Playing with Femininity: Transfeminine Gamers and Identity Play

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INTRODUCTION

The image of the gamer in popular culture is easy to conjure for most people. Depending on generational differences, one may imagine the bespectacled young arcade-goer, men shouting at the latest first-person shooter in a room full of friends, or the lone online gamer communicating through a headset. In popular culture, these images are male and the world of games is uncritically labeled as a “boy’s club.” Video games are seen as a way to blow off steam, even their worst content written off as meaningless entertainment. Yet, given the adherence of these games to the values of our “real” world, meaning is imbued at all levels, and communicated most aggressively to those who don’t or can’t share their values. Thinking on those who are cast out or misrepresented by mainstream video games and culture itself, what do video games offer the marginalized person? For transfeminine gamers, video games potentially offer the chance to develop a new identity in this treacherous terrain, making real what is labeled unreal or unthinkable in the real world.

LIT REVIEW

Situating this project within existing literature requires the marrying of texts from two separate fields: transgender studies and video game research. While illuminating the cultural adherence to binaries of player/avatar and sex-assigned-at-birth/gender is necessary, a foundational unpacking of transgender identity formation, individuals’ communication of those identities, and the representation of gender in video games is also required. In pursuing the project of transgender identity formation, I will avoid articulating a static definition of transgender or
transfeminine and instead focus on the modes and processes of self-identification detailed in these works; individual participant definitions of transfemininity will be utilized alongside other findings. Work discussing gender within a largely binary, cisgender context will be visited for its use in critiquing male and female representations in mainstream games, providing the point of departure for entering dominant discourse on video games. José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification is crucial to understanding transfeminine negotiations of (cis)feminine representations in video games and associated ambivalence, alongside work on gendered role-playing and the relationship between avatar and player.

Before proceeding into an analysis of gender in popular gaming, the concept of the magic circle needs to be adequately addressed. A belief which warps realms of play into pure fantasy, Gordon Calleja describes the magic circle as the false assumption of “a separation between games and the ‘real’ world, imbuing games with a sense of artificiality that is often seen as one of their defining elements” (336). He also notes the enthusiastic application of this impermeable circle to digital games. Conjuring images of the digital gamer glued to flashing screens and disconnected from others during play, the magic circle creates a reductive narrative of gaming as escapism into pure fantasy. Calleja takes issue with two binaries erected in service of trivializing gaming: virtual/physical realities, in which the former is “imbued with unreality by virtue of their being computer generated” and the artificial/real supported by the magic circle (336). Both binaries are deployed in service to fixed notions of reality relying on the primacy of purportedly inherent
states. They assume physical realities to have primacy over ones that are perceptibly created.

I see the maintenance of a rigid barrier between the artificiality of game worlds and unquestioned stability of the real world as mirroring the dichotomy that frames understandings of transgender/cisgender identities. Using the binary constructed by the magic circle as a framework for understanding digital games fails to recognize not only the processes actively constructing our non-game realities, thereby establishing a false natural state of being, but further assumes that those lifeworlds constructed contrary to that reality to be artificial or inferior. This valuation of assumed natural states of being or understanding reality is resonant with cissexist attitudes towards transgender people. By assuming there to be an unquestionable reality from which all other lifeworlds are synthetic deviations, the magic circle mirrors anti-transgender rhetoric that sees the identities of trans individuals as constructions and cisgender identities as real. The magic circle represents a larger trend towards the Othering of ways of being and knowing outside of those accepted as valid by dominant frameworks.

The system of bigenderism functions similarly to the magic circle, premised on the acceptance of two fixed genders that are direct reflections of our purportedly “natural” world. Like the magic circle, these two genders (cisgender male and female) constitute the reality against which the Other is deemed artificial. As the gender/sex binary maintains the dichotomy between men and women that inferiorizes the latter, bigenderism pulls back to reveal how both categories are maintained as an enclosed system from which deviation is either not allowed or not
inconceivable. Miqqi Alicia Gilbert details the maintenance of bigenderism as it is upheld by particular rules of gender: “Obviously, if the gender rules are natural and not arbitrary, then societal structures defined to defend them are justified and worthy of protection” (94). These rules define the parameters of “real” gender and create the conditions for being understood as a gendered subject. Referencing Butler, Gilbert contends with the degree of existence transgender people are allowed under bigenderism’s rules as these rules rely on fixed bodies and identities packaged into cohesive units. While some transgender individuals may fall within the parameters of male or female by virtue of identification, intense scrutiny is still applied to these bodies that disrupt bigenderism’s naturalized genders. Full existence of the transgender individual then requires the recognition of that gender by the dominant rules of gender.

Bigenderism and its rules of gender places many transgender people into a category of utter unintelligibility. The rigidity of this system limits expressions of gender forcing transgender individuals to present their gender in an acceptable way while simultaneously not appearing constructed, unless they risk being labeled an impostor. This unrealistic expectation of conformity places many transgender individuals into a space that cannot be understood by dominant culture. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler considers the precarious nature of gender non-normative identities, noting how trans people are often not regarded as real, existing in a space of vacuous unintelligibility that is prone to violent erasure. This reality causes Butler to consider more deeply the way that intelligibility functions within systems of power, noting that “having or bearing “truth” and reality” is an enormously
powerful prerogative within the social world, one way that power dissimulates as ontology” (27). Gilbert’s attention to the rules of gender embedded in social structures finds a partner in Butler’s criticism of the discourse of “real” or “true” gender being utilized as an existing fact. Much as Gilbert invites pulling back the curtain on a system which defends itself by asserting its own naturalness, Butler’s observation calls into question the establishment of gendered ways of knowing the world and how these views masquerade as being without formative processes embedded in social power. Bigenderism and thus creates a second dichotomy between the intelligibly and unintelligibly gendered that attributes unnaturalness to the latter. The unnaturalness attributed to the unintelligible renders transgender – and more broadly gender non-normative – bodies as false because of their assumedly apparent construction. A body that does not make sense to the observer is understood as outside of natural categories of gender. Even a visually “well-constructed” transgender identity can confirm the notion of unnatural construction if “discovered” via government documents or other means. Regardless of the means of discovery, the processes that form transgender individuals are heralded as somehow visible to cisgender individuals and confirm that non-transgender identities are not constructed at all. In either case, cisgender viewers or social structures assign transgender identity

