

Analyzing Trans (Mis)Representation in Video Games to Remediate Gender Dysphoria Triggers

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Many trans people experience *gender dysphoria* – distress caused by mismatches in internal and external experiences of gender. Video games engage intimately with the self, creating intense experiences involving identities, bodies, and social interaction. This combination of factors renders trans players vulnerable to gender dysphoria triggers: failures of interaction design that result in gender dysphoria. The present research undertakes a thematic analysis of four popular games, drawn from an initial corpus of 31. It contributes a definition of gender dysphoria triggers, case studies of triggering games, an initial gender dysphoria categorization to provide a useful design language, and examples of alternative designs for extant triggers. The analysis combines the authors’ positionality as trans gamers; critical cultural studies methodologies, including textual analysis; a critical discourse analysis of production-side statements and interviews and player-side comments about diversity in those games; and close readings of the games themselves. The paper concludes with a call for trans inclusivity in game design, which we structure around the necropolitical concept of the relation of care.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models; Systems and tools for interaction design**; *User centered design*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: trans-inclusive design, gender-inclusive design, gender dysphoria, game design

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1 INTRODUCTION

Gender dysphoria, experienced by many trans people¹, is a sense of distress resulting from a mismatch between one’s internal and external experience of gender, ranging in severity from

¹In this paper, we use “trans people” as an all-inclusive term for anyone who experiences gender dysphoria, including transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming individuals. We write from the position of being trans, ourselves, but understand that the term “trans people” does not map one-to-one with people who experience dysphoria [119].

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momentary discomfort to long-term trauma [10, 132]². Representations of self, either in private or social contexts, as well as other trans people and the context in which they live, can trigger moments of gender dysphoria. The inverse of gender dysphoria, *gender euphoria*, is a sense of joy resulting from positive experiences of gender. While not the topic of the present study, gender euphoria may be triggered through similar experiences.

Video games engage intimately with the self, its presentation, and the psyche of the player [11, 12, 52, 83, 108]. This level of engagement through games renders players vulnerable. For trans players, game experiences encompass moments that could trigger dysphoria. These moments come through the *game mechanics* [116], the moments of choice that are – or are not – offered to the player about how they interact with the game, and through the game’s narrative.

The heart of this research is a series of case studies that unpack existing dysphoria triggers and, in that process, build language for discussing them. Our case studies are AAA games, which are developed primarily by cisgender developers and for cisgender audiences, a context where transgender player experiences are often not considered and thus need to be brought to light. The discussion section (Sec. 6) then uses a necropolitical framework to explore whether, when, or how triggers ought to be removed. The discussion is two-sided: our case studies focus on games where transgender people are in a vulnerable position as players, and we denounce the use of triggers to reinforce their marginalization. On the flip side, we acknowledge and affirm certain triggering games which act as a means of care from (usually trans) developers to trans players.

1.1 Gender Dysphoria Triggers

The present research is aimed at understanding and offsetting *gender dysphoria triggers* in video games. By framing trans inclusivity through dysphoria triggers, we reify the problem of inclusivity as a direct problem of interaction design for the first time. We bring dysphoria triggers into the context of human-computer interaction, by defining them as:

Definition 1.1. A human-computer interaction resulting in gender dysphoria.

In the context of games, where game mechanics are the human-computer interactions afforded to a player, gender dysphoria triggers arise from the range of possible actions. Gender dysphoria triggers are hard to study because:

- Dysphoria is idiosyncratic; every dysphoric trans person experiences it differently.
- Dysphoria is psychological, requiring an analysis of a game’s predicted psychological effects, which need not arise from a single asset or fragment of code, but from their complex interactions.
- Dysphoria triggers are, potentially, everywhere.

Though trans gaming discourse has grown more vocal in recent years, there is no established methodology for classifying potential triggers in a game at any stage of development. Understanding triggers enables them to be identified and remediated through the design and development process. A method for assessing trans inclusion, as we begin to develop here, provides a concrete tool for researchers and developers to improve the inclusiveness of their work.

1.2 Research Questions and Approach

Though our long-term research goal of trans-inclusive gaming encompasses the design of actively-inclusive games that promote gender euphoria, euphoria is not the focus of this paper. Instead,

²While we expect many – but not all – trans readers will immediately understand, we know that those who have not experienced gender dysphoria may have difficulty comprehending. We recommend the following as further reading for those in need of additional context: [10, 119, 132].

we grapple with the fact that dysphoria is a common part of many trans people's daily lives, even those living in supportive environments. Games span the breadth of daily lived experience and beyond, yet we seek to address dysphoria without narrowing the breadth of virtual experience. **This goal is important because the inclusion of trans players is important.** Pushed by our own experiences as trans players, we began this project with the following research questions:

RQ1 In what ways is agency withheld from players such that it can trigger experiences of dysphoria?

RQ2 How can games be better designed to avoid gender dysphoria triggers?

In engaging in the present research, we found that the literature lacked the terminology to articulate the triggers that arose from our case studies. We thus identified a third research question:

RQ3 How can we begin to categorize triggers in order to better discuss and remediate them?

To address the research questions, our methodology is qualitative, invoking thematic analysis as a framing. The methodology combines:

- an initial assessment, as trans players, of potential triggers in 31 games;
- case studies of four popular, but triggering, games that address a breadth of experiences and are drawn from the initial 31 games: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* [G22], *Cyberpunk 2077* [G11], *Persona 4 Golden* [G2], and *Guilty Gear -Strive-* [G1];
- the construction of themes surrounding dysphoria triggers from those games by performing close reading [135] in combination with the critical cultural studies paradigm of combining textual analysis (content analysis) with critical discourse analysis [89] of 5 interviews, 6 articles, 3 public statements, and 11 blog posts; and
- the production of an initial gender dysphoria categorization (GDC) that serves as intermediate-level knowledge [64] to enable discussing gender dysphoria triggers.

1.3 Contribution

More radical, trans-centric games that promote gender euphoria and celebrate a diversity of gender experiences are critical, but are not the focus today. Specifically, we seek trans inclusion within games that are developed predominantly by and for cis people. As such, the manuscript's contributions are as follows:

- The definition of the gender dysphoria trigger as a useful mechanism in understanding trans players' experiences and as a turning point on which to hinge player agency;
- case studies of popular published games that include dysphoria triggers;
- an initial GDC that serves to ground discussion of dysphoria triggers and highlight how they may be remediated through design; and
- a discussion of how necropolitics can inform the path toward trans-inclusive game design

These contributions can help support trans players because our novel focus on dysphoria triggers is supportive of the trans community's mental well-being and playing experience.

1.4 Positionality Statement

The present research involves interpretation by the research team. We establish our positionality to contextualize our perspective. *None of this is call to authority*, but to point out that our experience helps us identify distinct perspectives on transness in games and interpret them through a trans lens. We are motivated by our own frustrations with the state of games and, thus, have undertaken the present research.

The research team consists of four trans feminine people in the United States of America (USA)³; some of the group are binary, some not. Our group is diverse in terms of race, nation of origin, native language, and socio-economic class. The group is neurodiverse [42], with members identifying as autistic and/or having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, which is important to trans representation because there is significant overlap between the trans community and neurodivergent community [144]. The researchers study games within the context of human-computer interaction and practice a combination of qualitative and critical/cultural approaches to understanding game designs, which we bring to bear on the present research.

Three members of the team have experience with software development and programming, which we employ to understand the implications of speculative redesigns in the present project. All four researchers have experience designing and developing small-scale video games, and three have commercial game development experience.

The researchers are all *well-played* [4, 43] – we bring decades of experience with gameplay and game culture to the research. This experience, though not easily developed into a scientific way of knowing, informs our viewpoints as researchers.

Notable limitations of our team composition include the absence of trans masculine researchers and researchers who are working from locations outside the USA. Researchers from these groups may bring different research insights due to the dependence of trans experience on gender and place, as well as its dependence on all other intersections of identity, some of which are inherently unrepresented on any team [24]. Even within the authors' own subcommunities, we respect diversity of perspectives and priorities, e.g., we support the development of games which represent dysphoria *by trans developers, for trans players* [6, 26, 86]. This paper's focus is orthogonal, examining triggering content which originates outside the trans community and how it might be addressed without appealing to ineffective notions of "empathy" [113].

1.5 Trigger Warning

The present research addresses gender dysphoria and we discuss it in detail. Readers may find this a difficult topic to engage with. Further, we use imagery from the games we study to analyze them. This imagery can be construed as sexually explicit, transphobic, and triggering. If, as a reader, you find yourself in an unexpected emotional state, please, step away and take care of yourself.

2 BACKGROUND

The present research is situated in trans identities and game design. We present a short primer of trans terminology to ground discussion, then develop background on the challenges trans people face in society and how this relates to video games. We proceed to discuss game design to establish our approach to understanding games.

2.1 Primer of Trans Terminology

We draw from the works of Badgley et al. [10], Scheuerman et al. [119], and Stryker [132] to introduce the reader to relevant terms. A *trans person* is any person whose gender differs from that assigned at birth. A *cis person* is anyone else. We use trans as an umbrella term, both for binary trans men and women, as well as non-binary genders. *Transphobia*, *trans-hostility*, and *cissexism* refer to bigotry and discrimination against trans people. *Gender dysphoria* is distress relating to a mismatch between gender and gender presentation; *gender euphoria* is the joy when they align. *Gender envy* is envy toward those whose gender presentation you desire. *Passing pressure* is the, generally transphobic, social pressure to be indistinguishable from a cis member of your gender.

