

Avatars In VideoGames: The Gender non-conforming experiences

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Hello reader, welcome to my space of expression.

I define myself as a non-binary shapeshifter. In my opinion, one million people have one million of different genders, sexualities and identities.

My gender evolves and lives outside of masculinity or femininity.

I consider the terms of female and male as defective and reductive constructions whose aim is to erase the rich and broad diversity of the material world.

When I started this research, I thought my process could be totally analytical and structured and that I could follow methodological guidelines.

I thought I could separate myself from my words to speak the truth, but the truth is, I can't, and actually, I don't want to. The word "truth" as the word "normal" is, in my opinion, meaningless until the time we recognise the multiplicity of their significance and their power of mutability over time.

My process is biased by my experience, my set of privileges stemming from whiteness and western origins, the literature I selected and the personal experience of the few people I will talk to during the advancement of this work.

With this thesis, I won't give a logical explanation to every feeling or emotion, but I try my best to provide space to unheard voices and valorise conversations instead of checked cases. Maybe I will be satisfied, perhaps I will fail, but I embrace the process.

As someone I admire told me when I was lost: It is time to understand that being is becoming, and to do so, it is necessary to put our knowledge under deconstruction.

I Need To Start Somewhere /Abstract

The humans living on this planet are settled in the different habitable zones of the planet, and they represent a wide diversity of genders, ethnic groups, cultures, and others. However, cultural media such as virtual spaces, and video games have shown a different reality. In this “reality”, the universe seems to revolve around the “normal Human”, meaning the heterosexual white male, who is the protagonist of all of these narratives.

In 1976, George Gerbner used the term symbolic annihilation for the first time to describe the absence of representation, or underrepresentation, of some group of people in the media. This term is used in social sciences to explain the fact that if you don't see certain people in the media you interact with, games included, you start to believe that those people are somehow unimportant or, worse, inexistent.

So, the representation of minority groups has a crucial role in the fight against social inequality, even if games take place in imaginary dimensions. This research aims to analyse the connection between the human body and the virtual avatar and the importance of non-normative gender identities, alternative and hybrid subjectivities in video games.

The analysis of existing literature will provide a base to define how virtual worlds serve the development of a more inclusive approach in Video Games. From Donna Haraway's *Ontology of Cyborg* to Bonnie Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, I will trace a non-linear overview about the perception of digital identities.

The qualitative interviews will be indispensable to understand the personal and unique relationship between virtual and physical bodies. Furthermore, they will allow investigating the needs and hopes of gender non-conforming bodies concerning avatar representation in video games. Finally, the exchange with people participating in the interview will generate new propositions and possibilities concerning how we think about the gaming community and game development.

Unpacking In Progress...

We, all humans, have a body, and every body is different. This envelope allows us to move and interact with the physical world. Besides all the practical perks of having a body, we can't forget its societal purpose. According to the british anthropologist Mary Douglas, the body is an "image of society¹" and it reproduces social categories and concerns. Historically, this society perpetuates untrue standards in which the body is projected towards a "normal" state which is, as a matter of fact, impossible to identify with. From patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and toxic masculinity to sexualisation, racism, and ableism, this way of creating these accepted ways of performing the body leaves little space for other forms to exist and express freely.

In the last century, tremendous progress has been made in the physical realm. Still, the World Wide Web's invention, the development of computer and video games, and the creation of online spaces allowed a new level of exchange in ways we couldn't even imagine before. This new dimension can be a way to perpetuate society's standards and all the biases cited before. However, the virtual space has been used as a militant tool allowing ideas to travel fast and touch every corner of the world. For example, we can think about the hashtags/ movements of #BlackLivesMatter and #MeQueer, which helped people worldwide participate in the battle, even from miles away.

This virtual world is also the place where a new type of body takes form, a body detached from the matter, an avatar growing from imagination.

In this research, I will explore the flourishing of this new body with particular attention to queer theories, playable characters in two games (The Sims 4 and Journey) and qualitative interviews. This approach would be a way to demonstrate that the representation of different bodies and the development of varying gameplay, technology and approach to game analysis can help the acceptance of other forms of being and existing in reality.

What are the implications of these crossings between these spaces, the interchange of digital and physical bodies? Furthermore, how would these bodies allow us to comprehend our physical bodies and gender?

As Judith Butler explains in *Undoing Gender*: "it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist... it is a question of developing within the law, psychiatry, social and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time.²" This statement on gender complexity suggests that virtual worlds and multiplayer online games might provide a place to develop new hybrids linguistically, socially, and in an embodied way.

My hope for this research is to give an intimate glimpse about the gender non-conforming experiences and needs concerning representation in video games' avatars.

Furthermore, I will highlight the impossibility of generalising and normalising one's identity In order to open a window of possibilities that concentrates on multitudes over singularities.

¹ Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. Mary Douglas. London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1970. Print, p.98.

¹ see also: Foucault, 1977, pp. 137-138.

² Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print, p.31.

It is important for me to make every part of my process as transparent as possible. This is the reason why I take this section to explain the different steps that helped me research the theme of this Master Thesis.

First of all, I will concentrate on the analysis of existing literature:

Queer studies to deconstruct my thinking and make a (reductive) state of the art concerning the real needs and hopes of genderqueer beings regarding avatar embodiment and representation. My research draws from Queer studies as a new approach aiming to merge the two other theoretical domains of Body studies and Game studies:

Body studies as an academic and theoretical approach because, as Bonnie Ruberg explains in their book *Queer Game Studies*: “the body is a central area of concern for queer theory, a focus on the body can also serve to enable queer theoretical approaches to games to break from past biases toward visuality, textuality, and formal structure³.”

Game studies as a starting point to understand the ways video games, as a medium, are unique and the confusion around subject-avatar that often arises while playing video games. An example is Brendan Keogh’s book *A Play of Bodies: How we perceive video games*⁴ in which the author describes how the sensory experience of playing video games is fundamental not only to understanding video games as texts (textual embodiment) but also to how we think about what video games are and how they participate to our sense of embodiment.

Secondly, I will spend time in the online spaces that offer queer folks a way of expressing themselves and their preoccupations: Reddit groups (non-binary gamers, non-binary talk) to connect with non-binary folks from all over the world. I will watch YouTube videos and documentaries concerning avatars in video games. I will use twitch(SonicFox, Winnie, MermaidRoyal) to access certain games I won’t be able to play. I will surf the Internet to find sites such as genderspectrum.org, WikiTrans, translash.org, allowing me to join the trans*non-binary narrative from a trans*non-binary point of view.

Finally, I will concentrate on the real people: I will organise conversational interviews to deeply understand the very personal and diverse experiences and stories of gender non-conforming gamers.

³ Ruberg, Bonnie, Shaw Adrienne. *Queer Game Studies*. 2017. Print, p.63.

⁴ Keogh, Brendan. *A Play of Bodies : How We Perceive Video games*. London, England: The MIT Press, 2018. Print.

Every/Body is Beautiful

Through this section, I will analyse the different entanglements concerning gender non-normative bodies and their current place in society. As the virtual world is a product of the actual world⁵, it is essential to continuously jump between them as the line separating them narrows down. The two concepts of virtual and actual merge, giving life to mixed reality⁶.

