Queer Players' Strategies for Queering Character Interactions

Mark Maletska
Tampere University
Kalevantie 4
FI-33014 Tampere University
mark.maletska@tuni.fi

ABSTRACT

This article presents the strategies that queer players use for queering character interactions in digital games, based on a reflexive thematic analysis of survey responses from international and Ukrainian gender-diverse players. The research questions addressed are: What are queer players' strategies for queering in-game interactions; What video game mechanics are used to employ these strategies; What are the differences between queering strategies utilized by Ukrainians and international participants? The article reveals three themes with several sub-themes around playable character-focused interactions at the stage of character creation and in the process of playing. The results of the international survey give insights into the main mechanics and interactions that are queered by players to accommodate themselves in game worlds. Most mechanics are focused on playable characters that are particularly important for many queer players. The analysis of Ukrainian players' responses shows environment-determined differences in their approach to queering. Notably, Ukrainian players seek for more explicit queerness and do not apply queer readings to video games, detaching themselves from the game characters.

Keywords

queer game studies, game mechanics, queering avatar, queering playable character, diverse gender identity

INTRODUCTION

In today's gameworld, queerness often gets introduced as a part of both storytelling and mechanics. Triple-A projects such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) offer an opportunity to create a nonbinary character. In indie projects, queer characters or plotlines are much more common. Still, a good representation of queerness is more an exception, which is particularly true for diverse gender identities. Both the storylines and implementation of queer genders often appear to be questionable (Ruberg 2019). Thus, revisiting questions on the connections between queer genders and video games remains relevant.

The ways players from different countries connect their gender identities and personal narratives to the video games they play is a particularly interesting and understudied topic, as most of the matters are described under the umbrella of "postcolonial perspectives" (Mukherjee and Hammar 2018). Discussing the queerness of video games (Ruberg 2018), scholars tend to talk about the nature and features of

a phenomenon mostly from a researcher's point of view, and the players' perspective remains much less covered. Also, while stories told in games can be disassembled similar to those in films and books, it is important to build connections for queer players with various backgrounds, and their interactions which are often seen as inherently queer.

I am a queer person myself, and I started my career as a game scholar in 2018 in Ukraine. Having encountered differences in social perspectives around both video games and LGBTQIA+ identities, I have always been curious about the applicability of ideas about the queerness of video games in less queer-friendly contexts. Noticing a shift from studying LGBTQIA+ to searching for queerness as non-normativity in various contexts (see for example, Chang 2015; Nylund 2007; Shaw 2012), in queer game studies, I was also interested in how the view on queerness would work outside of the academic setting. This led me to conduct the research project discussed in this article. The geographical scope was determined by my own background, and I decided to search for queerness in playing video games in my home country.

In this article, I present the results of the reflexive thematic analysis I conducted on the responses to a survey "Video game mechanics and gender identity discovery" collected from English and Ukrainian speaking participants from June 1st to October 31st, 2023. The survey and analysis focused on game mechanics and the interactions between video games and gender diverse participants with different cultural, national and social backgrounds.

The research questions for the study are:

1. What are queer (gender diverse) players' strategies for queering in-game interactions?
2. What video game mechanics are used to employ these strategies?
3. What are the differences between queering strategies utilized by Ukrainians and international participants?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although there are many studies on diversity and representation in video games, research focused solely on queer players' genders and their interaction with video games is much less common. Scholars often focus either on representation among video game characters and plotlines (Kosciesza 2023; Lacey 2023; Mejeur 2019; Shaw et al. 2019; Thach 2021), or diversity in gaming communities (Brookey and Cannon 2009; Freeman and Wohn 2020; Gillin and Signorella 2023; Shaw 2012). But although Shaw (2014) states that looking for queer players' need to connect their identities to video games is not necessary, and that queer game studies have to some extent been following this idea – looking into non-normativity in itself (Chess 2018; Engel 2017), this statement has rarely been revisited, and available results point to a need for reconsidering the topic.

Conducting a literature review on the impact of video games on the psychological well-being of sexual and gender diverse youth, Di Cesare et al. (2023) point out that connections between queer identities and video game avatars are one of the most widely studied aspects of works around queer identities and games. However, the gap between theoretical and player studies constitutes at least around five years, showing a lag in academic attention. It is also notable that most of the studies related to the

gender-affirming effects of video games are rooted in healthcare or psychology, and are seldomly produced by game studies scholars. Consequently, video games often seen as a tool rather than a complex medium, which in turn may lead to miscomprehension in research on gaming experiences.

Recently, several studies have been conducted on video games as a means of producing gender-affirming experiences. Griffiths et al. (2016) introduce case studies on video games as means to cope with gender dysphoria. As described by the authors, it was important for the study participants (trans persons) to reflect their gender identity and not assigned sex at birth in playable characters. Baldwin (2018) focuses on avatars in particular, showing how their study participants reflected themselves through avatar-creation in various video games. Morgan et al. (2020) disclose results of studying gender diverse players and experiences related to their video game avatars, and the study illustrates both the positive impact of avatar-creation as gender-affirming experience, and negative experiences with exclusive games and games that did not have enough customization options. Rivera (2021) connects queerness to play, building on a heritage of queer game studies that see video games as inherently queer (Ruberg 2019), and discloses a case report on the use of video games in therapy. Here, Rivera points to different approaches to relationships between avatars and players, and in the described case, it was important for a person to find a reflection of their authentic self in a game, but not to project an in-game character on real life. The study also underlines the role of play in self-exploration, which makes video games an important medium for further studies.

Cantrell and Zhu (2022) mention character creation and self-exploration in choice-based video games as a means of resilience building of LGBTQIA+ individuals, disclosing results of their analysis of responses by gender diverse young people. Di Cesare et al. (2023) review existing studies on video games and the well-being of queer youth, paying attention to gaming as a tool for identity development and describing previously conducted research around character creation being beneficial for acquiring gender-affirming experiences.

In their study on gender-alignment in avatars of gender diverse people, Whitehouse et al. (2023) point out that although external recognition is important, the avatar's appearance is not the only important part of gender recognition and affirmation. They discuss the importance of gaming communities as groups of people who could validate one's identity, as well as the importance of other features (e.g. pronouns and non-humanness) in representing players' queerness.

All of these studies have several limitations that need to be addressed, in order to trace the impact of queerness in video game characters on players' self-perception and self-determination. First, existing studies are mostly of a limited geographical scope (e.g. McKenna et al. (2022) interviewed transgender and gender diverse youth in the United States). These studies are also not focused specifically on playing video games or mechanics, but rather, their main point is to show the avatars and video games within a particular player's life story, or show the generally positive role of video games. These studies are also mostly focused on avatars and character creation, and do not usually take into account any pre-designed characters that could also have some impact on a player's relationships with video games.