³One is in the process of moving, hence the Australian affiliation.

2.2 Trans / Queer Theory

2.2.1 Passing and the Cis-Heteronormative Gaze. The cis-heteronormative notion of “passing” holds that transgender individuals who exhibit no evidence of the gender assigned to them at birth “pass” (as cisgender) [122, 139]. The concept of passing harms both binary and non-binary trans individuals. Passing denies non-binary trans people’s desire to be perceived as not aligning with binary notions of “male” or “female”, while binary trans people desire to be perceived as the right binary gender [112], which represents self-actualization and gender congruence [55, 127]. Yet the harm of passing to all trans people is that power lies with a cis stranger: for a transgender person to pass, they must “look cisgender” [16]. Failure to be read as cisgender may be linked to transphobic harassment and dire consequences [53, 97]⁴ such as physical violence, homelessness [14], and legal repercussions [5], which create intense pressure to pass that sidelines, not supports, self-actualization [140]. *Passing privilege* [126] refers to the privilege of those who pass successfully and thus avoid these repercussions.

2.2.2 Anti-Trans Rhetoric. Anti-trans rhetoric is core to analyzing dysphoria triggers; we focus on *necropolitics* and *TERF* rhetoric. *Necropolitics* is the use of sociopolitical power to dictate how some groups of people may live and how some must die, introduced by Mbembe [87] and used by Puar to explore post-9/11 queer ideology [105]. Without dismissing Puar’s queer necropolitics [105], we will rely primarily on Mbembe. We also draw on the concept of gender deconstruction [29], the analysis of the governing and punitive strategies employed by cis-heteronormativity towards gender-marginalized groups [28], transgender studies by Namaste [93–96], Keegan [76, 77], Ruberg [114], and Stryker [131], as well as our understanding of practical transgender theories within the field of video game critical cultural studies. We thus assert that game designs that leave no place for trans people as an audience eventually accept trans people as a disposable population destined for social, political, or literal death. In other words, the exclusionary effects for trans people in game design function as a ghost of necropolitical logic in the video game to stereotype, frame, deny, ignore, injure, and exacerbate trans-exclusion.

We take Butler’s concepts [28, 29] around interpreting and understanding cis-heteronormativity in this study, but we retain our skepticism and do not fully agree with most of their theories around gender performativity. Butler’s gender performativity [28] and “undoing gender” theory [30] advocate for understanding gender as a performance or behavior, where gender is the cultural creation and “nobody really is a gender from the start” [32, timestamp: 1:25], which usually is treated as one of the foundations of queer theory. However, as many trans scholars critique [15, 94, 95, 106], if we claim gender is only a culturally social creation that is performed, then gender identity cannot be innate [15]. If we claim gender is derived from performance, then we deny trans people the legitimacy of their daily living experience of gender dysphoria [34, 76, 94]. As Namaste states “... But our lives and our bodies are made up of more than gender and mere performance... Our lives and our bodies are much more complicated...” [94]. Therefore, we discard the notion that gender results from performance and replace it with the notion that performance of gender in video games should be made to affirm the identities of trans players.

The framing of trans feminine individuals as criminally duplicitous men is especially endemic to trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) rhetoric [132]. It is worth noting that “TERF” is the self-selected name of this movement [132]. Within the TERF paradigm, trans women are painted as men attempting to steal the “legitimate” identity of cis women [132, 147] and trans men are women actively betraying their fellow women [69, 132]. TERF discourse often uses bioessentialism to argue that sex and gender are intrinsic to the body and unchangeable [54, 132]. It views the transgender

⁴We also note that in the USA and elsewhere, many governments are actively seeking to harm trans individuals [107], amplifying all of the concerns here.

movement as a commodification of cis women's sexuality to reify cis-heteropatriarchal gender norms [35] and trans women as sexual deviants invading women's protected places [71, 132]. TERF ideology contradicts trans people's actual realities and fuels transphobia and hate.

2.2.3 Shift. The transgender and media studies scholar cárdenas provides the concept of *shift* – the act of modulating one's perceptibility by changing one's form [34, 81]. She explains that shifting is an operation against necropolitics that is practiced daily by many trans women of color to survive [34, p. 97]. cárdenas suggests that we cannot understand “passing” and “not-passing” as two fully separate concepts, but as a continuum along which one may move. We will extrapolate her theory toward trans-inclusive designs that give the ability to shift and have an allowance for trans people to choose how they move across the line. We return to the concept of shift throughout the paper.

2.3 Game Design

To ground our work in the game design space, we offer operating definitions of several terms pertaining to game narrative and designed player choices.

2.3.1 Game Mechanics. We work from Salen and Zimmerman's definitions with the understanding that games consist of rules and play in service to some uneven outcome (e.g., winning the game, a character dying) [116]. *Rules* are the constraints on available player choices and the parameters that drive the outcomes of those choices. *Play* is the agency of a player to make meaningful choices within the rules to influence outcomes.

Game mechanics are designed moments of choice in games [1, 72, 116]. These are action-outcome cycles in which a player observes game state, makes informed choices, then observes the rules-constrained outcome before repeating. These choices often happen within milliseconds and may involve careful parameterization (e.g., controlling the height and speed of an avatar's jump). Mechanics are the fundamental unit of game interactivity.

We further subdivide mechanics into *core mechanics*, the choices players make repeatedly as the essence of play [116], and *ancillary mechanics*, supporting player activities. While core mechanics are an established concept, we introduce ancillary mechanics to capture a particular element of games that is otherwise hard to identify. Ancillary mechanics support the core mechanics and represent activities players regularly perform, but do not directly drive the game toward and outcome. For example, in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, core mechanics include traversing the environment, collecting items, and fighting enemies; ancillary mechanics include managing inventory, selecting equipment, and engaging with the map.

Games contrast with less structured play, which may or may not have rules and/or some form of goal [1, 20, 65, 72, 116]. Player agency is a key differentiator between video games, our focus, and non-interactive media such as film.

2.3.2 Player Characters. The particular character through which a player interacts has been called a(n) “avatar”, “game character”, “persona”, “locus of interaction”, etc. [12, 13, 41], which have subtle differences. We choose the term *player character (PC)* [39] to identify who represents the player and gives them agency, which might be a pre-existing character, player-designed avatar, or changing roster of characters (who may switch between PC and NPC status) [51]. Players are identified with the character(s) and experience the game through them. Other characters in the game are *non-player characters (NPCs)* [39], which interact with the player throughout the game.

3 QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Our overarching framework is thematic analysis [23] applied to game design (e.g., as in [3, 137, 148]). Figure 1 diagrams the process and grounds this section. While we present the phases of analysis in

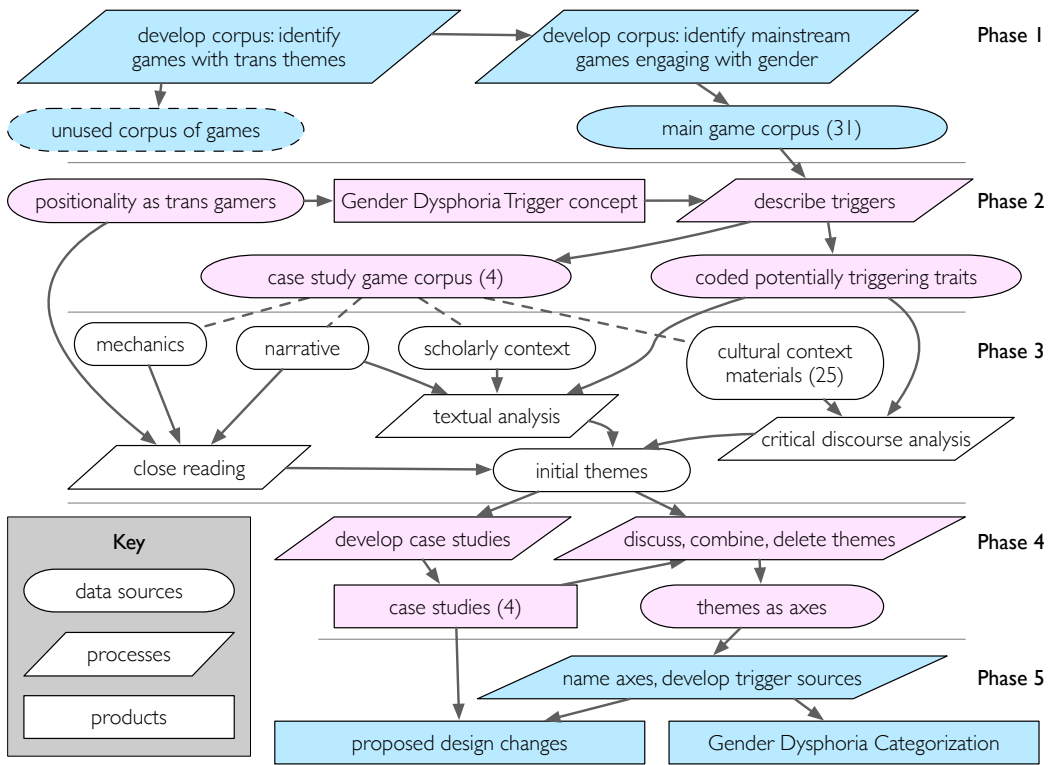


Fig. 1. Diagram of research methodology. **Phase 1:** Initial thematic analysis identified two corpora of games, one of which was further analyzed. **Phase 2:** The main corpus is described using our positionality as trans gamers and led to the conceptualization of a gender dysphoria trigger. To develop categories of sufficient detail, a case study approach was adopted. Four games were developed into a corpus for case studies. **Phase 3:** Games for case study were broken into component parts for analysis through close reading, textual analysis, and critical discourse analysis, resulting in initial themes. **Phase 4:** Case studies are written and the team collaborates to identify axes from the themes. **Phase 5:** Develop names for the axes and trigger sources, resulting in the Gender Dysphoria Categorization as well as proposed design changes from the case studies. (Note that **Phase 6** is developing the report, which is not included in this diagram.)

an orderly way, thematic analysis is necessarily iterative [23]. Phases are revisited repeatedly and the corpus changes throughout. We report on the corpus status in recounting the phases, below.