Transgender individuals can be seen as engaging in social movement from, departing from assigned gender identities rooted in biological sex designation at birth. For some this manifests as a transition from one established pole to another, but regardless of destination. Though individual understandings of transition or
transgender self-identification differ, this movement between genders is seen as a rejection of one’s “real gender.” The deviation from one’s (socio-)biologically prescribed role is so insidious because bigenderism relies on the impossibility of such a movement that undermines the assumed stability of separate, fixed genders rooted in biological sex. When Calleja attempts to rearticulate the movement into virtual worlds as being a value neutral migration, he sees the larger question as the existence of a binary that requires a charted movement in the first place. I would argue that his project might ring true with the constraints transgender individuals feel in transition. Using the comparison of a 3D model of a living room to the “real thing,” Calleja contends that “the difference in physicality” is not as interesting as the overlaps between the two (real and virtual) which “surface when we consider that both computer-generated and physical living rooms are designed artefacts with very specific qualities and affordances” (339). While recognizing how difference between the two has been constructed, Calleja contends more importantly with how both are constituent to a shared set of values and what this point of convergence means when those values are created in service to only one “living room.” When the potential for identity movement or reimagining in virtual worlds is characterized as always derivative of the real world, the real world is maintained as free from the realm of artificial imitation – the rules of gender mandate derivative embodiments of binary genders. To affirm a transgender individual’s transition is to recognize that cisgender identities are not fixed and real, but perhaps also (read: most assuredly) the product of processes of identity existing in social and historical context. Moving forward with a dissection of sex/gender and player/avatar divides requires one to
attend to how these formative processes within the construction of gender that are on display in virtual worlds exist as insidious and hidden in the real world.

Examining non-normative gendered identity construction and embodiment requires one to recognize how social discourse tends to reinforce easy binaries in service of bigenderism. In “Trans as Bodily Becoming: Rethinking the Biological as Diversity, Not Dichotomy,” Riki Lane considers bigenderism and the binaries it constructs apart from male/female. Lane destabilizes the tension between bodies as being either real or constructed that often fuels the differentiation between radical transgender and traditional transsexual identities. To apply a correct or incorrect way of being “trans enough,” this debate fails to contend with the binary identities that constrain transgender identification in the first place. As Calleja attempts to shift focus away from unproductive comparisons of a binary’s poles – claiming that a reconception of separation does not dissolve the conditions under which the binary was formed – Lane similarly pushes away this unproductive nature/nurture debate about trans identities. Establishing her argument, Lane asks if the “why” of gender or trans actually matters. She answers with a resounding yes:

I argue that yes, the “why” matters, for several reasons: first, trans people say it is important in their lived experience, especially around transition; second, the culture-wide obsession with genetic determinism has to be addressed, not just ignored. Moreover, there is a strategic utility to biological discourse, especially if it challenges reductionist biological determinism…and finally, etiology is important in “boundary disputes” about transsexual and transgender categories and rights. (138-9)
Lane’s points regarding the importance of the “why is someone trans” make visible how a naturalized view of gender/sex is imposed from outside of the trans subject, but still deeply felt at the level of the personal. Rather than viewing identification as an isolated event, she attends to how culture shapes and restrict one’s ability to identify in the first place. Lane does not articulate trans identification and bodies as separate from dominant public spheres and conceptions of gender. These identities are not formed in complete opposition to or outside the pull of bigenderism. Lane articulates personal identification within the maelstrom of societal pressures and expectations as an essential piece for figuring trans people in the naturalized landscape of gender.

Dianne Dentice and Michelle Dietert’s work in “Liminal Spaces and the Transgender Experience” approaches a broad spectrum of trans identities to think critically about the liminality that can mark trans processes of identity. They write that “liminality, the polar opposite of the rigid gender binary, opens up possibilities for freedom, rebirth, and eventual social change,” being a space of temporary or permanent “in-betweenness” that is often aligned with individually defined processes of transition (76). While liminality offers the space for “freedom, rebirth and eventual change,” it does not diminish the restriction of a “now” that does not invoke recognition of one’s transition, an individual who is consistently genderfluid, or someone occupying a firm place that is in between genders or outside of them altogether. Liminality provides the opportunity for expression outside of the limits of bigenderism, those limits are still felt in the act of daring to bridge or upset the
absolutism of poles; this upset is apparent in the controversy caused by validating the virtual as equally as formed as the physical.

Understanding the power of bigenderism to maintain opposites through sanctioned identities requires a brief considered of its entanglement with sexual identity, the magnetism that effectively separates and tethers male/female poles. Amy Page and James Peacock’s “Negotiating Identities in a Heteronormative Context” uses the case study of a transgender lesbian (Cory) to explore the complicated relationship of a transgender subject to heteronormativity and its organizing protocols. Their interview with Cory demonstrates how a transgender individual’s navigation of sexual orientation before and after transition ruptures heteronormative socialization processes responsible for the normalization of sex/gender/sexuality. While Page and Peacock forward socialization and constructionism as being the framework to understand identity in a way that Lane would avoid, their analysis focuses on the navigation of a seemingly unsanctioned gender/sex identity combination in a heteronormative context. They describe the toggling between private identification and identification with often stereotypical gendered/sexual representations as being indicative of transgender identity negotiation. Noting that this heteronormative context produces all of us as individuals who look for characteristics in others that allow us to read traditional gender and sexuality, Page and Peacock write that gender non-normative individuals face a more complicated process of negotiating gender and sexuality and “are required to rely on more stereotypical depictions while navigating their new identity” (651).
The system forces transgender and other gender non-normative individuals to engage in a complex process of identification, one prefaced on reflexivity and non-linearity. As they occupy some of the more aggressive departures from gender norms, transgender individuals “jump the tracks” which otherwise lead towards neatly aligned sex/gender/sexual orientation identities. Page and Peacock attempt to mediate the complications of transgender identity formation in their discussion of the processes of transgender and lesbian identification as mediated by male socialization that Cory still follows. While consistent gendered messaging and policing from dominant society based in bigenderism must be factored into an understanding of transgender identity formation, a more critical eye should be turned to how transgender individuals recognize and contend with dominant representations of gender. Rather than see these stereotypical representations as maintained throughout the process of identity formation, it is important to consider the work transgender individuals do in displacing representations that are visibly inconsistent with their identities and bodies.

As a medium, video games provide exaggerated depictions of idealized masculinity and femininity, communicating the dichotomous relationship between the two. In “Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People’s Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions,” Karen Dill and Kathryn Thill write that “[video game] character images tell blatantly sexist stories about gender” (861). These game images craft a narrative about femininity which dictates “that women should be extreme physical specimens, visions of beauty, objects of men’s heterosexual fantasies, and less important than men,” even if they are often allowed
the opportunity to be physically violent themselves (861). These depictions do not differ widely from other media representations of femininity as ancillary to masculinity or existing solely for aesthetic purposes. As Dill and Thill articulate using a framework of communication theories, “unreal symbols in the media contribute to users’ schemas...then influence people’s real life behaviors, thoughts and feelings” (854). As the representations of femininity in video games posit a hyperfemininity in agreement with dominant understandings of femininity, these representations work to reinforce bigenderism. These representations also maintain common misconceptions that the world of video games exists as a boys’ club. Game images – and particularly feminine representation – give masculinity dominance and centrality in game narratives in mainstream games.

