4.3.3 Player character and customisation

Gender Exploration

Many of the participants' gender exploration started while playing video games. While talking about her first time playing as a female character, participant 7 says,

> *"I played through as the female character and uh, I played it off as like a, no, no, it's just because, you know, she's cuter, it's better, better clothing options. But I, deep down, part of me was like, this, I want to look like this. I wish this was me."*

Video games gave participants' their first affirmation of their gender, and their first experience of being their preferred gender. Participant 7 continued to say that she quickly tried to repress that feeling, trying to "cover her tracks" and hide how she was feeling. This was an experience that was shared by other participants, with participant 8 further saying that experimentation was hard for her. Due to her gaming group being filled with cisgender males, she felt like she was pressured to try and fit in and not create a character how they wanted to. However, this was the start of the journey to discovering that they were transgender. As participant 2 put it,

> *"It didn't give me gender euphoria, but it gave me a hint of that. It was like, this is really cool, I feel like I'm me on the screen, because it wasn't me, but it was what I want to work towards, I guess"*

Character creation became a key part in exploring and working through these feelings. Participant 8 mentioned playing as a character that she had made pre-transition and talked about how it did not represent herself and was not an enjoyable experience, which made it much harder to play the game. So, she created and played characters that better represented who she is. She talked about her experience using character creation in Black Desert Online (Pearl Abyss, 2015) and Dragon Quest X (Square Enix, 2012) to help with gender dysphoria,

> *"Yes, in that I'd have a means to express myself in a video game, where I'm able to be myself in a virtual world. Especially if it's like a large, like a multiplayer type game. Like Black Desert or Dragon Quest and things like that, where I'm able to be treated and perceived as my gender".*

For some participants, being able to create characters that represented themselves became a way to express themselves, as well as to help with dysphoria. This was especially true when it came to how others viewed them in the video game. Being perceived and affirmed by other people, as well as the game itself, became helpful sources of euphoria. However, this still came with some caveats. Participant 8 continued to say that though helpful, the dissonance between the game character that she created, and her real-life body became a source of dysphoria. Though this did also help push her to change her real-life appearance. In-game clothing and accessories would go on to influence her own clothing and accessories that she would wear in real-life and help her with her dysphoria. Participant 7 also had somewhat of a similar experience. Her first time dressing up as a girl was when she was cosplaying as a video game character and became instrumental in realising that she was transgender. The ability to customise and change the player's character whenever was also seen as a positive by many participants.

Though participants would often create characters for what they wished to look like, and what they wished to eventually be, some participants would just create characters for the game itself. They would be roleplaying as a character, not as a representation of themselves. Furthermore, Participant 3 talked

about how she does not make characters look like what she wants to look like, saying that that is just how she interacts with games. She further talks about how though not wanting to look like a man in games anymore, creating characters just did not help with dysphoria,

> *"But…, it doesn't really help with like…, it doesn't help with like real-life dysphoria. Okay. Because to me, like, nobody within a game is ever seeing me anyway, so I don't, I don't put myself in the shoes of my character."*

This participant does not fully put themselves into the characters they play as. So, for some players the act of playing as or creating a character of their gender does not lessen the impact of dysphoria in real life as it does not have a tangible effect on them.

Additionally, Participant 2 talked about playing VR game Half-Life: Alyx (Valve, 2020) in comparison to the non-VR game Half-Life 2 (Valve, 2004),

> *"It's sort of like the role of VR games, specifically, because they're so, I guess like, all-encompassing of your senses and so immersive. You don't really have a choice but to fully embody any characters that you play as. You know, when I'm playing Half-Life 2, it's Gordon Freeman on the screen, I guess I'm controlling him, but when I'm playing Half-Life Alyx, I am Alyx, because her voice is coming out of my mouth and my hands are her hands. And it's kind of hard to describe, but that, I don't know, I appreciate that ability."*

Virtual Reality can be a way to get immersed into the game and to directly embody the character that you are playing as. This can be a powerful tool for experimentation for transgender players, giving them a perspective that they could not get playing other types of video games.

Creator Limitations

For non-binary participants, even when the option to create a character is available, it usually was not representative of themselves. Many games fell into the binary of creating a character that is male or female. However, some games have started to give more options for representation, giving more androgynous options. Participant 4 talked about their time playing Splatoon 3 (Nintendo EPD, 2022), where instead of having male or female, the player has multiple styles that they can choose from, some being more masculine, and some being more feminine. Furthermore, clothing is not gender locked, and any character can wear any piece of clothing. Interestingly, this is different from the previous Splatoon games (Nintendo EPD 2017), where the player could only select male or female and could only wear their specific gendered clothes. Other participants also viewed similar changes in other games, like pushing towards less gendered customisation through masculine and feminine styles, as being positive.

Pronoun customisation was also something that participants wanted. Games where the dialogue is voice acted did have some leniency with this, coming with the understanding that having more options would require more voice acting. However, many participants voiced that games where you interacted with others should have some sort of pronoun customisation, like showing on your account profile what pronouns you preferred. Additionally, Participant 6 brought up a point about pronoun use in team, character-based video games,

> *"People in game will tend to refer to however you're playing as, as the, the character name and that character's pronouns. Right? And that, that, that makes sense. That's, it's just so like everyone, everyone knows what's, what's happening. Doesn't have to*

look up the username or anything like that. Um, but it also means that if I'm playing as a guy character because I enjoy their play style, like mechanically, um, and I get to get referred to as, uh, with the wrong pronouns, which is just a little, a little upsetting."

The character that the player selects plays a part in the pronouns that are used for the player. Pronoun customisation may be able to help reduce misgendering, which is especially useful for games where the player is not always playing as a character of their gender.

No Creator

Not all games have the option of character creation. Silent protagonists were generally preferred when it came to this, over having a preset character. Being able to self-insert and be themselves easier was seen as the main positive, with participant 1 saying,

"I like those (silent protagonists) better than being locked into a character that already has an established personality. I like being able to project a little bit of myself onto them and tell my own story, even through the one that they're experiencing. But it's really nothing compared to like having one that I've made and that I'm able to put myself into and my own experience in life into."

Still, participants will enjoy games with preset characters. Though harder to initially get into a game, as preset characters rely more heavily on telling a good story to get the player immersed, these preferences will not get in the way of participants enjoying a good game. However, being able to create, or just have some hand in creating the character, was always the preference. Participant 5 says,

"if I don't get to make my own character, or if the character creation only has male options, then it will be harder to self-insert into that character. And it will feel more like I'm playing someone else's story than getting to experience my own adventure in this story world."

Though not usually a negative, playing as a character of a gender other than their preferred gender made it much harder to get immersed and want to play a game. This especially became a problem when the gender of the player's character became an important part of the character. Participant 1 talked about how usually, the player character's gender was not important to the story, and so when playing as a male character it was largely not an issue, however with her experience play Death Stranding (Kojima Productions, 2019),

"The main character of that game is just constantly on about how he's a man and how he has to be alone and so on, and how he's strong and he's strong enough to get through it. I just found that so vapid and so annoying, and I wanted to like that game, and I just couldn't."

This shows how aggressively playing into gendered stereotypes disconnects the player from the character that they are playing as, and in turn disconnects them from the game itself.

4.3.4 Representation

Seeing themselves

Representation has helped many of the participants in a number of ways. Though not a video game, participant 2 talked about representation in a show they watched, and how that helped to open up a conversation about being non-binary with their mum. Participant 1 talked about how exploring different perspectives and how they represented the participant felt like they affirmed her identity, especially early on. For many of the participants, representation became a way to see themselves in the media that they enjoy and helped them along with their journey.

The participants' favourite video game characters were ones that they felt represented themselves in some way. For a few characters, it was the way that the character explored and reacted to the story helped them helped the participants connect with the character. Participant 7 talked about V from Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red, 2020),

> *"I was going to say V from Cyberpunk, but I think specifically what I like about V is how the actor has portrayed her… I do feel represented in V, even though I'm basically just controlling her through the world, but like the situation she's put in and the kind of emotions expressed in her situation feel very real. They feel very, very genuine. And I really like that about her. Like playing through the first time and seeing this stuff unfold for her, I'm like, that is, that is probably how I would react in that situation"*

In these cases, they felt like the way that the character reacted was like how they themselves would have reacted. Though in some other cases the personality of the character was not like their own, but was something to aspire to, someone that they wanted to be like.

For other characters, it was more explicitly the character's story and how that character represented the participants' own experiences. In these cases, it was queer representation, and queer experiences that connected them to the character. Participant 5 talked about one of their favourite characters, Arueshalae from Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous (Owlcat Games, 2021),

> *"… they're very much a queer representation and also a representation of someone dealing with trauma. And trying to grow to be more than that trauma and to be allowed to grow and to be allowed to be okay. A world that tells them they shouldn't be okay."*

For participant 5, it was further about queer adjacent representation, character stories that weren't explicitly about queer people but were experiences that queer people could connect and relate to.

Finally, for a few characters it was the aesthetics that the participant connected with, that the character looked either how they wanted to look like or what they do look like. Participant 8 talked the character she created for Black Desert Online (Pearl Abyss, 2015),

> *"When I think of favourite character, I more so think of characters I've made myself with, like, Black Desert Online, because you have that level of customisation and I think that maybe is because I put that time into creating that character… A character that was both aesthetically interesting, and I kind of had some sort of lore that I made up around that character."*

Many of the characters that participants talked about had one or more of these themes of personality, story and aesthetics that participants felt like represented themselves and therefore were their favourite character. Interestingly, four participants talked about a character that they made themselves. In these cases, aesthetics was the main theme that participants would talk about, and the time invested into making the character. However, V from Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red, 2020) was an exception to this. Though they are character that can be heavily customised, they became a favourite character due to having their own story and personality, rather than because the player created them. Additionally, the participants favourite characters were not always characters that they play as. The character's talked about were a mix of point of view characters and non-player characters.

Representation of Transgender People

Participants felt that representation of transgender and non-binary characters has been lacking in video games. Many of the participants could not initially think of a transgender character from a video game because there just was not that many transgender characters. Non-binary representation by extension was also hard to come by, especially when the participants were mainly focused just trying to make a character that represented themselves. When participants did talk about a character, many of them felt like most characters failed to represent the participants. The main point that many of them made was that being transgender or non-binary was a surface level characterisation for many of these characters. It felt like these characters were just made for the point of being transgender and not actually representative of being transgender. Participants 1 said about a character from Apex Legends (Respawn Entertainment, 2019),

> *"Yeah, Catalyst is ostensibly a trans woman and a witch and talked openly about her transition. I found her writing very, in the trailers for her at least, relatable and so on. But when I then loaded up the game and tried to play her, I found the way that other characters interacted with her to be very surface level, almost like EA was avoiding trying to acknowledge this part of her identity in any meaningful way in order to appease the people who had things to say about it."*

This unwillingness to commit to a transgender character was also talked about by participant 5 and 6. Borderlands character Lor, is a transgender man introduced in Borderlands 3 (Gearbox Software, 2019). To the participants, it felt like the game was trying to hide the fact that the character is transgender. However, later games in the series continued to include Lor, and outright showing that he has transitioned. This was seen by the participants as being very positive, especially over other video games. This highlights how seeing a game commit to having a transgender character makes the participants appreciate the character more.

Participants did not want representation that showed too little that it looks like the game does not care about the character. Additionally, participants did not want a transgender character that is overtly transgender and everything about their existence about being transgender. Participant 7 talked about her feelings on transgender representation, not wanting representation that is forced and like it's just ticking boxes, wanting a character that just is a person existing in the world. Participant 5 further talked about wanting a character that does not have the struggles of being transgender defining the character, but still not being completely absent from struggle. Examples of positive transgender representation from participants 6 and 7 were characters that had their own story that people could relate to but had deeper meaning for transgender people. Madeline from the game Celeste (Maddy Makes Games, 2018) was brought up by participant 6 due to the emotional journey that Madeline goes through within the game's story. Her depression and anxieties that she goes through can be very

relatable to many people. Additionally, it is heavily implied that Madeline is a transgender woman. For many transgender people, this story took on a deeper meaning, that the story was further about Madeline's struggles with and acceptance of being transgender. Participant 7 brought up Paolo, a transgender man, from the game Far Cry 6 (Ubisoft Toronto, 2021). Paolo is bit more explicitly shown as transgender compared to Madeline, however, participant 7 talked about herself talking with her brother about the character. A part of the game requires you to save a doctor who mentions that he performed top surgery on Paolo without an anaesthetic. For the participants' brother, that comment flew over his head, and he did not understand it. For participant 7, it became a moment that cemented the character as being a badass, that he would push himself through a painful experience to get what he wants and helped the participant directly relate and understand his struggles.