I feel it is essential to communicate the position I take in regards to how I perceive the terms of body, sex, and gender. My reflections take direct inspiration from Judith Butler's standpoint, they considers identity as fluid and free-floating⁷.

In Butler's theories, gender (and therefore gendered bodies) is an enactment, a performance of iterative acts that fabricate the illusion of stable gender categories. Butler argues that "the tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions, and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them ⁸." Additionally, Butler emphasises that the most seemingly essential parts of the body—organs, genes, hormones—are already discursively situated, to the extent that the parts of the body are always already inscribed with preexisting sexual, gender, and racial baggage, both material and conceptual.

Our body is the organic machine that allows us to be alive, navigating this world. It is a place for transformation, movement and adaptability to our surroundings and ourselves, and it is a societal, political object⁹ that generates the branch of body politics¹⁰.

⁵ "The virtual is not merely an incomplete imitation of the real but another register or manifestation of the real" Shields, Rob. *The virtual*. Routledge London. 200, p.63.

⁶ The term Mixed reality appeared in 1994 in an article titled: *Augmented Reality: A class of displays on the reality-virtuality continuum*, written by Paul Milgram, Haruo Takemura, Akira Utsumi et Fumio Kishino.

¹⁰ Rollo-Koster, Joëlle. *Body politic*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Oct. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/body-politic>. Accessed 7 October 2021.

⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print, p.6.

⁸ Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. Theatre Journal, vol. 40, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press. 1988, p.522.

⁹ Burwood, Stephen. *The Apparent Truth of Dualism and the Uncanny Body*. Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences. 7 (2). 2008, pp.263-278.

Body politics reflects the political relevance of the body and has sparked a revolt to recover ownership of one's own body. To paraphrase a feminist slogan from the 1970s, "the personal is political¹¹." Rape, reproductive rights, and contraceptive methods are examples of situations in which the body becomes a political battlefield. Body politics occurs when LGBTQIA+ bodies are repressed, erased, controlled, and medicalised due to medical, political, and legal involvement. Consider as examples the difficulty to access hormonal treatments, the existence of conversion therapy, the need to wear gendered attire and engage in racist beauty rituals¹².

Sex is the combination of biological characteristics that determine whether a person is male or female. Chromosomes, hormone levels, genitals, gonads, and other factors can all influence a person's sex. Gender is the social implication of sex, i.e., whether one is regarded as a man or a woman in society. Gender, it has been commonly claimed, is both a social construct and a performance, reliant on both arbitrary traditions and distinctions that are reinforced on a daily basis (different gendered names, clothing, behaviours). However, there is a case to be made for sex being a social construct as well¹³. In reality, as opposed to the modern Western binary split, it is conceivable to contemplate a whole spectrum of sexes. The fact that doctors still perform non-consensual and non-medically necessary surgeries on intersex¹⁴ people just because they are different is an example of how binary sex, like binary gender, is a political construction. These people are not accidents or malfunctions, this is how human diversity works¹⁵.

¹¹ Kelly, Christopher J.. "the personal is political". Encyclopedia Britannica, 1 May. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/the-personal-is-political>. Accessed 26 October 2021.

¹² Donnell, Leah. *Is Beauty in the Eyes of the Colonizer?* NPR. 6 Feb. 2019

¹³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p.161.

¹⁴ Cohen, Cathren. *Surgeries on Intersex Infants are Bad Medicine*. National Health law Program. 1 July 2021. Web. Accessed 12 October 2021.

¹⁵ Venier A., Lundin O. *A Queer Glossary*. Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. 2019, p.10.

Beyond the gender binary

“This is a book about the gender binary. Specifically, why we need to move beyond it. The gender binary is a cultural belief that there are only two distinct and opposite genders: man and woman. This belief is upheld by a system of power that exists to create conflict and division, not to celebrate creativity and diversity.

We deserve more options. This false choice of boy or girl, man or woman, male or female is not natural—it is political. The real crisis is not that gender nonconforming people exist, it’s that we have been taught to believe in only two genders in the first place.

Gender diversity is an integral part of our existence.
It always has been, and it always will be¹⁶.”

¹⁶ Alok Vaid-Menon. *Beyond the gender binary*. Penguin. 2020, Pp.1-3.

This book opening by Alok Vaid-Menon resonates with my thinking and sums up the central struggle of gender-nonconforming bodies in modern society. I leave it here to open a way of reflection and encourage the reading of their book.

In this subchapter, I address the question of the gender-nonconforming body, both as a symbol and agent in society. As a mean to express internal needs, as a society performance tool.

¹⁷ Demello, Margo. *Body Studies: An Introduction*. 2014, Pp.13-20.

Body studies¹⁷, intended as an approach, are highly influenced by previous appearance studies which are profoundly biased by the “heterosexual matrix¹⁸”. For this reason, I will concentrate on more recent research and queer theories and texts whose aim is to valorise difference and individual experience instead of searching for unilateral perceptions, standardised propositions influenced by the heteronormative society we live in.

¹⁸ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print, p.154.

¹⁹ See The Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) research project systematically monitors, collects, and analyses reports of homicides of trans and gender-diverse people worldwide. Updates of the results are published on the TvT website: <http://transrespect.org/en/trans-murder-monitoring/tmm-resources>

Gender non-conforming bodies have been historically abused¹⁹ and misrepresented²⁰. They have been depicted as dangerous, deviant, or even worse (fig.1), interpreted and once again stereotyped to match the essentialist need to put everything in determined boxes. It is also important to highlight the different struggles different bodies go through while interacting with physical reality.

²⁰ Bertholet, Lynn. *Trans**. Till Schaap. 2020. This book contains 46 portraits of trans* people from all over Switzerland and aims to deconstruct stereotypes linked to trans* folks.



Fig.1 protagonist Norman Bates in Hitchcock's classic "Psycho" (1960)

21 McBee, Thomas Page.
Trans, but Not like You
Think. Salon, Salon.com, 7
Aug. 2012.

I am a non-binary being born with a feminine body (always following the definition of feminine given by society standards). The capitalist society demands that I treat my body in a specific way and makes me think I was born in the wrong body²¹, if I show an interest in a more “masculine” attire. From here, I feel the pressure to adapt my body to the “good type of trans body”, even if internally I don’t feel the real need to have a penis or a beard, for example, to affirm my identity. My gender expression and identity goes far beyond my aesthetics, and it can change every day. Something as simple as going to the supermarket cause strangers to interrogate my body and the reason why I display my body the way I do: “So, are you a boy or a girl?” “Why do you wear large clothes and still put makeup on? You should decide?” “I see curves under that sweater, Why don’t you show them?” “uh, hair so short! Have you had a Britney 2007 episode or you are just a butch?”.

Transmasculine bodies undergo a very different experience than transfeminine bodies. The pressure and expectations are different but the feeling of not being understood as you are, is always present. There is the question of being “real”, the passing in society, if you are a “man”, others must see you as one, or it doesn’t exist. The reality for trans* fem folks is different as their feminine appearance draws much more attention in public spaces. Furthermore, transfeminine identity expressions are keener to be wrongly represented in digital media and put under the critical eye of society. The same eye that scrutinises, sexualise and objectifies feminine bodies in general: in this case we are talking about trans misogyny. The internal struggle is real when people question your being “feminine” and treat your identity expression like a cross dressing experience. If you are a woman, you have to respect certain rituals, attire, aesthetics in order to be a good trans woman.

