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**Videogame Dys4ia and reflection of autobiographical narrative by
transgender community**

Dys4ia a reflexe autobiografického videoherního narativu transgender
komunitou

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Prohlášení:

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V Praze, dne 30. července 2019

Ondřej Trhoň

Abstract

Videogames are becoming an important means of expression for marginalized communities. Despite the growing body of research in queer game studies, transgender identity remains under-researched and lacking in empirical data. By using an experimental approach coupled with grounded theory and informed by current game and queer theory, this study aims to illuminate how transgender-identifying persons approach autobiographical videogame depiction of transgender experience.

Ten participants were asked to play influential independent videogame *Dys4ia*, which depicts the author's hormonal replacement therapy, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Their responses were coded, and a preliminary model of how *Dys4ia* works in the context of transgender media ecology was constructed. The term Procedural-autobiographic multimodality is introduced to describe an assemblage of interactive affordances, distinctive aesthetics and situatedness of *Dys4ia* in structures of minority media while considering video game-specific theories.

This study attempts to empirically ground transgender queer game studies, suggesting avenues for future research and proposing a model of how videogames as procedural artefacts work alongside vlogs and other expressive means within transgender mediascape.

Abstrakt

Videohry se stávají důležitým vyjadřovacím prostředkem marginalizovaných komunit. Ačkoliv se objem výzkumu v oblasti queer herních studií stále zvětšuje, transgender identita zůstává nedostatečně prozkoumaná, a to i kvůli nedostatku empirických dat. Tato práce si klade za cíl osvětlit, jak transgender osoby přistupují k autobiografickému zobrazení trans zkušenosti prostřednictvím videohry. Využívá k tomu experimentální přístup propojený se zakotvenou teorií a aktuálními teoretickými přístupy v herní a queer teorii.

Během výzkumu si deset účastníků a účastnic zahrálo vlivnou nezávislou hru *Dys4ia*, která zpracovává autorčiny zážitky s hormonální terapií. Následné polostrukturované rozhovory prošly několikastupňovým kódováním, na jehož základě byl vytvořený předběžný model toho, jak *Dys4ia* funguje v rámci kontextu trans mediální ekologie. Představený je termín Procedurálně-autobiografická multimodalita, který popisuje asambláž interaktivních afordancí, konkrétního estetického stylu s přihlédnutím k situovanosti *Dys4ie* v strukturách menšinové mediální scény.

Cílem této studie je empiricky ukotvit transgender queer herní studia, navrhnout možné cesty dalšího výzkumu a předložit model, jak procedurální zapadají do krajiny transgender médií vedle vlogů a dalších vyjadřovacích prostředků.

Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	7
2.	Queer terminology used.....	9
3.	Dys4ia description	11
4.	Literature Review	18
4.1.	Transgender, videogames and queer game studies	20
4.2.	Into the trans vlogosphere	30
4.3.	Literature review: Conclusion.....	46
5.	Research Design	50
5.1.	Interview structure	54
6.	Analysis	58
6.1.	Procedural Engagement	59
6.2.	Immersive Identification	63
6.3.	Abstract Aesthetics.....	66
6.4.	Politics of Representation	70
7.	Towards Procedural-autobiographic Multimodality.....	80
8.	Research limits.....	82
9.	Discussion and conclusion.....	85
10.	Literature.....	88

1. Introduction

New media brought new possibilities for marginalized communities. They opened up expressive space for authors with minority identity to present their experiences on their own terms, often correcting stereotypical mainstream representation. In the last ten years, videogames are becoming the medium of choice for such expression more and more often. As the new user-friendly game-building tools appeared and digital distribution brought producers and consumers closer, a new kind of videogame emerged - one that is more akin to blogs or YouTube videos. Autobiographical and deeply personal.

This is especially true in the case for various queer identities. But even though videogame research is focusing more and more on LGBTQ+ related topics, it scarcely goes beyond the confines of gay and lesbian sexualities. Notably, transgender identity is under-represented, and even existing scholarship lacks any firmer grounding in empirical data. Making any substantial claims about how videogames might work alongside other parts of transgender mediascape is therefore possible.