When designing this study, I carefully considered the limitations of previous works, as well as their scope, in order to focus my own work on queer gender identities and

interaction with video games. The way I define queerness here is "not only as an umbrella label for the LGBT community, but also as a strategy – a radical questioning of social and cultural norms and notions of gender" (Krobová et al. 2015). As I view "gender identity" as "a person's internal sense of their own gender" (Ok and Kang 2021), queer gender identities encompass all of the identities that are different from cisgender, and queering stands for changing something to be different from cisheteronormativity. In the survey and the paper, I do not consider sexual identities in detail unless they are brought up by the participants in relation to gender or as a way of queering, and as a separate study area, they fall outside of the research scope of the presented study.

METHODS

As I wanted to expand the scope of existing research in this area, I mostly focused on researchers' interpretations of game contents, and to include players' experiences, I started by collecting player data through surveys with both closed and open-ended questions (Braun et al. 2021).

Two surveys were created for different target audiences – a Ukrainian-language survey for respondents born in Ukraine, and an English-language survey for international gaming communities (Ukrainian-language answers are translated into English in this article, and the original expression used in the responses is retained in the quotes provided). Almost all of the questions of the English-language and Ukrainian-language surveys were similar, apart from enquiries as to the place of birth of the respondent. The Ukrainian-language survey did not have this option, asking about the current place of stay instead, since I was interested in participants brought up in a Ukrainian cultural environment, but due to the ongoing warfare, they could be displaced and that could also have an impact on playing video games.

In terms of design, the surveys were structured into several sections:

- personal information (name, age, place of birth, place of leaving, gender identity)
- general information about playing video games (regularity of playing, preferred platforms and genres, etc.)
- questions on video games and self-perception in terms of gender identity

All of these sections have been analysed for this study, as sometimes the general information contained some details of the impact of video games on gender identity development, and personal information was important to determine participant's identity, origin, and player experience.

Most of the questions were optional, so as not to make participants feel pressured into sharing some of their personal experiences if they did not feel comfortable about doing so (Braun et al. 2021). Questions regarding personal information gave participants a list of options, and the only open-ended question was about their gender identity. This was a conscious choice since ready-made answers might have led to the exclusion of some gender identities. Furthermore, not every transgender person identifies as transgender, a participant can be nonbinary and genderfluid and therefore not be willing to choose one option thus deciding not to participate in the survey at all, etc. In this way, the survey gained enough flexibility and allowed participants to determine themselves freely (Hughes 2021).

Questions on video games, mechanics and possible interactions around games that had impact on a participants' gender identity, as well as questions on accommodation of gender identities in games, attitudes towards queer playable / non-playable characters and gender dysphoria caused by playing video games were open-ended.

Participants for both surveys were recruited via 'snowballing' the survey links through queer subreddits (namely, *r/transgamers* (r/transgamers n.d.), *r/gaymers* (r/gaymers n.d.), *r/lgbtstudies* (r/lgbtstudies n.d.)), as well as LGBTQIA+ public organizations and their representatives. The English-language survey was published separately on Facebook of *Gaymers.eu* (*Stichting* n.d.), and the Ukrainian-language survey was spread through public organizations *Ukraine Pride* (*UKRAINEPRIDE* n.d.) and *Gender Zed* (*Гендер Зед* n.d.), as well as with the help of activist *marko I krapka* (*Personal profile* n.d.). In this way, I lessened my personal impact on the choice of participants, virtually eliminating the possibility of purposefully selecting people sharing my views, and so reached a broad geographical and cultural scope. When sharing the surveys, I openly stated my queerness, as well as the research position.

I have chosen reflexive thematic analysis as a method for analysing responses for several reasons, the main ones of which were to search for hidden connections and meanings in the responses, and to engage active researcher involvement in the analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2022). My personal cultural background allowed me to reflect on small differences in the answers of Ukrainian and international communities, and to have ideas as to what might cause these differences. So, the involvement of an informed and aware researcher personality was needed here (Braun and Clarke 2023).

A total of 71 full responses were received for the international survey, and 45 for the Ukrainian-language survey. A large proportion of participants who answered the international survey were born in the US (22), Finland (15), and Estonia (15).

In terms of gender identities, in the international survey, 17 participants identified as nonbinary, 23 as transgender, 4 as genderfluid, and 18 as cisgender men/women, with others mentioning being agender, greygender, or being not sure or hesitant. In the Ukrainian-language survey, 6 participants identified as nonbinary or primarily nonbinary, 5 as transgender, 2 as genderfluid, 25 as cisgender men/women, and other represented genders included agender, queergender, and xenogender-fluid.

RESULTS

In the analysis, I distinguished three main themes across the responses, each divided into several sub-themes. These themes correspond to what I have called "queering strategies" – the ways in which participants create queer characters and add queerness to non-queer games. I have named these strategies as 1) *actively queer in-game self*; 2) *queering non-queer characters*; and 3) *rejection of non-queerness*.
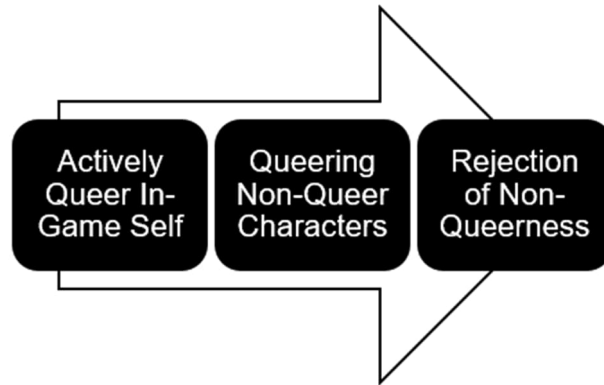
Figure 1: The development of queering strategies from the presence of the queer in-game self to rejection of non-queerness where it is not possible to queer the game.

All of the themes reflect the strategies players use to queer a playable character. The focus on playable characters is something that respondents repeatedly brought up in both surveys, either starting or ending with character creation and customization, and emphasizing the importance of playable characters. For some respondents, playable characters were much more than a reflection of their inner identities, and gender euphoria – a "distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth" (Ashley and Ells 2018, 24) – was mentioned as one of the reasons to play video games, and the relation to a character's gender identity became insightful in considering player's own gender identities for several participants. As one respondent described in regard to the importance of her character's appearance:

"*When playing an immersive sandbox game, it seems inevitable that we will start identifying as that avatar soon enough. For example, if I do poorly in a raid, I may not want my low DPS* [Damage Per Second] *to be screen captured, if I put on an non flattering outfit, I may not want that being screen captured either. I care about what more avatar looks far more than I do of what other things in game look like.*" (transgender woman, US)

The playable characters appear to be important not only in terms of their image, but also in the dynamics of interaction. As photos of people outside of game worlds are often perceived as undesirable, the screen capture of one's character can feel uncomfortable and be unwelcome. The above quote also gives insight into the player-character relation, where "my low DPS" and not the character's is described, and placed in line with a "non-flattering outfit". Playable characters are complex, and for the respondents they were perceived as something more than just a 'shell' (Lee and Mitchell 2018), and were often seen as a player's continuation.