For many feminine individuals, the exclusion of femininity in gaming can be detrimental to enjoyment of mainstream games, which are meant to cater to male/masculine players. When feminine characters are present, the maintenance of bigenderism within negative depictions of femininity defines only certain feminine bodies as acceptable, but ultimately crafts gameworlds that are not reflective of the lives of most feminine players. As Elizabeth Hayes details in “Gendered Identities at Play,” female gamers must contend with the “girl games approach.” This approach assumes that female gamers will naturally gravitate towards games that place more importance on social interaction or relationship-building. Hayes criticizes this model “for reinscribing popular stereotypes about women and for seeming to assume that gender differences in gaming are innate and immutable” (25). Girl games have the potential to be popular titles but often are not considered to be
within the realm of “real games,” bearing the onus of “casual gaming” meant to signify lower difficulty or less skill. Assuming girl games as the standard for the disposition of female gamers fails to consider the experiences of female gamers with more mainstream or “male games.”

Using her case studies of two female gamers and wildly popular open-ended single-player role-playing game (RPG) *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, Hayes advocates for “opportunities for, or even the necessity of, improvising identities that do not conform to [gendered] expectations yield the possibility of altered self-conceptions or identities and learning new meanings and practices associated with these identities” (27). Hayes adopts an “identities in practice” model, noting how the female gamers she observed amalgamated their previous life experiences with in-game expectations to engage in an identity-making process that was contingent upon the social norms and identities brought to the game by the player. The act of “playing a boy’s game” and finding ways to utilize life experiences deemed at odds with the gendered expectations for player engagement can be seen as a resistant. While each player felt ill-prepared in their own way to play the game effectively, both were able to find the act of playing pleasurable when developing personally important styles of play.

Hayes’ work speaks to the power of identity play through navigating avatars in new worlds with the knowledge of the world we occupy. José Muñoz’s articulation of “revisionary identification” illustrates the potential for making identity in spaces not designated for the subject: “Revisionary’ is meant to signal different strategies of viewing, reading, and locating ‘self’ within representational
and disparate life-worlds that aim to displace or occlude a minority subject” (26). Muñoz posits his theory of disidentification as an expansion upon revisionary identification. Disidentification is both a performance of resistant and disruptive politics, but also as a means of survival for the minoritarian subject in dominant social spheres. While opening up the possibility for identification that eschews the binary of assimilation/anti-assimilation, he also delineates the parameters of a disidentificatory politics:

It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus...It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in these situations. (12)

As consumers of dominant images, we must accept that these images are constructed within a dominant framework of identity. Hayes and Page & Peacock demonstrate through their case studies the effects of gender and sexual socialization and constructionism that follow individuals into identity formation and play. Though it is not my goal to apply a disidentificatory reading to the subjects in either Hayes’ or Page & Peacock’s studies given my distance from their subjects, Muñoz’s tarrying with those elements of identificatory loci that are questionable to the subject’s own politics or narrative is important in considering the questions they raise. As players come to video games, they work within an agreement that understands the mechanics and requirements of gameplay. Yet, in this approach remains an understanding of the gendered structure of commercial games as a part of the majoritarian sphere and the gamer’s individual politics as tempered by those
same forces. To say that this process of finding one’s self in gendered images that are troubling or “politically dubious” is always a reinscription of the stereotypical or generic parts of gender ignores the possibility for the sort of improvising Hayes sees a subject as being able to do when playing with identity.

Muñoz continues his examination of disidentification as a practice by attending to the disidentificatory process of creating self through fiction. Though Muñoz looks at the literary work of James Baldwin in his application, his view of fiction as a “technology of the self” can be applied to the fictional worlds of video games. Muñoz states that the self found through fiction “is a disidentificatory self whose relation to the social is not overdetermined by universalizing rhetorics of selfhood...is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction” (20). The “real self” found through the practice of disidentifying with fiction complicates easy binaries of real and fiction – a partner to the magic circle – inviting a self that is transformed by the work of fiction as opposed to solely one who acts with it. For the interactive medium of gaming, the player engages as their “real self," but enters the game through an avatar. The collision of this real self and game self ultimately crafts a new self altogether, one that is indicative of the overlap between real and game world. This self that is produced through fiction is constructed through the forces of real and game world that must be understood as spatially separate but joined through shared ideology. Mediating this shared self requires a situation of more than the system that governs constructions of gender (bigenderism) and the processes of identity formation that occur through engagement with the fiction of games. The avatar is a crucial piece of the equation as
the point of player engagement that illuminates how players interact as a piece of
the fiction and player point of engagement is critical to understanding how players
engage ideologies of gender through play and revise their own gendered selves.

The relationship between players and their avatars is indicative of the
latter's function as a player's site of primary identification in a gameworld and
represents the confines of identity play against a game's mechanics. In “Avatar
Creation and Video Game Enjoyment,” Sabine Trepte and Leonard Reinecke observe
that “depending on the player as well as the game characteristics, both similarity [to
avatar] as well as dissimilarity might lead to identification” (172). While seeing an
image quite similar or largely different from one’s self might be thought to engender
identification and counteridentification respectively, Trepte and Reinecke contend
that player identification with avatars is accordant to the appropriate “fit.”

Gameworlds do not represent as solely identificatory spaces or purely mediums for
raw entertainment – as Calleja’s work in deconstructing these binaries reminds the
consumer – but instead requires intentional user engagement with the game's
mechanics. While variations across genre and game style produce different
mechanics and player requirements, players are often confined in navigating their
own identities and those they wish to play against a game’s requirements for victory
or completion. As Trepte and Reinecke find, players engaging in noncompetitive
play and who are happy with their lives more often prefer similar avatars, while
those who are playing competitive games and are unhappy with their lives are more
likely to prefer dissimilar avatars (180).
The effect of gender/sex roles on player identification with avatars upsets this overall observation on the effect of player-avatar difference. Female participants in Trepte and Reinecke’s study showed a greater negative correlation to player identification in competitive gaming with dissimilar avatars, because “avatars do not only differ from their actual selves, but also from their gender role, that is their ought self” (181). The representations Dill & Thill discuss in mainstream gaming – much of which has competitive components – can be used to argue that the images of female avatars in most games are in line with the prescribed hegemonic/ought feminine self. When female avatars are present, the female gamer’s actual self in relation to that image is negotiated with the dominant and harmful expectations of femininity that produce both player and avatar; the ought self is the issue. In Calleja’s example of the living room, the furnishing of the virtual living room to mirror the non-virtual living room is most important not in the former’s fabrication but in the assumption that the “real” ideal embodied is correct. And, when the virtual living room is devoid of those furnishings which could be used to play at a desired real-world living room that is divergent from the real-world ideal of a living room, what is the disenfranchised gamer left with?