The present research was performed by four researchers. The project began in September 2022 and analysis was performed until January 2023. In January–February 2023, we finalized the framework and wrote this report. Finally, in April–May 2023, we revisited the project to detail the intermediate-level knowledge products that came out of it. In July 2023, we prepared the final revision, which clarified our stance on trans explorations of dysphoria and solidified the discussion of necropolitics.

3.1 Phase 1: Data Familiarization

While the present research focuses on problems that are often immediately apparent to trans players, it relies on an understanding of games that is not easily specified. A core challenge was to operationalize our feelings and understandings of gameplay that derive from a lifetime as a trans

gamer. The concept of a dysphoria trigger is not (*yet*) a classifier that one can use to locate relevant games (e.g., via MobyGames⁵ or the Giant Bomb Wiki⁶, both of which offer the ability to identify games by characteristics). Dysphoria triggers are complex, necessitating an understanding of the interplay of narrative, game mechanics, and wider discourse to describe.

For our corpus, we first considered games where trans themes like gender dysphoria and euphoria are core components. We then turned to examining how mainstream games engage with and potentially hurt trans players, which is more applicable. We drew on personal experiences of harm as well-played trans researchers. We chose single-player games because multi-player games' complicated player-player interactions should be studied separately and deserve a separate analysis in future work. From personal experience and media attention, we brainstormed a ludography of 31 games with triggering scenes for further study laid out in Table 1.

3.2 Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Our original ludography began with a generic description of triggers for 31 games. We teased out game traits that reveal dysphoria triggers, which we treated as codes. We expected that games heavily involving avatars and/or voices would likely induce dysphoria. We engaged in gameplay, reflected on play experiences, and developed context, including trans and queer theory and articles about individual games.

In this phase, we developed a short description of points to investigate in the game: player perspective (e.g., first or third person); whether the player customizes a PC; whether or not the player inhabits the PC; and whether or not the PC is voiced. These framings gave us a grounding to understand the corpus, but proved insufficient to capture the nuance of dysphoric experiences, to which end we switched to an in-depth analysis of a smaller number of games.

We performed in-depth case studies on four games: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* [G22], *Cyberpunk 2077* [G11], *Persona 4 Golden* [G2], and *Guilty Gear -Strive-* [G1]. We chose these because they are popular games, not aimed at trans audiences specifically, and, based on our initial phases of analysis, included a diverse range of dysphoria triggers. Given limited prior research on dysphoria in games, it was essential to study each game in depth, which made it essential to focus on a small number of games.

3.3 Phase 3: Searching for Themes

We handled the complexity of gender dysphoria with a multi-method approach: for each of the four games, we undertook an intertwined critical cultural studies process of textual analysis and close reading with the critical discourse analysis of production-side statements, interviews, and user-side comments of games. The results of this produced initial themes that would ground our case studies and serve as our initial GDC.

3.3.1 Close Reading of Games. We used close reading [135] to understand how player choice figures into the unfolding narrative and play experiences in the games. Close reading involved playing the games and exploring their context. Note that playing the games was necessary to fully understand them and is at least a 12-hour commitment, even 100+ hours in some cases. The same two authors engaged in close reading to understand how players are given choices – or not – to engage with gender autonomy.

3.3.2 Textual Analysis. The textual analysis serves as our key point of entry to understand how representations of transness “work” within these games. We considered the language-centered

⁵<https://www.mobygames.com>

⁶<https://www.giantbomb.com/games/>

Table 1. Initial Games Corpus arranged by year of platform specific release.

Title	Release Year	Platform Investigated
<i>Elden Ring</i> [G15]	2022	Windows
<i>Guilty Gear Strive</i> [G1]	2021	Windows
<i>Tom Girls of the Mountain</i> [G23]	2021	Windows
<i>Get in the Car, Loser!</i> [G17]	2021	Windows
<i>Persona 5 Royal</i> [G3]	2021	Windows
<i>Last of Us Part 2</i> [G20]	2020	PlayStation 4
<i>Cyberpunk 2077</i> [G11]	2020	Windows
<i>Yakuza: Like a Dragon</i> [G25]	2020	Windows
<i>Tell Me Why</i> [G13]	2020	Windows
<i>Persona 4 Golden</i> [G2]	2020	Windows
<i>Outer Worlds</i> [G24]	2019	Windows
<i>The MISSING: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories</i> [G30]	2018	Windows
<i>Assassin's Creed Odyssey</i> [G29]	2018	Windows
<i>Celeste</i> [G18]	2018	Windows
<i>Breath of the Wild</i> [G22]	2017	Nintendo Switch
<i>Dream Daddy</i> [G16]	2017	Windows
<i>Night in the Woods</i> [G26]	2017	Windows
<i>Stardew Valley</i> [G12]	2016	Windows
<i>Street Fighter V</i> [G10]	2016	Windows
<i>Overwatch</i> [G9]	2016	Windows
<i>Assassin's Creed Syndicate</i> [G28]	2015	Windows
<i>Elder Scrolls Online</i> [G31]	2014	Windows
<i>Dark Souls 2</i> [G14]	2014	Windows
<i>Dragon's Age Inquisition</i> [G8]	2014	Windows
<i>Sims 4</i> [G19]	2013	Windows
<i>Rune Factory 4</i> [G21]	2013	Windows, Nintendo 3DS
<i>Elder Scrolls Skyrim</i> [G6]	2011	Windows
<i>Mount & Blade: Warband</i> [G27]	2010	Windows
<i>Elder Scrolls Oblivion</i> [G5]	2006	Windows
<i>Elder Scrolls Morrowind</i> [G4]	2002	Windows
<i>Elder Scrolls Daggerfall</i> [G7]	1996	Windows

components of play with the scenes in which it was embedded, as well as the larger cultural context – a form of textual analysis [89]. Where possible, we acquired game scripts⁷, or read them during play, to understand how PCs and NPCs relate to each other with an emphasis on how gender and presentation play into the story. Two of the authors engaged in textual analysis, playing the games and reading the scripts. This process included unpacking game events using feminist theory and objectification theory to identify where gender, gender presentation, and identity were important and identify how games affirm or disaffirm trans players through relations between characters.

3.3.3 *Critical Discourse Analysis.* For the critical discourse analysis, we collected data about the games in the form of published materials. We gathered 25 such materials that (1) were written by or

⁷“Script” here meaning the text of the story, not a small computer program.

extensively quoted from both production sources and commentator sources and (2) foregrounded the topic of diversity. These are as follows:

- interviews [8, 57, 85, 121, 134],
- articles [48, 79, 82, 104, 136, 149],
- public statements [47, 68, 73], and
- blog posts [9, 45, 60–62, 98, 102, 110, 124, 138, 142].

Included among those cited or interviewed were directors, writers, producers, and actors. Although audience research is beyond the scope of this paper, this discourse analysis permits the indirect consideration of reception: the production discourse could be interpreted as the negative space of audience reception.

3.4 Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

As we undertook the multi-method analysis, the case studies began to materialize. We combined the components of that analysis to assemble clear themes and identify their meanings for a trans audience. We considered how best to operationalize our understanding of what was going on in these games in order to render it useful to others. This led us to develop RQ3; in reviewing, we discovered our themes were based around responding to a series of questions about particular scenes, which combine game mechanics and narratives. Through this process, we developed intermediate-level design knowledge, the GDC, described in the next section.

3.5 Phase 5: Defining & Naming Themes

During our thematic analysis, the themes stabilized into three axes which we then formalized as the axes of the GDC: CAUSE, MECHANISM, and MANNER. We were able to identify common sources for the triggers, drawn from our positionality. We use the GDC as a tool for describing the triggers found in our case studies and believe it serves as useful intermediate-level design knowledge for others. As we and other researchers collect additional data and bring in additional perspectives, the GDC may evolve to include other axes and additional points on those axes. We also used our case studies and GDC to engage in speculative redesign of the games, resulting in alternative designs, discussed later.