As Alok Vaid-Menon argues in their book:

“Being a masculine man or a feminine woman is assumed to be natural, and that being ourselves is an accessory.” They goes on writing that “It’s as if you take away our attire, makeup, and pronouns, we’re simply guys and women playing dress-up.

The focus on our body diverts our attention away from what’s actually going on: control.

The concentration on our looks diverts our attention away from the true focus: power²².”

²² Alok Vaid-Menon. *Beyond the gender binary*. Penguin. 2020. P.17.

The actual spectrum of identities doesn’t seem to have the basic right of existing and being. This spectrum is simply perceived as an aesthetic. As if our gender is not something that we own.

Virtual Projection

After understanding the control dynamics that occur between society and gender non-conforming bodies in the physical world, it is crucial to introduce the new dimension of the virtual body. The body we project into the virtual world as an alternative representation of ourselves. The Internet (World Wide Web (WWW)) and online games appeared in the 1990s. These platforms quickly became the primary sources of information, entertainment, and, in many cases, social contact. Thanks to the Internet and gaming, people have immediate and relatively simple access to the queer community, writings, and images. They can establish online profiles and personalities and can, in fortunate cases, designate them as LGBTQIA+. Previously, individuals interacted with queer identities, ideas, and texts in a physical world/setting. Now, these interactions can be principally digital.



Fig.2 Illustration by
Daniel Zender

Communities as a Safe Space?

Before concentrating on the personal and singular relation with our virtual body, I feel it is essential to point out communities as a place to exchange and valorise individual struggles. Our digital surroundings give chances for political activity by increasing visibility, the connection between people, and forming groups. These digital venues help to alleviate feelings of isolation for those who do not have a physical network of queer peers. Online interactions help strengthen these organisations, which are made up of people who frequently feel alienated or excluded in their “real world” existence. Empowerment via community is beneficial, and it is essential to understand how these communities shape the workaround queer gaming and queer game development. Unfortunately, it is difficult to define and participate in an actual and total “safe space” online or a general and great community. As Adrienne Shaw argues, “being part of a community can give us strength, grounding and a place to be, Yet communities are also contentious and limiting. Communities are never as inclusive as intended or as easily defined as they appear from the outside²³”.

She continues highlighting that it is fundamental to understand communities as multiple and overlapping, as intersectional and coalitional, to make queer game studies a reality. She takes the example of #GamerGate²⁴ to explain how often communities grow in opposition to other communities. #GamerGate allowed more queer creators, developers and gamers to come together and forge stronger bonds.

This doesn’t mean that the aim of a community should be to centralise the discourse on one proposition and “be all things to all people”(Shaw,2017). On the contrary, the aim would be to provide a space for multiple communities to exist together, following the idea of intersectionality²⁵ as a way to come together in divergence. This point on communities allows me to support the position that it is difficult to give general and collective explanations. Instead, the aim would be to provide space for diversity and find a way for a spectrum of differences to coexist.

²³ Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw. *Queer Game Studies.* , 2017. Print, Pp. 188-197.

²⁴ more on #GamerGate: Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, *A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 59, no.1, 2015, Pp.208-22.

²⁵ Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in a 1989 academic paper. Crenshaw, Kimberle. *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.* University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Dropping into the body

Coming back to the ways we project our body and the link we have with the virtual world. I will concentrate on games more than virtual spaces in general as my principal interest concerns game avatars. The interaction with machines and computer games gives life to a cybernetic process in which the player and the game establish a deep relationship of interdependence. Thanks to gameplay, where embodiment is experienced differently from the physical world, hybrid subjectivities and experiences are conceivable. This process blurs the boundaries between the game and the player and the self and the technological. This thinking draws from Donna Haraway's (1985) *Ontology of Cyborg*. The Cyborg is intended as a hybrid subjectivity dependent on this fusion of the machine and the human. The Cyborg character is an essential example of how technology can be embodied. Donna Haraway developed it in her *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: science, technology and socialist feminism in the 1980's* as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction²⁶." This theory encourages the connection with machines to create a spectrum of identities. I take the conceptual example of the Cyborg as it is a hybrid figure that opens new ways of being and expressing in society, between technology and performance. Our digital identity (avatar) goes beyond the construction between the human and the machine and acknowledges the intimate bond with machines. The cyborg figure, Haraway argues, can weaken the existing hierarchies of race, class and gender through new representations of being. If we accepted our interconnections with machines, the idealised white male subject would be "decentered" from his ontological supremacy. Haraway's work highlights and supports the development of even more genders than the ones I cited until now, and those will correspond to the umbrella term of Xenogender²⁷. Though it would be fascinating to explore this wider dimension of gender expression through video games avatars, I will concentrate on the wide but still limited, trans*non-binary experience for the reasons I explained (see chapter: Feeling Like a Blob In a Cubic World).

²⁶ Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York. Routledge. 1991, p. 150.

²⁷ Wikia.org, Xenogender, <https://lgbta.wikia.org/wiki/Xenogender>

As we talk about the body and its multiple dimensions, I will introduce the concept of embodiment and why it is necessary to merge body studies and gaming studies. Bonnie Ruberg recapitulates this need of converging the two bodies of research:

“Why body studies are Important in gaming studies:

- (1) The body has traditionally been left out of games studies— regardless of whether it is always “present” during play—and has been effectively ignored in relation to the virtual self as focus of analysis.
- (2) The body is central to queer theory, particularly bodies of difference, extension, and transition.
- (3) The body is the site of digital and real labour and is largely responsible for the creation, development, manufacture, distribution, consumption, and dissemination of material games and products.
- (4) Bodies are responsible, often in sweatshops and gold farms, for the production of virtual commodities and products marked for consumption in first world countries.
- (5) Digital technologies are increasingly being inscribed on and within the body (Google Glass, wearable technology, ingestible micro-cameras, etc.), while digital games gradually pursue an erasure of the tactile and screened interface (OculusRift, for example), in favour of an immersive and haptic non-interface, so that the body itself operates as interface²⁸.”

²⁸ Ruberg, Bonnie, Shaw Adrienne. *Queer Game Studies*. 2017. Print, p.63

So what happens when our body meets the game dimension and starts interacting with it?

Brendan Keogh, in the book *A Play of Bodies: how we perceive video games*, lays the foundation for a phenomenological appreciation of video game experience in which it is difficult to separate “player from character, actual from virtual, real from the fictional, story from the game, embodied from textual, active from passive, acting from interpreting²⁹.” Keogh’s phenomenology takes place in the “splice”, in the “hybrid all-at-once” theorised by Donna Haraway in 1991. He continues stressing out the fact that it is necessary to understand video games as an embodied textuality in which narratives and fictions merge with virtual bodies and artefacts. These objects, which are physically felt through manipulating plastic controllers, tapping on a keyboard or gliding on a touchscreen, create the embodied engagement with the material form of the video game and unconsciously with the video game itself. When we play, and we feel a sense of immersion in a given world, we are not paying attention to the specific materiality of the controller nor the audiovisual part of the video game. Keogh argues that we pay attention through these materialities and synesthetic experiences and feel the virtual world through its actual materiality. Furthermore, it is important to underline that this hybridity between player and video game should not be seen as a total fusion of the two. The human body playing video games is a particular and augmented version of the player’s body. The hands are wrapped around controllers, and the player is projected through the screen.