I use the phrasing 'playable character' (hereon PC/PCs) and not 'avatar' in this paper because some respondents talk about both avatars, and 'ready-made' in-game characters that have their own autonomy and backstory. Previous studies often utilize the term 'avatars' even though they do not define the 'avatar' or 'playable character' (Baldwin 2018; McKenna et al. 2022; Rivera 2021). Whitehouse et al. (2023) give a

brief definition, stating that an avatar is "an in-game character which the player controls to navigate the game-world; a representative of the player". Here the question of avatar autonomy (Willumsen 2018) arises, but in this study, I do not address this particular question and just want to highlight that the use of a broader term is important to include all of the meanings transferred by survey participants when they talk about a character they feel connected to or represented by.

Actively Queer In-Game Self

When the surveys asked participants about the impact of video games on their self-perception in terms of gender identity, the first point brought up was often the issue of playable characters. Many participants answering both the Ukrainian-language and English-language surveys expressed a necessity to 'actively' reflect their identity on a character – not just being aligned with social standards, but appearing as non-conforming and out of (cishetero)normativity at least in one possible dimension. This is one feature that is different from previous studies on player avatars (see Baldwin 2018; Griffiths et al. 2016; McKenna et al. 2022), where players simply described character-creation as a way to affirm their identities, to 'test' them in safe environments, or to create an 'ideal self'.

The desire to be outside the norm could be traced in the mechanics (and, sometimes, even full games) that players mention as supporting their self-exploration. For conciseness I will not discuss all of the video games mentioned, however, I will give some prominent examples used by participants to show the connection between gender identity and games. As one example, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) directly allows players to create queer characters:

"*Cyberpunk 2077 also has a mechanic where you can separately choose your character as female-looking or male-looking and then choose the genitals. It was... illuminating for me. It helped me realize my internalized transphobia and then deal with it.*" (trans man, Finland)

The Sims franchise (Electronic Arts 2000-2014) where "*you can make them masculine, feminine, neither, or both*" (nonbinary, hesitant, Finland) was also mentioned as a space for gender expression with a focus on queerness. Experiences of actively queering identities there were usually expressed as something positive, going beyond the norms, and giving a space for "*experimenting with sexuality and gender through a literal life simulation*" which "*was freeing*" (nonbinary, Netherlands).

This active queerness of PCs could be reached in several ways, at the beginning during the character customization, and later through clothes and the mechanics of interaction and change. Respondents described both of these stages of queering, with an emphasis on going outside of normativity:
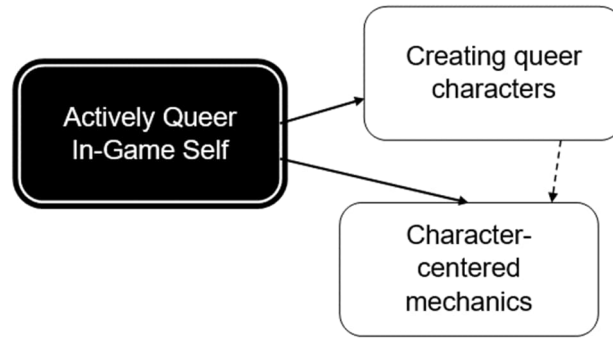
Figure 2: Scheme of relationships between the theme "Actively Queer In-Game Self" and sub-themes.

Creating queer characters

The desire to create queer PCs was expressed almost unanimously by participants from both international and Ukrainian groups. Many players expressed the desire to have a queer character from the very start of a video game, mentioning character creation and character customization as important mechanics. Although willing to reflect their gender identities, not all the respondents aimed to make it obviously queer. However, some level of queerness was sought, even when it was not stated explicitly.

Answers from participants from Ukraine were more general in nature: "*if there is a queer character, I would rather choose this character*" (nonbinary, gender neutral, genderfluid); "*play adding more gender-neutral traits to a character*" (nonbinary queer). The most detailed answer was given by xenogender-fluid Ukrainian participant who described their experience of queering character customization through the choice of "*undeads or something connected, for example, necromancer*" and "*if romance is possible I always choose sapphic*", emphasizing queerness through both sexual and gender identities. It was also one of few responses where a participant was willing to put an emphasis on queerness through several features, in order to make the queer identity of a character as pronounced as possible.

Respondents in the international group gave more details of how their PCs should look and be perceived. For nonbinary respondents, creation of non-gendered or gender ambiguous characters was a way to reflect their own queerness. They mentioned creating "*non gendered characters with short hair, a slim build and no chest*" (nonbinary, US), "*as neutral character as possible*", "*someone completely androgynous*" (nonbinary, Finland) as ways to represent nonbinary gender identity. For a nonbinary respondent from Iran who mentioned not reflecting themselves in games "*for security reasons*", it was still important to "*have the avatar to have a queer identity looking at least*".

A trans man from Finland mentioned that in games he tended "*to go for pretty hyper masculine characters*". From a superficial point of view, this could be perceived as an urge to represent 'normal' binary identity - however, for a transmasculine player, it becomes a way to emphasize the gender identity experienced differently from being a cisgender masculine person. The same respondent also mentioned not playing female characters before transitioning, so for him, hypermasculinity could be a way

to accommodate his own self-perception, rather than just something allowing him 'to pass'.

The preservation of queerness in character creation was mentioned by another binary trans man from the UK, describing customization features in *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023): "*Some modern games, such as Baldurs gate 3, have completely customisable bodies and voices regardless of gender, which is affirming as I can make or play a character with a body or voice that matches my own*''. This approach goes beyond the creation of a character of desirable sex, emphasizing the queerness of the created character – and for a transgender person, it could be more affirming to see a transgender character falling outside the traditional binary system.

Apart from appearance, the movement patterns of characters were among the tools of queering mentioned by one participant: "*you really could break the norms with putting men into the movement patterns of female characters*" (agender, Finland). Names and pronouns were mentioned as a tool through which to emphasize a character's queerness at the stage of character creation. Participants did not express the necessity to use all of these tools at the same time, and for many of them, the presence of queerness in a character was already enough to immerse themselves into a character.

