

**PLAYING TRANSNESS: AN ANALYSIS OF MEANINGFUL
TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION IN
VIDEO GAMES**

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ABSTRACT

Transgender media representation is generally plagued with problems, and rarely have I experienced transgender media representation where I feel seen, or where I feel as though it is made from a distinctly transgender-centric perspective. This dissertation develops a theorization of meaningful transgender representation in video games from the perspective of transgender people. Meaningful representation entails thoughtfully included, complex, and trans-coded characters as seen as such by transgender people, and as such require transgender people to be involved in their creation. Situated between literature on cultural studies, transgender studies, and game studies, I interrogated the following research questions: what does meaningful transgender representation look like in video games? What is involved in making meaningful transgender representation in games? And what do players think about transgender representation in video games? Starting autoethnographically from my own experience with trans video game representation, I used a combination of textual analysis and close reading on eight characters in video games with significant transgender representation, analyzed paratexts like published interviews and game wikis, and utilized semi-structured interviews with three game creators and consultants, one game journalist, and 31 players that had encountered these eight characters to answer my research questions.

I argue that there are distinctive features of meaningful transgender representation that include characters being significantly present; characters and their transness being thoughtfully included in the game; having an alignment being transgender identity, physical appearance, and voice acting; and characters looking and feeling distinctly transgender. In addition, I argue that trans involvement is important to crafting

transgender representation as I found demographic differences in how transgender players thought of and received these characters in comparison to others. This finding also signals that transgender audiences are receiving, and therefore thinking about, this representation in different ways than cisgender or LGBTQ players. As explored through paratexts and interviews with game creators and consultants, game companies that valued diversity, involved transgender folks in the process of creating these characters, and prioritized organic inclusion (Christian & White, 2020) created the most meaningful transgender representation. By offering specific evidence across the textual, producer, and audience sides, I show that including transgender folks in the creation process leads to more meaningful representation as read by all players in my sample, as articulated by folks I talked to and read about in the production process, and in the same way that transgender characters being incorporated thoughtfully throughout the game leads to more meaningful transgender representation. Ultimately, meaningful transgender representation is that which is made by, about, and for transgender audiences. Meaningful transgender representation offers the possibility for transgender folks to feel seen and to experience media that feels real; in addition, it encourages cisgender folks to experience media through a trans-centric gaze.

To those who live on in my heart: David, Addison, Jamison, Joey and Roy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO PLAYING TRANSGENDER

“It was like nobody could really see me. I was the invisible boy.”

Tyler Ronan, *Tell Me Why* (2020)

As this quote by *Tell Me Why*'s transgender character Tyler Ronan exemplifies, transgender¹ folks frequently have to deal with the concern that they are not seen for who and what they really are. Transgender existence is a mixture of invisibility and hypervisibility—of being ignored and being perceived, at times violently and negatively. On one hand, transgender existence can be ignored, such as when folks are not aware of how transgender people move through the world or choose not to care about “trans issues.” On the other hand, the increasing coverage of transgender stories and issues across media has made it so that, in some ways, trans folks are hyper visible. The media, like other institutions, is thus a key part of learning about and structuring transgender everyday existence. Video games² are an interactive medium that have recently started to feature more significant transgender representation.

In large part, I came to this dissertation topic because seeing transgender folks in media, especially transmasculine folks that look like me, made me feel seen. As such, I wanted to know if this experience extended to other folks and what people thought of this representation. I am therefore interested in what people think about seeing and playing transgender characters in video games. As an avid video game player who is also a

¹ I will use the terms “trans,” “transgender,” “transgender woman,” “transgender man,” “trans man,” and “trans woman” throughout this dissertation to refer to folks who do not feel as though their gender aligns with the bodies they were assigned at birth. I will use “trans” and “transgender” interchangeably throughout.

² I am using the term video game to refer to games that can be played through a computer, game console, on a phone, or on another digital device where the game is played on a screen. I will use video games, games, and digital video games interchangeably throughout.

transgender man, I have experienced a wide range of characters, plot lines, and genres. Despite this, I have rarely played as or with a transgender character. I vividly remember suspecting that the non-player character Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) was a transgender man the moment I heard him speak—I recognized the sound of someone who is trying to purposefully lower their voice. I was shocked when I realized someone had included a transgender character in a video game as I had never encountered this before. My second experience with transgender representation in video games was when I saw an advertisement for the game *Tell Me Why* focused on Tyler, the “first playable” transgender main character in a video game. The idea of a playable main transgender character was important to me, because it would mean that people would have to move through the world as a trans person in a game. Experiencing their transmasculine bodies on screen is something that has stuck with me because I felt seen, and I am driven to explore what others think of this kind of representation and how it comes to be. More specifically, I am interested in analyzing what it takes to create what I call meaningful transgender representation in video games. This idea of meaningful representation is rooted in my experience of feeling seen by media, but also watching the rare instance of transgender representation that *feels* real. This type of representation echoes the uniqueness of transgender experience. It feels relatable, and that the creators are trying to respectfully capture what it is like to move through the world as a transgender person. It does not feel like the plethora of shallow, negative, and harmful examples of transgender representation that are so often present in media. In short, I considered that there are certain kinds of transgender representation that are meaningful, or that capture this feeling of realness and being trans-centric, better than others. To explore this, I have

focused on instances of significant representation in games in this dissertation to discover what meaningful representation looks like. My purpose for focusing on meaningful representation is to see what happens when a transgender character is complex and thoughtfully created, and therefore feels like it is created for and by transgender folks. I was also interested in what playing and encountering trans characters in games could add to our understanding of how transness is represented in the media.

Representation in video games is an interesting place to examine this type of representation because of the medium's unique properties. While transgender characters in other media like film and television cannot be skipped unless the viewer leaves the room or stops watching, video game characters and content can be missed. For example, the player may not physically come near the transgender character, especially if they are not integrated into the main storyline where the player must go. Additionally, the trans character may only be available in an extra part of the game that has to be purchased separately. They can also be in later stages of the game, wherein the player must complete enough of the game to reach them. Video game characters can be skipped in a way that they cannot be in other types of media. In addition, games are interactive media (King & Krzywinska, 2006) and often have dialogue options where players can choose how to react to characters in game. Games will also often include menus or information that can be accessed in the game that includes character information.

As I was examining previous research on transgender representation in non-media and LGBTQ representation in games, I created a nine criteria framework that included aspects that seemed as though they were involved in more significant transgender representation to account for the interactive, paratextual, and unique accessibility

problems that games have. My dissertation focuses on the following games: *Apex Legends* (2022), *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Tell Me Why* (2020), *The Last of Us 2* (2020), and *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories* (2018). Each of the transgender characters in these games is representative of certain aspects of transgender representation that I wanted to focus on, such as explicit transness, thoughtful integration of transgender stories, having to reckon with the physical trans body on screen, transness created for mainstream games, and trans characters being major parts of their respective games. After cataloguing games that included transgender representation, I chose this selection of eight games to focus on for this dissertation because they each had a unique combination of different criteria for significant representation. As such, they offered insight into what meaningful transgender representation looks like in video games. While significant representation entails how present the trans character is in a video game, complex representation has more to do with how thoughtfully added or developed the character is in the game. Complex representation means that characters have backstories, have traits other than their transness, and have storylines that do not always revolve around their gender identity. Meaningful representation is generally complex and significant because of increased character presence and thoughtful characters designs and stories. However, meaningful representation is more than just presence and thoughtfulness.

The experience of feeling seen as a transgender person in a game I am playing is the root of meaningful representation. Briefly, Stuart Hall (1997) describes representation as the way that something is described or depicted, which can also stand in for, or

symbolize, something else (p. 16). While this is a simplified explanation to what Hall describes as a complex process, Hall (1997) notes that representation is the “production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language” (p. 17). Representation is actually an entire system that consists of ways to organize concepts and the complex relations between them (Hall, 1997, p. 17). In a similar fashion, media characters are frequently thought of as standing for, or representing, an entire group of people. To analyze how these eight transgender video game characters are represented in their respective games, I utilized Hall’s (1991 [1973]) encoding and decoding model of communication and his circuit of culture model (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]) to understand the characters in the games, what went into creating them by talking to creators and consultants, and what players think about this representation. By triangulating my findings from these three sets of data, I explored what went into creating these examples of significant transgender representation in video games.

Along with using Hall’s work as my theoretical framework, I built on Adrienne Shaw’s (2009, 2016; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019; Shaw & Persaud, 2020) body of work concerning LGBTQ representation in games. Like Shaw (2015), I too focused on why, when, and how representation matters (p. 8). However, I focused explicitly on transgender identity as a starting point, while allowing for my interviewees to tell me if, why, when, and how representations of transgender identity through characters were important to them. As Shaw (2015) notes, “media texts provide us with source material for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, and what worlds we might live in” (pp. 3-4). Transgender existence in the form of representation in

games signals that trans folks are not invisible. I wanted to find out what trans representation looked like in games and how players understand that representation.

I focus specifically on transgender characters partly because transgender representation has often been lumped in with LGBTQ identity in examinations of queer content in games. The problem with lumping in an examination of transness with LGB is that transgender experience, and therefore transgender representation, is fundamentally different. This difference is partly related to aspects of their unique experience of gender, their necessary dependence on the medical field if physical transition is involved, and challenges specific to transgender existence. Trans-coded characters are thus characters whose transness matters to them in the game and reflects this difference. In addition to wanting to explore this specific type of trans-coded representation, transgender folks and cisgender folks have rarely been asked what they think about transgender representation in games. By focusing specifically on the representation of transgender identity in games and asking players and creators about it, I make specific arguments about what meaningful representation looks like, what it takes to create it, and what players think about it.

Part of the frameworks of knowledge in Hall's (1991 [1973]) encoding and decoding communication model include the social and cultural aspects that these media images are created in and engaged with. The representation of transgender people has been a contentious issue as this kind of media coverage invites both support and harsh condemnation. While writing this dissertation amidst the 2020-2024 right-wing political landscape of North America, transgender identity became a frequently discussed topic across news outlets and social media. There was a marked increase in anti-trans news

stories during this time, such as the continued coverage of *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling's transphobic statements (see, for example articles by Sharf, 2022 and Gardner, 2022). Aside from Rowling, there was also an increasingly outspoken contingency of gender critical feminists who argued, and continue to argue, that sex categories are important and that transgender people, and transgender women specifically, re-enforce gender essentialism and attack the identity of cisgender women. Burke (2022) explains that the "recent 're-birth' of the gender critical strand of feminism can be linked, in the UK at least, to proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act that were believed to make it easier for trans women to access single-sex spaces for women including single-sexed sporting spaces" (pp. 1-2). Rowling and other gender critical feminists argue that transgender people are their sex assigned at birth while trans people are simultaneously 'destroying' the category of woman. This leads to further harassment and prejudice and continues a harmful legacy of anti-trans stereotypes and propaganda.

This harassment can lead to real world violence and dire consequences. In 2022, gender critical feminists and right-wing conservative figures began releasing the contact information of hospitals that offered gender affirming care to trans youth. For example, Fox News personality Tucker Carlson helped disrupt hospitals who offered gender affirming treatment for children and teens, (Villarreal, 2022) and stated that parents should "fight back" against LGBT teachers (Roche, 2022). As these news stories showcase, there has been and continues to be a lot of anger and hatred targeted at transgender people. In addition to the harmful and negative way transgender folks are being talked about in the news, conservative politicians, hate groups, and well-meaning but misguided parents are continually attacking the inclusion of transgender women in

sports (Balingit, 2022; McNamara, 2022), pronoun usage in schools (Oladipo, 2022; Huppke, 2022) and the right for transgender youth to be given gender affirming care (Shutt, 2022; Butler & Tartar, 2022; Schlott, 2022). These are just some examples of the messages that were circulated in the media about trans people while I completed this dissertation.

I worked on this dissertation in the context of increased and open transphobia across North America. For example, many states in the U.S. made it challenging for transgender people to play sports (Chen, 2021), blocked gender affirming healthcare for transgender teens and adults (Sarkissian, 2022), and there were open calls to attack and kill LGBTQ people in states such as Idaho and Texas (Brownworth, 2022). In this context, it was important to me to push for better representation to help combat these negative messages. Better representation can offset these negative messages by offering educational opportunities, and through positive transgender visibility. More complex representation can benefit all folks, regardless of gender identity.

By offering educational opportunities, I mean that media representation can allow viewers and audiences to learn about transgender existence. As McInroy and Craig (2017) argue, LGBTQ media content can offer educational opportunities through the creation of common dialogue about LGBTQ experiences, as well as identity validation and visibility (p. 38). MocarSKI et al. (2019) similarly find that media representations can contribute to increased public understanding of transgender experience, thereby making their lives better (p. 423). In some ways, these representations normalize transgender existence and make it so that their existence can be acknowledged and discussed through a common dialogue. Quoting Gray (2009), McInroy and Craig (2017) further argue that

media acts as the “primary site of production for social knowledge [regarding] LGBTQ identities.” While many people may not know (or realize they have met) a trans person, they can see and learn about them through media images. Positive learning opportunities are timely as the more transgender people are featured in the media, and especially in news stories, the more people have vocal (and at times, aggressive) opinions about trans existence.

The flip side of increased visibility is the accompanying violence it brings. In the *Disclosure* documentary, activist and author Tiq Milan states that the paradox of increased representation of transgender folks is that the “more we are seen, the more we are violated” (Feder, 2020). Violations can occur through negative representations, as well as real world harassment as explored above. For example, McInroy and Craig (2017) explore how their participants found most LGBTQ representations to be one-dimensional, stereotypical, and limited in terms of diverse identities, storylines, and trajectories (pp. 39-41). In another study focused specifically on transgender representation, McInroy and Craig (2015) note that their participants found transgender representation in offline media to be largely transphobic, limited in quantity, and oversimplified (pp. 609-612). MocarSKI et al. (2019) describe this mixed media effect as duality, wherein visibility can make trans people’s lives better, while also invoking reactionary and transphobic rhetoric and discriminatory laws (p. 423). Thus, even positive representation is complex and often has mixed outcomes.

On the other hand, positive transgender representation can also offer a chance to have people like me see our experiences reflected. McInroy and Craig (2015) argue that “media representations of transgender people have significant implications for the

identity development of transgender youth” (p. 612). Mocarski et al. (2019) also found that their interviewees believed that transgender representation in the media helped their understanding of their own transgender identity (p. 428). This visibility thus seems to be personally impactful for transgender identity growth and identity validation. For both educational opportunities and increased visibility, Shaw’s (2015) argument that representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible is important (p. 4) because, despite the harm that increased visibility can bring, it is better than erasure. Further, positive and complex representation is better than negative, shallow, or one-dimensional representations.

With this dissertation, I triangulated an examination of significant transgender representation in games through the texts, through the audience, and through the production side as driven by Hall’s circuit of culture model (1997) and his encoding/decoding model of communication (1991 [1973]). My overarching arguments for this dissertation include the following: first, that there are distinctive features of meaningful transgender representation that include how present they were, how thoughtfully their transness is included, decisions around what they look and sound like, and whether they look and feel transgender. Second, that trans involvement is important to crafting transgender representation because there were demographic differences in how transgender players thought of and received these characters in comparison to others. I found demographic differences in how and why certain characters were significant to players. As explored through paratexts and interviews with game creators and consultants, game companies that valued diversity, involved transgender folks in the

process of creating these characters, and prioritized organic inclusion (Christian & White, 2020) created the most meaningful transgender representation in this sample.

I started this introduction by outlining why seeing transgender characters in a video game mattered to me. They made me feel seen, that my experiences were reflected in the media world, and that others can see people like me. I suspected that these characters might also make a difference to the people that encounter them. This meaningful representation offers a chance for transgender people to see themselves and their experiences represented on screen—they offer possibility. Through this dissertation, I wanted to discover if, how, and when that assumption is true. Additionally, these characters give others a chance to learn about, and encounter, a character who is transgender. To discover if this assumption about others encountering the characters was true, I interviewed players who had encountered the trans characters in these eight games. Not only did these characters prove to be significant in different ways to different players, but there were demographic differences in how these characters were, or were not, memorable and significant to them. By triangulating my findings across all three areas of data, I found that the transgender characters of Catalyst from *Apex Legends* (2019) and Tyler from *Tell Me Why* (2020) were considered the most meaningful out of the eight games. As such, my dissertation explores what about these characters is meaningful, how these characters came to be, and what players thought about each of these characters.

Chapter Outline

As I will explore in Chapter 2 and throughout this dissertation, there has been a long history of problematic transgender representation in the media (Abbott, 2013;

Glover, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Phillips, 2006; Rigney, 2003). The representation of transgender characters in video games suffers from many of the same problems as other media like film and television (Thach, 2021). The same stereotypes and way of framing transness—such as through a medical or binary model (Johnson, 2016), and the way transgender women are seen as a problem to be dealt with (Shaw & Friesem, 2016)—find their way into video games as well. It makes sense that these stereotypes are transplanted across media because, as Dyer (1999) argues, they help us order the world around us and help us make sense of it (p. 2). If folks do not know a lot about transgender lived experience, stereotypes are easy to call upon and can easily be used as an understandable reference in media. In addition to the recycled stereotypes that appear across different media, there are not a lot of explicitly transgender characters in mainstream video games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019) which signals nonexistence, or symbolic annihilation (Gerbner and Gross, 2017).

As outlined in Chapter 3, I identified a group of significant transgender characters in games. I crafted a set of nine criteria that I thought reasonably resulted in more significant representation as the criteria were based on problems with transgender representation in media. Using these nine criteria for significant transgender representation I chose a sample of eight to focus my interviews and textual analysis on. I combined my textual analysis of eight games with semi-structured interviews with 31 players that had encountered these characters. There has long been a push for members of marginalized groups to be included in the creation process to create better, and less harmful, representation. To analyze this representation creation process, I took inspiration from Hall's (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]) circuit of culture model and analyzed paratexts

about the games as well as published interviews. I combined this analysis by conducting interviews with three creator/consultants involved in Respawn Entertainment's game *Apex Legends*, as well as a games journalist focused on Lev from *The Last of Us 2* who had insight into the production and representation process in video games. In doing so, I was able to offer specific evidence about what meaningful transgender looks like, how players interact with and what they think about this representation, and what it takes to create it in games.

In Chapter 4, I focus on textual analysis and close reading of the eight games in this sample. I use these games to explore what meaningful transgender representation looks like. My main argument in this chapter is that meaningful transgender representation has the following distinctive features: character presence that ideally includes being a main or playable character, thoughtful inclusion of that character's transgender identity, body models and voice actors that align with the character's transgender identity, and characters that feel distinctly trans. These features, as critically read through an autoethnographic lens, make certain characters feel trans-coded. Characters that have these traits generally feel more like transgender characters created for a transgender player audience.

Chapter 5 explores some of the production considerations around including these characters by interviewing creators/consultants, a games journalist, and analyzing paratexts. Through semi-structured interviews and analyzing published creator and consultant interviews, I outline what goes into creating meaningful transgender representation from the production side. I argue that game companies that value diversity, involve trans folks in the process of creating these characters, and prioritize organic

inclusion create the most meaningful transgender representation in games. This production happens in the context of a risk averse industry, and many companies that are hesitant to add diverse content at all, let alone transgender characters. It thus takes resources, having a company willing to thoughtfully integrate the trans character into the story, and trying to do representation well that leads to significant representation. These findings show us that creating meaningful representation takes effort and mindfulness on the part of creators—significant representation that has all these qualities does not just happen. Instead, it takes motivation, a certain amount of caring about “getting it right,” and a willingness to upset certain segments of players in order to do so.

I offer more evidence for the importance of transgender involvement in Chapter 6, where I focus on audience reception of these characters through my interview with players. I argue that players thought meaningful transgender characters were those that were incorporated thoughtfully and felt organic (Christian & White, 2020). Players often described the characters they felt most strongly about as feeling “real.” An important finding explored in this chapter was the demographic differences in how players received, or thought about, these characters. Transgender player interviewees saw certain aspects of the character, such as the type of questions you are allowed to ask characters about their trans identity, as problematic. Cisgender players generally felt more celebratory about transgender inclusion, which is not a bad thing. What this does show is that transgender interviewees want and need different things from their representation than cisgender folks do. It was also interesting that interviewees that were part of the LGBTQ community were more likely to think similarly to transgender folks, which signals that LGBQ folks may feel in community, and thus want to empathize with trans

folks. Chapter 6 offers specific evidence that there are differences in what different players want and need in their representation. Player interviewees also tended to correctly suspect when transgender folks had been involved in the process. This shows that players are generally knowledgeable about the processes of production explored in Chapter 5. It also shows that involving transgender folks in the process of creating these characters does make a difference to player reception of the characters. This finding contributes to audience research on representation by signaling that transgender audience members, at least the ones in my sample, see representation differently than LGB and cis/straight folks. As part of my argument, I show that transgender representation is unique, and the audiences in this sample see that. The demographic differences in how these characters are being received show how important it is to ground assumptions about representation in reception. Moreover, it is also important to consider the texts as a form of discourse that carries certain possibilities and understandings. I unpack this discourse in the following chapters.

As I will argue throughout this dissertation, trans involvement through voice acting, consulting, and having transgender folks on the development team leads to more complex and meaningful representation, as identified by players and through the textual analysis, as it leads to representation that is more centrally and organically trans (Christian & White, 2020). Transgender involvement in creating these characters leads to more complexity because of the uniqueness of transgender experience and representation. Christian and White (2020) argue that organic representation is sourced from the community it is about, and involves giving that community power to shape and benefit from the representation. I offer specific evidence across the textual (Chapter 4), producer

(Chapter 5), and audience sides (Chapter 6) that including transgender folks in the process leads to more meaningful representation as read by all players, as articulated by folks in the production process, and in the same way that transgender characters being incorporated thoughtfully throughout the game leads to more meaningful transgender representation. Transgender inclusion in the process helps prevent negative stereotypes from being thoughtlessly recycled, can lead to more thoughtful integration of transness into the character's story, and better enables the creators to attune to ways of creating a character that is distinctly transgender and moves through the game world in a distinctly trans-coded way. As a concept, meaningful representation helps us understand how trans-coded representation is created and received. In a more general sense, the concept of meaningful representation helps us to understand the varying implications of how representations circulate and are decoded by audiences based on who producers have in mind when creating them, as well as who they involve in the process of creation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Games as Texts

Media texts offer ways of seeing and understanding the world. More importantly, they also supply us with ways of understanding ourselves and others. We communicate through and within texts. Baran et al. (2014) describe texts as “any product of social interaction that serves as a source of understanding or meaning” (p. 15). The underlying assumption is that texts themselves carry meaning (McKee, 2003). Graddol (2005) states that texts as communicative artifacts are the “product of a technology and their material form in part reflects the nature of that technology” (p. 41). The conditions surrounding a text’s creation necessarily influence how the text takes shape. As Graddol (2005) argues, texts are created by “particular historical and material circumstances by people who work in particular relations of power...a text...will reflect in various ways the historical process of its production” (Graddol, 2005, p. 49). In summary, texts are communicative objects materially produced in some way—as such, they inevitably manifest signs of the historical, political, and social period of their creation as well as the material and technological production processes that shaped them. Games, like other media objects, are texts and can be read as communicating particular realities about the power dynamics of that time.

Understanding games as texts allows us to see how they are related to other media, such as film and television, and how they are unique. Cole and Barker (2020) outline how referring to games as texts also opens up the range of analytical tools we can use to study texts as communicative artifacts (p. 1). Drawing from King and Krzywinka’s

(2005) examination of video game forms, Cole and Barker (2020) argue that studying games means we must examine them as systems and individual components (p. 5). This means looking at the game as a holistic artifact, with differing storylines, characters, and purposes. It also means looking at aspects of video game production to see what influences game producers when crafting games.

Cultural Studies Approaches to Analyzing Texts

Games are cultural products, and as such are media objects that are influenced by culture and made in a cultural industry. Murray (2017) notes that by using the tools of cultural critique to analyze games as “dynamic forces of representation...[this] can provide a valuable means by which to better understand video games as culture within the matrix of power and difference” (p. 3). Murray (2017) argues that the ongoing struggle of culture is something we can observe in games (p. 3). Using a cultural studies approach allows us to consider the dynamics of power in representation as well. When thinking of the power dynamics in representation, Couldry (2000) argues that “power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) ...affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent” (p. 2). Issues around representation, who is allowed to speak, and who is seen as the normative audience for games are all implicated in these issues of power relations. My analysis centers on these questions—what issues do these representations combat, or avoid? What and who influences how these representations come to be created? Who is consulted on them?

Recognizing the importance of considering all the features of a game and its surrounding contexts together, in this research I integrate examinations of game texts, paratexts, interviews regarding game and character production, and interviews that focus

on audience reception. Much of the work grounding this research, including game studies literature grounded in cultural studies, uses Stuart Hall's formulations of culture, representation, and processes of representation. There are different ways of theorizing and positioning texts in cultural studies-based media research. Johnson (1986) notes that cultural studies research has been oriented in three main ways: "production-based studies, text-based studies, and studies of lived cultures" (p. 72). Each model has its respective strength, and combining these models allows the researcher to see different aspects of their research focus. Regarding common approaches to game analysis specifically, Consalvo and Dutton (2006) noted that, at the time of their writing, game research had focused on the audience or critiquing the games (para. 2). They wanted to build tools for qualitative and critical examinations of games. Since their writing, we have seen an increase in this type of research (see Cote, 2020; Mejeur & Cote, 2021; Mejeur, C., Butt, M.-A. R., & Cole, A., 2021 for examples of qualitative and critical game studies research focused on gender, queerness, and diversity). However, research in this area still typically follows only one or two models—either focusing on critical game analysis, production, or audience reception. It was thus important to me to be able to consider this topic from all three angles and determine what the intersection and differences can tell us about what is included in meaningful transgender representation.

Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model is one way to approach analyzing texts. Hall's model outlines how dominant meanings are 'encoded' on a text through a four-stage model of communication including production, circulation, use, and reproduction, and then decoded in certain ways by the people that consume the text (During, 1999, p. 507). This model is useful for seeing how processes of production (who

produces texts and/or messages and how they do so) encode, or embed, certain values and meanings on a text. This text then circulates, and people consume it. According to Hall (1999), there are three positions people decode, or interpret, media messages from: 1. Dominant-hegemonic position: viewer accepts message, takes connoted meaning from the text, and decodes the message the way it has been encoded by the producers; 2. Negotiated position: a mix of dominant and oppositional positions where the viewer acknowledges the way the text has been encoded but accepts this on “more restricted, situational level” (p. 516); and 3. Oppositional position: the viewer understands the way the text has been encoded, but decodes the message in the opposite way (p. 517). From this understanding of the encoding/decoding model, we can argue that there is a possibility that people consume texts in the way the producers mean them to and therefore accept the messages/values embedded in the text (dominant-hegemonic position); or that they accept some of the message, but negotiate or add their own reading (negotiated position); or that they understand and read the text in a contradictory or opposite way (oppositional position). As part of my process of analyzing the text, the production of the characters, and audience reception to these characters, I considered the ways producers said they crafted these characters and how audiences received them. In other words, did players receive these characters in the same way producers talked about them, or were there differences in a more negotiated or oppositional reading? And was there a difference between the way trans, nonbinary and cisgender folks read these characters? Keeping this model in mind helped me understand the relationship between encoding and decoding in the text, producer, and audience.

In addition to utilizing Hall's encoding/decoding model to understand how texts are made, circulated, and received, I also took inspiration from Hall's (1997) circuit of culture model to further place game texts in the cultural production process. Hall's (1997) original circuit of culture model describes five intertwined cultural processes that form this circuit and allow media researchers to holistically analyze media texts from these five locations: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (p. 1; Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997], p. 3). For the purposes of this research, I considered three of the five cultural processes: how transgender characters are represented in the game text (representation), what goes into producing significant transgender representation (production), and the audience reception of these characters (consumption). While I was most concerned with how these trans characters are represented, produced, and consumed, it is impossible to disentangle this representation from the other circuits in this model. Considering all five circuits would require taking a more focused approach to considering the identities of all involved in the circuit, and the processes of game regulation, which is beyond the scope of this project. While part of my analysis involved thinking through aspects of this circuit, I focused on representation, some aspects of producing the characters, and how the audience received these characters in order to answer my research questions.

Cultural Production and Game Studios

An important influence in structuring the texts of video games, and thus important to think through when answering this project's questions, is the production process games go through, as well as the culture of game studios. Video games are created in game studios or by independent (indie) game studios. Depending on the size of the studio,

video games will go through different stages of development, oftentimes overseen by separate departments—starting with an idea for a game and ending with distribution and then reception. The structures of the game industry influence how studios create games. They also influence what content mainstream game studios create and how they make it. Kerr (2017) explains that “digital game developers and publishers are conceptualized as content/symbol creators” (p. 5). As part of the cultural industries, game development is characterized by the high risk involved in production, high production costs and low reproduction costs, and by the fact that games, like films and books, are a semi-public good (Kerr, 2006, p. 45; Kerr 2017). As Kerr (2006) outlines, only a few of these products make a large profit or become big hits (p. 45). Keogh (2021) echoes this, noting that videogames are still “project-driven and hit-driven...creating a videogame has many upfront costs (labor, workspace, hardware, software) with little predictability as to when (or if) sales will ever recover these costs.” (p. 120). This is the heart of the risk in this industry—a lot of money and resources goes into producing AAA games, without the guarantee they will make money. To offset this risk, studios may prioritize trying to copy previous commercial successes over exploring new and untried content. Shaw (2009) argues that consistently appealing to the expected target market in this way has a reductive effect: “these games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time...as only economically successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what ‘gamers’ play” (p. 232). For all the games that are made, only a handful of them become wildly popular and financially successful, and the industry practices outlined above mean that this handful of “successful” games has a disproportionate influence on the mainstream gaming landscape at large.

The advent of high-speed internet and advances in technology has caused lasting changes in the game industry. Kerr (2017) states that the game industry has “embraced digital distribution, Internet intermediaries and amateur content creation, and it has been at the forefront of developing new business models to harness these developments effectively” (p. 6). This means that game production is more open to independent game creation, and there has been an increase in game making tools that folks outside of game studios can use to create games. As Martin and Deuze (2009) argue, “we can view the rise of indie development in part as the very product of an increasingly globally differentiated market, fueled by the rise and availability of cheap and easy-to-use development and distribution technologies” (p. 292). While the greater accessibility of these technologies means more people and communities can tell diverse stories and add to complex representations, my research focuses on mostly AAA, or bigger and more well-funded studios, in order to better understand the evolutions happening within the mainstream industry. The exceptions to this in this study is *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories*. I included this game as it is one of the rare games that centers a trans perspective (Thach, 2021) and requires the player to play as a trans character.

Incorporating more diverse stories into the mainstream game industry is more difficult because of the industry’s norms. More specifically, examining video game production through a cultural production perspective allows for a few things: understanding how transgender characters are produced in games, the barriers that still exist for that to happen, and what factors go into creating complex LGBTQ characters from the production side. Shaw (2009) establishes that using a cultural production perspective helps to analyze how “certain identities come to be represented in video

games” (p. 232). In Shaw’s (2009) research on cultural production and LGBTQ content in games, she finds a few factors that influence if LGBTQ content will be present in games—the “attitudes of those in the video game development community, the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content, whether the structure of the industry allows it to face this backlash, and the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium” (p. 229). The capabilities of including LGBTQ representation in games is thus influenced by the attitudes of those in the industry, the technology of games themselves, and how producers perceive what their audience wants—or what they will reject.

Representation in Video Games

Media characters are frequently thought of as standing for, or representing, an entire group of people. As Hall (1997) notes, representation is the way that something stands for, or symbolizes, something else (p. 16). Representation is therefore an entire system that consists of ways to organize concepts and the complex relations between them (Hall, 1997, p. 17). Thus, representation as a production of meaning through language contributes to how we make sense of others, the world, and ourselves (Hall, 2020, pp. 1-3). This becomes a problem as people sharing a certain characteristic such as age, sexual orientation, gender identity, or race, does not mean they are alike or have similar life experiences. In short, representation is more complicated than a direct media image representing the experience of an entire group, or that representation being a one-to-one reflection or imagining of real life. Thus, it is important that we work to understand how media representations diverge from, or align with, reality.

Game studies scholarship on representation and identity has been steadily increasing, especially with work on race (Brock, 2011; Leonard, 2003, 2009), the intersectionality of race and gender online (Gray, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2018), gender (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009), Indigenous representation (Bird, 2021; LaPensee, 2018), and LGBTQ representation (Shaw, 2014, Shaw et al., 2019), amongst many others. In their book on *Gaming Representation*, Malkowski and Russworm (2017) note that “representation and identity are...complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms—indeed, all technologies—are constructed” (p. 3). Representation and identity are a key part of playing and studying video games. The growing variety of literature in this area suggests the same.

In terms of situating this project, I am influenced by Shaw’s ways of thinking through how LGBTQ representation has been incorporated in games. Like Shaw (2015), I too focus on why, when, and how representation matters (p. 8). However, I focus explicitly on transgender identity as a starting point for the characters and games I examine, while allowing for my interviewees to tell me if, why, when, and how representations of transgender identity through characters are important. As Shaw (2015) notes, media texts like games can let us see what might be possible in terms of identity and the world around us. The growing, but still minimal, existence of transgender characters in mainstream video games serves as a starting point for imaging what might be possible.

Throughout this dissertation, I will be using Hall’s (1997) understanding of the work representation can do in conjunction with aspects of his circuit of culture model to frame my method, and using his encoding and decoding model of communication (1991

[1973]) to interrogate how the transgender characters are being created and experienced. Namely, I use this circuit of culture model to look at how transgender characters are represented, how transgender identity is both constructed in games and received by players, and how these characters are produced and consumed. Alongside this, I utilize his encoding and decoding model of communication (1991 [1973]) to account for the way that video game characters on the screen are created through frameworks of knowledge, encoded by game producers to be received in certain ways by the audience, and decoded by the audience within their own frameworks of knowledge. At the center of this model of communication is the text, and the discourse and representation within that text. Representations of transgender characters in a selection of eight video games are my chosen texts that sit in the middle of my version of this model.

LGBTQ Representation in Video Games

Although LGBTQ content has been a part of video games for a long time (Shaw et al., 2019), Shaw (2015) notes that digital game studies has been limited and cursory when it comes to the representation of marginalized groups in games (p. 14). Research that focuses on LGBTQ content in games has increased since 2015, but most of this research 1. focuses on one aspect of this representation, such as sexuality or queerness (see Adams, 2015; Consalvo, 2003; Thach, 2021), 2. aims to provide an overview of how this representation is happening across games, broadly construed (like both Cole's [2016] site *Queerly Represent Me* and Shaw's [2016] *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, as well as Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw, Lauteria, Yang, Persaud, & Cole, 2019), 3. Focuses on particular games and/or their players to critique LGBTQ representation (Brookey & Cannon, 2009; Condis, 2015; Greer, 2013; Pulos, 2013), or 4. Approaches LGBTQ

representation beyond the characters on screen (such as the paradigm of Queer game studies and scholars that use queer theory to do so, like Chess, 2016; Engel, 2017; Lauteria, 2011, 2012; Pow, 2018; Ruberg 2018a, 2019, 2020). Work on LGBTQ representation illuminates a few major trends and themes. As I will explore in more detail below, much of this research focuses on game content to the exclusion of other aspects. There are also trends regarding what type of content has increased over time, like minor characters and gay men characters. More than other identities, explicitly transgender characters are very rare. Character sexuality is generally revealed through their relationship with others. And perhaps most problematically, most of this content happens in a way that does not usually matter to the game or story.

Regarding content, both archives *Queerly Represent Me* and the *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* provide information on how LGBTQ content exists in video games. Shaw and Friesem (2016) find that most of these characters are minor or major non-player characters, meaning that they are not played directly by the player and remain largely inconsequential to the storyline or gameplay (p. 3880). While characters make up most of the LGBTQ content, Shaw et al. (2019) also note the inclusion of narrative content, ludic elements, locations, and references to LGBTQ people and/or themes (p. 1545) as well as relationships (the second most frequent type of content according to Shaw et al., 2019, p. 1546). Shaw et al. (2019) find that LGBTQ representation in general has increased over time (p. 1554).

Even within this increase, there are clear trends in what identities are included more than others. In Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory's (2009) exploratory study of characters in games, they found that men are far more often the main characters. In an

updated census, Harrisson et al. (2020) found that most characters were white, male, and adults, but that there had been a marked increase in female characters. However, these women were predominantly in NPC and secondary roles instead of main characters (Harrisson et al., 2020). Harrisson et al. (2020) also found improvements in racial representation, with the most increase in the frequency of Asian/Pacific Islander and biracial characters. Both censuses still found that white adult men are still the most common main characters in games.

In terms of LGBTQ representation, gay men are represented more than any other identity (Utsch et al., 2017; Shaw, et al., 2019). Shaw et al. (2019) find that there are less nonbinary, gender nonconforming, transgender, and intersex characters than lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) characters. Shaw and Friesem (2016) state that “representations of explicitly transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex characters are less common in games than of homosexual and bisexual characters, and most of them appear in more recent games” (p. 3882). There is also a difference in frequency between transgender men and transgender women, with many more transgender women characters appearing in games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Utsch et al. (2017) note that bisexual characters are rare until 1999 and increase until the amount of bisexual representation stabilizes in 2006 (p. 851), while lesbian characters are the second most represented following gay men (p. 854). Across identities, there is an important difference between explicit representation (the character is clearly described or states that they are a certain identity) versus implicit (the LGBTQ identity may be implied, read, or assumed to be LGBTQ/queer but this is not explicitly named) identities. In total, there are more often gay men as characters who

are explicitly named as such than other types of identities. These findings align with other types of media, like television (“Where we are on TV report — 2020 2021”; “Where we are on TV report — 2021 2022”; “Where we are on TV report — 2022 2023”).

Another finding is that character sexuality is often signaled by that character’s relationship with others. For example, Soldier 76 and Tracer are both gay characters in the game *Overwatch* (2016) and are established that way through the revelation that they have same gender partners. While adding more representation of LGB characters is technically a good thing, signaling sexuality solely through the ability to have sex or be in a relationship with a character of the same gender flattens out the complexity of sexuality. As Shaw (2015) explores, this type of dynamic implies that sexuality is immutable and reductive (pp. 29-30). There is an additional type of non-player character (NPC) specific sexuality, commonly termed “player sexual” which refers to when NPCs can be romanced by the player no matter what the player’s in-game gender is. In general, a major trend in LGBTQ representation in video games is that it flattens out most of the complexity of LGBTQ identities when they are represented on screen.

This leads me to a final major theme in this literature, which is the fact that this content happens mostly in an inconsequential manner. For example, many LGBTQ characters are non-player characters (NPC), or the content can be skipped, or the LGBTQ character is somehow monstrous, a villain, or a joke to be made fun of. Shaw and Friesem (2016) find that explicitly LGBTQ characters are rare, most are NPCs, and that these characters are mostly do not matter to the gameplay—their presence or absence does not change anything (p. 3880). Attributing the term the ‘gay button’ to game designer Anna Anthropy, both Adams (2015) and Shaw (2015) note that if the LGBTQ

content can actually be skipped during gameplay (having to press a ‘gay button’ to experience it or purchase/download additional content), then it is not as significant as it could be and therefore the player can continue to consume the “heteronormative-dominated texts” without truly having to reckon with the existence of LGBTQ content (Shaw, 2015, p. 34). For example, it is quite easy to miss the fact that Soldier 76 and Tracer are gay if the player does not read paratextual information or watch the animated shorts.

Gender and Game Culture

There has been a wealth of research in game studies focused on gender. Much of this research focuses on the representation of women as characters in games (Lynch et al., 2016; Williams, Martins, & Consalvo, 2009), or the experiences of women in the game industry (Harvey & Fisher, 2013, 2015; Ochsner, 2019) or as players (Lopez-Fernandez, Williams, Griffiths, & Kuss, 2019; Taylor, 2003). There is rarely consideration given to transgender, genderqueer, or nonbinary players, representing a gap in this area of research. A prevalent theme of work on gender in gaming is that mainstream gaming culture is dominated by men and that women, along with other identities such as LGBTQ and BIPOC players, are constantly at odds with such a culture. Video game spaces are often seen as belonging to men as the imagined gamer/audience (Shaw, 2009, p. 237; Condis, 2018, p. 8). This construct impacts who works (and stays) in the industry, what games are funded and made, what genres are popular and make money, and who is signaled as belonging in the category of ‘gamer’ (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Taken together, all these aspects create a culture that allows men to claim ownership and feel like they can dominate these spaces, and leads others to face harassment when

participating in them. Burrill (2008) argues that video games act as a performative space where masculine-coded subjects are “produced, reproduced, and maintained” and a certain type of masculinity is made to seem as naturally belonging/owning the game space (p. 2). This problem is not limited to game spaces, but it is animated in unique boundary guarding ways in such spaces.

This boundary guarding and gatekeeping largely characterizes the specific type of toxic masculinity often associated with video games. This association is evidenced by game studies scholars such as Taylor, Jenson, and De Castell (2009) who establish that video games continue to be made for and by boys³. Additionally, Condis (2018) argues that masculinity is policed in gaming spaces and that “gendered abuse is to be expected in gaming culture” (pp. 15-16). Consistent with Salter and Blodgett’s (2012) findings, it is still true that those who do not measure up to this type of gaming masculinity are challenged or harassed (p. 402). This techno-infused gaming masculinity is thoughtfully explored by Burrill (2008), who argues that the ‘boy gamer’ he has in mind, who cherishes their power over technology, is threatened by ‘competing’ groups such as women and LGBTQ players (p. 88). Boundary guarding and gatekeeping, then, are specifically mobilized in a bid to keep competing groups “out” and retain privileged status as the “primary audience” for mainstream games. This status is then further enforced through the widespread casual sexism (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), homophobia (Condis, 2015; Gray, 2014, 2018; Shaw & Friesem, 2016), racism (Gray, 2014), and transphobia (Shaw & Friesem, 2016) in some mainstream game spaces.

³ See similar arguments from Condis, 2015, as well as Gray's 2014 exploration of how minority gamers are not welcomed in gaming spaces.

