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Trans Game Studies

Video games are a rich site for exploring the place of trans identities and experiences in digital media. As a widely influential popular media form, video games simultaneously overlap, resonate, and clash with trans issues and the contemporary digital lives of trans people. Yet scholarship addressing the intersections of video games and transness remains comparatively limited. Here, I propose a vision of what we might call a trans game studies at the intersection of trans studies and game studies.

Rather than offer definitive answers, my goal is to pose questions that provoke thought and spark resistance. What should the relationship be between trans game studies and queer game studies? What might it mean to trans game studies itself? These questions recall other, equally pressing concerns about topics such as race and disability in games, subjects that similarly draw attention to identity and the body as key sites of cultural meaning-making. When I call on game studies scholars to engage more meaningfully with trans studies, I am admonishing myself as much as anyone else. I am a non-binary person with a complicated relationship to my own transgender identity whose scholarship has not yet sufficiently foregrounded trans issues. Game studies needs more trans studies, destabilizing the default centrality of normatively gendered people. And trans studies needs more game studies, drawing out the value of ludic spaces for identity exploration and trans worldmaking. Envisioning a trans game studies is only the beginning.

WHY GAME STUDIES NEEDS TRANS STUDIES

The relationship between video games and transgender experiences is complex. Many trans folks have described how playing video games has allowed them to explore their gender identities.[1] Trans characters have appeared in

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video games for decades, though they have admittedly been scarce. When new trans characters are included in mainstream video games, such as *The Last of Us: Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), they are often celebrated for their rarity.[2] Dozens if not hundreds of trans creators use video games to tell trans stories or draw from their own trans experiences to challenge norms of game design.[3] At the same time, transphobia remains rampant in gaming spaces, such as multiplayer online games and game-related forums and platforms.[4] For better or for worse, many of the ways that trans lives and digital lives intersect today is through video games, illustrating the growing need for a trans game studies.

Early game studies work on gender from the 1990s and early 2000s focused on cisgender women and girls. Examples include feminist critiques of in-game characters drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, writing by pioneering designers of "girl games," and reflections on gendered play.[5] Consideration of trans folks' identities was mostly missing from these early works, with the problematic exception of research on so-called cross-dressing or gender swapping: individuals of one gender choosing to play as characters of another, a practice that was often framed as sexual fetish or expression of male players' misogynistic control over women.[6] These scholars contrast accounts by transgender gamers of their own experiences playing video games. Thus, early writers on gender and games often assumed that "gender issues" in games were synonymous with "cisgender issues" and framed arguably trans forms of play as problematic curiosities.

More recently, conversations around gender in games have diversified, particularly through scholarship on games and queerness.[7] Feminist scholars have increasingly turned their attention to men and gaming masculinities,

the Transgender Community," Polygon, March 5, 2014, https://www.polygon.com/20 14/3/5/5462578/gaming-is-my-safe-space-gender-options-are-important-for-the.

2 Julie Muncy, "The Trans Narrative in 'The Last of Us Part II' Is Compelling. There's So Much More to Be Done," *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020, https://www .washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/07/21/trans-narrative-last-us-part-ii-is -compelling-theres-so-much-more-be-done/.

3 Bonnie Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Game*s (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

4 Jeff Green, "How Amazon's Twitch Protects Its LGBT Community from Online Harassment," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/business /la-fi-tn-twitch-trolls-lgbt-20190708-story.html.

5 Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002), http://www.gamestudies.org/0202 /kennedy/; Brenda Laurel, "An Interview with Brenda Laurel," in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces," in Cassell and Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, 262–297.

6 See, for example, Searle Huh and Dmitri Williams, "Dude Looks Like a Lady: Gender Swapping in an Online Game," in *Online Worlds: Convergence of the Real and the Virtual*, ed. William Sims Bainbridge (London: Springer, 2010), 161–174.

