

Trans Tissue: *If Found...’s* (2020) Dehiscence, Liminality and Decreation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Bo Ruberg has recently argued that trans game studies time has come (2022:205), a disciplinary direction both related and distinct to queer theory approaches (Keegan 2018). This abstract outlines planned work employing Trans Studies reflections on non-normative corporeality and phenomenological visual and autoethnographic analyses concerning trans embodiment through play in contributing to this emerging sub-field (Gallagher, 2020; Lawrence, 2018; Kosciesza, 2022). I argue *If Found...* (DREAMFEEL, 2020) presents an effective case study complicating assumed relationships of body to being, game space and temporality through an embrace of liminality, tactility and ambivalent affects. This visual novel on mobile and PC is one of few mainstream games that centre a trans character¹, Kasio, and is played predominantly by erasing vibrant hand-drawn illustrations with mouse or touch screen to proceed to the next image-text. Players eroding layers enact trans 'decreation' (Lau, 2018), in which the self is creatively destroyed/remade through acts of agency in contrast to tragic social erasures (Namaste, 2000). Here the story progresses chronologically through a trans woman's return home from further study to rural 1990s Ireland to family that don't understand and found family that do, but visually and haptically we dissolve our traces, wiping tableaux illustrating protagonist memories in a transing of comics' form. Instead of filmic cuts, or the 'gutter' space between panels McCleod sees as core to comics' affordances (1994), players rub and peel "audio-visual-haptically" (Keogh, 2018) through a laminate tissue of images. This process of bodily exploration and malleability speaks to trans experiences of both the material nature of knowledge and the primacy of ideation over pre-existing material configurations (Keegan, 2018b:28). Eventually we discover this seeming self-annihilation is an act of survival, our character burning their journal to stay warm when ostracised.

Ruberg emphasises three directions for trans game studies: surfacing trans characters; analyses of trans developers' work; and studies of digital platforms inhabited by trans creators/players (2022:202-3). Yet where Ruberg powerfully suggests we "lay claim to games as always-already trans" (2022:205), Lax argues we should hold on to transness' specificity "as fundamentally non-normative" (2021:1), able to voice dark affects elided by assimilationist narratives. If Ruberg suggests we conceptually 'trans' Game Studies, I argue Lax's provocation allows us to embrace the beautiful, messy horizons

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this opens onto. I claim games don't just represent or enact trans life/liberation but also *embody transitions*, both in terms of trans studies' more ambivalent framing of gender than traditional queer theory as both real and not real (Keegan, 2018a), and in terms of Steinbock's (2019:17) argument that visual effects can embody the cutting and re-suturing of trans bodies. *If Found...* not only constitutes trans developers' portrayal of a trans character, but articulates transition mechanically and phenomenally, *bodily*.

Critical reception has lauded *If Found...*'s minority representation and deeply affecting story (Acovino 2020; Andriessen, 2020; Carpenter, 2020) split between young adult homecoming and a parallel science-fiction journey into the protagonist's past to communicate her desire to explore gendered being to her family and avert existential threats haunting trans life (Tosh 2016; Lee & Kwan 2014). However, this game also breaks from conventions of trans biography by focusing on friendship and music over medical pathways, speaking powerfully to trans players and moving beyond 'empathy games' exploitative and reductive problematics (Brice, 2017) through powerfully ambivalent embodiment of transition. Many trans biographies reductively present unidirectional, positive teleologies to render transition's strangeness and ongoingness palatable and assimilable to cisnormative society (Lavery, 2021) when lived transition between/beyond categories ('trans-' as a prefix meaning 'across' and 'beyond') exceeds narrative "speakability" (Prosser, 1998:3). However, if "storytelling is a kind of suturing" (Cerankowski, 2021:19), *If Found...* powerfully expresses the idea that sometimes this "tears and bursts open—a dehiscence, a splitting, a spillage" (20). In embracing dehiscence (bursting open), this game pushes beyond both conventional narratives and agentic player's traditional suturing of games (Galloway, 2006), prioritising limited action over cisnormative heroics (Vist, 2015:63). Where many critics see our role here in the retrospective observational mode of walking sims (Kopas, 2017), to "be the last witness" (Carpenter, 2020:n.p.), as a trans player I found myself aware of the present's friction with the past--positioned as both eraser and erased.

Erasure here is mechanically and phenomenally complex, from revealing *pentimenti* to breaching jumps of perspective through the overlay of scenes. However, *If Found...*'s narrative is unalterable, our choices limited to the process of destruction: deciding the first point of puncture and feeling out the edges of where a scene is judged to be erased and the layer below primed for our next gesture. These painterly decisions are themselves played with ambiguously: in one scene we only erase objects' shadows, in another we move the space we've cut like a portal, but inevitable erasure constrains agency to our individual felt response to perforated visual fields.

If the categorisation of some objects as 'background' is a prerequisite for normative orientation phenomenologically (Ahmed, 2006), *If Found...* is queerly constituted with *no* ground, a string of erasable backdrops revealing yet more foregrounds within. Indeed, we even (repeatedly) erase the position of 'from' from which Ahmed suggests we might look "behind" normative perception (2006:29). *If Found...* I argue, suggests we feel instead how: "Moving toward your self through your body is less about a horizon in which change stops than about how to embrace the endless process of change" (Hayward, 2012:n.p.), where 'from' and 'to' are constantly entangling and dissolving each other.

This is a game about both light and dark affects constituting trans and queer life Stone sees us exploring through reparative play: recovery as always ongoing (2018:n.p.). Transness is not only transitivity, but often "the sense of being irreconcilably bodyfucked" by social and affective incongruences (Lax, 2021:3). Transness is not just metaphor or apparatus for the study of games, but an irrepressible bodily experience *If*

Found... articulates in the messiness of haunting, refashioning and surviving through its layering and peeling without origin or end.

As a trans player, I only speak to my transition, but I've found that sometimes we need to burn parts of ourselves to keep that-which-keeps-moving warm. *If Found...* powerfully enacts this churn of survival. By the process of eroding images of bittersweet mis/recognition by family and friends who, as Lau frames his own experience, "did and did not know you", we experience the "joyless joy" of decreation (2018:37). This is a contradictory loss through becoming where we do not end, but open ourselves towards a forever liminal future, knowing that with each old-yet-new page in *If Found...*'s journal, it too will be erased but its affects will linger.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Earlier instances include the excellent work of Anna Anthropy and Mattie Brice