Creating representation

Written more in depth in the previous section, character customisation also further plays into representation for players. Participants would talk about having a wide range of customisation options that would allow them to create characters that could represent themselves. Pride cosmetics like pride flags were additionally welcome due to the ability to show off who they are.

Though not always an option, mods were also a way for some of the participants to add representation to their games. Things like more customisation options for character were important, but also participants 1 and 8 have changed the preset player character in their games to make them more representative of themselves and connect more to the game. Transgender specific customisation was also added by some participants, like adding the transgender flag and other pride flags. Though not in a video game, participant 3 further added transgender medication mechanics to their tabletop RPG game.

Non-Transgender Representation

Representation of sexuality was also touched upon by some of the participants. Being able to romance any of the NPCs was seen as a positive. However, some also liked that in some games you cannot, that due to the NPCs sexuality they are not interested in the player. This helped show "real" representation, that just like in real life, not everyone will be attracted to you. Additionally, it also helped to affirm the player's gender, that the NPC is recognising the player's gender.

Representation of women in video games was talked about by some of the participants as well, with Participant 6 saying,

> "Sometimes you play a game, all the guy characters, all muscly, strong, cool. And then there'll be some girl characters and they're all like, my titties are fully out. I am in a bikini. Yes, this is a shooting game and I have no clothes or armour on. Also, I talk like this and I'm so hot and it's like, this is bad. None of these are real women, if that makes sense. Like the guys get to be an idealistic fantasy character for the guys, but the girls get to be an idealistic fantasy character also for the guys"

Participants talked about how a lot of women in video games came down to being an idealistic fantasy for men, rather than being a character for women to play. This further relates to what was brought up for transgender representation, where representation needed to not be stereotyped so that they could relate and see themselves in the character.

4.4 Conclusion

Overall, the interviews had 8 participants, with a mix of transgender women, non-binary and gender fluid people. The interviews resulted in a thematic analysis separated under the themes of social, mental health, player character & customisation, and representation. Video games were some of the first place where participants interacted others as their preferred gender. Additionally for some participants, video games were some of the earliest times that they came out to people. Video games provide a place for receiving gender euphoria, both from other people and the games themselves. Games provided opportunities for participants to meet other people, including other transgender people. These further became sources of support for the participants, like gaining help for mental health as well as with transitioning. However, participants would come across transphobic people, and moderation was a concern for them. Escapism, and the escape into video games "magic circle" became a way for many participants to help relieve their mental health struggles, and further to help work through them. Gender dysphoria could be relieved through this, though for some participants video games did not help. Character creation was a part of many of the participants' exploration of gender, further affecting how some participants wanted to look and dress in real-life. Being able to represent themselves through the characters they are playing as in video games became a source of gender euphoria and affirmation for participants. However, some games made it hard to create a character that represented themselves, especially for how gendered some character creators could be. Again, most participants created characters for what they wish to look like, though some participants would instead create a character specifically for the game and less so as a representation of themselves. Additionally, character creation itself can become a source of dysphoria, highlighting the difference between the player's created body and their real-life body. Participants usually did not mind playing games that did not have character customisation, preferring silent protagonists in those cases. However, stereotyping characters, especially in relation to gender, was a negative that made it harder to connect with a game. Participants' favourite characters were ones that represented themselves in some way. Many of the participants talked about how representation in video games have failed them most of the time, with transgender characters usually feeling more like cardboard cut-outs rather than real people. Transgender representation wants were also somewhat viewed differently from person to person. Some wanted just transgender people existing in the world, and with others wanting more direct representation.

5. Creating a framework for creating games that encourage exploration of gender

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of the survey and interviews. These are discussed in relation to how they contribute to existing studies, which were discussed in Chapter 2's literature review as background research. The most significant findings of this discussion are then presented in the form of a framework that includes game design ideas that can be incorporated by game designers to help create games that encourage exploration of gender. These all contribute to answering "What role do video games have in transgender gamers' exploration of gender?".

5.2 Discussing the survey and interview results

This section is a discussion of the results of both the survey results and the thematic analysis of the interviews.

5.2.1 Using video games to explore gender

RPG's where most included as an answer for favourite genres or games, though the answers were still quite varied in responses, but in general participants liked playing games that had some level of customisation. Comparing to Steam's Best of 2023 stats[1] they showed a somewhat similar spread of genres, with also a similar focus on some level of customisation for the player. Therefore, transgender players' favourite games and genres appear to be similar to cisgender people's favourites, possibly only skewing slightly towards RPGs, which may be more indicative of the participants rather than transgender people in general. It may be more reasonable to assume that transgender players skew more so towards character and build customisation in games, however, more research would need to be done to confirm this, as it may be more of a trend within gaming in general. Additionally, participants had similar responses to what video games they were playing at the start of transition, that many were just playing their favourite video games. Therefore, it is probable that many participants were playing games to just to have fun and get some enjoyment, with exploring gender being a byproduct of video games having character customisation and freedom to explore who you want to be. This all is very similar to Van Wert and Howansky's (2024) research into the impacts of RPGs for transgender people's gender exploration. They found that many of the aspects of RPGs, like character customisation and social interactions, impacted many of their participants' gender exploration. This impact was not consistently reported by all participants, but that participants who played RPGs with highly customisable avatars were more likely to say that RPGs affected their exploration compared to those that played with less customisation.

5.2.2 Transitioning recently

Though not a focus of this study, it is important to highlight how many of the participants started transitioning in the past year. Due to the time frame (this study took place between December 2023 and February 2024), it is likely that the Covid Pandemic effected when participants started transitioning. Studies researching this have been conducted. Mental health was reported to have gotten worse during this time, especially due to losing access to mental health services, medical care, decreased socialising, and the possibility of being stuck at home with unsupportive family (Hawke et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2023; van der Miesen et al., 2020). These closed services contributed to delays in transitioning until these services began to open back up, with social distancing further delaying

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[1] https://store.steampowered.com/charts/bestofyear/BestOf2023

interacting with others to help facilitate social transitioning. However, Jones et al. (2023) further wrote about how the pandemic also had a part in facilitating gender exploration for some people due to being locked inside. Social anxiety was lessened for some due to less social interactions and the pressures of conforming to gender were relieved. The free time given to them further allowed for them to explore their feelings at their own pace.

5.2.3 Social support networks

Similarly found by other studies like Strauss et al. (2019), Jones et al. (2023) and Koscieza (2023), VOIP services like Discord and in-game spaces like guilds were places that many people socialized with others through video games and helped to create and maintain social support networks. Many of the participants had met transgender people through these spaces, making new friends, and are able send and receive help from others. This help can come in many different forms like advice about gender presentation, medication, mental health and help coming out. This is especially useful for people who are just starting to explore their gender and need help figuring out if they are transgender. Somewhat unlike previous studies, most of the participants have not had many negative interactions with people in video games to do with being transgender. It is likely that these online spaces created safe spaces that helped to reduce interacting with and seeing transphobic content. Moderation in online spaces were seen as a must to keep them safe, which the main researcher saw first-hand in trying to get participants for this project. This was due to how many online transgender spaces would not allow surveys and other advertisements in fear of scams, but also worries for transphobia. This is especially shown with how many of the participants did have anxieties around being seen as transgender online. Like Strauss et al. and Koscieza's findings, participants would usually not reveal themselves to be transgender to people that they meet online unless they already know them. This likely contributes to the amount of transphobia that they face online, and so due to most participants not being publicly transgender, most participants have not faced transphobia. Therefore, transgender people online are faced with either being publicly transgender and being the target of transphobia, or hiding the fact that they are transgender and not interacting with people online. This all in turn may make it harder to make friends with people online, possibly also affecting if transgender people can find each other online. This aligns with the results of the study, where many of the participants had not met any transgender people before realising that they are transgender. However, most of the interview and survey participants had met other transgender people online, indicating that these spaces do work as places that transgender people can find each other, but means that in general transgender people must make the effort seek each other out. This all highlights the need for further protections of transgender people in public online spaces where transgender people can openly interact with other people without fear of transphobia, and the positive use of safe spaces for transgender people in video games.

Pride customisations in-game can be a way to passively and more easily find other transgender people. The use of these pride customisations is also similar to real life practises. Pride flags and colours are incorporated into everyday fashion, called "Flagging" (Evelyn, 2023; Medhurst, 2024). These are used by queer people to signal that they are queer to others, while also spreading solidarity with other queer groups. This included the "Hanky Code", a coloured hanky hanging from the back pocket signalling sexual preferences. However, this has further been incorporated into other clothing like t-shirts. More hidden signals are also used like wearing carabiners, rings, and coloured flowers (Medhurst, 2021; Medhurst, 2024). However, especially in video games for transgender people, it can come at the risk of publicly showing that you are transgender to transphobic people. Though there could be an argument for more hidden customisations (in which case customisation options need to

be in-depth and diverse to allow for this), the point of these customisations is to publicly show off to other people and to build solidarity. Rather, these pride customisations should be widely available and easy to use for all players. However, more research into the wants and needs of people using pride customisations is needed.

Another way mentioned within this study was that transgender people can find one another online through transgender and transgender positive streamers and other content creators. This has been a focus of some studies like Bond & Miller (2024) and Fox & Ralston (2016). Queer content creators can provide role models for queer viewers. They become someone to learn from and help to inspire and affirm themselves. Similarly to video games, joining these YouTube communities would become online social support networks and a means to connect with other queer people. Games companies may then be able implement creator programs (like Warframe's (Digital Extremes, 2013) Creator Program[1]), to promote these content creators. In turn, this may help to create and encourage a positive transgender gaming community. However, more research is needed into how effective this would be, as well as the means that transgender people find community online.

5.2.4 Voice chat and other communication methods

Voice dysphoria and the use of voice chat within video games was found to be an issue for many people. This led to people not using voice chat to communicate with others online, as this could lead to misgendering or revealing themselves to be transgender to others that they do not wish to. For these reasons, as well as social anxiety, many people wished for alternate, non-verbal means of communication. This could include things like text chat or emotes. Koscieza (2023) writes in-depth about how transgender people communicate in video games, where transgender people needed to find ways to signal their gender to other people online. His participants were very conscious of the way their voice sounded, changing their pitch and how they talk, as well as changing how they type in text chat, to be recognised as their gender. This would further affect if they even used voice chat at all. However, this would mean that these players could not quickly communicate with other players, which could become a problem in competitive games that require fast reactions. A system could be implemented to help with this, something like Apex Legends' (Respawn Entertainment, 2019) pinging[2] or Fortnite's (Epic Games, 2017) marking[3] to quickly communicate information without need to talk.

Figure 5.1: Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) screenshot of their marking system, taken in-game by researcher in September 2024

1. https://www.warframe.com/community/creators
2. https://apexlegends.fandom.com/wiki/Ping
3. https://fortnite.fandom.com/wiki/Marking

Additionally, Participant 6 mentioned using a voice changer online to help voice train. Some research has been done into how voice changers are used by transgender people. Povinelli and Zhao (2024) wrote similarly that interviewees had used different voice changers while gaming to help with dysphoria, with some using them as "training wheels" to help with voice training. Additionally, voice changers helped with "passing" and being seen as cisgender towards other people that they met online, while also further helping with gender exploration and confidence in their identity. Furthermore, some of their participants would use voice changers to help with the harassment that they would face with being "clocked" as transgender online, and to not face transphobia from random people they meet online. Voice changers may be a solution to help transgender people with interacting online. However, voice changers do still have many limitations, like how they are not a perfected technology and possibly disincentivising the person from training their voice for offline interactions and relying more on the technology. Further development of the technology, as well as further research into how transgender people use voice changers, is needed. Therefore, this technology does not appear to be a feasible addition for most games to include. Rather, moderation to prevent people from harassing transgender people would be more effective at this time. This could additionally be helped in some games by not having important content require communication with other people, which was a want that many people also had. This all highlights the need to combat the idea that voices must fit cisgender norms. Transgender and gender non-conforming voices need to be normalised in society to help build the confidence of transgender people and promote the freedom to experiment with presentation.