3.6 Phase 6: Producing the Report

As final steps, we developed research products for use by others and reported in the remainder of this paper: assembling the GDC as a way to characterize triggers in game designs; a series of case studies; and alternative designs for the triggers in the games.

4 INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL DESIGN KNOWLEDGE: A GENDER DYSPHORIA CATEGORIZATION

We propose a 3-axis system for categorizing dysphoria triggers in video games, derived from our thematic analysis process. This GDC serves to ground discussing gender dysphoria triggers and can be expanded upon in future work. The axes and their matching questions are useful in characterizing components of games, either formatively or summatively. Each of the axes asks a question and we have identified several sources of triggers in this project, yet we expect more could be discovered. The axes are as follows:

- CAUSE: “Which media acted as a trigger?”
- MECHANISM: “Why was it a trigger?”
- MANNER: “Who creates the trigger and how?”

These axes are intended to be non-exhaustive and malleable. We have synthesized the themes present in the case studies into example lists of descriptors for each axis:

CAUSE. Games are multi-sensory experiences and dysphoria triggers can come through any of them, which we denote as CAUSE. *Visual* triggers engage sight, e.g., seeing bodies that trigger dysphoria, characters that invoke gender envy. *Audio* triggers engage hearing, e.g., voices that are incompatible with the sense of self. *Textual* triggers are read; they might describe harmful experiences. *Metatextual* triggers occur through the player's inferences, rather than being explicit in the visuals, audio, or text.

MECHANISM. We found MECHANISM to be the most open-ended axis, thus our list of triggers is not exhaustive. From our data, we have identified four MECHANISMS, which we use as the basis for the case studies. *Stereotyping* is the reduction of the trans player to a caricature of trans people. *Objectification* is the reduction of the trans player to an object, lacking agency, for the pleasure of the cis gaze. *Conscription* is a process by the player is forced to perform trans-hostile or transphobic behavior during game play – rendering players complicit in causing harm and denying players game mechanics attain gender autonomy. Pressuring trans players to pass devalues players who do not pass in favor of those who do – *passing pressure*.

MANNER. MANNER addresses the reasons for triggering content and is harder to identify in extant games, but is easier to identify by the development team while making a game. To understand MANNER in the present research, we needed to look at texts outside of the game, especially looking at what creators and media have reported on it. *External, active transphobia* means the developer actively seeks to trigger trans people. *External, passive transphobia* means the developer, though not actively hostile toward trans people, permits trans-exclusionary content to remain in-game. *Communal* means the trans community treats one another in a way that allows harm to persist. *Individual* means an individual trans person treats themselves in a way that exacerbates existing harm.

5 CASE STUDIES

As one product of the present research, we present case studies that illustrate the interplay of narrative and game mechanics and how these give rise to dysphoria triggers, whether intentional or not. Each case study illustrates a single MECHANISM. We summarize the games for the reader, although this is not substitute for playing them. Each case study begins with a brief description of the game: narrative, core mechanics, and any ancillary mechanics that are relevant to the study. We then present one or more scenes from the game, followed by a matching analysis.

5.1 Stereotyping in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild [G22] is an action-adventure video game in which the player explores the land of Hyrule as the PC Link. The core mechanics of *Breath of the Wild* involve traversing a landscape through multiple modalities, engaging in stealth and combat against enemies, talking to and completing quests for NPCs, and solving environmental puzzles using a variety of tools. A key ancillary mechanic is the ability to change the PC's equipment, in particular, their clothing, which alters NPC interactions.

5.1.1 The Scenes: Visiting Gerudo Town. A typical play through of *Breath of the Wild* (especially for first-time players) involves completing four Divine Beast labyrinths before proceeding to the final stages of the game. To access the Divine Beast Vah Naboris, Link must head to Gerudo Town. The Gerudo are an all-female race living in the desert and Gerudo Town is a settlement where no man is allowed to visit. Figure 2 shows part of the sequence of accessing Gerudo Town.



Fig. 2. A series of screenshots depicting key points in the quest to gain access to Gerudo town (read left-to-right, top-to-bottom). **Upper Left:** First, Link is denied access to Gerudo Town by a guard because they are a “voe” [man] and not a “vai” [woman]. **Upper Right, Lower Left:** Link locates and talks to a merchant who claims to have determined how to enter the town – a man previously snuck in. **Lower Right:** A townsfolk who knows how to locate the relevant woman. Screenshots taken by the authors.

Since Link reads as a man, players must find a means to disguise themselves to persuade the guards that they belong there. Their search will eventually take them to the NPC Vilia, who is described as a male merchant who was somehow able to infiltrate the town. However, players find that Vilia identifies as a woman and wears feminine Gerudo attire (Figure 3). She denies having any knowledge of a man entering Gerudo Town, but she will assist players in dressing as a female Gerudo in order to progress. At the conclusion of the relevant cutscene, a gust of wind blows away the veil over Vilia’s face, revealing that she has facial hair, to Link’s shock.

As part of Link’s interaction with Vilia, the player engages with ancillary mechanics of branching dialog with NPC characters. During the conversation, the player has the option of either complementing Vilia on her looks or calling her a man. Upon completing the dialog tree successfully, the PC acquires new equipment, the Gerudo Outfit, which allows them to change clothes and infiltrate Gerudo Town in the guise of a woman.

5.1.2 Analysis. The representation of Vilia invites players to view trans feminine characters as deceitful men who disguise themselves for the sake of infiltration (CAUSE::*metatextual*) – a central component of TERF anti-trans rhetoric. This simultaneously depicts trans people as objects of mockery (MECHANISM::*objectification*) in accordance with stereotypical cisnormative expectations (MECHANISM::*stereotyping*). Discourse around this particular scene has pointed to these issues. The dialogue implies players believe Vilia is actually a cross-dressing man [47]. Rather than accept Vilia as a transgender woman the player should view her as a deceptive man and an object of ridicule [2, 63]. The intentionally-designed sequence (a form of either MANNER::*external, active transphobia* or ::*external, passive transphobia*) exposing Vilia’s beard further emphasizes the comedic ridicule



Fig. 3. A series of screenshots depicting part of Link's interactions with NPC Vilia (read left-to-right, top-to-bottom). **Upper Left:** Link finds Vilia; with the right camera angle, Vilia's face is visible. **Upper Right:** Link asks Vilia about a man entering Gerudo Town, to which Vilia expresses ignorance. **Middle Left:** After Link looks at Vilia, the player can either complement her or accuse her of being a man. **Middle Right:** After complementing Vilia, the player can purchase the Gerudo Outfit from Vilia. **Bottom Left:** Link after equipping the Gerudo Outfit. **Bottom Right:** Vilia's veil is blown aside, revealing her face and shocking Link. Screenshots taken by the authors.

essential to the illegitimatization of transgender identity (CAUSE::visual and ::textual). By staging Vilia's cutscene as a dramatic *trans reveal*, *Breath of the Wild* aims to make the player laugh at a cisnormative joke that frames trans identity as criminal and deceptive. By analyzing this scene through its triggering potential, we reveal a problem which was undiscovered by prior scholars' discussion of other games in the *Legend of Zelda* series through the lens of Bulter's performativity theory and queer theories around the gender portrayal of characters [79]. This prior analysis is insufficient to study the case of Vilia, who self-identifies as a woman while being designed to serve as a figure of mockery.

Breath of the Wild's narrative and visual framing of trans characters as objects of ridicule and criminal deceivers not only privileges cisnormativity through transphobic stigmatization, but

brings internalized social stress and self-esteem damage to the trans audience (MANNER::*individual*), thus causing gender dysphoria. The ridiculing aspect of Vilia's design is produced by the contrast between her feminine attire and the intentionally manufactured beard put on her – the “cross-dressing” trope in film and other media used to render trans characters comedic [103]. Further, Miller [89] asserts in her textual analysis of several mainstream films with trans representation that the use of humor to position trans characters as objects of ridicule reinforces the notion that trans identities are not to be taken seriously.

In the case of *Breath of the Wild*, the transphobic visual humor of Vilia's beard is constructed around trans-misogyny and the cis gaze. Such a design, creating a joke from a character's failed attempt to perform femininity according to cisnormative standards, harms trans audiences by directly ridiculing and marginalizing them [123]. According to Brewster [25], such transphobic stigmatizing and body monitoring from the public has a significant effect on body shame and self-esteem decline of trans people; the stigmatized and stereotyped body of Vilia signals danger and stress to trans players. Denigrating trans players in this way plays into necropolitics [87] – it renders us as less worthy of existence.

5.2 Objectification in *Cyberpunk 2077*

Cyberpunk 2077 [G11] is an open-world first-person action-adventure role-playing video game. As the name implies, it follows a future setting on Earth (2077) in which technology is infused throughout day-to-day life and is set in a 3D urban environment called Night City. Technology is so suffused that modifications to human bodies for aesthetic and functional purposes (the *Cyber*-component) [58] are commonplace. There is an emphasis on immersion with extensive character creation options for facial features, skin tone, body type, and genitalia of the PC. Gender and pronouns are determined by the player's choice of voice option.