In this study, a mix of experimental and grounded theory approach is used to illuminate possible ways autobiographical videogame *Dys4ia*, depicting author's experiences with hormonal replacement therapy, can be received by transgender people and what are their opinions towards transgender identity representation in videogame. Ten participants self-identifying as transgender and with no prior knowledge of the game were recruited and played *Dys4ia* in a controlled environment. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

As is made clear in the literature review section, since no existing scholarship exists in this area of game studies, the interview structure was inspired by similar approaches in transgender studies in different media, combined with general videogame theory. By using grounded theory, interviews were then coded and a model of how study participants perceive *Dys4ia* was constructed, taking in account main affordances of the game as well as the videogame medium itself, including

procedurality (or interactivity), aesthetics and particular context of individual transgender experience, coupled with surrounding media ecology.

According to the emerging model, *Dys4ia* can be understood as Procedural-autobiographic multimodality. Crucial for its reception is a sense of identification, which is enabled by its procedurality (that is, rule-based representation, see chapter 3 for further discussion about procedurality) and distinctively abstract aesthetics. Procedurality (the unique property of videogames as a media form) is important because it motivates the audience and at the same invokes a strong sense of immersion. Coupled with avatar embodiment, it is the main quality that separates *Dys4ia* as a videogame from the rest of transgender mediascape. Only successful identification can lead to perceived practical effects of playing *Dys4ia*, such as empowerment, education or representation. All those processes are nevertheless always happening within a given media ecology and directed by the explicitly stated autobiographical origin of *Dys4ia*.

The preliminary model presented in this study is the first attempt to lay out some principles and concepts, that are important when transgender people encounter autobiographical transgender videogame. Due to the limited sample size and used method, it is not complete, but hopefully suggests promising ways future research might continue and broaden the understanding in the area of queer game studies.

2. Queer terminology used

In this thesis, terms and definitions as recommended by queer-advocacy non-governmental organization GLAAD (GLAAD, 2016) are used. When encountering differing terminology (for example in the texts written before there was a wider consensus among English-speaking queer community), original terms were used, and this situation noted.

Queer is in this paper used as an umbrella term for describing both people whose sexual orientation is non-heterosexual and those whose gender doesn't match the one they were assigned at birth.

Transgender

“An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 10)

Cisgender

“A term used by some to describe people who are not transgender. (...) A more widely understood way to describe people who are not transgender is simply to say non-transgender people.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 11)

Genderqueer, non-binary

“Terms used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 11)

Transgender man, trans man, FtM (Female to male)

“People who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as a man may use this term to describe themselves.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 10)

Transgender woman, trans woman, MtF (Male to female)

“People who were assigned male at birth but identify and live as a woman may use this term to describe themselves.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 10)

Transition

“Altering one's birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition can include some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one's family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person.” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 11)

Visibly transgender, not visibly transgender (or passing in case of specific text)

“The terms refer to a transgender person's ability to go through daily life without others making an assumption that they are transgender” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 14)

Also, abbreviations are introduced for the sake of clarity:

AFAB

A person assigned female gender at birth

AMAB

A person assigned male gender at birth

3. Dys4ia description

Dys4ia (Anthropy, 2012a) is a web-based flash game made by Anna Anthropy, a part of a still-growing body of queer-centered videogame work. Dys4ia is an autobiographical game, which portrays Anthropy's own experience with undergoing transition, more specifically estrogen hormone replacement therapy (referred to as HRT from now on).



Fig. 1 - Dys4ia introduction screen

Dys4ia is reminiscent of old console games, borrowing their pixel art, 8-bit aesthetic, depicting various aspects of HRT/transition on each screen. Those include experiences with hormones themselves (disappearance of body hair, liver effects, other bodily and emotional changes), everyday issues of being transgender (misgendering, visiting bathroom, increased visibility), family issues (sister inquiring about her medication, receiving clothes for Christmas) or larger structural problems (access to care, insurance coverage, medical procedures and forms). Dys4ia is divided into four chapters (see Fig. 2): “Gender bullshit,” “Medical bullshit,” “Hormonal bullshit” and “It gets better?”, which player goes through, following Anthropy's personal journey. The game starts when she's looking for a suitable clinic. Game chapters show Anthropy being admitted and Dys4ia then

continues to explore mentioned topics and documents changes in Anthropy's life. It ends up with an optimistic note after her situation turns out for better - in terms of her bodily/emotional changes as well acceptance by others.