7 See Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor, "Queer Game Studies: Young but Not New," in *Queerness in Play*, ed. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Cham: Springer, 2018).

including "toxic gamer culture."[8] Despite these changes, certain strands of feminist and queer game studies continue to marginalize transgender people. I state this less as a critique than as an invitation—most importantly to trans and non-binary scholars themselves. While queer game studies has been home to much of the existing research about transness and games, it is valuable to create additional spaces that explore and affirm trans experience, respecting it as both related to and yet distinct from queerness more broadly and resisting the assumption that trans studies must form within (or against) the constructs of queer studies.[9]

Scholars have already begun addressing the interplays between video games and transness. One thread of this work looks at transgender characters or characters who can be interpreted as trans.[10] In part, this has entailed surfacing and counting characters, as in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive project led by Adrienne Shaw.[11] It has also entailed studies of interpretation, such as Evelyn Deshane and R. Travis Morton's attention to the cultural reception of the character Samus Aran, the heroine of the *Metroid* series (Nintendo, 1986–2017), whom many have read as a transgender woman.[12] Others have explored the presence of non-binary characters in video games, including Sheik, the masculine-presenting alter ego of Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series (Nintendo, 1986–2021).[13] An interest in the fandoms surrounding video game characters recurs in this scholarship. For example, Brianna Dym, Jed Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler analyzed metadata from the fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own, demonstrating how fans use tags to trans seemingly cis characters.[14] These examples suggest initial inroads into trans game studies, highlighting connections between video games and trans media representations, histories, and fandoms beyond games.

A second strand within existing scholarship focuses on transgender game designers. As I argue in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, many trans designers are pushing the medium of video games in counter-hegemonic directions.[15] Teddy Pozo has explained how trans game makers critique empathy, or the expectation that games made by trans folks should allow cisgender players to "walk in their shoes."[16] Pointing to experimental game artist Jamie Faye Fenton, Whitney (Whit) Pow has argued for the glitch as a

8   Mia Consalvo, "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology* 1, no. 1 (2012).

9   See Cáel M. Keegan, "Against Queer Theory," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020): 349–355.

10 Rob Gallagher, "Dirty Footprints and Degenerate Archives: Tabitha Nikolai's Impure Walking Sims," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 1 (2020): 105–122.

11 LGBTQ Video Game Archive, accessed July 5, 2021, https://lgbtqgamearchive.com.

12 Evelyn Deshane and R. Travis Morton, "The Big Reveal: Exploring (Trans)Femininity in *Metroid*," in Harper, Adams, and Taylor, *Queerness in Play*, 131–146.

13 Chris Lawrence, "What If Zelda Wasn't a Girl? Problematizing *Ocarina of Time*'s Great Gender Debate," in Harper, Adams, and Taylor, *Queerness in Play*, 97–114.

14 Brianna Dym, Jed Brubaker, and Casey Fiesler, "'theyre all trans sharon': Authoring Gender in Video Game Fan Fiction," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/brubaker_dym_fiesler/.

15 Ruberg, *Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

16 Teddy Pozo, "Queer Games after Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo/.

historically trans mode of engaging with games.[17] This scholarship importantly foregrounds the contributions of game makers, who are often on the front lines of transing the medium. Those working in game-adjacent areas have similarly articulated the importance of trans creators. "Hypertext and digital games are totally trans genres," merritt k has written, instructing, "If you're interested in new currents in trans literature, you need to start following work being done by trans authors in games."[18]

Resonances between video games and trans experience are also evidenced by scholarship on trans digital cultures. We see this, for instance, in the call from Oliver L. Haimson and colleagues to explore "trans technologies": platforms that create spaces for trans communities.[19] Another strand of research connects trans issues and digital media through data and surveillance, addressing the benefits and potential pitfalls of capturing trans lives through data.[20] Such work makes clear that digital tools, including video games, are at the heart of many elements of contemporary transgender experience. Considerations of digital media have also been formative for transgender studies, given the early influence of scholars such as Sandy Stone, who has long theorized transness alongside computing.[21]

IMAGINING A TRANS GAME STUDIES

Before building from this genealogy to more explicitly establish a trans game studies, game studies and trans studies scholars invested in this intersection must engage in critical self-reflection. This is a chance to set the terms for how trans game studies might position itself, what and whom it might value, and what sorts of interventions it might make. The following is a set of proposed guidelines. They should be understood as simultaneously polemical, pragmatic, political, idealistic, and incomplete. There are many other possible paths for this work, as varied as the trans people whose lives intersect with games.