My purpose in exploring this imagined gamer audience is to outline how diversity initiatives or efforts to make games include more diverse content are faced with the toxic nature of this perceived masculine mainstream gaming culture. Salter and Blodgett (2012) state that the rise of casual gaming has left hardcore players feeling alienated⁴ (p. 407). The backlash comes from this sense of alienation and the feeling that others are encroaching upon this space. Relatedly, Adams (2015), Condis (2015), and Tomkinson (2023) all thoughtfully explore how there is often pushback when LGBTQ identities are included in games. It is seen as “political,” separated from the “fantasy world” of games (Adams, 2015). This has resulted in an indie and casual gaming culture that exists alongside mainstream gamer culture. This in turn influences what games are popular or seen as “real games.” For example, some indie, casual or ‘different’ games are often not considered ‘real’ games by some hardcore players. Consalvo and Paul’s (2019) examination of what counts as real games versus those that do not further highlights how the way video games are “constructed by the community shapes the way in which they are received and developed” (p. 129). Consalvo and Paul (2019) find that “what games get centered as real and which get marginalized as something else is a meaningful process that shapes what games we are likely to see more of, and who gets imagined as a player and is welcomed into a community of fellow players” (p. 125). With increasingly diverse representation in more mainstream spaces, those who are imagined as players can shift, therefore creating even more space for everybody in these mainstream game spaces.

⁴ See similar arguments from Cote (2020), where she argues that players who have enjoyed a dominant position in gaming culture react aggressively when they feel their privileged position is being threatened (p. 3).

More complex representation can help to create space in this way. As McInroy and Craig (2015) argue, the media can act as a positive influence on the opinions people hold about transgender people—interrogating this representation is thus critical.

Transgender Representation in Non-Game Media

Transgender representation has a long history in film and television shows (Abbott, 2022; Phillips, 2006). There are certain trends in what kind of transgender representation has been featured in non-game media, as well as what happens to those characters in film and television. Across non-game media, there are generally more representations of trans women than trans men. For example, all three of GLAAD’s “Where We Are on TV” reports above find that there are more transgender women characters than trans men or trans nonbinary characters. Capuzza and Spencer (2017) similarly find that transgender women outstrip transgender men and nonbinary characters in terms of character quantity.

Aside from the amount of transgender characters, another enduring problem is that many trans characters are played or voiced by cisgender actors that do not align with the characters gender identity. For example, trans man Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) was played by Hilary Swank, and Eddie Redmayne played trans woman Lili in *The Danish Girl* (2015). This trend has continued in various non-game media. Casting cisgender actors in transgender roles is a problem for a several reasons. First, it makes it appear as though transgender people are really just men or women in drag. Second, it takes away the already limited prospects of transgender actors (Kisner, 2020). While transgender actors should not be limited to just playing trans roles, they do not usually get cast into cis roles and are usually typecast into trans roles. Third, it takes away the

opportunity for transgender people to really understand and embody the character and their experience (Wynne, 2022). Fourth, there is the potential for this misalignment between actor and character to replicate misinformation and stereotypes about transgender people, rather than promoting empathy and understanding. There has thus been a larger push for more opportunities for transgender actors, both in trans and non-transgender media roles.

Transgender representation in film and television can serve as an introduction to the transgender experience. As I've mentioned, McInroy and Craig's (2015) show how media acts as a source for knowledge about trans people for the public (p. 606). On the other hand, both McInroy and Craig (2015) and Cavalcante (2017) argue these media presences are also impactful for other trans people to see on screen. Thus, this content has the potential to offer visibility to those that can benefit from such encounters and trans people themselves. At the same time, misrepresentations and other major issues in the depiction of transgender characters can reinforce problematic and harmful beliefs. Problematic transgender representation trends include: the trans character suffers trauma and violence; the characters are stereotypical, negative, or one-dimensional; the trans character is rarely seen in relationships with others or as loveable; and many of these representations follow a transnormative and medical model of transgender identity. I explore each of these trends in more detail below.

One of the more vicious tropes is when the transgender character endlessly suffers trauma, violence, or death. This trauma and violence can take many forms, such as physical, sexual, emotional, and/or mental harm. An example of a film that perpetuates these kinds of stereotypes is *Boys Don't Cry*, which is based on the real-life story in

which transgender man Brandon Teena was murdered by John Lotter and Tom Nissen when they discovered he was transgender. Rigney (2003) states that while the film acknowledges the crimes of Nissen and Lotter in their assault on Brandon Teena, it “suggests that the source of Brandon’s demise is his outrageous confidence in his ability to pass as male...his crime is a crime of arrogance: to violate gender norms while not expecting punishment” (p. 14). As in real life, *Boys Don’t Cry* ends with Brandon’s death at the hands of John Lotter. Rigney (2003) points out that, “as in prior representations of trans characters in film, Brandon is viciously conquered and defeated” (p. 20). The transgender character frequently dying or suffering trauma endlessly is exacerbated by the small number of characters that are trans, as this is the most common type of trans story that people see.

Harm can also occur through stereotyping, ridicule, and more indirect forms, like the use of cross-dressing in comedy films. The trope of “psycho-trans killer” is another common form of violence against transgender people as it perpetuates the myth that transgender people are mentally ill. Phillips (2006) offers an in depth and compelling overview of transgender representation in mainstream films with the explicit aim of demonstrating that “perceptions of transgender are mediated by culturally constructed images” (p. 1). He explores the main ways that transgender people have been represented in film: through cross-dressing in comedy (such as in *White Chicks* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*), as the psycho-trans killer (think Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*), drama queens and macho men, and the prevalent role of and fascination with transgender women in pornography. Ultimately, Phillips (2006) concludes that the “dominant filmic image of transgender from 1950s to the end of the 1990s have in the end tended to reinforce

stereotypical thinking on the subject” (p. 165). Either the transgender character endlessly suffers because of this stereotypical thinking, or they are the source of cruel jokes. If their storylines always include being the punchline of a joke (*Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*), the sacrificial lamb (*Boys Don’t Cry*, *Dallas Buyers Club*), a psycho killer or villain (*Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Silence of the Lambs*), having their body revealed without consent (*Boys Don’t Cry*), misgendered repeatedly (*The Fosters*), or being physically attacked (*Boys Don’t Cry*, *The Danish Girl*, *Orange is the New Black*), then what kind of messages does that reinforce to those watching? These representations reinforce these negative tropes, and signal that transgender folks are not deserving of respect or consideration. In addition, it constructs an image of transgender folks as victims and objects of pity.

In many of these representations, the trans characters are rarely seen in relationships. While it is true, as noted previously, that using romantic/sexual relationship to make queer sexualities explicit can ultimately be reductive, the exclusion of trans characters from relationships presents a different problem. Abbott (2013) uses the term trans-romance dilemma to describe how trans characters are often denied romantic or sexual connections with others. Abbott (2013) argues that this dilemma is the “result of two...cultural associations between transgender identity and sexual transgression” wherein transgender identity is linked with sex and deviance, and to be intimate with a transgender person is to cross the threshold from normal sexuality to transgression (p. 32). As Cavalcante (2013) explores in his research on trans audiences, affirmations of love are important to trans folks who feel anxiety about starting a family or finding love

(p. 174). Cavalcante (2013) argues that media depictions of trans folks as unlovable serve to amplify these concerns (p. 174).

There are many examples of transgender characters attempting to pursue relationships and being denied fulfilling love story narratives. In my previous research, I note how Cole's failed attempt at romance twice throughout *The Fosters*—one in which his love interest tells him he is not a real man—is indicative of this inability to find love (McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021). Even when characters are married, such as Sophia from *Orange is the New Black*, they are often prevented from having a healthy relationship. Since Sophia is in prison, she is not able to enjoy a relationship with her wife, who subsequently starts dating a cisgender man. In summary, transgender characters are often portrayed as unlovable.

Many of the representations include a narrow view of transgender identity as following a strictly medical model of transition. In other words, transgender people are understood to be 'born in the wrong body', and therefore they all relentlessly pursue hormone replacement therapy and gender affirming surgery to "switch to the other gender." This normative standard is called transnormativity (Glover 2016; Johnson, 2016). This medical model is a common trope used in the media, and it makes it appear as though transgender people all desire to go from one binary gender to the 'opposite' one. Looking at how gender identity intersects with race, Glover (2016) considers how trans women of color like writer Janet Mock and actress Laverne Cox, who both have considerable platforms, are constructed as representatives of all transgender women of color (p. 341). They find that Mock and Cox produce a certain definition of acceptable transgender identity, otherwise known as transnormativity, that capitulates to

heteronormative assumptions and erases the experience of other trans people, especially transgender women of color that do not look like Mock or Cox (Glover, 2016, p. 351). This means that there is still a certain type of transgender experience that is represented and seen as more palatable in media more than others. Namely, the type of transgender experience preferred is that which does not disrupt gender norms around women being feminine or men being masculine, and preferably those that are attractive and in heterosexual relationships. The ability to ‘pass’, or appear to be cisgender, is among the most important aspects of transnormativity. Johnson (2016) adds that the born in the wrong body trope reinforces transnormative models of representation, as well as instances where the character’s trans identity is actualized by medical and/or surgical interventions (p. 475). In other words, a transnormative framework reinforces the belief that real transgender people feel as though they are born in the wrong body, and that they must seek medical interventions to escape the hatred they have for their bodies. The themes of violence enacted against the transgender body (McLaren, Bryant & Brown, 2021; Rigney, 2003), negative and stereotypical tropes such as the “psycho trans killer” used over and over again (Phillips, 2006), transgender folks being seen as unlovable (Abbott, 2013; Cavalcante, 2013), and transgender identity being understood through a transnormative and/or medical model (Glover, 2016; Johnson, 2016) are themes are readily found across other scholarly work, and all manner of transgender media representation⁵.

⁵ Films such as *Boy’s Don’t Cry* (1999), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), and *The Crying Game* (1992) all variously include violence against trans folks, the “psycho trans” tropes, and the trans character seen as unlovable or as disgusting by other characters.

Despite the enduring harmful and negative tropes that I have outlined, some scholars are optimistic that transgender representation is improving in quantity and quality. For example, Sandercock (2015) argues that the characters Adam in *Degrassi* and Unique in *Glee* have “broken ground” (p. 448); Glover (2016) notes that the media presence of Cox and Mock represents an “important step forward in rendering transgender women of color not only visible in society but also human” (p. 353); and Capuzza and Spencer (2017) agree that the representations they critically analyzed suggest we should be “cautiously optimistic” about further trans representation (p. 227). In their thesis, Nash (2019) describes the term ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’ as a phrase “used by *Time* magazine in 2014 to describe the increased visibility of transgender people in popular culture” (p. 9). This image featured Laverne Cox on the front cover, with the words “The Transgender Tipping Point” beside her. Transgender characters are appearing more frequently across more platforms (as seen in GLAAD’s “Where we are on TV” reports), in more shows and films, and across more genres.

As transgender representation increases, a key concern is how we break away from oft-used negative tropes and stereotypes that plague transgender representation across different media to improve its quality and influence. What would it, or what does it, mean to create complex transgender representation in video games? What would it mean for transgender representation to be significant to the storyline? As explored here, there has been a wealth of research on LGBTQ and gender representation in video games and transgender content in non-game media. Yet not many researchers have asked transgender players and cis players what they think of the transgender representation in games. As such, these are all important considerations for this dissertation going forward.

Transgender Representation in Video Games

I will address the findings of existing research on transgender representation in video games in chapter 4, but it is useful here to note how my project aligns with, and expands on, previous work in its design, focus, and aims. My dissertation builds on previous LGBTQ game studies research that examines game content and talks to players and game creators (such as by Ruberg, 2020; Shaw, 2009; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019), as well as on research that looks specifically at transgender representation in games (Thach, 2021; Kosciesza, 2022). Thach (2021) offers a cross-game look at trans representation across 63 video games based on content from *The LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, finding four overarching trends of transgender representation in the games: dysphoria/physical transition, mentally ill killers, trans shock/reveal, and ambiguity (p. 24). In comparison, Kosciesza (2022) specifically focuses on non-player transgender characters in the role-playing game (RPG) genre. Kosciesza (2022) uses textual analysis of three games and discourse analysis of paratextual information surrounding the games, including interviews, articles, public statements, and blog posts (p. 5) to argue that these non-player trans characters serve to “evoke empathy and provoke moral transformation in cisgender protagonists” (p. 12). Additional work on transgender representation in games does a lot of counting or cataloging of transgender representation in-game (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Lauteria, 2018).

My dissertation includes analyzing game content, asking players who have encountered these transgender characters what they think about them, and talking to those who helped bring these characters to life to find out what is involved in crafting them. Using Hall’s circuit of culture model, I triangulated my analysis of the characters (what is

on the screen) with what players had to say (how are these characters being actively received), and what those involved with character creation said about how these characters were created (how they came to be). In addition to analyzing the game texts and paratexts, I wanted to find out if, how and why they made an impact on people through my interviews by focusing on how players were receiving and thinking about these characters.

My overarching goals in this dissertation were to (1) critically examine what meaningful transgender representation has looked like in games using specific examples, (2) explore how these representations were created, and (3) discover what players thought of these representations to find out what it takes to make meaningful transgender representation. My specific research questions are:

RQ 1. What does meaningful transgender representation look like in video games?

RQ 2. What is involved in making meaningful transgender representation in games?

RQ 3. What do players think about transgender representation in video games?

- a. What games with transgender representation are important to players?
- b. What transgender characters are important to players?
- c. Are there demographic or identity-based differences in how people relate to or talk about these characters?
- d. What do players consider meaningful transgender representation?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND INTERVIEWS

In this dissertation, I examined eight games that included significant transgender characters. I used critical analysis of the games themselves and relevant paratexts to understand how each trans character was represented in their game. In addition, I included interviews with creators, consultants, a game journalist and relevant paratexts to understand what was involved in crafting the characters. Finally, I interviewed 31 players that had played one or more of these games to understand how players were encountering these characters and what they thought about them.

My methodology is guided theoretically by Hall's work on encoding and decoding (1991 [1973]) and circuit of culture (1997). I situated my analysis by considering the social, political, and cultural contexts in which these games are created, circulated, and received in. This project was also conducted in a time of virulent and violent media coverage demonizing transgender people. Throughout this process, I was careful to consider how my analysis, experience of this research, and conversations with my interviews were influenced by the media's distressing and prejudicial coverage of transgender people. Additionally, my own positionality as a white transmasculine researcher and video game player influences this project, so I would be remiss to not mention that there is a part of this project that is also autoethnographic in nature (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Jones & Adams, 2016). I take influence from Ellis (2004) description of reflexive ethnography, or ethnographic work that is reflexive and "starting research from one's own biography" (p. 47). Ellis (2004) states that reflexive ethnography allows researchers to "incorporate their personal experience and

standpoint...by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project, or using personal knowledge to help them in the research project” (p. 48). My positionality and lived experience as a white transgender man are thus an important starting place for my analysis. The following sections outline my procedures for data collection to interrogate meaningful transgender representation in video games. First, I will explain my framework for judging significant representation and how that helped me narrow down my sample to eight games.

Defining Significant Transgender Representation

Using previous research predominantly focused on transgender representation in non-game media and LGBTQ representation in games, I created nine preliminary criteria for major transgender characters in video games to focus this analysis:

- the trans character and their storyline(s) should be *integrated into the game in a substantial manner*. This means that their existence as a character must matter, including a thoughtful storyline and/or dialogue.
- the character must be *explicitly transgender*. For a character to be explicitly transgender, they must be “clearly or easily read” as such (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3879). This can be fulfilled in one of two ways: in character dialogue or through game discovery. At some point in the game, the player must be told that the character is transgender. This criterion can also be met if the player has a reasonable chance to find out that the character is transgender throughout the game or through paratexts. For example, some games have items like journals that can be collected throughout that give the player more information about the game world, narrative, etc. This criterion can be satisfied if paratexts about the game,

including interviews and game wikis, clearly state that the character is transgender. Explicit transness is rare (Shaw & FrieSEM, 2016, p. 3882) and this means that the developers purposefully set out to create a transgender character. While only including explicitly trans characters has been noted to be limiting (Shaw & FrieSEM, 2016, p. 3979) and only counting characters on the screen has its limitations (Ruberg, 2019, p. 14), explicit representation means that these characters are purposeful. I am interested in what it means to purposefully make a transgender character, which requires developer intention.

- the character must be a *main or major part* of the gameplay. The transgender character either must be a main, playable character, take part in main story quests, or be present for a large portion of the game. Taking part in the gameplay means the player interacts with them often, can take them on quests, can speak to them, and/or can learn a lot about them through dialogue. In short, the player must have extended interaction with the transgender character.
- the character is *not missable*. No matter how the player chooses to play the game, they must encounter the transgender character. The character must be embedded into the storyline in such a way that it would be very hard to progress through the narrative or game without encountering them. Game designer Anna Anthropy referred to the ability to make queer content missable, or to turn it on and off, as the “gay button” (Krampe, 2018, para. 25; Østby, 2017, p. 15). Theoretically, players that could benefit the most from encountering queer and trans content could just turn it off instead of being faced with it. Part of a transgender character

being significant is that they cannot just be skipped over or ignored. The player must reckon with their existence in the game world.

- the *paratexts* of the game *explore the characters' transness*. Paratexts can include interview material, wikis, websites, videos, or game lore that circulates in the public. This can also include intertextual material that appears outside of the game, such as in comics or books that the game is based on. This explicit exploration of the characters transness serves to inform players that the character is transgender, as well as reveal some of the intentions that went into the creation of the character. The intention is key here because it alerts us to whether the developers wanted to do something good in terms of representation or whether it is treated as an afterthought.
- the *player must see the character on screen*. While many indie games have developed excellent transgender characters played from the players point of view (such as Sam from *That Boy is a Monstr*, 2017, where the player *is* Sam, a transgender man on a date), I am interested in how the transgender characters are created to be looked at. What does it mean to create a transgender character on the screen to be encountered? The purpose here is for the player to interact with the character, not necessarily as the character themselves. What is the player seeing? What are they hearing? How can the player interact and talk to the trans character? These questions are all involved with this criterion.
- the character is *human/humanoid*. The trans character must be human, or have a humanoid form. A humanoid form can include common fantasy character types

like elves, or dwarves. The point of this criteria is that these characters are recognizable as human, and to get away from the trans-person-as-monster trope.

- the game that character is featured in should be a *popular game or made by a AAA studio* and therefore more likely to be encountered by a variety of people. In most cases, this means that the game will be a AAA game and therefore created by a company with more resources and money than an indie, or smaller, game studio. In addition, AAA studios tend to have more influence amongst game studios because their games are marketed widely and played by a wide variety of players.
- the character is *widely believed* by the gaming community to be transgender. Although this criterion is trickier to define, there are some characters like Birdo from the Mario games (featured in *Appendix A*) that are widely accepted as transgender characters. This criterion would be achieved through a critical mass of discussion or understanding of the character as transgender, whether this is implicitly or explicitly noted in the game. If a character appears on many LGBTQ game character lists, or in the *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* or *Queerly Represent Me*, then there is a good chance this criterion has been fulfilled.

Character Inclusion

There were specific reasons for choosing the eight characters I did out of the 37 on my list (*Appendix A*). Although each character includes at least one of the criteria for significant representation, each one also had particular aspects I wanted to dive into. Krem is known as one of the first transgender video game characters in a AAA video game, and the *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* notes he is one of the first trans male characters to appear in a game (“Cremisius (Krem) Aclassi in dragon age: Inquisition”).

As such, I wanted to include him in my sample as he is often discussed as one of the main examples of transgender representation in games (Kosciesza, 2023; Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Similarly, I wanted to include Tyler in this sample as he is often described as one of the first playable transgender characters in a AAA game (Henley, 2020). I suspected that Tyler and *Tell Me Why* could act as a breakout text, or a text that affords “first of its kind” visibility and as a “break with historical representational paradigms,” because of this (Cavalcante, 2017, p. 539).

Chevalier was a real person, and I wanted to see how *Assassin’s Creed* would incorporate her transness—especially because she is not referred to as the first *Assassin’s Creed* trans character in public creator interviews, even though she is the earliest. Thach (2021), Dale (2019) and Blondeau (2019) wrote about how JJ from *The Missing* centers transgender perspectives and how important this game was to their transgender experience. With such strong sentiments surrounding this game, I knew I wanted to include it in my sample. I chose Hainly from *Mass Effect: Andromeda* because of the huge backlash against the careless way her trans dialogue options were incorporated into the game (as detailed by Dale, 2017 and Polo, 2017). In comparison, there was a lot of positive coverage that discussed how involved transgender voice actress Meli Grant was with Catalyst’s creation (Chung, 2023), so I was interested in analyzing her representation to see if it made a difference to how meaningful Catalyst was. I included Lev in this sample because he was voiced by a transgender actor Ian Alexander, and because of Lev’s extended involvement in the game as an NPC.

Textual Analysis and Close Analytical Reading of Eight Games

Sampling

To determine which characters I would focus on, I used the databases *Queerly Represent Me* (Cole, 2016) and *The LGBTQ Video Game Archive* (Shaw, 2016), to compile a list of video games through the end of 2022 that included transgender characters. I also used targeted Google searches with the phrases “transgender video game characters,” “transgender game characters,” and “transgender games” to supplement these two databases. As mentioned, I used previous research on transgender representation to develop nine criteria for significant representation to help me create a selective sample of games for the textual analysis stage. This resulted in a list of 37 games that included at least one of the nine criteria (*Appendix A*). *Appendix A* presents a list of 37 games, with 26 of these games including binary transgender women and 11 including binary transgender men, that have all included major transgender characters in some way; the threshold for inclusion on this list of 37 in *Appendix A* was meeting at least one of the nine criteria (see *Table 1* for the different criteria each game included).

For the textual analysis, I chose eight games (*Appendix B*) from this compiled list of 37. I chose these eight games based on their inclusion of different combinations of criteria from my framework, my ability to access them, whether I had prior experience with the game, and the specific gender identity of the transgender character. Video games are unique in that access to all games is not possible. While some games can only be played on certain systems, others become unplayable because they are too old and no longer available. Some games are only available in certain regions of the world, or banned in others. Multiplayer games played over the internet are also dependent on the

game company keeping the server up and continually updating the game. Access is thus dependent on having the money to buy the system and game⁶, having the right system to play them on as some games are exclusive to certain systems, and that the games are still being attended to by their parent companies. Having prior experience with the game allowed me to understand how the controls work, to understand what the purpose of the game was, and to plan for how much time each of the eight games would take me to work through. Many of the games in this sample are large games that can be played for hundreds of hours—my familiarity with most of the games helped me to plan how to approach these games and their paratexts strategically. Since I wanted to include a balance of binary transgender men and binary transgender women, I selected four characters of each gender identity. My choices around which eight characters to choose were influenced by particular aspects of my chosen media, such as access and the interactive nature of storytelling in games.

Incorporating a range of criteria combinations ensured I had a variety of examples of transgender characters in different games. Many of these games in *Appendix B* were ones that stuck with me after I played them specifically because of the transgender character. They were meaningful to me, and I wanted to see if these characters and games were meaningful to other folks as well. I also wanted to balance my sample with four binary transgender men and four binary transgender women. Although this does not reflect the gender balance of *Appendix A*, I wanted to ensure there was gender balance in

⁶ Games available on Steam, which is the largest computer-based game digital distribution service and storefront as of this writing, can cost anywhere on average from one dollar to 100 dollars. In comparison, console games cost approximately 50 to 80 dollars per game. According to Statista, the average price for a game on Steam in 2023 was 15.50 American dollars, while the average price for a PlayStation 5 or Xbox X/S game was 69.99 American in 2022 (Clement, 2023a; Clement 2023b).

my sample to have an even number of examples between transgender men and transgender women. I included only binary transgender characters, not non-binary or gender ambiguous characters, to examine transgender identity specifically. I wanted to see how transgender identity, or the specific way of moving away from one gender category towards another, was depicted. Stryker (2009) defines transgender folks as those that “move away from the gender they were assigned at birth,” emphasizing the “movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place” (p. 1). It is this movement away from this unchosen place and towards another gender that I was most interested in focusing on. I have summarized the criteria that each character satisfies below in *Table 1* below.

Procedures

In the textual analysis, I utilized a combination of close analytical reading (Adams, 2015; Kosciesza, 2022) and textual analysis (Cole & Barker, 2020; Fernández-Vara, 2019) to play through the eight games until the transgender character’s storyline was completed. If the transgender character’s storyline continued until the main story missions were over and the game ended, I played the entire game; if the transgender character’s storyline ended earlier than the rest of the game and they were no longer visibly on screen or no longer mentioned, I stopped playing after the transgender character’s final scene. Therefore, I played through the entirety of *Tell Me Why*, *The Last of Us 2*, and *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* and most of the following games: *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Since Krem is also present in *DA:I’s* extra

Table 1. *Character sample selection*

Criteria	Catalyst	Tyler	Lev	JJ	Hainly	Ned	Krem	Chevalier
Character + storyline integrated in a substantial manner	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Explicitly trans	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Main/major part of gameplay	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Not missable	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Paratexts explore characters' transness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Player must see character on screen	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Character is human/humanoid	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Character is in a popular game or made by a AAA studio	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Character is widely believed to be trans by gaming community	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

content (DLC), I played the DLC for *DA:I* as well. In comparison, *Apex Legends* is a multiplayer battle royale game, and thus it does not have an end or linear story to play through. Instead, I played multiplayer mode for a period of 10 hours to reach a point of saturation with the character. After 10 hours, I had gotten a good sense of how prevalent Catalyst was in public matches in terms of other teams picking her, and how rare it was that my teammates picked her before me. In addition, I had heard most of her voice lines and witnessed her movements on screen during that time.

As much as possible, I played through each of the games how I imagined an average player would play. In other words, I imagined myself as a player who has some experience with these game genres, is familiar with the controls needed to move through the world, and would play on a “normal” or “average” difficulty. This also means I placed myself in the position of how the average player would progress through the game to see how likely it would be that the player would encounter the trans character. While some games are linear and follow a preset story that each player must follow to complete it, other non-linear games are much more varied in how one can play them. Some characters and missions in non-linear games are not necessary to finish the game, and thus some characters can be more obscure, or missed completely, in these types of games. I took detailed research notes from this “average player” point of view. In addition, I also bracketed the experience of playing the game as an average player alongside playing as a critical researcher (Fernandez-Vara, 2019). This dual approach to playing and notetaking was necessary to imagine how players would encounter these characters, and to ensure I encountered these characters as much as I could.

For my notes, I tracked how long it took me to play each game in addition to taking detailed and descriptive notes of each game’s content and my experiences as a player. Tracking the duration of each playthrough was useful for two reasons. First, to see how big the game itself is and how much effort and time it takes to play the trans story all the way through. Second, to see how present the character was in the game. The results of this data are summarized in the table below (*Table 2*). In total, I spent 213 hours playing through the eight games.

Table 2. *Game play time*

Game	Time to Complete or Total Time Played
<i>Apex Legends</i>	10 hours
<i>Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate</i>	27 hours
<i>Assassin’s Creed: Unity</i>	20 hours
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	69 hours
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>	31 hours
<i>Tell Me Why</i>	11 hours
<i>The Last of Us 2</i>	30 hours
<i>The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories</i>	15 hours

Through my notes and a combination of textual analysis and close reading, I focused on the following: the context and game world, including storyline and lore; the significant characters and their storylines; relationships between characters in the game; my own play experience; the transgender characters and what they look like; the transgender characters storyline and their relationships to other characters; and ultimately how the

respective transgender characters exist in relation to the context and game world. I also considered dialogue options concerning the transgender character, as well as who their voice actor is. Of particular concern in the game was how the transgender characters are talked about or described by other characters, and/or relevant artifacts in the story. My focus while playing the games was on the way the transgender characters were represented, how the players can interact with them, how other characters interacted with them, and what happened to them in the game.

Paratexts

In addition to playing through the games and taking detailed game notes, I also supplemented my game playthroughs with paratexts of the game. While playing I followed Shaw and Persaud's (2020) method of drawing from sources outside of the game text itself, including wikis and walkthroughs, as part of the game-focused textual analysis. I used game wikis to ensure I was aware of all the content that included the transgender characters. In a few cases, I played through as much of the game as possible to see all the ways the transgender character is included in the game. This included doing side quests, exploring the game world further, and talking to as many characters as I could. For example, I played through a lot of the *Dragon Age: Inquisition* game to ensure I experienced all Krem's dialogue options. If I had missed playing through any transgender character content on my initial attempt in game, I would go back to play those portions of the game again or watch YouTube playthroughs that featured those specific scenes from the game. Fernández-Vara (2019) argues that we can study games as cultural products and interpret their meaning and cultural significance from the context that surrounds play, such as who plays, as well as why and how (p. 6). Fernández-Vara

(2019) describes paratexts as “texts that surround the main text”—including author information, reviews, websites, interviews, other games in the series, and other media—that may influence the player to “read text a certain way” (p. 7). I wanted to analyze the meaning within the game—what Fernández-Vara (2019 refers to as meaningful play—as well as the meaning that surrounds the game, or the cultural significance of it (p. 6). I was particularly interested in gathering information about the parts of the game that include the transgender character. On average, I consulted between five and ten paratexts per game. My chosen paratexts included game reviews, game walkthroughs, game wikis, game company websites, Reddit threads concerning the game, game announcements, lore videos, books, graphic novels, and blog posts. Reading these paratexts not only helped me to find all of the transgender character’s content in each game, it also helped me further understand the lore of the games, games and storylines that came before, during, or after the game, as well as how the transgender character fits within the game world.

Analysis

I used inductive qualitative coding (Thomas, 2006) on the detailed game notes I created while playing through the games. I went through each game note in multiple passes using a grounded approach, generating codes from the data. Specifically, I was looking for data that seemed significant and related to RQ1: What does meaningful transgender representation look like in video games? I compared recurring and important themes across games, noting which ones seemed to cut across most or all the games. As themes emerged from the textual data, I continued to review the codes to see what themes were emerging together. This process led me to the prevalent themes occurring across my data which included how present the characters are in the games, how their transness is

explored and included in the game, what the characters look and sound like, and what dialogue options are included. I noticed common patterns that occurred across characters that were more significant, as well as those that were less significant. I used these themes and patterns to develop an argument for what patterns constitute meaningful transgender representation.

Creator and Consultant Interviews

Sampling

While working through the textual analysis, I began recruiting specific people involved in creating these characters. I identified 22 people involved in the creation of these games and characters, including people who had been consulted about the transgender characters, or who had written popular press published articles about these characters (*Appendix C*). This list included lead writers, creative directors, voice actors, creators, game designers, game journalists, and GLAAD representatives. These interviews were meant help me answer RQ2: What is involved in making meaningful transgender representation in games? I recruited potential participants through direct messaging on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and/or contacting them through email, explaining the purpose and their possible involvement in the project.

Recruiting creators/consultants turned out to be very challenging. Thanks to the hate and harassment a lot of these creators are subjected to, many of them have their contact information hidden. It took a lot of effort to track down a way to contact them, and many of them never responded. In addition, I attempted to contact a lot of people who have celebrity status, such as voice actors Jennifer Hale and Ian Alexander, as well as *Naughty Dog's* creative director Neil Druckmann, through their personal social media

accounts. I knew there was a slim chance that they would respond to a stranger asking for an interview, and I was correct.

Despite my recruiting efforts, I was only able to interview folks on my list associated with the studio Respawn entertainment, a GLAAD consultant that had consulted on *Apex*, and a games journalist. The first of the creator and consultant interviews was the direct result of my advisor, Dr. Adrienne Shaw, connecting me with GLAAD's Associate Director of Gaming Blair Durkee. Through this connection, I was able to conduct an interview with Durkee. Durkee then connected me to Respawn Entertainment's Lead Writer Ashley Reed. Respawn Entertainment is the gaming studio that created *Apex Legends*. From here, Durkee connected me to Catalyst's voice actress Meli Grant. Additionally, I also interviewed game journalist Julie Muncy who had written extensively on transgender video game representation, and especially about Lev from *The Last of Us 2*. Muncy's role as a games journalist gave her insight into critically analyzing games themselves, and she also had valuable insight into how transgender characters exist in current mainstream games. While Ashley Reed is a cisgender woman, Blair Durkee, Meli Grant, and Julie Muncy are all transgender women.

In the absence of primary interviews, to answer RQ 2 for most of the games I utilized paratexts referencing, or written by, the people on my list that I could not interview (Shaw, 2009). While consulting these paratexts helped me analyze what game creators were saying publicly about their game and these characters, I approached these sources with a critical eye towards the fact that they are crafted for public consumption and are not the same as primary source interviews; they are specifically designed to spin the narrative a certain way and may not provide comprehensive coverage of the

interviewee's original statements. The paratexts I used included public statements about the game and the transgender characters, interviews, messages, blogs or game journal posts from creators and consultants. These paratexts helped round out my interview data by collecting additional secondary source information about the creation process, including how creators approached creating a transgender character and what other considerations were important when doing so. I specifically looked for published interviews from the following people: Nick Adams, GLAAD's Director of Transgender Representation; August Black, Tyler's voice actor from *Tell Me Why*; Florent Guillaume, *Tell Me Why* game director; Neil Druckmann, president of Naughty Dog and creative director of *The Last of Us 2*; Halley Gross, cowriter and narrative lead of *The Last of Us 2*; Ian Alexander, Lev's voice actor of *The Last of Us 2*; Hidetaka Suehiro, creator of *The Missing*; Marc-Alexis Côté, creative director of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*; Ferelith Young, Ned's voice actress in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*; and Patrick Weekes, creator and writer of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. I also utilized public interviews of creators and consultants as needed to help me understand the context of the games, and how these transgender characters came to be.

Procedures

Before the Zoom interviews, I sent my four creator/consultant and game journalist interviewees a consent form (*Appendix E*) and then asked them during the interview for their verbal consent to conduct the interview and to record it. I utilized a semi-structured interview format guided by the industry-focused questions (*Appendix F*) to allow for following the thread of the conversation and asking follow-up questions. While I generally followed this list of questions, I pursued any interesting leads or deviations

from the question list as they came up. All interviews were transcribed by Otter.ai and files were stored on a password protected external hard drive. On average, interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to an hour and 37 minutes.

For each of the creator/consultant interviews, I asked if they were okay being named in the manuscript, or whether they would prefer to be anonymous. I wanted to be able to name these creators as who they are is directly relevant to the information they provide. They were key in shaping, in some way, each of the transgender characters on my list, or they had insightful things to say about such characters. As such, they acted as insiders and experts on the character creation process and offered valuable insight that no one else can offer because of their involvement. After describing the reasoning for naming the creator/consultant interviewees to Temple University's IRB, I was given approval to go forward with this process if the creators/consultants gave their consent to be named. All three of the creators/consultants and Muncy as a journalist agreed to be named in the manuscript and are therefore not anonymous.

Analysis

I qualitatively analyzed the creator, consultant and game journalist interview data using NVivo qualitative coding software. I went through each of the four interview transcripts multiple times using an inductive approach to generate codes that arose from the data. I looked for interesting findings, including aspects of the interview that gave me unique insight into the process of crafting the characters and that could help me answer the research question about what creators think about crafting these transgender characters. At the same time as I was looking for interesting findings in my primary interview data, I read or listened to the paratextual sources in different passes, taking

notes on interesting findings that could help me further understand what is involved in creating meaningful representation. I had to use paratexts for seven of the eight games as I could not get interviews with creators/consultants from those games. Even though paratexts cannot give me the same insights as interviews I have conducted, they helped me to further understand what went into crafting each of these characters. As such, I carefully analyzed the paratexts of each game.

As themes began to emerge from the interview transcriptions and paratextual sources, I compiled relevant codes and themes across the creator interviews. In addition, I continued to review the codes to see what themes were emerging together. I used NVivo qualitative coding software to help me compile, combine, review, and refine the codes that occurred across all my datasets. As each of my datasets works in tandem with each other, I looked at the codes and themes across the interview and textual analysis collectively. This process led me to the prevalent themes occurring across my data.

After the manuscript was drafted, I sent my interviewees an anonymized draft. My reasoning for involving my interviewees in this draft process is because I wanted to have a dialogue with them about how I was interpreting and using their words in my work. This was especially important for named creator and consultant interviewees. Involving my interviewees in the process of knowledge making, in my opinion, was both an ethical and iterative part of this process.

Player Interviews

Sampling

In order to find players to interview, I launched my recruitment announcement (*Appendix D*) with a link to the Qualtrics recruitment survey (*Appendix E*), posting it

online in the following places and asking for it to be circulated widely: academic Discords such as ICA game studies, Gaming Reddit forums, and Temple's Reddit forum; I also circulated it through gaming friends, asked academic friends to circulate it to the classes they were teaching, and I posted it on my personal Twitter and Facebook profiles. The announcement focused on the eight games, asking for players who had played at least one of the eight games on my list to fill out the survey.

My Qualtrics recruitment survey asked demographic questions, questions about gameplay habits, whether they had played the games on my list and then whether they remembered the specific transgender character from that game. I did not mention that the character was trans—I simply named the character (for example, do you remember the character Catalyst?) and survey respondents answered yes, no, I'm not sure, or prefer not to answer. At the very end of the recruitment survey, participants were asked if they would be interested in doing a virtual interview with me. At this point, they were given a blank box to input their email address into if they wanted to be included in the interview portion.

My goal was to recruit a broad range of players in terms of gender identity, location, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, with a preference for those who had played more than one of the games on my list. I purposefully cast a wide net in my calls for participation because I wanted to hear what a variety of players had to say about this representation. While I wanted to include LGBTQ, queer, and transgender interviewees, it also felt important to include cisgender and straight people that do not presumably have a stake in this representation. The recruitment survey (*Appendix E*) helped me filter out people who did not remember encountering the transgender characters. In addition, I

made sure the language in my recruitment announcement did not specify that I was asking about transgender representation for two reasons: to not immediately tip off potential interviewees that I wanted to talk about specifically transgender representation, and to avoid transphobic respondents who would have responded to the survey specifically to be transphobic. To be considered for an interview, the players had to have played at least one game on the list and remembered the corresponding transgender character from that game. Those who did not consent (one), were underage (two), or did not remember any of the transgender characters (eight) were excluded, which left 254 out of a total 265 responses. Of these 254 responses, 85 said they were not interested in being contacted for follow-up interviews, while 137 said yes to a potential follow-up (52% of the original respondents).

The Qualtrics responses had a few interesting demographic trends. Not all folks answered all questions, but I did not necessarily exclude them from interviews if they did not answer all the questions. For the purposes of discussing the overall Qualtrics responses and trends, these include all 265 responses. First, of those who reported their race, the majority were white and/or European, with 171 out of 222 total responses (77%). The second largest ethnicity race listed was Hispanic/Latinx with 18 responses (8%). Of those players who reported their gender (230 total), 75 described themselves as female (62) or woman (13) (33% total), 121 described themselves as male (118) or man (three) (53%), 19 listed nonbinary (8%), five as trans man (2%) and three as trans woman (1%). A total of 222 players reported their sexuality; a majority of these players described themselves as heterosexual/straight (46%) or heteroflexible (1%). Other popular responses included bisexual (21%), lesbian (5%), gay (6%), pansexual (7%), or queer

(6%). Players ranged in age from 18 to 54, with an average age of 32 across 233 responses. Most of these respondents were 20-29 (114 responses or 49%) or 30-39 (89 responses or 38%). In summary, the pool of recruitment survey respondents was mostly white, between the ages of 20 and 39, straight, and described themselves as male.

I sent emails to request interviews in three waves, resulting in emails to approximately 63 participants out of the 137 respondents remaining who had said they were interested in being interviewed after I applied my exclusion criteria. My considerations regarding who I requested for interviews across my three waves of emails were (1) those who had played multiple games; (2) I wanted a range of identities, including different gender identities, sexualities, as well as races and ethnicities, and requested interviewees from these folks; and (3) towards the end of my interviews, I targeted respondents who had played the games and remembered the transgender characters that had not come up in interviews as frequently—which were Tyler from *Tell Me Why*, Catalyst from *Apex Legends*, and JJ from *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*. When deciding who to contact in the first wave, I looked for who had played most of the games in my sample and prioritized the following identities: transgender and nonbinary participants; folks who were not white, especially Black and Latinx identities; and those who were older than 35. I could see that many of the respondents were mostly white and younger than 40, so older and non-white players were my priority. I emailed respondents using the email they had given me and sent a follow-up email approximately a week after if I had not heard back yet from the respondent. Many of the folks I had wanted to interview that were not white and/or were older than

35 did not respond to my request for an interview. During my second and third wave of emails, I started to focus more on ensuring each game was reflected at least a couple of times in interviews.

As more responses to the Qualtrics survey came in during the recruitment period and as I worked my way through player interviews, I continued to choose those who had played more than one of the games. Even when I was choosing folks to reach out to in my third wave of emails, I prioritized transgender, agender, genderqueer, nonbinary folks, and non-white folks. For example, if I had respondents who had played the same games, I would choose those with identities who were not well represented in my current interview roster. I found that white, cisgender, straight men and white cisgender women were the most likely to respond to my requests for an interview. I consistently attempted to include and contact those whose identities were not yet reflected in my completed interviews, such as: Asian folks, Black folks, and other people of color; transgender, nonbinary, and agender folks; younger folks that were 18, 19, or early 20s, and folks older than 35; and those outside of the United States and Canada. I was met with 32 nonresponses, no shows to scheduled interviews, and/or respondents changing their mind about interviewing.

Ultimately, I was able to reach saturation through interviews with the remaining 31 respondents. I have listed the 31 interviewee participants' demographics in Appendix H and used their own words for their identities. My interview sample was majority white, with 23 out of 31 (74%) interviewees describing themselves as white, Caucasian, and/or European. Five out of the remaining eight interviewees considered themselves Latino, Hispanic, or Latinx, with an additional interviewee describing themselves as

white/Hispanic. The remaining interviewees described themselves as Nigerian and white Jewish. As those that described themselves as men and/or male made up the majority of Qualtrics responses, I had invited more women, nonbinary, transgender folks, and those outside of the gender binary to interview. My interviewees thus described themselves as the following: 12 women/females (39%), 11 males/men (35%), three transfeminine and/or transwomen, one trans man, two nonbinary folks, one agender, one demi man, and one fluid nonbinary person. Most of my 31 interviewees were straight/heterosexual (11) or bisexual (10) (35% and 32% respectively), with the remaining describing their sexuality as lesbian (three), pansexual (two), asexual (one), bisexual/pansexual (one), queer (one), gay (one), and demisexual/pansexual (one). My interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 46, with the following breakdowns in terms of age ranges: most interviewees were in their 20s (15 interviewees or 48%) or 30s (14 interviewees or 45%), with one interviewee aged 19, and the other 46. In summary, most of my interviewees were white, straight or bisexual, binary cisgender men or women, and in their 20s or 30s.

