

SUBTLE PRESENCE AND (DIS)IDENTIFICATION: TRANSMASCULINITY IN NARRATIVE VIDEO GAMES

Keywords

Transmasculine, video game representations, transgender, trans studies, film and media studies, autoethnography, narrative analysis

ABSTRACT

The past two decades have seen the emergence of transmasculinity in various contexts, from trans theory to gender identity politics (Stryker 2008, Nagoshi & Brzuzy 2010, Gottzén & Straube 2016) including the introduction of transmasculine representation in the media entertainment industry (Billard 2019, Banks 2021, Thach 2021, McLaren et al. 2021, Abbott 2022). Authors have shown the risks of such emergence in the media, as adherence to hegemonic masculinity and stereotypization (Banks 2021, Billard 2019, Kosciesza 2022). Whereas several transmasculine representations have been discussed by film and media scholars (Cavalcante 2017, Banks 2021, Billard 2019), the discourse in the field of game studies could benefit from further investigation. The purpose of this study is therefore to analyze the emergence of transmasculinity in narrative-based video games, by selecting a set of characters and observing their shared characteristics, assessing whether they too present stereotypization or hegemonic masculinity.

The adjective *transmasculine* is used here to refer to individuals assigned female at birth who identify as masculine in a culture characterized by gender binarity. Examples of transgender men are noted on the TV and movie screen (Cavalcante 2017, Banks 2021), but several of such are considered aligned with the cisgender and hegemonic interpretation of masculinity (Billard 2019) – consisting of aggressive behavior, heterosexuality, courage, and competitiveness according to Connell & Messerschmidt 2005. Transgender masculinity instead proposes a reappropriation of alternative and delicate aesthetics (Billard 2019), self-reliance, and emotional control (Anzani et al. 2022), and finally detachment from the cisgender male body (Gottzén & Straube 2016).

Scholars have argued that transgender characters in video games are often portrayed as stereotypical, instead of being more accurately developed (Ruberg 2019, Rudolph, Shaw e Schnorrenberg 2019). Thach (2021) analyzes some of the common patterns of transgender characters, demonstrating how often they are portrayed as ambiguous, having traumatic experiences, or even lying to the player character. Kosciesza (2022) shows how transgender characters are very rarely explored to their full potential and are instead employed for the sole purpose of sustaining the protagonist. Many of the transgender representations are trans women or genderfluid characters, which suggests a scarcity of trans men. Similarly, the video game independent industry and their media coverage sees the presence of many trans women, as Anne Anthropy and Maddy Thorson, while trans masculine designers have not yet risen to public fame. This is even more relevant as several transmasculine individuals consider themselves

members of the gaming community, and many employ the process of avatar creation as an act of gender-affirmation (Baldwin 2018, Morgan, et al. 2020, Rivera 2022).

Given all the above, this paper proposes to study transmasculine representations in video games so as to gain insights into their common narratives and whether such representations echo hegemonic or alternative masculinities. Seven transmasculine characters were selected and analyzed, following a mixed methodology consisting of autoethnography (Chang 2008, Bjørkelo 2018) and close reading of the presented narrative (Cassar 2013). This sample has been found through the existing literature on trans representations in games (Thach 2021, Ruberg 2019), social media threads (particularly on Reddit and Steam Store), and online articles (King 2020, McKay 2020). By investigating these narratives, my aim was to point out the shared traits of such characters, their relevance in the narrative, the role of their transition, and whether they embrace hegemonic or alternative masculinity. As a transgender man myself, I have employed autoethnography as a tool to enhance textual analysis, and to observe in which cases I experienced feelings of empathy, discomfort, or distance – hence, comparing my reflections to the disidentification experienced by other transmasculine individuals (Banks 2021).

This analysis found several similarities among the selected characters, of whom only one was playable. Most of the non-playable characters constitute a supportive presence for the player-controlled protagonists while having minor roles in the plot. All of them underwent a physical and social transition, and often a medical one, as evidence of hormone-replacement therapy or surgeries are presented. For many of them, transitioning is described as a pivotal point and is often accompanied by traumatic events. For two of the analyzed characters, Lev (*The Last of Us II*) and Tyler (*Tell Me Why*), the act of cutting their hair is a symbolic event to determine the character's decision to transition. All these characters express a strong sense of hegemonic masculinity (Billard 2019, Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), with the only exception being Damien (*Dream Daddy*), however only subtly presented as trans (Schaufert 2018). These representations are often conventional and avoid alternative or delicate expressions of masculinity. The analyzed characters are socially accepted by their inner circle, but not by their culture, which provokes a sense of ambiguous acceptance.

During playing, I have rarely noted empathy or understanding for the depicted trans men. Many narrative situations have been experienced as painful to play, particularly when engaging with coming out as a traumatic event for the given character. I have often found myself detached – mostly because the characters were either scarcely analyzed or perceived as stereotypical. As many other trans players (McKay 2020), I empathized with Tyler, whose creation has involved the contribution of numerous transgender people and LGBTQ+ organization, including Tyler's voice actor, Aiden Black. Also in the general literature, Tyler is the only playable character of the selected set and has been generally received positively (McKay 2020), with the main criticism being focusing on transness as traumatic (Elsam 2020). Transgender creators were not explicitly involved in the creation of the other transmasculine characters. This suggests that including transmasculine authors in the development process might help crafting a more authentic depiction. It appears also interesting to observe that Dontnod entertainment advertises the company and the game as independent (Ruffino 2019), highlighting the will to differentiate from the mainstream industry even in the representation of minorities.

In conclusion, despite the noted increase of transmasculine characters in video games, those representations tend to reaffirm rather than subvert the hegemonic vision of

masculinity. Trans men are often reduced to tropes, which results in disidentification. Alternative representations are rare and, where present, are often subtle, or discussed in paratextual elements (Fiadotau 2015). This suggests a specific vision of hegemonic transmasculinity in video games, that is either subtle or pivotal, becoming the main trait of a given character. This article suggests the need for a broader range of transmasculinity in video games and the involvement of transmasculine creators in the process, so as to allow more authentic forms of representation.

Character	Game	Play able	Transitio n as pivotal point	Physical and social transitio n	Traum a	(Cis)mas c behaviou r and aesthetic s	Ambivalen t acceptanc e
<i>Tyler</i>	<i>Tell Me Why</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x
Krem	Dragon Age: Inquisition			x		x	x
Ned	Assassin's Creed: Syndicate			x		x	
Janeva	Horizon: Zero Dawn		x	x	x	x	x
Lev	The Last of Us II		x	x	x	x	x
Paolo	Far Cry 6		x	x	x	x	x
<i>Damien</i>	<i>Dream Daddy</i>			x			

Table 1: The selected transmasculine characters in narrative-based video games and the categories emerging from their narratives' analysis. Independent games are in italics.

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