²⁹ Keogh, Brendan. *A Play of Bodies : How We Perceive Video games*. London, England: The MIT Press, 2018. Print, p.17.

“Sense become heightened or muted; identities, abilities, literacies, and perspectives are taken up and put aside; flesh integrates with plastic and code in what Martin Lister and his colleagues highlight as a “literally cyborgian” phenomenon³⁰.”

³⁰ Keogh, Brendan. *A Play of Bodies : How We Perceive Video games*. London, England: The MIT Press, 2018. Print, p.25.

The embodiment participates to the level of immersion the player experience while being in a determined video game world. Depending on the player’s needs they will feel more empathy for a game where the felt level of embodiment is higher. This goes from the narrative through the graphics and code to the characters in the game. In conclusion, this is why giving wide possibilities concerning characters and avatar creation is essential in order to touch a wider and inclusive audience³¹. It is also essential to stress the fact that it is not only a question of the character appearance but a general welcoming of diversity. This point will be developed further in the next chapter

³¹ Morgan, Helen et al.
The Role of the Avatar in Gaming for Trans and Gender Diverse Young People.
International journal of environmental research and public health vol. 17,22
8617. 20 Nov. 2020

Do You See Me?

As cited before, the virtual world can be perceived as mirror to the actual world and vice versa, so it is no surprise that there is little effort within the mainstream video game community³² to give visibility and space to diversity and alternative ways of being or expressing. Moreover, when this “effort” is made, it often escalates to tokenisation³³ and perpetuates the problematic narratives we already experience in literature, cinema, and so on³⁴.

“In many ways, digital games, seem to be the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms³⁵”

In order to start working on my critical position, I take inspiration from the introduction of the book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* written by Jennifer Malkowski Treandrea and M. Russworm. The authors argue that “representation is not fully separate from the implicitly hard-core elements of games: it is achieved through and dependant of player and machines actions, on code, and on hardware, not just on surface-level images and sounds³⁶.” They go on stating that “There is much to say about representation and identity on games and gaming culture that goes beyond flat assessments of good and bad objects, code versus image, and form versus content³⁷.”

³² Shaw, Adrienne, Evan W. Lauteria, Hocheol Yang, Christopher J. Persaud, & Alayna M. Cole. *Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985-2005*. International Journal of Communication [Online], 13 (2019): 26. Web. 26 Oct. 2021

I think it is the only “quantitative” research I found which really goes deeper on the problematics linked to representation in video games and draws the limits of research within research itself.

³⁵ Shaw, Adrienne, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 2014, p. 203.

³⁶ Malkowski, Jennifer. M. Russworm, Treandrea. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Indiana University Press. 2017, p.3.

³³ Grosso, Robert, et al. *Queer Characters in Gaming - A Brief History*. TechRaptor, 18 Feb. 2019, <https://techraptor.net/gaming/features/queer-characters-in-gaming-brief-history>.

³⁴ Evans, Jessica. Nixon, Sean. Hall, Stuart. *Representation*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2013. Print. Extremely interesting book about representation and its evolution in general. From cultural appropriation to soap opera, the authors are able to give the tools for an active reading and comprehension: they provide, among others, sets of questions and activity propositions aiming to train critical approach.

³⁷ Ibid. p.24.

The more I research the matter, the more I understand it is impossible and reductive to discern objectively what is good and what is bad concerning character representation. I feel everything can be problematic at some point, depending on your level of openness and understanding: following the process presented by Jennifer Malowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm, according to which they deal with representation as “a formative, not merely expressive³⁸” system in game studies. This position nurtures an always-in-becoming, fluid approach. This is the reason why I won’t analyse a set of problematic games and non-problematic games and treat them as case studies. I prefer to give examples of personal experience supported by existing literature. Additionally, this feeling of frustration generated by the impossibility to interpret given information as good/bad, correct/incorrect, inclusive/not inclusive supports my vision whereby we should always move on a spectrum and not following a dichotomy. Thinking about the spectrum of representation in video games, we could say that GTA³⁹ leans towards a wrong model (of women, sex workers, LGBTQIA+ beings) whereas *Gone Home*⁴⁰ presents a more inclusive narrative and characters. *Cyberpunk 2077*⁴¹ could be put somewhere in the middle of the two: the creators marketed it as the first game in which character creation is really inclusive (concerning gender and sexuality), but it also sparked controversy for the same reasons, the queer community of gamers was divided in giving opinions concerning the inclusivity of the gameplay and the different characters. I decided to analyse two games I played: *The Sims 4*, as it can be considered one of the first mainstream games where heterosexuality is put under deconstruction⁴² (even if it was a glitch in the code and they decided to keep it). I analyse this game as an example of how gamers can intervene, modify and manipulate the core of the game itself to make it more inclusive. *Journey*, because when I played it, I was persuaded it was the perfect game I could present as a good example of character inclusiveness, but then, further research made me rethink the way I understood it.

³⁸ Ibid. p.25.

³⁹ Conditt, Jess. *GTA v Brings Transphobia to the next Console Generation*. Engadget, 1 July 2020,

⁴¹ Rowett, Sam. *Cyberpunk 2077’s Sexist and Transphobic Scandals May Always Overshadow It*. CBR, 14 Sept. 2021.

GTA: Rockstar North. *GTA Series*. Capcom. 1997–2013.
Gone Home: The FullBright Company. *Gone Home*. ed. Annapurna Interactive. 2016
Cyberpunk 2077: CD Project. *Cyberpunk 2077*. 2020.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, Brigid. *Space, Navigation, and Queerness in Gone Home; or toward a Queer Spatiality*. First Person Scholar – Weekly Critical Essays, Commentaries, and Book Reviews on Games. 18 Sept. 2020.

⁴² Ben, Winsor. *How ‘the Sims’ Helped a Generation of LGBT+ Gamers*. SBS, 17 Jan. 2018, www.sbs.com.au/topics/pride/fast-lane/article/2018/01/17/how-sims-helped-generation-lgbt-gamers.

A journey with interiorised racism

In Shaw's Book *Gaming at the edge*, she uses an ethnographic approach to study "those placed at the margins of the constructed centre of gaming⁴³" and the reasons why representation is essential for marginalised gamers. She argues that it's not only a matter of playing with queer characters but also rethinking the aims of a better representation. In order to Queer the game world, It is needed to review the core of the game itself, from characters and gameplay, through code, to game controller design. That is why I decide to bring the example of *Journey*⁴⁴, even if the game doesn't integrate character creation in its gameplay. When I started the game, I felt ecstatic: I am in the middle of a desert, alone, the music accompanies my sidereal solitude, I feel strangely safe and powerful within this desolation. I see the avatar (The Traveler) who will accompany me through this adventure. Their personal details and background story remain a mystery. The Traveler's humanoid body is hidden under a robe. I imagine a cloud of smoke under it. I feel gender euphoria because that is the way I see myself: a floating cloud under wide costumes. The avatar doesn't have a characterised face nor appearance, besides from glowing eyes and the lack of arms. I perceive it as a being with no visible gender expression. Furthermore, no interaction through the game suggests any kind of gender-coded actions or attire requirements. The multiplayer mode allows you to have a companion (who will be another anonymous player and will look exactly like you) with whom you can share the experience so as to solicit the notion of mutual aid. The players can only communicate through chirping sounds and gestures. The Traveler's default attire is a Red Robe. In the beginning, the avatars have no scarf, but while you advance in the game, you can collect Glowing Symbols, the amount of glowing energy the player collects will influence the scarf's length and magic and allow you, for example, to fly higher or walk faster.