A particularly different experience was expressed by genderfluid participants answering the Ukrainian-language and English-language surveys. Ukrainians created queer characters through "*choosing nonbinary character*", leaning to one of the binary genders and creating "*gender-nonconforming characters, for example, a woman with a very stereotypical masculine body or vice versa*", or choosing games with invisible protagonists. Answering the international survey, genderfluid participants mentioned the impact of video games on their perception of themselves, stating that "*Gameplay can change what is my current gender feeling (masculine usually from power fantasies, though sometimes playing a feminine character during a power fantasy can make me feel feminine)*" (genderfluid nonbinary, Estonia) and "*i don't need to actively try to, i don't think. i easily insert myself into most characters, gender irrespective*" (genderfluid, US). While leaning towards nonbinary characters has been mentioned in a previous study (Whitehouse et al., 2023), the point of 'changing current gender feeling' for genderfluid people has not been commonly expressed or studied in previous work.

Character creation appeared to be a set of mechanics that attracting the biggest degree of attention. Appearance, voice, names, and other features such as moving patterns or clothes were considered as means of reflecting queerness, and not simply accommodating the self. These mechanics are connected with the characters' bodies so tightly that a reflection of a stereotype that queerness should be reflected in the body could also be traced here. However, a shift towards embodied queerness can be seen, since the point from which participants were talking about their characters was consistently going beyond normativity.

Character-centered mechanics

Queering in the process of playing was the most mechanic-focused domain in the responses, as well as the only part where participants named particular mechanics in addition to generalized descriptions. Most mechanics were PC-focused and related to the gender of PCs either directly or through representation, or just by connections to

appearance, allowing players to add a norm-breaking change to the gameplay and their character's existence.

Several mentioned that mechanics were similar in 'form' and resulted in a similar impact on PCs. Namely, participants talked about "*gender change potion*" (transfemme, Finland) from *Terraria* (Re-Logic 2011), "*The potion* [in *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010)] *that can change your character's gender*" (nonbinary trans woman, US), and "*mechanics that also change aesthetics such as "jobs" mechanics that change character appearance*" (nonbinary male, US) were also mentioned without any particular references to a game. These mechanics allowed players to bring their queerness into a game and give their characters what the players wanted to achieve in their lives. These players not only created a character with the "correct" gender – they found a way to change their gender and appearance in the playing process. Gender change potion in *Terraria* (Re-Logic 2011) allowed a trans woman player to create a trans character with experiences similar to her own, even before she fully acknowledged her identity. Sharing her experience, the participant said that she would "*kind of wish I could've tried, regardless of permanence*".

While the mechanics of crossdressing mostly affect gender representation, it was also mentioned as a way to reflect players' gender identity and impact their self-perception, even in games where it was designed as a humoristic element. "*Cloud's crossdressing minigame*" in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) (agender, Finland), and the possibility "*to give traditionally feminine clothes to the male protagonist*" in *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2008) (trans masculine nonbinary, Finland) were highlighted mechanics. But identity did not affect reading the Cloud scene as a queer, which also shows that for gender diverse players, crossdressing has additional layers of meaning.

It is important to note that the mechanics described here were mentioned in responses to the international survey. Ukrainian participants did not mention any mechanics, and generally expressed doubts that non-narrative parts could have an impact on gender identities.

Queering Non-Queer Characters

When there were no suitable options readily available, many players felt the necessity to find a way to be themselves and bring their queerness into game worlds. Answering the questions on queer mechanics and the impact of video games on their self-perception, players described several ways of queering non-queer PCs, disclosing how they use either one or several of them. Three particular ways to queer PCs (modding / using addons, adding other non-normative features, and using external markers) imply using video game mechanics directly, and respondents mostly focused on a general description of ways to broaden the playing process.
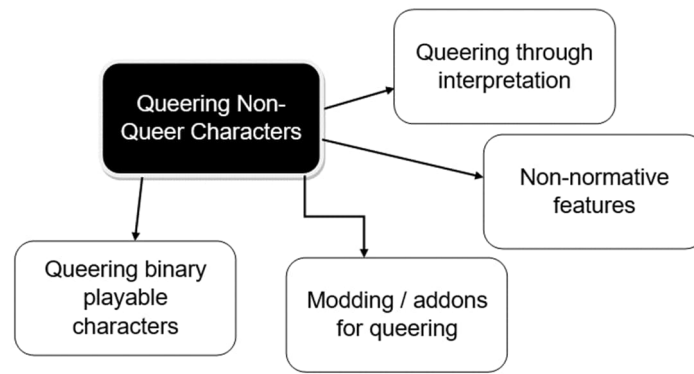
Figure 3: Scheme of relationship between the theme "Queering Non-Queer Characters" and sub-themes.

Queering through interpretation

Several participants mentioned queering in-game characters not through changing something in a game, but through simply reading them as queer, which is not a new phenomenon in general. In "Video Games Have Always Been Queer", Ruberg (2019) talks about "too-close" reading, queer interpretations and connotations, using *Portal* (Valve 2007) as one example. Chess (2016) describes the queerness of *Tetris* (Pajitnov Alexey 1986), and generally, never-ending mechanics (such as grinding, i.e., constant fighting and searching for resources) as non-reproductive, and thus queer. However, in those works, even where queering is mechanic-focused, it is about non-normativity in itself, while the respondents in this study propose reading as a tool to accommodate a player and change an in-game world at least in their imagination. For players, this possibility is not about an inherent queerness of video games, but rather as a way to have queer PCs even where none of them are planned by the developers.

According to those players mentioning only (or mostly) queer interpretations as a way to accommodate their identities, any character could be read as queer. One participant (agender, Finland) even stated that "*I come from the generations where everyone who I decide is gay is gay, or gender nonconforming, or asexual, so the lack of them doesn't usually bother me all that much*", so, "*I might just pretend they are more like what I'd like to play (e.g. choosing a binary option but thinking of them as non-binary)*". No additional interaction with a game happens here, and players who want to reflect themselves in a game sometimes simply turn to their imagination. Furthermore, no mechanics were described as supporting queer reading, and the queer reading of mechanics also was not mentioned.

This way of interpreting PCs was present only in the responses to the international survey, and Ukrainians did not mention the idea of queer reading at all.

Queering binary playable characters

Other approaches to queering a PC that combined both in-game actions and imaginary play were choosing a character opposite to the assigned gender at birth (AGAB), or switching binary genders. Both the Ukrainian and international respondents mentioned this as a way to accommodate themselves in a video game, although switching was more prominent in non-Ukrainian nonbinary participants' responses.