5.2.1 The First Scene: Chromanticure Advertisements. Night City is saturated with posters advertising the beverage Chromanticure, portraying a model with a feminine presentation with what can only be described as an enormous and swollen penis, visible through their leotard (Figure 4). Above the figure are the slogan “MIX IT UP” and the subtitle “16 FLAVORS YOU'D LOVE TO MIX.” The advertisement is pervasive throughout the game.

5.2.2 Analysis. The Chromanticure poster design is a CAUSE::*visual* trigger that centers MECHANISM::*objectification*. Some fans criticized the poster's design as exploitative, mocking, and transphobic nearly as soon as it was released [37, 48, 60, 102]. In discussing the poster's design with the game's art director, Kasia Redesiuk, the director stated “Personally, for me, this person is sexy...this model is used – their beautiful body is used – for corporate reasons.” [57]. Although the gender identity and sex of this femme model are unspecified within the game, and multiple interpretations are possible (e.g., as intersex), our focus here is the impact of this publicly displayed representative figure on both trans players' feelings and experiences and the impact of potentially misleading (for broad audiences) perceptions of trans women in reality. This is especially true because Redesiuk acknowledged in an interview that their body is implying a “trans body” [57], and Kate Rayner, the technical director at The Coalition, further pointed out that it “overtly fetishizes transgender women's bodies” [48]. The discourse around the Chromanticure poster design risks becoming an endless debate where one side argues the poster embodies a transphobic attitude and the other side advocate that the design provides a grim world for the audience to reflect and critique our own world. As creator Mike Pondsmith [85] and Redesiuk [57] defend, the narrative and aesthetics of *Cyberpunk 2077* are set in a *dystopian* future world, where the hyper-sexualized and commodified trans portrayal is purposely aggressive. Regardless of whether the hyper-sexualization of the trans figure in the Chromanticure poster is an embodiment of transphobia (MANNER::*external, active*

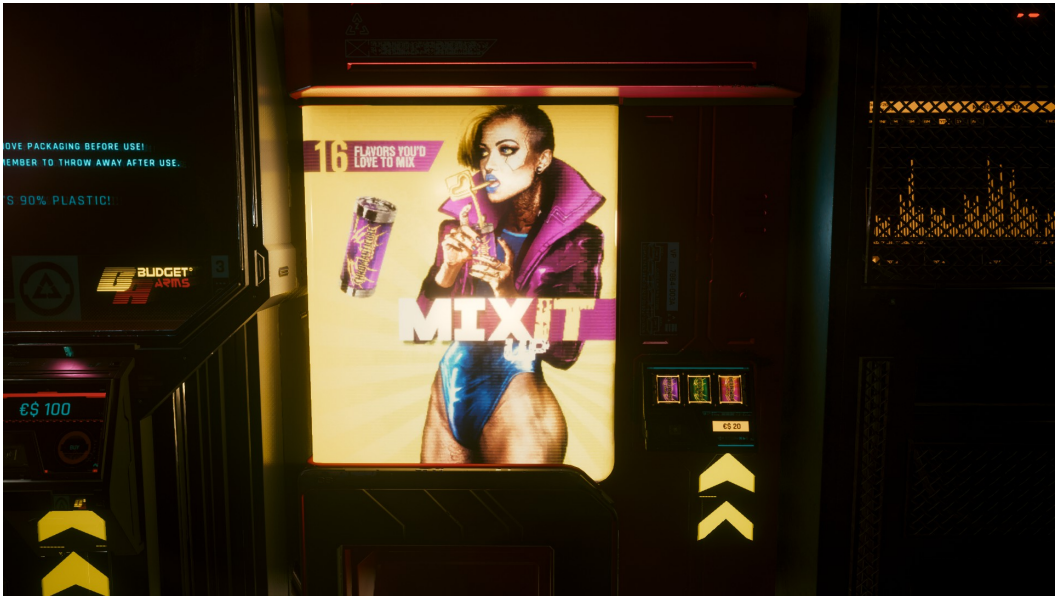


Fig. 4. An in game screenshot of the Chromanticure advertisement on a vending machine. This advertisement appears throughout Night City on vending machines, televisions and billboards as one of many potential in game advertisements. Screenshot taken by the authors.

transphobia) or an aesthetic of the dystopian setting, its objectification and commodification of the trans body has the potential to trigger gender dysphoria [25, 49, 130].

Sexual objectification results in a common psychological concern of women in which they are reduced to their bodily components and sexual performance [50]. Such sexual objectification can cause body shame, appearance anxiety, decreased awareness of physical states, and lead to more psychological and mental problems through sexualized comments, media images, and other forms of abuse. Similar topics around objectification theory have been widely studied by researchers [115, 145, 146]. Applying these studies to the Chromanticure poster through an intersectional perspective [38, 40, 125] enables an analysis of how the poster can trigger gender dysphoria.

Flores and Watson [49] demonstrate in their studies how cissexism and systemic discrimination can cause psychological distress, incongruence, anxiety over physical safety, and self-doubt in transgender individuals through various embodiments of sexual objectification (e.g., identity-based fetishization, genital- and transition-based comments, body policing, sexualized gaze, body objectification). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the identity-based fetishization present in the Chromanticure poster design is exemplified by the poster's depiction of a large penis protruding from the leotard and confirmed by Redesiuk's statements [57]. Through investigation and interview of trans people Flores and Watson concluded that, "... this fetishization appeared driven by sexual curiosity and sexualized stereotypes of participants' bodies," and further explain that objectification occurs when perpetrators regard trans people as exoticized sexual curiosities rather than full beings [49]. In this objectification, fetishization is motivated by cissexism. Correspondingly, Strübel et al. [130] confirmed in their research that objectification is strongly associated with body surveillance, body shame, internalized sexism, and depressive symptoms.

Although the designers vigorously defend the poster as dystopian aesthetic, the commercialization of sex and dehumanization of the trans body present in the design interposes the public



Fig. 5. In-game screenshots of Claire Russell during her quest line: The Beast in Me. **Left:** Claire speaking with the PC and describing her gender transition. **Right:** The interior of Claire’s vehicle, The Beast, showing the transgender pride flag painted across her center stack.

epistemic awareness of trans people. It plays on colonialism and neoliberalism to produce a stigmatizing perspective that perceives transgender people via cisgender-supremacist spectacles [141]. Taking into account the marginalized social position of trans people, particularly trans feminine people in this instance, their bodies might be exploited as commodities by the market via stereotypes and stigma [141], exacerbating the social marginalization of transgender individuals [25]. Indeed, the trans figure shown on the poster as a hyper-sexualized representation of the objectified trans stereotype exacerbates the self-appearance-related discomfort and dysphoria of the trans audience [78]. Fredrickson and Roberts [50] argue that once appearance is socially valued and represented, individuals monitor their appearance to determine consistencies and inconsistencies, which would cause greater body shame. The Chromanticure poster design in *Cyberpunk 2077* serves as a form of MECHANISM::*objectification* and commodification targeting trans people, which can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, bulimia [25], and form a trigger for gender dysphoria in trans players.

5.2.3 The Second Scene: Claire Russell. Claire Russell is an interactable NPC who is shown later to be a trans woman (Figure 5), a clear contrast to the hypersexualized, commodifying Chromanticure poster. The player may initially meet her at the Night City club Afterlife, where she is a charming bartender. She is far along in her transition and is designed such that she may “pass” to the player as a cis woman. Claire is the only trans NPC the player may meet in *Cyberpunk 2077*, and many fans [62, 98] praised that the trans character design of Claire is well-rounded and appropriately portrayed.

5.2.4 Comparative Analysis. The comparison between Claire Russell and the canonically trans model on the Chromanticure poster introduces discourse about “passing” and its role as a gender dysphoria trigger. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, in-transition, non-passing trans bodies are sexualized, typically objectified, and belittled, while “passing” trans bodies are treated with relative respect. Claire Russell’s body obviously is passing, but the trans body in the Chromanticure poster is not. A comparison between Claire and the trans model – two trans bodies in different states – reveals a comparison-driven gender dysphoria trigger of MECHANISM::*passing pressure*.

Prior research has shown that appearance comparison among trans people can lead to depressive symptoms [130] and anxiety about “passing” [91]. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, a gender dysphoria trigger arises when a trans player both experiences the side story of Claire and finds the Chromanticure poster. The depiction of a large penis on the trans model in the poster not only stigmatizes trans people but is a denial of passing for in-transition trans people. Highlighting anatomical sex via

body monitoring [21] is apparent in the Chromanticure poster – the transgender body that fails to pass is a joke. MacKenzie and Marcel [84] noted that trans women who do not pass are depicted as “men in dresses” who deserve “disciplinary violence” [84]. Reading this threat from the implications of the poster can cause self-monitoring of appearance which links to many psychological problems, such as body shame, appearance anxiety, and depressed mood [111].

In *Cyberpunk 2077*, another reason for the existence of a contrast-driven gender dysphoria trigger is that the comparison between Claire and the Chromanticure model forces trans players to look at or be in one of two places: comical “not-passing” or respectful “passing.” Similar to what Booth [21] describes, there are some trans characters who pass well in the media, but it is hard to find a respectful depiction of a trans character who is in transition. Here we return to cárdenas’ concept of shift – decisions about one’s position in terms of passing or not [34, 81]. A dysphoria trigger exists when media only shows trans figures in one specific place instead of a full process of shift.