The reality of under- or misrepresentation of female characters in video games creates the dissonant conditions that motivate many feminine gamers to take alternative approaches to the game’s material for fuller identification. In “The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance,” Katherine Angel Cross locates the possibility for roleplaying, as it is a core component of many video games, to craft identity through enactment and self-exploration. A transsexual
woman who credits her experience with MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games) as helping her discover and construct her identity, Cross recognizes that transgender identification is not an intended part of the gaming experience, but sees the act of roleplaying as allowing “people a means of safely and comprehensively exploring a subjectivity from which they were otherwise restricted” (75). For Cross, pleasure in role-playing is found in identification with an avatar that is perhaps only liminally dissimilar from the player; there is, upon recognition, the potential for a transgender player to move towards avatar-player similarity.

Cross, in discussing a futuristic sci-fi/fantasy role-playing tabletop game, articulates the future-looking role-playing that can take place in the fantastical realms of games. Role-playing requires a disidentificatory “permanent recognition of social contingency, of one’s agency in the midst of oppression’s crucible, and the ability to find one’s self enchanted with the possibilities that can spread before one” (75). In other words a multiple recognition that pushes the transsexual or transgender gamer to be enchanted by a future-looking fantasy that could happen even within one’s social conditions. For Cross, role-playing has the potential to begin a trans gamer’s process of transition and provides the space to communicate identities in game worlds that can be both vastly different yet similar to the worlds we occupy.

As the construction and communication of identity through role-playing is contingent upon both players’ situation of themselves within social context and the fluctuating proximity of their character to their real world identities, the
communicative negotiation of transgender identities provides a mutual
(real/virtual) reference point. Nuru articulates “gender identities as constituents of
communication whereby self-concepts, enactments of self, and understandings of
self are fused through interaction with others” (283). Virtual spaces offer a different
set of enactments as has been detailed, but the interactions with others in single
player console gameworlds are of particular interest in that often games do not
involve interaction with non-virtual individuals. Individuals who play single-player
console games and can be seen to miss out on what Nuru articulates as the
relational layer of identity:

In the relational layer, identity is co-created through a process of
interaction with others...identity is formed in relation to others’
perceptions about the individual...through roles and relationships to
other people...through the very establishment of a relationship as an
identifying unit. (284)

Accepting the bleeding of real world values into the fabric of gameworlds means
avoiding the trap of the magic circle and contending with the felt realness of in-
game interaction. Conversations with NPCs (non-player characters), making in-
game decisions, choices of fashion/armor/playstyle are at the mercy of in-game
value systems, with various individual game titles providing more or less interaction
with respect to any of these characteristics. The interactivity of gaming promises a
degree of reaction from the game and the validation of player choices about
character appearance, personality, and identity may be validated, invalidated, or
even ignored by gameworlds.
The other layers of identity articulated by Nuru compound the relational for a more expansive reading of the identity negotiation that occurs in the context of gaming. The personal layer consists of self-identification and understandings of the self, the enacted involves performance of self, and in the communal “group membership is the focus of identity in which societal ascriptions about identity are based on membership” (284). Negotiating the personal/enacted and relational may involve anxiety and fear for the transgender subject, as others’ incorrect readings of a transgender person’s sense of self and performance of self can result in erasure, misgendering, and/or harm. Game spaces can be seen to mediate this particular pitfall even as certain interactions may ignore a potential trans identity applied by the gamer. Within gameworlds, the communal layer operates to define appropriate identities in relation to the parameters of gender, race, and class – among other categories that may be game-specific and without direct out-of-game counterparts – and has the potential to enforce certain performances or interactions which may be inconsistent with the fuller identity a gamer is trying to enact and communicate. In articulating the role of these layers for the gamer in-game, it is important to consistently contend with the “double duty” these layers pull, the personal, enacted, relational, and communal functioning simultaneously as player-negotiated real-world and in-game frames for identity.

This projects rests at the intersection of the erasure of trans identities created by bigenderism and the negotiation of virtual femininities that can be dissonant for transfeminine gamers. The precarious nature of transfeminine gamers as culturally removed from the box provided for femininity at any given moment
outlines a disidentificatory politics as a potential answer for a praxis of celebration and resistance. As these discordant and resistant identities are created, they must also be negotiated in their communication within game worlds and ability to carry over to the politics of the real world. Disidentifying with often deeply flawed feminine representations in mainstream games instigates a discussion about the nature of transfemininity as constructed or artificial in a way that cisfemininity is not, inviting a startling parallel between the real and the virtual and sex-assigned-at-birth and gender identity. The separation of the poles of both binaries and the possibility for transformative identity development in the real world that identity play in the virtual world affords are at the center of this project. Utilizing the personal narratives of transfeminine gamers allows the consideration how transgender gamers interact with the medium of video games in ways that are mediated by, but resist false binaries of gender and reality.

**METHODS**

In approaching the topic of identity play for transfeminine gamers, I saw the most effect method of research to be the collection of qualitative data through individual interviews. By focusing on the individual narratives of a small pool of participants, it is my goal to tease out how video games have factored into and affect their personal processes of identification. Though participant responses are linked to consider shared experiences of identity formation that resonate with the literature I have reviewed for this project, by no means are my findings meant to be indicative of all transfeminine gamers or people. For this project, I have also received full IRB approval from Simmons College to work with human subjects.
The majority of my participant collection occurred through electronic means, utilizing mailing lists populated by LGBTQ or feminist-identified folks. One participant was enlisted through prior acquaintance, while another was found through a mutual connection; in both these cases, potential ‘outing’ of participations by association was mediated by the practices of confidentiality and anonymity taken for all subjects. In total, my population consisted of four different subjects, varying across age (18-40), gender identity, race, geographic location and other axes of identity as participants chose to share them. The only consistent unifying trait of all participants was that they identified themselves as DMAB (designated-male-at-birth) people falling along the transfeminine spectrum and as gamers. For my recruitment materials, the only criteria listed for participation were that participants must be DMAB and transfeminine. DMAB transfeminine was chosen as the umbrella terminology to organize all participants due to its recognition of birth sex as being a category applied from outside the individual and the wide variety of non-cisgender, feminine identities that can fall under transfeminine. Emphasis is only placed on sex designated at birth to better illuminate the strict separation of avatar and player that corresponds with the primacy often afforded to sex as a category over gender identity. In moving from a male designation at birth to a transfeminine identity, participants’ experiences of gender resonate with the movement situated between avatar and player.

My baseline recruitment of DMAB transfeminine individuals was supported by the proliferation of game culture into mainstream culture, making identification as a gamer optional. While experience with gaming adds the potential to dissect
personal engagement with the interactive medium, I was also considerate of the
diverse experiences with gaming I would hypothetically find among gamer-
identified participants. As individual interest in genre (first-person shooters,
fighting games, simulations, etc.) would produce narratives that may be
representative of only one subset of game culture, I was attendant to the possibility
that non-gamers could have a wider knowledge of video games as outside or more
detached observers and consumers. As all subjects identified as gamers, the
separation of gamer and non-gamer in the data was not an issue I experienced.
Nevertheless, the openness to including the narratives of DMAB transfeminine non-
gamers was crucial to the methodological framework I was employing to
deconstruct harsh binaries between in-game and real worlds.