⁴³ Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press. 2014. Print. p.38.

⁴⁴ Thatgamecompany, Santa Monica Studio. *Journey*. PlayStation, PC, IOS. Sony Computer Entertainment, Annapurna Interactive. 2012.

Once the player collects the totality of glowing symbols, they have access to the White Robe, which has the power to regenerate energy over time. The treatment of the avatar's appearance, the apparently neutral language developed to communicate with other players, the anonymity, and the simple interactions made me think about this game as a successful effort concerning general inclusivity. Further research made me question my feelings concerning the game. Journey was acclaimed by the critique and in mainstream media outlet, and was praised for integrating the universal experience of struggling for meaning. Irene Chien⁴⁵ proposed another critical angle about the game. First of all, it is possible to say that the creators played well with the creation-by-omission ethos, what Ian Bogost⁴⁶ calls "tabula rasa". He explains that the game could be about "A coming of age, or a metaphor for life, or an allegory of love or friendship or work, or overcoming sickness or sloughing of madness. It could mean anything at all...Surely every sect and creed will be able to read their favourite meaning onto the game." This means that by creating a broad set of references, mixing them all and then reducing them to the essential, it is possible to create an environment relatable to everybody. This technique can be helpful when trying to include everyone/everything without taking a specific position. As Irene Chien argues, "this deliberate erasure of signs of difference is essential to achieving the global, universal appeal to which the game aspires." This first point of analysis aims to inspire a discussion about representation and whether omission could be a way to disrupt specific standards and demands concerning representation.

⁴⁵ Chien, Irene. *Journey into the Techno-Primitive desert*. In: Malkowski, Jennifer. M. Russworm, Treaandrea. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Indiana University Press. 2017. Pp.150-168.

⁴⁶ Ian Bogost, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Game Studio*. The Atlantic. March 15, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/03/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-game-studio/254494/>. See also Scott Juster, "'Journey' and Seeing the Best in My Fellow Gamer," *PopMatters*, March 21, 2012.

⁴⁷ Chien, Irene. *Journey into the Techno-Primitive desert*. p.157.

48 John C. Van Dyke, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1999, p.200.

Chien brings two other points worth mentioning: the first touch on the narrative and the setting, and the other concentrates on the characters' appearance and gameplay. She uses the experience of the art historian John C. Van Dyke, who ventured alone in the American desert in the summer of 1898⁴⁸. She argues that at the time, "the desert was a no-man's-land that white men were forced to pass through to get to the abundant lands beyond⁴⁹." She continues, linking this narrative to the narrative presented in *Journey* in which "the desert offers a vision of the future and prehistory of civilization that is both the end and the beginning of the American colonial imperative: on the one hand the desert seems to offer the last horizon of virgin territory, ripe for adventuring and conquest⁵⁰." She claims that the juxtaposition of the two narratives "serves to foreground some of the anachronistic consistencies between these two historical moments of seeking spiritual regeneration through a journey across the desert⁵¹." Both the narratives of *Journey* and *The Desert* try to build an imaginary place of purity and redemption in which the white Western male subject "may recover from the corruptions of modern technologized existence by way of radically othered geographies and identities⁵²." Chien's progressive deconstruction allowed me to see something that my privileged whiteness couldn't: The game enacts a dream of the Orient and Africa as opposed other to contemporary technology. It does it by using the Arab and Islamic worlds through the desert myth. This site of enchantment resists the dynamics of Western modernity and its imperialistic goals. After the narrative, she goes on writing about the character and gameplay: The creators of the game describe The Traveler as genderless even if they have a light step, high-pitched chirp, and cuteness that suggest childishness and femininity. Here, I can argue that the high-pitched voice and feminine attire don't necessarily mean woman or child. In the case of an "outed" agender character, the creators could have left this detail to ambiguity, but they decided to write it in the game's description.

49 Chien, Irene. *Journey into the Techno-Primitive desert*. p.150.

50 Ibid. p.151.

51 Ibid. p.152.

52 Ibid. p.152.

Furthermore, The author argues that the “gameplay reinforces the traditional racial hierarchy”: The Traveler’s dark-skinned face, hijab-like head covering, and tribal patterns of its robe bring to mind an indeterminate ethnic identity. At the end of every level, the small, red-robed avatar meets a tall, white-robed being with a white face and blue eyes who “towers over you with paternal benevolence” (fig.3). These are the ancestors from the civilization that has been destroyed by its own technology, and “their racialized contrast to the small, brown-faced avatar is striking⁵³.” After reading this chapter and talking with concerned people and gamers who played Journey, I can see and play the game with different “glasses”. I still liked the game’s experience, but through research and exchange, I am now able to see it with critical eyes concerning the different symbols and references used in the game. Even if the critical eye doesn’t uniquely concern the character, there are allusions to racialized bodies and cultures which participate actively in how diversity is displayed in video games.

⁵³ Ibid. p.159.

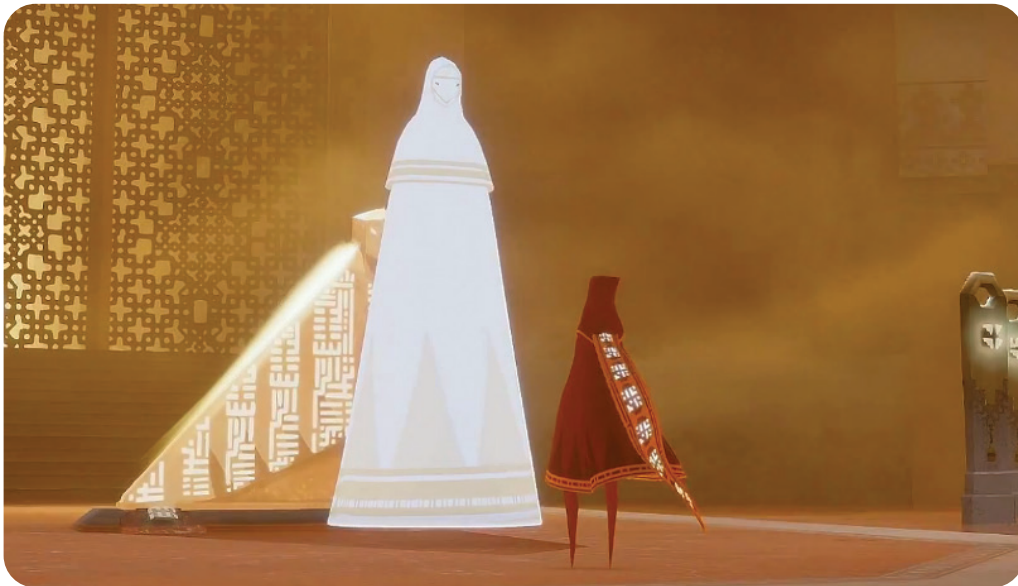


Fig.3 Journey. The Traveler meeting the Ancestor (video game still)