Around the end of these interviews, I was no longer finding anything that was new to answer RQ 3: what do players think about transgender representation in video games? This signaled to me that I had reached saturation, and I wrapped up my player interviews after 31. These player interviews helped me answer the following sub-questions: What games with transgender representation are important to players? What transgender characters are important to players? Are there demographic or identity-based differences in how people relate to or talk about these characters? And, what do players consider meaningful transgender representation.

Procedures

In my interview recruitment emails, I asked my participants to give me times they were available over the following three weeks. For the ones that confirmed they were still interested in the interview, we locked in a date and time, and I set up virtual interviews on Zoom. One interview was held on Facebook messenger via text chat by request of the interviewee. All interviews were semi-structured following my list of questions (*Appendix I*) but gave me the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, or to skip some questions if time was short.

All interviewees were sent a consent form before the interview (*Appendix J*), and I verbally asked for their consent to do the interview and to record the interview as well. I asked at the beginning of the interview for participants to give me an anonymous handle I could use for them. All interview files were stored on a password protected external hard drive. On average, interviews lasted between 34 minutes to an hour and 40 minutes. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai.

Analysis

As with the creator and consultant interview transcriptions, I used NVivo to help me manually code the 31 player interviews. I went through each of the 31 interview transcripts using an inductive approach to generate codes that arose from the data. I was looking for what type of transgender representation players found meaningful, what they thought about the characters themselves, and what influenced what they thought about those characters. I also coded other interesting themes that arose from the transcripts. I

noticed demographic differences along the lines of gender identity and sexuality between player interviews which helped me answer the research question: Are there demographic or identity-based differences in how people relate to or talk about these characters?

As themes began to emerge from the interview transcripts, I merged and compiled relevant codes and themes across the player interviews. I reviewed the themes that were coming up, taking note of any interesting findings that were arising from the data. I used NVivo qualitative coding software to help me compile, combine, review, and refine the codes that occurred across my datasets. As each of my datasets works in tandem with each other, I looked at the codes and themes across the interview and textual analysis collectively. This process led me to the prevalent themes occurring across my data.

After the manuscript was drafted, I sent my interviewees an anonymized draft. My reasoning for involving my interviewees in this draft process is because I wanted to have a dialogue with them about how I was interpreting and using their words in my work. I considered my participant's comments as part of my data analysis, much like in the style of Pearce's (2011) book *Communities of Play*. Involving my interviewees in the process of knowledge making, in my opinion, was both an ethical and iterative part of this process.

How Each Stage Informed the Others

In total, I played through eight games for a total of 213 hours. In addition, I conducted 35 semi-structured virtual interviews; three of these were with creators/consultants on the games and one was a game journalist that had written about these games, while the other 31 were with a variety of players. As my datasets are meant to work in tandem, each aspect of the analysis informed the others in a cyclical process,

allowing parts of each stage to be informed and shaped by insights from the others. For example, I was able to learn more about various games lore from my interviews, as well as consider ways to approach and think about the games and characters. Additionally, I was influenced during my player interviews to consult books and graphic novels that were made in addition to games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda* to understand the game lore and context better. Overall, playing through the games, consuming paratexts, and watching related videos helped me acquire a better understanding of the games and characters. In turn, this helped me better understand the context for the existence of these transgender characters.

In the next three analysis chapters, I will present the results of my triangulated data analysis. Chapter 4 focuses on findings around what meaningful transgender representation looks like through my textual analysis, Chapter 5 explores what goes into crafting these transgender characters and features interviews with creators/consultants, while Chapter 6 focuses on audience reception of these characters and my interviews with players. Taken together, my data offers specific evidence across textual, producer, and audience sides that transgender folks see transgender representation in games different than cisgender people. As my data chapters will show, having transgender folks involved in the process leads to more meaningful representation. More specifically, through my triangulated approach I articulate what meaningful transgender representation in video games looks like, the aspects that lead to this meaningful representation, and how players respond to it.

CHAPTER 4
CHARACTERISTICS OF MEANINGFUL TRANSGENDER
REPRESENTATION IN THE TEXTS

“I’m the grim trans witch your parents warned you about”

Catalyst, Apex Legends

In this chapter, I analyze the significant representation of transgender characters in eight video games: *Apex Legends*, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, *The Last of Us 2*, *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*, and *Tell Me Why*. This chapter answers research question 1: What does meaningful transgender representation look like in video games? By using a combination of textual analysis and close reading, I examine what meaningful transgender representation looks like as well as the representational problems in some of these games. The aspects of these characters that are meaningful, as well as those that are problematic, reveal certain features that influence how complex these characters are. They also tell us something about how media representation influences what comes next in future representation.

As I explore below, the transgender representation explored in this chapter builds on or diverges from stereotypes that exist in other transgender media, such as the “man in a dress” trope (Richardson & Smith, 2022). As there are more examples of transgender women in media than transgender men (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; “Where we are on TV report — 2022 2023”), there are thus a wider range of stereotypes available for media

makers to recycle. In contrast, there are less stereotypes of transgender men to utilize, so game makers seem to create more thoughtful representations of trans men than of trans women.

This chapter argues that meaningful transgender representation has four distinctive features. First, there needs to be adequate character presence that ideally includes being a main or playable character. The relative absence or presence of a character in a game will influence how these characters are decoded and how significant they are in terms of transgender representation. Second, there should be thoughtful inclusion of the character's transgender identity. The third key feature of meaningful transgender representation focuses on how the physical appearances and voice actors align with the character's transgender identity. The final feature of meaningful transgender representation is that the character feels, or is coded, as being distinctly transgender. All these factors—adequate presence, thoughtful inclusion, alignment between actors, appearance, and voice, and trans-coded characters—lead to transgender characters that feel complex and organic (Christian & White, 2020). Christian and White (2020) describe organic representation as a form of reparation that is “sourced from the community it serves and in which it must thrive” (p. 145). The inclusion of these four factors leads to meaningful transgender representation. As my textual analysis reveals, the characters that included these four factors were meaningful, while the others had representational problems that limited how complex or meaningful they were.

Characteristics of Transgender Representation in the Media

As explored in the literature review in Chapter 2, there have been consistent stereotypes and tropes included in the representation of transgender characters in the media. Media creators tend to utilize the following common tropes when creating transgender characters for the screen. Many transgender characters have cisgender actors that do not align with their gender identity (Abbott, 2022). Other common tropes include the fact that the trans character suffers trauma and violence (Abbott, 2022; Rigney, 2003; Sandercock, 2017); the characters are stereotypical, negative, or one-dimensional (McInroy & Craig, 2015); the trans character is rarely seen in relationships with others or as loveable (Abbott, 2013); the “comedic” effect of the non-passing trans body (Richardson & Smith, 2022); and many of these representations follow a transnormative and medical model of transgender identity (Johnson, 2016). In addition, Richardson and Smith (2022) argue that the two main transgender tropes used in media are the “pathetic” and “predatory” ones, used mostly for transgender women (p. 10). The pathetic transgender characters are those that are “easily read as the gender they were assigned at birth” and most commonly linked to the man in a dress trope (Richardson & Smith, 2022, p. 10). According to Richardson and Smith (2022), the predatory transgender character is the “highly successful trans body” who passes well and “does” hyper-femininity well, and is therefore “coded as a predatory threat” (p. 10). In their research on the representation of transgender folks in the news, Billard (2016) argues that the following patterns are used to delegitimize transgender folks: misnaming and misgendering; misrepresenting trans identity; using the transgender trickster trope; and sexualizing the trans body (p. 4196). Aside from these common tropes, transgender content or characters

are usually included in an inconsequential manner. As explored in Chapter 2, transgender content is not as significant if it can be skipped as players do not have to encounter the existence of these characters (Adams, 2015; Shaw, 2015). Overall, transgender representation has historically been overwhelmingly negative, demeaning and incorporated thoughtlessly.

Common trends of trans representation in video games specifically include some of the following: they are much less common than LGB characters, they usually have small inconsequential roles, and they are also rarely explicitly named as transgender in game (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). There is also a difference between the way trans women and trans men are treated in games—Shaw and Friesem (2016) found that the gender of transgender women is “treated as a problem to be dealt with by the other characters,” using the example of the player character in *Leisure Suit Larry* reacting in disgust upon discovering that they have slept with a transgender woman (p. 3882). There are still a lot more representations of transgender women and men across different media platforms. Califia (1997) explains that “the number of male-to-female transsexuals’ life stories in print continues to outstrip female-to-male autobiographics...it seems the world is still more titillated by a ‘man who wants to become a woman’ than it is by ‘a woman who wants to become a man’...of course women want to be men, the general consensus seems to be, and of course they can’t” (pp. 177-178). The fact that transgender women are featured more often in media and frequently include the stereotypes and tropes explored above signals that media makers tend to recycle these representations.

Shaw et al. (2019) find that trans representation is increasing over time (p. 1556) but note that most examples are non-human characters (p. 1564). Based on data from the

LGBTQ Video Game Archive, Utsch et al. (2017) state that the presence of transgender representation is rarely addressed, and explicit and transgender characters usually have small secondary roles (p. 848). With more recent games like *Tell Me Why* and *The Last of Us 2*, the number of explicit trans characters in mainstream video games is slowly increasing. A major trend in LGBTQ representation in video games is that it flattens out most of the complexity of LGBTQ identities when they are represented on screen.

Transgender characters in video games are like trans characters in other media in terms of recurring tropes and trends. For example, Thach (2021) finds the following tropes: dysphoria where video games portray trans bodies through a “wrong body” narrative; characters are mentally ill or unstable because of their transness; trans shock/reveal scenes where transness is revealed through unexpected gender markers (p. 20). In addition, Shaw and Friesem (2016) note that transgender characters are generally voiced by cisgender actors that do not align with their gender identity, such as cisgender women playing trans men or cisgender men playing trans women. This simplifies transgender experience, takes away opportunities for trans actors (Kisner, 2020), and eliminates the opportunity for the trans character to be fully embodied and understood by a trans person (Wynne, 2022). Transgender media representation also commonly includes the trans character suffering trauma, violence, and trans characters are generally stereotypical, negative, or one-dimensional (McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021). Pini, Keys, and Riggs (2018) argue that transgender representation is often linked to being deceptive as well. In terms of narrative, transgender people are understood through a medical and transnormative model of identity (Glover 2016; Johnson, 2016), wherein the character wants to or has transitioned into the “other” gender and “becomes” a binary

man or woman. The ability to ‘pass’, or appear to be cisgender, is among the most important aspects of transnormativity. As I will explore throughout this chapter, transgender representation in video games draws from and utilizes many of these tropes. However, some of these tropes are subverted towards more complex representation in this sample. When transgender folks are involved, this leads to more organic representation, which helps to subvert and challenge these common stereotypes in trans media.

Abbott (2013) has thoughtfully argued how trans characters are rarely seen in relationships with others, and that these relations are generally delegitimized by refocusing attention on the trans characters genitals in what she coins the “trans/romance dilemma.” In other words, transgender characters are often portrayed as unlovable and there is a focus on what their body looks like. This marks sex, relationships with, or attraction to a transgender person as transgressive (Abbott, 2013). As transgender characters across media are still limited and generally follow these common tropes, the mere presence of transgender characters in any media text is still seen as important and the lowest bar for representation. In other words, presence and absence becomes the low bar to compare transgender representation against.

Eight Character Roster: Transness in Action

In this section, I give a brief overview of each character and their roles in their respective games. In addition, I will explain why I chose each of the eight characters for this sample. All eight of these characters have a unique combination of the nine criteria outlined in Chapter 3. As I explore in my overview of each character below, each

character is a unique case for different reasons. As the representation of transgender characters seems to be trending towards complexity with more recent transgender characters appearing more complex (McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021), I have organized this portion of the analysis to begin with the oldest game (Chevalier d'Eon in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*) and end with the newest (Catalyst in *Apex Legends*).

Chevalier from *Assassin's Creed Unity*

Ubisoft's 2014 game *Assassin's Creed: Unity* is set in Paris during the French Revolution (approximately 1789 to 1794). It is an action-adventure game and the eighth installment in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. The player explores the world of *Unity* through the main character Arno Dorian. Like other *Assassins Creed (AC)* games, *Unity* is a mix of stealth, fighting sequences, and parkouring around the city of 1700 Paris. The player encounters many historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte and Maximilien Robespierre. The addition of real-life historical figures is a common occurrence across all the *AC* games.

The transgender character in this game, Chevalier d'Eon, is a real-life historical figure that was featured as a non-player character. The fact that she is a real historical person complicates our understanding of her as a transgender character. Namely, it is tricky to use our current understanding of gender identity on historical figures who lived in a different time, with different understandings of gender, transgender existence, and crossdressing behaviors. As Mowat, de Groot, and Perisanidi (2024) point out,

reading trans pasts, in all their diversity, allows us to read trans futures and (re)create trans possibilities. But there is a careful balance to be negotiated here, and we must be careful to see someone's roadmap in their wider context, without assuming each journey can and must be the same. We should ask, instead, how individuals have been recognised by the societies

in which they lived, positively and negatively, and how they have resisted the boxes that do not represent them. (pp. 3-4)

As the *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* notes, Chevalier's "portrayal in *Unity* and information about the real historical figure seems to imply she identifies as a woman and not a crossdressing man" (Shaw, 2016). Sources describe real life Chevalier as an interesting anomaly and someone who lived openly as both a man and a woman throughout her life ("A&E Television Networks"; "The Chevalier d'Eon"). According to most accounts, she eventually started living permanently as a woman and fought to be legally recognized as such. For that reason, I refer to Chevalier using she/her pronouns and consider her a trans woman to honor the way she resisted the boxes she felt did not represent her.

The main story will take the average player 17 hours to complete, including side quests will take roughly 35 hours, and the average length of the game is approximately 31.5 hours ("*Assassin's Creed: Unity*"). My own playthrough took around 20 hours to complete all story missions, and to encounter Chevalier for all 4 of her side missions. Chevalier's missions are part of a string of NPC side quests called "Paris Stories" that players can stumble upon as they gamble about Paris. They are not part of the main story, and are not necessary to complete the game. Chevalier's involvement in the game is limited to these side missions. This means it takes a fairly large time commitment to make it through the main game and to encounter Chevalier for her complete story.

When we encounter Chevalier, she is wearing a beautiful dress and hat, has a cinched waist, and looks like many other women we would encounter in the streets of Paris except for her deep, masculine voice. During her quests, Chevalier wants to test your ability at sword fighting, which makes sense since she is historically known as a

renowned sword fighter. Once you defeat all the swordsmen and Chevalier at the end, her involvement in the game is over.

Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014) is the third installment of Bioware's *Dragon Age* franchise. This adventure role-playing game features a sprawling campaign world filled with different characters, including older fan favorites from the previous games.

According to "How long to beat" the average player will spend around 88 hours in the game, with the main story lasting about 47 hours; main and side quests will take around 87.5 hours ("How long is *Dragon Age: Inquisition*?"). In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the player takes on the role of Inquisitor—your role is to unite various parties under the Inquisition banner to fix a mysterious green breach in the sky while battling against Corypheus and his army of demons. Along the way, you can recruit a variety of allies amongst the different races in the *DA* universe. Your choices in dialogue and otherwise matter as they impact what happens in the game, especially your relationship with NPCs in your party who will approve or disapprove of your choices, and there are different "forks" you can take along the main storyline. The game has the same beginning and ending for every player, but there is some choice about how you arrive at your destination.

Cremisius Aclassi, or Krem, is a non-player human trans character and mercenary soldier who is Iron Bull's lieutenant. Iron Bull is a Qunari mercenary who can be included as part of the player's party. While the player can bring Bull along on missions and even romance him, the player's interactions with Krem only includes dialogue options, and ultimately choosing whether he lives or dies. He is known as one of the first

transgender video game characters in a AAA video game, and the *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* notes he is one of the first trans male characters to appear in a game (“Cremisius (Krem) Aclassi in dragon age: Inquisition”).

Krem is in an area of the game world that the player must go to earlier on, and so the player is compelled to encounter him. He is shorter than most other men in the *DA* universe, with dark brown hair that is shaved on the sides, no facial hair, and an average build that is always covered in thick-looking armor. After encountering him in this area, Krem will come to the player’s camp with a message for the Inquisition. He thus serves as a link between the Inquisition and Iron Bull and is part of the main quest. If the player chooses to have Iron Bull join the Inquisition, the player can interact with Krem throughout the main game. If the player rejects Iron Bull or lets Krem die, they do not get as much interaction with him. However, he cannot be missed in the game if the player continues the main quest.

Ned from *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*

Assassin’s Creed Syndicate follows *Assassin’s Creed Unity* and was released in 2015. Like *Unity*, *Syndicate* is an action-adventure game and the ninth installment in the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise. *Syndicate* was created by Ubisoft Quebec, published by Ubisoft, and takes place around late 1860s London, or in the Victorian Era. A pair of Assassin protagonists named Evie and Jacob Frye are the protagonists for this game. An evil company called Abstergo is out to find objects called pieces of Eden that are used to control people’s minds. As Assassins, we are trying to stop them from doing so and retrieve the piece before they do. Players use stealth, fighting, and parkouring around England to achieve this.

The main story will take the average player 19 hours to complete, including side quests will take roughly 33.5 hours, while the average run takes about 33.5 hours to complete (“Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate”). Ned is a type of NPC known as an associate, which means he offers side quests to the player in exchange for experience points and items (“Ned Wynert”). Despite Chevalier existing in an earlier game, Ned is commonly referred to as the first transgender character in the *AC* series (Frank, 2015). Moreover, Chevalier and Ned are treated very differently in their respective games. I wanted to analyze this difference deeper given that they are from the same franchise, and both were published by Ubisoft. While *Syndicate* was developed by Ubisoft Quebec, *Unity* was developed by Ubisoft Montreal.

The player initially meets Ned during a cutscene in the main campaign. Ned enters the train, which is the player’s main base, and speaks to Jacob and Evie Frye. He is wearing a business suit and bowler hat, has a slim build, and is generally shorter than the other men in the game. After this cutscene, we can go meet him and complete his side quests. During one of the main quests later in the game, we are tasked with making an alliance with a woman who wants us to steal combustible engines off of a Templar train. Jacob says, “I’ll need a second train for this, and I know just the man.” After that, a quest point pops up that asks the player to locate Ned Wynert. Aside from these experiences in the main story, players can also complete as many side quests for Ned as they would like. In total, it took me 26.9 hours to complete all of Ned’s tasks and quests, and the main storyline.

JJ from *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories*

The Missing is a platformer-puzzler developed by White Owls Inc. and published by Arc System Works in 2018. White Owls Inc. CEO and President SWERY, or Hidetaka Suehiro, is known for making “weird” games. JJ Macfield is the central character in this action-adventure game. She is tall, slim, and has long flowing blonde hair. Her main purpose is to find her best friend Emily. Throughout the story, JJ’s relationship with her friends, teacher, and mother are explored through text messages that she receives on her phone. By the end of the game, the game reveals that JJ is a closeted transgender woman through implicit and contextual clues. The game is short, with the main story taking approximately 5.5 hours to complete and the average playthrough taking 7 hours (“How long the missing”).

The game mechanics are brutal as they force the player to rip apart, burn, and mutilate JJ’s body to get through and around various obstacles. JJ can regenerate for the player to mutilate her all over again. By the end of the game, this ability to unmake and rebuild herself turns out to be her greatest strength as she uses her now speedy ability to defeat a razor blade-wielding demon. I was intrigued by the strong opinions on this game—academics such as Thach (2021) and game journalism pieces like Dale’s (2019) describe this game as uniquely centering transgender perspectives, or noting how important this game was to them in feeling seen (Blondeau, 2019). It was the fact that this game rarely centered transgender perspectives that I chose to include it, even though the rest of my sample includes AAA games, and this one is not from a AAA studio.

Hainly from *Mass Effect: Andromeda*

Mass Effect: Andromeda (2017) is the fourth entry in the *Mass Effect* action-adventure role-playing series set in space. Like *Dragon Age*, it was developed by Bioware and published by Electronic Arts. *Andromeda* was specifically developed by the Bioware Montreal studio, while *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was developed by the Bioware Austin studio. *Andromeda* is set in the Andromeda galaxy and is an offshoot to the events of the original *Mass Effect* games. The main character is part of the Andromeda initiative, tasked with finding new worlds for a home for humanity. Using a third person shooting mechanic, players travel to different planets in the galaxy in a more open world style.

Hainly Abrams is a scientist and a very minor side character that can be found on Eos, the first planet we go to. Physically, Hainly has olive skin, short dark hair, is shorter than the player character, with a higher but slightly husky voice. Since she is a scientist, she will often talk about science with excitement. She also has a good sense of humor, putting in subtle jokes here and there or asking things in a cute manner. By and large, she acts like other NPCs in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Hainly does not leave her physical location on Eos.

When the game was launched, Hainly immediately told the player character that she is transgender by dropping her deadname, or birthname and the fact that she had joined the Andromeda initiative to get away from her past life. After community outcry, her original dialogue tree was moved in terms of when it can occur. The player must first earn Hainly's trust by getting her husband out of stasis before she will talk about her

transgender identity. As such, this game offers an excellent case study on careless representation, community backlash, and an example of a company having to apologize for the way they handled representation.

Lev from *The Last of Us 2*

The Last of Us 2 (TLoU2) is game studio Naughty Dog's sequel to their highly popular game *The Last of Us*. The first game was widely acclaimed and won many awards ("List of accolades," n.d.). Many players loved the game and the bond between the main protagonists Joel and Ellie. The 2020 action-adventure/horror/survival game is set in a dystopian zombie-infested America and follows fan favorite characters from the first game while introducing a new cast of characters. In *TLoU2* the player controls Ellie or Abby throughout the game. Combat is common, and killing NPCs is not only encouraged but often necessary. Due to the limited resources in the world, stealth and close takedowns without using ammo are encouraged.

This emotional game forces the player to consider the violence they must enact on the screen as either Ellie or Abby. Unlike the first game, the release of *The Last of Us 2* was much more contentious. As Trumbore (2021) outlines, this game was review bombed by irate players leaving negative and offensive reviews shortly after its release for three main reasons: 1. The fact that Joel, the beloved main protagonist from the first game, is murdered shortly into the game by Abby; 2. the game forces the player to switch from playing Ellie to playing as Abby halfway through the game; and 3. the inclusion of LGBTQ and diverse characters. This includes Abby, a very muscular cisgender woman, Lev, who is a young transgender boy, and Ellie's lesbian love story with non-player character Dina. The player plays Ellie on a quest to avenge Joel for the first half of the

game. As Ellie, we methodically hunt down and kill all of Abby's friends to find out where she is in order to kill her. Halfway through the game, we switch to playing as Abby. The game thus forces the player to empathize with characters they spent half a game considering as their enemy. We as players meet the character of Lev while playing as Abby, and end up spending a lot of time with him throughout the second part of the game. The game is quite lengthy, totaling 11 acts and 45 chapters of various lengths. The time to finish this game ranges from 23 to 42 hours long, with the main story lasting around 24 hours (Cardy, 2020; "How long is the last of us part II?"). An average player takes around 28 hours to complete the game ("How long is the last of us part II?").

When we meet Lev, he and his sister Yara save us from being hung and disemboweled by their fellow Seraphites. We learn that Lev is being hunted by Seraphites, a primitive cult faction, for "being an apostate" but the player does not discover why until later in the game. Lev is a short, slight 13-year-old transgender boy. He has a shaved head, scars on his face, and has a bow and arrow as his weapon of choice. He is close with his older sister, Yara, and bonds with Abby throughout their time together. Lev serves as Abby's main helper. Out of a total of 11 acts and 45 chapters across the entire time, Lev is present for 4 acts and 12 chapters. Lev is often threatened by violence from his former community even after being cast out, and is attacked by his own mother towards the end of the game.

Lev and Abby are intricately linked, and they protect each other throughout the story. Lev humanizes Abby, and through Lev, Abby learns to care and becomes much like an older sister/protector figure to him. While there are some ways that Lev makes Abby look good (Kosciesza, 2022), Lev and Abby also have a strong connection. Lev

stops Abby from murdering pregnant Dina and Ellie, and acts as a moral compass in this way. Abby also relentlessly ensures she takes care of him, saves him, and she never judges him. Through their relationship, Abby is shown to be caring, vulnerable and kind, while Lev displays his bravery and steadfast sense of morality. Lev's influence on those around him is displayed in his influence over Abby, and points to the power that Lev has.

Tyler from *Tell Me Why*

Tell Me Why (2020) is a three-chapter narrative focused adventure game created by Don't Nod Entertainment. The story is about a set of twins, Tyler and Allyson, who reunite and return to their mother's house 10 years after the horrible tragedy that ended in their mother's death. Tyler is a transgender man who has spent the past 10 years at a juvenile detention center, while Allyson has spent her time living with her guardian, Uncle Eddy, and figuring out what she wants to do with her life. At first, we are led to believe that Tyler's mother tried to kill him 10 years ago. As the twins revisit their hometown to try to unravel what happened that night, they start to discover more about their mother, as well as remember their childhood. Players can move around the setting, explore the areas they are in to a limited degree, choose dialogue options which impact your relationships with other characters, and examine different objects around the game. The episodes range in length from two to three and a half hours for Chapter 1, two and a half to four hours for Chapter 2, and two to two and a half hours for Chapter 3.

Tyler Ronan is a 21-year-old trans man who is one of two protagonists in the game. When we meet him, he is getting ready to leave the group home he has lived at since he was 11. He has dark facial hair, short dark hair, has a masculine yet husky voice, and has a square-shouldered, toned build. Tyler's transness is part of his story, but it is

not the only or most interesting aspect of his story. The story is generally split between playing Tyler and playing his twin sister Alyson throughout the three chapters

Catalyst from *Apex Legends*

Apex Legends is a popular “free to play” battle royale style game created by the American AAA game studio Respawn Entertainment. It was initially released February 4th, 2019 and is a live server game that, as of this writing, is regularly updated with new content that includes maps, game types, and characters. While there are different game types, the base type is called trios in which three “legends” are launched out of a drop ship to a sprawling map below. The goal is to defeat the other three-person squads while the map slowly closes in, forcing players to encounter enemy teams. It is therefore necessary to work with your team, and interact with other players, to be successful in this game and win the round.

Legends are characters that players can choose to play as. Squads can only have one of each legend on their team. Legends have their own backstory and unique abilities based around five classes: assault, skirmisher, reconnaissance, controller, and support. These classes signal what type of playstyle the legend is best used for. For example, assault characters excel at delivering damage and getting into the action, while support characters are good for inter-player support such as healing. There are currently 26 different characters in the *Apex Legends* universe. *Apex* is lauded for the diversity in playable legends, who differ in terms of race, sexuality, gender identity, and age (among other things). There are currently eight legends that are part of the LGBTQ community: Gibraltar is gay, Bloodhound is non-binary, Loba is bisexual, Fuse and Seer are pansexual, Valkyrie is lesbian, Alter is asexual, and Catalyst is transgender. Unlike most

other games, including in this sample, it is worthwhile to note that Catalyst is not the only LGBTQ character in the game. Therefore, Catalyst is not the lone LGBTQ+ character in a game filled with straight, cis folks and does not bear the entire representational load.

In terms of interaction with each of the legends, you play as them from a first-person point of view, but there are also instances where it is a third person point of view and you can see your character on screen. There are also a bunch of interesting skins that include various colors and designs that differ from the base character that you can get for each legend, which slightly changes their appearance. Characters often have voice lines to alert you to things in game (such as when an enemy lands near) or just to say fun quips, such as upon landing from the dropship. Sometimes the characters also say things to each other randomly. Players will hear these voice lines regularly while playing. Aside from the cinematic short videos that are released when a new character or new content is launched, the player interacts with the character by playing with or against them, seeing their animations, and hearing their voice lines.

The specific character I focus on in this game is Catalyst. She was released on November 1st, 2022, and is the 23rd legend released into the game. Catalyst is tall, with dark black and blue hair, and dark make-up. According to the wiki, Catalyst is 30 years old, referred to as the “Defensive Conjurer,” and she is a controller class legend (“Catalyst”). This means she is skilled at forcing enemy players into certain positions on the map and fortifying locations with her abilities. She can use her ferrofluid to put down spiky traps that slow enemies and damage them, rebuild and fortify doors, and her ultimate ability allows her to build a massive ferrofluid wall over a distance. Enemies are

slowed and damaged when they pass through her ferrofluid. She is the most recent transgender character in this sample.

Transgender Characters in Video Games: From Minor to Playable

Transgender characters appeared in their respective games differently depending on what kind of character they were. Characters ranged from being minor characters in large games to playable characters. While this does not mean that minor characters cannot be meaningful, there was a relationship between how much care was put into creating the characters that were more present on screen versus those that were minor NPCs in the sample. This is because there is necessarily more care taken with characters that are more central to the game and therefore are more important to the game. Characters that had less screen time, that could be missed, and that were not playable were the weakest in terms of significant representation. In contrast, main and playable characters offer more complex representation.

As Hall (2020) notes, representation is the “production of meaning through language,” so the words we use to describe and construct characters on the screen *mean* something. The way transgender characters are constructed (encoded) and read by both myself and players has meaning (decoded) as influenced by our own frameworks of knowledge and the means of production around the text (Hall, 1991 [1973]). One useful way to think about representation for this research is to think of a spectrum between presence and absence. On the one hand, representational presence means that characters, or the identities they represent, are seen and imagined. Presence symbolizes, and can be decoded as, existence. Shaw (2015a) explores that one way of understanding representation is through providing “evidence of what could be and who can be possible”

(p. 41). Presence, then, means that folks can see themselves represented on screen, and that others must reckon with their existence.

Absence, on the other hand, means that the status quo is not challenged and that this lived experience effectively does not exist. Shaw (2015a) discusses that work on representation usually argues that it is important because people want to see people like them (the market-logic argument); that it is important that people see those unlike them to experience a broader view of the world (educational argument); and that representation allows us to see the possibility of different ways of being (pp. 41-42). These characters being present in media allows for these possibilities. On the other end of this spectrum, we have complete omission and absence. Gerbner and Gross (2017) argue that “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation” (p. 182), or in other words, the message that one does not exist if they are not represented in media. All eight characters chosen for this study exist in their respective games as explicitly transgender characters. They were purposefully designed to be transgender and to be decoded that way. However, their relative absence or presence in the game will influence how these characters are decoded and how significant they are as transgender representation.

Minor and Missable Characters

Some characters in this sample, like Hainly and Chevalier, were minor and potentially missable characters in large games. Being a minor character with limited screen time makes it harder for players to encounter and remember them. Chevalier appears in four side missions in *Unity* and was difficult to find. Similarly, the player can find Hainly on the first planet they have to go to in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Once the

player finds her, there are side quests that the player can do for her. It took me 15.2 hours in my *Andromeda* playthrough before I found her, exemplifying how easy these characters can be to miss. As Adams (2015) and Shaw (2015) have argued, the player does not have to reckon with the existence of missable characters.

Chevalier's quests are a little more memorable than Hainly's because they require the player to fight against duelers and then face off against the ultimate duelist—Chevalier herself. The fact that you must fight Chevalier means you must enact violence upon her, which echoes the problems of other transgender representation where violence is part of the transgender experience (Abbott, 2022; Rigney, 2003; Sandercock, 2017). Apart from the excitement of the duels themselves, Chevalier is also interesting because her deep voice is a juxtaposition to her feminine clothing. While she looks like any other nicely dressed woman you can encounter in the game, her deep voice is startling. The juxtaposition between her clothing and her male voice actor results in what Cover (2023) calls an identity 'misalignment' between the character's gender identity and their actor.

Hainly is present on the first planet the player arrives on, making it a little more likely that players will explore the settlement she is in. Since she is the science officer, she sends the player on quests that are related to monitoring the planetary conditions. Once the player completes her initial quests, they can talk to her a few more times to get a second line of quests that involves getting her husband out of stasis so they can be together. The game has been patched so that a piece of dialogue where Hainly tells the player her dead name, or birth name, happens after this second line of quests.

There are many problems with the choice to have Hainly drop her dead name to the player without any context that it is highly vulnerable information to disclose. As

Lieurance, Kuebbing, McCary, and Nunez (2021) explain, dead naming is the use of a trans person's birth name after they have taken a new name as part of their transition (p. 342). Dead naming is usually done without the trans person's consent and against their wishes. Using a transgender person's dead name is often emotionally harmful to them (Freeman, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2022). It is much better to use a transgender person's chosen name. Research shows that using transgender folks' chosen name leads to increased mental health (Russell, Pollitt, Li, Grossman, 2018) and a feeling of empowerment (Anzani, Rucco, Lorusso, & Prunas, 2023). Anzani et al. (2023) describe how the ability to self-determine one's chosen name "provides a valuable chance to integrate many components of one's identity, such as one's gender and social identities and personal qualities" (p. 100).

This research signals that using a transgender person's chosen name is important. It is therefore highly problematic that Hainly casually shares her dead name as it sets up certain expectations around what questions are appropriate to ask transgender people, and about what transgender people are expected to share about themselves. As Dale (2017) explores, asking about or using a transgender person's birth name brings up painful memories, which Dale describes as an "emotional gut punch that reminds me of how bad I felt during that part of my life" (para. 29). While not all transgender people feel this viscerally about talking about their birth name, Dale (2017) also notes that dead naming is often used as a way for people to try and hurt transgender folks, or to accuse them of being liars or being deceitful (para. 29). Ultimately, the problem with dead naming is that

it is often weaponized against transgender people. The way that Hainly casually uses her dead name sets up certain expectations that trans folks owe that to anyone curious enough to ask.

While both women exist in their games and offer more variety to the type of identities in the game world that is otherwise largely cisgender and straight, their lack of screentime makes them less memorable. In addition to the fact that they are missable and therefore do not have to be reckoned with (Shaw, 2015), neither character was crafted very carefully. In many ways, the problems with Hainly and Chevalier’s representation are linked to how they reflect negative media stereotypes of transgender women. While Hainly spends very little time with the player, it is her blunt disclosure of her transgender identity that stands out. As Patterson (2023) notes in her work the news reporting of the deaths of transgender folks, the unwanted and nonconsensual use of a transgender person’s birth name is harmful misrepresentation (p. 240). Patterson (2023) articulates how misgendering and misrepresenting a trans person by using their birth name “pushes a narrative that transgender people have a link or connection to the gender they were assigned as birth” (p. 244). This is the heart of the issue with Hainly disclosing her birth name in such a cavalier way without context—it also pushes this narrative.

The identity misalignment between Chevalier, who was a real transgender person, shows that her identity was not thoughtfully considered when they created her. Instead, the representation of Chevalier feeds into the comedic effect of the non-passing trans body as explored by Richardson and Smith (2022). Her husky and deep voice makes the identity misalignment the most prominent aspect of Chevalier’s character. Her character is thus a combination of Richardson and Smith’s (2022) pathetic and predatory tropes—

her voice makes it so that she does not pass, and the fact that she looks like any other woman you would meet in Paris makes her appear deceptive.

Hainly and Chevalier thus both include aspects of problematic transgender representation as explored above. The combination of their limited screen time, the fact that they are not thoughtfully incorporated, and the problem with their respective characters makes them less significant as examples of transgender representation.

Adequately Present Characters

Two of the eight characters are adequately present in their respective games as NPCs. Ned from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are both non-player characters that are involved in the main story line in their respective games. Compared to Hainly and Chevalier, the player will encounter both Ned and Krem as long as they play through the main story. This means that neither of these men can be missed. In addition, it seems like more thought went into these characters than Hainly or Chevalier. Both add more transmasculine representation where, as Shaw and Friesem (2016) found, not a lot of transgender men exist in mainstream games as characters or in media in general (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). For example, McInroy and Craig (2015) noted that their interviews felt that transgender men were less visible than transgender women, while the representations of transgender women were stereotypical or problematic (p. 614). Like other media, there has been a relative absence in terms of the representation of transgender men in games. The fact that both of the least complex examples of transgender representation in this sample are transgender women, while the transgender men are at least adequate, signals that game makers are recycling previous stereotypes of transgender women in media. It also suggests that, if media makers do not

have a variety of stereotypes of transgender men to draw from, they will be compelled to ask trans folks or to more thoughtfully consider how to include such an identity. The relative invisibility of transgender men in the media means there is a lack of stereotypes to draw from. While Krem and Ned are not as complex as they could be, there are aspects of their representation that make them adequate and, at the very least, not “bad” instances of representation. Instead, they are adequate characters with representation problems.

As an associate character in *Syndicate*, Ned is one of six who the player can do side quests for. As the player completes quests for each of the associates, they gain more loyalty with that character. These associate quests allow the player to earn experience points and level their skills up, as well as supply the player with items, resources, and money for crafting. In addition to the ability to run quests for Ned, he also appears in the main story. Ned is introduced to the twins early on and reappears when Jacob Frye needs to steal engines from an enemy train. Since Ned uses his business around the London transit system to cover for his crime, he has unique access to trains to help Jacob with this task (“Ned Wynert,” n.d.). The fact that Ned is one of six associates means that he is more important to the story than other NPCs. He serves a purpose, and the player runs into him more than once.

Krem is comparable to Ned in terms of his presence in the game. Depending on whether the player chooses to let Iron Bull join the Inquisition and whether the player chooses to save Krem and Bull’s other soldiers during a mission, Krem can remain with the Inquisition until the end of the game. Krem is involved in the main story as he provides the link between Iron Bull and the Inquisition. The player can do quests for main non-player characters like Iron Bull that allow the player to get to know the

characters better. If the player gets close to Iron Bull, they can do his quest which requires the player to choose between saving Krem and Bull's other soldiers, or gaining an alliance with the Qunari. Unfortunately, Krem can die depending on player choices. The transgender suffering violence and death is a common occurrence found across all trans media (McLaren, Bryant & Brown, 2021; Sandercock, 2015). Krem being one of the few Inquisition NPCs that can actually die perpetuates this trope. However, throughout the game the player can seek out Krem and talk to him. As the game progresses, different types of dialogue open. Through Krem, we can learn about Iron Bull, Bull's mercenary group of soldiers, and Krem himself.

Neither Ned nor Krem can accompany the player on quests, but both appear in the main quest line at least once. They both serve a narrative purpose and are present on screen at least a few times. While Ned is a stable part of the game and appears at least twice no matter how the player plays the game, Krem's time in the game is more variable depending on player choices. However, the player must encounter Krem at least once. There are a few problematic aspects of their presence on screen that keeps either of these men from being complex. While Ned is present on screen, he is not present as a transgender man specifically unless one reads the bio. Krem's presence on screen is dependent on whether Iron Bull joins the Inquisition, and ultimately he can be killed off. Thus, both characters are just adequate in terms of their presence in their respective games.

Major and Playable Characters

The remaining four characters, Lev, JJ, Catalyst, and Tyler, are present for major parts of the game, are playable, and/or they center transgender experience. Characters

that qualify as any of these three things have a major presence in their respective games, and they also serve important functions in the game. As they cannot be missed, they challenge the common trend that LGBTQ content is often skippable (Adam, 2015; Shaw, 2015). Their stories are thoughtfully integrated into the game, and therefore their presence on screen is significant and unavoidable. Even more than the presence of the other four characters, each of the characters in this section has more prolonged contact with the player because they are in the game more. Lev, JJ, Catalyst, and Tyler force the player to reckon with their existence, thereby offering visibility for transgender folks (Cavalcante, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2015) and an opportunity for cis folks to see transness on screen. As there has been a relative absence of transgender characters as main or playable, this disrupts the problem of lack of major trans characters in video games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016).

Lev is a primary non-player character and is integral to protagonist Abby's story. Halfway through the game, players switch to playing Abby. Lev and his sister are responsible for saving Abby's life. From that point, players are more or less accompanied by Lev until the end of the game. As Abby and Lev journey together, the player gets to listen to their conversation and learns more about Lev and the Seraphite community he comes from. Kosciesza (2022) argues that Lev acts as a moralizing force to the other characters around him—he outlines that it is Lev's victimization that provides an opportunity for cisgender protagonists like Abby to act heroically. For example, there is a scene where Abby is about to murder a pregnant character and Lev stops her from doing so. It becomes clear that Abby becomes like a big sister and protector to Lev. They take care of each other and become a found family unit by the end of the game. You can and

do regularly interact with Lev when you play as Abby. As long as the player continues through the game, Lev is not missable as he is part of the key trajectory of the story. Lev is present for a good portion of the game. Lev is thus a main non-player character and a major part of the gameplay.

JJ, Catalyst, and Tyler are all playable main characters in their games. JJ and Tyler are main characters in story-driven games, while Catalyst is a playable legend in the battle royale game *Apex Legends*. JJ is the title character and main protagonist of the game *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories*. The player plays as her and sees her onscreen the entire time. Thach (2021) argues that by focusing exclusively on JJ and her experiences, the game centers transgender perspectives (p. 37). Similarly, Tyler is one of two main protagonists in *Tell Me Why*. Both games focus on their transgender characters and explore their experience, allowing the player to control and play as a transgender character. The presence of Catalyst in *Apex Legends* differs from the other three characters in this section because she is in a battle royale game. The game play is not story focused—the goal is to kill the other legends in the game. Players can choose to play as Catalyst and often will play against her as well. In this way, her presence is variable but always possible. If a player chooses to play as her the whole time, they will play as her from a first-person point of view. Players embody her, hear her voice lines, and play as a trans character.

Currently, there is still limited mainstream transgender representation in video games. Any presence of transgender characters in a game contributes meaning to our conceptual map of trans folks (Hall, 2020), signals existence (Gerbner & Gross, 2017) and possibility (Shaw, 2015a). However, presence in the form of unavoidable reckoning

and playing as a trans person or having them be a major character is the most meaningful form of transgender representation currently available. The characters of Lev, JJ, Catalyst, and Tyler represent unavoidable and apologetic transness through a combination of sustained presence and the care put into their representation. Notably, there was more care put into characters who are main characters and/or playable as I explore in the following section.