> *A trans game studies must acknowledge a wide range of approaches to exploring transness and games.* It must bring together perspectives from across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Such a trans game studies should resist the disciplinary and disciplining urge to police which methods constitute legitimate scholarship. It should seek out possibilities for reclaiming digital games, analog games, and play in the name of trans folks, while also addressing the challenges that trans folks often face in game-related spaces. This

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17   Whitney [Whit] Pow, "A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors," *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197–230.

18   merritt k [formerly Merritt Kopas], "Trans Women & the New Hypertext," *Lambda Literary*, July 8, 2014.

19   Oliver L. Haimson, Avery Dam-Griff, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter, "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 345–361.

20   Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, "Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–12.

21   Susan Stryker, "Another Dream of Common Language: An Interview with Sandy Stone," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 294–305.

trans game studies should remain wary of prioritizing data without considering its implications for trans lives or claiming to promote diversity and inclusion without reflecting on problems of trans visibility and the ways that trans folks themselves may wish to resist interpolation into cisnormative systems of representation, education, and industry.

A trans game studies must bridge scholarship and design. It should hold insights from trans game makers in equal esteem with those from academics, acknowledging that many trans creators already straddle the line between research and practice. Indeed, it should embrace opportunities to combine making and theorizing, finding inspiration in artist-scholars such as micha cárdenas.[22] This trans game studies should resist (and, where possible, dismantle) the structures that sever alliances between those who study radical media and those who make it. It should value collaboration and a sharing of resources between trans scholars researching games, trans developers making games, and trans activists creating spaces for trans expression. These values are particularly crucial for trans game studies, since many trans game creators remain financially precarious despite growing recognition of their work.

A trans game studies must center trans voices and acknowledge trans embodiment as a powerful form of meaning-making. Trans game studies should be, first and foremost, the terrain of transgender people, including trans players and trans fans. At the same time, it should not entail regulation or judgment about who counts as "trans enough." Nonbinary, agender, and genderqueer people, should be welcome, along with other trans folks presenting in any gendered manner. Lessons learned from our own lived trans lives are equally important as (if not more important than) other analytical frameworks. This is true for all forms of trans media studies but represents a particularly needed intervention into game studies, where quantitative researchers and those from computational disciplines regularly insist that truth can only be known through numbers.

A trans game studies must confront the complexities of its relationship to queerness. It should productively question its place as simultaneously both part of and separate from queer game studies. There is much to be gained from thinking through queerness and transness together, especially for those who identify as both queer and trans. Simultaneously, trans game studies must hold space for resisting the expectation that trans studies can be subsumed under the

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22 See micha cárdenas, "*Dilating Destiny*: Writing the Transreal Body through Game Design," *Jump Cut* 57 (2016), https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-cardena sDilatingDestiny/index.html.

general umbrella of queer studies.[23] Should trans game studies be its own area apart from queer game studies? I hope to see a vibrant trans game studies grow up alongside queer game studies, finding meaning in the ambivalences, overlaps, and entanglements between queerness and transness in games.

A trans game studies must trans game studies itself. Trans game studies should do more than fold transness into currently dominant ways of doing game studies research. Instead, it should re-envision what it means to study games. Transing game studies might entail decentering those who have long been positioned as authorities and insisting on new narratives about who appears in, plays, makes, and studies games—a call to fundamentally re-evaluate who is seen as "normal," as Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick write about cripping media studies.[24] Transing game studies will also require breaking from threads of feminist game scholarship that have undermined trans people and cutting ties with the trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in our midst. Transing game studies can also manifest as a theoretical approach, building from scholarship in which the "trans" in transgender is understood as a force of disruption and creation.

I conclude here with a call to game studies scholars and trans studies scholars alike. It is time for a trans game studies. Moreover, it is time to trans game studies. To trans game studies is to lay claim to games as always-already trans while also making the field of game studies something new—to transition, transgress, transform, and transmogrify in the continual process of transing media.

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23 Cáel M. Keegan, "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* about Queer Studies Now?," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 384–397.
24 Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, "Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 139–144.