Each participant underwent one audio-recorded interview, utilizing various
video chat services. Interviews were planned to last 1-2 hours, but actually ranged
from 44 minutes to 1 hour 40 minutes. Depending on length and content, interviews
were transcribed in their entirety or by sections. In addition to having editorial
control over their completed transcription, all participants were encouraged to use
pseudonyms of their own choosing to appear on all file names and within the write-
up; two participants declined the use of pseudonyms. Given the potential
vulnerability of participants depending on varying levels of “being out,” names of
locations, events attended, and any other possible identifying details not
immediately related to this research have been omitted from their responses.

As participants were collected electronically, they varied by geographic
location. Participants were not directly asked about the effects of their location on
their identity development, but rather were asked to speak on their immediate environments and discuss those in context. Participants are asked to consider the differences between in-game worlds and everyday life, which conjures notable differences based on day-to-day activities, public interactions, and ability to express femininity. All participant locations are presented in their individual descriptions, but are not used to make generalized claims about the politics around transfemininity in any given area. Though far from articulating a universal transfeminine experience, my decision to pull from a wide range of locales is part availability of participants and partly to centralize the potential for identity play video games carry as a medium that can be widely accessed.

Following in the same vein as location, participant variation among my established demographic categories (age, race, gender identity) and identities personally provided by participants did not receive alternative treatment or lines of questioning. With the necessary exception of gender identity, participants were not asked direct questions about these identities, unless they were addressed outside of initial demographic data collection or were discussed in context as important parts of their individual identity formation process. My ‘ask’ for the three aforementioned categories and an additional inquiry into “any other axis of identity you find important for me to know” framed my reporting of identity as rooted in participant agency and personal impact. The goal here was to avoid an additive model of identity and instead embrace a holistic approach.

Each participant underwent one audio-recorded interview, utilizing various video chat services. Interviews were planned to last 1-2 hours, but actually ranged
from 44 minutes to 1 hour 40 minutes. Depending on length and content, interviews were transcribed in their entirety or by sections. In addition to having editorial control over their completed transcription, all participants were encouraged to use pseudonyms of their own choosing to appear on all file names and within the write-up; two participants declined the use of pseudonyms. Given the potential vulnerability of participants depending on varying levels of “being out,” names of locations, events attended, and any other possible identifying details not immediately related to this research have been omitted from their responses.

For each interview, I followed a semi-fluid two-part set of questions. The interview questions were designed to address the major themes of self-identification, identification with feminine images, pleasure in gaming, and perception by others. At the onset of each interview, participants were informed of the separation of the interview questions into the two categories of (trans)feminine identity and video games. All participants were encouraged to view these categories as open, inviting discussion of video games as they arose in answering questions geared towards (trans)feminine identities and vice-versa. In forecasting the structure of the interview and encouraging movement among the sections, it was my goal to situate the two loci of my research separately so as to look closely at both, while ultimately attending to their interconnectedness and simultaneity.

Within the section on (trans)feminine identity – written as such given the nature of questions about femininity generally and transfemininity personally – participants were asked about personal definitions of femininity and transfemininity, how femininity was worn or presented personally, interactions
with others, representations of participants’ ideal femininity, and the uniqueness of DMAB femininity and barriers to full expression for transfeminine folks. The definitional questions are useful in constructing individual participant understandings of femininity and transfemininity in lieu of adopting established, outside definitions; this is foundational to centering the individual narratives of participants. The next three questions aim at forming how femininity is embodied, how these embodiments reflect participant-selected images of femininity, and how both are folded into publics that may produce dissonance based in outside perceptions or readings of femininity. Participants are then asked to consider more closely those spaces which bar feminine expression to the degree the participant prefers and to conceive of spaces in which a fuller expression of one’s femininity can occur.

The video game portion of the interview focuses first on what makes gaming pleasant or enjoyable for each participant, immediately followed by the potentially more negative questions about feminine and transgender (specifically transfeminine) representation in video games. Dealing with the tension between enjoyment and understanding the problematic nature of (trans)feminine identities in video games is crucial to the questions that follow about picking and creating characters. Understanding player-controlled avatars as the primary means of interaction in most video game worlds, participant responses regarding their connection with and the pressure or ability to choose certain characters is crucial to defining the parameters of a gendered gaming experience. The interview concluded by asking participants to reflect on what they personally felt it meant to be both
transfeminine and a gamer, providing the opportunity for them to bridge the gap between both identities.

As I myself am a DMAB transfeminine gamer, I understand my position as both a boon to my research as well as presenting potential bias. I see my location under the same umbrella of “DMAB transfeminine gamer” as allowing greater ease in discussing identity and gaming with participants, as this is largely not an “insider looking in” approach to this community. I do recognize that both my bounding of a community around gender identity, birth-assigned sex, and gaming has the potential to erase differences that occur among participants within this community. In creating the space for participants to recognize and speak to other parts of their identity, I hope to mediate some of the potential dangers of a large identificatory category. In this way, I have also striven to be critical of how my own experience as a member of this group may differ from participants, and have been conscious of structuring my analysis around participant responses as opposed to my personal experiences; I recognize the impossibility of complete impartiality.

In considering the limitations of this study, the most formidable is the size and relative scatter of my population. Though it was not my intention, my research can make no claim to representing a significant majority of transfeminine experiences. My study can only make claim to investigating how the individual experiences of transfeminine gamers deal with in-game and out-of-game logics of gender and what these narratives cause us to consider about gender and identity play. An additional limitation in regards to data collection was the restriction to using video conferencing as opposed to face-to-face interviews.
FINDINGS

In detailing my findings, I loosely follow the format of my interview, but similarly have allowed flexibility as I see participant responses best flowing and linking across themes. I begin by introducing each participant alongside their personal definition of transfemininity before transitioning into a more general discussion of femininity as a whole. In discussing femininity, I discuss the distinction participants noted between cisfemininity and transfemininity, the aesthetics of femininity, and what it means to “look feminine.” Continuing a discussion of femininity, I detail the feminine traits participants see as ideal in a variety of representations, as well as to what degree certain traits can be accessed or emulated given the limits on presentation they experience as transfeminine individuals. Following their responses about these “real world” femininities, I move to discuss how participants experience gameworlds as positive, yet complicated alternate realms for players. Participant experiences with often constraining character creation/selection options and mixed feelings regarding cis- and transfeminine representations are then provided, considering how avatar options and representations frame identity.

Though all identifying as DMAB transfeminine gamers, my participants come to their transfeminine identities from different social locations and as such, have different working definitions of transfemininity. In introducing each participant, I provide their personal definition of what transfemininity means, so as to situate their individual self-descriptions alongside their personal understandings of what it means to be transfeminine.
Spiral, a 40-year-old Black genderqueer/fluid parent and animator, identifies transfemininity as a transgressive and personal version of femininity that is about “challenging what people assume to be feminine in the first place.” Ze notes the role of hir body in creating potential dissonance for others based on conceptions of “the correct type of femininity.”