5.2.5 Being referred to as yourself

Pronoun customisation is not something that many games currently include. Most game usually tie pronouns to the player's selected gender, usually a choice between male and female. This ignores the possibility of the player being non-binary or otherwise and further means that pronouns are tied to the player's body. Baldur's Gate 3 (Larian Studios, 2023) is one of the only games that allow players to select their identity separate from their body type, allowing a choice in pronouns. Therefore, pronoun customisation was mentioned as a want by participants. Being able to select what pronouns you are referred to as by other NPCs is affirming of the player's gender and further helps with the player's representation and immersion in the game. This can extend to showing other players online what pronouns you wish to be addressed with to make communication with others easier. This will help prevent misgendering, especially with many online players using he/him by default to refer to other players.

Showing pronouns is also something that people have begun doing in online social media spaces. Jiang et al. (2023) and Tucker & Jones (2023) studied the use of pronoun displays in Twitter profiles, finding that a rising number of people are adopting this. Non-binary pronouns were found to be in the minority of usage compared to She/Her (most used) and He/Him (second most). However, they were shown to be the most likely to display pronouns and also most related to other people displaying pronouns. This suggests that non-binary people are the most in need and want of showing pronouns, especially with being typically left out compared to She/Her and He/Him. Additionally, She/Her was the most prevalent pronoun display. This may be due to He/Him typically being used online for anyone else, which may suggest that people who use She/Her may be displaying their pronouns to help combat misgendering.

Pronoun customisation in video games may also help in instances where the player is playing as a character of a different gender, like in competitive online character-based games, where the player may be misgendered due to playing as a character of a different gender. A want to not be misgendered

in video games may further manifest in the characters that a player plays as. Hypothetically, transgender people, and possibly cisgender people as well, may gravitate towards playing as a character of their gender not just because that character represents themselves closer than a character of another gender, but also so that the correct pronouns would be used for themselves in game. However, more research needs to be done into pronoun use in online gaming to see this.

5.2.6 Playing for relief

Participants talked about the many ways that video games had helped them with their mental health difficulties. Like studies conducted by Koles and Nagy (2016), Strauss et al. (2019) and Morgan et al. (2020), video games were used by many participants to help relieve anxiety, depression and gender dysphoria. Video games help for some by engaging them in a world and providing an escape away from their problems. Similar to Baldwin (2018), immersion was found to be important for helping in this escapism and further helping the player's ability to enjoy the game. Gender dysphoria was helped with this immersion, not just as an escape, but also for the character that the player is playing as to become a realised version of who they want to be. Virtual reality technology was also mentioned as being exceptional in immersion, which Reyes and Fisher (2022) studied. They wrote that the high fidelity that VR provides can give a very immersive experience that can be very euphoric and affirmative for a transgender player. Unlike other studies, with only mention by Baldwin, gender dysphoria was not always lessened by playing video games or playing as a character of their preferred gender. This can be due to a few different things. Sometimes it is just due to the dysphoria to be too intense on some days for playing games to be effective. Playing as an idealised character can also highlight the differences between what the person wants to look like, and what they look like in real life, causing more stress. For some transgender people though, they just do not view the character that they are playing as to be an extension of themselves. For these people, there was much more of a disconnect between the character on screen and who they are, and so dysphoria was not relieved as much as someone who plays and views a character as themself. Therefore, it appears to be that participants are separated into two categories, those that strongly identify with their character to the point of being their character, and those that have a disconnect and view the game character as being separate from themselves. Goetz (2017) writes about an interesting theory about how players are instead connecting to the game through the game world, rather than through the player's avatar. These players may be doing this, though more study into this is needed.

5.2.7 Escaping into the magic circle

Many of the participants appeared to be using video games as a metaphorical crutch, especially pre-transition. For players, video games offered a "magic circle" to escape into, to free themselves from negative thoughts and to immerse themselves in a world where they are who they want to be. This was especially true for participants that were suicidal and used video games as an escape from negative thoughts, additionally found by Griffiths et al. (2016). Furthermore, due to those breaks in video games, the participants were able to further process their feelings. Games give them the space to help relieve that pressure of figuring out themselves, while still facilitating that process. This is further compounded with how some participants turned to video games because they did not have any other space that they could use for gender exploration and gender euphoria, like found by McKenna et. al. (2024). Consequently, transgender people using video games as a safe space may be more indictive of not have a safe space in the real world. After starting transitioning and working through the difficulties of figuring out that they are transgender, most participants were either playing video games less, or the same amount. This is not a definitive conclusion as that would require more

rigorous research. However, this indicates that some transgender people were using video games to help through difficult times and played less once they did not need to lean on them as much. Nardi (2010) found that some players would self-regulate by suspending their accounts in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Games developers could implement some sort of self-regulation, like letting players suspend or ban their own accounts for a time, to help players that are conscious about the amount of video games that they are playing.

5.2.8 Playing as themselves

Most participants had played as a character of their preferred gender before coming out, with a majority also creating characters that they wished to be (Similar to Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Rivera, 2022; van Aller, 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2023). This points to how video games were a helpful tool to figure out that they are transgender, and to further explore who they wish to be. This can come about due to how many transgender people have a dissatisfaction with their body due to gender dysphoria and so create a character that they can be themselves in and experience gender euphoria. This is further found with some participants having the characters that they play as and create influence the way that themselves dress and accessorise in real life (like Rivera, 2022). Similarly found by Morgan et al. (2020) and Whitehouse et al. (2023), most of the participants also preferred to play as a character that they created, over one that the game gives you, which further strengthens how important character creation is to transgender people.

However, most participants went on to say that though preferring to create a character, they were not put off from playing a game if they cannot. This leans more into how seeing yourself in the character that you play as is important, and that character creation is just one of the ways that video games can facilitate this. This is also shown by how most participants preferred to play as a silent protagonist over a character that the game gives you due to how it is easier to see themselves in the character and to be immersed in the game and so can enable this representation of self. Playing as a character of a different gender can make it harder for players to see themselves in the video game, but like the preferences to creating a character, this is not always going to be a problem. This is again due to how the player can relate and see themselves in the character, but it can still become a problem when the differences are too much, like playing into gendered stereotypes. This all also shows why participants favourite characters are ones that in some way represent themselves but also highlights why most participants were not likely to answer with a character that they made themselves. Character creation is just one of the ways that a character can be representative of the player, and that there are many more ways that a character can be representative, like personality and tailored story, which a created character usually cannot have. Whitehouse et al. (2023) wrote similarly to this. Participants would be playing as and creating characters as a representation of themselves. Furthermore, while participants wished to play as a character of their gender, many participants would be satisfied with little to no customisation. Additionally, participants will align their gender with the avatar will through their personal values, while distancing themselves from an avatar that does not align with their values.

5.2.9 Representation through character creation

Like in Morgan et al. (2020) and Koscieza (2023), non-binary participants voiced their frustrations with character creation. Many character creators in video games would only allow for binary gender options and was hard for non-binary players to create a character that represented themselves. Character creation for gender fluid players was also a hassle, as most games would not allow the player to edit their appearance and change their character's gender after creation. So, genderfluid players would have to settle for a character that does not always represent themselves and causing dysphoria or

create a new character and the game's progress not being shared. These issues make it harder for players to get immersed within a game, and to want to continue to play it. Furthermore, these problems do not just affect these groups of players. Other transgender participants talked and wrote about similar frustrations with creating characters that did not represent themselves due to the limitations of character creators. The ability to change your character's gender would also be a positive to be able to change a character's gender that was created pre-transition. This can also encourage experimentation in the players, without the need to restart progress with the game and creating new character. Adding mods to the game can be a way for players to rectify this. By giving more customisation options or fully swapping out the character for another can make the game more immersive and more representative of themselves and so are more likely to play the game. However, it does appear that video games may be getting better at this. Participants have mentioned recent games that have better character creators, which may indicate that video games are getting less restrictive character creators. Splatoon 3 (Nintendo EPD, 2022) in particular shows this change, as compared to previous titles in the series, the character creator is now much freer, with the removal of gender in favour of styles, clothing is no longer gender-locked (or "style-locked" in this case), and players have to ability to change how their character looks whenever they want to. However, more specific research and analysis into the relaxing of these restrictions would be needed to see if this is becoming more common.

Figure 5.2: Splatoon 3 (Nintendo EPD, 2022) screenshot of their initial character creator, taken in-game by researcher in September 2024

5.2.10 Transgender representation

Seeing transgender and other LGBTQIA+ content within video games helped people see these things as being normal, while also helping transgender people feel more comfortable in themselves. This further helped with opening communications with non-LGBTQIA+ people by seeing LGBTQIA+ content in the media they enjoy. Additionally, being able to play as many different people in video games, and connecting with all ranges of people, helped to give players more perspectives on different people and further helping with figuring out themselves. However, participants felt similarly to Thach's (2021) analysis on video games from the LGBTQ game archive, that there has not been much transgender representation in video games. Participants further had problems with representation usually being

very generic and surface level. However, unlike other studies like Strauss et al. (2019), none of this study's participants talked about representation that was actively harmful. Participants talked more about a lack of good representation, and not specifically about negative representation. This may indicate that in some respects, transgender representation has been getting better, though this may be more representative of the questions asked and the participants. However, online support networks and the open discussions around video games online may be affecting what kind of content transgender people are interacting with. Through this, transgender people may just be getting better at avoiding video games with harmful representation. Yet, video games still do not always make the effort to treat their transgender characters as more than just being transgender. However, what constitutes as good representation can be different between different transgender people. Some wishing transgender representation to be specifically about how being transgender has affected the character and their story, and some only wanting passing references to the fact that they are transgender. But, in general, transgender characters that have effort put into them, and do not play heavily into negative stereotypes, were seen as positive by participants. This is all supported by other research into transgender representation wants (McInroy & Craig, 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2017; van Haelter et al., 2022). Transgender people wanted to have representation that is not transphobic, is authentic, and not stereotyped. They felt that there was not a large amount of representation, but that it was important for there to be more positive representation to help spread affirmation and validation in being transgender, even when they were flawed. Additionally, transgender women appear to be in the majority of the existing transgender representation, with transgender men and non-binary people largely being left out. Furthermore, transgender people had differing views on representation, with some viewing a source of representation as negative, with others viewing the same source as positive. However, more research is needed to understand transgender peoples wants in representation.

Not playing into stereotypes was also something that was mentioned by participants about the representation of women within video games. This was especially remarked about how women were stereotypically shown to be weak in comparison to men, as well as being sexualised. Gestos et al. (2018) also found this, noting that this kind of representation objectifies women. This stereotyping is showing negative role models for women who may be internalising these stereotypes, as well as promoting sexist and negative attitudes towards women in general. This all emphasises that though these stereotypes may be different towards different people, all representation needs to not be stereotyped to not promote negative ideas that harm the people they are trying to represent.

5.3 A framework for creating games that encourage exploration of gender

This section is a culmination of this paper's work. It details a framework that can be used by video game designers to help create video games that are better tailored towards transgender people, while additionally helping transgender people understand how video games have helped their exploration of gender. This framework takes inspiration from The Art of Game Design (Schell, 2019). Schell writes about how when someone plays a game, they have an experience. This is something that the game designer can not directly control over the player, rather it is the player playing the game that creates that experience. However, this is something that a game designer can try to push towards through the creation of the game. In this case, we are trying to encourage the experience of gender exploration. A game designer can try to create and include mechanics in the game that push that experience. Therefore, these recommendations will be centred around how and what experiences in video games have helped participants with gender exploration, and how game designers can strengthen them. However, it is inevitably up to the player and how they experience the game that creates the

experience of gender exploration. Furthermore, Schell writes about Lenses, the different perspectives that you can view a game from to create and design a game. Though Schell wrote about over 100 different Lenses that you can use, these are all incomplete views and are just small parts of the overall design. For the purposes of this framework, the themes created by the thematic analysis were used as lenses instead. However, this is not a complete view of all the perspectives that a designer can take.