Mods and Desires in The Sims 4

During research and numerous discussions, as part of my interviews, the question of how queer gamers could come together to influence the main stream video games, came up. There is a growing need to find safe communities free from trolls and haters and a demand to queering existing games following a process of revendication. This is why I take the game The Sims 4⁵⁴ and the world of Mods⁵⁵ as a case study for this research. Furthermore, The Sims can be considered one of the first simulation games to explore “romantic interests” outside of the heterosexual norm that dominates most narratives. Relationships and marriages between characters of the same sex were accidentally included in the initial game of The Sims, according to Patrick J. Barrett III, the game’s programmer⁵⁶. So, even if it was a coding flaw, it’s important that they decided to preserve it. Through the interviews and the organisation of talking groups, I identified one within the numerous needs of queer, trans* and non-binary folks concerning avatars and character creation: customisation.

As one of the interviewees highlighted:

“[...] I think character creation should present itself in a less binary way, and features should be put on characters without it just being male/female. [...]An example is so many games will have nail polish options or skirt/dress option for whatever the female option is at character creation. I think all characters should be allowed to wear any clothing, it shouldn’t be so gendered as it is.”

⁵⁴ Maxis. The Sims 4. Electronic Arts. 2014.

⁵⁵ Mod: to modify (a software application, such as a video game). Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mod>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2021.

⁵⁶ “It was a magical moment when my first same-sex Sims couple kissed. I still sometimes wonder how in the world I got away with it.” – The Sims Programmer Patrick J. Barrett III <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-kiss-that-changed-video-games>

The Sims is a simulation game in which character creation and its development are one of the main features of the gameplay. Even if, through the years, there has been an effort to develop a more inclusive gameplay (more choice concerning skin tones, sexual preferences and body customisation), the game doesn't present genuine, diverse interactions and appearances, which are essential in a life-like game: For example, you still can't choose your pronoun, gay couples can get "joined-union" but can't marry each other, and the stage for its play is an unmistakably suburban American domain based on consumerism and the narrative of the so-called American Dream. In order to tweak and adapt this faulty plot, the fan community, since the first release of the game, developed diverse ways of appropriating and manipulating the game through Mods. I will present three of them that I argue are pertinent to the queer identities.

The first is WickedWhims (fig.6). This series of Mods allow intervening on multiple aspects of your Sims' interactions and appearance, from gender preference to the possibility of adding the sex worker career and owning a strip club. WickedWhims allows you to add a nudity option and Body Selector, which can be interesting for queer and trans folks as you can select every body part the sim will use. You can use body parts other creators developed or create a unique body mod for your character. Moreover, the player will access a full detailed naked body for all genders and dynamically growing pubic hair. Another feature concerns gender preference. Using this mod will allow you to decide not only your sim's gender preference but also the gender preference of all the Sims in your world (the player can only choose between only hetero, gay or bi): this means that the player could decide to live in an entire bisexual world for example.

The second concerns Hormone Therapy (fig.5) and can be found on *Patreon*. This Mod will allow your Sims to start a transition. The player will search for Hormone Replacement Therapy on the Internet, this allows the player to find three new types of drugs: Tostran 2% Gel (Testosterone), EstradiolGel 0.1% Gel (Estrogen) and Anti-androgen Treatment. You can choose to stop the transition at any time, allowing a more fluid conception of what a transition is. The only problem is that to access the option on the Internet, you still have to get a doctor's prescription and diagnosis of gender dysphoria. This choice perpetuates the general phobia toward trans* and queer folks.

If the player is not satisfied with the Mod of gender preference proposed by WickedWhims, it is possible to find a slightly different approach on *Patreon* with PimpMySims4 (fig.4). This Mod allows a wider spectrum of gender identity and preference: Aromantic, Asexual, Bisexual, Demisexual, Gay, Gender Fluid, Lesbian, LGBT Activist, Non-Binary, Pansexual, Transgender, Drag Queen/King/Queer and Questioning. Furthermore, it is possible to organise drag shows, protests and non-mixed events for the queer Sims in your world. In conclusion, the world of Mods is infinite and in perpetual development and can be a tool to understand what can be modified within the code of a game.

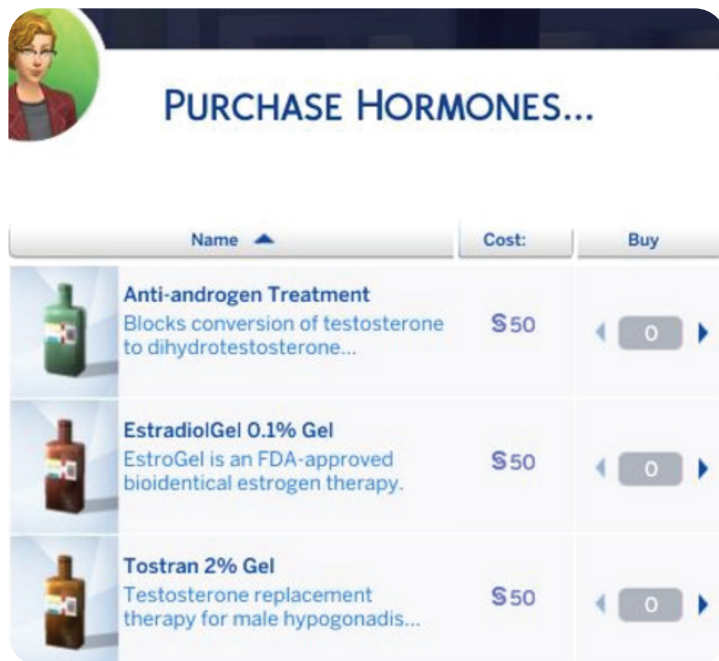


fig.5 Purchase Hormones Mod



fig.4 LGBT Mod Pac



fig.5
WickedWhims Mod

Let's fail together

This sub-chapter aims to provide a conceptual foundation for further investigation of queerness in video games that goes beyond representation. This should help seeing the Queer in games that aren't presented as Queer. It is a way, once again, to open up the discussion on the multiplicity and fluidity of our worlds. It is also a way to terminate on a good note. When we think about the "Non-normative" (body, race, mind etc.) experience (in the worlds of gaming and reality), we too often have to talk about trauma and violence and the energy we put to change this state of the art. The theories I cite in this section helped my research end on a powerful, radical note, and at least for me, full of hope. In chapter 20 of the book *Queer Games Studies* by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw it is possible to find a transcription of the conversation between Jack Halberstam and Jesper Juul⁵⁷. This conversation took place in October 2013 as a part of the inaugural Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon). It revolves around the themes of success and failure in society and Video Games. Halberstam's work concentrates on the logic of success and failure and how logic constrains us to a very normative viewpoint. He takes the social context of capitalism to explain his claim that "someone might actually want to fail" because they're dissatisfied with a particular social context. If being a good capitalist means accumulating wealth, then anticapitalists want to fail at that game to find other ways of thinking about money. If we switch to the realm of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, "the queer becomes the failure of logic" meaning that literally "the queer fails to be straight. The butch fails to be a woman. The sissy boy fails to be a man. They all fail in their socially prescribed role". At this point, you have to decide if it is more important to win the game of society or if you refuse and rewrite the game accepting what we call failure. "So, that acceptance in failure, that investment in failure, that excitement about failure, is the queer art of failure."

