

Queer Games Studies Material Turn: Centering Trans Bodies in Video Games

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper proposes to analyse the role of transgender bodies in games, and trans embodiment beyond character customisation options or scripted characters. In doing so, we look at the ways in which transgender players perceive and employ their virtual bodies within video game worlds, from their avatars' aesthetics to their movements.

STATE OF THE ART

Despite the material turn (Apperley and Jayemanne 2012), game studies have only seldom considered the role of the player's body within video games. This appears instead foundational in the field of queer studies and queer game studies. Among others, Burrill points out (2017, 32) how: "Our bodies are prime sites of disidentification; they are objects, subjects, and spaces where we can break up our binary patterns". Video games in particular can be seen as primary sites for bodies explorations and dis/identifications, given their medium specific affordances. In particular, players in video games inhabit a different navigable dimension than the one of their ordinary world, which allows them to temporarily undertake different skills, capabilities, and goals (Klevjer 2022). Research on the use of character customisation affordances among transgender players would suggest that this is particularly relevant for trans folks, who, at least in character customisation, do employ their virtual bodies to explore idealised versions of themselves or to ease gender dysphoria (Griffiths et al 2016; Baldwin 2018; McKenna et al. 2022).

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Nevertheless, especially after orienting itself away from representation (Dalby 2024), queer game studies has not yet extensively discussed bodily features in relation to transgender and gender diverse (TGD) characters. For instance, one of the most vastly used databases for LGBTQ analysis, LGBTQ Video Game Archive (*About...* 2017) contains separate tags for gender identities, some images of characters, and presents human, non-human, monstrous-looking and robotic characters. Those, however, are usually united under umbrellas like “nonbinary” or “agender” without much attention paid to their bodily features and the ways they embody specific gender identities. The same can be said about articles analysing TGD representation. In their analysis of the Archive content, Shaw and Friesem (2016) briefly mention bodily traits of TGD characters. At the same time, self-presentation of non-heterosexual characters is described there in more detail. Utsch et al. (2017) only briefly mention TGD bodies in the context of a visible move from abstract gender non-conforming characters to visibly non-binary characters and a clear distinction of them from binary (transgender) representation. Studying players’ views on LGBTQIA+ representation, Látal (2022) does not discuss anything related to the perception of characters’ bodies or embodiment either. Representation there is once again tied to image, narrative, or both, and is discussed on a more abstract level.

Articles on trans/nonbinary characters and representation have paid more attention to characters’ aesthetics specifically in relation to the various ways in which non-binary genders and gender ambiguity is portrayed (Thach 2021; Lacey 2023). Moreover, studies on non-digital games that pay attention to bodily experiences often discuss live-action roleplaying games (larp) and look primarily at players’ bodies (Baird 2022; Zabala et al. 2025). It appears crucial to bring this reflection further that has been only marginally touched upon.

The body is the site of change, transformation and transition, experiences and emotions (Burrill 2017). While it is important to tackle such a topic with care, as, a lot of instances of TGD representation have too much focus on unhealthy curiosity towards TGD bodies (McLaren 2023), its omission in queer games studies limits space for critique. Therefore, the primary goal of this paper is centering the importance of the body and the virtual body as a queer site of dis/identification, exploration, and transformation; and the second is to look at ways in which TGD players are engaging with their virtual bodies that represent how this site is explored.

To do so, we first situate the topic of the body and its omission in queer games studies, and lack of connections with embodiment in the call for trans game studies (Ruberg 2022). Second, this research arises from two different qualitative interventions on TGD players: a data set containing responses to several qualitative online surveys on TGD players from different countries (n=198: 82 responses from Brazil collected by Thais Weiller and analysed by Mark Maletka and Thais Weiller, 45 from Ukraine and 71 from an English-language mixed sample collected and analysed by Mark Maletka), and a series of 12 semi-structured interviews with transgender players based in the UK, collected and analysed by Robin Zingarelli. In our analysis, we consider also the cultural backgrounds of our participants that shape angles from which they experience in-game embodiment.

Participants pointed out the variety of ways in which they employ their virtual body. Some players in particular reported employing video games as a means to almost transcend their gender, focusing on concepts such as speed and movement as the primary motivator to be engaged with games. Others reported to put a lot of effort

into crafting characters that not only appear and look in a certain way, but that, within the video game affordances, choose to move in a specific way that is consistent with the image of the character that players crafted - e.g., spending several times close to a specific NPC if it is meaningful for the player. For some, a virtual body became not just a visual reflection, but an extension of their own body able to perform what a 'real' body was not. Among all data sets, embodiment was a read thread connecting otherwise different approaches to finding space for TGD identities in video games.

In turn, this reasserts the centrality of the body within queer games studies and specifically in the experience of TGD players, not only limited to gender choices and scripted representations, but foregrounding the virtual body as a site of exploration, affirmation, and experimentation.

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