The game contains a disclaimer stating, "My experience isn't anyone else's and is not meant to be representative of every trans person." (Anthropy, 2012a, see Fig. 3) This is an important remark for my research, as it frames *Dys4ia* in the same vein as other autobiographic media (most notably personal blogs and vlogs). Respondents mentioned the importance of this disclaimer as well, citing it in responses to questions about limits or inaccuracies of the game.

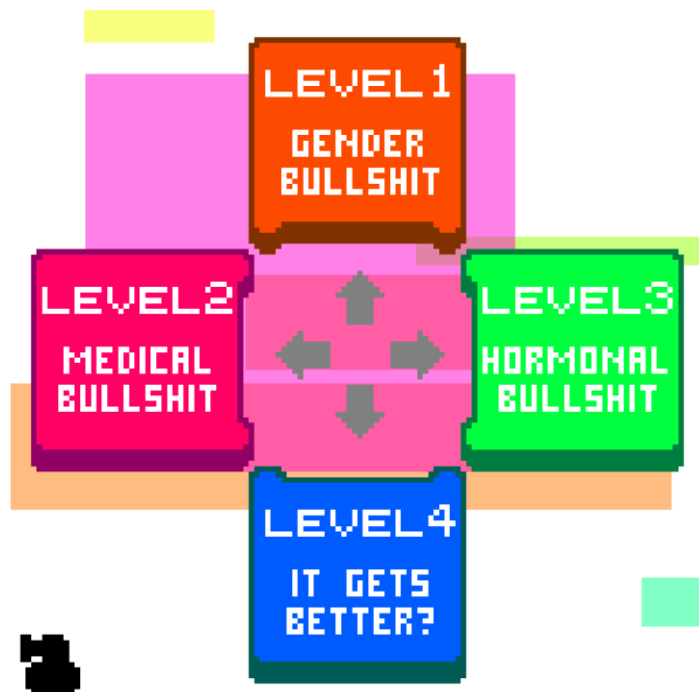


Fig. 2 *Dys4ia* chapters



THIS IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
GAME ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES
WITH HORMONE REPLACEMENT
THERAPY. MY EXPERIENCE ISN'T
ANYONE'S ELSE'S AND IS NOT
MEANT TO BE REPRESENTATIVE
OF EVERY TRANS PERSON.



Fig. 3 Disclaimer by game's author

History and impact/influence

Anna Anthropy is a well-known indie developer. She published a manifesto/DIY tutorial *Rise of Videogame Zinesters* (Anthropy, 2012b) where she calls for opening up videogame market towards non-normative identities, including gender, racial, and others. *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012a) was made in 2011 and is arguably her most discussed title. It was initially published on a flash-game platform Newgrounds, from where it was migrated to Anthropy's Itch.io profile.¹ The game is currently unavailable for undisclosed reasons, only an unofficial online mirror exists.² The game helped to cement Anthropy's position as an influential queer game maker while opening up discussions about limits of videogame empathy (D'Anastasio, 2015) and the position of queer authors inside mainstream videogame discourse. (Ellison, 2013)

¹ Accessible at <https://w.itch.io/> [Checked July 27, 2019].

² Accessible at <https://freegames.org/dys4ia/> [Checked July 27, 2019].

Procedural rhetoric and Dys4ia

From the standpoint of videogame theory, Dys4ia is somewhat problematic. Following Juul's (2003) definition of videogame, Dys4ia fails to fulfill several of Juul's categories, but apart from "valorizing the outcome" (there is no goal or score), what's most interesting from the point of my research are "player's effort" and most notably "variable outcome." Each of Dys4ia's game screens is a self-contained mini game. For example, in one scene, (see Fig. 4) player controls "L" shape and is asked to fit it in the gap in the pixelated wall. The shape doesn't fit, and mini-game ends after the timer runs out - ending exactly after the same number of seconds during each playthrough. This model is repeated throughout the Dys4ia. Thus, the game fails to meet mainstream standards of "variable outcome" that Juul (2003) describes. There is no fail state or win state; the game mostly continues by itself, and a player cannot alter the progression of the mini games in any way. Few of them give a sense of failure, like a scene depicting a bathroom visit (See Fig. 5), where touching some of the lights switches to another screen, but the order in which they are presented is given, and players effort makes no impact on the game.