Transgender Identity: How Transness is Included and Revealed

The second key consideration is how trans identity is included and revealed in the games, which can be done with more or less care. There are different ways that a character's transgender identity can be included or revealed in the game. This can be in more subtle, less obvious ways, as well as explicitly stated. This section is an exploration of the different ways that transness is included in these games. Three predominant ways that transness was included are: the "trans reveal" present in the games, the type of trans dialogue options, and the range between subtle vs. clearly outlined and explicit transgender identity. The most significant way that transness is included and revealed is when trans characters can talk about their trans experience with their own authority and because they choose to. The way transness is incorporated is also influenced by the relative availability of other transgender tropes in media as seen by the way these stereotypes are repeated in this sample.

The Trans Reveal

All eight of these characters were created to be transgender characters, which is part of the reason why all eight are included in this sample. Part of this explicit transness is somehow letting players know that the characters are transgender. Seid (2014)

describes the “reveal” as a “moment in a trans person’s life when the trans person is subjected to the pressures of a pervasive gender/sex system that seeks to make public the ‘truth’ of the trans person’s gendered and sexed body” (p. 176). Seid (2014) argues that, as a narrative technique in media, this reveal is often “highly sensationalized, dramatized, or eroticized” and represents the transgender character’s struggle over the “truth” of their body (p. 177). In this sense, the reveal is understood as an act that reasserts the “biological” and binary truth of the trans body (Seid, 2014, p. 177). However, the reveal I discuss here does not include the trans body being unveiled for curious players. Instead, it is the articulation of that character’s central trans experience and identity.

There are four main ways that this reveal happens: the character talks about it, another character talks about it, it is stated in the game through items or in texts, or it is discussed in paratextual information around the game. While these avenues of discussing the character’s transgender identity are not inherently good or bad, the more complex transgender characters in this sample generally talk about it themselves at some point. There is a qualitative difference between a character choosing to talk about it in a way that feels organic and potentially coded specifically for other transgender people to understand. As we can see from Hainly’s very jarring way of talking about her transgender identity, it is no guarantee that a transgender character talking about their transness will be significant or complex. I explore how transness is revealed via texts and then move into discussing how characters in the game talk about it.

Games that describe the character’s transgender identity mainly using in-game texts and paratextual information including *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, *The Missing*. While JJ, Ned, and Chevalier do not explicitly talk about their

transness, in-game texts such as the biographies and the official game wikis let players know they are trans. While the *Assassin Creed* games incorporate Ned and Chevalier's trans identity via the in-game biographies, JJ's story is focused on the fact that she is a closeted transgender woman. The use of in-game texts to express the character's trans identity is thus a subtle way of naming that experience.

Some games include a mix of the transgender character and their ally's discussing transness. Lev from the *The Last of Us 2* alludes to being cast out for shaving his head, and references his transness in subtle ways. However, the player is given much more information about Lev's transness from his sister Yara, as well as the Seraphites when they dead name him. After this happens, there is a moment where Lev asks Abby if she heard what they called him. Abby says yeah, and Lev asks if she wants to ask him about it. Abby says, "do you want me to ask you about it?" After a moment, Lev says no and walks away.

We get the fuller story later in the game through a dialogue with Lev's sister Yara. As part of Seraphite culture, people are given a role in the community. Lev was given his role—to be one of the elder's wives. That night, he went against the gender stratified rules of the Seraphites and shaved his head, announcing his identity as a man. He was then cast out and considered an apostate. In the game, Yara tells Abby that Lev had previously told her how he felt and she encouraged him to keep it to himself. However, Yara ran away with Lev when he was cast out to protect and support him. His transness is therefore mainly revealed by others talking about him. Characters like Lev, Chevalier, Ned, and JJ do not actually get a chance to talk about their trans experience or identities. As Rooke (2010) explores, there is immense power in trans folks being able to

tell their own stories. Having others explain the character's trans story to the player effectively outs that character without their consent.

Hainly, Krem, Tyler, and Catalyst all talk about their transgender identity directly. Hainly reveals the fact that she is transgender directly to the player in conversation. Krem talks about his transness, but the player can also discuss it with Iron Bull. In this way, Krem is a character whose transness is revealed by himself and by the characters around him. Tyler talks about his experience as a transgender man to other characters throughout the game. Aside from the player witnessing aspects of Tyler's past, he himself also discusses the experience of taking testosterone and his excitement for top surgery⁷. Catalyst similarly talks about trans-centric experiences through her quips and voice lines. Some of her voice lines clearly signal her identity as a transgender woman. For example, one of her best lines related to her trans identity is "I am the grim trans witch your parents warned you about." Like Tyler's discussion about testosterone and top surgery, Catalyst also references estradiol⁸ and taking hormones in two different voice lines: "If you can't produce your own liquid metals, store-bought is fine" and "colloidal, estradiol, magical. I'm a perfect concoction." Both characters thus directly discuss common trans experiences because they choose to, but also in a way that is immediately intelligible to trans folks.

There is a qualitative difference in how each of these characters' transness is revealed. Catalyst's voice lines and Tyler's description of his experience starting testosterone feel much more organic and as though they are things a transgender person

⁷ Top surgery involves removing or augmenting chest tissue to create a more masculinized chest.

⁸ Estradiol are hormones taken by some transgender women to promote physical changes as part of hormone replacement therapy.

crafted. Although they talk about aspects of their medical transition, they do so on their own terms and via their own choice. On the other hand, Hainly's blunt reveal of her dead name and old identity feel inappropriate. Her explanation of her "coming out" story is reminiscent of Funk and Funk's (2016) exploration of Maura's coming out in the show *Transparent* as a social requirement, one that trans folks like Maura must perform to "attain recognition as a human being, not as an 'it'" (p. 889). In comparison to Hainly's seemingly random disclosure of her identity, Ned is just allowed to exist in the game as another man in London. However, players can go to his in-game bio to verify that he is transgender and find out his birth name. While these moments of identity reveal are necessary for players to reckon with trans existence, some feel better than others. That is because conversations that "reveal" transgender identity also play with the idea of deception (Billard, 2019) and the "centrality of passing to transgender existence" (p. 467). In other words, transgender folks are, in some case, seen as deceptive if they do not disclose the fact that they are transgender. However, Billard (2019) warns that discourses of deception delegitimize trans identity (p. 473). If characters talk about their transgender identity on their own terms and because they want to, it therefore feels more organic (Christian and White, 2020) and natural rather than forced.

Trans Dialogue Options

As an interactive text, players can prompt game characters into revealing different elements of their backstories and thus the notion that characters "speak for themselves" is not exactly the same as other media. What I am calling "trans dialogue options" are in-game dialogue where the player can talk to or ask the character about their transgender identity. In this way, players can learn about and explore that character's transness.

Games that include this type of dialogue include *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Depending on how dialogue is worded can influence how characters are perceived. For example, trans representation can be moved into more comedic or abrupt areas based on word choice and framing. Trans dialogue options can be educational for non-transgender folks, but not actually be reflective of trans experience or the way trans folks talk about their transness.

Krem can be found at the main camp for a large portion of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Krem. During a cutscene where we are introduced to Iron Bull's mercenary gang called the Chargers, trans dialogue options ensue. There is some back and forth joking between Krem and Iron Bull, at which point you can ask Krem whether he prefers his full name or Krem. He says Krem—there is some joking about Qunari “binding” their man bosoms and Krem says “let me know if you need any help with that.” At this point, there are four dialogue choices: “Why pass as a man,” “are you a woman,” “and the rest of your crew?” and “when did you know?” During this conversation, Iron Bull mentions there is a word for transgender people in the Qunari. This is the first major trans-focused dialogue option in the game.

After this interaction, you can go back over to Krem and you get a “tell me about you” prompt. You can choose: “how did you end up leaving?” “What is Tevinter life like?” “Goodbye,” and “why do you pass”? If you chose “why do you pass?” you ask Krem why he decided to live as a man, and he snaps back with “I didn't *decide* anything.” He describes some of his backstory, including the fact that his mother wanted him to marry a man and how his refusal to do so created a rift between them. After this conversation with Krem, I can go back to Iron Bull and ask him to tell me about Krem. I

can ask “him being her isn’t an issue?” Bull vigorously defends Krem when you do this, saying very assertively, “he is *not* a woman.” And then he says something about how Krem has a “little difficulty pissing standing up.”

The trans dialogue options around Krem are complex. On one hand, they make it so that Krem’s transness is central to his story and the game itself reacts protectively if you ask transphobic questions. On the other hand, the tone and wording of these questions are problematic. They equate Krem’s transition to a medical and transnormative model (Glover 2016; Johnson, 2016), understanding him as a woman who “became” a man. This is not a correct understanding of transgender identity and oversimplifies it (McInroy & Craig, 2015). In addition, it may give the player the idea it is okay to ask such problematic questions to real trans people (Fink & Palmer, 2020; McLaren, Bryant & Brown, 2021).

Hainly is another character that has trans dialogue options. Originally, Hainly immediately disclosed to the player that she was transgender. After community outcry, her original dialogue tree was moved in terms of when it can occur. Now, the player must do her quest to get her husband out of stasis first before she discloses her old name and backstory. I reviewed the old dialogue tree as it was before the patch. Right after you encounter her, you could ask what brought her to Andromeda. She says: “back home, I was filling test tubes in some dead-end lab. People knew me as Stephan. But that was never who I was. I knew what I could do. And I knew who I wanted to do it as. ‘Hainly Abrams, Andromeda Explorer.’ That’s me. Feels good. Feels right.” When choosing “good for you,” the player will say: “congratulations. Talk about a whole new life.” Hainly says “thanks. Once my fiancé is out of stasis, it’ll be complete. When it’s

time...I'm hoping Bradley will perform our wedding ceremony.” At this point, you can also ask why she chose the name Hainly. She will tell you that “it’s the initials of all my favorite places back home. My fiancé helped me pick it before we left.” Hainly is a prime example of transgender representation that is clearly stated but feels inappropriate. As Hainly is a minor character in a large game, her disclosure of her transgender identity to the player whom she barely knows does not feel thoughtful.

The value of trans dialogue options is contested as it depends on what the ultimate purpose is. If they are educational and meant to introduce cisgender players to transgender people, they are not necessarily meant for transgender audiences. Compared to Krem and Hainly’s invasive conversations, characters like Tyler and Catalyst talk about their experience as though they are just that—relevant parts of their trans experience. Examples of thoughtful inclusion include Catalyst’s voice lines that almost feel like inside jokes between trans folks. Some of the games in this sample include clearly outlining that the character is transgender, but they do not land as well. Instead of being outed without their consent or talked about, giving characters the power to talk about their transgender experience directly is important as it gives that character power over the telling of their story. I have previously argued that giving transgender people autonomy to tell their own stories results in more complexity—this is because transgender people are often talked about in news coverage but are rarely allowed to speak (McLaren, 2022). The fact that Tyler and Catalyst talk from a place of authority about their own transgender experience makes their representations more meaningful.

From Subtle to Explicit Transness

The way these games include transness ranges from subtle to transness being a central part of that character and their story. Each of these games in general or, more likely in certain moments throughout the game, include transness in subtle, mediocre, explicit, and central ways. This range can vary throughout the game, meaning that games can have instances of subtle transness but also have transness be central to the character's story.

As I explained when discussing the trans reveal, subtle transness can include items found in the game world or it can be implicitly included, or implied. For example, contextual clues in Tyler's room at the beginning of *Tell Me Why* include a book entitled "The Transgender Man's Guide to Healthy Masculinity" and a poster for a trans visibility march in Juneau. McPhail (2023) similarly explores how the physical clues left in Madeline's bedroom during the final chapter in the game *Celeste* meant something to players—it "confirmed" what players had suspected about Madeline's unstated trans identity all along. In this way, subtle and implied clues can inform players about the character's trans identity. Characters like Ned and Chevalier are noted as transgender in their in-game bios. An example of transness being implied is JJ's story. The game itself does not name her as trans—instead, we see the messages between JJ and her mother. When JJ's mother tells her she found women's clothes in JJ's closet and read her diary, the player realizes that JJ is a closeted transgender woman.

As these examples show, transness can be subtly included in the story and game world. By including items, adding it into the character bio, and implying it through messages, the game includes transness in a more subtle manner. Including transness in a

subtle manner can be a good thing. It signals that the character is trans, and it also allows for less blunt messaging. However, if the fact that a character is transgender is too subtle, it can problematically be missed or players can refuse to believe it. As Shaw (2015a) points out, the ability to ignore LGBTQ identity allows players to continue playing the game without having to reckon with trans existence. Players cannot ignore explicit transness.

Mediocre levels of signaling transgender identity in representation include those that clearly signal that the character is trans, but the fact that the character is trans is more about decoration or variety of character identity than a meaningful inclusion. Characters like Krem and Hainly are trans for variety, because why not? On the surface, more transgender representation is a good thing. As Shaw (2015a) argues, “the goal in increasing representation in games is...making more games that reflect more modes of being in the world” (p. 143). As Shaw (2015a) explores, if it does not matter what the character could be, why not make them trans? In many ways, you could take the fact that they are transgender out of the equation, and they would still fundamentally be the same. However, I argue that being transgender does matter when thinking about complex representation because it should make a difference in that character’s story.

Explicit, central, and meaningful transgender inclusion is what leads to more complexity in transgender representation. Even though there has not been a lot of transgender representation in games, there has been enough inconsequential representation. There needs to be more central trans representation. In their study, Villegas Simón, Sanchez Soriano, and Ventura (2024) noted that their participants felt like

most trans characters were conceived by cis people, were played by cis actors or actresses, and are designed to satisfy the gaze of a cis audience: ‘It is for a cis and mostly hetero audience’ (transman, 32 years old, interview). In general, they feel that trans people are not part of or taken into account at any stage of this process and that the trans characters that appear on screen fail to meet their demand for representation. Instead, they are created from a cis perspective to exhibit trans people to the cisheterosexual audience. (p. 31)

In comparison, representation that is meaningful in some way centrally and fundamentally centers and includes how the transgender experience impacts who that person is. Characters like JJ, Tyler, Lev, and Catalyst are centrally transgender. It matters to their character, and it matters to the game—it is not to satisfy a cis gaze (Villegas Simón, Sanchez Soriano, and Ventura, 2024). If you took away their transgender identity, their story and dialogue would not make sense. Who they are as transgender characters influences how they move through the world. These representations are not about learning about transness from a cisgender perspective—they feel like experiencing transness from a distinctively trans perspective. This is the transgressive potential of playing as trans—players are not able to look away and must experience this trans way of moving through the world. This is what it felt to play as and with these characters. I offer an example from *The Missing* below.

The whole point of *The Missing* is to play along through JJ’s mind as she overcomes her demons and decides that she truly wants to live at the end. As a player, we must enact a high level of violence upon JJ’s transgender body. There is a myriad of ways JJ must be torn apart and put back together to get through each level. The text messages between JJ and her mother get increasingly tense. At some point, there is a conversation where her mother randomly says how glad she is that JJ grew up “normal” and mentions people these days who claim to be genderless. JJ asks her what normal

means, and her mother responds by saying “normal normal, the way God made you.” At the end of the game, we find out that the weird tone of the messages, such as the tension between JJ and her mom, are because JJ is transgender. We also discover that this whole game has been JJ in a limbo state because she attempted suicide and is being revived. While the game does not name her as transgender, paratexts and insinuations in the game let us know that JJ is clearly a closeted transgender woman (Burns, 2020; Dale, 2019).

There is a point in the game where the text messages get more intense. First, JJ mentions to her friend Emily via text that she thinks classmates have “found out about her.” Then, JJ receives texts from her mom that made my blood run cold as I immediately sensed what was coming. Her mother had gone through her room and found women’s clothes. JJ’s mom is clearly suspicious, and JJ tells her that they are Emily’s clothes. In a further invasion of privacy, JJ’s mom proceeds to bring the clothes back to Emily’s house, where Emily’s mother tells JJ’s mom that they are not Emily’s. JJ’s mom then reads JJ’s diary and discovers how JJ feels. JJ is forcibly outed, and her mother brings her to a psychologist to “fix” her and to get her “normal” again. The invasion of privacy, the sense of being revealed despite JJ’s best efforts to control it, hits me like a semi-truck. I note my visceral reaction to this string of events. This game is centrally about transgender experience in ways that are perhaps unintelligible to cisgender players.

In the final level in which JJ is fighting the demon in her mind, she starts to use her pain and newfound ability to instantly regenerate. She beats the blade-wielding demon and chooses to live as who she is. JJ is successfully revived by the paramedics. JJ’s physical model and voice are different as she is revived, so we can see JJ’s “boy” version post revival. I read this mechanic of being ripped apart, regenerating, and

choosing to live as a stand in for the experience of being transgender. Of being ripped apart and sewing yourself back together in a way of your own choosing, of using the power to be ripped apart and regenerate as who you are as a strength of transgender experience. In many ways, this game is a performance of transgender suffering, but also transgender resilience (Stryker, 2013).

While JJ is not explicitly stated as transgender in the game, the characters of Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst are. Tyler's storyline revolves around his transgender identity and the mystery around his mother's death. While initially the player is led to believe Tyler's mother Mary-Anne tried to kill him because he is transgender, we find out that Mary-Anne wanted Tyler to be "whatever perfect little butterfly was in that cocoon." After their family friend says this, Tyler asks "so she was cool with who I was?" Tessa, the family friend, says "she was more than that, she loved you." Not only does the player get to see Tyler as a well-adjusted transgender adult, but we learn that his mother was working towards affirming him as a transgender child.

The beginning of Chapter 2 in *Tell Me Why* features a beautifully done cinematic cut that showcases how being transgender is a central part of who Tyler is. There is this very sweet montage scene of the twins running through the house. They switch from their younger selves to current day as they play tag, throw pillows at each other, and enjoy being around each other again. This scene shows that Tyler is still the same person, despite and possibly because of his transness. He is whole, he is happy. After the twins are done running through the house, they look at a picture of them when they were younger and both are in dresses. Alyson says "you look cute here." Tyler talks about how that is not really him, that it is weird to look at. He says "it's dealing with other people

that's been way harder than figuring myself out....being able to look in the mirror and see Tyler makes the biggest difference. That's why I'm scheduling top surgery as soon as we sell this house. No more putting a binder on every morning." Alyson says she will be there to help him with whatever he needs, and asks what he wants to do with the pictures. He says he wants to keep a few to see how far they've come. The combination of the montage and picture conversation gives the player some insight into Tyler's transgender perspective. It hints at some of the experiences transgender people feel and deal with.

In this discussion of considerations around how transgender identity is included in the games, there are common aspects of when it is included well. Trans representation is most meaningful when it is an important aspect of the character. It is generally the most complex when the characters themselves talk about it. However, this is tempered by the purpose of the dialogue. Including the fact that a character is trans can serve an educational purpose for cisgender players, wherein they get to learn about transness. In comparison, central and explicitly included transness compels the player to move through the world as the character in a distinctly trans manner. Moving through the world in a distinctly trans manner is similar to Halberstam's (2005) argument about the transgender gaze in film, wherein we as a viewer see from the transgender character's point of view—a "mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body" (p. 150). We thus move through the world *as* and with a transgender character rather than looking at them. In other words, transgender characters in this sample that featured transgender identity included in a thoughtful way that mattered had the most meaningful representation. The character's physical appearance and voice actor can help or hinder this aspect, which I discuss next.

Physical Appearances and Voice

Historically, transgender representation has looked a certain way, wherein transgender women are hyper visible and transgender men are relatively invisible. As Phillips (2006) explores, cross-dressing, being a psycho-killer, and the fascination with the transgender body in pornography are the main ways transgender folks, and predominantly transgender women, have been represented in the media during the 1950s to 1990s. Abbott (2022) argues that “televsual popular culture has, since the 1960s, consistently provided the cisgender mainstream with trans subjects meant to be seen as trans, their difference identified as not cis, not ‘normal,’ not acceptable” (p. 2). As I outlined in Chapter 2, these images have been largely stereotypical and problematic. The transgender body, then, has been an object of curiosity to be looked at and generally played by a cisgender actor (Cover, 2023). As Abbott (2022) argues, transphobic representations are those that “maintain a cis/trans or male/female binary and normalize the equation of sex with gender, female with feminine, and male with masculine” (p. 3). Representations that are stereotypical and harmful work to normalize this equation. The physical appearance of transgender characters has thus tended to be for comedic relief and therefore falls into Richardson and Smith’s (2022) “pathetic trans” category. These characters have a mix of opposing gender characteristics, such as a transgender woman with a deep voice or a short transgender man who still has a high voice. This serves to maintain a cis/trans and male/female binary as argued by Abbott (2022) because these juxtapositions between physical appearance and voice, or misalignments, signal what the transgender character’s “birth sex” is.

The fact that most transgender representation is played by cisgender actors means that it is cisgender bodies, and not transgender bodies, in these representations. By virtue of being cisgender, these actors do not undergo any sort of transition and thus do not physically look or sound different. Transgender folks who have undergone hormone replacement therapy will experience a change in the sound of their voice. Depending on their transition choices, transgender folks may sound different. While having cisgender actors play the part of transgender folks who align with that gender identity is better than not having them align (such as cisgender women playing transgender women), a cisgender body playing a transgender character is problematic because they do not sound like transgender folks.

Physical Appearances

Video game characters are created to look certain ways, particularly around gender. In other words, character models are created to look like binary men or binary women. This is why there is a set variety of in game models and often character models of the same gender will look similar in the same game. Tompkins and Martins (2022) argue that women characters are coded to be looked at and are therefore sexualized (p. 401). Overviews of how gender is represented in games by Williams et al. (2009) and Lynch et al. (2016) have similarly found that women characters are more often sexualized secondary characters while men are overrepresented in popular video games. In summary, men and women in game often look physically different from each other, but will often times resemble other characters of the same gender. For example, many of the men look physically alike in the *Assassin's Creed* games in terms of height and build.

There is some variety, but the NPCs especially generally look alike along body build lines.

It is thus a question of what “gender” appearance will be used for transgender video game characters—do they look aligned with their gender identity in terms of physical appearance? The physical appearances of the trans characters fall into the following categories: cisgender and non-aligning, cisgender and aligning, and transgender. For a character to look transgender in game, producers seem to meld together characteristics of both men and women characters. I have categorized these types in *table 3* below.

Table 3. *Character physical appearances*

Physical Appearance Type	Cis non-aligning	Cis aligning	Transgender character models
Characters	Ned, Krem, Lev	Hainly, Chevalier	JJ, Tyler, Catalyst

Ned and Krem appear to have character appearances like cisgender women in their games. Ned does not look like the other men in the *Syndicate* game. When Ned stands next to Jacob Frye, he is much shorter and slighter than Jacob. It serves as a real juxtaposition in the physical appearance of Ned versus the traditional build of the cis men in the *Assassin’s Creed* Universe. Both Ned and Krem have wider hips than other men around them. While Ned wears business clothes, it is easier to see the outline of his body than Krem’s as Krem is always wearing bulky armor. However, when Krem is next to other men in the *Dragon Age: Inquisition* game, his build is not quite like other human men either. Physically, it is harder to compare Lev to other men in-game because of juxtaposition between him and Abby. Abby is very strong, tall, and her body is very

muscular. In comparison, Lev looks much more like Ned with his short and slight appearance. Like Krem and Ned, Lev does not quite look like the other men in *The Last of Us 2*. In comparison, he aligns much more with the character models of Ellie and Dina than anyone else in the game world. In short, all three of these men physically compare much more closely to some of the cisgender women in their respective game worlds.

Hainly and Chevalier look like any other woman you would meet in each of their respective games. Both games have clearly used woman character models for these characters. Hainly is wearing a tight-fitting body suit, while Chevalier's gown features a cinched waist, and she has long hair covered in a fashionable headpiece. Thus, they both have cisgender character models that align with their gender identity. The fact that Hainly and Chevalier *look* like cis women challenges the pathetic trans characters that Richardson and Smith (2022) describe as being "easily read as the gender they were assigned at birth" (p. 10). This alignment is one way that these characters are examples of significant transgender representation, although other problems with their representation prevent them from being meaningful.

JJ, Tyler, and Catalyst all look transgender. While JJ and Catalyst are tall, Tyler is short. For each character, it looks like their physical appearance has been adapted from other men and women characters. JJ and Catalyst do not look exactly like the other women in the game world, but they do have feminine features. Tyler physically resembles his twin sister in terms of height and having wider hips. However, his bulkier shoulders and slight rise across his chest⁹ signal the changes to his character model. This

⁹ As I observed Tyler's character in-game, I assumed he was wearing a binder because of this slight rise across his chest. Dialogue in the game confirms this as Tyler talks about his plan to get top surgery after selling the house.

adaptation to in-game models, as Oleszczuk and Waszkiewicz (2022) argue about non-normative character body modifications, helps to “redefine the borders and definitions of (non-) normativity” in games (p. 209). Transgender bodies *are* different—this is not a bad thing. However, the important aspect that prevents these characters from being objectified is that there is no body reveal for the sake of satisfying audience curiosity about what the trans character’s body looks like under their clothes (Cavalcante, 2017; McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021 p. 173).

In a study focused on trans folks creating their ideal avatars in gaming, Baldwin (2019) found that most participants wanted certain characters in their ideal avatar:

A flat chest, facial hair, tattoos, and muscles were among the most desired characteristics among the trans men, while trans women talked about breasts, hair, and clothes more than any other characteristics. Most explicitly stated they were giving their avatars the characteristics they wished they could possess in their physical bodies. (p. 10)

I found that JJ, Catalyst, and Tyler align with Baldwin’s (2019) findings about what trans folks would want included in their ideal avatars. These three characters both look trans by virtue of their unique trans appearance that does not entirely resemble cis characters in the game.

Related to the way these characters physically look, another interesting question I thought of was whether these characters were conventionally attractive or not. Abbott (2013) explains the trans/romance dilemma as the inability for trans folks to have fulfilling sexual or romantic relationships without revealing and focusing on transgender person’s genitals, disregarding romance, and invalidating the relationship itself (p. 39). In this instance, the transgender person is defined by their genitals and not their gender identity. Creating transgender game characters that are attractive and that do not focus or

reveal that character’s body is a way of destabilizing this trans/romance dilemma. Catalyst, Tyler, Krem, Hainly, and JJ all look conventionally attractive. In the case of Catalyst, Tyler, and JJ, I have argued that their characters physically look different. Making these characters look trans and attractive is a way to push boundaries around normative standards of attractive vs. unattractive. Similarly, letting transgender characters have relationships with others is another way to challenge Abbott’s (2013) trans/romance dilemma. Tyler is the lone character in this sample that is given a chance at romance in the storyline. Further, Tyler is given the chance at a healthy and consensual relationship.

Voice Acting

Like the in-game character appearances, the match between voice actor and character ranges from cis non-aligning, cis but aligning, and trans voice actors that align with the character (see *Table 4*). Voice casting choices can help the character sound more meaningfully trans by having the voice actor at least align with the character’s gender identity. Having a trans actor that aligns with the character’s gender identity is even better. As Zimman (2018) argues, “vocal cues are often a key factor in the process of categorizing someone's gender, making the voice an enormously important aspect of gender presentation, particularly for those who are transitioning from one gender role, identity, or presentation to another” (p. 2). Having the correct voice actor, and especially one with trans lived experience, is an important component of meaningful transgender representation in games.

Table 4. *Voice acting alignment with character*

Type of alignment	Cis non-aligning	Cis but aligning	Trans Aligning
Characters	Chevalier, Krem, Ned	Hainly, JJ	Catalyst, Lev, Tyler

Chevalier offers an example of the harm that casting a cisgender non-aligning voice actor can do. Not only does her deep and masculine voice repeat common media missteps in casting cisgender men to play transgender women in media (Davenport, 2023; Talusan, 2018; Wynne, 2022), but it adds to her problematic representation. The game treats her as a man cross-dressing in women's clothes. This calls to mind dangerous media stereotypes of transgender women that Abbott (2022) explores represent trans women as "deceptive" and "trespassing" (p. 168). Chevalier's in-game dialogue and voice actor casting choices makes her gender identity and gender presentation confusing.

The most meaningful characters were ones that had trans or gender aligning physical appearances, as well as trans or gender aligning voice actors. While having cisgender appearing bodies and voice actors that aligned with the trans character's gender identity is good, the most meaningful representation is that which feels and looks transgender.

Conclusion: What Does Meaningful Transgender Representation Look Like?

As I have explored in this chapter, there are distinct features of meaningful transgender representation in some of these eight games. The four key factors that related to whether these significant trans characters were meaningful or not were: how present they were, how their transness is included, decisions around what they look and sound like, and whether they look and feel transgender. Having a transgender character be a main character or be playable is the most complex for two reasons: the continued presence of these characters in game means players get more interaction with them, and these characters were generally made with the most care because they are more central to the game. While care can be taken with minor representation just as much as with main

or playable characters, the minor characters in my sample were not made with as much care as they could have been. Significant issues, such as Hainly's blunt reveal of her trans identity and encoding Chevalier as a man in a dress through voice acting choices show that not as much care was taken with these minor characters. In comparison, much more care was shown with the playable and main characters of Tyler, Catalyst, Lev, and JJ.

Each of the more meaningful trans characters was also given autonomy, in some ways, to tell their story. While Catalyst and Tyler make trans-coded jokes of their own volition, Lev is given the choice not to talk about his trans identity with Abby. This is unfortunately upended later on when Lev's sister tells Abby his story of being chased of their home for being trans. JJ is also forcibly outed as transgender by her mother and peers, and is not given a chance to talk about her transness. However, all four of these characters are centered on trans perspectives. This is why they feel more complex than Hainly, Chevalier, Ned, and Krem.

Thoughtful inclusion of the character's transgender identity is another feature of meaningful representation. In some ways, the representation of some of these characters, such as Tyler and Catalyst, continues common tropes around transgender representation in complex ways. For example, the way transness is revealed challenges the traditional notions of harm around aspects like the trans reveal—which has been a negative trope used to discipline the trans body back into the gender binary (Seid, 2014; Sloop, 2000; Thach 2021). Seid (2014) argues that the reveal reasserts the “binary truth of the trans body” by letting the player or audience know what is under the transgender person's clothing. However, the reveal in these games is reframed. We do not get to see anyone's body, and the characters in this sample that talk about their transness do so in a variety of

ways. When characters like Catalyst and Tyler talk about their transness, it is because they are consenting to it as per the storyline or the way their character is designed. The framing of this reveal is thus remixed—their trans identity is laid out, but it is through the character’s choosing. The player cannot ignore Tyler or Catalyst’s trans identity, thus foreclosing the ability for the player to simply “opt out” of trans content (Adams, 2015; Shaw, 2015a). In addition, although Tyler and Catalyst align with a binary medical model as per their discussion about hormones and surgery, this is employed in an intriguing way. On one hand, both these characters fall into the trope of aligning with transnormative standards (Johnson, 2016). However, the dialogue that includes discussions around hormones and surgery is used as a shorthand, and feels like a symbolic nod, for trans experience for a transgender audience. Tyler does not explain what top surgery is when he mentions it—nor does Catalyst explain what colloidal or estradiol is. Catalyst’s voice line about how, if you cannot produce your own liquid metals, store bought is fine is clearly about hormones. The intriguing part that makes it seem as though these lines were crafted for a trans player is that the game does not explain these lines any further. These instances thus represent thoughtful inclusion of transgender experience that is not necessarily aimed at a cisgender audience, and therefore they are also trans-coded and lead to characters feeling trans.

The final aspect of meaningful representation has to do with physical appearances, voice actor choices, and dialogue options chosen for the transgender character. If the character’s physical appearance and voice actor choice align with the

trans character's gender identity, this is a good start. The most meaningful are those characters that are distinctly trans—such as by altering existing character appearances and choosing trans voice actors.

The way transgender characters are represented in games is tied to how they are represented in other forms of media. As I stated previously, there are more transgender women characters than transgender men. The stereotypes used for transgender folks in other media, such as television film, will thus influence what trans video game characters look like. Cavalcante (2018b) argues that the media are “arbiters of possibility” (p. 13) and therefore offers up possible selves for transgender folks and others to see. However, these possibilities are tempered when negative stereotypes are recycled. For example, the transgender prostitutes in the *Grand Theft Auto* games (Phillips, 2006) and transgender women characters who are revealed as trans for shock value (Seid, 2014) or barely passing (the pathetic trans as explored by Richardson & Smith, 2022) reflect and extend negative stereotypes of transgender women in media. In contrast, there are not a lot of examples of transgender men represented in popular media. This means there may be more space to do things differently, to not recycle negative stereotypes like we have seen with transgender women in games. Whether media makers are recycling stereotypes or not when creating characters, involving transgender folks in the process of production can help avoid problems with transgender representation. As the next chapter will explore in more detail, there are certain ways to include trans folks in the creation process that contribute to meaningful representation.

CHAPTER 5

CREATING MEANINGFUL TRANSGENDER CHARACTERS

“So many trans characters that have come before [Catalyst] have downplayed their transness...Respawn really wanted to make her something unique and different from what had come before...make it clear that her trans identity was a source of her strength.”

Blair Durkee, GLAAD Associate Director of Gaming

In this chapter I address the production considerations for meaningful transgender characters in video games. There is a clear connection between how game studios value diversity, how thoughtful they are while including diversity, and how meaningful the characters they create end up being. I argue that companies that valued diversity, prioritized organic inclusion (Christian and White, 2020) even at the risk of losing some of their fanbase, and involved trans folks in the process of creating these characters, created the most meaningful transgender representation in games.

Diversity initiatives or efforts in games to include more diverse content are faced with the toxic nature of a perceived masculine mainstream gaming culture (see for example, Adams 2015; Condis, 2015; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; and Tomkinson, 2023). There are different aspects that make it so studios can, or reasonably should, be able to take on the risk of including transgender characters. AAA studios generally have the most resources and influence in the industry as they are the biggest and most well-funded. If these studios have a loyal following or have found success with certain game series, they do not have to worry as much about their reputation. Even if they face backlash, it is

more than likely these companies will be fine in the aftermath. Larger AAA companies also have a variety of resources at their disposal to consult resources or to try out different things.

Some games already value and center diversity and inclusion in their game series. For example, many game series already have a variety of characters of different races, sexes, genders, and sexualities. In this case, companies like this have already frontloaded diversity and included it into their game. For studios who are adding a transgender character into a white, cisgender, straight roster of other characters, there are different stakes. In this case, the transgender character is taking most of the representational load. Relatedly, companies must decide whether they care about driving people out or if they want to create boundaries around what is acceptable, and what is not. In other words, companies have to decide to take a stand against transphobia and commit to caring about diversity. As Cole and Zammit (2020) point out, preparing public relations and marketing teams to respond to criticism and properly advertise the content is important, and that is one way to mitigate this risk. All these considerations create layers to transgender inclusion, which is different than LGBTQ representation.

I look at these considerations through my interviews with creators and consultants who worked on *Apex Legends*, as well as published interviews, writings, and paratexts of creators for the other games in the sample. I consider the production circuit of Hall's (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]) circuit of culture by looking at what creators say about what was included in the process of making these characters. In addition, I examine how characters are encoded differently depending on the circumstances of production (Hall, 1991 [1973]). The production of these characters and how relevant communities are included

in this process influences how meaningful they are. Involving trans communities in the process of production is part of moving toward organic representation. White and Christian (2020) describe organic representation as a form of cultural reparation by empowering “those who have been historically marginalized” to appear in, own, and fine-tune the narratives, as well as the marketing and distribution process (p. 144). As I will explore, this was a key aspect of what made some characters more meaningful than others.

In my analysis of creator considerations, I identified three recurring themes that answer research question 2: What is involved in making meaningful transgender representation in games? First, studios expressed how they valued diversity in various ways. Second, folks thought that transgender characters should be thoughtfully included in the game. This includes having these characters be more than just their transness; their traits, storylines, and identity should not just revolve around them being trans. The transgender character should be created and incorporated in thoughtful ways. There must be a balance between the transgender character’s trans identity, their backstory and how it is included, and how they generally fit within the game. Similar to the considerations I outlined in Chapter 4, there are certain characteristics of meaningful transgender representation that signal that creators thoughtfully incorporate transness into these characters. As will be explored in Chapter 6, the way creators design these characters through their physical appearance and the way they are included in the storyline influences how audiences experience and decode these characters. The third and final recurring theme that answers RQ2 is the inclusion of trans folks in the creation process. These three considerations are all influenced by the process of producing games.

Aspects of Game Production

As explored in Chapter 2, games are part of the culture industry. Murray (2017) argues that the ongoing struggle of culture is something we can observe in games, including what and who is represented in certain ways and what is not (p. 3). Using a cultural studies approach and considering cultural production, or the way that culture is produced and shaped by systems involved in the production process, allows us to consider the dynamics of power in representation as well. Couldry (2000) argues that “power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) ...affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent” (p. 2). Issues around representation, who is allowed to speak, and who is seen as the normative audience for games are all implicated in these issues of power relations. It is at the level of production and how studios choose to incorporate diversity, and who they consult on how to do this, that influences these power relations. As Shaw (2009) argues, a lack of media representation signals that particular identities, thoughts, and concerns are not important (p. 231). The way creators talk about crafting these characters tells us something about who was allowed to speak, and who these representations are meant for.

Shaw (2009) outlines how considering a cultural production perspective provides insights into representation in games, and allows us to examine how certain identities are represented in them (p. 232). Kerr (2006) showcases how games are like other cultural industries in that there is a high risk involved in production, high production costs and low reproduction costs, and that games, like films and books, are a semi-public good (p. 45). As Kerr (2006) outlines, only a few of these products make a large profit or become big hits (p. 45). For all the games that are made, only a handful of them become wildly

popular and financially successful. Kerr (2006) uses this to show the risk involved in creating a game in general, and that these big hits make up for the losses of less successful games (p. 45). Kerr (2006) argues that only approximately three percent of games make a profit, so studios will tend to stick to certain tried and true genres or existing game universes (p. 45). Similarly, Dyer-Witheford and Sharman (2005) find that game publishers face what they call the 90:10 dilemma wherein 10% of the games make 90% of the profit (p. 190). There are thus specific stakes to making a game that is different, or includes aspects that have not really been included before.

Based on these risk conditions, whether studios are even willing to try to include more diverse characters is an important first step. As some consultants pointed out, it is expected that there will be backlash when diversity is included. The extreme vitriol seen in the case of *The Last of Us 2* is an example of this. Due to a mix of story leaks that revealed diverse content, players not liking the narrative arc, and the inclusion of LGBTQ characters and a muscular woman as the antagonist, *The Last of Us 2* was almost immediately swamped by approximately 38000 negative reviews in 48 hours after launch on game rating websites like Metacritic (Tassi, 2020). Tassi (2020) and Tomkinson (2023) attribute this negativity to the inclusion of LGBTQ characters, out-of-context spoilers about Joel's death at the hands of Abby Anderson, and a mix of transphobia and disgust at Abby's masculine figure.

Tracing shifts in Australian video game production, Keogh (2023) outlines that the increasing move toward independent work means more of the risk is moved to game makers themselves (p. 195). As Keogh (2023) explains, larger video game companies instead provide platforms for game makers to create content for and take their cut from

hosting the games on their platform (p. 195). The field of videogame production increased autonomy through the 2010s thanks to better Internet and the ability for game makers to distribute and make their own games outside of big studios (Keogh, 2023, p. 196). In other words, video game production has become decentralized. Kerr (2017) argues that game developers and publishers, still, are content creators that include aspects of other cultural production industries, such as “high risk involved in producing content, the tension between creativity and profit, the high production and low reproduction costs, semi-public good nature of games and the artificial construction of scarcity in the market” (pp. 5-6). Both Keogh (2023) and Kerr (2017) note that video game production has embraced digital distribution as a more dominant business model (Kerr, 2017, pp. 5-6) that puts more of the risk on the individual game makers. The continued risk aspect of the game industry is important for understanding why studios would be reluctant to deviate from formulas that seem to work in games—they do not want to risk losing profit or driving what they see as loyal fans away. The industry is thus seen as very risk averse. This risk averseness creates challenges to change the status quo because game makers are encouraged to go with what has worked before.

Some studios fear the potential backlash that including diversity can bring. Game developer Bioware is responsible for the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series. In an interview with *Video Game Sophistry* (2015), one of the *Dragon Age* lead writers David Gaider discusses the considerations around including LGBT characters, noting that the Bioware team had a lot of apprehension about how the gaming community would react to gay romances in *Dragon Age*. This echoes Shaw’s (2009) finding that studios often consider the risk posed by including gay content in their games, which is based on their

“construction of the gamer audience as both heterosexual and potentially homophobic” (p. 240). As the mainstream gaming industry is largely risk averse, this apprehension is encouraged by game industry structure and norms to keep operating the same way as other studios (Kerr, 2006, Johnson, 2013, Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005, King & Krzywinska, 2006). As explored in this interview, Bioware made assumptions about how players would react (Shaw, 2009), and were nervous about the risk that could result from negative reactions. However, Bioware purposefully included a variety of LGB and queer romance options throughout their games which seemed to be pushed by Gaider himself (Cole, 2017). Ultimately, including LGBT characters did not seem to hurt their bottom line. This shows that, despite the concern and risks, studios can include diverse characters and continue to sell their games if they are already successful and have the resources to give it a try.

Game Studio Constraints and Challenges

There are certain constraints and challenges to creating games in general, and in terms of including diversity specifically. Game studios all belong to the same industry, but they vary in size, resources, what markets they are trying to appeal to, and attitude toward including diversity. O’Donnell (2014) and Kerr (2006, 2017) both note the changing nature of the game industry based on several factors, including the secrecy of game production (O’Donnell, 2014), and other changes that include the increasing capability of internet connectivity and as Johnson (2013) notes, better gaming technology. These changes can all contribute barriers to including diversity. Johnson (2013) notes that the “primary factors...about video game production reveal that economic, technological, and social forces all play a part in shaping the culture of video

game production,” which then impacts the insularity of the game industry (p. 137). Some of these aspects are discussed below in relation to what creators and consultants had to say about the specific aspects of the companies included in this sample.