5.3 Conscription in *Persona 4 Golden*

Persona 4 Golden [G2] is an entry in the role-playing game *Persona* franchise. The franchise features core mechanics wherein the player is prompted to choose the actions they want their PC to perform during specified blocks of time each day of the in-game calendar. During these time periods, the player can choose where to explore, what items to purchase, what NPCs to speak to, or whether to engage in the other core set of mechanics related to combat. The plot of *Persona 4 Golden* [G2] centers on a murder mystery in an otherwise tranquil Japanese town. Certain inhabitants of the town have been mysteriously abducted and teleported into a parallel dimension – the Midnight Channel, which is inhabited by malevolent “Shadows”, which are personifications of the will of human characters in the game.

5.3.1 The Scenes: Playing with Naoto. The character Naoto is introduced into the story as a talented child investigator asked by local police to assist in solving this spate of abductions. When the player first meets Naoto, they introduce themselves as a man. *Persona 4 Golden* presents Naoto as an assigned-female-at-birth character, but stops short of explicitly calling them trans masculine. Naoto’s trans potential is left as an implication through traits they share with self-identified trans men, such as introducing themselves as male and wearing male clothes.

The text of *Persona 4 Golden* claims Naoto’s gender presentation is due to their insecurity about their age and gender, as they worry that their femininity will hinder them from success in this male-dominated occupation. In a battle cutscene later in the game, the player encounters Shadow Naoto, a Shadow formed from Naoto’s psyche. Shadow Naoto cries and says “I wanna be a big boy right now... a name doesn’t change the truth. It doesn’t let you cross the barrier between the sexes.”

Furthermore, Naoto’s transition is not achievable within the game’s narrative or mechanics. The player is required to defeat Shadow Naoto and reach the end of this story where Naoto reconciles with the Shadow. Then Naoto will formally state that they do not desire to be a man but to accept themselves for who they are. In the later stages of the game, the player has the option of encouraging Naoto to cease using “*boku*”, a masculine equivalent to an English first-person pronoun in Japanese, and start using the feminine pronoun “*atashi*” instead⁸.

5.3.2 Analysis. *Persona 4 Golden* is a primary example of MECHANISM::conscription – the player is given many choices throughout these scenes, but all converge toward pushing Naoto to de-transition. Previous research read the narrative of Naoto through the lens of queer theories [149],

⁸In contrast to English, Japanese first-person pronouns are gendered and third-person pronouns are relatively infrequent. Gendered references to Naoto occur in both editions of the game. For further detail on gender in Japanese, we direct the reader to Ono and Thompson [100] or the easily accessible Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_pronouns.



Fig. 6. A series of screenshots taken during the cutscene preceding a combat encounter with Shadow Naoto. Noteworthy are the crude surgical tools and devices behind the characters throughout the scene (read left-to-right, top-to-bottom). **Top Left, Top Right:** Shadow Naoto facetiously describes Naoto's name as "cool" and "manly" but denies that it can change Naoto's physical sex. **Bottom Left, Bottom Right:** Shadow Naoto outs Naoto to their team which is reacted to with shock and disbelief. Screenshots taken by the authors.

unpacking how the procedural rhetoric of the game compromises the player's agency in reckoning with Naoto's desire for transition. We continue the conversation initiated by this work by centering the impact of this rhetoric on trans players. The game mechanics do not offer a choice, but enforce a transphobic choice made by the game designers (MANNER::external, active transphobia); players' decision making must be in service to this. Butler states "the body is not an independent materiality that is invested by power relations external to it, but it is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive," [31, p. 34] where the digitalized body is invested both by the specific ideological design that shapes it and by the discourse around it. Eskelinen and Tronstad in their work call for studies to "find out what is possible, necessary, prohibited, permitted, or obligatory to do in the game, and what the players do or could know, believe, or wish regarding those action schemes." [46]. Thus, it is possible to analyze both the options available in games and their narrative structures to reveal covert ideological control and its possible impacts on their audience.

The player is not given the option of allowing Naoto to explore the possibility of transness. *Persona 4 Golden's* narrative and mechanics presume that transition for Naoto is the *incorrect* choice. This frames one's identity expression as something that others can impose, rather than a personal choice, denying gender autonomy. Shadow Naoto's lines appear to be an explicit statement of bio-essentialism and the immutability of gender, core tenets of modern anti-trans rhetoric. The fixed outcome of the game's story and lack of choices follows Bogost's [19] theory of procedural rhetoric in which modeling behavior through game mechanics develops a persuasive argument to enforce ideological performance [101].



Fig. 7. A series of screenshots taken after defeating Shadow Naoto in combat. (read left-to-right, top-to-bottom). **Top Left, Top Right:** Naoto addresses that being a “child” is a state that can and will change with time but that changing from a woman to a man is impossible. **Middle Left, Middle Right:** Naoto states that being a woman doesn’t fit with their ideal lifestyle when asked if they don’t like being a girl. **Bottom Left, Bottom Right:** The character Yukiko, Naoto’s senior in age, tells Naoto what they want isn’t to be an adult or a man. Naoto agrees, stating they must not yearn nor strive to be a man. Screenshots taken by the authors.

Within the game, heterosexual gender performances are allowed to be shaped through interactions with the various characters by engaging in core mechanics of dialog choices with NPCs, establishing cis-heteronormativity. At the same time, the presence of queerness is never anything but threatening, as Shadow Naoto must be destroyed to continue the game. The ideology of bodily transition is depicted in this narrative as being so hazardous and incorrect that it becomes the antagonist of a whole game level, in this way contributing to systemic transphobia. Ostensibly, the narrative of *Persona 4 Golden* is meant to create a role-playing experience where players become and assist characters in overcoming their fear and anxiety. However, Naoto’s dysphoria and treatment in the narrative are more likely to create triggers of gender dysphoria in a trans audience, heightening their own fear and anxiety.

Naoto presents traits of being a trans man, yet the narrative presents them with “she/her” pronouns, matching Naoto’s assigned sex. Naoto presents as male by dressing masculinely and using “he/him” as their pronouns, desiring to be treated as a male by others. Their trans status is constructed through the storyline itself, where the mystery of their identity is designed as key to the narrative and the core conflict of the later battlefield with Shadow Naoto. The battle with the Shadow Naoto depicts a scenario of Naoto’s “coming out” moment where their Shadow speaks out of dysphoria and a desire for bodily transformation. The narrative structure is an extension of the ideology behind the design, a fixed outcome where players never witness a transformation by Naoto, reflecting Jenkins’s note [70] that such a “coded narrative structure” is to prevent players from “totally derailing the larger narrative trajectory.” – here, crossing gender is bad, but accepting assigned sex is good. Choosing to transition derails the mainstream. Such anti-trans moralities are coded, woven into *Persona 4 Golden*’s narrative and mechanics, as a real shadow threat advocating cisgender heterosexual domination. A similar moralist reinforcement happens after the battle cutscene where a female character declares to Naoto “You must know already what you yearn for isn’t to become an adult or become a boy,” and Naoto is programmed to reply that “What I should yearn for... no, what I must strive for isn’t to become a man. It’s to accept myself for who I really am.” Such a narrative structure at the conclusion of the story, with its emphasis on the superiority of the “natural body,” the statement of the conservative purity of the undivided body, and rejection of the utopian possibilities of change, forms a definite cause of gender dysphoria.

5.4 Passing Pressure in *Guilty Gear -Strive-*

Guilty Gear [67] is a series of fighting games. The series features related narratives and the same game mechanics throughout. Players choose a PC fighter from a roster, each of whom is a capable fighter and a character in the narrative with a long backstory and motivation for fighting the other characters.

5.4.1 The Character: Bridget. Bridget is a recurrent character and has been a source of debate about non-cis character design. In 2003’s *Guilty Gear XX* [7], Bridget was first presented as a cross-dressing boy with a feminine figure and blonde hair. According to the game’s narrative, Bridget was raised as a girl to conceal that she was born as a boy to escape being murdered by a strong superstition about male twins.

Since *Guilty Gear XX*, the discussion of Bridget’s gender identity has been contentious. The first twist in the discussion occurred when *Guilty Gear* series creator Daisuke Ishiwatari stated that he intended to portray Bridget as an “obligatory cute cross-dressing guy since the creator wanted something unconventional” and that Ishiwatari “thought it would be interesting to make the character a guy” [8, 134]. Following a long period of ambiguity and debate surrounding Bridget, along with the announcement of *Guilty Gear -Strive-* [G1], Ishiwatari confirmed at EVO 2022 that Bridget’s character design has changed and the bounty hunter Bridget now fully identifies as a woman [9].

