

Beyond the Bodyfucked: Mapping a Politics of “Trans Game Studies”

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INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen the rise of ‘queer game studies’, an area of inquiry which seeks to reclaim the queer potential of both games and how they are played. And yet, this new approach has not come without its problems. As someone doing transgender work in game studies, I find that the ideology of queer game studies is not always productive; and ultimately, the further I get into my research project, the less I believe that a politics of trans game studies can align with the project of queer game studies. It is for this reason that I argue for a disciplinary break into “trans game studies”, indebted to queer game studies and yet distinct from it.

As Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg write in the introduction to their volume *Queer Game Studies*, the paradigm of queer game studies “refigures games as systems of pleasure, power, and possibility, excavating the queer potential that can be found in all games” (2017, x). And yet, to contend that all games contain queer potentialities undermines the concept of queerness as fundamentally non-normative. If everything can be queer, then nothing is; if even games that lack potentially queer themes can be ‘queered’, or considered as ripe for queer readings as games with significant and well-intended LGBT content, then the term ‘queer’ has become so broad as to be unhelpful here.

On a less theoretical level, approaching queerness this way also frames it as a social and constructed phenomenon, and glosses over the fact that queerness – and particularly transness – is also lived. Transness, in particular, is meaningfully embodied in a way that goes well beyond the social. Even in a perfect world where I could both have my ideal gender presentation and be read as I wished, I would retain the uneasy relationship to my body which is the core of my transness; and this is one of the major factors motivating my push for an ideological break.

In addition, my use of “trans” over “transgender” is also significant. I do this partly following Jack Halberstam, who favours the term “trans*” for the way it opens up a broader “politics of transivity” (2018, xiii). However, I am less interested in transness as transivity than transness as a particular kind of bodily estrangement, which begins on the level of gender, but certainly does not end there. This means I am interested in transness not in the sense of queerness, but transness in the sense of being irreconcilably bodyfucked. To support this turn, I begin with the move towards disability studies made by Cameron Awkward-Rich, in his essay “Trans, Feminisms: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual” (2017), and particularly the part of his argument where he contends that we should treat feeling bad as an inevitable, banal

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fact of certain embodied experiences. And it is this which leads to his titular approach of reading like a “depressed transsexual”, which involves taking a position “both committed to the idea that trans lives are ‘lived, hence livable’ while also taking feeling bad as a mundane fact” (826). That is, this intersection of trans and disability studies unlocks the idea of being able to sit not only with pain, but with the bigger problem of having a body, without feeling the need to rehabilitate the bad affect this produces.

For these reasons, I argue that a politics of transness in game studies must go further than simply reading games with a trans eye. It must not only prioritise a non-rehabilitated form of bad affect, and reject the everyone-can-play politics of queer game studies, but also undermine the core logic under which most game bodies operate.

BIO

Gawain Lucian Lax is a PhD candidate at Monash University, in the School of Media, Film and Journalism. His thesis work looks at theorising a methodology of trans game studies, and transgender embodiment in games as a whole, through a case study of Japanese boys love visual novels. More broadly, his research interests include visual novels, mobile games, fan studies, and transgender studies.

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