Ivan, who is 22 years old and identifies as genderqueer/fluid and white, sees transfemininity as “having an image of yourself that doesn’t fit what society tells you you should fit.” He expands by noting personal experiences of embodying qualities that he doesn’t see as masculine or feminine, and similarly echoes Spirals’ bodily dissonance in terms of not being able to present conventional femininity through discussing personal experience with body dysphoria.

Paige, a 37-year-old software/game developer who identifies as a Caucasian non-binary trans femme initially described transfemininity as “someone who’s designated male-at-birth but does not identify as male.” Expanding their definition, Paige talked on their experiences with having to teach themself as an adult various feminine-coded personal tasks such as applying makeup or determining bra size, noting that a transfeminine individual may not absorb these in youth as someone who is birth-assigned-female might. Like the other participants, they also discussed body parts – hollow cheeks – that are not generally read as feminine, but saw this characteristic as one of many which allowed them to “layer subtle shades of gender on top of each other.”

Ana, an 18-year old white Christian female described transfemininity as a part of her identity by virtue of fitting the label, but noted that the degree to which
people identify with or use the term is based on personal preference. She associates the term with its difference from “cisfemininity,” noting how transfemininity is rooted in accepting that difference and the way others react to each type of femininity.

While each participant provided an individualized definition of transfemininity, commonality was found among all in their articulating a definitive separation between cisfemininity and transfemininity that is based in bodily appearance, outside perception, and a conscious identification. Paige stressed that femininity in general is automatically political, but gave transfemininity the modifier of “revolutionary.” For them, it is a “disruptive kind of political” that requires work to be “quiet” and does not easily fade into the background. Embracing this disruptive quality of transfemininity fits with their articulation of femme identity as a specifically queer embodiment of femininity. Paige sees femme as queer in how it “subverts expectations,” often playing with feminine appearance in exaggerative ways – bright colored clothing, body adornments, long pointed fingernails – that are done in ways that are femme-centered and often purposely abrasive to men and dominant expectations for femininity.

In talking about what can be defined as feminine appearance or expression more generally, participants discussed the tendency for femininity to be more gregarious or aesthetically invested. Participants listed items such as dresses and skirts, makeup, and tight clothing as being associated with femininity, but acknowledged that their descriptions of femininity and what constituted feminine appearance were based on generic or stereotypical depictions of femininity. Spiral,
though describing hir feminine style as “a lot of dresses and skirts and thigh high
socks,” consistently returned to a refrain of “But they’re just things!” For hir, a
recognition of objects and mannerisms associated with femininity as being actively
gendered by hirself and others was crucial to identifying with femininity. Ivan also
hesitated in describing what he understood as feminine, wanting to avoid “the
stereotypical things...’cause that’s not what [femininity] is.” For all participants,
femininity existed at least partially as something that could be “put on” and its
reception as feminine rested on fulfilling certain parameters of what appropriate
femininity looks like.

“Looking feminine” to others was a varying experience for participants. Ivan
and Spiral both expressed feeling as if others perceived and interacted with them as
they would gay men, though Spiral added that the way people perceived hir
ethnic/racial identity led to increased suspicion about hir sexuality: “I don’t use a lot
of what people assume to be slang that my ethnicity would lead to, you know? So,
people automatically start assuming things about my sexuality.” Here, Spiral noted
hir deviation from expected images and linguistic modes of Blackness as being
specific to hir experience of gender non-conformity. For Ivan, femininity felt like a
trait that was most apparent when he interacted with or was around straight men.
In both cases, their femininities are only acknowledged as perceived deviations
from masculine norms for racial and/or sexual identities.

Paige, who reported being perceived as feminine most of the time by people
with whom they interacted described those people who misgendered them as
picking up on physical cues such as their height. They also articulated a deviation
from femininity in the way people perceived their profession, noting that computer programming lends itself to a particular type of “masculine, nerdy guy.” As Paige also spoke about the legitimacy masculinity is automatically afforded within the field, representing a dichotomy of gender in their field regarding ability (men are tech savvy, women and gender non-conforming people are not). Ana echoed this sentiment of automatically ascribed masculine capability, describing how people tended to see her “as more competent because they view [her] as masculine,” even though she joked this was often a false assumption. Spiral and Ivan also provided examples of the perceived differences in ability based on gender expression or assumed gender identity, listing both physical and personality traits of weakness or passivity as being applied incorrectly to feminine bodies and individuals.

When asked about the traits that represented their ideal femininities and what representations they saw embodying these traits, participants articulated a mix of positive physical and personality traits. Ana discussed her attachment to the characters of Monica and Rachel in *Friends* for embodying femininity in their personalities and their interactions with others. Other participants were quick to point out action-oriented female characters in video games, films, and comics. Ivan, acknowledging masculine video game culture, described playing/seeing feminine characters as being pleasurable in the ability “to just show up and kick someone’s ass as a pretty woman.” While participants had different conceptions of what beauty looked like in their ideal feminine representations, a mixture of the appropriate aesthetic and physical ability and agency were important.
Spiral found himself gravitating towards images of comic book superheroines, both because of their form-fitting athletic wear and the power they possess. Ze described the most recent incarnation of Power Girl as “this black woman who is just like tall and broad-shouldered and powerful.” While Power Girl represented an ideal aesthetic for Spiral, her physical appearance and strength represents a departure from hegemonic feminine appearance due to her frame and blackness - though comic book heroes/heroines often have multiple incarnations of different people under the same moniker, the change from a white character to a character of color is often met with fan outrage. Paige also found inspiration in female characters who they found to break from negative feminine stereotypes, citing more action-oriented characters such as Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Mako from *Pacific Rim*, and Furiosa from *Mad Max* as ideals. Though dissimilar from each other in certain ways, Paige articulated femme-centeredness as a common thread, in that “they don’t let the men in their lives define who they are.”

Participants saw many personality traits of their ideal representations being parts they could emulate in their real lives. This isn’t surprising given each participant’s inclusion of social interaction or relationship-building as a part of femininity, but is complicated when participants describe difficulties in having their feminine identity read by others they interact with. While participants describe embodying feminine ways of relating to others, the relationships they engage in are also filtered through the perceptions of others. Ivan describes his personality as more feminine than his appearance and notes how the reception of his more feminine personality by cisgender women manifests in his inclusion in
conversations that women typically wouldn't talk to men about. Ana also described the binary perception of masculinity as closed off or unemotional and femininity as open and communicative, seeing a higher tendency for women to talk about their problems with other women. To varying degrees, participants talked about their ability to feel validated and be communicated with as feminine as being mediated by the safety of a location and the company they were around, mostly in more intimate settings or with closer friends and family. Physical aspects of femininity – given the dominant understandings of femininity participants articulated – were more difficult for participants to embody.