5.4.2 Analysis. Ishiwatari’s statement that Bridget is a trans woman cannot conceal the *Guilty Gear* series’ chaotic and crude methods of portraying the queerness and gender of Bridget. Riedel [110] comments that “[The design of Bridget] inevitably led to her attaining an erotic status in some corners of the nerdy Internet, especially imageboards like 4chan, where Bridget became synonymous with the concept of a ‘trap’: a crossdressing boy who can ‘pass’ effortlessly as a girl.” *Trap* is a slur in Internet anime forums to describe a character who is a man with a feminine look [22], and generally portrayed by voice artists who identify as women [45]. It is a pejorative term that stigmatizes the trans community, since it implies that their femininity is utilized to trick heterosexual men into being an object of their sexual desire [45, 120, 128], which contributes to

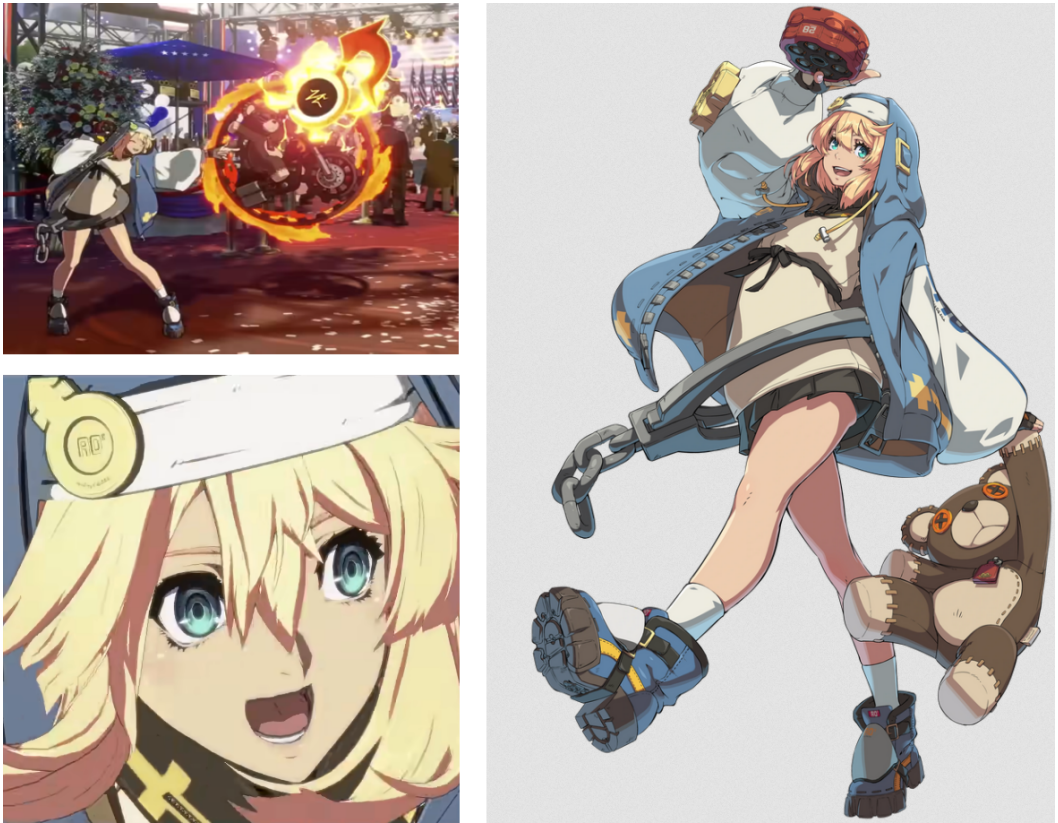


Fig. 8. A selection of screenshots and images from the official announcement trailer promoting Bridget's inclusion in *Guilty Gear: Strive*. **Top Left:** Bridget's in game character model. **Bottom Left:** Close up of the transgender symbol on Bridget's veil/ bandeau shown prominently during the trailer. **Right:** Full body artwork of Bridget used in promotional materials. Trailer and promotional materials as distributed by Arc System Works.

MECHANISM::*objectification* in the game. The nearly flawless degree to which Bridget passes here is affirmed by many fans and commenters [45, 104, 110, 124, 142], as to how the concept of a 'trap' works.

Character designs resembling Bridget are extremely common and popular in Japanese anime and video games. Their origins can be traced to earlier Japanese cultural forms, the *onnagata* of Kabuki [22], in which male performers assume the role of female characters [90] and must "express female beauty without negating his own male body... to evoke a beauty that surpass[es] the appeal of women." [74, 75]. Bridget became one of the most prominent characters associated with the "trap" meme not only as a result of the designer "playing with gender", but also as a result of the problematic focus on over-idealized trans figures by promoting the investment in passing "effortlessly" as cisgender [110], further highlighting passing privilege.

Bridget depicts an over-idealized trans figure who passes effortlessly (CAUSE::*visual*, ::*textual*, ::*metatextual*). This places overemphasis on passing and reinforces cis-normative social expectations toward the trans audience (MANNER::*communal*) [17, 36]. This can cause trans players to compare the character to their investment in passing and the exposure of their own gender variance [17, 117],

leading to negative self-appraisal [59] and internalized transphobia [18]. Ultimately this leads to gender dysphoria attached to gender incongruence [18]. Thus, we identify *MECHANISM::passing pressure* in *Guilty Gear -Strive-* – it promotes an unhealthy approach to transitioning.

Sociocultural models of body image, as examined by scholars in the objectification theory and feminist fields, imply that exposure to unrealistic beauty standards that accentuate features linked with femininity might result in body image disturbance, self-monitoring, and mental anguish [92, 118, 129]. Under the near impossibility of reaching such ideals of beauty, this constant work of body monitoring often results in body dissatisfaction or negative self-appraisal. Influenced by the cultural context of Japanese anime, Bridget’s design as a nearly flawless passing trans figure turns into internalized oppression based on transnormativity [80, 143], bringing passing pressure to trans audiences by triggering their conscious examination of their own passing investment [18, 36]. The trans figure of Bridget as idolized normative femininity asks their trans audience the question of whether their own passing investment is enough to be perceived as their self-identity.

Catalano identifies the need to “pass enough,” while pointing out how passing pressure is generated through perceiving others’ identity expression and passing investment. This competes with their own self-identification, and reveals that “participants were influenced by messages they received from other trans men and cisgender people about being trans enough, and sometimes these messages trumped their self-confidence in their trans identity.” [36]. The flawless and effortless figure of Bridget is a passing pressure stimulating trans people to examine their own bodies, causing uncertainty about how others view themselves. Bocking’s study showed that the overemphasis on passing is highly related to internalized transphobia and society’s normative gender expectation [18], while internalized transphobia is characterized as self-loathing and further negatively impacts mental health [59].

6 DISCUSSION: A CALL FOR TRANS INCLUSIVITY IN GAME DESIGN

Gender-inclusive design is a deep topic, of which trans inclusivity is a rich part and growing in prominence [133]. Previous works informed by queer theory have aimed to create safe gaming communities, avoid gender-essentialist and heteronormative oppression [109], and seek out queer modes of play [27, 56]. However, queer theory, alone, cannot account for trans lived experiences and critiques that arise from them [76, 77, 94, 114, 131]. We engage with the discussion on trans-inclusive design primarily through the lens of necropolitics, specifically drawing on the necropolitical concepts of disposability [88, 27], the survivor [66, pg. 150–151], vulnerability, the relation of enmity [66, Ch. 2], relations of care [66, pg. 141], gestures of care [66, pg. 176], and silence-breaking language [66, pg. 142]. We begin by addressing our research questions, then delve into more detail.

RQ1 In what ways is agency withheld from players such that it can trigger experiences of dysphoria?

From our data sources, we identify the ways in which trans people are stereotyped, objectified, conscripted into anti-trans violence, and pressured into cis-heteronormative expectations. These center on design choices that force a player to go through a painful experience, often as a transphobic attempt at humor. When these portrayals are made primarily by cisgender developers for cisgender audiences, they treat trans audiences as *disposable*. This is the source of a necropolitical dynamic where the fundamental relation between cis developers and trans audiences is one of enmity and the position of trans audiences is one of vulnerability.

RQ2 How can games be better designed to avoid gender dysphoria triggers?

Necropolitics theorizes that the relation of enmity only ends when one party is in a position of vulnerability and the other chooses to initiate a relation of care. This suggests that cisgender developers should address triggers through a relational lens. Advocating the hiring of trans

developers and the inclusion of trans players in decision making are key steps in establishing relationships. But, beyond that, we propose that the relation of care emerges when trans players are given agency: this is a concrete expression of non-disposability. This agency can take the form of being given the choice whether, when, and how to engage with content that is likely to be triggering, i.e., access to safety measures.

RQ3 How can we begin to categorize triggers in order to better discuss and remediate them?

We have categorized certain triggers into the GDC, in the form of intermediate-level design language. The role of this GDC is to serve as *silence-breaking language*. In the relation of enmity, the vulnerable are stripped of the language that could allow them to even express the nature of their vulnerability, resulting in silence. The GDC is meant to produce new language which breaks this silence. The production of language does not guarantee a relation of care, but is prerequisite to it.

6.1 How to Design to Support Trans Players - GDC

The Gender Dysphoria Categorization is a descriptive tool, providing designers, critics, researchers, etc. with language to formulate *why* a particular combination of mechanics and/or narrative could be a dysphoria trigger. It is useful as a formative tool when designing and developing games. The vocabulary facilitates communication and understanding. It does not negate the importance of diverse design teams.