⁵⁷ Jack Halberstam:
Professor at the University
of Southern California and
the author of *The Queer Art
Of Failure*

Jesper Juul:
Professor at the royal
Danish Academy of Art,
tutor of books like *Half-
Real, The Casual Revolution
and Art of Failure*

On the other hand, we can agree that failing in real life can also be painful and difficult. For example, suppose someone fails to be a cis person and claims their queerness. In that case, they will probably experience violence, poor medical support and gaslight, so I can argue that failing at the game of society is not that easy. Actual games give a place to fail in a kind of security because even if players are frustrated by losing, they can always argue that it is just a game in the end. Video Games give us “the opportunity to deny that we care about failure”. After debating the difference between failure in games and failure in society, the question arises on how to create a queer art of failing at video games. In the introduction of their book⁵⁸, Jesper Juul uses the concept of hedonism, which suggests that humans are not only oriented around pleasure, so the idea that players only play to win is wrong. Furthermore, during play, players may experience disorientation or negative experiences, but that doesn’t keep them from playing a level repeatedly. It is possible to say that there is a kind of pleasure in repetition and a “pleasure spiked with pain”, which can allude to a sort of masochism. As Juul argues during the conversation: “Sometimes we seek out failure because, by directly seeking it out, we lessen it; we find a kind of enjoyment of it.” In this context, it is essential to consider failure, masochism and queer as powerful concepts that allow us to see queerness in the most peculiar places. Taking the example of a game where you can’t choose an avatar, let’s say a car race game, that doesn’t imply that the game is straight. Bonnie Ruberg, in Chapter 11 of the book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, argues that “the player who sees queer as a synonym with gay, [a car race game] appears sexless, benign. Games like this make up a huge majority of commercially released titles. Yet it’s specifically because this presumed straightness dominates the medium that we need to challenge the mould and look at all types of games through the lens of queerness⁵⁹”, not just those who present avatars or interactions between determined characters.

⁵⁸ Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. 2013.

⁵⁹ Ruberg, Bonnie. *Playing to Lose*. In: Malkowski, Jennifer. M. Russworm, Treaandrea. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Indiana University Press. 2017, p.199.

⁶⁰ Ruberg, Bonnie. 5. *Playing to Lose: Burnout and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games*. Video Games Have Always Been Queer, New York, USA: New York University Press, 2019, p.135.

The process of queering games can be complex but powerful simultaneously. It can be difficult because, as Bonnie Ruberg explains, the mainstream player base doesn't hesitate "to dismiss, mansplain and refuse any queer reading of mainstream video games⁶⁰." It is also empowering as it allows gender non-conforming folks to revendicate their queerness in an homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic place. Ruberg stresses the fact that to argue for queerness, it is vital to understand that queer is "not only flesh" but primarily "desiring differently and simply being differently (or, in this case, playing differently)⁶¹." Queering games is not a way to make them gay, but it opens multiple ways of interpreting them. This brings us back to the failing and the difference between failing towards (failing following the rules) or against(failing for the pleasure of failing) a game system. An example of failing queerly against a game is driving slow and respectfully during a race in Need for Speed. Ruberg concludes by trying to express what we can call the queer art of failing at video games. They argues that "failure is part of games and that failure is queer". This means that video game failure brings queerness to games that don't have explicit queer content. Following their point of view, it is possible to say that if failure is part of video games and we accept failure as coded as queer, all games become queer in a non-representational sense.

⁶¹ Ibid. p.7.

What Do You Think?

This chapter was nurtured by the exchange I had with different gamers. I decided to concentrate on a conversational approach. This method helped me to give space to the interviewees and go deeper concerning personal experiences. Every exchange lasted on average 2h+. I mostly had face to face conversations and when it was not possible I used text messages or Discord. It was interesting how, no matter which platform I used, the conversations have been equally intense and rich. When it comes to the transcription of these conversations I decided to separate the different statements following different themes. Before each of them I will give a resume of my findings and why they are relevant for this research. Additionally, I won't give much information about the people I talked to (just the place where the interviews took place and the pronouns of the interviewees), as I see their testimonies as a manifesto of experiences which highlight the vast, multiple and personal experiences of playing video games.

About characters and Avatars, empathy and embodiment

The first theme concerns the relationship with avatars and the way the interviewees embody and feel empathy for them during game play. As I was expecting, different people have different needs concerning game play and avatar creation.

Some are more interested in the world and the narrative of the game:

THEY/THEM/HER, Casual gamer, on the phone
Geneva – Brussels:

“I pay more attention to the world than the characters. I don’t like realistic games because too often I can’t identify with the character I play (RPG, Call of Duty, Assassin creed...). That is the reason why I like to play in fantasy realms. For example I like the Mario series because the characters are cute and far more imaginative than more realistic worlds.”

SHE/HER, Game creator and hardcore gamer.
While drinking tea and eating hummus at the Phare, Geneva:

“My level of embodiment doesn’t change depending on the character I play, it is more about the narrative and my projection into a determined narrative. I don’t want to play myself in a scripted world, I like to impregnate myself with the existent narrative and avatars. In a simulation game the experience is different.

I love to explore customisation and find an augmented state of myself within the virtual persistent world of Second Life for example.”

Some prefer when they can choose between different avatars and change it when they feel like it:

HE/HIM, former professional gamer. During a walk along the Rhone River:

“I prefer when you can choose from different characters (apex Legends). I feel there is more diversity. I like when the background story is well written and every character has a particular personality.”

Others need wide possibilities concerning characters and avatar creation, and sometimes this freedom helps with their identity and creativity:

THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva and Canada:

“I cannot enjoy a game if I don’t find a character that i feel represents the aesthetics I like to express, flat out. I actually feel that the more I can personalise an avatar the more I feel empathy for them.”

ZE/ZIR, casual gamer. Voice call on discord, between Geneva and Paris:

“I feel body euphoria when I can build a character in order to project an image of myself that I like.”

HE/HIM, eclectic gamer. Face to face conversation in Geneva:

“When I build a character (in The Sims for example) I make it as weird as possible, outside of limitations. In virtual worlds it is possible, it brings new creativity and help me develop this creativity in the physical world too.”

Some have a critical position concerning character creation in most mainstream games:

THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva and Canada:

“I think a flop for character creation is not having a diverse way for a person to express themselves. Of course most games have male/female binary character creation, and even if I identify as non binary I like to pick characters that represent me regardless and that usually ends up on the female side of the spectrum because of the way their armour and fashion suit them.”