Many players also shared some of their reasons for using a binary character as a way to play queer. As one nonbinary participant from Finland stated, an avatar of the gender that does not match their AGAB would be a way to somehow accommodate their gender identity, and as noted by another participant (transgender, nonbinary, agender, transmasculine, Finland), "*to get some "distance" from being gendered as that gender* [assigned at birth]". The same appears to be true for one agender/greygender participant (UK), for whom "*identifying with a male character allowed me to experience the gameworld from a gender-neutral perspective, which is how I feel about my own gender identity*". Involving a character opposite to AGAB allows players to change viewpoints in a game world, and although it is not fully the same as experiences of being nonbinary, agender or genderfluid, it does however add flexibility to the playing process.

Another way to expand in-game gendered perspectives is switching between binary characters, "*female in first playthrough, male in 2nd*" (nonbinary, Finland). This was expressed as a way to accommodate nonbinary gender identity, differently from the findings of previous studies (Whitehouse et al. 2023) where switching was mentioned as being particularly important to genderfluid participants, and was expanded even more with the involvement of sexual identity into the combination: "*Specifically in visual novels, I often play as a woman (and will choose male and female love interests about 50/50 each), but if I'm playing as a man, I almost always play him as a gay man*" (nonbinary, hesitant, Canada).

Gender diverse Ukrainians also described choosing characters opposite to AGAB as something queer. One Ukrainian nonbinary participant stated that for them, "*choosing characters opposite to my AGAB*" was the easiest option to accommodate their identity in a game. Another nonbinary participant noted that they make this choice if a game does not allow them to play according to their gender identity. An agender participant answered similarly regarding the choice of characters in RPGs, and one of the genderfluid Ukrainians noted that they "*choose male characters more often if it is not possible not to mention a gender/choose nonbinary, since it gives me an opportunity to play the gender opposite to mine*", stating the importance to broaden the gender perspective. However, no details or ways of interaction with a video game were given here by Ukrainian respondents.

Modding / addons for queering

Although not as popular as queering binary PCs, using mods or addons was also viewed by participants from the international group as a queer tool, in line with the idea of modding as a "tool for destabilizing the accepted norms of both the video game industry and naturalized gender and sexuality performance" (Welch 2018). Talking about modes, one participant (nonbinary aphrodisian, US) emphasized modding in a safe way and "*in games like older Pokemon* [(Nintendo 1996)] *titles*", editing representation in the games that could have none because it was prohibited on the general social level. They also mentioned *Garry's Mod* (Facepunch Studios 2006), a sandbox initially created as a mod for *Half-Life* 2 (Valve Corporation 2004) and popular because of its broad facility for customization, stating that "*In Garry's Mod I used PAC3 to load a custom nonbinary player model of myself*". Another participant (binary trans man, UK) stated that they "*use queer mods*".

Among Ukrainian participants, modding was not mentioned at all. The only response that contained something similar to modding stated that if it is not possible to

accommodate gender identity "*and this game is mine – I patch it so it allows to, if game is not mine – I do not* [accommodate myself]" (nonbinary transfem). There might be several reasons for this, in that the Ukrainian queer player community has no scene or space for modding and is relatively small to seek for support from bigger modding communities. Also, the unpopularity of queer modding in Ukraine could also be caused by a lower level of involvement in modding in general.

Non-normative features

Some respondents described accommodation of their identities through the use of other features, sometimes not even related to them, as 'interchangeably queer' or simply non-normative from any other point of view. Answering a question about accommodating identity in games where the gender identity needed is not available, one nonbinary respondent (Finland) stated that "*I try to use different races that have been subjected to racism or have a female character, just for them to be used and maybe have a role in games*". Races struggling with social denial and oppression were seen as a way to make a PC closer to a player's real experience by adopting another 'non-normativity'. Responding to the same question, another nonbinary participant (Finland) mentioned that they "*choose an animal type character if possible as those are seen more gender neutral most of the time*". Even though animals usually have (binary) genders, in comparison to socially determined genders and gender roles (including all the stereotypes usually attached to them), animals offer a more comfortable option for a queer person – and this neutrality has also been noted in an earlier study by Whitehouse et al. (2023). A similar experience was shared by a binary trans man (UK), who said they "[u]*sually create non realistic, nonhuman, and very stylised avatars for fantasy RPGs*" to accommodate their identity.

Some of the mentioned non-normative features were close to players' real lives – as an example, one participant (nonbinary, Netherlands) noted "*choosing a fat playable character, as being a fat person is a huge part of my identity too!*", which points out that the game cannot limit their perception of the identity. Accordingly, body shape, age or any other embodied feature that goes out of social standards can become a tool for character appropriation and the accommodation of a queer identity.

This strategy was described only in responses to the English-language survey. Participants from Ukraine did not talk about reflecting non-normativity in a broader sense on characters as a way to accommodate their gender identities, seemingly separating these categories.

External markers of gender identity

Ukrainian participants emphasized the use of external identity markers as an option for accommodating themselves in game worlds. These were more connected to the players than the characters, becoming a way to not just queer a game, but also to transmit a player's queerness directly through it. For one genderfluid Ukrainian, "*clothes that allow me to transmit my tastes in real life into the game*" was an option to reflect their identity in a game that would not allow the creation of appropriate PCs. Apart from clothes and armour, other markers participants shared as ways to reflect their identities were gender-neutral names for characters, and use of correct pronouns where possible.

These options are not directly related to queering as a 'non-normativity of playing'. However, they add some details related to diverse gender identities related to playing video games, mixing reflections of a player's identity in the game and the perception of a character as something different from a player. This is also something that participants from the international group did not bring up explicitly, focusing on other, less direct ways to reflect their identities. There, the use of pronouns and gender-neutral names was rather a part of the social experience aimed at in multiplayer games.

Rejection of Non-Queerness

If there is no way to accommodate gender identity, players tend to exclude themselves from a video game. This happens either through the detachment from a PC, or the rejection of a video game:
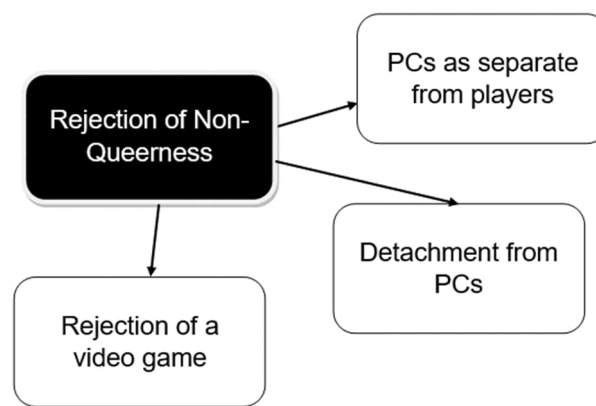

Figure 4: Scheme of relationship between the theme "Rejection of Non-Queerness" and sub-themes.