Social

- Moderation and protections against transphobia
- Variety of communication options without the need for voice chat
- The ability for transgender people to create safe spaces for themselves
- Foster a transgender positive community and promote transgender positive content

Mental Health

- Different game difficulties to allow for relaxation
- Ability to customise and self-regulate play time

Customisation

- Wide variety of character customisation options open to everyone
- Pronoun customisation for online interactions and NPCs
- Ability to change customisation whenever the player wants to

Representation

- More representation and inclusion of transgender people and characters
- Do not negatively stereotype transgender people, and include transgender people in the creation process
- Romance options for people of all sexualities
- A wide variety of player characters (or customisation options)

Encouraging exploration of gender in video games

Figure 5.3: Framework for exploration of gender in video games

5.3.1 Social

What is needed for transgender people to safely communicate and find each other online?

- Moderation is needed for any online content, with specific protections for transgender people due to the risks of transphobia. This will help make online video game spaces safer for transgender people to interact and talk with other people, further helping with anxieties that transgender people may have with interacting with people while openly being transgender. Further protections will be needed for hate, like homophobia and sexism, to help create a safe space for anyone to talk and interact with the game.

- The ability to communicate with other players in a variety of communication styles is needed so that players can interact with each other in the way that they prefer. This will help players with anxiety around communicating with others, especially with transgender people that may have voice dysphoria and want other ways other than verbally talking with others. Other than

voice chat and text chat, being able to ping what you need like highlighting an item or place in the game world, or quick selecting a symbol or phrase can be an easy way to communicate with others, which further has the benefit of being able to quickly communicate in a fast-paced game. Emotes are also a good way to non-verbally communicate with others, both within text chat but also an action for your character to do.

- The ability for players to create and manage groups is needed to for transgender people to create safe social spaces for themselves in video games. However, this should not be mandatory to progress through the game due to anxieties that people may have around interacting with others, which may make it harder to play the game.

- Promoting transgender and transgender positive content creators is needed to help foster a community that is welcome of transgender and other LGBTQIA+ people.

5.3.2 Mental Health

How can video games help promote positive mental health?

- Games should have the option for a more relaxing playtime, like being able to customise the difficulty of the game to it easier. Players that are just looking to relax and destress can do so with the games that they enjoy, which is especially useful for transgender people due to the mental health difficulties that they may be facing. This additionally means that game will be more accessible for players that may have difficulties playing the game.

- To encourage player self-regulation, they need to be able to customise their playtime. This can be through the ability to suspend your own account for a time or letting the player set specific times when they can play. This can be helpful for ensuring that game time does not become all-consuming.

5.3.3 Customisation

What is needed for transgender players to customise and create themselves in video games?

- Customisation options that represent a wide variety of body types and presentation options that anyone can choose from is a must. This means that anyone can create a character that is representative of themselves. This will also affect how players interact with other players online, as a range of customisation options will mean that players can interact and be seen by others how they wish to be seen. These options should further extend to the use of pride customisations that can be easily used by anyone to show solidarity and community.

- Pronoun customisation is needed to make the game feel more inclusive and affirming of the player's gender. This can be NPCs that will address the player with their preferred pronouns. Online, showing what pronouns that the player wishes to be referred to with means that other players can correctly gender them and create a safer social space. This can further help interactions in online games where you choose from preset characters, so that players can still be gendered correctly despite playing a character of a different gender.

- The player needs to be able to change any customisation options whenever they wish to. This will help with genderfluid players being able to change their character to whatever represents themselves at any time and further allow people early in transition or exploring their gender to find what feels right for them. This would in general encourage experimentation in all players so that anyone can find something that fits themselves.

5.3.4 Representation

How and what can representation do in video games help transgender players?

- Representation of transgender people is needed to help transgender people feel more welcome in game, helping them feel more comfortable with being in the game world, but also with themselves. This can further help normalise the existence of transgender people to cisgender people, but also to people who are questioning their gender and help encourage them to be themselves and figure out who they are. In general, seeing and playing as many different people will connect to many different people and help show different perspectives to the player.

- Many transgender people want different things out of their representation. In general, though, transgender people want transgender characters that feel real, and are not stereotyped, and especially not negatively so. Seeing a game commit to having a transgender character goes a long way for good representation. Furthermore, a transgender character needs to have transgender people help with creating them, which also helps give the space for transgender people to tell their own stories.

- Representation for sexuality can be done either through the player being able to romance any of the romanceable NPCs, regardless of gender, or considering the player's gender and having set sexualities for the NPCs. Both have their own positives, with the first making it so that the player has the freedom to choose, while the second being more like real life that can be affirming of the player's gender. Overall, though, there needs to be options for all sexualities so that no player is left out.

- It is harder for a player to engage with a game while playing as a character that does not represent or is too different from themselves. Having a wide selection of player characters to choose from, a wide selection of customisation options, a player character that is not negatively stereotyped, or not too stereotypically gendered that it alienates people of other genders will mean that a wide variety of different players can play and enjoy the game.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Research outcomes

The research question for this project was to understand "What role do video games have in transgender gamers' exploration of gender?" This was approached through these objectives:

- A comprehensive literature review was conducted to find out what research has been conducted into how video games encourage exploration of gender. This was done to help gather background research for the study. This was then analysis to help inform and to create questions to be asked for the survey and interviews.

- A survey and interviews were conducted on transgender players using the questions created and gather the experiences of these people. The answers gathered helped find first person accounts on how video games helped participants explore gender and how they feel about the current representation of transgender people in video games. A survey was used as a preliminary study, to help support the interviews that were used for more in-depth answers. There were 45 survey participants, and 8 interview participants.

- The answers to the survey and interviews were transcribed and gathered, with the interviews analysed with the thematic analysis method to find common patterns and themes in the answers. These results were then discussed in relation to previous studies. This all explains the different ways that video games can influence transgender gamers' exploration of gender.

- This all resulted in a framework that can be used to help game designers with creating video games that are better suited towards positive transgender representation and experiences, and to help encourage exploration of gender.

6.2 Answering the questions

Due to the research undertaken in this study, the sub-questions can now be answered.

1. **How do transgender players use video games to help cope with mental health struggles and gender dysphoria?**

Transgender players were shown to use video games to help cope with mental health struggles like depression and anxiety using video games as a "magic circle" to escape their struggles. Through this, they were able to process their feelings, which helped them figure out they are transgender. For some, gender dysphoria was also lessened by this, as well as by such things as playing as and creating a character of their gender to experience gender euphoria. However, not all players used video games to help cope with gender dysphoria. For some players, gender dysphoria was too hard to escape from through playing video games and could even highlight the differences with themselves and inflict more dysphoria.

2. **How does interacting socially in video games and online affect transgender players' exploration of gender?**

Some players would roleplay as their gender or play as a character of their gender before coming out and would be referred to as their preferred gender. This in turn helped many players explore gender and further realise that they are transgender. Most players had received or given help to other

transgender people, with many saying or writing that support networks through video games as well as other places online were vital in gaining help. This would include information such as mental health help, specific transition related help like with medication and clothing, as well as just general advice on what it meant to be transgender. This all helped with transgender people understanding want it meant to be transgender and help with their transition. However, transphobia is also an issue with interacting online. Though not all transgender players have faced large amounts of transphobia, like avoidance through the use of support networks, many have that did affect their exploration. This can come in the form direct hate of transgender people, misgendering, chasers, and ignorance about being transgender. Voice dysphoria and the use of voice chat in video games was also a source of discomfort that can make the player not want to talk online. This could further push the player to not train their voice and therefore affecting their transition and exploration negatively.

3. **How does playing as and creating video game avatars affect transgender players' exploration of gender?**

Most players created avatars to find out what they want to look like. This further translated to real life, with some players picking clothing and accessories that were influenced by their video game avatar. Additionally, creating and using video game avatars helped some players with their gender dysphoria, and help experience gender euphoria. However, for other players gender dysphoria would be too much for this to be effective, the avatar could highlight the difference in themselves, or they did not connect to their avatar in a way that helped. Additionally, it was found that representation of transgender and other LGBTQIA+ people helped with normalising the existence of queer people. This helped transgender people with understanding and feeling comfort with themselves, helping with their transition and exploration. This additionally helped with opening up and sharing stories with cisgender people, further normalising their existence and helping with understanding transgender and other LGBTQIA+ people.

6.3 Limitations and future work

One of the main things that we would want to have for another project like this is to have more time for the study itself. This would mean that we would have more time to find participants, so that we would have more information to use and analyse. So, though this study does have a larger sample size than other studies, this may not be representative of transgender people in general. More time would have further helped with finding more transgender men for project, which would have made the project less biased towards transgender women. So, this study may be more indicative of transgender women, rather than transgender people in general. We also wished to have included some cisgender participants. This would have enabled comparisons in answers between transgender and cisgender participants and may show that some of the answers are representative of people in general, like with video gaming trends, video game representation wants, gender experimentation in video games, and character creation. However, due to time restraints and the worry of having too broad of a project, we instead just focused on transgender people. More time would have further allowed for a wider variety of places to find participants, and as many of the participants were found either on Discord or Reddit, which may have affected the results. Race and ethnicity were also not considered for this study. This means that any conclusions based on these could not be made, which may have affected the results.

Some of the questions for the survey needed more careful wording, like the use of "games" instead of "video games", and the description of transitioning that may have caused some confusion. This may have been improved with gaining community input into the questions. More specificity would have further helped with some of the questions, like asking more specifically about game features instead

of more generic answers about genres and game features that could be interpreted in several different ways. However, that did mean that there was a variety of answers for each question that showed the different experiences of participants. It should also be noted, that though the interviews were semi-structured, questions were asked that related to categories found through the literature review, which may have affected the thematic analysis. However, due to the nature of being semi-structured, participants were welcome to and did answer more broadly than just within specific aspects of their experiences.

This whole project was also a general look at multiple different aspects in games that help with gender exploration. This does help with what the project is trying to achieve, with finding many different parts of game design and development that help, but further research into each of the specific themes would find a deeper understanding of why these aspects help. More research into transphobia in video games and how it affects gender exploration is needed for a deeper understanding of how to combat it. More research into what representation is needed for transgender people to be effectively represented, especially with possible differing wants between transgender people and what that means for them. A deeper look at how transgender people self-regulate and the use of video games to escape, especially pre-transition, could help with finding effective ways to use video games to help transgender people. More insight into voice changers is needed, especially as a developing technology, as well as how it is used by transgender people. More specific research into how changing gender to styles and not having gender-locked customisation, as well as pronoun customisation, in video games affects gender exploration. Gender euphoria and dysphoria within avatar creation needs more research to more deeply understand the impact of creating a character for gender exploration, especially for how the avatar represents the player, and for those that do not create an avatar to represent themselves. Finally, the framework created need to be implemented as a part of designing a game to understand how effective it is at helping create a game that encourages gender exploration, as well as to update and change it as needed.

6.4 Conclusion

This study shows that video games do help with transgender people's exploration through several different ways. Video games help with players' mental health by helping them relax and to provide a way to escape from their struggles for a time. This can be especially useful for transgender people going through mental health struggles like with gender dysphoria, as well as anxiety and depression. Video games provide a way to connect with other people, giving opportunities to create friends, and find online social support networks. Transgender people can use this to find other transgender people, asking help with things like mental health and transition help, but also as a safe space to be themselves. Character creation became a way for transgender people to experiment, to find out who they want to be and how they want to look. Playing as a character of their preferred gender is also a source of gender affirmation for transgender people. Representation of transgender people and other LGBTQIA+ people helped transgender people to feel more welcome, and to encourage them to be themselves. Games that want to facilitate gender exploration should include things like a good moderation and chat system to create safe spaces for transgender people to interact in online and to encourage gender exploration. Customisation options for the player should include a wide variety of body types and presentation options that are not bound to gender so that players can create a character that represents themselves, as well as the ability to change whenever they want. More games also need to include more transgender characters, with representation that is not negative or surface level. Furthermore, more research needs to be done into how transgender people interact and play video

games to get deeper understandings of issues in video games, and to create better and more inclusive video games.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A

Digital flyer sent out to participants

Hi, my name is Thalia Johnson, and I am a transgender woman studying for a Master of Science (Research) in Computing Sciences and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Currently I am researching for my thesis about "How video games give players the opportunity to explore gender" and I am looking for participants to either be interviewed or to complete a survey. I am looking for transgender and non-binary people who played video games either before or during the start of their transition, and I will be gathering your thoughts and experiences about playing video games and how that has affected your transition and gender exploration.
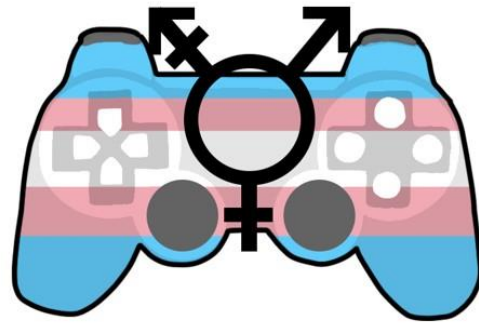
The survey will be completed online through the service REDCap and will take about 20 minutes to complete. The interview will be done online through either Zoom or Discord and will take about 60 – 90 minutes. Interviews will start in early January.