While discussing game studios, my interviewees regularly acknowledged that game studio attitude influences what representations will look like. As GLAAD¹⁰ Associate Director of Gaming Blair Durkee notes, there is understandable skepticism that big studios will screw up transgender representation (personal communication, August 1, 2023). The assumption, backed up by years of negative and shallow transgender media representation (Abbott, 2022; Bell-Metereau, 2019; Phillips, 2006) and lack of diversity in mainstream games, is that big game studios will not do a good job with transgender media representation. For example, in Chapter 4 I explored this very problem in my discussion of Bioware’s missteps with Hainly in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and Ubisoft’s careless use of the “man in a dress” trope with Chevalier in *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*. Durkee noted that when she talks to game studios in her capacity as the GLAAD Associate Director of Gaming, a lot of them see trans characters as a checkbox to include (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Games journalist Julie Muncy similarly discusses how cultural sensitivity seems to be becoming a box that studios want to check (personal communication, September 28, 2023). On one hand, this is good because, as Muncy points out, there is a vested interest in including more diverse characters (personal communication, September 28, 2023). If it is a thing that game studios know they should include, it may happen more often. This is one reason why studios decide to take the

¹⁰ GLAAD stands for Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, which is a media watchdog organization dedicated to educating folks about LGBTQ issues and combatting negative LGBTQ media representation.

risk—because diversity has become a box to check as there is more external pressure to include a variety of characters. However, Catalyst voice actress Meli Grant argues that if representation is done to check a box, that is not necessarily the best reason for diversity and inclusion—that it is more important to tell compelling stories that reflect the diverse world we live in, while employing world-class talent to do so (personal communication, October 24, 2023; August 15, 2024). Part of the reason that studios outline their process for what sources they consult and why is to show they are not just checking a box. Including diverse characters to check a box therefore does not necessarily lead to including this content well.

Different types of studios have different types of influence and varying resources (Johnson, 2013). My creator and consultant interviewees discussed that AAA studios do have a lot of influence, and therefore having a transgender character in a AAA game was a big deal. The fact that AAA companies like Respawn and Bioware are attempting to create good transgender representation holds more weight than smaller game companies because of the larger influence they have. Voice actress Meli Grant acknowledges this as well when discussing how immense of an opportunity getting to voice act as Catalyst, a trans character in a AAA game, was (personal communication, October 24th, 2023). Voicing the sentiment that is articulated in both literature (Cole & Zammit, 2020; Johnson, 2013) and during my player interviews, Durkee talked about how we are “so used to this idea of the of the gaming industry being homogenous, being dominated by straight white men that we just assumed that the trans community and the gaming industry are separate, and never the twain shall meet” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Game studio Respawn and their approach to creating transgender representation

showcases how this is not always the case—big studios can break this commonly held assumption and include the trans community in the production process. An important precursor to including the appropriate communities in the production process is whether, and in what ways, studios value diversity.

Valuing Diversity

When companies value diversity, it means they want to include a range of identities and different characters in their games. They want to tell different stories. They also want to ensure those stories are thoughtful and well done. As explored above, there are barriers that sometimes prevent studios from wanting to tell different stories, such as the fear that doing something different will not make them money (Dyer-Witheyford & Sharman, 2015; Keogh, 2023; Kerr, 2006). Despite this, some companies do thoughtfully and carefully set out to be inclusive and to show that they value diversity. Not only do these companies try to tell different stories, but they also hire and support a diverse workforce.

Companies can value diversity by utilizing the four aspects outlined by Cole and Zammit (2020). First, in order from internal to externally, studios can ensure their development team is actually diverse. This means having a variety of people with different identities across different departments. Second, studios should intentionally include diverse content from the beginning of the production process. This means it is purposeful, and that diversity is not used to make a game or character more interesting. Third, Cole and Zammit (2020) note that relevant consultants should be involved in the process to help the studio implement the content thoughtfully. Lastly, public relations and marketing teams should be prepared to respond to criticism and properly advertise the

game content. The reason that following these four aspects tends to lead to more meaningful representation is because they put studios in a position to incorporate transgender content thoughtfully.

Whether video game studios value diversity in their games or not indicates two things: whether they will include different characters and storylines, and whether they will consult the resources available to include diversity in a thoughtful way. Both players and creators acknowledged that game studio attitude does influence what representations will look like. As Shaw (2009) argues, the “presence of motivated producers is one requirement for GLBT content in media,” which can come from studios thinking diverse content is important and identifying as part of the community (p. 234). In other words, if there are members of the studio that care about this representation, it is more likely it will be included. In this section, I explore what valuing diversity looks like in the games in this sample, as well as some difficulties to including diversity.

What Valuing Diversity Looks Like

Just because a studio wants to value diversity does not mean they will consult the resources to do so or to do each of the four things outlined above by Cole and Zammit (2020). All eight games are made by studios that, on the surface, care and want to include diversity in their games. Each studio uses a different combination of these four aspects of valuing diversity with varying results in terms of representation.

Game publisher Ubisoft, responsible for the *Assassin's Creed* series, expresses their want for diversity in their games in their published and scripted interviews. It is important to note that published and scripted interviews are based on what the studio wants outside sources to know about their process—it therefore may be skewed or

contrived in certain ways. A Eurogamer article focuses on *Assassin Creed: Syndicate*'s "leap towards inclusivity," where creative director Marc-Alexis Côté claims that "inclusivity is something that's super important for us as a team...we've made a good push towards diversity and how we approach different subjects in the game" (Phillips, 2015). When asked about how the *AC* team felt about the importance of LGBTQ representation, lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem refers to how they modified the description that pops up at the beginning of the game to include the fact that a variety of sexualities and gender identities were involved in creating it (Loomer, 2015). Specifically, they changed from the game was "designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs" to "inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities" (Phillips, 2015). Shaw (2015b) argues that statements such as this are meant to "curb representational critiques by anchoring their right to portray groups in their group's diversity" (p. 12). As such, this gesturing to their change of their opening description serves in this interview as a signal towards "how much they value diversity."

Both Côté and Yohalem gesture to the fact that Ubisoft values diversity and use their game disclaimer as evidence of this. During the interview between The Assassin's Den YouTube channel and Yohalem, the interviewer notes that inclusivity in the *AC* series has been a core attribute, and brings up the point that some people think that Ned being treated "normally" is immersion breaking as the assumption is that people would not be okay with his transness during that historical time period (Loomer, 2015). By normal, the interviewer means that no characters are transphobic to Ned or treat him as

anything other than another man in London. Yohalem responds by explaining the *Syndicate* writing team made a clear artistic choice about how they wanted to portray their world and the characters. Yohalem discusses how it would have been historically accurate that all the women in *Syndicate* are treated badly based on society at the time. After a debate with the team about treating characters historically accurately and portraying a more idealized version, they decided to create the game using the lens of today's sensibilities rather than trying to capture historical accuracy. In some ways, Ubisoft does attempt to include different characters and storylines and attempts to be diverse. In this way, they gesture toward valuing diversity. Compared to the four aspects explored by Cole and Zammit (2020), Ubisoft does not really utilize any of them. Ubisoft does not note that they included Ned's transness from character conception; they did not utilize relevant consultants; they gesture toward the development team being diverse; and there is never any mention about preparing their public relations or marketing teams to respond to transphobia or valid critiques. Instead, they use problematic aspects of transgender representation by hiring a cisgender woman to voice Ned and making his birthname readily available in the bio. As such, the way they actually incorporate diversity in terms of character representation is not great. Similarly, *The Missing* creator SWERY does not mention at what point they decided JJ would be transgender. SWERY also does not talk about utilizing professional consultants, whether other folks he works with at White Owls are diversity, and he seems to act as his own PR and marketing team.

DON'T NOD (*Tell Me Why*), Respawn (*Apex*), and Naughty Dog (*The Last of Us* 2) studios all outline how they value and include diversity in their games. They thus offer

a good example of what companies valuing diversity look like. For example, DON'T NOD included relevant consultants such as GLAAD and prepared their marketing and public relations team to respond to criticism. They also prepared materials that could accompany the game and outlined their process for consulting relevant resources, such as their official *Tell Me Why* website. *The Last of Us 2* game director Neil Druckmann outlined their process, noting how diversity gives them an option to tell richer stories and broadens their audiences (Powell, 2020). He was happy that the inclusion of a transgender character in *The Last of Us 2* opened conversations that featured what the studio had done well, as well as critiques around it (Rosenblatt, 2020, para. 52). *The Last of Us 2* narrative lead Halley Gross also noted that diversity and representation has been a priority for their studio:

Our studio is very diverse. And it was a priority for so many different departments, especially our character concept that our artists constantly kept coming to us. They would say, 'We've got this character, who we need in this role in the game. What if we made the character look like this? What if we focused it this way, trying to really push every character to feel like you're seeing the diverse America that we live in?' (Dean, 2021, para. 8)

Druckmann and Gross therefore describe how they wanted to include different characters to reflect a diverse America as well as appeal to a variety of audiences.

Respawn Entertainment has outlined how they intentionally included diverse content from the beginning of their production process with Catalyst and the rest of their LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) characters. Like DON'T NOD, Respawn hired GLAAD to consult on crafting Catalyst. What is unique to Respawn is that they took a very hard stance against those who were unhappy with the diversity in their game, going so far as to state that their game was not for those that did not like the diversity of identities reflected

in the game. *Apex Legends* developer Respawn has been vocal about how diversity is important to their studio as well. GLAAD Director of Gaming Blair Durkee discussed that “Respawn has been absolutely, unambiguously clear about representation being a key pillar of [*Apex*]...they care about representation, and they want it in their games” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Respawn had decided that they were going to stand strong in their support of the LGBTQ publicly. Durkee discusses how

in June of last year before they announced Catalyst during pride month they had...you know, from time to time when you load up the game...they had a screen like that for Pride Month. It said trans rights and it had a message about how Respawn supports trans people and opposes the laws that are being passed around the country to take away our rights. (personal communication, August 1, 2023)

This was an instance where a game studio was taking an assertive and outright stance against the sociopolitical atmosphere happening in the world. Durkee mused how Respawn stood their ground against negative backlash, realizing that cultivating a “healthy, respectful, inclusive community...will reap the benefits of that, in terms of things like player retention, and even bringing new players into the game...Respawn understands that if...they still want people to be playing *Apex* five years from now, they have to ruthlessly enforce a culture of inclusion and acceptance” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Durkee notes how “Respawn truly does understand that actually, what's good for the health of the community, what's good for inclusion and diversity and representation is good for their bottom line” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). In their public statements, Respawn similarly echoes that they value diversity. What sets them apart from the other studios explored in this sample, and makes them a particularly good example of a studio valuing diversity, is that they were willing to make players angry and risk them leaving to continue incorporating diverse and

unapologetic representation. While DON'T NOD and Naughty Dog devoted resources to include diversity and included it well, Respawn went further by publicly announcing they did not care if those against diversity left their game.

Difficulties When Including Diversity

Some of the main difficulties that studios face when including diverse content are the expected backlash from some of mainstream game culture, the resources needed to do it properly, a risk averse industry that encourages studios to reuse what has worked in the past, and worries around making a mistake with representation and dealing with the backlash from those communities. As Condis (2015, 2018), Gray (2012, 2018) and many others explore, there is predictable backlash when diversity is included in games. Cole and Zammit (2020) explain that “others—who do not value the increasing diversity within games—may vocally criticize any attempt to include non-white, straight, able-bodied, cis male characters” (p. 31). In addition, meaningful and thoughtful representation requires resources to do so. Consulting the right people, searching for the appropriate voice actors, and incorporating diversity in a careful way from the beginning takes time and money. As outlined above, Kerr (2006, 2017) and Keogh (2023) explain that the industry is risk averse, and therefore much more likely to play it safe by reusing what has worked in the past. Not only do studios have to worry about the backlash from those who do not want diversity—they also must worry about upsetting those communities they are trying to represent.

Thoughtfully Including Transgender Characters

One aspect that influences whether the character is thoughtfully included or not is if the studio creates the character first and makes them transgender second. Starting to

build a character first helps avoid crafting bad or shallow representation. This is because it allows creators to envision who that character is, what their traits are, and how they fit into the story. While it does not guarantee that the character will feel as though their transness is meaningful, it does help because the studio is not inherently building a transgender character from negative stereotypes. Cole and Zammit (2020) argue that it is helpful if the studio decides to make a diverse character early in the process. The intention behind creating a transgender character is what matters here. A character should make sense and fit into the game world, which is what imagining the character first helps with.

Deciding a character will be transgender early in the production process and consulting the required resources is what makes a character's transness feel meaningful and as though it makes sense. This section is organized from what generally contributes to less meaning—spicing up a boring character by adding transgender identity—to what contributes the most meaning, which is centering transgender experience. In relation to paratexts, Cavalcante (2013) notes that they can serve to “create spaces that validate and celebrate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) life and subjectivity” (p. 86). Melo (2023) suggests one way to do this is by decentering negative aspects like dysphoria and suffering, and instead center gender euphoria and trans joy. This is what centering transgender experience in representation can do.

Making Them Characters First, Trans Second

According to creator interviews and paratexts, the following characters were all conceived as characters first before it was decided they would be transgender: Krem, Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst. In comparison, it seems as though creators decided Hainly, Ned,

and JJ would be transgender later on in the development process. Chevalier is a special case as she is a real person, and there is nothing I could find that outlines when they decided she would be included in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*.

During an interview with Video Game Sophistry (2015), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* lead writer David Gaider discusses how Iron Bull's second in command was originally crafted as a male mercenary character who "seemed dull." Gaider tells the interviewer that Bioware writer Patrick Weekes suggested that it would be neat if they took it "one step further" and made him a transgender man. In other words, they decided Krem would be trans to make a boring character more interesting. While exploring the concept, they discussed how Iron Bull, and as an extension the Qunari, would feel about transgender people. In addition, Iron Bull's Chargers already consisted of people who were "othered," a sort of found family group. The team had wanted the Chargers to say something about Iron Bull's character, so including Krem as transgender made sense to them in the context of the rest of the narrative. According to both Gaider and Weeke's account, it seems as though they did have a role in mind before deciding that Krem would be transgender, albeit to make a dull character more interesting. Like Krem, creator interviews outline how Tyler (Hart, 2020), Lev (Rosenblatt, 2020), and Catalyst (interview with Ashley Reed) were similarly conceived as character concepts in the story before it was decided they would be trans.

In the process of crafting Catalyst, lead writer Ashley Reed shared with me the team's thought process (personal communication, October 2, 2023). While she notes that Respawn had wanted to include a transgender character for a while, they wanted to be sure they could do that character justice and include the character in the right way. As

Reed describes, they were working on the idea for a trans character and this character who could create things “out of nothing” simultaneously, and they decided these ideas could “play nicely together” (personal communication, October 2, 2023). In comparison to the other characters, who were part of more story focused games and had been included in the narrative in some ways already, Catalyst had been drafted as a character concept and was adapted once Respawn decided she was going to be transgender. This is a good example of a studio crafting a character concept first that made sense for the game world, but also figuring out how Catalyst’s transness fit with that character concept early in the process.

In addition to crafting a distinct witchy aesthetic and ensuring Catalyst had an intriguing personality that comes through her dialogue lines, making her trans identity matter was important to Respawn. Voice actress Meli Grant, Reed, and GLAAD consultant Blair Durkee all talked about how transness had to be a central part of Catalyst’s character. None of them wanted players to be able to deny or avoid her trans identity. Durkee states that Respawn “wanted to make it absolutely unavoidably clear that Catalyst is a trans woman” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Reed confirmed their intention with this: “So we did have her say very outright, like, I’m trans, like, she just said it” (personal communication, October 2, 2023). Similarly, Grant said that she needed Catalyst to say she is trans and wanted to hear her say it, that it can’t be something people are left guessing about (personal communication, October 24, 2023). Grant did not want players to debate her existence as a trans person—she points out that Catalyst talks about being trans, makes a joke about the hormone estradiol, and that she has voice lines and makes jokes that will land with the trans community (personal

communication, October 24, 2023). Durkee notes that “so many trans characters that have come before have downplayed their transness,” and that Catalyst was not going to be one of those (personal communication, August 1, 2023). The important aspect for Catalyst is that this is not just all she is, but it is unavoidable and her transness matters. While they started with a character concept, Respawn adapted the character to make Catalyst’s transness central.

Durkee discusses something called a disclosure moment for transgender characters when a character’s transness is revealed (Seid, 2014). As I explored in Chapter 4, these reveal moments can range from characters being outed without their consent to characters choosing to talk about their trans identity on their own terms. These disclosure moments can be meaningful depending on whether the character has autonomy over them or not. As Durkee states, thinking about this moment is “an important aspect of designing a trans character, and there's two elements of it, which is, when does the audience know that this character is trans and when do other characters within this fictional universe know this character is trans?” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). For Durkee, she argues that it does not have to be a single moment, but that there can be a character that is just out and proud without having to be “revealed” as transgender. This subverts the expectations around Seid’s (2014) description of a reveal as being against the transgender person’s consent and as negative, and serves to decenter suffering and center joy (Melo, 2023). The team wanted this for Catalyst, where everyone just knew she was transgender and her transness was not a constant source of suffering. Durkee says they did not want her transgender identity to “be a footnote that only gets brought up once in

this disclosure moment and the trailer and then never gets mentioned again...that was really, really important and it was something to sort of distinguish her from trans characters that have come before us” (personal communication, August 1, 2023).

In this case, they wanted there to be a balance as well. Her transness had to be stated and explicit so players could not argue that she was not. In this sense, making her transness central avoids the “gay button” problem where LGBTQ content is hidden (Adams, 2015; Shaw 2015a). Although Catalyst’s transness is an important part of who she is, it is not the purpose of her entire existence as a character. This helps the character feel more meaningful.

Incorporating Characters Thoughtfully

Aside from creating characters first, it also helps when the characters are incorporated thoughtfully and not just in a shallow or tokenistic way. The characters should make sense for the game, and their story should somehow fit into the story being told. This requires that creators consider how the character will fit into their game world. In this section, I start with examples of how studios have not quite succeeded at this and end with examples of how studios have done this well.

Amidst the large amount of unwarranted negative reviews and unreasonable critiques of *The Last of Us 2*, there were some valid criticisms about Lev and his role and narrative in the game specifically. Bigley II (2021) argues that Lev exists to guide Abby, and that the LGBTQ community criticized this move for “forcing his story through a cisgender lens” (para. 29). Extending this idea that Lev’s story is told through a cisgender lens, Muncy (2020), Bigley II (2021), and Rosenblatt (2020) point out that Lev is dead named and therefore outed in front of Abby. Narratively, dead naming Lev is the first way that

the game lets the player know that Lev is transgender. As explored in Chapter 4, dead naming transgender folks is emotionally harmful (Freeman, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2022). Waverly (2020) argues that Lev's inclusion is a way to "make cis voyeurs feel good about themselves" (para. 1). Waverly (2020) states that for both Abby and the player, Lev is a character to be investigated, not respected. Waverly (2020) argues that it is clear that "Lev's story isn't made for trans people, but to give cisgender players a space to connect with their guilt and pity for trans people" (para. 7) echoing Yang's (2017) and Ruberg's (2020) argument around the problem with games that are meant to elicit empathy in cis and straight players. While acknowledging that all characters have violent encounters, Waverly (2020) argues that Lev's violence includes domestic, emotional, and physical abuse from his community and his own mother. While all characters suffer abuse, Lev's particular storyline has the added layer of being dead named and having his transgender history revealed without his consent. As Waverly (2020) notes, this is the game's only trans character and therefore the only representation of trans people.

Thinking of Hall's (1991 [1973]) encoding and decoding model, having the transgender character consistently suffer violence and abuse and repeating those tropes in the character's backstory or storyline encodes certain messages into the representation—namely, that transgender existence is pain, dysphoria, and suffering. It is not surprising that Waverly (2020) decodes these messages as Lev suffering because he is transgender based on this. Waverly (2020) argues that the way Lev is treated in the game "communicates that even when all the structures of the world fall away and communities relearn how to come together, trans people will forever be made to face the same violence they've always known" (para. 10). This reading of Lev is a negative counterbalance to

the celebratory tone of other reviews and creator interviews. It also exemplifies that transgender people are not a monolith, and therefore they will not read or feel the same way about transgender representation. Even the most complex and well-done trans characters will not be universally loved by all transgender players, showcasing that different players decode meaning of a text in various ways (Hall, 1991 [1973]).

In a *Washington Post* article about Lev's representation in *The Last of Us 2*, Julie Muncy (2020) discusses how Lev being one of the only trans characters in a AAA game is a reminder of "just how messy and contested our place in mainstream fiction really is" (para. 1). Muncy thoughtfully explores the connection between Abby and Lev, how protecting and helping Lev becomes a major arc in Abby's story, and how divided trans players are about how Lev is handled in the game. As Muncy (2020) outlines, Lev's narrative does include common negative trends in transgender representation: Lev's deadname is used, his old community wants to kill him on sight, and his suffering is tied to his transgender identity (Franzese, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2020). On the other hand, Muncy (2020) states that "terrible things happen to Lev, but even so his role in the story is, paradoxically, one of hope and optimism." Writing for *VG247*, Stacey Henley (2020) similarly and thoughtfully weighs what she sees as the good and bad, discussing how "Lev being transgender is an important part of his journey, and we simply need to know it...I can respect people just not wanting to play a game with deadnaming, but it does happen in real life and the game delivers it sparsely, without cruelty, and uses it for a specific purpose" (para. 5). Henley's commentary signals that complex representation does not just equal positive representation—it is more important that it is thoughtfully incorporated.

I appreciate the fact that both Muncy and Henley offer a nuanced reading of Lev from the perspectives of two transgender women. Taken together, they read Lev as being incorporated thoughtfully into the game. Muncy and Henley argue that the amount that Lev suffers does make sense according to the post-apocalyptic game setting, and the level of violence that all characters suffer and enact upon each other. The optimism comes from, as Muncy (2020) puts, Lev's "persistence to break from the [Seraphites] and embrace queerness offers an alternative to both him and Abby, who's desperate to find something meaningful in her life" (para. 7). Despite the problems, Lev's story makes sense for the game he is in.

Many of the games in the sample, including *Assassin's Creed*, are large game worlds filled with numerous characters and intersecting minor and major storylines. Ned is an associate non player character from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, which means the player interacts with him occasionally to do missions for him. No one in the game describes him as transgender, but the player can find out his past experiences and dead name in the biography section in the menu. Like Lev and Hainly, the cavalier inclusion of Ned's dead name in the bio is a problem because it sets up expectations that folks should have access to this information. The use of Ned's birth name also serves to tie him to his "past as a woman" without contextualizing why this information is problematic to include.

Assassin's Creed Lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem thinks the lack of focus on Ned as transgender is a good thing because he is not centered out or treated as special because he is transgender—instead, he is just another character you can encounter in London. The *AC* creators seemed to have given Ned more thoughtful treatment as a transgender

character than Chevalier. He is treated better narratively, and he is not made a joke like Chevalier. Instead, he is integrated into the game in a way that makes sense for the type of character that he is. The difference between the representation of Ned and Chevalier narratively is how their transgender identity is integrated into the narrative. For Ned, the fact that he is transgender does not come up. It is not a big deal. However, Chevalier's transness is displayed in the juxtaposition of her masculine voice, off putting voice lines about how she enjoys wearing women's clothes, and her feminine in-game model.

There must be a balance between the transgender character's trans identity, their backstory and how it is included, and how they generally fit within the game. As Respawn lead writer Ashley Reed discussed, there are aspects of Catalyst's backstory that they had to figure out but that they did not "necessarily want to broadcast" in the narrative (personal communication, Oct 2, 2023). The team wanted to balance creating a character that felt authentic but not overdoing it by providing people with unnecessary and invasive information. For example, Reed mused about how they had to figure out what age Catalyst transitioned, why she chose to medically transition, how transitioning worked medically in this world, how that would change her body shape, and how that would change her voice (personal communication, Oct 2, 2023). They did not want to broadcast that information as these are often the invasive questions present in most transgender representations in the media.

Voice actress Meli Grant reiterates that a lot of thought went into creating Catalyst's backstory, especially because they were hiring Grant as a transgender woman to do the voice. As she discussed, she asked why they were hiring a woman with a

testosterone affected voice (personal communication, October 24, 2023). What did that mean for Catalyst’s backstory? Grant describes how that question:

led us down this incredible conversation of the things we do sometimes in our lives to undermine ourselves for the sake of the people we love. And how a desire not to even if she's not worried about people hating her knowing how big a change and an adjustment that would be for her family or her or for her friends, why in a world with no prejudice Catalyst may still have decided to try and deal with it until the point where it was maybe starting to become too late. And then panic transitions. And that something like that can still happen in a world where there's all the accessibility and no prejudice was so compelling to think about. (personal communication, October 24, 2023)

Reed talked about their approach to Catalyst and designing her narrative: “you come at it from a point of view...why you made the decisions you did, and you went through, and you like, did all the right checks, you made sure that you're presenting what you actually intend to present” (personal communication, October 2, 2023). This reflects *Dragon Age* lead writer David Gaider’s statement that part of designing characters is making sure you only say things you intend to say with those characters (Video Game Sophistry, 2015). Reed admitted that you won’t make everyone happy, but that you must make measured decisions and stick with those decisions—as long as you have reasons for making the decisions you did, that is the best way forward (personal communication, October 2, 2023). Having solid and thought-out reasons for certain design choices is a good indication that the studio took some time to think about how that character exists in the game world. Grant thinks that the team “put enough into the bones of that character that made her so much more compelling to the people watching because that's often how subtext works...you just feel something and you can't put your finger on why and so I hope; I hope enough of that got into the performance” (personal communication, October

24, 2023). Judging by the excellent reception as explored in Chapter 6, players value the way Reed, Grant, Durkee, and the rest of the Respawn team brought Catalyst to life.

There are different ways to incorporate transgender characters thoughtfully. This is influenced by how central transness is to the character, and how they are incorporated narratively. While there is more room to dig into narrative in a single player story-driven game, there is less time for narrative in multiplayer type games. Characters like Catalyst exist in a multiplayer battle royale game which is focused on quick matches and killing other players. For the rest of the characters in my sample all come from single player story-centric games. However, each game world is different from the others and therefore offers different ways for characters to exist in them. The more well received characters in this sample also stemmed from their respective studios consulting the appropriate resources.

Consulting and Utilizing Resources

Consulting a multitude of resources is important for crafting a meaningful character. Just consulting one resource, such as one transgender employee or a handful of folks from the LGBTQ community, may not be enough to identify how characters should be thoughtfully created. As Cole and Zammit (2020) explore in their example of Indigenous consultancy for the game *Never Alone*, asking one Indigenous person was not enough because they may not have had the information needed (p. 23). In this way, Cole and Zammit (2020) argue that this ensures “both culture and characters are being represented in an authentic and respectful manner” (p. 24). In a similar way, consulting a variety of the appropriate people means the representation is more likely to be authentic and respectful. Consultancy, in turn, helps with this. Media advisory and advocacy

groups like GLAAD have resources, experience, and a working knowledge around the history and trends in LGBTQ representation. They can thus bring this wealth of resources to bear on projects that include adding complex transgender representation in games. This, in turn, helps create complex representation by avoiding common pitfalls and including those members that are of the community being represented.

There were three main types of resources that studios cited as consulting and utilizing: LGBTQ individuals within the respective studios themselves, LGBTQ and/or the queer community, and GLAAD. Involving LGBTQ individuals within the studio and from the community provides the studios with advice from those with lived experiences related to the characters they are creating. Working with GLAAD means hiring consultants with expertise in media representation specifically. Studios used varying combinations of these resources.

This ranged from some studios, like publisher Ubisoft, claiming that the game was made by people of “various” genders and sexualities, to studios like Respawn and Don’t Nod who utilized all three different types of resources. There was also a range of how much these resources were included, from asking LGBTQ studios employees about dialogue to working with GLAAD from inception to launch of the character. There is no direct formula that automatically equals creating a well-rounded and complex character. However, each character does seem to be more complex according to players (as explored in Chapter 6) and game reviews if the studio consulted the resources available to them and worked with them to actively construct the characters. Utilizing those with lived experience and hiring consultants with expertise around media representation helps disrupt the structural problems of the game industry. It also centers transgender

experience (Cavalcante, 2013). By including more transgender voices, these characters are received well. This tells us that consultancy and involving transgender folks works to move these representations towards more organic complexity. Next, I explore how studios claim they consult LGBTQ individuals within their companies to explore how different companies approach this, as well as examining what kinds of consulting lead to meaningful transgender representation.

Consulting LGBTQ Individuals in the Studio

It seems that the most common route for these studios is claiming that they consulted LGBTQ employees within the studio. As Bulut (2020) explores, making games is a “creative collaborative practice” that is also influenced by cultures of secrecy around game design “dictated by strict intellectual property regimes” (p. 17). Bulut (2020) notes how “collaboration, communication, and negotiation are key to game development, an intensely emotional labor process” (p. 17). While on the surface game design can seem creative and fun, previous scholarship outlines how multifaceted, intense, and communal game creation is in bigger studios. It thus makes sense that the first place game studios would turn to consult is internally.

The studios responsible for the *Assassin’s Creed* series, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *The Last of Us 2* all explore how they consulted employees within the studio about the transgender representation. Regarding Lev from *The Last of Us 2*, Rosenblatt (2020) noted that “queer staff members, who include transgender employees, began to give input on how to move the character forward” (para. 17). In the Assassin’s Den Youtube channel interview, *Syndicate* lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem signals toward their opening claim that a variety of sexualities and gender identities were involved in creating the

game (Loomer, 2015). The implicit claim here is that members of the LGBTQ community were consulted in the studio about the various representations in it.

Similarly, Bioware used this tactic when apologizing for their missteps with Hainly's representation. Steven Bogos, writing for *The Escapist* online, explores the apology that Bioware posted on Twitter that explains that Hainly, who is a scientist encountered in a minor side-quest within the game was not included "in a caring or thoughtful way" after making the claim that they actively consult their "diverse workforce, as well as speaking with different communities" (Bogos, 2017). In this apology, Bioware states that they "had several discussions with members of the transgender community, both internally at Bioware and in the broader community" and that they are working to change the issue. They note that once they change it, Hainly will "only reveal certain information to Ryder after they have developed trust, and only if the player chooses to support her" (Bogos, 2017). The first claim here is that they consulted their "diverse" workforce; the second claim includes how the community critiqued Hainly.

Part of the process for carefully choosing a path for the representation of Catalyst was figuring out how trans people talk to other trans people about being trans. As Respawn lead writer Ashley Reed explores, they wanted to embody that, and so they started working with trans developers and asked them how they talked to other people, both cis and trans, about being trans and how much that comes up in their day-to-day life (personal communication, October 2, 2023). Reed describes how the team wanted to know inside jokes, the things they talked about, and what that lived experience was like (personal communication, October 2, 2023). She says that they also sent their drafts of

Catalyst's bio to trans developers on the team first, getting feedback that varied from person to person (personal communication, October 2, 2023; August 20, 2024). The way they handled this was consulting with more trans folks and hiring more people to tell their own stories, by letting trans folks be more involved in the process of creating these characters. Prepared with this information from transgender individuals, they made creative choices that reflected the vision they had for Catalyst. The next level of studio's using their resources is consulting actual LGBT communities and transgender folks specifically.

Consulting LGBTQ and Queer Communities

Consulting LGBTQ and queer communities encompasses asking those communities for their opinion on the characters, running dialogue by them, and casting transgender actors to influence the trajectory and feel of the character. Involving trans folks in the creation of these characters was one of the most prevalent themes across all my interviews, which I will explore in the next section. In this section, I detail how studios described consulting LGBTQ communities.

Lead writer David Gaider alleges that Bioware wanted to speak to people from the trans community to see if they were “doing it right” in terms of Krem's representation. Much of this is confirmed by Patrick Weekes' blog post focused on building Krem as a character (Weekes, 2014). Weekes (2014) describes how both he and the editing team took great pains to review the dialogue lines and ensure that they did not convey the wrong impression. Weekes claims that he consulted two friends in the genderqueer community and took their feedback into consideration. For example, Weekes had originally written a draft that had Bull making a friendly joke about Krem's

binding, but Weekes' friends pointed out that this would be wildly inappropriate. Weekes changed it so Krem brought up binding, therefore sending the message that Krem is comfortable discussing being trans and that he will not be offended if the player asks him questions about it. Weekes states that he wanted Krem to be a positive character who was happily living his life with Bull, the Chargers, and helping the Inquisition. I do wonder why the genderqueer community, and not specifically the trans community, was consulted and mentioned as being the expert opinion here. While transgender and genderqueer are under the trans umbrella, it seems like sensitivity reading (which is what Weekes sounds like he did) is a good first step, but is not involving the community in a substantial way.

Laura Dale, in an opinion piece for Polygon, outlines the difficulties that games like *Zelda*, *Mass Effect*, and *Horizon* all have in introducing their transgender characters (Dale, 2017). Dale, who is a transgender woman, notes that Hainly's introduction is terrible for a "number of reasons, all of which would have been easier to fix if the development team included more trans individuals before trying to address what we go through" (Dale, 2017). Dale then talks about her own experience of having people ask what her dead name is, and how people feel it is appropriate to both ask about it and then ask her why she does not want to tell them. Dale details how hearing her dead name is "an emotional gut punch that reminds [her] of how bad [she] felt during that part of my life...it's often used as a way for people to try and hurt me, to make me feel like I am a liar or deceiver by transitioning" (Dale, 2017). She explains why the dialogue and immediate disclosure makes no sense:

the fact that Hainly expresses discomfort at her previous name, yet willingly and unprompted reveals it to Ryder upon their first conversation,

makes little sense. It shows a surface level knowledge that birth names can be harmful to hear, but fails to make the link that as a result the character would likely keep that information private. If you travel that far to make a new life, you often don't bring up your old, painful existence as a way to introduce yourself. (Dale, 2017, para. 33)

Game director SWERY claims he included the LGBTQ community for *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories* (Hashimoto, 2018). SWERY states that he made sure to “present JJ’s story with care and attention, so that players could understand who she was in her everyday life” (Hashimoto, 2018). The interviewer asked SWERY if transgender people were consulted when writing for the game. In response, SWERY claims he worked with transgender individuals, other minorities, psychology professors, and students on this title. He admits there are shocking scenes in the game, but he “made sure that it always came back to this game’s central message that ‘this title was made with the belief that no one is wrong for what they are’” (Hashimoto, 2018). Baird (2021) connects the opening message about nobody is wrong with being what they are with what the *Assassin’s Creed* team uses in their introductory message about how the game was “designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities” to curb critique (Shaw, 2015b). Sometimes a studio laying out who they consulted is meant to prevent critique, while at other times it helps the studio deal with representation better.

Last of Us 2 game director Neil Druckmann explains how the character of Lev was conceived in collaboration with prominent members of the company who are part of the LGBTQ community, as well as a diversity focused segment of the company (Rosenblatt, 2020, para. 14). Additionally, Rosenblatt (2020) noted that “queer staff members, who include transgender employees, began to give input on how to move the

character forward...[the team] also consulted with an LGBTQ scholar” (para. 17).

Importantly, Lev also has a transgender voice actor and this was a key consideration for the studio. Paratexts citing Druckmann explore how Naughty Dog attempted to find trans talent to fill the role of Lev (Bigley II, 2021) and that “authenticity in representation was a key factor in bringing Lev to life” (para. 10). Druckmann wanted to be sure they cast a trans actor, knowing that the character would likely be a lot of peoples first exposure to a trans masculine character (Rosenblatt, 2020, para. 19).

Don’t Nod was very transparent about how they included trans voices and relevant communities in their process for crafting transgender representation in *Tell Me Why* (“FAQ”, n.d). Outside of consulting GLAAD and other resources, Don’t Nod director Guillaume describes how they used playtests and included transgender and allied players in those tests to gather feedback through all stages of production (Hart, 2020). They wanted to avoid common mistakes and make his representation meaningful and complex. As these interviews explore, GLAAD was an excellent resource for doing so.

Consulting GLAAD

Consulting with knowledgeable professionals can help advise studios how to thoughtfully incorporate diverse representation and avoid repeating stereotypes and problematic representation. Consultancy does not guarantee that representation will be complex as studios do not have to listen to what they are told, and consultants like GLAAD work within a mainstream media system. GLAAD (Gays and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) is a media watchdog organization that seeks to educate and challenge negative media representation. As Doyle (2016) notes, GLAAD has historically utilized a politics of respectability lens, which means there is a focus on fitting in or

creating representation that is palatable to mainstream, heterosexual audiences. Doyle (2016) explores how this approach is linked to larger LGBTQ movement tactics that pursued inclusion within dominant institutions, rather than being liberated from the very institutions that oppressed queer life (p. 8). Doyle (2016) reflects on the price we pay to use the lens of respectability:

the gains that mainstreaming makes possible—inclusion for some in the dominant institutions of society—come at the cost of reinforcing exclusions on the basis of race, class, and gender. But even those who benefit the most from mainstreaming pay a price for entering into the gated community that respectability makes. When we draw lines between good and bad LGBT subjects on the basis of heteronormative assumptions, we cut ourselves off from our movement’s histories of resistance to dominant norms and participate in a process of diminishing our own present and future possibilities for self-definition and community building. (p. 231)

As such, while I will explore how GLAAD was a valuable resource to the game makers of *Tell Me Why* and *Apex*, they are influenced by the trajectory of their organization.

For the two games in my sample that utilized GLAAD, the game producers described GLAAD as a valuable consultancy resource. In this section, I’ll explore how consultancy helps to disrupt the structural problems in the game industry around representation and helps studios avoid common problems in transgender representation. The games that brought in GLAAD as consultants are *Apex Legends* with Catalyst and *Tell Me Why* with Tyler. Studios in this sample that included transgender folks and resources like GLAAD consultancy tended to create characters that were considered by players and game reviews to be well done and felt organically transgender.

I was only able to speak with GLAAD Associate Director of Gaming Blair Durkee for consultant interviews, so my data about consultancy and its influence comes from this sole interview and represents GLAAD’s approach to consultancy. Both Blair

Durkee and Nick Adams of GLAAD were included in consulting on Don't Nod's *Tell Me Why*. Published interviews that explain their consulting process explore how GLAAD worked with the game studio Don't Nod from the conception of Tyler as a character to marketing and release of *Tell Me Why*. Narrative director Stéphane Beauverger described GLAAD as a key resource in the process of creating Tyler's character. In an interview with me, Blair Durkee stated how:

One of the most profound things that we worked through with Tyler was what is this experience of Tyler going back to his hometown and seeing people that had not seen him since before he transitioned? And, and having to come out? And then maybe not having the best reaction? Right? What is that experience gonna be like? And for a lot of cis players, that was probably the first time in their life that they had ever been put in that kind of scenario before of like, how do I react to this and that is something that is totally unique to games, but it's only unique if the trans character is playable. Right if it's just an NPC then it's no different than a movie character or, or character in a novel or anything like that. So we're always pushing really, really hard for more playable trans characters. (personal communication, August 1, 2023)

This process of encouraging studios to think about character background, narrative choices and the implications of those narrative choices is one way that consultancy helps studios think about meaningfully including diversity. Durkee and Adams encouraged the studio to think about and through different considerations around Tyler's story that they may not have considered otherwise. With their wealth of knowledge about transgender representation in games and across media, consultants like Durkee and Adams can bring in this experience and pose important questions that the studio may not have thought of. This disrupts common patterns in the game industry when studios try to include diversity, such as repeating problematic patterns by casting cisgender voice actors and reusing stereotypes.

Once Don't Nod decided that Tyler would be transgender, Guillaume said that they “knew right away the responsibility it would mean to create a character as true to life as we possibly could...we partnered with GLAAD early on to get the feedback and resources we needed to write this character in the most meaningful and respectful way” (Hart, 2020). Guillaume and the rest of the team seemed very aware and conscious about the mistakes that have been made before in terms of transgender representation, and they knew they needed to do their homework to create a complex and well written transgender character.

E.L. Meszaros (2020) writing for CBR attributes the reason why Tyler works so well as a character to the fact that Don't Nod worked with GLAAD during game development. When discussing trans characters who are not playable, Meszaros (2020) describes how the problem with this is that players “must experience these characters through the lens of the non-trans protagonist...their story and experiences navigating the game's world is only presented when it's important to the protagonist's narrative...this leaves players without the complete picture” (para. 6). Considering the creator and consultant interviews, as well as the paratexts and articles surrounding this game, the game developers wanted to do good and utilized what many see as the right resources to do so. Both consulting GLAAD and involving transgender folks in crafting the transgender character resulted in many thinking that Tyler was a complex and groundbreaking example of transgender representation.

I found a lot of overlap between the care that Respawn took with Catalyst and Don't Nod took with Tyler. They both wanted to do a good job, were willing to bring in transgender voice actors and consult transgender communities, and both worked with

GLAAD and Blair Durkee, a transgender woman, specifically to bring their transgender characters to life. Durkee notes that she and GLAAD worked with Ashley Reed and Respawn from “conception, pre-production, through marketing and release” and were intimately involved in consulting on Catalyst at every stage (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Both Reed and Durkee discussed the partnership between GLAAD and Respawn to bring Catalyst to life in a meaningful, thoughtful way. Durkee describes how they helped “review her dialogue...started working on her lore trailer” and made “sure that she fit within the existing roster of characters” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Writing for *Gamesrader* (2022), Mercante describes how Blair Durkee and Ashley Reed articulated that Respawn had wanted to include a transgender character for a long time but wanted to make sure they were in a good position to do so, including consulting with appropriate resources. In comparison to Don't Nod, Respawn really centered Catalyst's transgender experience from the outset through their more involved inclusion of transgender folks from the beginning.