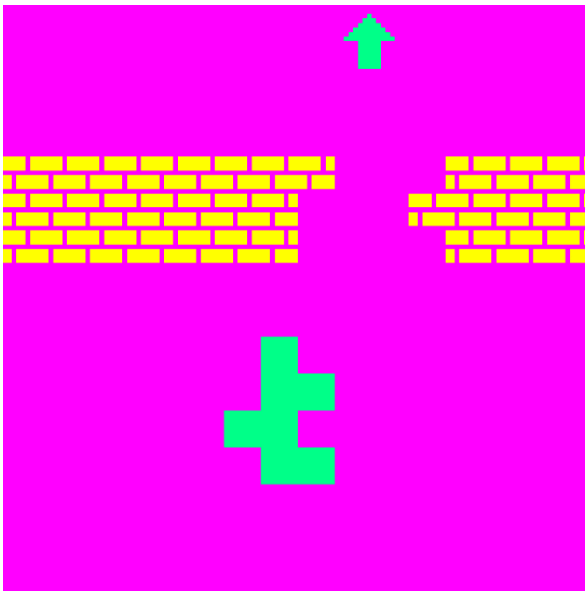


Fig. 4 - Wall 1



Fig. 5 - Bathroom

What is crucial for my research is that despite showing these “shortcomings” or limit from the point of view of more traditional theoretical understanding of videogames, I argue that *Dys4ia* is procedurally rich, in a sense that Ian Bogost (2017) uses when describing his concept of Procedural rhetoric.

In his book *Persuasive Games*, Bogost (2017, p. ix) explains Procedural rhetoric as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” or later as “practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general.” (Bogost 2017, p. 3) In his work, Bogost ties procedural persuasion closely with computational processes and procedural persuasion for him is an expressive device that can be effectively deployed in videogames. It has two aspects - the persuasive, rhetorical aspect (the aim to convey a message) and procedural. “Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models,” writes Bogost (2017, p. 29) Or, as he sums up: “Procedural representation explains processes with other processes. Procedural representation is a form of symbolic expression that uses process rather than language.” (Bogost 2017, p. 9)

Since the set of social interactions one encounters during the transition can be framed as encountering various social and political processes and at the same time transition is arguably itself a process, albeit, with varying components, procedural rhetoric is a fitting theory to draw from. *Dys4ia* is, then, an exemplary of Bogost's (2017, p. 45) claim that "Videogames are uniquely, consciously and principally crafted as expressions. As such, they represent excellent candidates for rhetorical speech." Bogost (2017, p. 53) also importantly distinguishes between the rhetoric of play and procedural rhetoric of the game. Between rhetoric of play as "characterizing broad cultural contexts" and procedural rhetoric as expressing "specific patterns of cultural value" (2017, p. 54). In the case of *Dys4ia*, this difference is clear when looking at the Wall 1 (Fig. 4) scene. Rhetoric of play situates this level in a broader context of trans politics and trans-self-expression media, while procedurally speaking, the wall and process governing the scene are a representation of the more local feeling of not being able to adhere to a social role that is intrinsic to the transgender experience.

Even though the player's actions are limited, a procedural interpretation can easily be made - the wall might represent society's image of gender roles, the "L" shape the author's perception of gender. The tactile feeling of not fitting in that is included by the gameplay mechanic and "impossible" game design of the scene is arguably a device of procedural rhetoric. The same goes for mini-game about bathrooms, which a) directly references stealth genre and b) uses the "stealth-like" game design to convey a feeling of being an intruder, of not-belonging, crafting a dangerous situation in itself. Bogost (2017, p. 53) describes this as a procedural genre. This suggests, that that Anna Anthropy consciously draws on a shared set of videogame procedural affordances - the stealth game.