If you wish to learn more information or would like to participate in the interviews, please email me at thalia.r.johnson@student.uts.edu.au.

UTS HREC Ethics Application Number: ETH23-8199 How video games give players the opportunity to explore gender.

8.2 Appendix B

Introduction/General questions

- Questions that help prepare the participant for the later questions, as well as to get to know the participant.

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1) **What do you most identify as?**
   - i. Multiple choice of:
     1. Transgender Man
     2. Transgender Woman
     3. Non-binary
     4. Other (with a field to specify)
2) **What country are you from?**
   - i. Inputted answer
3) **How long have you known that you are transgender?**
   - i. Inputted answer
4) **How long have you been transitioning/ "out of the closet" for?**
   - a. **(In other words, how long since you've started any sort of transitioning other than just knowing, e.g. Like social, medical.)**
     - i. Inputted answer

The above questions were used to gain a better idea of the participant, while also warming them up for the questions that require more thought. Question 4 was a hard one to word, specifically because many transgender people will have different ideas for what they consider as the start of their transition. Like some consider starting medically transitioning to be their start, others considering socially transitioning to be their start. Overall, this is just to get a better idea of where the participant is at with their transition and to see if their answers may be different to others.

5) **How frequently do you play games?**
   - i. Multiple choice
     1. Everyday
     2. Every other day
     3. Once a Week
     4. Once a Fortnight
     5. Other (with a field to specify)
6) **What games were you playing when you first started transitioning (if you're out of the closet)?**
   - i. Inputted answer
7) **What are your favourite video games?**
   - i. Inputted answer
8) **What are your favourite genres of video games?**
   - i. Inputted answer

Though also used to get to better know the participant, questions 6 - 8 were also used to see if a pattern formed in the answers. This pattern may show some similarities in how transgender people remember video games, and if their experiences can be related to being transgender, especially with

MMO's being a common focus of studies that studied people's exploration of identity (Baldwin, 2018; Nardi, 2010). However, I do not believe that there will be a pattern as people play video games for a variety of reasons.

9) Do you feel like you are playing more, less or the same amount of video games after beginning transitioning?
   i. Multiple choice
     1. More
     2. Less
     3. Same

Koles and Nagy (2016) stated that many players not only used as an escape, but as a way to cope with self-destructive behaviours like self-harming. Hypothetically, transgender people might be playing video games less after transitioning as they feel more comfortable in themself and no longer need an escape in the form of video games. However, it is more likely that there will not be a change, or the change will be unrelated to transitioning as, like the previous questions, people play video games for a variety of reasons.

Social Questions

- Many transgender people can use video games to connect with other people. They will use video games to help find other transgender people, helping them and themselves with exploring gender and help with their mental health (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Nardi, 2010; Strauss et al., 2019).
  - Furthermore, interacting socially with others can help make the player understand themselves more and realise that something is wrong, like figuring out that they are transgender (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Strauss et al., 2019).
  - However, interactions can be negative in how they relate to transgender people or just gender exploration and gender non-conformity in general, which can negatively affect someone's exploration of gender (Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019; Nardi, 2010).
- Relates to research question what the social environment is like in video games and how it affects transgender people.

----

10) Have you met any transgender people while playing video games?
   i. Yes/No

Participants may have used video games to socialise and become friends with other transgender people. This means that video games may be a safe place to socialise and meet other transgender people.

  b. **If you answered yes to the last question, have you ever asked for help from transgender people you've met online, like help with transitioning or mental health?**
   i. Multiple choice
     1. Yes
     2. No

3. Helped another transgender person

Meeting other transgender people in video games can become part of a support network that the participant utilised to help with their transition and mental health.

11) Did you use video games to help come out to people?
    i. Yes/No

Some participants may have used video games to come out to their friends, or even taken advantage of the anonymous nature of video games and had instead just come out to strangers before coming out to their friends and family (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019).

12) Did you interact with people as your preferred gender before coming out?
    i. Yes/No

Some participants interacted with others as their preferred gender before coming out, some before they even realised that they might be transgender (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024). This points to how video games can be safe environment for gender exploration and prepares the player for real life.

13) Have you ever had any negative interactions with people in video games to do with you being transgender?
    i. Yes/No
b. **If you answered yes to the previous question, have you stopped playing a game because of these interactions?**
    i. Yes/No

This question is asked to get an understanding of the environment the participants play in in video games, and if that has affected them playing the game.

14) What social features do you most want in video games?
    i. Inputted Answer
15) What social features do you least like in video games?
    i. Inputted Answer

These questions are asked to get a broad understand of social features within video games that transgender people want to have in video games, what they do not.

Avatar/Character questions

- Many transgender people use their video game avatar, both by creating it and by using it, to explore what they want to look like and who they want to be (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).
    o Transgender players will also create video game avatars to help cope with gender dysphoria.
- Relates to research question in how video games give the player the opportunity to be whoever they want to be and show the world who they want to be.

----

16) Is your favourite video game character one that you made yourself?
> i. Multiple choice
>> 1. Yes
>> 2. No
>> 3. Don't have a favourite character

Hypothetically, the participant's favourite character would likely be one that they themselves made, as they relate more to a character that they have inserted themself into.

17) Did you play as a character of your preferred gender before you realised that you are transgender?
> i. Yes/No

Found by other studies, this question asks if the participant experimented with how they present in video games before they realised they were transgender, pointing towards gender presentation in video games playing a role in finding out (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024).

18) When you make a character, do you mostly try and make them look like yourself or someone that you want to be?
> i. Multiple choice
>> 1. Make them look like yourself
>> 2. Make them look like what you want to be
>> 3. Other (with a field to specify)

This question is used to find out how transgender people make their character. It is likely that transgender people will make characters that look more like they want to be, due to most having a dissatisfaction with their body due to gender dysphoria. Furthermore, they may also use character creation to find out how they wish to present themself outside of video games.

19) Do you prefer to play as a character you have made yourself, or one that the game gives you?
> i. Multiple choice
>> 1. Play as a character you have made yourself
>> 2. Play as a character that the game gives you
> b. **If you prefer a character you made yourself, do you feel worse if you can't make your own character?**
>> i. Yes/No

Hypothetically, transgender people will prefer creating a character over a preset character as they can create and play as a character that better represents them compared to a preset character. This may also affect their enjoyment of the game.

Representation questions and wrap up

- Seeing different people represented in video games helps normalise their existence to others. Seeing yourself represented in a video game helps not just with connecting with the game but also normalises your own existence to yourself, helping yourself come to terms with who you are (Baldwin, 2018; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).

- These questions relate to the research question about how do video games handle representation and how does it affect the player.

----

20) **Have you ever felt like you haven't been represented by the characters in a video game in relation to gender?**
    i. Yes/No

Asks participants how they feel about the current representation in video games.

21) **What do you feel makes for good character representation?**
    i. Inputted answer

Directly asks the participant what they feel about representation in video games what is needed to make it good.

22) **Do you believe that video games have helped you with your life in any way, including with mental health, presentation of yourself or just with figuring out things?**
    i. Inputted answer

This question asks and gives the participant the space to directly answer if and how video games have helped them.

8.3 Appendix C

What games were you playing when you first started transitioning?

Game	Count
X3	1
World of Warcraft	1
Warframe	2
VRChat	1
Undertale	2
Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2	1
The Sims 4	1
The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim	4
The Binding of Isaac	1
Terraria	5
Tekken 7	1
Team Fortress 2	3
Super Smash Brothers: Ultimate	1
Sunless Seas/Skies	1
Stardew Valley	4
Starbound	1
Star Wars: The Old Republic	1
Star Trek Online	1
Splatoon Series	3
SnowRunner	1
Sly Cooper	1
Slime Rancher	1
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	1
Saint's Row: The Third	1
Runescape	1
Rocket League	1
Roblox	1
Risk of Rain 2	1
Risk of Rain	1
Portal Series	1
Pokémon Go	1
Pokémon Series	6
Pathologic	1
Overwatch	4
Night in the Woods	2
Nier: Automata	1
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe	1
Need For Speed Heat	1
Moonlighter	1
Mirrors Edge	1
Minecraft	10
Metroid Prime Trilogy	1
Mass Effect Series	3
Marvel's Spider-Man	1
Mario Kart Series	2
Marenian Tavern Story	1
Maplestory	1
Luigi's Mansion 3	1
Left 4 Dead 2	1
League of Legends	3
KoboldKare	1
Kingdom Hearts Series	2
Just Cause 2	1
Jackbox Party	1
Inscryption	1
IllBleed	1
Horizon Series	1
Honkai: Star Rail	1
Hollow Knight	1
Helldivers 2	1
Heart of the Woods	1
Hades	2
Guilty Gear Strive	1
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	1
Gone Home	1
Garry's Mod	1
Fire Emblem Series	2
Final Fantasy XIV	2
Fate/Grand Order	1
Fallout Series	4
Factorio	1
EVE Online	1
Dragon age: Origins	2
Destiny 2	1
DDLC	1
Dark Souls Series	2
Cyperpunk 2077	2
Cube World	1
Cities: Skylines	1
Celeste	4
Call of Duty	1
Borderlands Series	2
Blade & Sorcery	1
Beat Saber	1
BeamNG.Drive	2
Baba is you	1
Assetto Corsa	1
Apex Legends	1
Animal Crossing Series	2
A Day at the Hot Springs	1

To keep the graph smaller and neater, 62 game series with only one mention were not included in the graph in the paper. These were: A Day at the Hot Springs, Apex Legends, Assetto Corsa, Baba is you, Beat Saber, Blade & Sorcery, Call of Duty, Cities: Skylines, Cube World, Doki Doki Literature Club, Destiny 2, EVE Online, Factorio, Fate/Grand Order, Garry's Mod, Gone Home, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, Guilty Gear Strive, Heart of the Woods, Helldivers 2, Hollow Knight, Honkai: Star Rail, Horizon, IllBleed, Inscryption, Jackbox Party, Just Cause 2, KoboldKare, Left 4 Dead 2, Luigi's Mansion 3, Maplestory, Marenian Tavern Story, Marvel's Spider-Man, Metroid Prime Trilogy, Mirror's Edge, Moonlighter, Need For Speed Heat, New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe, Nier: Automata, Pathologic, Pokémon Go, the Portal series, Risk of Rain, Risk of Rain 2, Roblox, Rocket League, Runescape, Saint's Row: The Third, Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin, Slime Rancher, Sly Cooper, SnowRunner, Star Trek Online, Star Wars: The Old Republic, Starbound, the Sunless series, Super Smash Brothers: Ultimate, Tekken 7, The Binding of Isaac, The Sims 4, Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2, VRChat, World of Warcraft, and X3. Additionally, games that are in the same series were grouped as a series. However, games that are significantly different in gameplay were kept separate (eg. Pokémon [mainline series being RPGs] and Pokémon Go [Augmented Reality game]). The games specified as a series were: the Animal Crossing series (Animal Crossing [2 participants answered]), the Borderlands series (Borderlands 2 [1], Borderlands 3 [1]), the Dark Souls series (Dark Souls 2 [1], Dark Souls 3 [1]), the Fallout series (Fallout: New Vegas [3], Fallout 4 [1]), the Fire Emblem series (Fire Emblem Heroes [1], Fire Emblem: Three Houses [1]), the Kingdom Hearts series (Kingdom Hearts [1], Kingdom Hearts 2 [1]), the Mario Kart series (Mario Kart [1], Mario Kart 8 Deluxe [1]), the Mass Effect series (Mass Effect Trilogy [1], Mass Effect [1], Mass Effect Series [1]), the Pokémon Series (Pokémon [4], Pokémon Games on Switch [1], Pokémon Moon, Pokémon Ultra Sun, Pokémon X, Pokémon Alpha Sapphire [All from 1 participant]), and the Splatoon series (Splatoon [2], Splatoon 3 [1]).