In describing their feelings of being restricted in feminine presentation, participants gave a range of reasons for not presenting in ways truer to who they are. Physical safety, freedom from harassment, discomfort in standing out, and needing to have ‘the talk’ (explaining a trans identity to others) were common reasons. Ana’s example of bathroom usage demonstrates how this censure plays out in highly sex-segregated spaces:

Because if I’m presenting male, I can use the men’s bathroom without being worried. It’s still uncomfortable, but I don’t have to worry about being, you know, called or beat up or whatever. But, if I’m presenting female, I have the choice to either go in the men’s room and be uncomfortable and get beat up or go in the women’s and maybe get the police called on me. In public, there’s a lot of sort of danger.

For Ana, censure comes from an inability to embody a femininity that will be read by cisgender men or women as unquestionably female. Where this same fear of not
“passing” was a part of other participants’ experiences, a return to having the wrong or an unsuitable body was discussed. In thinking about his sex designation, Ivan said he felt trapped, that “it’s not even something I can really decide…it’s just, ‘This is who you are.” Ana and Ivan both articulate the confines of the sexed body as it as strictly aligned with gender, but like Paige and Spiral, see video games as providing the possibility to play with and resist their sex-assigned-at-birth. The experience of feeling forced into one gender or sex and being restricted based on gendered perceptions allowed game spaces to become spaces of desired gender performance for participants.

Understanding video game worlds as alternate or fantasy realms was important to all participants and part of their overall enjoyment in gaming. Alongside the exploration of a different world, participants saw the possibility to embody different identities pleasurable. Spiral cited the ability to tailor characters to the player’s liking as a major pull given the possibility of creating “a character that kind of looks like the female version of myself.” Ivan expressed a similar sentiment, describing the selection or creation of female characters with the analogy of looking into a mirror: “If you could look in a mirror and see yourself in the way you wanted to look that would be ideal.” Ana and Paige also note the personal investment and joy that coincide with being able to choose or create female characters. Ana described having a hard time playing games where there isn’t the option for a feminine character, while Paige noted that she generally preferred female characters but also enjoys creating purposely dissimilar characters to explore diverse perspectives. Overall, female characters in video games provided
participants the ability to play out the fantasy of a more ideal feminine version of themselves or embody femininity in a world alternate to their reality.

Interacting in gameworlds as feminine was a largely positive experience, often because of the way those interactions were often reliant on recognition of (assumedly cis) character gender. Paige describes their experiences with interactions in games as differing from real-world interactions in their certainty: “I don’t have to wrestle with the ‘Am I going to pass or not?’ and if and when I don’t pass, ‘How is this person going to react?’ which is almost always very front and center to my mind when I’m dealing with real people.” Ivan spoke to a similar experience in discussing the Fire Emblem series. Addressing the inclusion of a support system in combat that allows male and female characters to pair up for increased power and survivability, he speaks to the pleasure of playing a female character interacting with an assumedly straight cis male character in a way he couldn’t otherwise; this feeling also extended to the pursuable romances in the game. In both examples, the fixed gender of gameworlds served to produce environments free of misgendering and allowed for relationships structured by the recognition of self-identified gender.

The ability to play with identity and choose or create feminine characters was constrained for the participants in two ways: 1) the option to play a feminine/female character is not available in the game or 2) the types of feminine/female characters that can be chosen or created are insufficient. Although availability of female characters and the options for their appearance, personality, and character creation options will vary by title, the existence of any customizable
option as an identificatory locus provides a better understanding of participant attitudes toward femininity. Paige describes the difficulty of making a character that looks like them and looks trans, differing from heteronormative femininity in that they don’t neatly pass as cisgender, but that still remains attractive by Paige’s standards. For them, feeling like this is a possibility is very unusual in games. Spiral discusses a similar struggle in character creation with the MMORPG *Guild Wars 2*, given the standard of making all feminine characters overly sexual ze observes:

I wanted to make a character as neutral as possible. And of course, you can’t do that, because no matter how much you decrease the features...I could only go so far with that...no matter what I did, I couldn’t make this character exactly how I wanted.

Spiral struggled at resisting norms of beauty for women as written into the character creation process for a female avatar, hir desire to make a more gender ambiguous female character held within a constrained range of appropriate feminine expression. In wanting to produce a flat-chested character with big legs that remained lithe overall, ze turned to creating a male character only to find that “the skinniest guy is more muscular than the average human.” As participants found their preference for character gender and body type varying, all expressed frustration at the gendered limits of character creation that hindered the ability to play as their ideal feminine characters.

When character creation wasn’t an option, most participants commented on the nature of hypersexual or conventionally attractive female or feminine characters. Ivan was pessimistic about the option to play as female in more
mainstream gaming, believing it to be either a pandering to women for an increase in sales or a sexualized figure “put there for men to fantasize about.” Paige articulated a set of three feminine archetypes in mainstream games, which include motherly or subservient background characters unimportant to the game, women “who are important foreground characters and are hugely sexualized in a way that is extremely male gaze-y and problematic,” and “ostensibly male characters that are feminine in order to be gay-coded so that they make for creepier villains.”

In discussing transgender – and specifically transfeminine – representation in video games, participants provided mixed responses, noting the extremely sparse and dubious appearances as potentially pleasurable. One example most participants jokingly mentioned was Birdo from the *Super Mario Bros.* series, a pink dinosaur who wears and is presented as confused about their gender; Birdo enters the series as a villain, but eventually becomes situated an ally as Yoshi’s female counterpart. Ivan described feminine-coded male characters when asked about trans characters, saying that for him, “if they’re supposed to be like a very feminine male character, they’re normally a villain...they’re literally monsters.” Paige provided the example of Flea from *Chrono Trigger*, a male villain who appears as highly feminine, even bearing an alternate form named “Diva Flea.” This outward appearance as feminine is compounded by combat abilities such as “Blow Kiss” and “Rainbow Beam” and the personal item “Flea’s Bustier,” but the character ultimately self-identifies as male. Though Paige describes Flea as “a pretty problematic character from a number of perspectives,” they also note one of Flea’s comebacks to confusion about his gender
as a poignant and inspiring moment of gender transgression as a younger gamer:
“Male, female. What’s the difference? Power is beautiful and I’ve got the power.”

For transfeminine characters, the ultimate dilemma is the treatment of transgender identity disclosure. Both Spiral and Paige discussed Poison from the Final Fight and the Street Fighter series. Poison exists as a hypersexual feminine character who is somewhere between villain and a neutral moral alignment and depending on the individual game and localization, is described as a transsexual woman or a cross-dressing man. While both Spiral and Paige expressed some enjoyment at the idea of Poison, both agreed that her existence was marred by insensitive remarks by other characters that questioned the validity of her womanhood. As Paige described her, “she’s constantly on display and [like Birdo], her transness is somewhere between a fetish and a joke.” When transgender identities were present in video games, all participants described their gender as often being used to communicate an evil alignment and usually was something that was under the scrutiny of other game characters. As Ana sarcastically remarked, “You have to know. You can’t not know. Duh.”

