

Gender-Identity-Play in Young Trans* and Gender Diverse Players

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INTRODUCTION

Young people face questions of identity and go through phases of identity construction. For young trans* and gender diverse (TGD)¹ folk, these questions can focus on concepts of gender and gender identity. Young TGD folk have significant levels of poor mental health, which is exacerbated by lack of gender-affirming support (The Trevor Project 2022). According to The Trevor Project's 2022 report, only 1 in 3 TGD youth found their homes to be gender-affirming (4). It is possible that in lieu of supporting homes, young TGD players are turning to videogames for this gender affirmation.

It has been argued that videogames provide spaces for identity-play where individuals are able to “work through” questions of identity whilst overcoming real-world² barriers to doing so (Turkle 1995). Similarly, videogames have been investigated as spaces for players to try on costumes to explore, experiment and experience identities difficult to achieve in the real-world (Peña, Hancock, and Merola 2009; Nakamura 1995). For young TGD players, being able to control and manipulate a representation of self with such immediacy and customisation means that videogames, particularly avatar building, presents a potential avenue for rapid identity testing. Similarly, this could enable gender affirming interactions with others, without the safety concerns of the real-world.

Existing works have explored the potential for identity exploration and expression within virtual worlds (Crowe and Watts 2014; e.g., Baldwin 2018; Bruckman 1992). Additionally, previous works have identified a preference for TGD players to play as their identified gender identity GID (van Aller 2018; Baldwin 2018; Griffiths, Arcelus, and Bouman 2016; Marciano 2014). Yet the potential for trans and gender diverse players to use the games as a space for gender-identity-play has received little attention. In this paper we will examine identity-play in the context of gender identity

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for TGD videogame players, as little work has yet to investigate whether these players are adopting the virtual world of videogames as spaces for gender-identity-play.

Utilising the queer gaming studies framework (Ruberg and Shaw 2017), a phenomenological thematic analysis was conducted on the semi-structured interviews with 20 young (18 – 26 years old) TGD videogame players to investigate the relationship between participants' game play and their exploration of gender. Data analysis, conducted using NVivo, was in the form of a bottom-up, inductive process and reflected the phases Braun and Clarke (2006, 87) and Sundler et al., (2019, 736–37) recommend for phenomenological thematic analysis.

Through this analysis it was found that these young, trans and gender diverse participants used videogames for gender-identity-play. Specifically, the participants of this study used videogames as a place of safety for experiencing, exploring, and constructing their gender identity. Participants described their videogame-based gender-identity-play as times of self-discovery and acceptance, particularly through challenging times in the real-world related to gender identity. These findings have implications for future research into videogame-based identity-play and works concerning young TGD videogame players.

This article draws on findings from the lead author's Masters of Research thesis (Whitehouse 2021) exploring how TGD players use videogames to express and explore their gender identity through videogames. This research conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 participants, aged 18 – 36, who identified as trans* and/or gender diverse and a videogame player. The findings applying to the original dataset (i.e., all 40 participants) differ from that of just the young participants (aged 18 – 26), motivating further analysis of this subset. Future work would see the subset of the 20 older participants (aged 27 - 36) examined for differences distinct for this older age group. Potential factors of the differences between these groups, which rely upon analysis of the older group, could include generational differences, accessibility of videogames, and social attitudes towards TGD folk.

BIO

Kayson (they/he) is a Graduate Teaching Associate and PhD Candidate in Computing at Macquarie University's School of Computing. Their work focuses on videogames and trans and gender diverse (TGD) players. Their PhD draws on the findings of this MRes to understand what factors contribute to a videogame being welcoming (or unwelcoming) to TGD players. The aim of this research is to develop, in consultation videogame developers and publishers, as well as TGD players, a set of guidelines which can be used in the development of videogames to intentionally create games which are welcoming to these players.

ENDNOTES

¹ The terminology *trans** and *gender diverse* was decided upon through conversations with participants of this study and others in the queer, trans and gender diverse community in early 2019. Recently the "*" in "trans*" has become a point of contention in this community (see Clare 2022, 118-20 for discussion concerning the use of the asterisk). However, this article continues to use "trans*" as this is a snapshot in time when participants of this study felt represented by this term.

² The terms *real-world* and *virtual world* have been used throughout this thesis to refer to the world in which the player physically exists (real-world) and the digital world of the game (virtual world). Whilst the contrast of the terms real and virtual

could imply a delegitimising of experiences within the “virtual” (i.e., not real) world, this is not the intention of this work. These terms were used over the alternatives “physical” and “digital” as “physical” places emphasis on the physical body. Such emphasis was felt to be more problematic than “real” as this work considers TGD players, for whom their bodies can be at odds with their felt and expressed gender.

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