6.2 Shifting Toward Gestures of Care

In order to invite a relation of care, this paper has served to unpack the trans experience under necropolitics. This section seeks to imagine what gestures of care could look like. In doing so, we *do not* seek to prescribe singular solutions. Our goal is relational, to demonstrate that cis developers are in a position where gestures of care are possible.

In order to conceptualize gestures of care, we must reflect on the position of trans players as we survive under necropolitics. Mbembe's concept of *the survivor* [66, pg. 150–151] is not a happy one. The survivor has refused literal death under necropolitics, but has experienced substantial trauma in the process, perhaps even killing others for the sake of physical survival. As a result, their psychic life is one where they are not truly living.

Years of trans scholarship have revealed the remarkable potential of trans players to resist and survive. These forms of resistance are varied: Dym, et. al. study it through LGBTQ fan fiction [44], modders have resisted the narrative of *Persona 4 Golden* by making Naoto trans [99], and cárdenas' concept of *shift* [33, 34, 81] provides key resistance strategies. Of these, we focus on shifting: cárdenas points out that trans people make frequent choices about their identity expression; shifting between forms. They shift under passing pressure to escape the danger of transphobia. Yet, even in safe and affirming spaces, trans people shift into an expression that is comfortable. The crux of this resistance is the assertion of trans autonomy. We argue, however, that this resistance is a process of *survival*, i.e., a process which is often traumatic for the trans player.

Thus, we invite gestures of care that aim to make trans autonomy a default state, not a state that requires trauma to achieve. We structure this invitation by revisiting each of our case studies and ideating: "What would it look like if these games were designed with trans autonomy as the default, where shifting need not be a struggle of survival?"

6.2.1 Caring about Vilia in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. Breath of the Wild demands transphobia from the player, removing their autonomy. Though the player can choose an affirming

dialog option with Vilia, they will automatically react with shock in the cutscene containing Vilia's trans reveal.

What if the NPC Vilia were instead given a larger story arc in which she and the PC work together? Vilia might make fewer efforts to pass with the PC as their relationship deepens, in a sign of trust and safety.

In a more conservative change, the transphobic option could simply be removed. A caring PC would not react with shock to Vilia – the scene could be taken without comment or even with kindness.

There also exist more controversial options which may not fully avoid a trigger, yet would assert the indisposability of trans players. For example, the game could provide the option of transphobic PC behavior, but impose mechanical and narrative consequences where the PC is required to work to repair the relationship with Vilia.

Such changes would be relatively easy to implement. Additional branching dialog and extant character models and animations should already be readily available in the game logic, so it is only a matter of expanding the range of player choices.

6.2.2 *Opposing Objectification in Cyberpunk 2077.* The developers claim that the Chromanticure ad is a depiction of dystopia – what if the player were given a meaningful way to oppose it? This would shift the PC from the role of the objectified into the role of an agent. As the game is open-world, a subquest involving the company behind the ad could be appropriate, which would then change the ads. As Mbembe notes [66], this would not necessarily end the relation of enmity, e.g., if the PC resists the company violently. However, it would remain an assertion of indisposability and a breaking of silence.

These gestures of care are likely a larger amount of game content, needing scripts and branching dialog, though it should, largely, build on assets that already exist in the game. If developers decline this route, trigger warnings would be recommended as the bare-minimum expression of care.

6.2.3 *Combating Conscripting in Persona 4 Golden.* In *Persona 4 Golden* the player is called on to be the agent of detransitioning a friend. Conscripting the player into this activity prevents them from expressing care to the trans NPC. It mandates a relation of enmity.

Imagine, instead, if the player were instead enabled, encouraged, or even expected to support the transition. This would enable a nuanced portrayal of the transition from a relation of enmity to a relation of care. For example, supporting transition might have consequences for other NPCs in the game and the PC's relationship to them – perhaps a bit too much like real life.

This would be a major alteration to the game's storyline and program logic, requiring new dialog, possibly new quests, and re-balancing. It would be a serious undertaking, but then leads one to wonder whether conscripting the player in this way was a worthwhile design choice in the first place.

6.2.4 *Choosing How to Pass in Guilty Gear -Strive-.* Our imagined shift for Bridget is to offer the player a choice of outfits for the character. The player could choose between a look that is effortlessly passing or one that is less-so, yet still respectful, which is, perhaps, more appropriate given that the character's backstory does not suggest that she has done anything to medically transition.

While *Guilty Gear -Strive-* offers a range of palette-swap color options for characters, it does not have alternative outfits. The developer would have to consider the cost of creating the art assets, which is not small. In addition, in fighting games like *Guilty Gear*, core mechanics are tightly bound to the character art. This is because contact between sprites determines the effects of attacks and

movement; it is necessary that hit boxes reflect the sprite art on the screen. Overall, even a minimal design change such as this would require substantial work on game assets to accomplish.

6.3 When the Relationship of Enmity Continues

We do not make our invitation of care from a position of naïvety. On the contrary, necropolitics assumes a relationship of enmity as its starting point, where trans players are not only vulnerable but seen as disposable. This is not an invitation to the development of empathy games, which conceptualize oppression as a mere problem of ignorance to be solved through education. We agree with the criticism of such games [113] as serving to provide comfort to the oppressor in detachment from the oppressed, thus reinforcing the relation of enmity. Our invitation is to actual relationships between cis developers and trans gamers on equal footing, where the trans gamer is seen as indisposable.

This analysis would be incomplete without acknowledging that breaking the relation of enmity is deeply difficult. We live in a world that remains necropolitical. Enmity ends only when the oppressor, who has every social incentive to continue in their oppression, chooses care instead. As we invite care, trans gamers must be prepared for a response of “no,” prepared to continue survival. Because though Mbembe [66, pg. 150–151] criticizes the psychic impact of the survival process on the survivor, it is no coincidence that the cycle of oppression and survival has continued: destruction is no alternative.

We thus recognize that inviting care alone is not enough, because complete trans autonomy also means moving from the object-status of a trans gamer to the subject-status of a trans game developer. The history of trans game design is long and rich. Titles like Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi* [26] and Anna Anthropy’s *dys4ia* [6] intentionally elicit feelings of alienation and trigger emotional responses, and we recognize their legitimacy in centering gender dysphoria as a prominent, even constructive feature of trans life [86]. Our analysis must not be misconstrued as a rejection of such games. Our relational analysis exposes a fundamental difference vs. our case studies: trans games by trans developers for trans players already function socially as a means of care within the trans gaming community, but our focus is games developed outside this community setting, instead in settings where a relation of enmity exists.

6.4 Limitations and Call for Future Work

The present research has achieved its goal of providing flexible language for categorizing dysphoria triggers. We call for future work to address the limitations inherent in our goal.

This work draws on the authors’ transfeminine and non-binary lived experiences. While we made sincere effort to build language that all trans people can use, we call for further research that centers other intersections of identity, especially trans masculine people.

We used a small corpus so that we could evaluate each game in depth, enabling us to develop new theory and new language. We call for future work to use this language for larger corpus studies to determine the breadth and prevalence of triggers.

We focused on single-player games because triggers in multi-player games could arise from interactions between players, which require a separate analysis and different tools. Such a project is social in nature, more akin to computer-supported cooperative work (or, more appropriately, “computer-supported disruptive play”). We call for future work to provide that analysis.

7 CONCLUSIONS

We develop the concept of the gender dysphoria trigger and present an initial categorization to support designers (particularly cis designers) in avoiding and remediating gender dysphoria triggers in contexts where they would amount to trans-exclusionary content. The triggers and the GDC are

grounded in close readings of four popular-but-triggering games; textual analysis of game content; and analysis of popular and academic discourse, filtered through the perspective of the authors, who are all trans women.

Because gender is nuanced and personal, it is explicitly not our goal to capture all potential triggers. In our own experience, we have seen that some triggers can be so individualized that we would not expect others to design around every trigger. Because dysphoria can be engaged with constructively, it is not our goal to remove it in all cases [86]. Rather, we have provided the language to assess instances where triggers do amount to harm against trans people by cis people, and thus should be prevented.

7.1 Costs of a Necropolitics of Survival – To Make or Not to Make

From our case studies, we propose examples of alternative designs that might remediate triggers that have already been made. It is notable that none of these changes would be inexpensive or easy to implement, which is partly the point. What is the value, to game designers and developers, to produce trans-hostile content? If remediating serious harm to part of an audience requires a substantial restructuring of the game, what is it that the designer or developer values? Engaging in this exercise leaves us to question – should such content even be made in the first place?

7.2 A Call to Action

We plan to expand our study of trans inclusion in game design beyond the current focus of doing no harm to a focus of centering trans play experiences; trans thought processes in design; and trans joy, including gender euphoria, the happy antonym of gender dysphoria. Though not our focus, we affirm the validity of representing dysphoria in games from a trans-centric perspective [6, 26, 86]; their trans-centricity helps avoid shallow depictions aimed at ineffective notions of “empathy” [113].

These topics are essential reminders that transness is neither defined by dysphoria nor subservient to medical definitions of gender. Instead, this paper’s goal of doing no harm is but part of this broader agenda. We entreat our readers to engage with this agenda in all its forms, including by advocating for diversity in design and research teams.

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