DISCUSSION

This paper takes as its project the examination of transfeminine gamers’ engagement with video games as sites of identity play. Participant responses articulated video game spaces as offering the potential for exploring new identities, but demonstrate through their experiences the carrying over of dominant ideologies into video games in ways that break the fantasy of video games. This breakdown of the magic circle demonstrates the tension that transfeminine gamers must
negotiate, the ability to play around with new identities in game worlds still
predicated on the rigid adherence of those digital identities to the rules of gender. In
placing participant responses within existing literature on transgender identity and
video games, I would like to focus on three areas in particular: (1) the dual
reinforcement of male/female and cisgender/transgender binaries in game worlds,
(2) disidentification required in character creation/selection, and (3) the ability of
digital identities to reconstruct self.

The false divide between the realness of our world and the fiction of game
worlds creates the conditions for the maintenance of bigenderism thorugh the
binaries of male/female and cisgender/transgender. Calleja’s critique of the magic
circle highlights the artificiality placed on movement as a failing of the binary that
structures the magic circle. To understand game worlds as separate both denies the
ideologies of gender/sex inherent in the creation and invisibilizes those structures
within game world’s due to their ultimate meaninglessness (as entertainment). Both
the positive experiences in game worlds regarding the ability to embody
unquestioned, stable gender identities and the negative experiences in the real
world of being unable to meet criteria for acceptable femininity as told by my
participants demonstrates the rigid and static quality of gender tied to outward
appearance and expression. All participants in this study reported difficulty in
expressing femininity fully in all spaces and what they felt to be their bodily non-
conformity to hegemonic femininity. The insidiousness with which the rules of
gender functioned at the level of the body and expression both in and outside game
worlds served as a reminder to participants about the artificiality of non-cisgender
femininity in its inability to be fully expressed alongside cisgender femininity. The role of the biological in fixing binary gender against self-identification is at the core of this distinction.

While the interactive power of video games as a medium allowed participants to play around with and resist these norms through personal performance and choice within gameworlds to an extent, the biological imperative of bigenderism still maintained the limits of gender within these spaces. The naturalization of male and female genders as related to sex-assigned-at-birth presents a challenge to transfeminine subjects by crafting ideal appearance for feminine bodies that are situated in particular physical traits and cues. Though participants discussed varying degrees of success with presenting or embodying what they saw as elements of feminine appearance through dress or mannerisms, the ultimate decision of their “passing” was in the perceptions of others who determined their successful adherence to the rules of gender. Transfeminine gamers are often asked to choose between dominant representations of femininity as passive or hypersexual and the rare transfeminine representations that are overwhelmingly evil or played up for comedic effect. The extent to which transfeminine representations are often male characters upon which feminine appearance is superficially placed also speaks to a construction of transfemininity as costume piece or theatrics, a gimmick that can be included in a game to apolitically disrupt gender norms while reaffirming the naturalness of birth-assigned sex underneath gender expression.
Given that all participants agreed that representations of both (majority cis) femininity and transfemininity in available characters were either problematic or missing, their identification with these images notably undergoes at minimum a revisionary identification as articulated by Muñoz. Participant awareness about the confines of gender in their daily lives and the absurdity of attaching fixed gendered meanings to objects and bodies both arise from a subject position that sees itself outside of the majoritarian sphere. Transfeminine embodiment and disidentification with female or feminine-coded characters does not arise as an uncomplicated attachment to those characters, but one that understands how these characters are not made to serve their needs. By engaging with these characters in gameworlds for the purpose of playing with and developing identity before, during, and/or after personal processes of transformation, participants in this study are engaging in the political work of identity formation where it is otherwise only encouraged within a context of entertainment-value exploration. The implications of these performances are not necessarily felt outside of the gamer’s individual sphere, but the filling in of game spaces while recognizing those elements at contention with transfeminine identity are utilizing this medium for their own means without forgiving its trespasses against them.

Though recognizing the role of dominant concepts of gender in video games as functioning on behalf of bigenderism is important, trans identity negotiation should not be understood as working solely with the raw materials of dominant gender. Transgender identity formation does not occur from static representations of identity enforced by dominant culture, but from identities in context that are
practiced in game worlds. A criticism of Page and Peacock's work for giving too much credence to stereotypical binary enactments of gender demonstrates the similar/dissimilar enactments of gender transfeminine individuals engage in. Rather than subscribe to understandings of gender as so strict as sex-assigned at birth, the identity processes of transgender people invite diffuse conceptions of gender identity. Trans people are required to read dominant identities within the social framework of bigenderism and in their various contexts in games, but are forced to navigate them through a perceived distance from cisgender expectations of gender. This creates a fundamentally different experience of gender that is predicated on departure, movement, and opposition. The social worlds of games provide the perfect opportunity for situating oppositional selves in worlds removed from reality but visibly structured by the real world.

As gamers maneuver these game worlds in sophisticated ways through the use of avatars and with the ideological trappings of the real world in tow, the ability to communicate identity and self within virtual worlds rests on the congruence of in-game reception of gender with out-of-game understandings of communicating identity. Nuru's articulation of layers of identity matches with the necessarily contradictory and overlapping strategies my participants engaged with, navigating personal understandings of gender with expressions that are mediated by media representation, interactions with others, and a larger sense of their identities within social structures. In mirroring our world's ideological framework, video game worlds reinforce binary gender behavior by utilizing gender in in-game interactions. Communicating stable gender is a requirement of game worlds precisely because of
the way it used as a baseline for character interaction and the ways outliers are used to delineate deviation. The characters of both Flea and Poison are indicative of the structuring of gender among character interactions and how transfeminine identification with either rests on a re-reading of dominant definitions of either.

CONCLUSION

Though video games operate as spaces for exploration, imagination, and play for many gamers, they present themselves to transfeminine gamers as flawed constructs carrying the remnants of dominant and oppressive bigenderism. By contending with these less fantastical fantasy realms, transfeminine gamers do the work of locating themselves in part because they derive pleasure from the act, but also for the simple fact that a game world may represent the only space for the gender transgression that most resonates with them. To frame video game worlds as strictly problematic entities that cannot escape our reality is not the answer to this plight. Instead, considering how transfeminine people make space in both realms, and how these identifications are filtered through the bigenderism structuring both the physical and the virtual is required. My participants saw video games as an opportunity to re-articulate trans identities in ways that combat limiting perceptions of gender and offer the potential for a reconfigured future. Picking up a controller does not mean escape from one’s world or complicity in a new one. It instead opens the possibility for an altered self, one that must be seen as legitimate. If those aspects of the physical realm that constrain and damage transfeminine gamers transfer over to the digital, so must possibilities for real resistance and self-identification.
WORKS CITED