8.4 Appendix D

Favourite Games

Game	Count
Yume 2kki	1
X-Wing	1
Warframe	6
VRChat	1
Vendetta Online	1
Undertale	1
ULTRAKILL	1
Truck Simulator Series	2
Titanfall 2	1
TIE Fighter	1
The Witcher Series	3
The Sims Series	2
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild/Tears of the Kingdom	2
The Legend of Zelda Series	3
The Elder Scrolls Online	1
The Elder Scrolls Series	7
The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood	1
The Binding of Isaac	1
Terraria	2
Team Fortress 2	1
Super Lesbian Animal RPG	1
Strike Commander	1
Stellaris	2
Stardew Valley	5
Splatoon Series	5
Spiritfarer	1
Slime Rancher	2
Six Ages	1
Silent Hill 3	1
Signalis	2
Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne	1
Sekiro	1
Sea of Thieves	1
Scarlet Hollow	1
Sayonara Wild Hearts	1
Saint's Row Series	1
Risk of Rain 2	2
Rez	1
Resident Evil Series	2
Project Zomboid	1
Project CARS 2	1
Portal 2	2
Poker Quest: Swords and Spades	1
Pokémon Series	5
Planet Zoo	1
Pilot Wings 64	1
Overcooked	1
Outer Wilds	4
osu!	1
Noita	1
No Man's Sky	1
Night in the Woods	1
Nier: Automata	2
Mother 3	1
Moonlighter	1
Monster Prom Series	1
Monster Hunter Series	1
Mirror's Edge	1
Minecraft	13
Miitopia	1
Mice Tea	1
Metroid Prime	1
MechWarrior 2	1
Mass Effect Series	1
Marvel's Spider-Man	1
Mario Kart Series	2

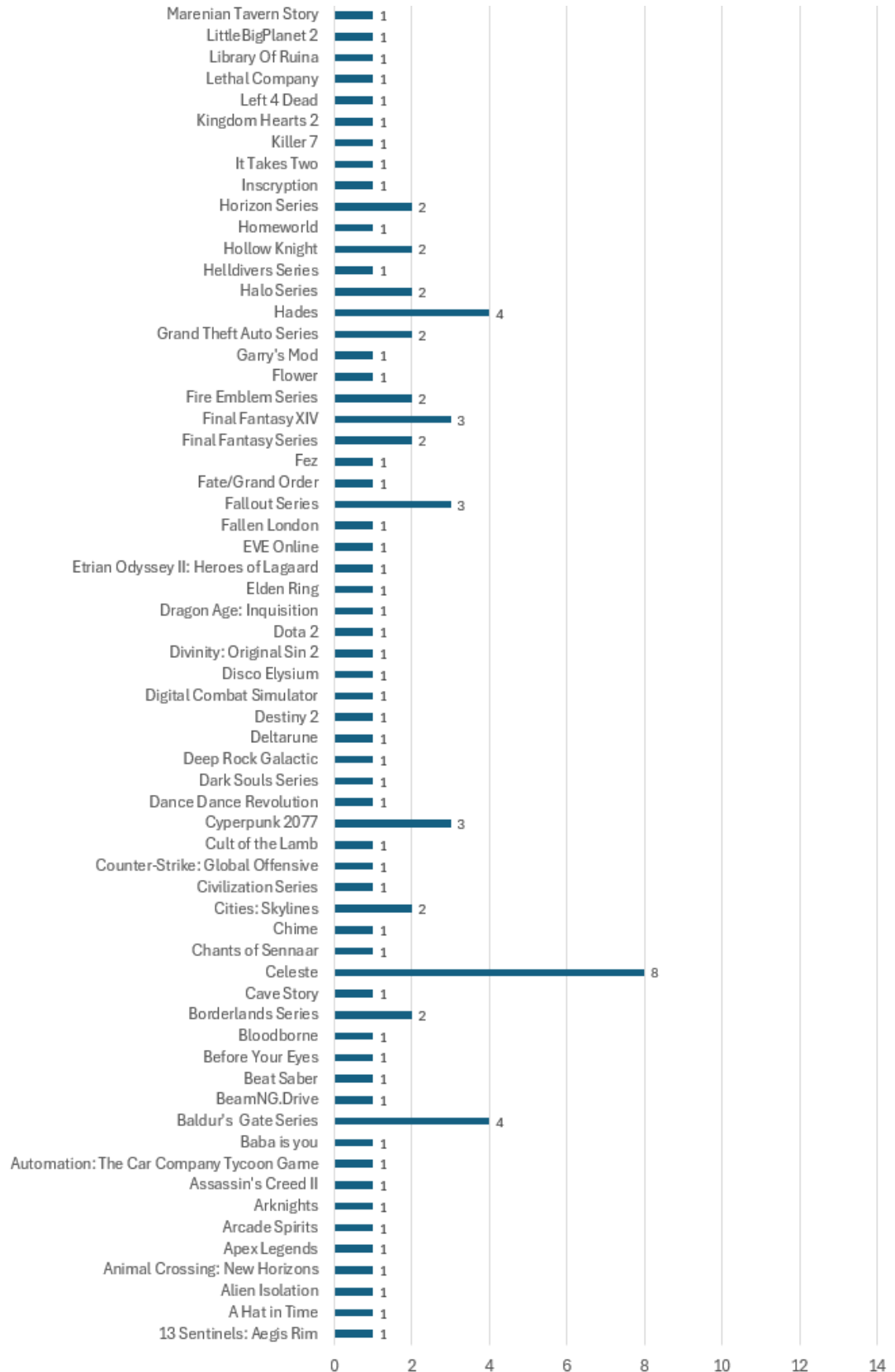| Game	Count
Marenian Tavern Story	1
LittleBigPlanet 2	1
Library Of Ruina	1
Lethal Company	1
Left 4 Dead	1
Kingdom Hearts 2	1
Killer 7	1
It Takes Two	1
Inscryption	1
Horizon Series	2
Homeworld	1
Hollow Knight	2
Helldivers Series	1
Halo Series	2
Hades	4
Grand Theft Auto Series	2
Garry's Mod	1
Flower	1
Fire Emblem Series	2
Final Fantasy XIV	3
Final Fantasy Series	2
Fez	1
Fate/Grand Order	1
Fallout Series	3
Fallen London	1
EVE Online	1
Etrian Odyssey II: Heroes of Lagaard	1
Elden Ring	1
Dragon Age: Inquisition	1
Dota 2	1
Divinity: Original Sin 2	1
Disco Elysium	1
Digital Combat Simulator	1
Destiny 2	1
Deltarune	1
Deep Rock Galactic	1
Dark Souls Series	1
Dance Dance Revolution	1
Cyperpunk 2077	3
Cult of the Lamb	1
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	1
Civilization Series	1
Cities: Skylines	2
Chime	1
Chants of Sennaar	1
Celeste	8
Cave Story	1
Borderlands Series	2
Bloodborne	1
Before Your Eyes	1
Beat Saber	1
BeamNG.Drive	1
Baldur's Gate Series	4
Baba is you	1
Automation: The Car Company Tycoon Game	1
Assassin's Creed II	1
Arknights	1
Arcade Spirits	1
Apex Legends	1
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	1
Alien Isolation	1
A Hat in Time	1
13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim	1

To keep the graph smaller and neater, 94 games with only one mention were not included in the graph in the paper. These were: 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, A Hat in Time, Alien Isolation, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Apex Legends, Arcade Spirits, Arknights, Assassin's Creed II, Automation: The Car Company Tycoon Game, Baba is you, BeamNG.Drive, Beat Saber, Before Your Eyes, Bloodborne, Cave Story, Chants of Sennaar, Chime, Civilization series, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Cult of the Lamb, Dance Dance Revolution, Dark Souls series, Deep Rock Galactic, Deltarune, Destiny 2, Digital Combat Simulator, Disco Elysium, Divinity: Original Sin 2, Dota 2, Dragon Age: Inquisition, Elden Ring, Etrian Odyssey II: Heroes of Lagaard, EVE Online, Fallen London, Fate/Grand Order, Fez, Flower, Garry's Mod, the Helldivers series, Homeworld, Inscryption, It Takes Two, Killer 7, Kingdom Hearts 2, Left 4 Dead, Lethal Company, Library Of Ruina, LittleBigPlanet 2, Marenian Tavern Story, Marvel's Spider-Man, the Mass Effect series, MechWarrior 2, Metroid Prime, Mice Tea, Miitopia, Mirror's Edge, the Monster Hunter series, the Monster Prom series, Moonlighter, Mother 3, Night in the Woods, No Man's Sky, Noita, osu!, Overcooked, Pilot Wings 64, Planet Zoo, Poker Quest: Swords and Spades, Project CARS 2, Project Zomboid, Rez, the Saint's Row series, Sayonara Wild Hearts, Scarlet Hollow, Sea of Thieves, Sekiro, Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne, Silent Hill 3, Six Ages, Spiritfarer, Strike Commander, Super Lesbian Animal RPG, Team Fortress 2, The Binding of Isaac, The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood, The Elder Scrolls Online, TIE Fighter, Titanfall 2, ULTRAKILL, Undertale, Vendetta Online, VRChat, X-Wing, and Yume 2kki. Additionally, games that are in the same series were grouped as a series. However, games that are significantly different in gameplay were kept separate (eg. Final Fantasy [Majority of games being singleplayer RPGs] and Final Fantasy XIV [an MMORPG]. Games specified as a series were: the Baldur's Gate series (Baldur's Gate 3 [3 participants], Baldur's Gate [1]), the Borderlands series (Borderlands [2]), the Fallout series (Fallout: New Vegas [1], Fallout 4 [1], Fallout 3, New Vegas [Both from 1 participant]), the Final Fantasy series (Final Fantasy [2]), the Fire Emblem series (Fire Emblem Series [1], Fire Emblem Awakening [1]), the Grand Theft Auto series (Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas [1], Grand Theft Auto: V [1]), the Halo series (Halo [2]), the Horizon series (Horizon [1], Horizon: Zero Dawn [1]), the Mario Kart series (Mario Kart 8 Deluxe [1], Mario Kart [1]), the Pokémon series (Pokémon [4], Pokémon Violet [1]), the Resident Evil series (Resident Evil 2 [1], Resident Evil 4 [1]), the Splatoon series (Splatoon 3 [1], Splatoon Series [1], Splatoon [3]), the Elder Scrolls series (The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion [2], The Elder Scrolls Series [1], Elder Scrolls [1], The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim [3]), the Legend of Zelda series (The Legend of Zelda Series [1], The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time [1], Zelda [1]), the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild/Tears of the Kingdom (The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild [1], Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild & Legend of the Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom [1]), The Sims series (The Sims [2]), The Witcher series (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt [2], The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings & The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt [1]), the Truck Simulator series (Euro Truck Simulator and American Truck Simulator [1], Euro Truck Simulator 2 [1]).