Reed noted how happy she is with the character and that she is very excited that people like Catalyst (personal communication, October 2, 2023). As Durkee states, Respawn finally got to a place “where they felt comfortable that they had all the resources and the knowledge and the expertise around them that they could do this character justice.” Mercante (2022) explores how GLAAD and Durkee assisted Respawn by working with them on voice lines, character design, and other aspects that “go into making an authentic trans character” (para. 5). In this Gamesradar article, Reed says

there were people who have lived these experiences who have been very honest and forthcoming about difficult topics...people who haven't lived these experiences that were really open to hearing about them and taking feedback. And just trying to make the best character they could with all of

this information – and really make something we're proud of. (Mercante, 2022, para. 4)

Durkee confirmed this in our interview, saying that they did a lot of voice line reviews, as well as characterizations and carefully considered how her interactions with other legends would go (personal communication, August 1, 2023). This is also displayed by Durkee talking about how Respawn wanted to make sure they “laid the foundations for Catalyst, rolled out the red carpet, as you might say, so that when she did she would be received well” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Durkee stated that Respawn wanted to ensure Catalyst was unique and different from what had come before (personal communication, August 1, 2023). These aspects of the interview signal how concerned Reed, Durkee, and Respawn were with making sure Catalyst was created in a thoughtful manner that centered transgender experience.

The vision for Catalyst was that her transness would be an important part of her identity. In the *Gamesradar* article, Durkee notes that

we were very aligned from the very beginning that we wanted her trans identity to be super impactful to her character. I think players will be pleasantly surprised that her trans identity sort of shines through in every aspect. And that's something that distinguishes her from some other trans characters that have come before – it's not just a footnote in her bio that players will read once and then never think about again. It's something that is intrinsic to who she is in the game. (Mercante, 2022, para. 5)

The key difference between *Apex* and other games is that they wanted her trans identity to matter. According to the *Gamesradar* article, GLAAD helped to do this by advising Respawn on how to avoid dangerous tropes of previous trans representation, such as shock reveal moments or trauma so often associated with trans stories (Mercante, 2022).

Durkee notes because of the lack of transgender characters, “the community expects them to represent the entire trans community, and the trans community is not a

monolith...Catalyst represents a certain type of trans character who is out and proud and is proud of her trans identity” (para. 13). A huge part of this was Catalyst’s character design, which GLAAD helped with. As Durkee stated in our interview, “it was a different experience, certainly to ensure that her trans identity shines through in a really positive and like I said, unavoidable way...and her visual design was a huge piece of that...her design didn't change a lot from conception to final, but there are some changes” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Durkee and GLAAD clearly offered thoughtful guidance, but Reed’s motivation to carefully consider how Respawn wanted to craft Catalyst helped create a complex and carefully constructed transgender character.

In figuring out her aesthetics, the team decided on a witchy vibe for Catalyst. Durkee explored how a lot of the transwomen at Respawn wanted the creators to “lean into that” and that it would resonate with the trans community. Durkee thinks it did indeed resonate, connecting this aesthetic to stereotypes in the trans community about trans women liked witchcraft and crystals. According to Durkee, Respawn had already come up with the concept of a techno witch before deciding Catalyst should be trans, and upon encouragement by the community, they went for it. Durkee described how decisions around her design, characterization, abilities and ensuring she was the “same level of quality and polish” as other legends was important, and that the team wanted players to “aspire to be her as a legend as a hero” (personal communication, August 1, 2023). There was also an extra layer of making sure she was treated well in the game and that she did not fall into negative stereotypes. Durkee says:

And it was also important to make sure that, you know, there's the like, the small things that people don't notice. One of them being ensuring that none of her voice lines or abilities, or anything about her appearance could be misinterpreted as being transphobic, or whatever. That's like a subtle

thing. So, for example, none of her abilities could be called a trap, obviously, because that is a horrible slur, it's a stereotype, it's a horrible thing. So we're very cautious about how things were worded and designed to just avoid any of that association, even if it was unintentional. (personal communication, August 1, 2023)

Durkee described how they also helped Respawn's marketing team to deal with the public aspect of Catalyst, including answering questions and responding to community feedback. Durke noted how "their response to the blowback is...if you don't like a trans character in our game, then maybe this game isn't for you" (personal communication, August 1, 2023). They decided they were going to stand their ground about their inclusive game choices and diverse characters. Durkee and Reed acknowledge that there was negative backlash, with Reed describing it as the expected "underbelly of shitty trolls" (personal communication, Oct 2, 2023) and Durkee referencing the anticipated and expected horrible comments and transphobic backlash made about Catalyst. Durkee notes that Respawn did a good job handling the backlash (personal communication, August 1, 2023). However, Reed, Durkee, and Grant all discussed with me how great Catalyst's reception has been even despite the anticipated transphobia. Durkee discussed how she personally fought for Catalyst to talk candidly about her transness (personal communication, August 1, 2023). Reed noted that people thought her representation was "a little on the nose," but just as many people appreciated the way they handled it (personal communication, October 2, 2023). Ultimately, the reception to Catalyst was great and Reed noted how people reached out to say they really liked her character. Grant stated that Catalyst was received with almost universal love and appreciation, accurately reflecting that it is not easy to accomplish that (personal

communication, October 24, 2023). Respawn therefore utilized all four of the tactics that Cole and Zammit (2020) suggest for studios that value diversity to include it.

An organization like GLAAD, which is focused and knowledgeable about media industry, trends in representation, and has experience working with game companies, was proven to be an invaluable resource to Don't Nod and Respawn studios. They were able to help both studios navigate creating complex characters that avoided negative stereotypes, reframed previous instances of trans media representation in complex ways, and pointed out what was important to do and include. GLAAD and both studios also involved the transgender voice actors for both games. In this way, the influence of a knowledgeable media advocacy group and input from transgender folks in creating the character enabled Don't Nod and Respawn to navigate the still thorny issue of transgender media representation and the problems of the structure of the game industry.

Involving Trans Folks

Involving trans folks in the creation of these characters was one of the most prevalent themes across all my interviews and struck me as one of the most important aspects of meaningful representation. This theme came across in most player interviews and all creator/consultant interviews. Creators, consultants, and players (as explored in Chapter 6) felt strongly that transgender communities should be involved in creating the trans characters. This echoes Christian and White's (2020) argument that organic representation as a form of reparation should be "sourced from the community it serves and in which it must thrive" (p. 145). Going further, Christian and White (2020) argue for a reparative praxis that "requires engagement and restoration, not just taking stories but using them as an opportunity to train, fund, and provide resources to the communities

from which these narratives originate” (p. 147). Giving transgender folks the opportunity to embody transgender representation and tell trans stories is a first step towards this reparative praxis. I explore how creators and consultants discussed this to show how this is implicated from the production side.

As games journalist Julie Muncy outlines,

looking at representation without looking at the people making the stuff is a trap. And I think that a world where there are a lot of trans characters, but they're all written by straight cis men is not a better world...I think the way to get honest, interesting representation, and you know, just fairness and equity within artistic communities in general is to see queer and trans people behind the scenes, and in positions of power and being narrative directors and doing all of these things. And I think like that's not something that's not happening, but still, like, when there's something with a lot of barriers to it. (personal communication, September 28, 2023)

Muncy stated that the priority for her is having trans people involved in telling stories about themselves. Making space so trans people can be allowed to write about things that are not trans related is another important goal. Voice actress Meli Grant similarly notes how it is wrong for an industry to profit off trans stories without trans people receiving compensation for it (personal communication, October 24, 2023). Grant discussed how it is important to pay attention to what is happening behind the scenes in terms of whether studios are consulting marginalized folks and bringing in those with lived experiences for the purposes of creating these characters (personal communication, October 24, 2023). Grant wants to see more studios “opening themselves up to a more diverse talent pool because the fact of the matter is, many of us don't see remotely the same kinds of opportunities” (personal communication, October 24, 2023). As she says, we should “all have a chance to actually make a living doing this...real people matter the most and knowing that trans and non trans, and other queer creators and creators of color are able

to actually make a living in the arts to me is just as important as seeing those queer and characters of color in the stories. I think we need to be doing both” (personal communication, October 24, 2023). To Grant, Muncy, and others, creating opportunities for real marginalized people is the end goal and aligns with Christian and White’s (2020) conceptualization of organic representation as reparation. As Grant points out, the playing field is not level enough—trans performers do not have the opportunities that cisgender performers do (personal communication, October 24, 2023).

Games journalist Julie Muncy argues that the involvement of trans performers is a big part of what makes them feel real and lived in (personal communication, October 28, 2023). Interviewees like Julie Muncy and player Jacob wanted trans characters to have trans voice actors; they wanted the characters to sound trans. Voice actress Meli Grant argues that the “fact that you have an actor there to play the role is all the proof you should need that a character like that is viable in your story because you’re literally looking at a human being that exists that’s exactly like that.” Even though it seems like it could be a little more difficult to get a trans voice actor, it is clearly not impossible. All game studios that have set out with the goal to find a trans voice actor, without settling for anything less, have managed to find it.

Trans involvement is important, and the more trans folks that are included in positions of production, the better. Meli Grant talked about encountering another trans guy that was part of the writing team on a different game project. She discussed how having him in the room “fundamentally changes how much I feel like I’m being understood when I’m in that room, knowing that there is a trans person on the writing team who is informing a lot of the stuff that the words that are being put in front of me”

(personal communication, October 24, 2023). As Julie Muncy explores, she thinks that having people like Ian Alexander involved, another trans voice actor who played Lev from *The Last of Us 2*, lets the narrative be a little deeper and more complicated than other games that have a lack of trans people in positions of decision-making power. In other words, many interviewees articulated how having a transgender person as a voice actor made a difference, that they were able to make the character feel more real and complex. The presence of trans folks in positions of influence made a difference and shone through in how the players I interviewed thought about these characters. Respawn lead writer Ashley Reed argues that having one character bearing all the weight means you are making a statement with that one character. This is why it is important to do that character right, and then to work on adding others.

Laura Dale (2017) explains that Bioware would not have made such an error with Hainly from *Mass Effect: Andromeda* if Bioware had trans folks working on the game. Even though Dale is grateful that there are more transgender characters in AAA games, she states that

you don't get a free pass for trying. Writers or designers can stumble badly when they treat these subjects carelessly, or without learning more before they write characters or scenes in the game....development teams can bring life to their characters simply by asking trans individuals about the dialog or scenes they're writing into their game or, even better, employ trans individuals to help create the game from the ground up to help see these easily avoided mistakes before they make it into the final game. (Dale, 2017, para. 40-46)

She ends with this important call for trans communities to be involved in creating these transgender characters, and argues that the mistakes that these developers would have made would not have been made were trans people involved in the first place.

Casting Trans Actors

As explored in Chapter 4, having an alignment between the gender identity of the trans character and the chosen actor is important. It was one of the features that lead to meaningful representation in my textual analysis. Out of the games in this sample, Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst all have transgender voice actors. Each of these three studios made it a priority to find a transgender person to voice act. Paratexts citing Druckmann explore how Naughty Dog attempted to find trans talent to fill the role of Lev (Bigley II, 2021) and that “authenticity in representation was a key factor in bringing Lev to life” (para. 10). Druckmann wanted to be sure they cast a trans actor, knowing that the character would likely be a lot of peoples first exposure to a trans masculine character (Rosenblatt, 2020, para. 19). Citing the connection between Abby and Lev on a software level, Bigley II (2021) explains that Lev’s development is “driven by AI in reaction to what the player, as Abby, is doing.” As such, hundreds of lines of dialogue had to be recorded for AI Lev to react to what Abby is doing (Bigley II, 2021). To find the actor who would voice Lev, Bigley II (2021) claims that Naughty Dog “reached out to several talent agencies in search of a young transgender actor, as well as organizations such as GLAAD” and had no success (para. 11). Druckmann remembered seeing Ian Alexander on the Netflix show *The OA*. After initially having trouble getting a hold of him, Alexander landed the role of Lev.

According to the paratexts, Ian Alexander was highly influential in bringing Lev to life. Bigley II (2021) states that Alexander described being Lev as “free-falling” with full support from Naughty Dog, also noting that this was his first-time doing voice acting. Alexander was “able to pull from his own experiences,” including religious trauma and

navigating his own gender (Bigley II, 2021, para. 25). Alexander had such good chemistry with Abby's voice actor, Laura Bailey, that they ended up creating more material than was originally planned. Bigley II (2021) quotes Druckmann as saying:

based on Ian's mannerisms, based on how we saw him act against Laura Bailey, his role actually grew quite significantly because of how much it was adding to the story and her overall arc...as we got more and more scenes back, and as we got to see the chemistry that Ian had with Laura, we just wanted more of it. (para. 27)

This showcases how Ian was influential in shaping Lev as a character, but not because Naughty Dog originally envisioned Lev having a bigger role. Once given the opportunity to embody the character, Ian Alexander impressed the team so much that they wanted more of it.

The interviews that discuss Alexander's influence on creating Lev are telling of two things: first, that having someone who understood the nuances of the character surprised the creators so much, they added even more content to Lev's original story. Second, the opportunity to voice a transmasculine character was deeply significant for Ian Alexander:

I think that will be something that'll be really wonderful looking back on, seeing so much of my mannerisms, so much of my young self in Lev, because Lev and I are very similar...my voice is such a huge part of my identity. I think my voice is something that gives me the most euphoria. With every role I have, with every interview I do, with every fan I speak with, all of those things do help me heal my self-confidence...I can be a successful trans person, and I can have a happy, beautiful life, and I do deserve this, and I don't have to doubt myself. (Bigley II, 2021, para. 42-44)

Not only did having a transmasculine actor transform the role, both my player interviewees from Chapter 6 and paratexts generally considered Lev a complex and well written character. Importantly, it also made a real-world difference to Alexander to be

able to portray Lev. Catalyst's Meli Grant and Tyler's August Aiden Black expressed similar sentiments about their opportunity to voice trans characters.

Guillaume and the other members of the Don't Nod team made it clear that casting a transgender man to play Tyler was a top priority, but also challenging (Hart, 2020). As interviews by Hart (2020) explored, voice actor August Aiden Black was an integral member of the creative team and had autonomy over dialogue and any particular characteristics of Tyler. However, Black said that he only really changed dialogue when it felt awkward to say, so dialogue was only changed so he could speak more naturally (Dechart Games, 2021). Black described how Tyler is a bar that other companies should try to reach for, that the studio Don't Nod did a good job and consulted the right people, and he specifically named Nick Adams at GLAAD as an invaluable resource for this process.

While Black was given autonomy to change what he saw fit, the difference between his involvement and Meli Grant for Catalyst is that Grant, along with trans folks in the studio, Ashley Reed, and Blair Durkee of GLAAD communally seemed to have a hand in crafting Catalyst as transgender in a way that mattered to who she is. Mercante (2022) discusses how Meli Grant describes her casting as Catalyst as life-changing and how nice it was to work with a team that cares so much about "making sure that they're handling this character with care, and creating a character that is respectful and has dignity and feels authentic and feels like a human being, and reflects experiences that are familiar to me" (para. 6). Grant describes the Respawn team as receptive and communicative about the character—to her, it was a very collaborative process.

In our interviews together, Grant similarly expressed excitement and gratitude for the opportunity to voice Catalyst. When asked about her experience, Grant enthusiastically noted how much she enjoyed her experience embodying a “playable openly trans character in a AAA video game that's all over the place...I now represent this thing to so many people” (personal communication, October 24, 2023). She recognized how big of an opportunity this was when she was originally reading (interviewing) for the part:

I recognize a couple of things right off the bat. Immediately, the idea of having an opportunity in a AAA video game is massive. Knowing that they were looking for a trans woman specifically, I knew that that meant the talent pool was going to be tiny, which meant that my chances were huge compared to anything else where I'd be reading against, you know, Jennifer Hale. And so I knew that this was an immense opportunity. (personal communication, October 24, 2023)

The talent pool Grant refers to is the fact that she was only reading against transgender women for the part, which eliminates popular cisgender voice actresses like Hale. It is worth noting that Jennifer Hale was cast as Krem's voice actress in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, as she is both prolific in voice acting and had previously played a trans character. The two aspects that are important takeaways are that there are still not a lot of opportunities for trans voice actors, and thus there is a small pool to compete against when casting is for specifically transgender women. In addition, Grant references how difficult it would be to compete against actresses like Hale who have prolific credentials and are popular voice choices. The playing field is not even for transgender voice actors.

When she was chosen for the part, Grant reflects that her two wishes for Catalyst was that she wanted her to be powerful and explicitly state that she was trans. In her words, Grant describes how “I want to hear her say it, it has to come out in the text. It

can't be something that people are left guessing about...they already had the line in there. But that was, you know, they had more than one line in there” (personal communication, October 24, 2023). In other words, Grant did not have to push for her transness to be explicit and a major part of the character—the team behind Catalyst had already planned for that.

In addition to wanting Catalyst to be powerful and explicitly trans, Grant talks about how she wanted Catalyst to be hot as she knew Catalyst would be a high-profile character (personal communication, October 24, 2023). Expanding on this, Grant talks about how making her attractive will mean more people will likely play her even if she is not meta (popular to play) or powerful. Thoughtfully, Grant points out that people will be more likely to draw her and make art or other media as “there is a pretty privilege and it sucks but I want to capitalize on it” (personal communication, October 24, 2023). In player interviews, most players did describe Catalyst as a “pretty witch lady” and commented on her attractive character design. Grant points out how powerful this attractiveness factor is:

if we have a character who is open in the text about being trans and she's an appealing character, that means we're going to be getting fan art... and thank God now that she's meta we're seeing her and...we have this playable trans openly trans character in a AAA video game that's all over the place. I feel like that's like us getting the most bang for our buck possible with an opportunity like this. You know, and I think that there's still a place for telling other kinds of trans stories, but I think that the one two punch of having her be a very appealing character, so that people are interested regardless of her backstory, but then have her be really open about being trans and about her journey and her story. It's like a secret weapon. I feel like it's like the secret weapon to wrangle this community and get as much Catalyst exposure as humanly possible. I want her front and center. And so it's even cooler that she is now meta...massive amount of people all playing this trans character in this game and that's so freakin' amazing to me. (personal communication, October 24, 2023)

The Respawn team was also very open to considering valid critiques about the direction they were going with *Catalyst*. As Reed explores, she knew they were not going to get everything right all the time. She mused about how “it’s valuable to call out like, hey, maybe next time somebody does something like this, they should keep this in mind” (personal communication, October 2, 2023). Reed listened, and knew that *Catalyst* could not be all things to all people. However, the team very carefully chose a direction for her and stuck to that path. In short, they had specific and well-reasoned answers for each aspect of *Catalyst*. Both GLAAD’s consultancy and Meli Grant’s thoughtful questions helped with this.

In the video by Xbox Game Studios called “Approaching Representation” that was released with *Tell Me Why*, Adams noted that they spent about two years consulting after being approached by Microsoft to consult on the game (“Tell me why—approaching representation”). During this interview, Durkee notes how she was always bracing herself for what comes next in terms of transgender representation because it has historically not been very good. She explains that when you have trans stories told by non-trans people, there is a fascination with “certain ideas about the trans experience that just aren’t true to life” (“Tell me why—approaching representation”). Instead, media makers tend to rely on recurring stereotypes seen in television or film. Dyer (1999) notes how stereotypes help us make sense of the world—the danger in these stereotypes is that they’re wrong, and as Blair notes, not true to life. However, if this is all people know about transgender people, they are more likely to believe these things are true to trans life. As “Approaching Representation” explores, having trans folks involved in the project can help with that. Durkee states that having her, Nick Adams, and voice actor August Black on the project

is “going to show through that this is a trans character that is unlike anything we’ve seen before” (“Tell me why— approaching representation”). Ultimately, she predicted that it would change the future of what trans representation in gaming looks like.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored some of the challenges and constraints to including diversity in video games. In turn, this influences how transgender representation is included in games. Valuing diversity was an important first step in games including transgender representation. Different game studios outlined how they valued diversity in different ways, with some using as many resources as they could when crafting their respective characters. Studios like Respawn and Don’t Nod showcased how they valued diversity and wanted to do it well, consulted resources like GLAAD and transgender communities, and involved transgender people in the process of creating trans characters. As a result, the characters in these games were well received and considered as complex examples of transgender representation. This finding aligns with similar findings from Chapter 4, where Tyler and Catalyst were considered the most complex relevant to the others in this sample. From a production standpoint, the active involvement of transgender folks through Meli Grant as Catalyst’s voice actress, transgender folks at the studio, and Blair Durkee as GLAAD’s transgender gaming consultant, meant that transgender folks were involved in the production of Catalyst from an early stage. This, as Cole and Zammit (2020) point out, is a way to help create complex representation. As Christian and White (2020) argue, including marginalized folks, in this case transgender folks, in position of power over production is a form of reparative praxis. Catalyst, as

well as Lev and Tyler, also each offer an example of what happens when a studio commits to opening space for a transgender person to embody a transgender character by giving them this power.

In this chapter, I explored how the specific instance of Respawn Entertainment bringing in transgender folks at different levels and early in the process contributed to how complex Catalyst's representation is. There were transgender folks involved in the studio, in voice acting, and through consultancy at GLAAD. Combined with Respawn's already inclusive game world that valued diversity, willing creators in the team behind Catalyst, and the desire to "do this right" resulted in complex, organic, and thoughtful transgender representation. Beyond this, involving transgender folks as voice actors mattered to them. Being a part of the production and embodying a distinctly trans role was deeply important as articulated in their public interviews. The involvement of transgender communities in production also helps avoid common and problematic stereotypes.

CHAPTER 6

AUDIENCE RECEPTION TO MEANINGFUL TRANSGENDER

REPRESENTATION

“I really like that [Ned’s transness] is not a central part of his story here. Like he gets to be more than that. It’s relevant. It’s not that it’s an afterthought, but it is not all that he is.”

Jacob (25, trans man, white, bisexual)

“Catalyst...is one of the few characters who is not only trans narratively, but also very meaningfully transcoded...she is a specific type of a trans girl I am familiar with, I’m reasonably sure she has a trans voice actress. Or if she doesn’t have a trans voice actress, whoever is playing her is doing one hell of a job giving the trans girl voice.”

Moira (30, trans woman, white, bisexual)

As this chapter will explore and as these quotes above exemplify, players recognize thoughtful and meaningful transgender representation as explored in Chapter 4. Players are also aware of what it takes to create video games, craft characters, and to include diversity in representation as outlined in Chapter 5. In answering research question 3: what players think about transgender representation in video games, I argue that players think that characters who are thoughtful, feel organic (Christian & White, 2020) and are included thoughtfully are meaningful examples of transgender representation.

Demographic differences in what players think about these representations show us that transgender players need different things from their representation, thus underscoring the importance of transgender involvement in producing these characters. It

also signals that the audience in my sample plays and thinks about games in different ways depending on their demographics—most notably depending on whether they are transgender, part of the LGBTQ community, or cis/straight.

Players who were transgender, agender, or nonbinary generally noticed things, or thought certain ways, about the representation in comparison to the cisgender interviewees. In addition, folks that were part of the LGBTQ community in terms of their sexuality were more likely to see things similarly to transgender, nonbinary, and agender interviewees. I also noticed that cisgender men were among the most thoughtful when thinking about their own relationship to how they view diversity. In short, many of them articulated how they had had to work hard to be more empathetic, and that, even if diversity did not personally matter to them, they knew it was important and therefore, it mattered.

When thinking about how players are encountering and thinking about these characters and how that relates to the text of the games and their production processes, I took inspiration from Hall's work on representation. In Hall's circuit of culture model, consumption is the part of the circuit that deals with the way the audience reads, or consumes, the texts (Du Gay et al., 1997). The way players (the audience) play and consume the game is influenced by the other four processes in the circuit of culture model—this includes the way the game is produced, the conditions around regulation of games as a product, the representation in the text itself, and the identities of the people involved in producing, consuming, and regulating the text (Du Gay et al., 1997; Leve, 2012). Hall (1991 [1973]) argues that media texts are encoded with meaningful discourses, and that this meaningful discourse is decoded by the consumers in, often,

different ways than the media producers intend. The way players consume the game is thus influenced by both the circuits of the game's production and the messages that are encoded into the game.

In answering RQ3, I found that there were demographic and identity-based differences in how player interviewees answered and thought about the transgender representation in these eight games. Transgender and cisgender players differ on how they receive and think about these representations. As McInroy and Craig (2015) point out, media acts as an important source of knowledge about transgender issues for trans and nontrans individuals alike (p. 606). However, they argue that transgender representation also has an impact on transgender lives and experiences (McInroy & Craig, 2015). In another study, Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia (2015) found that media representation provided opportunities for resilience by coping through escapism, feeling stronger, fighting back, and finding and fostering community (p. 262). It thus makes sense that trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming players thought more deeply and in different ways because their existence is involved in these representations, and they get different things from this representation than cis players. In contrast, cisgender players were generally celebratory and wanted different things from these representations. My interviews with cisgender men were the most surprising in terms of demographic findings. These 11 interviewees often wrangled with the fact that they had worked very hard to come to a place where they cared about representation. Even if it still did not personally matter to them, two of the 11 cisgender men specifically articulated how they knew it mattered to others, and therefore these representations were

important. The other nine cisgender men interviewees also noted how they had to work hard to care about representation, or were honest about how it did not always matter but they could see why it was important in general.

In the next section, I focus on dominant themes that came from asking interviewees about the transgender characters and their respective games in this sample. Organized from the characters and games that interviewees liked less to what interviewees thought were the best representations, I explore what interviews thought about the characters in this sample. The table describing how many interviews involved each character is summarized below.

Table 5. *Characters Mentioned in Interviews*

Characters	Catalyst	Ned	Hainly	JJ	Lev	Krem	Chevalier	Tyler
Number of Interviews	7	7	9	3	13	15	7	6

What Players Thought: From Problematic to Meaningful

In this section, I explore the main themes that came up in player interviews about what made some characters exemplary, while other characters were considered problematic. Based on player’s reactions to the characters, I categorize characters into the following ratings: problematic, “okay,” and “good,” and meaningful characters. I discuss what influenced players to feel this way about certain characters, and offer examples of what players considered problematic, good, and meaningful. As Shaw and Friesem (2016) found in their examination of LGBTQ content in games, NPCs are the most common LGBTQ character type. Likewise, five of the eight characters in my sample are

NPCs. In my study, NPCs appear in both the minor and missable category, as well as the “okay” and “good” category. As I will explore, the fact that players thought the playable and main transgender characters were more meaningful than the NPCs has more to do with the thoughtful inclusion of these characters in their respective games. Players articulated that characters that were minor and missable seemed to be the least thoughtful and organic, while more major NPCs and playable trans characters were the most thoughtfully included and felt the most complex.

Problematic Characters

Out of the eight characters I analyzed, Chevalier and Hainly were rated the worst by the player interviewees. Both characters are similar in that they are very minor characters in large, sprawling games filled with other characters. Hainly appears in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, while Chevalier is featured in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. Both are transgender women, and both are given female character models in their respective games, which is a good thing because it aligns with their gender identity as explored in Chapter 4. However, while Hainly had a female voice actress, Chevalier had a very masculine voice actor. The fact that Chevalier had a masculine voice actor is a problem, as Zimman (2018) notes that vocal cues are important in categorizing someone's gender (p. 2). As I argued in Chapter 4, having the correct voice actor that aligns with the character's gender presentation is an important component of meaningful transgender representation in my textual analysis. Likewise, players had a problem with the misalignment between Chevalier's feminine presentation and her masculine voice. While

players generally struggled to remember either character in detail, players found Chevalier more memorable because of the juxtaposition between her voice and her very feminine appearance.

Player reactions to Chevalier were mostly mixed and all but one interviewee out of seven struggled with what pronouns to use for her. As the game constructs her as a man who likes wearing women's clothes, it made sense that only R (female/nonbinary, bisexual, 26, white), who is very knowledgeable about history and knows who Chevalier is historically, was the only one who consistently used she/her pronouns. R noted that it felt like the creators did not actually do the work of depicting her and instead leaned more towards making her a joke, or depicting her as a guy in a dress. The problem with the continuation of this "cross-dressing" man trope is that it comes from a long history of media representations where ostensibly transgender women are depicted as comedic cross-dressing men or psychopaths (Abbott, 2022). Like my own observations, R noted that the voice actor playing Chevalier had a distinctly masculine voice, and that it is not outside the realm of possibility that the real Chevalier would have softened her voice.

The other outlier in interviews focused on Chevalier was Pabu (female, heterosexual, 28, white). She had fond memories of Chevalier because of the way this character made her laugh in an otherwise forgettable game. Pabu recalled thinking she was going to see a woman for a quest, and in her words:

the only thing I remember is that I walked up and I thought it was a lady and it was not a lady [laughs]. And I thought that was hilarious. Because I was like, the setting the time period...but that also like we have to think about, it's the French so I was like, it's not surprising.

Even though Pabu read Chevalier as a cross-dressing man, she had a very positive reaction. Based on her personal experience with her friends who were drag queens, she

thought it was cool to see what she perceived as a man in drag represented in a bigger game series. While this is good that Chevalier was memorable because of that, her representation still draws on problematic media tropes about transgender women. Other players remember Chevalier in less amused terms for this very juxtaposition between her masculine voice and feminine attire.

Like Chevalier, no one had very positive things to say about Hainly's portrayal either. In general, there was a sentiment among my interviewees that she was a very minor character in a game packed with other characters. Five players discussed how Hainly is tokenized, described her as just another quest giver, and Lara (woman, bisexual, 25, white) noted that it felt "cheap to have a trans character and to interact with them very minimally." Cloud (man/demiman, bi/pan, 25, white Latin American) also remembered that she would "dump" information about herself, which he felt was weird. This information dump was the problem with Hainly's representation, and what Bioware had to change after community backlash. It was also a point of concern with my player interviewees who thought it was unrealistic that Hainly would do that.

A lot of the problems with Hainly are in her dialogue lines. Interviewees thought her immediate disclosure of her identity as a trans woman was strange, aligning with the concerns voiced by the gaming community (Dornbush, 2017; Cooper, 2017). Alistair (male, heterosexual, 46, Spanish) thought that it did not make sense that she was so direct about her "previous gender identity," and discussed how, in his experience, trans people do not immediately come out and tell you their dead name nor do they talk about the miserable time in their previous lives. This sentiment that transgender folks would not immediately reveal their birth names and negative past was echoed by three other

participants as well. In other words, player interviewees felt that transgender people simply do not act that way and therefore it felt highly problematic.

Interviewees wanted studios to have done a better job of crafting Chevalier and Hainly. Speaking specifically of Hainly, player Lara (woman, bisexual, 35, white) wishes “they had done a better job of making a trans character more important.” In general, players barely remembered her or did not think she was a good non player character. If interviewees remembered Hainly, they either did not know she was transgender, or thought her representation was problematic because she immediately discloses the fact that she is transgender to the player.

Brigitte (female, heterosexual, 34, white) had insightful things to say about the problems with the game and Hainly’s representation. This signals that whether players considered a game good or not influenced what they thought about the transgender characters in this sample. Brigitte mused:

I don’t know that the problems with how she’s represented are unique to her. So much as there are problems with *Andromeda* as a whole because there’s not such a sense of the rich backstories of a lot of people, you don’t get the same sense of interaction between characters, particularly people that aren’t companion characters on the ship.

Brigitte points towards the general lack of rich backstory or thoughtfulness in the *Andromeda* characters as a problem that extends to Hainly—not that Hainly herself is particularly ill-designed. In short, problems with the game itself led to Hainly as a character feeling not thoughtful.

Both Hainly and Chevalier are considered by the interviewees to be the worst of these eight characters. There are three main reasons as to why—first, they are minor and unmemorable characters in large games. Second, interviewees did not think there was a

lot of substance or thought put into their creation. Third, interviewees did not find them believable as transgender characters and thought there were problems with their representation. These problems included Chevalier's misalignment between her physical appearance and her voice, therefore making her appear as a "man in a dress" (Abbott, 2022); they also include Hainly's inappropriate disclosure of her transgender identity.

"Okay" and "Good" Characters

There are characters in the sample that interviewees had generally okay or good reactions to. While some aspects of their representation were good, there were differing opinions on other parts. These characters are Krem, Ned, and JJ. While Krem and Ned are both nonplayer characters in large games, JJ is an outlier as she is the main character.

Out of 30 player interviews, 15 discussed Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Many players enjoyed the game itself, with seven describing *DA:I*'s well written and fleshed out characters and four players describing how the game had great storytelling. In terms of the characters, Brigitte (female, heterosexual, 34, white) thought that the relationship between characters is "so well fleshed out...you get a sense that they talk to each other without you." In general, most interviewees enjoyed most aspects of this game. Interviewees also liked the characters in *Dragon Age* games, and Slinky (female, asexual, 32, white) described how the Inquisition felt like it was filled with characters who had not yet found a place where they fit in before joining the Inquisition. Interviewees were split on their feelings about the character Iron Bull, which is the character most closely associated with Krem. While some interviewees liked him and his character design, others thought he was weird. This influenced how much players interacted with Krem, as the storylines of Krem and Iron Bull are tightly intertwined.

Players often brought up the *Dragon Age* developer Bioware in relation to this game, referencing how previous games seemed to allow players to avoid queer characters and relationships. Marie (woman, bisexual, 29, white) thought that the developers had decided that players could not “opt out of the real world” in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. This reference to opting out echoes the “gay button” concept as originally discussed by Anna Anthropy and rearticulated by Adams (2015) and Shaw (2015). The concept of the gay button is that LGBTQ+ themes and content in games is generally hidden, or can be skipped, and thus players are not forced to reckon with this content. Marie was happy that the developers, instead, forced players to encounter the queer characters and relationships. She also mused that Bioware is aware of who their audience is, and therefore she thought they could push the boundary with their inclusion of queer content. As Bioware has been massively successful with their *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series, players thought they have more leeway to include queer content.

Krem is often used as a benchmark for transgender representation in AAA games because he is considered one of the first explicit transgender characters in a game. Players thought he was well portrayed, felt well done and “natural,” and liked or loved him as a character. If players liked Iron Bull, they generally thought highly of and liked Krem and Iron Bull’s mercenary group the Chargers. In showcasing the strong connection between Krem and Iron Bull, Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian) noted that Krem did not stick out that much to him, and he thought it was mainly because he did not like Iron Bull so did not really get to know Krem. Platypus appreciated that Krem is “aggressively normal,” but ultimately thought that Krem was a character that was in the game to be representative of trans people. Platypus’ comments are representative of

why some players did not like aspects of Krem's representation. Others believed Krem to be a cisgender man and this varied in how and when they figured out he was trans. Spyro (cis female, heterosexual, 29, white) discussed how she genuinely thought "Krem was a dude" until a comment at a bar saying he was born a boy but not in the body of a boy. As this example shows, some participants, and especially cisgender ones, talked about the representation of these characters through a transnormative and medical lens (Johnson, 2016). As a lot of examples of transgender media representation follows this transnormative model, it is not surprising that cisgender participants describe transgender media in this fashion. Transgender characters like Krem, in many ways, are encoded to explain transness in this way (Hall, 1991 [1973]).

Like Spyro, Altair (male, heterosexual, 32, white) had no idea Krem was transgender until the game addresses it in the dialogue options if you talk with him long enough. Kath (female, pansexual, 34, Caucasian) figured out he was trans during the dialogue with Iron Bull where he tells us that Krem was supposed to be in the female corps of the Tevinter army. Before that, Kath notes that while she "didn't think he was cisgender, she didn't think he was trans either." Alistair (male, heterosexual, 46, Spanish) thought he was a trans man as there was "something about him." These comments show that there was something about Krem that some players were picking up on—he seemed different. Concerning the dialogue options, two of my interviewees were troubled with the ability for the player to ask Krem invasive questions. Jacob (transgender man, bisexual, 25, white), stated that the player is "given way too many options to be transphobic to him as a playable character...like way too many dialogue options that are just rude." Similarly, Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) articulated that they did not

like that you could ask Krem “weird, invasive questions” and noted that it asserts that the player character is cis because “why would a trans person ask those questions to another trans person.” Overall, players generally thought that Krem was a good example of representation in terms of his role and time in the game. However, trans and nonbinary players noted that the option to ask Krem invasive questions is problematic. In addition, many interviewees had problems with the choice to cast cisgender woman Jennifer Hale as Krem’s voice actress instead of finding a transmaculine voice actor.

Ned from *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* was the second character in this category. Seven out of 30 player interviews were at least partially focused on discussing Ned and *Syndicate*. Two interviewees thought it was quite fun that Ned was a Victorian criminal and business entrepreneur, while others read him as a quest giver and a tool to progress the game. While Ned was fun to encounter, players did not see him as much more than a slightly interesting non-player character. Ned’s transness was not explicitly discussed at any point during the game. Players can read his bio in-game, or consult various paratexts or interviews for that information. Players noted that it made sense for Ned’s character to not focus on his transness as it made him like other quest giving characters. In this way, Ned was consistent in terms of what type of NPC he was. Two players noted that they wished they could have interacted with him more. Even though his transness was not explicitly stated in game, all my interviewees knew he was trans. Two players referenced his voice and facial structure as the factors that let them know Krem was trans. Alistair (male, heterosexual, 46, Spanish) described how Ned “looked like a woman dressing like a man,” and player Spyro (cis female, heterosexual, 29, white) thought Ned “looked like

a girl and sounded kind've like a guy." These descriptions show that Ned, like Chevalier, caused some gender confusion but was more clearly read as transgender than Chevalier.

JJ is the last character in this category and had more opposing player readings than the other two characters. The interviewees that had played this game were familiar with Hidetaka Suehiro, aka SWERY, and his previous work as a Japanese video game director and writer. Three of the 31 player interviews reflected on JJ and her game *The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories*. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) discussed how SWERY had to apologize for the representations of transgender characters in his previous games. In other words, this is not the first time SWERY has crafted transgender characters, but he has been critiqued on these previous renditions.

The three players thought the game itself was bizarre, and all three had different opinions on the game and how JJ is portrayed. Arno (male, heterosexual, 26, white) mused how SWERY has a lot of creative control because his game development company, White Owls Inc., is an independent game company with presumably less production costs. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) had mixed feelings on the game, whereas Lara (woman, bisexual, 25, white) liked the game. Two common points of discussions across these three interviews were the surprise narrative twist that JJ is revealed to be transgender, and the game mechanics themselves.

Interviewees had a lot of thoughts about the storyline. Arno (male, heterosexual, 26, white) appreciated the game's message that you don't need to be ashamed of who you are. He explained how you only get to know more about JJ, as well as her friends and family, if you play the game more. The more you advance, the more you understand her.

Lara (woman, bisexual, 25, white) discussed how JJ's story was more important than the actual gameplay. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) thought it was clever to find out she was a trans woman, and that it reframes the violence and gameplay mechanics, although it did not change her opinion that it was a cruel game. Lara and Arno recall thinking she was trans during the text conversation with her mom, where her mom accosts her for having women's clothes and then tells her she read her diary. Lara discussed how the text conversations between JJ and her mom are heartbreaking as her mom clearly does not accept who she is. Lara stated that she would not be shocked if JJ's mother was planning on sending her to conversation therapy, which based on contextual clues from the text conversation, seems like Lara's thoughts around this are correct. There was a mix between thinking the story was important, believing the game itself was cruel, and being emotionally moved by the harsh aspects of the story.

An interesting aspect of Lara's interview (woman, bisexual, 25, white) was her belief that the game is hopeful. She felt that when JJ survives the suicide attempt, there is life ahead of her when the game could have easily just made her continue to suffer. Even though JJ survives, she still suffers endless violence as a core mechanic of the game. The transgender character suffering violence is an enduring and unfortunate media trend that is continued through this game mechanic (McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021; Abbott, 2022). However, Lara points out that the end of the game is instead left open-ended in a potentially hopeful way. Lara does not know if she will work it out with her mom, but the ending left her with the impression that she is going to be able to continue living her life. Lara liked the framing of the ending because, compared to the stories of other LGBTQ characters, they are always tragic. In comparison, while this game deals with tragedy and

tragic things, it is not hopeless. Additionally, Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) noted that it is hard to not have strong feelings for JJ while she is being tortured the whole game. Therefore, the game seems to successfully encourage the player to have empathy for JJ and her suffering. I had no transgender interviewees that talked about this game, so I was not able to see how trans players feel about this suffering core game mechanic.

The narrative twist that JJ is transgender was a surprise to the interviewees. The unexpected reveal/disclosure that JJ is transgender aligns with many other examples of transgender media representation. As Abbott (2022) explains, the “reveal” is the moment where the trans person’s gender history is disclosed, and the “meaning of the trans body is contested, and competing ‘truths’ vie for dominance” (Seid, quoted by Abbott, 2022, p. 13; Seid, 2014). The player actually sees JJ’s masculine, pre-transition body when she is revived by paramedics after her suicide attempt. Lara (woman, bisexual, 25, white) described how she remembers sitting with the game after playing, especially when JJ is revealed to be transgender in the moment referenced above—she was not expecting the story to go that way. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) described the twist as clever but thought it was still a mean game. Aegis was the most troubled by the game mechanic, thinking that the surprise transgender experience did not make the fact that the players must force JJ to rip herself apart forgivable. While Lara thought the game was hopeful and liked that it centered on transgender experience (Thach, 2021), Aegis critiqued how the player is shown JJ’s “male presenting body” towards the end. She did not believe it was necessary for the game to have a male body and voice actor for JJ.

While the game may center transgender experience, it still includes a problematic transgender reveal, and it does so through revealing JJ's broken and pre-transition body (Seid, 2014).

In terms of gameplay mechanics, the game requires players to repeatedly JJ rip herself apart. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) thought it was a cruel concept for a game. While it was interesting to reframe the puzzle mechanics, she did not think the rest of the game was sympathetic enough to justify the meanness and cruelty of this mechanic. Arno (male, heterosexual, 26, white) described this mechanic to advance the story as interesting, and can link the themes of the game with these mechanics. These contrasting readings of the game do not align with some of the game reviews that describe this game as framed from a transgender perspective. Instead, two of my cis player interviews see the game as bizarre and with cruel mechanics while the third reads it as hopeful.

While all three characters have aspects and storylines that players liked, there were also problematic aspects that players pointed out. Krem and Ned are both minor characters in large games. Player interviewees often voiced a desire to be able to get to know them better, and to be able to spend more time in game with them. Players also alluded to gender confusion with Krem and Ned, commenting on the misalignment between the way their bodies looked with the way their voices sounded. As both Krem and Ned have cisgender women as voice actors, this confusion makes sense. JJ is the sole main and playable character amongst the three of them. However, all three of my player

interviewees had contrasting opinions on her representation. While none of these characters are considered by my players to be bad representation, each had problems that prevented players from considering them as completely good.