PCs seen as separate from players

The perception of PCs as separate entities with their own stories and feelings is a clear pattern in the answers of Ukrainian participants. Many of them did not feel themselves to be attached to characters, seeing PCs as something separate from players from the very beginning, and mentioning that "*I do not feel that my gender identity should be present in a game where the story is not about it at all*" (she/they). Talking about the accommodation of gender identities, one of the Ukrainian participants (between nonbinary and agender) stated that "*I choose my sex. I like my body and it is not a sign of my feeling of gender*" (nonbinary or agender), which reflects a different approach not only to PCs, but also to the perception of gender identity.

Among the international group, there were several participants who did not initially see PCs as players' reflections, and excluded the player's identity from the game from the very beginning. For these players, there was no need to search for mechanics or ways to accommodate themselves, and they described this by stating that "*I'm playing as a character, not as myself*" (male, no longer identifying as trans, US) and "*I never felt particularly attached to protagonists as a version of myself*" (genderqueer, nonbinary, transfemme, US). For the respondents seeing PCs as characters with their own identities, video games did not have any significant impact on their gender

identity in general – they either did not think about their gender while playing games, or the games they played were not able to grasp all the spectrum of gender identities.

Detachment from PCs

Some players mentioned the detachment from a character in a game not allowing them to accommodate their identities as a way to play it with some limitations. The main means of detachment was simply to treat the PC as a unique person with their own features, choices and fate. It was either described directly through phrases such as "*I make my own characters and give them their own backstories*" (it/its, US) and "*I would see the playable character as their own character rather than any form of self-insert*" (transgender man, US), or indirectly, talking about "*a more third-person view*" (nonbinary trans man, Germany) or "*it's not me, just the avatar I have to use in this game world*" (transfemme, Finland).

With this detachment, players removed themselves from the playing process, resolving the conflict of any inability to reflect their identities in game worlds. This attitude is quite similar to seeing a character as a separate entity from a player, however, here the reason for the change in the attitude is different, in that it is triggered by the inability to reflect the player's queerness in the game in any way.

Other ways of separating PCs were also described. One of them is by focusing on the story or gameplay, treating the game differently than if the PC was the player's reflection. A transgender man (US) also mentioned focussing not on the story, but to a close connection to "*male NPC characters that I liked, rather than the playable character*". Separating himself from the main character, the participant made the narrative part of a video game more valuable, adding personal emphasis on NPCs on the level of interpretation. This was one of the rare cases of NPCs being mentioned.

Among Ukrainians, attachment to a character was mentioned only by one participant, for whom an inability to accommodate gender identity would make it "*more difficult to see the game world through the character's eyes, and I become an 'observer from the side'*" (transgender woman).

All the detachment described by respondents occurs on the player's side, without any additional activities or interactions within a video game. The only thing that takes place in a game world is a different manner of character-creation, which might further impact the playing style and choices. At the same time, it shows the importance of accommodating gender identities into video games for many participants, since it can lead to different perceptions of a PC and a game in general.

Rejection of a video game

For many players, the ability to accommodate gender identities could impact the decision of whether to play a game at all. Although the negative impact of this was frequently mentioned, some participants also mentioned the positive impact it had on their decisions, seeing queerness as a reason to return to a particular game or genre. On the positive side, one of the respondents mentioned the ability to accommodate queer gender identity as a reason to start playing again:

"*Finding out that Bridget in guilty gear was a trans playable character inspired me to start playing fighting games again and has allowed me to get good enough to actually*

enjoy playing with my friends, even if it's not guilty gear, but another fighting game." (nonbinary trans woman, US)

On a more negative side, some respondents simply mentioned that possibilities to reflect themselves in the characters could be a crucial factor for them, stating that "*I tend to choose games based on whether I can choose the character*" (trans man, Finland). For a trans woman (US), an inability to play a female character was "*one of the reasons that while I like Assassin's Creed Black flag* [(Ubisoft 2013)] *I have never completed the game*". For another trans woman (US), the fact that only male characters could use the overpowered class "deathknight" in *Lineage 2* (NCSoft 2003) was the reason for them not to use that class. A similar point of not playing video games with PCs not matching gender identities was expressed by a trans man (Estonia), who mentioned that "*Very rarely I'm willing to play a female character,* [even] *if the character and story are amazing. Otherwise I can't relate to it*". This goes in line with a previous study (Morgan et al. 2020) showing that customization can determine playability and the willingness to purchase a game.

The rejection or acceptance of a particular video game was discussed only in responses to the international survey. Ukrainian participants did not consider leaving a non-queer game at all. As described at the beginning of this section, for many of them, a player's identity was something they saw as not necessary in a game world, and playing with no possibility to reflect themselves was something perceived as a norm.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study include differences in the queering strategies of Ukrainian queer players and queer players belonging to international communities. Some of them are relatively small, yet these differences are massively driven by social and cultural contexts. Ukrainian players mostly mentioned seeking for explicit queerness that was not always tied to interaction, but rather narrative and involving character design and connected it not with a character as player's reflection, but with a player interacting with a game. This could be noticed from focuses on how PCs are chosen, named and dressed, if they are perceived as something more than just a main character in a video game story.

This differs this study from previous research (Griffiths et al. 2016; Di Cesare et al. 2023), and at the same time, ties it to Shaw's book "*Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*" (2014). Talking about identity and identification, Shaw draws a line between an avatar and a playable character, describing differences in player relations to set characters and self-created avatars. Shaw shows how study participants (do not) relate to PCs and avatars, and argues that it is important to talk about set characters more in context of representation. The answers of Ukrainian players present similar points, and although many of the respondents felt an importance to reflect themselves in games, they also often pointed to differences between games built around particular characters where they saw no space to reflect a player's identity, and those allowing character creation.

On the other hand, responses to the English-language survey contained more points regarding set characters, and were generally less focused on avatars and explicit representation. Choosing a game based on characters, detachment from a PC or the rejection of the whole game were described by participants from various countries as

16

upsetting experiences, while for Ukrainians it appeared to be a common way of perceiving video games.

In the English-language survey, many participants also expressed a need to show queerness in various ways. Most of the ways to add the queer self into the game have been briefly touched on in several previous articles, but did not gain further development in this study. Griffiths et al. (2016) described gender swapping and the use of PCs opposite to AGAB in more normative way. In Baldwin's (2018) article, several mentions are made of interviewees' desires to go beyond the binaries, although it is not the point of emphasis. This changes slightly in the study by McKenna et al. (2022) that quotes nonbinary participants willing to go beyond the normative bodily features. However, the preservation of queerness still does not become the main point.

In this study, respondents expressed the need to preserve their non-normativity, even if game does not fully allow it. Their focus on PCs, even though they were asked on video games in general, allows tracing the importance of a reflection of themselves into gaming spaces not because they feel safer, but rather because they just allow it.