SHE/HER. Competition and MMOs gamer. On the phone between Geneva and Lausanne:

“Even when you can create your avatar, the possibilities are so limited, I always feel it is not enough myself. It’s mostly checking cases and slide minus and plus. It is extremely frustrating when I think about the possibilities of my creativity concerning identity expression.”

Reconnecting to the physical body

In this section the beings I talked to traced back their virtual experiences to physicality. In most cases playing certain games helped to be more comfortable with their identity in real life:

THEY/THEM, casual gamer. Text messages on Discord, between Geneva and Brussel:

“Avatars helped me feel more comfortable with my aesthetic. I don’t know if there was any other way to cope with my complete lack of representation in the real world, especially growing up in a world that didn’t even tell me what non-binary identities were. I think that without gaming as a tool I would be significantly less comfortable with my own self expression and I wouldn’t feel as confident in it.”

THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva and Canada:

“I really enjoyed that Cyberpunk 2077 allowed us to customise our characters to the extent that we could even choose the right genitals for the right body, instead of it just being cis male/ cis female like most games do. That game actually cracked my egg, so to speak. It made me realise I needed to come out.”

HIM, former professional gamer. During a walk along the Rhone River:

“I grew up in a traditional a conservative family. Seeing different characters in video games helped me accept myself and be unapologetic with my family and the comments they made about my gender expression. If I like to play and be soft, I can, I don’t have to be the manliest man to identify as a man.”

The state of the art of representation in mainstream video games

In this section I asked folks about the current state of the art concerning representation in mainstream video games, and some made a point on some essential needs. For example, the possibility to add pronouns to different characters. While talking to them I sense a general positive attitude and faith concerning the future possibilities of game development. Although, they are still skeptical and aware that we are far from what it is really needed:

THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva and Canada:

“I think that a lot of developers speak a big game about LGBTQIA+ and trans*non-binary inclusion, but do very little for us. For single player games, if we are included, we are relegated to characters that contribute very little to the game, if at all. In multiplayer settings, trans characters rarely exist, and if they do they are almost always binary trans. I think representation is one of the most important things. I think character creation should present itself in a less binary way, and features should be put on characters without it just being male/female. It is a tiny detail, but an example is so many games will have nail polish options or skirt/dress option for whatever the female option is at character creation. This is especially prevalent in MMOs, where fashion is a huge part of the end game content. I think all characters should be allowed to wear any clothing, it shouldn't be so gendered as it is. I also think games that feature romances should be more flexible. How often cis het players have options to 5 or 6 different heterosexual romances, while us Queer players get 1 or 2?”

THEY/THEM/HER, Casual gamer, on the phone Geneva — Brussels:

“It is evolving for the better, but I feel it is principally pinkwashing and tokenisation. Check the Blizzard scandal. I have faith in indie games and queer game developers.”

SHE/HER. Competition and MMOs gamer. On the phone between Geneva and Lausanne:

“It evolved, video games touch more people and minorities. I feel big companies are forced to do it in order to sell more. I also feel it is necessary to pass through pinkwashing to normalise “non-normal” bodies and characters. Even if it is fake, it can be helpful.”

ZE/ZIR, casual gamer. Voice call on discord, between Geneva and Paris:

“I think letting us choose pronouns for our characters would be a huge step! I think society is slowly starting to realise how important pronouns are, and just allowing us to choose them would be very simple I imagine.”

About game communities

Some of them brought up the question about online game communities. It is the reason I consecrated a little section of the research on this theme. As we know, mainstream game communities are not exactly inclusive of women, queer folks and other minorities. But also dedicated communities can be the target of violence, keeping people from expressing in a presumed safe space.

THEY/THEM, casual gamer. Text messages on Discord, between Geneva and Brussels:

“Because I am non-binary and don’t hide it online I struggle to be accepted in the game community or when I have to enter a team for MMO games.”

THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva and Canada:

“Safe on line spaces for gender nonconforming folks are not easy to find in the game community. It is really hard sometimes because there is a lot of brigading in communities I have been in before. Where it was clear right wing trolls were pretending to be trans, POC etc. Just to say stupid things and make people upset. The game community in general, is transphobic as hell.”

Where does the revolution start

Finally, I asked the gamers about their needs and some advice concerning how we could fight the current state of game development.

THEY/THEM/SHE/HER, Casual gamer, on the phone
Geneva – Brussels:

“Underrepresentation is a societal problem so I don’t know for the large scale. In general I boycott problematic games and enterprises.”

/THEY/THEM, passionate gamer. Text messages
on Reddit until 5 in the morning, between Geneva
and Canada:

“I think I can resume my opinion on the matter by screaming to the allies: ASK PEOPLE, GIVE SPACE! Use your privilege wisely”

HE/HIM, eclectic gamer. Face to face conversation
in Geneva:

“Mods for me have been a way to reappropriating certain games and go against some problematic gameplays. In the Sims 4, for example, I use mods in order to have a more inclusive life-like experience.”

SHE/HER. Competition and MMOs gamer. On the phone between Geneva and Lausanne:

“I feel it is necessary to give voice to minorities and concerned folks. It would be cool to have a safe platform in order to express or denounce different games and ideas. I feel it is important to create a community because the single doesn’t have much power. I need more virtual and safe spaces to meet people like me.”

ZE/ZIR, casual gamer. Voice call on discord, between Geneva and Paris:

“As I was frustrated by my gaming experience I decided I would start creating my games. I principally use Bitsy and itch.io.”

Monsters Don't Sleep

This thesis has been a way to inform myself on the actuality of queer theories, games and the theme of the embodiment. In a world where virtuality and materiality co-exist in perpetual exchange. It is important to become aware of the power video games, as other digital spaces, have on our daily lives and how they can be a tool to open discussions and new points of view. Taking Judith Butler's theories on the fluidity of gender as a starting point helped the understanding of the current struggles alternative subjectivities face. Bringing the question of the place of gender non-conforming bodies in society was indispensable to link them to their projection in virtual worlds. Following existing literature on the phenomenology of video games and the "Queer games Avant-Garde", I could underline the importance of merging game studies and body studies, as the latter plays an important role in how and why bodies are displayed, in reality and virtuality.

Furthermore, the projection of gender non-conforming bodies into a game plays an important role when it comes of embodiment: they can help the feeling of immersion in a determined game or show diversity, changing the centre of attention from the heterosexual white male to a more fluid, open narratives. It is essential to underline that displaying the bodies we don't often see is just a part of effort when it comes to representation within game development. The code, the story, the symbols, the context, and the physical supports are equally important when it comes to understanding the embodiment that someone experience during a game. The games I presented stressed that it is impossible to give unilateral solutions and approaches concerning representation. It is an ongoing work of research that brings together openness and deconstruction. The point on failure aims to be an example of how everything can be queered if we pay enough attention. Finally, Talking to real people helped me stress and support the points made throughout the redaction of this work.

I wrote this thesis because QUEER was, is and will certainly be in abundance. I wrote this thesis because I love you, I see you, and I thank you for your courage and existence. We are not a minority in number but society and media made us the other, the crazy, the hysteric, the aggressive, the monster under your bed. I argue for a future based on multiplicity and fluidity, in which the different becomes the main character of our narratives. Proud to be a monster, I am eager to see what's next.

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MULTIPL*

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