Meaningful Representation

Out of the eight characters in the sample, player interviewees considered Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst as the best characters. While different interviews focused on different characters and not all interviews were about these three, interviews that included any of these three characters involved the most positive descriptors. Interviewees thought these characters avoided the problems of the other characters and felt more complex or “real.”

Lev is a secondary character in *The Last of Us 2*. Most interviewees played *The Last of Us 2* (TLoU2) because they had played, and generally loved, the first game. It is reasonable to assume then that these people know and love the characters of Joel and Ellie, and especially the relationship between the two. People’s attachment to these characters clearly influenced how they felt, and how upset they were, with the events of *The Last of Us 2*. There was a divide between players who loved the events and storyline of *TLoU2*, and also loved Abby and the narrative switch, and those who were irate about Joel being killed off and being made to play as Abby. Out of the 13 interviews about Lev, there were two players who noted that *The Last of Us 1* and *2* are their favorite games of all time. All the player interviews about this game involved a discussion about how heavy, serious, and weighty the subject matter of the game was. My player interviewees all said that *The Last of Us 2* is a good game, with strong storylines and well written characters. As Maxine (transfeminine, queer, 30, white Jewish) describes, the game world

feels “real and lived in,” and interviewees really appreciated that. More than other games in this sample, interviewees expressed the power of emotions that they experienced while playing it.

Players knew about and understood the negative discourse that arose around this game, including the negative review bombing. Marie (woman, bisexual, 29, white) observed that *The Last of Us 2* “developers took a risk and it paid off...I think if people would have let the themes of it sit with them a little bit more, they probably would have resonated with them.” Judging by the speed of the review bombing, which happened before and shortly after the game was released, Marie’s observation that players did not give the game a chance seems accurate. Chuck (male, straight, 32, white) also observed that there was a massive amount of review bombing from people who had not even played the game. However, he complimented the company for “doubling down on the things that people got mad at them for” instead of bending to the negative backlash. It was interesting to hear that players seem to pay attention to the way studios react to backlash like this.

Aside from the fact that interviewees enjoyed that women were the protagonists, other interviewees also appreciated the general diversity present in the game. There are various characters of color, old and young characters, and both sexual and gender diversity. For example, Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) notes how cool she thought it was seeing Dina, who is Jewish, talk about aspects of Judaism when she and Ellie are in the mosque. Even the protagonist Abby, as a very built and muscled woman, challenges traditional norms around women in video games (as explored by Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009) in that she is powerful and looks like she could crush

a zombie with her bare hands. The character roster is also filled with queer characters who are central to the game itself, so Lev does not bear the entire representational load as the games only queer character. Ellie and Dina pursue a relationship as they venture together, while Lev is the game's sole transgender character. My interviewees really appreciated the presence of these queer characters in the game. Banton (cis male, straight, 36, white) thought that the studio “did a nice job making the queer community a huge part of the game without making their queerness the story.” In other words, the characters have motivations and move through the story but also happen to be queer.

Similar to how Krem’s story is intertwined with Iron Bull’s in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Lev is a side character to Abby’s story. The character of Abby is one of the most contested aspects of *The Last of Us 2*. Tomkinson (2023) explains how Abby is not conventionally attractive to straight men and that players argue that her muscular and “masculine” build is unrealistic (pp. 691-696). My interviewees found critiques about Abby’s body ridiculous, and criticized other players for loving Joel while hating Abby for displaying similar characteristics. It was interesting that some players discussed how they initially thought Abby was the transgender character because of her build—these players had heard the rumor that the game included a trans character and assumed it was her. Other interviewees had understandably mixed reactions to Abby as a character. Some players like Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) thought Abby was cool and attractive, while others noted that she was easy to hate. If players liked or even accepted Abby, they generally liked Lev. Players noted that Lev acted as a moral compass, which reflects Kosciuszka’s (2023) findings about the moral service of trans NPCs, and many had strong reactions to the negative events that happened to Lev.

The second character that interviewees thought was well done was Tyler from Don't Nod's *Tell Me Why*. Interviewees generally liked the game and found it very moving, although two of the six interviews noted how slow the pace of the game felt. All six of the player interviews liked Tyler as a character and felt he was well done. Pinkypie (male, heterosexual, 36, European) went so far as to say he absolutely loved Tyler's character and felt he connected with him. It was a common sentiment that interviewees felt connected to Tyler. Interviewees also talked about the potential romance options that Tyler has in the game. Pinkypie noted that he pursued Tyler's romance with Michael, describing how the connection was genuine and that he "felt it." Tyler's romance option challenges what Abbott (2013) calls the trans romance dilemma as he is allowed to form a romantic connection with Michael without a moment in which Tyler's identity as a man is delegitimized. Abbott (2013) argues that this moment of delegitimization usually occurs when the trans person's body or birth sex is "revealed," thus recategorizing that trans person via their "biological" sex (p. 35). By not revealing Tyler's body and not including a conversation that includes this topic, Don't Nod avoids this dilemma. As Pinkypie describes, their connection feels genuine and not shallow.

According to interviewees, the best representation across all eight characters was Catalyst from *Apex Legends*. Two players made a point to discuss their interest in the way Respawn managed their community. Marie (woman, bisexual, 29, white) really liked how Respawn held firm in their support of their trans character, telling angry players that they did not care if they did not like diversity in the game. As I explored in Chapter 5, Respawn is clearly willing to make players angry and risk losing them to continue incorporating diverse and unapologetic representation. The players in my study echoed

this appreciation as well. Across my interviews, players would express their desire for toxic players, or those that did not like diversity, to leave the game space. As Alistair stated, it made him happy to know that players are getting so angry at diversity that they “feel triggered to leave the game because I feel like that's creating a better community for most of us...we don't need people like that. It's not...it's a big loss for us.” In short, the players in my study responded very positively to Respawn standing their ground and choosing diversity over capitulating to those that do not want diversity.

For these three characters, players were all complimentary about how much thought had gone into the characters. In short, players thought the best characters were thoughtfully done. Interviewees described Tyler and Catalyst as feeling “real” and organic (Christian & White, 2020). These characters did not include common transgender media stereotypes like the others—the player and other NPCs cannot ask these characters invasive questions, they are not subjected to violence that does not make sense for the game, and Tyler is actually allowed to pursue a romance that “felt genuine.” Most importantly, interviewees described these characters as complex and noted that they felt connected to them.

What Players Think About Meaningful Transgender Representation

While players generally aligned on whether the transgender characters in this sample were not good, okay, and the best, there were six common themes that arose across the player interviews regarding transgender representation in games. These themes include minor characters in big games, connections between game and characters, voice acting choices, characters being more than their transness, trans dialogue options, and

trans folks being involved in the creation process. I explore each of these six themes in turn below, starting with themes that related to the characters with the most problems and working towards characters that interviewees considered most meaningful.

Minor Characters Thoughtlessly Included in Large Games

As I explored in Chapter 2 and 4, the problem with many transgender characters in games, including some of these eight, was that they are generally minor characters in large games that were not included as thoughtfully as they could have been. All playable and major characters in this sample were rated by players as at least good representation, while the minor non player characters were generally considered problematic. This aligns with what I found in my textual analysis as explored in Chapter 4. The less presence the characters had in the game, the less players thought they were examples of meaningful representation.

The two main issues with minor characters in large games are that they are easy to miss and even easier to forget. Chevalier, Hainly, and Ned were the three most likely to be mostly overlooked as the players continued through each of these characters' respective games. Thus, the risk here is that transness is a missable or optional feature of the game. For example, player Speedy (female, lesbian, 37, white) could only recall that Chevalier "dressed as a woman in order to act as a spy or something." Part of this, as Speedy considered, could be that the game is so large and there are so many missions and quests in this game that it was hard to keep track of all the characters. However, Speedy also noted that it was a really nice change for her to be included because you "don't

typically see characters that are anything other than hetero and cis.” Chevalier thus offers some variety to a homogenous Assassin’s Creed landscape in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The fact that she is so easily missed or forgotten counteracts the fact that she could represent a nice change in an otherwise largely hetero and cis landscape. In addition, the fact that Chevalier is encoded more as a man in a dress thanks to her dialogue and voice acting signals that she was not included in a thoughtful manner. As I explored in Chapter 4, an alignment between a character’s gender identity, their in-game physical appearance, and voice actors leads to meaningful representation. An enduring problem with transgender media representation is this misalignment, partly because it leads to problematic stereotypes—for example, that transgender women are just men in drag. McInroy and Craig (2015) argue that media can act as a main source for folks to learn about transgender issues and identity, and thus continuing to spread stereotypes can have a negative impact. The repetition of these stereotypes in the creation of these characters signals that these characters were not included thoughtfully into the game. Apart from not being able to remember all the NPCs in large games, players also considered characters like Chevalier and Hainly shallow and did not describe them as “real” or “complex.” This aligns with my finding in Chapter 4, where I also considered Hainly and Chevalier to have the most representational problems out of the eight characters.

What Players Think of Games

What players think about the game influences what they think about the characters in the game. The type of game and how well the transgender character fits in

the game world is an important consideration that came up in interviews. This was related to how transgender characters show up in terms of their transness, whether it is subtle or clearly outlined. Some players felt like characters and diversity were not as central if the game was not trying to tell a story, like FIFA or Call of Duty. For example, player Alan Wake (nonbinary, bisexual, 19, Caucasian) notes that players are less likely to focus on characters in less narrative focused games. Alan Wake argued that they thought most people would not really dwell on the characters or story unless it was a game focused on narrative, aligning with Shaw's (2015) finding that her interviewees identified with characters through the story elements (p. 101) and the narrative aspects of games (p.107). In this case, Alan Wake thought that character diversity mattered less in non-narrative games.

It was clear that interviewees thought that the type of game impacts what makes a good character. When asked about characters, interviewees had various opinions about what made a character "good." A recurring theme that came across in many interviews was that good characters are those that feel complex and real. Other character centric aspects included good backstories, lore, and dialogue. Interviewees also mentioned visual design as being important. The transgender characters that players considered good were also considered by players to feel complex, real, have good backstories and dialogue, and they had strong visual design as well. Good transgender characters are thus good characters in general, and ones that players feel have been thoughtfully crafted. Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian) discusses how a good character should serve a narrative purpose that makes sense with the rest of the narrative and feels like part of the world. Players thought that characters like Krem and Ned felt like they were part of the world

and made sense for the narrative. In short, some transgender characters were well liked by my interviewees because they are good characters according to these criteria.

Interviewees also desired substance in their characters and they wanted their characters to feel as though developers had really put thought into their creation. As such, the transgender characters that felt real, well written, thoughtful, and complex were considered the best representations. These sentiments align with my findings around what meaningful transgender looks like as explored in Chapter 4. In addition, player interviewees appreciated transgender characters that were thoughtfully interwoven into the story as I outlined in Chapter 5. What came through strongly in each interview was how passionate most, if not all, interviewees felt about having strong and well written characters. Players sensed which characters had a lot of thought and resources put into them—Catalyst, Tyler, Lev—and noted which characters felt flat, which included Hainly and Chevalier. My interviewees articulated that good characters pull you into the game world and immerse you as believable parts of that world. Characters that are considered problematic, like Hainly and Chevalier, tend to pull the player out of the immersive experience. However, this also happened to some players with Krem as well during the scene where Iron Bull defends Krem if the player asks invasive questions to him.

There were instances where interviewees used the same terminology to describe characters that they did not necessarily think were good. For example, Pabu (female, heterosexual, 28, white) noted that Chevalier was memorable because she made her laugh in a game that was entirely unmemorable. While Pabu did not describe Chevalier as a good character, Chevalier being memorable stuck with her. The trans characters in this sample that aligned more with what players considered as good characters were spoken

of more highly and in more complex ways. In other words, characters like Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst stuck with people for better and more meaningful reasons.

Voice Acting Choices

The importance of choosing voice actors that align with the character's gender identity is a theme that came up across Chapter 4 and 5. As Hall's circuit of culture shows, production choices such as character design and voice acting choices shape reception and encode certain meanings into the representation (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]). They influence the other parts of the circuit, especially the reception and decoding of representation. Voice acting choices are especially important to transgender media representation because, as Zimman (2018) points out, voice is a large aspect of gender presentation and especially for someone transitioning. Voice acting choices and juxtapositions between the character's gender identity and the sound of their voice also helped or hindered what players thought about characters. As players noted, it was often the character's voice actor or actress that helped players figure out certain characters were transgender. The characters of Chevalier, Ned, and Krem all had cisgender voice actors that did not align with their gender, while JJ and Hainly had cisgender voice actors that did align with their gender. The misalignment between character appearance and voice, such as Chevalier, Ned, and Krem, alerted some interviewees to the fact that these characters were different in some way. In the case of Chevalier, it encoded her as a "man in a dress." While JJ and Hainly were aligned between their gender identity and voice actresses, interviewees did not describe either of these characters as feeling "real." In contrast, Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst all had transgender voice actors that aligned with each

of their respective character's identity. Interviewees articulated that they either suspected transgender involvement with these characters, that they were voiced by trans folks, or that they felt "real."

Out of the eight, Chevalier's character caused the most gender confusion because of the juxtaposition between her deep voice and feminine appearance. I had made a point to refer to the characters as "they" to see what pronouns interviewees would use. R (female/nonbinary, bisexual, 26, white) was one of two (out of the seven interviews that focused on Chevalier) interviewees that immediately referred to Chevalier as she. While I did not judge my interviewees for reading or gendering Chevalier a certain way, I argue that it does tell us something about the way her character was created and received, including the role the choice of masculine voice actor played in this process. Choosing a masculine voice actor and adding a line of dialogue where Chevalier says she enjoys wearing women's clothes depicts her as a cross-dressing man.

Some of my interviewees distinctly remembered encountering Chevalier because they were so surprised by the incongruence between her dress and masculine voice. Spyro (cis female, heterosexual, 29, white) said that it was the first time "it had been so in your face," and considered Chevalier to be a man who was dressing in women's clothing. She described Chevalier as "a dude" that did not even try to disguise his voice, and if you panned up to his face, Spyro thought it was "1000% masculine." In addition to Chevalier's deep voice and forceful declarations of liking to wear women's clothes, Spyro noted that if you panned up you could see Chevalier's "masculine face." This was the only interviewee that described Chevalier's face as masculine looking. While all these factors contribute to the player's confusion about Chevalier, it is the voice acting choices

for her that create the biggest confusion. Choosing a man as a voice actor for Chevalier creates an instance of trans reveal (Thach, 2021; Seid, 2014; McLaren, Bryant, & Brown, 2021) where the incongruence of her voice with her feminine appearance positions her as a joke. In Liang, Cormier, Toups Dugas, and Bohrer's (2023) research on transgender misrepresentation, they argue that characters that have a mixture of gender identity markers, such as a woman with a bearded face, are meant to "make the player laugh at a cisnormative joke that frames trans identity as...deceptive" (p. 13). Likewise, Chevalier is "designed to serve as a figure of mockery" (Liang et al., 2023, p. 13).

In relation to Krem's transness, players discussed his physical appearance and the fact that he had a voice actress. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) noted that his character model was good, that they designed him in a way that they read as trans masculine, and Aegis thought he "actually looks like a trans man." This tells us that it was not one particular thing that outed Krem, although his prolific voice actress also alerted most of the 15 interviewees that Krem was not a cisgender man. The fact that Jennifer Hale voiced Krem was a big sticking point for a lot of interviewees. Despite the positive ways that creators talked about Jennifer Hale embodying Krem and the good work she did, many player interviewees had problems with this casting choice. Some of them talked about how they immediately recognized the voice of Jennifer Hale from her work as Commander Shepherd in the *Mass Effect* series, which resulted in him being almost immediately outed as "different." Aegis was annoyed that he had a voice actress. She noted that seeing the voice actress did give away that he is trans, and made her assume that they did not ask trans people for feedback once the character was written, or

that trans people did not have a big input in the character creation process. On this note, Aegis thought that if you are making these types of characters, you need to hire the right people to perform them and write them, which she did not think was the case.

Slinky (female, asexual, 32, white) similarly thought the casting choice was weird and recognized Hale from her work on *Mass Effect*. She figured out Krem was trans when she first placed Hale's voice. Slinky was surprised that Krem was voiced by a woman. She noted how "Hale's voice did throw me because it was kind of a subversion of expectations for the character." Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) also stated "he is voiced by a cis woman...I know it's Commander Shephard" and thought they chose Hale as the voice actress because "she's so cool." Gizmo talked about how she knows who Hale is, and it causes confusion between her voice and Krem looking very masculine, and therefore she did not know what the creators were going for. Like the others, Altair said he had an "inkling" Krem was trans because of his voice. In other words, Hale's recognizable voice creates a jarring juxtaposition with his masculine physical appearance, resulting in what Cover (2023) calls an identity misalignment. However, Hale's clear efforts to utilize a huskier and deeper voice for Krem more aligned with his gender identity than Chevalier's voice actor's work.

Interviewees guessed or sometimes knew when trans voice actors were the ones behind the trans characters. Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst are the characters that have trans voice actors—Ian Alexander, August Aiden Black, and Meli Grant all voice each of these respective characters. Three out of the 13 interviews about Lev mentioned the fact that they knew Naughty Dog had hired a trans voice actor to play Lev. In an interview focused on Catalyst, Moira (transwoman, bisexual, 30, white) stated that they were

“reasonably sure she has a trans voice actress...or if she doesn't have a trans voice actress, whoever is playing her is doing one hell of a job giving the trans girl voice.”

Players picked up on this “trans” voice, although they often used phrases like “sounded trans” or “felt trans” to articulate this fact. Characters that had voice actors that aligned with their gender identity, and especially if they sounded trans, were considered the most meaningful representation. As explored in Chapter 4, players picked up on a specific transgender voice that was the result of real transgender people voice the characters. Whether it was a specific sound of the character’s voice, such as the huskiness that comes from hormone replacement therapy, players picked up on this and could generally tell when it was a transgender person or not behind the voice.

Trans Dialogue Options

I refer to trans dialogue options as in-game dialogue where the player can talk to or ask the character about their transgender identity. In this way, players can learn about and explore that character’s transness. Games that include this type of dialogue include *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Krem and Hainly are two of the main characters that feature this type of dialogue. Players can ask Hainly about why she chose her new name, and comment on the fact that she has started a whole new life in Andromeda. Krem’s trans dialogue options are a little more substantial.

Aside from Krem’s physical appearance and voice actress, interviewees stated that they knew Krem was trans from the dialogue options for him. The game lets you ask Krem questions about his transgender identity and experience, and as Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) and Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian) explore differently in their interviews, the game and the NPCs will react accordingly to the tone and

invasiveness of your questions. As I noted before, Gizmo found it weird that you can ask Krem invasive questions about his identity. Marie (woman, bisexual, 29, white) and Spyro (cis female, heterosexual, 29, white) read this ability to have trans dialogue options as positive. Spyro liked that if you asked about it, Krem gave you answers. His transness and trans experience were not hidden or secret. Spyro thought the tone of the dialogue was positive, discussing how she read Krem's general attitude as "this is who I am, it doesn't matter what I identify as...these are my beliefs, this is what matters to me." Marie noted that there's a prompt where you ask Krem permission for more information on him and his backstory. Marie thought it was an interesting approach to "actually have a character that's willing to talk to the protagonists about their whole process." This shows that some interviewees really appreciated the ability to ask him questions, while others had concerns.

Another interesting aspect of the trans dialogue options is that they can act as a buffer for real transgender people. Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) discusses how, if the player never met a real trans person, and this is the first trans person they are meeting, they probably would have the types of questions the player can ask. She asks whether it is not better for players to be able to ask these questions to a fictional character who does not actually have feelings, to hear them and answer them in the place of someone having to actually endure that in real life. In other words, Krem can act as a buffer to real trans people. For example, Cloud (man/demiman, bi/pan, 25, white Latin American) explored how Krem was the first encounter he had with a trans person/representation when he was younger. He noted that he was still very ignorant and did not know a lot of people different from him, so his experience interacting with Krem

was positive because he learned about transness from Krem. This reflects McInroy and Craig's (2015) argument that media can act as a source of knowledge about transgender experience. Two interviews noted that Krem was one of the first trans characters they had ever encountered. Thus, these characters can and do act as educational for cis folks (Shaw, 2015a).

As discussed, Krem is very connected to Iron Bull and the other Chargers. Some interviewees felt that the way Iron Bull and the Chargers treat Krem, and especially around his transness, models good allyship. Brigitte (female, heterosexual, 34, white) thought that they model that everyone treats him respectfully, and if anyone misgenders Krem or says transphobic things, the game and characters let the player know that it is wrong. Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian) found this very off putting, and said that it felt out of place, but Brigitte points out that this NPC reaction is important for backing up Krem and supporting him. Platypus experienced this as Iron Bull coming completely out of character to lecture the player about how to respond—it felt that the writers were addressing him personally to give their take. He noted that he understood where the writers were coming from, but felt that Iron Bull was turning to the camera and staring straight at it to say “this character is trans and transphobia is wrong.” Comparatively, Brigitte thinks that the game models for players how to talk about Krem very explicitly. She says that she thinks this part makes it useful, including thinking through what we are modeling for players, and what kind of discussions are being opened for players. Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) similarly appreciated that the characters get “quite mad at you if you ask them the shaky questions,” stating that it was nice to see, and “I think they

are kind of like, you're being an idiot, which is the correct response." In other words, trans dialogue options can also model for the player what questions are not okay to ask transgender people.

Characters Who Are More Than Their Transness

Players discussed how characters were or were not more than just a transgender character. It was a common sentiment that characters be more than their transness—that they have other character traits, storylines, and identify as more than just a checkbox trans character. For example, Jacob (transgender man, bisexual, 25, white) discusses how some trans side characters are just “assigned to just be trans and that's their character trait, and they don't really have very much else going on.” Overall, my interviewees thought that trans characters that are well done feel more authentically and organically (Christian & White, 2020) trans. This generally also meant that these characters were somehow more than just transgender. As Mikaela (female, demi pan, 25, white) describes when asked how she would craft a transgender character, she would think first that they are making a character so a “part of them is them being trans...it's like, a beautiful crystal with all of the faces, and then being trans is just one of the little faces of the whole crystal.” These characters had a narrative purpose or served an important role in the story. This resulted in them being included in the story in a more thoughtful way.

This does not mean a character's transgender identity cannot be an important or central part of their identity—just that it is not all they are. As Dyer (1999) argues, stereotypes express “particular definitions of reality” (p. 14). He notes that the role of stereotypes is to “maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it” (Dyer, 1999, p. 16).

Having characters be complex beings that are more than just their transgender identity, challenges these sharp boundary definitions. Shaw (2015a) notes that increasing representation in games can help games be more reflective about modes of being in the world (p. 143). Having a playable character be centrally trans and also a well-rounded and thoughtful character is one way that these characters can be more than just their transness.

Hainly is a good example of a character who is not much more than her transness. As a minor non-player character in a very large game, the player does not get much interaction with her. In that limited window of interaction, she discloses her identity as a transgender woman. Cloud (male/demiman, bi/pan, 25, white Latin American) described this reveal (Seid, 2014) as Hainly “dumping” information about herself, which they felt was very strange. As previously discussed, at least three of the nine interviews about Hainly mentioned how strange her immediate disclosure of her trans identity was. The combination of her limited presence in the game, the thoughtlessness from the producer side of her jarring disclosure, and the lack of other defining traits makes Hainly a character that is really only her transness in a shallow way.

In comparison, Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* felt like more than just a transgender character to most of the 15 interviewees. Interviewees discussed how it is nice to see Krem accepted in community with others. Kath (female, pansexual, 34, Caucasian) liked how he was introduced, saying that it felt normal and “not a big coming out thing”—she liked that he was just Krem. Alistair (male, heterosexual, 46, Spanish) felt like Krem was his ally in the fight against evil, that he was not a “trans man,” but a

friend who, as a character, felt well done and natural. This shows how interviewees saw him as more than just his transgender identity.

Others had more complex feelings about parts of Krem's story that centered on his trans identity. Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) loved his character and liked that he chose to not magically transition but did not love that you can ask him weird invasive questions. Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian) was particularly critical of the way the game deals with Iron Bull, Krem, and the dialogue that ensues from Krem's transness. Platypus said that Krem did not have much camera time, and the camera time he does have is inherently shared with another character that he did not like. The dialogue surrounding Krem's transness was jarring to Platypus and took him out of the immersion of the game because it felt as though the game creators were talking directly to him to tell him that "transphobia is bad."

The characters of JJ, Lev, Tyler, and Catalyst are all centrally trans characters. In other words, their transgender identity is an important part of who they are and it matters to their character. However, I was struck by the fact that player interviewees talked about many other things besides their trans identity. This is because they are more than just transgender. We do not even find out that JJ is transgender until the end of the game—instead, players learn all about her throughout the game without her transness being named. Similarly, interviewees talked about Lev's experience and how much they liked him in *The Last of Us 2*. Interviewees spoke the most positively about Tyler and Catalyst. These four characters are the most meaningfully transcoded, to borrow interviewee Moira's (transwoman, bisexual, 30, white) description of Catalyst. Their trans identity

matters to who they are as characters, but it is not all they are. In this way, they do not become shallow transgender stereotypes.

Trans Folks Being Involved

Players considered the characters more complex if there were trans folks involved in the creation—even if players did not know for sure that transgender people had been involved in creating these characters. For example, player interviewees speculated that Catalyst had a transgender voice actress. Moira (transwoman, bisexual, 30, white) stated that she thought the actress did “one hell of a job giving the trans girl voice,” Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white-Hispanic) thought she “sounded right,” and Mikaela (female, demi pan, 25, white) suspected transgender people had worked on creating her. El (woman, bisexual, 30, Hispanic/Latina) also assumed that Tyler had a trans voice actor, and J (agender/genderqueer, lesbian, 22, Nigerian) guessed that a trans person had been the model and voice actor for Lev. Players speculated that trans people were involved because, as these players argued, they sounded and felt organically transgender (Christian & White, 2020). Many interviewees articulated how having a transgender person as a voice actor made a difference, that they were able to make the character feel more real and complex.

In comparison, missteps in representation lead interviewees to believe that trans folks were not involved in the process. For example, interviews questioned the voice acting choices for characters like Chevalier and Krem. Interviewees did not understand why game creators would not choose a trans voice actor, or why they would cast such a deep voice actor for Chevalier. Similarly, interviewees were confused about the casting of Jennifer Hale for Krem. Another big misstep that led interviewees to conclude trans

folks were not involved in the creative process was Hainly's problematic dialogue. Four interviewees stated that Hainly's disclosure of her dead name and trans identity right away is not something they think transgender people would do. Cloud (male/demiman, bi/pan, 25, white Latin American) noted that it does feel like that interaction was not written by a person who understood that experience, and he "didn't feel like a trans person was writing a trans person character."

Involving trans folks in the creation of these characters was one of the most prevalent themes across all my interviews and struck me as one of the most important aspects of meaningful representation. This theme came across in most player interviews and all creator/consultant interviews. When I asked players what they would do if I asked them to create a transgender character, every single interviewee felt strongly that transgender communities should be involved in creating the trans characters—they all stated they would ask transgender folks. This echoes Christian and White's (2020) argument that organic representation as a form of reparation should be "sourced from the community it serves and in which it must thrive" (p. 145). Going further, Christian and White (2020) argue for a reparative praxis that "requires engagement and restoration, not just taking stories but using them as an opportunity to train, fund, and provide resources to the communities from which these narratives originate" (p. 147). Giving transgender folks the opportunity to embody transgender representation and tell trans stories is a first step towards this reparative praxis. Every player identified this as a necessary step in crafting transgender representation in games. As Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31,

white/Hispanic) outlines, if studios really value diversity, they need to hire those folks as otherwise it is just a matter of aesthetics. Aegis argues that getting the right actor is the bare minimum for these characters.

Production Knowledge: What Players Know

Throughout the player interviews, it was clear to me that interviewees are mostly aware of the production process in the video game industry. In Hall's (1991 [1973]) conception of both encoding and decoding, and the circuit of culture (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]), the moment that consumers decode, or receive, the text is connected to production but a separate moment. However, the fact that players know what goes into the production process disrupts this conception. In short, consumers are aware of what producers are encoding into the game, and therefore they read this representation with knowledge about what game studios can do. They are also highly critical of studios that do not create or include diversity in thoughtful ways. They know what it takes to create a game and add diversity, and so they do not accept when games just do not do this "bare minimum."

According to my interviewees, players had a lot of knowledge about video game production process for three main reasons: as fans, they are knowledgeable about the process of what goes into creating games from reading and consuming video game related news and information; they work in or adjacent to the video game industry; and they are academics who study or are familiar with game studies and therefore have studied video game production. Despite the different reasons why players are knowledgeable, all 31 player interviewees in my sample showed an impressive range of understanding about how games are made and what studios risk by including diversity.

As interviewees were knowledgeable about the video game production process and industry, there was a strong connection between whether they judged something to be a good game and whether they then thought the characters were well done. For my interviewees, the process of production is not shrouded or mysterious. They also know the difference between various types of game studios, with two players referencing the power and weight that AAA game studios hold. For example, Pabu (female, heterosexual, 28, white) discussed how it is a big deal when vetted AAA games go through a whole process to get representation right, describing it as “pretty substantial.” As this quote exemplifies, the players that mentioned the risk and importance of diverse representation thought it was particularly important when AAA studios include it. The fact that AAA companies like Respawn and Bioware are attempting to create good transgender representation holds more weight because of their influence and their considerable resources.

The willingness of studios to include trans characters came up often in player interviews. Whether studios are even willing to try to include more diverse characters is an important first step. Players noted the risk it takes for a game to include diverse content, as well as the fact that not a lot of mainstream game companies are willing to take this risk. Mikaela (female, demi pan, 25, white) thinks that the companies are fearful of the backlash they will receive for including representation, and this creates a cycle of fearful and unwilling companies who do not want to shoulder the risk. As half my player interviewees pointed out, it is expected that there will be backlash when diversity is included. As Jacob (transgender man, bisexual, 25, white) put it, he cannot blame game studios for deciding they were not going to even try to include more diverse characters

because of the degree of violent backlash against LGBTQ+ inclusion. Interviewee Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) described how they believe it is the gut reaction of the game industry to make games for straight boys, which aligns with some research on the culture of the mainstream game industry (Condis, 2015; Cote, 2015, 2021). All players, regardless of identity, referenced the risk of including LGBTQ+ content and the current negative sociopolitical focus on LGBTQ+ visibility. Despite this, player interviewees generally wanted companies, especially bigger companies with what they saw as more influence, to take more risks with diversity. This signals that players know and appreciate when studios take a risk and incorporate diversity thoughtfully—not just to spice things up, but in a way that signals the company cares about the communities they are trying to represent. Since the players are knowledgeable about the production part of the circuit (Du Gay et al., 2003 [1997]), they seem to pick up on when companies have used their resources to bring in folks with lived experience to help with these representations. However, the lived experience of folks and demographic factors also impacted how they thought of and articulated the representation in these games.

Comparing Transgender and Cisgender Interviewees: Different Lived Experiences

There were demographic or identity-based differences in how people relate to or talked about these characters. This tracks with one of Cavalcante's (2018a) arguments in his work on LGBTQ resilient audience reception. Cavalcante (2018a) states that

Media interact with extra-media forces to generate powerfully affective and emotional moments of reception. A dominant trope in popular transgender representation is violence: violence enacted on and perpetrated by transgender people. When watching these images, the participants in my study experienced powerful feelings of discomfort and personal violation. This was the case because they live with the threat of violence daily, outside of the media encounter. Transgender communities are at a greater risk of experiencing violence than their non-trans

counterparts, and have painfully profound histories of violence (Valentine, 2007). They bring these extra-media histories with them to the media encounter. (p. 1193)

As Cavalcante (2018a) explains, transgender gender nonconforming/nonbinary viewers thought different things than cis players because they have related lived experiences—they have “extra-media histories” with this content in their day to day lives. While cisgender players were generally celebratory or wanted certain types of representation for different reasons, transgender folks were generally a lot more critical or wanted other types of representation. If cisgender interviewees were also a part of the LGBTQ+ community, they were more likely to closely align with transgender players. In this section, I explore how trans and cis folks intersect and diverge in how they think about this representation.

Celebrating and Being Critical About Transgender Inclusion

All players were happy to see transgender characters being included. For example, Kath (female, pansexual, 34, Caucasian) explicitly stated that they loved to see representation in the *Dragon Age and Tell Me Why* and it made her happy to think that people would play the game and see someone like them. Interviewees were happy to see transgender characters, and many discussed how it made them happy to know that trans folks would feel seen in the games they discussed. Cisgender players in particular thought it was interesting and cool when transgender characters were included. A wholesome interview moment for me was with Pabu (female, heterosexual, 28, white), who had not realized Krem was trans until I specifically asked her in the interview when she knew Krem was trans. She was a little shocked, laughed, and then said, “he’s still a cutie

though, I honestly would have never known.” It was a positive experience to hear her say that, and perhaps this is more telling of my own expectations around what people will think of transgender folks that I was grateful to hear she still thought Krem was cute after finding out he was trans.

While it is important for cisgender folks to see transgender representation, cis people do not need the same type of representation that transgender people do. Cisgender players are celebratory because it is nice to see diversity, but they do not have to live as transgender folks. As Shaw (2015a) explores, it is important for cisgender people to see transgender representation in games for the educational argument that people see those unlike them to experience a broader view of the world (pp. 41-42). For transgender players, seeing and playing as transgender characters on screen allows them to see their own experiences reflected, learn further about their own identities, and experience what Cavalcante (2017) refers to as breakout texts. Cavalcante (2017) defines breakout texts as media that offers “first of its kind” visibility (p. 539). Since there is limited significant transgender representation in mainstream games, each one of these characters is generally first of its kind. Cavalcante (2017) argues that breakout texts “break into the cultural mainstream, break with historical representational paradigms, and [break] into the everyday lives of the audiences they purport to represent” (p. 539). These characters thus represent first of its kind visibility to trans folks who do not often see themselves represented in video games.

“Too Much” vs. “Not Enough” Representation

Interviewees ranged in what they thought was too on the nose in terms of announcing a character's transness, what was too subtle, and what felt right. In general,

transgender and cisgender interviewees had differing opinions on what was too “on the nose” and whether they wanted transness to be more included in the character storyline. While there was some gray area, cis players generally judged some instances of explicit representation to be too much, whereas trans players sometimes wanted the character’s trans identity to be more central.

A key example of this difference is my interview with Platypus (male, straight, 24, Caucasian), who is a cisgender straight man, and how he thought it felt very strange when Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* directly tells you he is trans. He mused that if Krem does not disclose this to you in the trans dialogue options, then Krem is “just like a dude.” Platypus felt awkward that, in his words, the characters must specifically sit you down to tell you. As I discussed above, there were mixed reactions to Krem’s trans dialogue options. Three of my interviews who are cisgender women appreciated the ability to ask Krem questions and get answers about his transness. Gizmo (nonbinary, lesbian, 25, white) and Jacob (transgender man, bisexual, 25, white), both read these questions as weird and invasive.

It was interesting to hear differing opinions around these dialogue options, and I argue these different reactions are based on who creators have in mind and who is involved in the creation of these trans characters—in other words, how the producers are encoding these characters with a certain audience in mind (Hall, 1991 [1973]). In turn, people’s own experience of gender seems to influence how players read these dialogue options. Both Spyro (cis female, heterosexual, 29, white) and Marie (woman, bisexual, 29, white) are cis women and Krem is a character that, while thoughtfully created, was crafted by a cast of mostly cis people. Jacob and Gizmo, who are transgender and

nonbinary, read the dialogue options as confused and invasive. As a transgender person, I similarly read the dialogue options as invasive.

Why Representation and Diversity Matters

There is an interaction happening between player identity and how players are decoding these representations based on their own lived experiences and frameworks of knowledge (Hall, 1991 [1973]). This point reiterates why having trans folks involved in the process matters as they see things in ways that cisgender folks do not. While educational dialogue about transgender experience may seem fine for cis audiences, transgender audiences can read it as inappropriate at best, and transphobic or violent at the more extreme end. If there are transgender folks involved in the process, they can ask questions or spot problems that cisgender creators do not think of. In addition, they can influence the character in thoughtful ways.

The reception of Catalyst is evidence that having transgender folks with lived experience involved in the creation does not just land well with transgender players. Without exception, my interviewees liked Catalyst with a focus on her cool aesthetics, her in game abilities, and her inclusion as a transgender character. Mikaela (female, demi pan, 25, white) discussed how both her and her friends enjoyed Catalyst's "witchy vibes" and came back to *Apex* specifically to play her. Meow (male, heterosexual, 36, European) noted that he liked the visuals of her character and that she looked very appealing. Aegis (woman, bisexual, 31, white/Hispanic) also described Catalyst as a "very pretty witch lady," while Mikaela referenced the cool color scheme of her original character model. It was interesting that Catalyst's physical appearance and attractiveness were referenced so often, especially compared to the other seven characters in my sample. There were no

demographic differences in the players' glowing discussions about Catalyst. As her character had the most trans involvement in her creation, this signals that there is power in giving trans folks power to craft their own representation in games.

One of the interviews that had me thinking deeply for a while afterwards was with Moira (transwoman, bisexual, 30, white) concerning Catalyst. Moira talked about how Catalyst is not only trans narratively, but also meaningfully transcoded. Instead of having a character just state they are transgender, Moira felt like Catalyst was a particular type of trans girl that she recognized, that Catalyst embodied a trans experience through her representation that felt real. As Moira put it, they found Catalyst refreshing because she was clockable¹¹ as a trans person, and therefore meaningfully transcoded. While Moira did not explicate this, I think that what was left unsaid in this interview was that Moira thought Catalyst was meaningfully coded by and for trans people.

Those interviewees that were part of the LGBTQ community were more likely to align with what transgender players thought. At the very least, they seemed to be more sensitive to the complexities of transgender representation. For example, El (woman, bisexual, 30, Hispanic/Latina) discussed how inclusive it felt to play *Tell Me Why* with her largely LGBTQ streaming community. When discussing her frustration with Chevalier's representation, R (female/nonbinary, bisexual, 26, white) stated that "as another member of the queer community, we do recognize our own and, you know, any irritation, any anger is definitely partially coming from the fact that I recognize when one

¹¹ To be clockable means that people can "tell" someone is transgender. However, there are differences in transgender people recognizing other transgender people and the more sinister idea that cisgender can "tell" by looking at a person what their "birth sex" is. While the first conveys recognition of shared experience, the second type has much more to do with policing others gender identity and is linked to trans-exclusionary feminism and general transphobia.

of us is being done wrong.” Interviewees like Watson (male, gay, 22, white) who are in the LGBTQ community noted how they felt a sense of community with these trans characters. These examples show that these players were thinking about the benefits of trans inclusion, felt anger on behalf of less thoughtful transgender inclusion, and felt aligned with transgender characters.

One of the most surprising findings in my interviews with players was listening to how the white, cisgender men in my sample wrangled with their thoughts on diversity and inclusion. Out of all my interviews, cisgender men most often came into the interview ready to talk about their favorite games without always realizing the topic of the interview. The thoughtfulness of these interviews was the most surprising as I expected them to be the most honest about transgender experience. As Anderson (2017) explores in their research on cisgender men and their attitudes towards trans folks, they found that there was a relationship between “sexual orientation of cisgender men is associated with levels of trans prejudice, attitudes towards trans women and trans men, and attitudes towards transgenderism being a psychological disorder and as something people are born with” (p. 378). Most relevant to my own study was Anderson’s (2017) finding that cisgender men with higher gender self-esteem, or how much they identify with their gender group, reported higher levels of transgender prejudice and more discomfort around trans folks (p. 379). I expected to find that cisgender men in my study would similarly talk about how they did not quite agree with transgender representation, especially if they read me as another cisgender man. Instead, I found that this demographic of interviews overall noted how diversity was important, even when it did not personally impact them. At the worst, cisgender men interviewees admitted that they

got sometimes got upset when things were changed for the purposes of adding more diversity into a game. Every single player in this demographic talked about the work they had put into caring about diversity. Some acknowledged they were used to, and even tired of, seeing themselves represented all the time across media. Another articulated theme from interviews with the white cisgender men was that, even if it did not personally matter to these men, they knew diversity mattered to others, and so they thought it was important. As Meow (male, heterosexual, 36, European) stated, “it's nice to have representation so why not? Some people feel that it's good, or that they need it. So, it's just plus positive.”

Player opinion and reception differed based on demographic factors. Trans and nonbinary players were more critical about trans dialogue options, as well as what they considered too much vs. not enough in terms of the quality of representation. Cisgender players were generally more celebratory and appreciated the inclusion of transgender characters more for educational purposes. That there are demographic differences in audience reception of transgender representation points to the need for transgender folks to be involved in crafting this representation. As I previously argued, transgender interviewees see things that cisgender ones do not. Interviewee Jacob (transgender man, bisexual, 25, white) argues this point, stating that representation “probably will not be as good...as it could be unless they have consulted someone who has that lived experience.”

In general, all player interviewees thought the inclusion of transgender characters was positive and important. As I purposefully avoided transphobic interviewees by obscuring the fact that I was asking about transgender representation, it is not surprising that interviewees were not hostile. However, what was surprising was that viewers

articulated how important it was—even when it did not personally matter to them. According to player interviews, the most meaningful transgender representation happened when the representation was thoughtful, felt organic, and where the characters were thoughtfully included in the game. Aspects such as the type of game and how well the transgender character fits in the game, voice acting choices, whether the character is more than their transness, trans dialogue options, and how trans folks are involved in character creation all contribute to whether players think these characters are meaningful or not. This tells us that players pay attention to diversity and how thoughtfully studios are including diverse characters. Players appreciated and desired diversity that was well done. In addition, players could tell when diversity seemed to be included haphazardly or when it was not done thoughtfully. In general, player interviewee opinions on which characters were included thoughtlessly aligned with my textual analysis in Chapter 4, such as considering Hainly and Chevalier not well done while Tyler, Lev, and Catalyst as complex.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored audience reception of the eight transgender characters in my sample. I have argued that players recognize meaningful representation as that which is thoughtful, feels organic or “feels trans,” and is included in a thoughtful manner. Player interviews therefore align with characteristics of meaningful transgender as outlined in Chapter 4. Players are also aware of the conditions of game production as outlined in Chapter 5, and expect that studios should be including diversity in their games

despite the risk. Players believe that mainstream games and AAA studios have the most power and resources to include diversity, and want to see studios take more risks in this area.