Although the exact reasons for the difference between respondents' views are yet to be defined, some speculations can be made. One reason for Ukrainian queer players being less concerned about a reflection of their gender identity could be the fact that topics related to LGBTQIA+ are more openly discussed in American and Central European mainstream media, but not in Ukrainian media, where these topics are still either underrepresented or distorted (*Права* 2023) and are perceived more negatively by society in general (*Становище* 2023). That is why, when explicit representation is rarely seen as a common thing, Ukrainians might seek it more than representatives of other nationalities and cultures. With this in mind, the current situation of international LGBTQIA+ gaming communities can be considered as more developed in comparison to the Ukrainian situation, and this gives a hope for similar development in the Ukrainian context. Another reason could be the high level of hostility shown towards any queer representation and reflection of queerness (*У Києві* 2024) that makes it relatively uncommon to seek for representation and want to be connected with a character in terms of gender identity. This could also have a similar impact on queer readings in general, and living in much more cisheteronormative context, Ukrainian players might not 'read' games in queer ways because they are made to be as normative as possible by the society around them. So, being limited even with explicit representation, they do not feel themselves connected to characters if they are not explicitly queer, and do not see ways to queer non-queer characters, leaving them as they are in the plot.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the international survey give insights into queer players' strategies for queering in-game interactions used to accommodate themselves in game worlds, and for the game mechanics utilized within these strategies. Most of the strategies are focused on playable characters that are of a particular importance for many queer players. The participants of the international survey often described their characters as a continuation of themselves and something as important as their own bodies, which explained the high level of attention given to the appearance, and queerness at the stage of character creation and in the further playing process, and the search for other ways to accommodate players' identities through a variety of tools.

Participants mentioned several game mechanics explicitly. However, complex interactions that involved both ludic and narrative elements were discussed more. With games not allowing an accommodation of gender identities in any way, by including various ways of queering, players could detach themselves either from a character, or from a game by not playing it at all.

The national background of Ukrainian respondents impacted their way of interacting with video games and general perception of gaming. Even though some of them pointed to queer games of the indie scene such as *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) that include gender diverse characters, they did not see video games as something connected with their identities, mostly pointing to queer communities, books and films with more explicit queer characters. Implicit queerness and a space for playing with genders and sexualities remained undescribed by Ukrainian queer players, which could be a result of living closeted in a society that feels or has felt hostile for many years (*Становище* 2023). Ukrainian gaming communities are also more masculine (and often more toxic) (*Портрет* 2022), which could form the idea of video games being seen as spaces that are uncomfortable for LGBTQIA+. But even though Ukrainian respondents mostly did not mention a perception of in-game characters as part of their continuation, some of them also sought a reflection of themselves in the video games they played, and were not fully satisfied with normative binary choices.

The list of mechanics that had an impact on participants' self-perception is a big finding of this analysis, as well as the fact that all of them are in one way or another connected with a character's body. It shows a willingness to create a queer character who undergoes similar changes to those desired by some gender diverse people, and not simply a wish to create the ideal self. It is particularly worth noting that not all of these mechanics were designed as queer, but all of them *became* queer tools for players.

This survey strengthens the idea of queering as non-normativity in playing and reading video games. Most participants expressed a willingness to make their characters queer, or at least see them as such, even when the game has no direct opportunity for playing queer characters. Choosing characters opposite to AGAB, animals and employing customization that breaks commonly accepted gender representations are all aimed at going outside of the predetermined norms, in order to feel more comfortable at least in the video game world.

Since this is the first study of this type with Ukrainian participants, further studies need to be carried out, in order to clarify the differences seen in this survey, as well as studies with other geographical scopes to trace the connections between interpreting video game mechanics and social environments of players. However, a significant advance is that it can be already seen here that this difference exists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Ashley, F. and Ells, C. 2018. "In favor of covering ethically important cosmetic surgeries: Facial feminization surgery for transgender people." *The American Journal of Bioethics.* 18 (12), 23–25. 10.1080/15265161.2018.1531162

Baldwin, K. 2018. "Virtual Avatars: Trans Experiences of Ideal Selves Through Gaming." *Markets, Globalization & Development Review.* 03 (03). https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2018-03-03-04

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide.* London: Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2023. "Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher." *International Journal of Transgender Health.* 24 (1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L. and McEvoy, C. 2021. "The online survey as a *qualitative* research tool." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology.* 24 (6), 641–654. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550

Brookey, R. A. and Cannon, K. L. 2009. "Sex Lives in Second Life." *Critical Studies in Media Communication.* 26 (2), 145–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860260

CD Projekt RED. 2020. *Cyberpunk 2077.* Microsoft Windows. CD Projekt.

Chang, E.Y. 2015. "Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in *FrontierVille* and *World of Warcraft.*" *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2 (2): 6–31. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0006

Chess, S. 2016. "The queer case of video games: Orgasms, Heteronormativity, and video game narrative." *Critical Studies in Media Communication.* 33 (1), 84–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129066

Di Cesare, D. M., Craig, S. L., Brooks, A. S. and Doll, K. 2023. "Setting the Game Agenda: Reviewing the Emerging Literature on Video Gaming and Psychological Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth." *Games and Culture.* 155541202311788. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231178883

Engel, M. 2017. "Perverting Play: Theorizing a Queer Game Mechanic." *Television & New Media.* 18 (4), 351–360. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416669234

Facepunch Studios. 2006. *Garry's Mod.* Microsoft Windows. Valve.

Freeman, G. and Wohn, D. Y. 2020. "Streaming your Identity: Navigating the Presentation of Gender and Sexuality through Live Streaming." *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW).* 29 (6), 795–825. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-020-09386-w

From Software. 2014. *Dark Souls II.* PlayStation 3. Bandai Namco Games.

Game Freak. 1996. *Pokémon Red Version.* Game Boy. Nintendo.

Gillin, L. E. and Signorella, M. L. 2023. "Attitudes Toward Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Online Multiplayer Gaming Spaces." *Psychological Reports.* 003329412311537. https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941231153798

Griffiths, M., Arcelus, J. and Bouman, W. P. 2016." Video Gaming and Gender Dysphoria: Some Case Study Evidence." *Aloma: Revista de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i de l'Esport.* 34 (2), 59–66. https://doi.org/10.51698/aloma.2016.34.2.59-66

Hughes, P., Harless, C. and Leach, K. 2021. "Methods and strategies for effectively surveying the LGBTQ+ population." *Research in Social and Administrative Pharmacy.* 17 (5), 997–1003. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sapharm.2020.06.024

Kosciesza, A. J. 2023. "The Moral Service of Trans NPCs: Examining the Roles of Transgender Non-Player Characters in Role-Playing Video Games." *Games and Culture.* 18 (2), 189–208. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221088118

Krobová, T., Moravec, O. and Švelch, J. 2015. "Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink: Queer Playing in a Heteronormative Game Culture." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 9 (3). https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-3-3.