8.5 Appendix E

- Walking Simulator
  - Adventure games mainly involving walk around.
- Visual Novel
  - Game involving mostly reading, with player interaction mainly involving progressing to the next page of text or selecting a choice.
- Turn-based RPG
  - RPGs where the characters take turns to do an action
- Tower Defence
  - A strategy game where the player must defend a point by placing down structures that work autonomously.
- Top-Down
  - A game where the perspective is from the top-down, a bird's eye view.
- Telltale games
  - Games from or based off the games produced by the games company Telltale games. These are similar to visual novels and point and click (where the player only interacts by clicking on things) games, usually involving more player interaction like being able to move around. Also has a focus on player choices, usually with repercussions further down the line.
- Tactics
  - Games heavily involving tactics.
- Tactical RPG
  - RPGs heavily involving tactics
- Survival Sandbox
  - A mix between Survival and Sandbox games, where the player must survive within a world gathering and crafting resources. This has a heavy focus on sandbox elements, a world that can be heavily modified to encourage player creativity.
- Survival Horror
  - A mix between Survival and horror games, where the player must survive within a world gathering and crafting resources. Has a heavy focus on horror elements.
- Survival
  - A game where the player must survive within a world gathering and crafting resources.
- Strategy
  - A game that heavily involves strategy.
- Space simulator
  - A game that simulates space, usually giving the player a spaceship and allowing space travel.
- Souls-like
  - Games based on the Dark Souls (FromSoftware, 2011) series of games. Typically, an ARPG focusing on high difficulty.
- Singleplayer
  - Games where only one person can play at a time.
- Simulator
  - A game that simulates a thing or activity.

- Shooter
  - A game that heavily involves shooting.
- Sci-fi
  - A game that incorporates Science Fiction elements.
- Sandbox
  - A game that provides a metaphorical sandbox, a space with no set goal that encourages player-driven gameplay and creativity. Usually, the world is also highly editable.
- RPG
  - A Role-Playing Game, where the player takes a role as a character within the game world. Focuses on customisability to allow the player to create a character that they wish to.
- Rogue-like
  - Games based on the game Rogue (A.I. Design, 1980), typically must navigate a randomly generated level with permanent death (player must restart the "run" when they lose).
- Rhythm
  - Games focusing on music, where the player must keep some sort of rhythm in sync with the game.
- Racing Simulator
  - A simulation of real-world racing.
- Racing
  - A game incorporating racing, though not always focusing on perfect simulation.
- Puzzle
  - A game that incorporates puzzle elements, where the player must solve puzzles to proceed.
- Party
  - Games that encourage in-person multiplayer, typically involving a combination of split screen and shared screen. Usually these are simple and quick games that anyone can easily pick up and play. Therefore, party games are usually characterised by playing and competing in a series of minigames.
- Open World
  - Games that include a large playable world, encouraging player exploration.
- Narrative-focused RPG
  - RPGs that focus on the game's story.
- Multiplayer
  - Games that involve more than one player.
- MOBA
  - Multiplayer Online Battle Arena. Strategy games where players compete against another team of players within a battle arena to destroy the other teams base.
- MMO
  - Massively Multiplayer Online game. Online games where players interact and play within a game world with a large amount of other players.
- Metroidvania
  - A portmanteau of Metroid (Nintendo R&D1 & Intelligent Systems, 1986) and Castlevania (Konami, 1986). Involves a large, interconnected map that the player

most progress through and explore. Usually involves building up a character's strength and backtracking through the map.

- Mecha
  - Games where the player takes control of a mech, a human-controlled robot.
- Lore-Heavy
  - Games with a heavy emphasis on lore and backstory.
- Looter-Shooter
  - Shooter games that focus on the player looting their enemies for upgrades
- Life Simulator
  - Games that simulate aspects of life.
- JRPG
  - Japanese Role-Playing Games. Usually involves playing as a party of characters, with an emphasis on story.
- Indie
  - Games created by indie developers.
- Horror
  - Games that incorporate horror elements.
- Grand Strategy
  - Like tactics games. Focuses on strategy and battles between armies.
- FPS
  - First Person Shooter. Shooter games from the first-person perspective.
- Flight Simulator
  - Games that simulate flight, usually through the player controlling an aircraft. Usually focuses on being as close to real-life as possible.
- Exploration
  - Games that focus on player exploration.
- Experimental
  - Games with experimental features that are not typically shown in video games.
- Driving
  - Games that focus on driving.
- Cozy
  - Games that focus on creating a cozy feeling for the player.
- Co-op
  - Multiplayer games involving co-operative play between players.
- City Builder
  - Games where the player build and maintains a city.
- Adventure
  - Games that focus on adventure and creating a sense of adventure within the player.
- Action RPG
  - RPGs that focus on action. Usually real-time combat.
- Action
  - Games that focus on action
- 4X
  - Strategy games that focus on Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate.
- 3rd Person Shooter
  - Shooter games that take place from the 3rd person perspective.

8.6 Appendix F

Introduction/General questions

- Questions that help prepare the participant for the later questions, as well as to get to know the participant.
- Also includes some questions that did not fit into other sections.

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1) **What do you identify as?**
2) **How long have you known you were transgender and how long have you been transitioning for?**
3) **How frequently do you play games?**
4) **What gaming consoles did you grow up playing?**
5) **What is currently your favourite console or device to play on?**
6) **What are your favourite video games?**
7) **What are your favourite genres of video games?**
8) **How do you feel when you play your favourite video games?**
9) **What's the most memorable experience that you've had in a video game?**

Though also used to get to better know the participant, questions 6 - 9 were also used to see if a pattern formed in the answers. This pattern may show some similarities in how transgender people remember video games, and if their experiences can be related to being transgender, especially with MMO's being a common focus of studies that studied people's exploration of identity (Baldwin, 2018; Nardi, 2010). However, I do not believe that there will be a pattern as people play video games for a variety of reasons.

10) **What games were you playing during the start of your transition?**

Hopefully a pattern will emerge through this question, where participants were playing character focused video games mostly (subconsciously or consciously, preset or custom characters). This would tie into their transition by how they are playing games about characters, while also during a time in their life that focuses on themselves. Like the previous question, MMO's may be a common answer, due to the large amount of customisation. However, like the previous questions this pattern likely won't emerge as people play games for a variety of reasons.

11) **Do you feel like you are playing more, less or the same amount of video games after beginning transitioning?**

Koles and Nagy (2016) stated that many players not only used as an escape, but as a way to cope with self-destructive behaviours like self-harming. Hypothetically, transgender people might be playing video games less after transitioning as they feel more comfortable in themself and no longer need an escape in the form of video games. However, it is more likely that there will not be a change, or the change will be unrelated to transitioning as, like the previous questions, people play video games for a variety of reasons.

Social Questions

- Many transgender people use video games to connect with other people. They will use video games to help find other transgender people, helping them and themselves with exploring gender and help with their mental health (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Nardi, 2010; Strauss et al., 2019).
    - Furthermore, interacting socially with others can help make the player understand themselves more and realise that something is wrong, like figuring out that they are transgender (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; Strauss et al., 2019).
    - However, interactions can be negative in how they relate to transgender people or just gender exploration and gender non-conformity in general, which can negatively affect someone's exploration of gender (Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019; Nardi, 2010).
- Relates to research question what the social environment is like in video games and how it affects transgender people.

----

12) **Have you met any transgender people while playing video games?**

Participants may have used video games to socialise and become friends with other transgender people. This means that video games may be a safe place to socialise and meet other transgender people.

   a. **Did you meet any transgender people while playing video games before transitioning?**

If the participant met transgender people before transitioning, meeting them may have helped with realising that they are transgender.

   b. **Have you ever asked for help from transgender people you've met online, like help with transitioning or mental health.**
      i. **If haven't meet transgender people online, then see if they've asked cisgender people for help.**

Meeting other transgender people (or even just people in general) in video games can become part of a support network that the participant utilised to help with their transition and mental health.

13) **Did you use video games to help come out to people? (doesn't have to be specific to within the game, like you were in a voice call with friends while playing a game or came out in text chat)**
   a. **If so, why did you use video games?**
   b. **If not, was there anything stopping you from using video games to come out to people?**

Some participants may have used video games to come out to their friends, or even taken advantage of the anonymous nature of video games and had instead just come out to strangers before coming out to their friends and family (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2019).

14) Did you interact with people in video games as your preferred gender before coming out?
   a. **If so, why did you use video games?**
   b. **If not, was there anything stopping you?**

Some participants interacted with others as their preferred gender before coming out, some before they even realised that they might be transgender (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024). This points to how video games are a safe environment for gender exploration and prepares the player for real life.

15) Have you ever had any negative interactions with people in video games to do with you being transgender, and if so, what happened?
   a. **Have you stopped playing a game because of these interactions?**

This question highlights how some places in video games are not safe and explores how the participant reacted to these situations and interactions.

16) Does moderated chat take part in deciding to play a game?
   a. **If not, does it take part in deciding to talk with people online?**

Many transgender people in other studies have cited moderation, as well as other safety precautions like reporting people, as being a must for deciding if they will play a game (McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).

17) What other social features do you most want in video games and which ones do you least like?
   i. **Like eg. Friends lists, activity feeds, co-op, guilds, Social Media connections, trading/buying from other players.**

Directly asks the participant what social features they like and need, while also asking what ones that they do not like.

Avatar/Character questions

- Many transgender people use their video game avatar, both by creating it and by using it, to explore what they want to look like and who they want to be (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).
  - Transgender players will also create video game avatars as a way to help cope with gender dysphoria.
- Relates to research question in how video games give the player the opportunity to be whoever they want to be and show the world who they want to be.

----

18) Do you have a favourite video game character? If so, who are they and why? This character can be one that you have made.

Hypothetically, the participant's favourite character would likely be one that they themselves made, as they relate more to a character that they have inserted themself into. This also prepares the participant to think more characters they have played in video games.

19) **What's the earliest time that you remember playing as a character of your preferred gender, and how did you feel?**

This question probes into the participant's memories, finding out if and how video games were instrumental to them realizing that they were transgender.

a) **If it's a preset character, when's the earliest that you remember making your own character?**

As a follow up question, this pushes for a more personal memory to see how they felt making a character that more relates to themself and how they felt.

20) **When you make a character, do you try and make them look like yourself or someone that you want to be? Why?**

This question is used to find out how transgender people make their character. It is likely that transgender people will make characters that look more like they want to be, due to most having a dissatisfaction with their body due to gender dysphoria. Furthermore, they may also use character creation to find out how they wish to present themself outside of video games.

a. **Have you ever made a character and tried to make it look like what you want to be?**
  i. **May need to specifically ask if the player has created avatars as a way to help relieve gender dysphoria.**

If the participant does not make characters generally look like their ideal self, this question will try to push to see if they ever have used video games to do so and try and find specific experiences that may point to them using character creation to help with transition or with relieving dysphoria.

21) **How do you feel about blank slate/silent protagonist characters compared to other types, like one that is voiced or one that you make?**

Theoretically, transgender people will prefer using blank slate characters over preset characters as they will be able to more easily self-insert, and therefore play as a character that better represents them compared to a preset character.

Representation questions

- Seeing different people represented in video games helps normalise their existence to others. Seeing yourself represented in a video game helps not just with connecting with the game but also normalises your own existence to yourself, helping yourself come to terms with who you are (Baldwin, 2018; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).
- These questions relate to the research question about how do video games handle representation and how does it affect the player.

----

22) **Do you prefer to play as preset characters or to make your own character and why?**

Hypothetically, transgender people will prefer to play as a character that they make themself, so that they can play as someone that more clearly represents themself.

a) **Do you feel worse if you can't make your own character?**

This question furthers the discussion of dysphoria, to see if discomfort can be caused from playing as a character that they do not directly relate to.

23) **How do you feel playing as a character of your own gender compared to one of another gender?**

Many transgender people suffer from gender dysphoria, how the mismatch between a person's gender and how they perceive themself causes distress. This question is asked to find out how dysphoria is experienced in video games.

24) **Have you ever felt like you haven't been represented by the characters in a video game in relation to gender?**
    a. **Have you ever felt like you haven't been represented by characters of your own gender?**

This question follows up on dysphoria, to see if relating to the character that they play can also distress them. Furthermore, it asks how transgender people feel about their representation, and how they feel playing a character that they ca not relate to.

25) **Have you ever been stopped by the game from exploring a game mechanic or game world because of your gender and how did it make you feel?**
    i. **May also push them to think about locked character choices, like can only get to do a certain thing if you are a guy and can only wear certain clothing.**
    ii. **Maybe also ask about how the game world itself being made for another gender in mind, or if video games have been good for gender-neutral play.**

Somewhat of a follow up from the last question, asking more broadly about game mechanics and the game world.