I have shown that there are demographic or identity-based differences in how people relate to or talk about these characters. In many ways, transgender folks have the same lived reality as these characters. They must also often experience invasive questions, unexpected revealing of their identity, and navigating juxtapositions between the way they sound and the way they look. People with this lived experience have different expectations and receive this representation in different ways than cisgender people do. Cisgender people who do not have to live in the reality of moving through the world as a transgender person think these representations are fine or are generally celebratory about it. In short, transgender folks see transgender representation in video games differently from cisgender players. This is why having transgender folks involved in the creation process throughout matters. Players could tell when transgender folks had been involved in the production process. As this chapter shows, thoughtful trans involvement led to audiences thinking that characters like Catalyst and Tyler are excellent examples of meaningful transgender representation.

An interesting finding was the fact that there were no demographic differences in the glowing discussions involving Catalyst. Players thought she was well done and that there was a good balance between the thoughtful inclusion of her transgender identity. As Catalyst is the character that had the most transgender involvement in her creation, this signals that there is power in putting transgender folks in positions of influence over transgender representation in games. Tyler was also considered to be well done, but was

not discussed as widely as Catalyst. This could have something to do with the fact that Catalyst is featured in a bigger, more well-known game than Tyler. *Tell Me Why* took a big risk by featuring Tyler as one of their unavoidable protagonists because if the player does not like Tyler or the game type, they probably will not continue to play the game. In contrast, the players can choose not to play as Catalyst. However, the player will encounter her in the game even if they choose not to play as her.

The findings in this chapter from the audience align with what I found in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5—there are specific aspects of these character representation that lead to complex and organic transgender representation. As explored in Chapter 5, studios must value diversity and care enough about the way they are including this diversity to do it carefully and thoughtfully. I offered evidence in this chapter to signal that game audiences know enough about the game production process to be able to tell when studios do this. Thinking of Hall’s circuit of culture model, players are aware of the other parts of this circuit and know what it takes to include diversity. Players appreciated that they saw studios like Respawn taking a stand against other players that were complaining about inclusion. As players in my study articulated, it was actually better when this type of toxic backlash was driven out of the community.

As I argued in Chapter 4, the involvement of transgender people in the creation of these games led to more complex and the character feeling organically transgender. This was echoed by my player interviewees, who found that those characters who did have transgender folks involved in their creation felt “real.” For the player interviewees, they stated that the least studios could do was involve transgender communities in the

telling of transgender stories. All of my interviewees, as well as my own critical analysis of these characters, align on the fact that characters that are thoughtful, feel organic, and had transgender people involved in the creation of these characters in major ways were the most meaningful.

One of my key findings is that meaningful transgender representations matters—to me, to my player interviewees, and to those involved in production that value diversity and want to do it well. The reasons why these characters are included also matter. If it is thoughtful, if the right communities are consulted, if transgender people are given a chance to be involved, the result is more organic representation (Christian & White, 2020) and better reception to that inclusion. I have showcased in Chapter 5 that there are certain contexts where the risk of including transgender characters is mitigated and that make it more likely a studio will include transgender representation and do it well.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

“There is a one-word solution to almost all the problems in trans media—we just need more.”

Jen Richards, *Disclosure* documentary, actress and writer

I started this dissertation thinking through what Richards claims—first, that there are clearly problems in trans media, and the argument that adding more representation will help these problems. I have explored some of the problems that exist when transgender people are represented in the media throughout my previous chapters, such as the enduring negative storylines and stereotypes. While more varieties of representation can be nice, my dissertation shows that it is not enough to just create more. More representation does not equal good or better representation. I knew from my own personal experience that there was an important distinction between seeing more trans media, and seeing trans media that felt familiar to my own experiences or that felt like it was well done. Formulating this concept—meaningful transgender representation—gets at this distinction between creating more representation to offset the harmful types by virtue of increasing visibility, and representation which feels like it is by and for transgender people.

Visibility is a double-edged sword that brings both harm and recognition. In her seminal work on the oppositional gaze and black women spectatorship, hooks (2014) states that the “conventional representations of black women have done violence to the image” (p. 120). hooks established the harm that this visibility can cause, noting different ways that black women had to either make do with these images or to resist the violence

of visibility on screen through a critical and oppositional gaze. Similarly, conventional representations of transgender people have done violence to the image of transness. The more that transgender people are visible in public life and in media, the more there seems to be an upswing in transphobic messages and anti-trans attitudes (Keegan, 2022).

Gossett, Stanley, and Burton (2017) similarly note that we are “living in a time of trans visibility...yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence” (p. xv). The hypervisibility and problematic images of transgender bodies are usually rooted in transphobia, harassment, and cultural discourses around gender essentialism. It is clear that visibility, or the increasing prevalence of representation in media, does not fix the problems of transgender media or necessarily help with the everyday existence of trans folks. There is a price to pay for such visibility.

However, I have two rebuttals while acknowledging that visibility can lead to harm. First, representation that is thoughtful and well done also presents recognition and hope as I’ve shown in this dissertation. Gossett, Stanley, and Burton (2017) state that

representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible...if we do not attend to representation and work collectively to bring new visual grammars into existence...we will remain caught in the traps of the past. (p. xviii)

Representation that is meaningful combats the mistake of the past because it centers transgender experience and signifies a new “visual grammar.” My second rebuttal is that our other option—invisibility—is not an acceptable path either. While discussing the power of an oppositional gaze, hooks (2014) argues that “even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency” (p. 116). hooks (2014) explores how looking is an act of power, and that defiantly gazing back is a form

of agency and resistance. Recognition and agency are the two aspects of transgender media that make this price of visibility, in my opinion, worth it. Meaningful representation does not just allow us to gaze back at harmful images, but also imbues these representations sourced from the community with the ability to experience trans agency and to recognize the legitimacy of our unique existence.

Transgender representation in the media *is* different than lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual representation, and as such meaningful representation must be defined from the perspective of transgender people—this is where recognition and agency come in. There are ways that the trans body is talked about, looked at, and policed that are distinctly in reaction to transness, and not sexual or gender difference. As Jen Richards states in the *Disclosure* documentary that I’ve quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the solution to the problems we have seen with trans representation is to create more of it (Feder, 2020). I partly agreed that more representation would be nice, but I also knew that a thousand more Brandon Teena stories that end in murder, or more examples of transgender women being portrayed as psychopathic men in drag, is not better. There needs to be something more, something rooted in this sense of recognition and agency. This dissertation is a result of thinking through that tension around what makes transgender representation complex and meaningful to folks. What did it look like? What did it take to create it? What did players think about transgender representation in these eight games? What does meaningful representation mean for transgender players? These are the main questions that drove my exploration of this topic.

Meaningful Transgender Representation

Meaningful transgender representation is distinctly transgender in that it is trans-coded, feels real, and is meant for a transgender audience. The player goes through a trans-centric experience because the character's transness matters to their story, who they are as a character, and their transness is unavoidable because it is explicit. As I mentioned, there is something specific to transgender identity, and representing this identity, that creates a stumbling block for those who are not trans when they include it in media. The transgender body is different, and there is a way of creating that difference that does not feed into negative stereotypes that have been recycled throughout media history (as explored by Abbott, 2022; Phillips 2006). Meaningful representation owns and respectfully leans into that difference. This type of representation allows the transgender character to have agency and autonomy to explore this difference. The transgender body is sometimes forever wedded to the medical system and is a product of medical intervention and science, thereby making the connection to medical models of transnormative existence (Johnson, 2016) somewhat inevitable. However, the more complex and organic representation explored in this dissertation allows the transgender characters to speak from an autonomous position about things such as hormones and surgery. These representations include dialogue options that are immediately intelligible for transgender people, and feel as though they are meant for transgender folks—this is what I mean when I say they are trans-coded. In many ways, this complex encoding of transgender lived experience is meant for a transgender audience, and not a cis one.

This is what I am defining meaningful transgender representation as, and I have traced the factors that contribute to creating it, what it looks like, and what players think about it. I started my examination of meaningfulness from an autoethnographic place, and extended that to see what others think. This is part of what makes some of these representations, like the representation of Tyler, Catalyst, and JJ, feel like they are from a trans perspective and meant for transgender people. To quote Halberstam (2005), trans-coded game characters encourage us to look with and move as the transgender body in an extension of the transgender gaze. These characters are unique because of the way their transness does not capitulate to acting as an educational moment for cis players.

The Uniqueness of Transgender Representation

Transgender representation in general, and in games specifically, is unique. I previously utilized Stryker's (2009) definition of transness as moving away from an assigned and unchosen starting place towards another gender place of one's choosing (p. 1). This movement means that there are specific aspects of trans existence to represent, and that there is also a specific kind of harassment and prejudice directed towards transgender folks based on misunderstanding or transphobia. When transgender media representation is shallow, it is usually because specific aspects of transgender experience—such as a misalignment between gender identity and physical characteristics—are used as a stand-in for the whole transgender experience. For example, when comedy uses cruel tropes like trans woman portrayed as “men in dresses” (Richardson & Smith, 2022) or how transgender identity is equated to a mental illness when the psychotic killer is conveniently revealed to be trans. The prevalence of such stereotypes signals that transgender experience is often misunderstood.

On the other hand, there is joy in this difference. Branstetter (2022) describes trans joy as revolutionary, as challenging the narratives of trans existence as constant pain and suffering. Transgender experience is not just leaving one gender to become another—it is leaving an unchosen gender identity behind to create a more aligned existence. This experience is reflected in Krem’s nuanced discussion about being happy in his life with a “well-placed sock” and being at peace with refusing to magically transition; in JJ’s realization that she wants, needs, to live despite the pain of being outed against her will as a transgender woman; and in Hainly’s choice to pursue a new life as herself in an entirely new galaxy. Significant transgender representation also holds these pockets of trans joy. Meaningful transgender representation leans into this difference and thus, the characters are unique because of their transness. Transgender representation in games is also unique because players can interact with characters in ways that they cannot in other media. Players can play as trans characters, enter dialogue with transgender characters, and encounter these characters. This difference is why having transgender folks involved in the creation process helps to both avoid common pitfalls of transgender representation and to create more significant and meaningful characters.

Across my interviews and in my own textual analysis, Catalyst was universally loved. She was, by far, considered the most complex and meaningful across all measures of analysis in this project. This tells us a few things: first, it *is* entirely possible to create meaningful, playable transgender characters that are liked by a variety of players. Creating meaningful transgender representation does not mean completely avoiding stereotypes or ensuring that the representation is only “positive.” Instead, there were certain factors that influenced Catalyst feeling, as player interviewee Moira described,

meaningfully transcoded. I argue that it is the thoughtfulness put into incorporating these characters, the studio valuing diversity and wanting to include representation well, and the involvement of transgender people behind the character that resulted in Catalyst being so well done in terms of meaningfulness.

I have shown how involving transgender folks in the production process can lead to meaningful representation. Meli Grant is the voice actor of Catalyst from *Apex Legends*, and she was involved in conversations behind the scenes about Catalyst's character and backstory. In addition, Blair Durkee was involved in Catalyst's production as a GLAAD consultant. The combination of these trans folks involved in the project, including those unnamed folks that Ashley Reed describes as being involved and consulted, made a huge difference in how Catalyst was represented and received by audiences because she was trans coded for trans people—not just for a cis gaze (Villegas Simón, Sanchez Soriano, and Ventura, 2024). Trans people understand this difference in a way that cis people cannot, because they do not move through the world as a transgender person or experience being looked at as a trans person.

Reception: Transgender and Cisgender Folks

While I began this journey knowing that I was personally impacted by seeing transmasculine characters like me in a game, I have discovered that these characters matter to others as well. Diving into what myself, players and producers think is meaningful about transgender representation has allowed me to explicate what meaningful representation looks like, specifically that is it trans-centered and trans-coded, which necessitates trans people being involved in the creation process. Throughout this dissertation, I offered specific evidence across the textual, producer, and audience sides

that transgender folks see transgender representation in video games differently from cisgender players. That the reception between transgender and cisgender folks differed signals that cis and trans players are receiving this representation and decoding it in different ways. Transgender, agender, and nonbinary players noticed things or thought certain ways about representation than cisgender interviews. This makes sense as these players move through the world in distinctly trans ways. Players who were part of the LGB community were more likely to align with how transgender players saw things—at the very least, they seemed to feel protective and celebratory of trans folks via their feelings about how they are represented. My discussions with players who were cisgender men, who were 11 out of the 31, were among my most surprising because of how they thoughtful they were. These men articulated their own relationship with diversity, noting how they had worked hard to be more empathetic. Even if diversity did not personally matter to them, they verbalized how they knew it was important. They notably had no stake in such representation, but still felt it was important to see.

These demographic differences showcase that gender identity and being a part of the LGBTQ community seem to influence how folks decode these representations. I have made the following arguments based on this finding: that different reactions to aspects of the game like trans dialogue options are influenced by who creators have in mind when creating these characters, and who is involved in creating them; that those folks with lived experience think about this representation differently because they have to live it; and that demographic differences point to the fact that transgender involvement in creation is important because they uniquely understand transgender experience. I argued

that including transgender folks in the process leads to more meaningful representation as read by all players, as articulated by folks in the production process, and in the same way that transgender characters being incorporated thoughtfully throughout the game leads to more meaningful transgender representation.

Making and Receiving Trans-Coded Representation

Triangulating data across multiple sources gave me insight into what making trans-coded representation involves, and how it is received. Ultimately, making trans-coded representation means including transgender folks in crafting these characters. Since meaningful representation is distinctly from and for a transgender perspective, including trans folks in the process is necessary to create it. While creating more transgender characters may help in terms of saturation, it does not necessarily mean that these characters will be done well. More than just avoiding stereotypes, I have ultimately offered examples of what happens when transgender folks are involved in creating transgender characters within studios that want to do this well, and what happens when they are not involved. Characters like Lev, Tyler, JJ, and Catalyst offer different ways of creating transgender characters that include significant elements of representation. Chevalier and Hainly are examples of problematic representation that could have had the potential to be meaningful, but fell flat because they were thoughtlessly included and creators did not appear to consult transgender people when crafting them. Krem and Ned fall somewhere in between meaningful and thoughtlessness, having some aspects that were done well, and others that do not quite reach the potential of the other four. Out of these eight, it was the characters that included the elements outlined above that were considered the best in terms of my textual analysis and audience reception. This is why

having transgender folks involved in the creation process matters. It results in characters that feel as though they are recognizably transgender.

Transgender interviewees noted how qualitatively different representation is when transgender folks were involved, and all player interviewees stated how important it was that transgender folks be involved in the process. As explored in Chapter 6, players are aware of what producers are encoding into the game, and therefore they seem to understand what game studios are capable of and what they choose to do. The players in my study want diversity included, and they believe including diverse stories and characters in their games is the bare minimum a studio can do at this point. They were critical of studios who seemed unwilling to include more diversity in their games. As I noted in Chapter 5, there are certain contexts where the risk of including transgender characters is mitigated and that make it more likely a studio will include transgender representation and do it well. This is what the players in my study want to see more of.

As I established, there were demographic differences in how player interviewees thought of these characters. These demographic differences were most notable along gender identity (cis men, cis women, and transgender or nonbinary) and sexuality (heterosexual, LGB) lines. However, the results of my textual analysis and all player interviewees tended to agree on which characters in the sample were the worst, which ones were in the middle, and which ones were the best. Chevalier and Hainly were considered the most minor and/or problematic. Krem and Ned, and sometimes Lev and JJ, were considered by both myself and all of my interviewees to be somewhere in the middle between “okay,” “adequate” and “good” in terms of their representation. Tyler and Catalyst were found to be the most meaningful across all my data points.

At other points in my analysis, I found a much more pronounced divergence between what transgender interviewees, LGB folks, and myself thought in comparison to my cisgender interviewees. For example, Aegis (31, woman, bisexual, white/Hispanic) and I agreed that the focus on JJ's trans perspective in *The Missing* was not enough to account for the central role of violence the player must enact on her body. However, the paratexts I explored around this game and other cis player interviewees generally found her game hopeful and complex. In part, this disconnect seems to be because transgender folks, including myself, see this representation differently because it directly involves our existence and day-to-day lives. I found that cisgender players were generally celebratory or appreciated the educational nature of encountering transgender characters on screen. In comparison, it was clear that transgender players, consultants like Blair Durkee, and those involved in creating the characters like Meli Grant, wanted and needed more from transgender representation. Those who were also in the LGBTQ+ community were more inclined to commiserate with the transgender community when there were representational issues. It was not exactly about trans visibility—for the transgender participants and myself, encountering real and recognizable transness was profound. This felt more important than a chance to educate cisgender allies.

Certain aspects of the game and character storyline can help make a character more trans-coded and less about an educational opportunity for cis players. The way a character's transgender identity is revealed can help make them meaningful. Two significant examples I discussed include Durkee's thoughts on how transness can be a part of a character's story without the necessity of a big disclosure moment (Chapter 5); the other is my exploration of Tyler and Catalyst's autonomy to talk about their transness

on their own terms (Chapter 4). Another aspect of the games that can make characters more trans-coded are the in-game dialogue options. In Chapter 4, I noted that trans dialogue options allow the player to learn more about transness through specific conversation prompts around trans identity. If these dialogue options tend to be educational, or to teach the viewer about trans experience, they seem to be crafted for a cisgender audience. However, trans-centric dialogue that is not always immediately intelligible to cisgender folks is much more directed towards trans players. Aside from dialogue and how trans identity is revealed, I found that physical and vocal characteristics also mattered. Having an alignment between the trans characters gender identity, physical appearances, and voice actor cut across all my analysis chapters as significant. If these three things were in alignment, both my player interviewees and I considered these characters to feel more meaningfully transgender in both appearance and voice. These three factors—how trans identity is revealed, trans dialogue options, and an alignment between voice, body, and gender identity—contributed to a character feeling recognizable and trans-coded.

In addition to these factors, I found that if the trans character and their storyline are included thoughtfully, if the right communities are consulted, and if transgender people are given a chance to be involved, the result is more organic representation (Christian & White, 2020) that feels sourced from the transgender community. Transgender interviewees had a better reception to characters that included these factors, as well as the ones discussed above. In addition, cisgender players tended to like and appreciate these same characters as well. This signals that players in this sample,

regardless of gender identity or LGBTQ+ community affiliation, like the trans-coded characters. In other words, they do not turn players off the game.

Why Meaningful Representation Matters

As I described in Chapter 1, I worked on this dissertation in the context of rising anti-trans sentiments across North America and in the UK. Every time I opened my newsfeed or social media, I was inundated with the latest ridiculous statement JK Rowling had made about transgender women, or (former) acquaintances reposting memes about Lia Thomas arguing that Thomas was not good enough to swim with men, so she is “taking over” women’s sports. Before this moment of intense and prolonged visibility of transgender folks in popular culture, I had been used to relative invisibility in terms of media coverage. While it has been nice to see more “possible selves” as Cavalcante (2018b) describes, this visibility has come at a price—there are more harmful and incorrect opinions regularly circulated. As Keegan (2022) points out,

despite the newly affirming images of transgender people proliferating across US visual media, there has been a concomitant rise in anti-transgender attitudes, transphobic legislation, and trans-antagonistic violence...the transgender ‘tipping point’ period has demonstrated that ‘good’ representation does not necessarily mean reduced social or political antagonism for transgender people. (p. 26)

In this challenging context, why do images on the screen matter? Despite this context, I have noted in this dissertation how these representations mattered to me, to my player interviews, to trans voice actors like Meli Grant, August Black, and Ian Alexander, and to those involved in production that want to include diverse representation and do it well. These transgender characters even mattered to my cisgender player interviewees who presumably have no stake in this representation. The reasons why these characters are

included, and the ways they are included, also matter. Part of what this dissertation adds for other media representation scholars is an exploration of how and why this representation matters.

As Shaw (2015a) notes, representation allows us to see the possibility of different ways of being (p. 42). In the absence of visible representation, Gerbner and Gross (2017) state that absence is equal to symbolic annihilation (p. 182). Without visibility, without continued representation, we effectively do not exist. Representation matters because transgender folks are here to stay. We cannot go back to non-existence or continue to be represented in deplorable ways written by those that could care less, or never stop to think about, whether the stereotypes they use lead to further harm against transgender communities. Meaningful transgender representations offer possibility and a counterweight to the continued recycling of negative stereotypes. In his book on the ordinary lives of transgender folks, Cavalcante (2018) notes that each of his interview participants had questioned whether trans life and identity was possible, and that media had helped them recognize that it was, indeed, possible (p. 13). The more meaningful these representations are, and the more trans-coded they are, the more examples of trans-centered media we will have as possibilities. Not all transgender representation in games must be good or complex—although I have offered evidence for what that does look like and what it takes to create it. Both cisgender and transgender players need more examples of thoughtful transgender inclusion, even as minor/missable characters in big game worlds, and hopefully in the form of many more significant transgender characters. For trans players, meaningful representation offers the possibility to feel seen and to experience distinctly trans-coded media. For cisgender players, it offers them the

opportunity to experience diversity from a perspective that is meaningfully trans. While meaningful transgender representation is not necessarily for cisgender players, it also offers the possibility for these players to be immersed in a trans experience outside of shallow, harmful representation. As more significant representation happens, at least in the words of Jen Richards, we will have more—and hopefully, it will be meaningfully trans-coded and trans centric. In this way, all players will be able to meaningfully play transgender experiences. And we, as transgender players, will be able to meaningfully experience recognition.

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APPENDIX A

GAMES WITH SIGNIFICANT TRANSGENDER REPRESENTATION

Character	Identity	Game	Year	Company	Location
Catalyst	Trans woman	Apex Legends	2022	Respawn	California, US
Paolo	Trans man	Far Cry 6	2021	Ubisoft/Ubisoft Toronto	Canada
Bridget	Trans woman	Guilty Gear Strive	2021	Arc Systems Works	Japan
Cody Price	Trans man	Mission: It's Complicated	2020	Schell Games	US
Claire Russell	Trans woman	Cyberpunk 2077	2020	CD Projekt Red	Poland
Tyler Ronan	Trans man	Tell Me Why	2020	DONTNOD Entertainment	Paris, France
Lev	Trans man	The Last of Us 2	2020	Naughty Dog	Santa Monica, California
Kasio	Trans woman	If Found...	2020	DREAMFEEL, Annapurna Interactive	West Hollywood, California
Lia Hauata	Trans woman	The Sims 4: Island Living	2019	Maxis, EA	US
Erica Anderson	Trans woman	Catherine	2011/2019	ATLUS/Sega	Japan
Pelagos	Trans man	World of Warcraft: Shadowlands	2019	Blizzard Entertainment	Irvine, California
Zoe	Trans woman	Monster Prom	2018	Beautiful Glitch	Barcelona, Spain
JJ Macfield	Trans woman	The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories	2018	White Owls Inc/Arc System Works	Japan
Damien	Trans man	Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator	2017	Game Grumps	US
Janeve	Trans man	Horizon Zero Dawn	2017	Guerrilla	Amsterdam

Jackie	Trans woman	Night in the Woods	2017	Infinite Fall	Australia
Hainly Abrams	Trans woman	Mass Effect: Andromeda	2017	Bioware	Edmonton, Canada
Miranda Comay	Trans woman	Watch Dogs 2	2016	Ubisoft	US/International
Mizhena	Trans woman	Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear	2016	Beamdog	Canada
Lala Escargot	Trans woman	Persona 5	2016	Atlus	Tokyo, Japan
Venus	Trans woman	We Know the Devil	2016	Pillow Fight	Virginia, US
Ned Wynert	Trans man	Assassin's Creed: Syndicate	2015	Ubisoft Quebec	Montreal, Canada
Max Lao	Trans man	Technobabylon	2015	Technocrat Games, Wadjet Eye Games	NYC, US
Chevalier d'Éon	Trans woman	Assassin's Creed: Unity	2014	Ubisoft	Montreuil, France
Krem	Trans man	Dragon Age: Inquisition	2014	Bioware/EA	US/Canada
Beauty Nova	Trans woman	Pokémon X/Y	2013	Game Freak	Tokyo, Japan
Transgender Sex Workers	Trans women	Grand Theft Auto V	2013	Rockstar Games	NYU, US
Maevaris Tilani	Trans woman	Dragon Age: Those Who Speak; Dragon Age: Until We Sleep; Heroes of Dragon Age (mobile game)	2013	Electronic Arts	California, United States
Sya	Trans woman	Guild Wars 2 (2012)	2012	ArenaNet®, NCSOFT	South Korea
Naoto Shirogane	Trans man	Persona 4	2008	Atlus	Tokyo, Japan

Jun Watarase	Trans woman	Happiness!	2005	Windmill	Japan
Vivian	Trans woman	Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door	2004	Intelligent Systems/Nintendo	Japan
Morpheus Duvall	Trans woman	Resident Evil: Dead Aim	2003	Capcom	Osaka, Japan
Angof, Wizard Jalarast	Trans women	Runescape (2001)	2001	Jagex Ltd.	United Kingdom
Shablee	Trans woman	Leisure Suit Larry: 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!	1993	Sierra Entertainment	California, US
Yasmin	Trans woman	Circuit's Edge	1990	Westwood Studios/Infocom	Las Vegas, Nevada, US
Birdo	Trans woman	Super Mario Bros 2; Captain Rainbow	1988; 2008	Nintendo	Kyoto, Japan

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE FOR TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Character	Identity	Game	Year	Studio	Location
Catalyst	Trans woman	Apex Legends	2022	Respawn	California, US
Tyler Ronan	Trans man	Tell Me Why	2020	DONTNOD Entertainment	Paris, France
Lev	Trans man	The Last of Us 2	2020	Naughty Dog	Santa Monica, California
JJ Macfield	Trans woman	The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories	2018	White Owls Inc/Arc System Works	Japan
Hainly Abrams	Trans woman	Mass Effect: Andromeda	2017	Bioware	Edmonton, Canada
Ned Wynert	Trans man	Assassin's Creed: Syndicate	2015	Ubisoft Quebec	Montreal, Canada
Krem	Trans man	Dragon Age: Inquisition	2014	Bioware/EA	US/Canada
Chevalier d'Éon	Trans woman	Assassin's Creed: Unity	2014	Ubisoft	Montreuil, France

APPENDIX C

LIST OF CREATORS AND CONSULTANTS TO RECRUIT FOR INTERVIEWS

Game	Person to Interview, Role
Apex Legends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ashley Reed, lead writer · Meli Grant, voice actress and trans game developer · Blair Durkee, GLAAD associate director of gaming
Tell Me Why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Nick Adams, GLAAD’s Director of Transgender Representation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · August Black, voice actor · Florent Guillaume, creator · Stéphane Beauverger, narrative director · Stacey Henley, editor-in-chief of TheGamer who has interviewed Florence and Stéphane about Tyler
The Last of Us 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Neil Druckmann, creative director · Halley Gross, cowriter and narrative lead <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ian Alexander, voice actor · Julie Muncy, author of “The trans narrative in ‘The Last of Us Part II’ is compelling. There’s so much more to be done”
The Missing: JJ Macfield and the Island of Memories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Hidetaka Suehiro, creator · Kellie Holway, voice actress
Mass Effect: Andromeda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mac Walters, creative director · Chris Schlerf, lead writer
Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Marc-Alexis Côté, creative director · Ferelith Young, voice actress
Dragon Age: Inquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Patrick Weekes, creator and writer · Jennifer Hale, voice actress
Assassin’s Creed: Unity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Alexandre Amancio, writer, game designer and creative director · Darby McDevitt, lead writer

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT FLYER



Participate in Research on Digital Games!



Have you played any of these games?

- Apex Legends (Respawn, 2022)
- Assassin's Creed: Syndicate (Ubisoft, 2018)
- Assassin's Creed: Unity (Ubisoft, 2014)
- Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare, 2014)
- Mass Effect: Andromeda (BioWare, 2017)
- Tell Me Why (DONTNOD Entertainment, 2020)
- The Last of Us 2 (Naughty Dog, 2020)
- The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories (White Owls Inc, 2018)

Want to talk about these games?

I am a graduate student at Temple University who is interested in hearing about your encounters with these games listed above. If you have played at least one of these games, I would like to talk to you about your experiences with them.

What do you have to do?

Fill out a short survey asking you about your gaming habits, your experience with these eight games, and demographic questions. At the end of the survey, I will ask whether you would like to participate further in one or two interviews regarding these games.

If you are interested in participating or have further questions, please contact me:

Jackson McLaren, Ph.D. Candidate
Klein College of Media and Communication
Temple University
Jackson.mclaren@temple.edu



Survey Link: https://templeklein.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9FDrOmNoEJ1uVoy

APPENDIX E
RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Recruitment Survey: Research on Digital Games

Distributed online, via email, or on paper as respondents prefer.

Section 1: Gaming Habits

The following section will ask you questions about your gaming preferences. Please select the option that is most accurate.

1. How long have you played video games?
 - Less than 3 years
 - 4-6 years
 - 7-9 years
 - 10 years or more

2. Which option best describes how often you play video games in an average week?
 - Everyday
 - Once a week
 - Few times a week
 - Few times a month
 - Once a month
 - Few times a year
 - Other:

3. What platforms do you play on? Select all that apply.
 - Console
 - Handheld
 - Mobile phone
 - PC
 - Other:

Section 2: Exposure to Games

The following section will ask you questions about your experience with eight video games.

4. Please check all games that you have played:
 - Apex Legends (Respawn, 2022)
 - Assassin's Creed: Syndicate (Ubisoft, 2018)

- Assassin's Creed: Unity (Ubisoft, 2014)
- Dragon Age: Inquisition (BioWare, 2014)
- Mass Effect: Andromeda (BioWare, 2017)
- Tell Me Why (DONTNOD Entertainment, 2020)
- The Last of Us 2 (Naughty Dog, 2020)
- The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories (White Owls Inc, 2018)

5. If you played Apex Legends, do you remember the character named Catalyst?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

6. If you played Assassin's Creed: Syndicate, do you remember the character called Ned Wynert?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

7. If you played Assassin's Creed: Unity, do you remember the character called Chevalier d'Éon?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

8. If you played Dragon Age: Inquisition, do you remember the character called Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

9. If you played Mass Effect: Andromeda, do you remember the character called Hainly Abrams?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

10. If you played Tell Me Why, do you remember the character called Tyler Ronan?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

11. If you played The Last of Us 2, do you remember the character called Lev?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

12. If you played The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories, do you remember the character called J.J. Macfield?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- I have not played this game
- Other:

Section 3: Demographics

This section will ask you questions about your demographics.

13. What is your gender:

14. What is your age:

15. What is your sexual orientation:

16. Please specify your ethnicity:

17. What other parts of your identity are important to you?
18. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- Less than high school
 - Some high school, no degree
 - High school
 - Some college, no degree
 - Associates degree (ex: AA, AS)
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Professional degree (ex: MD, DDS, LLB, JD)
 - Doctorate degree
 - Prefer not to say
19. What is your occupation?
20. What country do you live in?
21. What time zone are you in?
22. A small sample of individuals who respond to this survey will be asked to participate in one or two interviews. Are you interested in being considered for the interview stage of this project? If so, please fill in an email address I can best follow up with you.
- a. Yes, I am interested and will put the best email to contact me in the box:
b. No

Thank you for your participation in my dissertation research! I appreciate your time. If you have any questions, comments, concerns, or thoughts about this project, please reach out to me at jackson.mclaren@temple.edu.

APPENDIX F

CREATOR AND CONSULTANT INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Title: Research on Digital Games

Protocol No.: 30533

Primary Investigator: Adrienne Shaw

Student Researcher: Jackson McLaren

PhD Candidate, Klein College of Media and Communication

Temple University

Email: jackson.mclaren@temple.edu

Welcome to my study and thank you for your interest! This interview will help me with my dissertation research on video games. You are being asked for your consent to take part in a research study. This consent document describes the key information that we believe most people need to decide whether to take part in this research.

Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Your experience as a character creator and/or consultant of a transgender character in a video game will help me understand what considerations went into including a transgender character in these video games. The results of this study will help me analyze how transgender characters are represented in video games.

How long will I be in this research?

The interview part of this study will take between **1-2 hours**. You may be contacted for follow-up interviews after the initial interview.

What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?

As part of your participation in this interview, I will ask you some questions about the games you have helped create or been consulted on. If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be asked to complete a virtual interview. The interview will take between **1-2 hours**.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded. Interviews will be transcribed with an automated transcription service.

I will ask whether you would like to use your real name or to choose an anonymous handle. If you choose an anonymous handle, your data will be kept confidential and anonymous. Any identifiers, such as contact information, will be stored separately from the interview recordings and transcripts to protect your identity and anonymity if you choose an anonymous handle. The data will only be available to me, but contents of your interview will be used in my dissertation.

You can choose not to have the interview videotaped/recorded and still participate in the research study. You will be asked permission to be contacted later for potential follow-up studies. You are free to decline contact for follow-up, and your decision will have no bearing on your participation in the current study.

What are the risks of this study?

There are no physical risks, but you may experience momentary discomfort. You do not have to answer any questions that make you too uncomfortable and can withdraw from the study at any point.

If you choose to use your real name, you may be connected with quotes used in my dissertation and I cannot guarantee anonymity. However, you will see a draft of the manuscript before it is completed. At this point, I will welcome your input as to how I am using any of your quotes or interview material.

If you choose an anonymous handle, there is also a mild risk of breach of confidentiality. In this case, your participation in this research will be held strictly confidential, however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

Your private information may be shared with individuals and organizations that conduct or watch over this research, including, if applicable:

- The Primary Investigator: Adrienne Shaw
- The Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research
- Temple University

The separation of your interview data and identifiable information will help prevent risks of confidentiality breach. All files will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and there will not be any link between your contact information and the interview you gave. If you choose to use your real name, only your name will be connected to quotes used in my dissertation.

I will supply you with a copy of the manuscript in its draft form. You may also request to see the interview transcript to make sure none of your words are misrepresented. You will be contacted for follow-up if I am not confident that I understood you correctly.

Any information collected during interviews may be used in my dissertation in the form of generalized analysis and as anonymized or named quotes. You will be affiliated with your quotes only if you choose to use your name. In addition, I may publish the results of this research. However, if you chose an anonymous handle, I will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. If you chose for your name to be used, only this information will be used.

All of your data will be kept indefinitely on a password protected external hard drive.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

I encourage you to ask any questions at any time about the content or nature of this study. Your suggestions and thoughts are important to me, and I can be reached at jackson.mclaren@temple.edu. Please contact me with any questions or concerns you have, if you wish to withdraw your participation, or if you would like to chat about this project more.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think this research has hurt you or made you sick, talk to the research team at the phone number or email listed above on the first page.

This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or irb@temple.edu if:

- You have questions, concerns, or complaints that are not being answered by the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.

APPENDIX G

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for game industry people

1. What do you think makes a good video game character?
2. Can you tell me more about your experience with (*insert name of game this person is associated with*)? What was your role?
 1. What did you think about the gameplay?
 2. What about the characters?
3. I know that you had worked on (*insert name of game here that included a trans character*). Do you know what the inspiration was to include a trans character?
4. If you can, can you tell me what the process was like when creating this character?
 - a. What role did you play in creating this character?
 - b. What kind of considerations did you or the team have?
 - c. Did you have any concerns? If so, what were they?
5. What were the stakes, or what else did you/the studio have to take into consideration when creating this character?
6. Can you tell me a little more about creating [*insert appropriate character here*]?
 - What did you think about that character?
 - What do you think about how they were portrayed in the game?
 - What did you think about the gameplay?
 - What did you think about their place in the storyline?
 - What did you think about how they were treated by other characters in the game?
7. Did you have strong feelings about this character? What feelings?
8. What did you like or dislike about this character?
9. Did you feel as though you identified with this character?
 - a. Why or why not?
10. Is there anything about this game that you would change? Would you change the representation of the trans character? How so?
11. What do you think the studio/you did well when creating this character?
12. What do you think could have been improved?
13. How do you think people have reacted to this character?
14. How do you see this type of representation, transgender specifically or diverse representation in general, being incorporated in games going forward?

15. How important do you think it is that minority groups, such as LGBTQ, people of colour, and women, are represented in digital video games?

- a. Why do you think it is important? OR
- b. Why not?

16. Is there anything else I should know? Any other angles I should follow?

17. Is there anyone else that you think would be good to talk to about this?

18. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX H

PLAYER INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Pronouns	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Age	Ethnicity
Alistair	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	46	Spanish
Alan Wake	He/they	Nonbinary	Bisexual	19	Caucasian
Arno	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	26	White
Altair	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	32	White
Aegis	She/her	Woman	Bisexual	31	White/Hispanic
Banton	He/him	Cis Male	Straight	36	White Caucasian
Brigitte	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	34	White
Chuck	He/him	Male	Straight	32	White
Cloud	He/him/they/them	Male/Demiman	Bi/pan	25	White Latin American
EI	She/her	Woman	Bisexual	30	Hispanic/Latina
Gizmo	They/she	Nonbinary	Lesbian	25	White
Jacob	He/him	Transgender	Bisexual	25	White
J	Any	Agender/Genderqueer	Lesbian	22	Nigerian
Kath	She/they	Female	Pansexual	34	Caucasian
Lara	She/her, they/them	Woman	Bisexual	25	White
Laura	She/her	Female	Straight	28	Caucasian
Lifeweaver	He/him	Male	Bisexual	25	Hispanic
Maxine	She/her	Transfeminine	Queer	30	White Jewish
Marie	She/her	Woman	Bisexual	29	White
Meow	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	36	European
Mikaela	She/her	Female	Demi pan	25	White

Moira	She/they	Transwoman	Bisexual	30	White
Pabu	She/her	Female	Heterosexual	28	White
Pedro	He/him	Male	Pansexual	30	Latino
Pinkypie	He/him	Male	Heterosexual	36	European
Platypus	He/him	Male	Straight	24	Caucasian
R	She/her	Female/nonbin ary	Bisexual	26	White American
Slinky	She/her	Female	Asexual	32	White British
Speedy	She/her	Female	Lesbian	37	White/Caucasia n
Spyro	She/her	Cis female	Heterosexual	29	White
Watson	He/him	Male	Gay	22	White

APPENDIX I

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for players

1. What kind of games do you enjoy playing?
 1. Thinking of digital games in particular, what kind of games do you usually play?
2. What are your favourite games?
3. How often do you play digital games?
 1. What do you play them on? Do you play them with others?
4. What do you think makes a good video game character?
5. *Depending on games they list, ask about those specific characters, and talk about each game/character they have encountered. Do you remember [insert appropriate character here]?*
6. What did you like/dislike about [*insert game title here*]? When was the last time you played this game
7. What did you think about the characters?
8. Thinking specifically of [*insert name of trans character here*], what did you think about them?
 - What do you think about how they were portrayed in the game?
 - What did you think about the gameplay?
 - How did you know they were transgender?
 - What place did they have in the storyline?
 - How were they treated by other characters in the game?
9. Did you have strong feelings about these characters? What feelings?
10. What did you like or dislike about these characters?
11. Did you feel as though you identified with these characters?
 - a. Why or why not?
12. Have you encountered transgender characters in games other than the games we have talked about?
 - Which games?
 - Which characters? What did you think about them?
 - What do you think about how they were portrayed in the game?
 - What did you think about the gameplay?
 - How did you know they were transgender?

- What place did they have in the storyline?
 - How were they treated by other characters in the game?
13. Did you have strong feelings about these characters? What feelings?
14. What did you like or dislike about these characters?
15. Did you feel as though you identified with these characters?
- a. Why or why not?
16. Is there anything about this game that you would change?
- 1. How would you change the representation of the trans character?
17. If you were to create a transgender video game character from scratch, what would you include?
18. Are there any further thoughts regarding transgender representation that you would like to add?
19. In general, how important do you think it is that minority groups, such as LGBTQ, people of colour, and women, are represented in digital video games?
- a. Why do you think it is important? OR
 - b. Why not?
20. Is there anything else I should know? Any other angles I should follow?
21. Is there anyone else that you think would be good to talk to about this?
22. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX J

PLAYER INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Title: Research on Digital Games
Protocol No.: 30533
Primary Investigator: Adrienne Shaw
Student Researcher: Jackson McLaren
PhD Candidate, Klein College of Media and Communication
Temple University
Email: jackson.mclaren@temple.edu

Welcome to my study and thank you for your interest! This interview will help me with my dissertation research on video games. You are being asked for your consent to take part in a research study. This consent document describes the key information that we believe most people need to decide whether to take part in this research.

Why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You are being asked to participate in the interview portion of this study because you have played at least one of the eight games I am analyzing. The results of this study will help me understand how characters are represented in video games.

How long will I be in this research?

The interview part of this study will take between 1-2 hours. You may be contacted for follow-up interviews after the initial interview.

What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?

As part of your participation in this interview, I will ask you some questions about the games you play, about your experiences with the eight games I am looking at, and specifically about some of the characters you have encountered in these games. If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be asked to complete a virtual interview. The interview will take between **1-2 hours**.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded. Interviews will be transcribed with an automated transcription service. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym to anonymize yourself on record. Any identifiers, such as contact information, will be stored separately from the interview recordings and transcripts to protect your identity and anonymity.

You can choose not to have the interview videotaped/recorded and still participate in the research study. You will be asked permission to be contacted later for potential follow-up studies. You are free to decline contact for follow-up, and your decision will have no bearing on your participation in the current study.

What are the risks of this study?

There are no physical risks, but you may experience momentary discomfort. You do not have to answer any questions that make you too uncomfortable and can withdraw from the study at any Point.

There is also a mild risk of breach of confidentiality. Your participation in this research will be held strictly confidential, however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

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The separation of your interview data and identifiable information will help prevent risks of confidentiality breach. All files will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and there will not be any link between your contact information and the interview you gave.

You may request to see the interview transcript to make sure none of your words are

misrepresented. You will be contacted for follow-up if the researchers are not confident that they understood you correctly.

Any information collected during interviews may be used in my dissertation in the form of generalized analysis and as anonymized quotes. In addition, I may publish the results of this research. However, I will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

All of your data will be kept indefinitely on a password protected external hard drive.

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