Lacey, L. 2023. ""A Checkbox on a Character Sheet": Nonbinary Gender Representations in Video Games." *The IJournal: Student Journal of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information.* 8 (2). https://doi.org/10.33137/ijournal.v8i2.41032

Larian Studios. 2023. *Baldur's Gate 3.* Microsoft Windows. Larian Studios.

Lee, T. and Mitchell, A. 2018. "Filling in the Gaps: "Shell" Playable Characters." In *Interactive Storytelling. ICIDS 2018. Lecture Notes in Computer Science* edited by Rouse, R., Koenitz, H., Haahr, M. vol 11318. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04028-4_24

Lionhead Studios. 2008. *Fable II.* Xbox 360. Europe: Microsoft Game Studios.

Lionhead Studios. 2010. *Fable III.* Xbox 360. Microsoft Game Studios.

Maxis. 2000-2014. *The Sims* series. Microsoft Windows. Electronic Arts.

McKenna, J. L., Wang, Y.-C., Williams, C. R., McGregor, K. and Boskey, E. R. 2022. ""You can't be deadnamed in a video game": Transgender and gender diverse adolescents' use of video game avatar creation for gender-affirmation and exploration." *Journal of LGBT Youth.* https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2022.2144583

Mejeur, C. 2018. ""Look at Me, Boy!": Carnivalesque, Masks, and Queer Performativity in Bioshock." In *Beyond the Sea* edited by F. Parker and J. Aldred, 113–142. McGill-Queen's University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773555556-007

Morgan, H, O'Donovan, A., Almeida, R., Lin, A., and Perry Y. 2020. "The Role of the Avatar in Gaming for Trans and Gender Diverse Young People" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 22: 8617. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17228617

Mukherjee, S., and Hammar, E.L. 2018. "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies." *Open Library of Humanities* 4 (2): 33. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.309.

NCSoft, E&G Studios. 2003. *Lineage II.* Microsoft Windows. Korea: NCSoft.

Nylund, D. 2007. "Reading Harry Potter: Popular Culture, Queer Theory and The Fashioning of Youth Identity." *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 26 (2): 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1521/jsyt.2007.26.2.13

Ok, C., and Kang, H.J. 2021. "To Be Defined or Not to Be? Addressing Internal Questions in the Online Community for Gender Diverse Youth." In *Interaction Design and Children*, 552–57. Athens Greece: ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3459990.3465200.

Pajitnov Alexey. 1986. *Tetris*. IBM PC.

Personal profile Марко І-Крапка [marko I krapka] n.d. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/mk.official.ua/

Pow, W. 2018. "Reaching toward Home: Software Interface as Queer Orientation in the Video Game *Curtain*." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 81, 43–56. https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8105

r/gaymers. n.d. *Reddit*. Accessed April 29, 2024. https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/.

r/lgbtstudies. n.d. *Reddit*. Accessed April 29, 2024. https://www.reddit.com/r/lgbtstudies/.

r/transgamers. n.d. *Reddit*. Accessed April 29, 2024. https://www.reddit.com/r/transgamers/.

Re-Logic. 2011. *Terraria*. Microsoft Windows. 505 Games.

Rivera, S. 2022. "From Battleground to Playground: The Video Game Avatar as Transitional Phenomenon for a Transgender Patient." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 70 (3), 485–510. https://doi.org/10.1177/00030651221104487

Ruberg, B. 2018. "Queerness and Video Games." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24 (4): 543–55. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-6957940

Ruberg, B. 2019. "Introduction" In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 1–28. New York, USA: New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479893904.003.0003

Shaw, A. 2012. "Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media Representation." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. 9 (1), 67. https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.150

Shaw, A. 2014. "He Could Be a Bunny Rabbit for All I Care!: How We Connect with Characters and Avatars." In *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 97–146. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1287nqh.7.

Shaw, A., Lauteria, E., Yang, H., Persaud, C., and Cole, A. 2019. "Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985–2005." *International Journal Of Communication, 13*, 26. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9754

Square. 1997. *Final Fantasy VII*. PlayStation. PlayStation.

Stichting Gaymers EU – Stichting Gaymers EU. n.d. *Gaymers EU*. Accessed April 29, 2024. https://www.gaymers.eu/.

Thach, H. 2021. *A Cross-Game Look at Transgender Representation in Video Games.* 7 (1).

Toby Fox. 2015. *Undertale.* Microsoft Windows. Toby Fox.

Ubisoft Montreal. 2013. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag.* PlayStation 3. Ubisoft.

UKRAINEPRIDE. n.d. *UKRAINEPRIDE.* Accessed April 29, 2024. https://www.ukrainepride.org.

Valve. 2004. *Half-Life 2.* Microsoft Windows. Valve.

Valve. 2007. *Portal.* Microsoft Windows. Valve.

Welch, T. 2018. "The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods." *Game Studies.* 18 (3). https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch

Whitehouse, K., Hitchens, M. and Matthews, N. 2023. "Trans* and gender diverse players: Avatars and gender-alignment." *Entertainment Computing.* 47, 100584. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2023.100584

Willumsen, E. C. 2018. "Is My Avatar MY Avatar? Character Autonomy and Automated Avatar Actions in Digital Games." Paper presented at the *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2018)*, Melbourne, Australia, 25-28 July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DIGRA_2018_paper_32.pdf

Гендер Зед [Gender Zed]. n.d. *GENDERZED.* Accessed April 29, 2024. https://genderz.org.ua/.

Портрет українського геймера під час повномасштабної війни—Результати опитування [Ukrainian gamer's image during the full-scale war – survey results]. 2022, December 22. *Na chasi.* https://nachasi.com/videogames/2022/12/22/ukr-gamer-during-war/

Права людини та новини ЛГБТ+: Папа благословляє, а росіяни забороняють [Human rights and LGBT+ news: Pope blesses, Russians forbid]. 2023, December 6. *Інститут масової інформації.* https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/-i57454

Становище ЛГБТК в Україні у січні – червні 2023 року [The position of LGBTQ people in Ukraine in January – June 2023]. 2023, July 8. *Правозахисний ЛГБТ Центр «НАШ СВІТ».* https://gay.org.ua/blog/2023/07/08/stanovyshche-lhbtk-v-ukraini-u-sichni-chervni-2023-roku/

У Києві трапився черговий напад на ЛГБТ-пару: Підозрюваних затримали [Attack on LGBT couple happened in Kyiv again: Suspects were arrested]. 2024, April 8. *ZMINA.* https://zmina.info/news/u-kyyevi-trapyvsya-chergovyj-napad-na-lgbt-paru-pidozryuvanyh-zatrymaly/