26) **Have you ever installed mods onto a game to change game features to make them more representative of yourself?**
    a. **If so, what did you change?**

Transgender players may want to play video games, but unfortunately they cannot connect with the video game properly due to them not feeling represented by it. This can then be fixed by player created mods. This questions also highlights what the player wants in video games and is continued in the next question.

27) **What do you feel makes for good character representation?**

Directly asks the participant what they feel about representation in video games what is needed to make it good.

Mental Health Questions

- Video games can help the player with their mental health and teach them proper ways to cope with their struggles. This helps transgender people due to many of them struggling with

mental health issues, and in turn can help them with their transition due to having mental health strategies in place (Baldwin, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2019).

- Though not directly relating to the research questions, exploring how video games help with mental health may highlight parts of games that are significant for helping transgender people with their gender exploration.

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28) Have you ever played video games to help with your own mental health, like with relieving dysphoria, using it as an escape from depression or help with anxiety?

  a. If so, what games were they and what did you do?

This project does not focus on mental health; however, some patterns may form about important game features that help transgender people. This question directly asks the participant if they feel like video games have helped them with their transition, as well as mental health.

Conclusion questions

- Questions to help wind down and end the interview.

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29) Do you have any (other) video games that remind you of a specific time in your life?

This question was a part of the final wrap up questions. This one specifically was used to see if any other patterns would form in the answers, while also giving the participant a way to share any other memories that they want to share.

30) Finally, is there anything else that you would like to add on to the interview.

Examiner Comments

Chapter/page numbers	Detailed comments	What to do	Done
Examiner 1			
p. 12	Section numbering for 'Thesis Structure' should be '1.6'	Fix typo	Yes
Chapter 2	As there is no method for a literature review (systematic or in any other form) is given, and the sample of papers introduced is not concretely motivated (and seems a bit opportunistic), this Section reads more like a classical 'Related Work' or 'Background' section and should probably be framed as such.	Specified it was a traditional literature review and how the papers were found.	Yes
Chapter 3.2 & Chapter 4.2	There is no specific method (or reference) for data analysis given. This should be specified. Table 4.1 indicates in its caption that some type of 'thematic analysis' was used for the interview study, but this needs to be specified further and referenced.	Added more detail about process for survey. Add more detail about process for interviews.	Yes
p.30/Chapter 3.2.3	The author refers here to interview questions without having presented these yet to their readers. If they are that essential, they might be better placed in the main body of the text.	Rephrased.	Yes
Chapter 3.3	It is unclear as to why some questions receive more detailed numbers than others. Maybe a brief explanation might be sufficient here (to cover most cases; exception below).	Added more detail and remade graphs to show the numbers better.	Yes
p.33	Given that the type of game is highly relevant to how avatars or characters (or the lack thereof) can be experienced, specific numbers regarding Questions 7 and 8 are essential.	Added graphs and more detail to questions 6-8	Yes

Examiner 2			
10	It isn't appropriate to use quoted material for almost every definition in the glossary – these definitions should be rephrased into your own words, and references still used.	Rephrased	Yes
10	Typo of "who's" rather than "whose"	Fixed typo	Yes
11	Typo: Mckenna should be McKenna	Fixed typo	Yes
11	"Conduct surveys and interviews on transgender players" should be "Conduct surveys and interviews with transgender players"	Changed	Yes
11	"Furthermore, not a lot of research has been done into transgender people and their experiences. This project would help expand into research both about how video games can help with exploration of gender, as well as transgender people in general." – their experiences of what? And it is unclear what you are referring to by "in general"	Rephrased	Yes
16	The first few sentences of this page are confusing – research has been lacking in its depth, frequency or another factor? There has actually been a huge growth in research into trans mental health… in addition it is unclear why the claim that more research into mental health will lead to insight into transition? In fact, the opposite is likely true? A more explicit discussion of mental health is warranted here.	Rewrote to better introduce this section, and why this was a topic explored, as well as more referencing.	Yes
17	The sentences "However, the participants resorted to playing video games instead, often getting sucked into the video game, but it allowed them to continue to live and	Removed comparison to make it more concise, as it is implied from the previous part. Rephrased.	Yes

		stop self-harming. This points to video games being used by transgender players as a crutch, something to lean on to help with their mental health struggles, which is very much needed especially in comparison to cisgender people." Should be rephrased to describe self harm and suicide in a more sensitive manner. It also is unclear why the comparison to cis people is made here – if this is referring to the higher rates of self-harm and suicide this should be stated more clearly		
18		Specify whether by "gender" in the Arcelus study you are referring to cis vs trans, or across different genders of trans participants.	Rephrased	Yes
19		"high waiting list times" should be "long waiting list times"	Changed	Yes
20		Suggest specifying what is meant by "significant others" – partners? Significant others can be broader than a romantic partner.	Yes, I used significant others because it is broader that romantic partner.	N/A
20		The evidence presented is not convincing that "Video games are becoming a core way for people to connect with each other" – this is likely true for a subset of people, but not universal, so suggest rewording to have this be more accurate to the evidence presented	Rephrased	Yes
21		The paragraph prior to section 2.4.3 – it is unclear whether you are summarizing the existing research (in which case references should be added in), or if you are writing a concluding paragraph (in which case this should be rephrased, and still some references added)	Rephrased, added references	Yes
24		Typo "interestingly, their second participate instead used their avatar as a way to collect items,"	Fixed typo	Yes
25		Good overview of the role of the avatar as a method for gender exploration	Thanks!	N/A
26		"patient" is used without explaining the context?	Rephrased	Yes
28		Representation in general or in video games or both?	Rephrased	Yes

28	The following sentence is confusing and needs to be phrased more clearly: "Mental health benefits help with critical thinking, while also helping deal with other mental disorders like depression and anxiety that may prevent exploration and transition." Also rephrase "However, due to how little participants most studies got, any sort of participation is sorely needed."	Rephrased	Yes
30	More attention to tense throughout – "A survey was conducted due to not having a large time requirement so that more participants can be found.	Rephrased	Yes
30	Typo "Ethics approval was sort out for this study	Fixed typo	Yes
30	"Links to the survey were sent out in digital flyers (see Appendix A) and took approximately 10-20 minutes to complete." – sounds like the link sending took 20-30 mins to complete, when I believe you mean the survey was estimated to take 20-30 mins to complete?	Rephrased	Yes
30	More information is needed on the survey questions – referring to the appendix is insufficient	Added more detail to survey questions. Added more reasoning for survey questions.	Yes
31	Demographic information is repeated from the participant section on page 30	Removed questions 1 and 2 from results section, added more detail to the participants section.	Yes
31	The trans experience is not the same across genders - suggest removing that sentence and rephrasing this as a limitation of the study. It is fine for studies to have limitations as long as they are acknowledged.	Removed part, already in limitations section otherwise	Yes
31	The figure numbers need to be referred to in the text. The graphs are fine but in the text the main data should still be described and then refer the reader to the figure for further information.	Figure numbers added to text.	Yes

32	Was the actual question "how frequently do you play video games?" Otherwise this should have been specified and should be addressed in limitations if not.	Added a footnote to the page, added more about specificity in limitations section	Yes
33	Was a content analysis employed for the qualitative data? How was this data analysed?	Added information about content analysis for survey	Yes
34	The language here is very casual e.g. non-insignificant amount-the language use here and throughout the thesis should be academic and professional in tone	Edited wording throughout the paper.	Yes
36	It would be interesting to know at what stage of transition someone was at if they were making a character to look like they currently look like-if someone is happy with how they look now why would they make a character that looks different to them (based on your argument presented)?	Added part writing about this.	Yes
35-37	A lot of these questions would be game dependent based on the options available within that game and how inclusive the character options are	Added more information about survey questions to help with this. However, this was a general look at games that the participants were playing rather than looking at specific games, to gather a general idea of the thoughts and feelings of participants.	Yes
39	Why were the sections of the interviews time limited? This is not in line with keeping interviews open for the participant.	Remove the breakdown of estimates to be more concise and less confusing, especially as interview did not always go from section to section.	Yes
40	As above with the survey, you should describe the questions used in the interviews in more detail here, not just refer to the appendix	Added more in-depth description of questions asked.	Yes
40	The methodology of a semi structured interview does not align with a phenomenological approach where usually only one or two questions are asked and it is left to the participants to respond how they see fit about the actual phenomenological experience. This also is a very structured interview, not a semi structured interview and is not appropriate to the methodology described.	Clarified more specifically that the questions were a guide for myself (with not all the questions being/needing to be asked) Added that some of these questions were more so quantitative in nature (especially the introduction questions asking about the participant, which are separate in the results).	Yes

41	The results look much more like a content analysis than a thematic analysis. I suggest you advise how you've written up the methods for this section.	Added more detail about analysis	Yes
48	The tents throughout should be past tense.	Edited wording throughout the paper.	Yes
Interview write-up	There are some great quotes, so I believe you likely have the data for a thematic analysis.	Thank you!	N/A
Interview write-up	Additional subheadings would help here, especially using your themes and "codes" as headings – the codes really should be analysed further in more depth and used as sub-themes (once revised)	Categories were added as subheadings. Codes and categories were further revised.	Yes
53	The interviews don't have a thematic analysis – the researcher conducts a thematic analysis of the interviews	Changed	Yes
53	You have mentioned the covid pandemic as being relevant – provide context of the time period of the study, plus some relevant literature about the impact on covid – there are general mental health studies as well as trans-specific studies you can reference here	Rewrote, adding information about the time frame that study took place, and adding more references.	Yes
59	Suggest having the framework be a standalone chapter on its own, referencing other relevant frameworks and specifying how these factors were chosen. In addition, the language should be direct, e.g. strengthening phrases like "Pronoun customisation would be appreciated" to be "Pronoun customisation is a necessary aspect of a game". As it currently stands it is more of a repeating of the study findings rather than a discrete framework.	Added reference to other framework, rephrased wording	Yes
Discussion	The discussion is much stronger than the results section, but you should add in more referencing throughout to strengthen your arguments and bring the findings in context with other studies. Without this detail and context it is a very surface-level discussion.	Added more referencing and rephrasing to help strengthen the discussion section.	Yes

62	The "answering questions" section should be interwoven into the discussion section	It is, this is a clearer restatement for the conclusion	N/A
63	It's unclear why you would want to compare experiences between trans and cis people, if the focus is on gender exploration? Especially as with the way you have phrased the questions you have not queried gender exploration overall, but gender exploration specifically within a trans context. More elaboration is needed here to justify this suggestion.	I have mentioned in parts of the discussion that certain conclusions may be more indicative of people in general, rather than just transgender people. I have added those here to specify. But, we did not do this, so the questions were more specifically tailored towards transgender people.	Yes
Overall	Were any participants reimbursed for their time?	No, I have changed to specify that participants were volunteers	Yes
Overall	Transitioning and "being out of the closet" are not synonymous for everyone.	Correct, I tried to specify with those questions that it is asking for when the first step was taken for the participant, whatever it may be. This however was not specified for question 6 on the survey, which I have added a note as this may have been confusing for participants.	Yes
Overall	Were any other forms of mental health support utilised explored or commented on by participants?	No	N/A
Overall	It feels like a very medicalised model of transition is being used within this thesis. Transition for many does not start and stop. It's not that simple and many people may never feel like they are "fully transitioned". I am not sure if you have the date for it but it would be beneficial to further clarify what you and participants mean by transition.	This was already specified with question 4 in the survey (as well as talking with the participants in the interviews) what I was looking for with "transitioning" ("In other words, how long since you've started any sort of transition other than just knowing, e.g like social, medical"). As this is different for many people, the choice for when the participant started "transitioning" is up to the participant. However, this could have been better worded, like "the first purposeful steps for affirming your gender after figuring out you are transgender". I have added a part in the terms and definitions to help better define "transition", as well as mentioning this in the limitations section discussing the specificity of the survey questions.	Yes
Overall	There are a lot of typos throughout – I stopped noting them, but a spell/grammar check and thorough read through is needed.	Edited wording throughout the paper.	Yes
Overall	Was there any community input into the study design? I imagine a lot of the phrasing of the questions for both the	No. This has now been added to the limitations section, mentioning this as a way to improve the study.	Yes

	survey and interview would have been phrased differently had there been such input		
Overall	The language throughout should be reviewed and updated to be more academic in tone.	Edited wording throughout the paper.	Yes