Dys4ia's approach also shows the limits of Bogost's procedural rhetoric. As Bogost's critics noted, there can be no pure procedural rhetoric. It always needs to be coupled together with more traditional means of conveying information, be it text, image, or sounds. Both game scenes mentioned here are evidence of this. Stripped of context of being inside a game about the transgender experience, presented without specific imagery alluding to everyday transgender struggles and, as it in case of the wall scene, using visual semiotics to draw on the collective

metaphorical interpretation of “wall,” they wouldn’t work expressively. As Sicart (2011) puts it:

“But the missing part in the mechanism of procedural discourse is the player. Not the player as a configurator of the system, which is the implicit position taken by many proceduralist theorists and developers, but the player as a living, breathing, culturally embodied, ethically and politically engaged being that plays not only for an ulterior purpose but for play’s sake. (...) Ignoring the player means ignoring the single most important ethical and political, and creative element of the game: the values and opinions and cultural presence of the player who engages in play.”

All the visuality, textuality, the embeddedness of *Dys4ia* in the surrounding ecology (be it trans games or indie games) but also experiences of its players constitute this subject of culturally embodied and engaged player. Procedural rhetoric in this study is thus used as a complementary perspective.

As will be argued later, it is precisely this coupling of highly expressive visual and textual rhetoric that makes procedurality of *Dys4ia* impactful. This framing influenced by research design. As is described in detail in the appropriate section, in the semi-structured interview I included a brief definition of procedural rhetoric to draw the attention of my respondents to the game elements itself, then showed them nine arguably procedurally richest mini-games (see research design chapter, section 5.1 for screenshots) and asked them to comment on their views.

Since the purpose of this thesis is not to provide a throughout analysis and interpretation of the way *Dys4ia* uses procedurality as expressive means, Bogost’s (2017) procedural rhetoric serves as an additional perspective, which to some extent directed research design and data analysis.

4. Literature Review

It is rather recently since transgender identity became a focus of academic and theoretical scholarship. Along with an increase in public visibility and unearthing various kinds of oppression transgender people suffer, it is important to illuminate more ways transgender identity works in today's mediascape.

Thanks to decreasing skill-barrier needed for making their own game and emergence of new, user-friendly game-building tools, autobiographical titles speaking from previously unheard of positions began to flower. Yet there exists too little insight into how those work in the context of minority mediascape, along with personal blogs or self-help community message boards.

Research questions directing the literature review were:

What are the main theoretical approaches to studying the relationship between videogames and transgender identity and which one is the most fruitful?

What are the main findings about transgender persons' attitudes towards transgender videogame representation?

As is concluded at the end of the first chapter, those proved insufficient due to the limited literature available. Because of this, the scope of research was broadened to include texts referring to transgender video vlogs. The second set of questions was:

What are the main theoretical approaches to studying the relationship between vlogging and transgender identity, and which one is the most fruitful?

What are the main findings about transgender persons' attitudes towards autobiographical transgender vlogging representation?

The literature review has two parts. First one summarizes findings in the area of queer game studies and is divided according to thematic clusters, with almost no overlapping articles. The second chapter deals exclusively with transgender vlogging research. It is divided into sub-chapter according to the most prevalent

and important concepts found throughout all studies articles. At the end of the review, a summary and conclusion synthesizing both chapters are presented, along with the most important concepts used during the construction of research design and data analysis.

4.1. Transgender, videogames and queer game studies

Surprisingly, there currently exists no research focusing specifically on the relationship between transgender identity and videogames. Multiple searches with various key phrases (for example “transgender AND videogames,” “transsexual AND videogames,” “trans AND videogames”) returned nothing. When broadening the search queries to include more general labels “queer,” “LGBT” and similar, the results are much richer, although identifying ones that actually deal to some extent with the transgender category is tricky. Also included are articles referenced by other articles, and when those were part of a special issue of a given journal (for example QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking had a special issue about videogames), they were scouted for additional material. The final selection consists of 33 articles from various sources, both game studies and communication/cyberspace-related journals.

A choice was made not to search for articles dealing with explicitly gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities, because of the limited applicability of possible findings to this thesis’ topic. Even though they do not deal specifically with transgender identity, general queer and queerness articles and studies are included as they might prove useful, emphasizing transgender topics in those which contained them. Those that turned out to be only about lesbian/gay/bisexual content were omitted. Articles that are not grounded in any academic theory were also excluded - a case of several articles collected from Queer Game Studies reader (Shaw, 2017), as the book contains texts by scholars, journalists, and game designers.

Area of trans queer game research is rather under-theorized, both in scope and its theoretical devices. A large portion of current research is dealing with issues of mainstream representation and alternative modes of play, together with issues of construction of “gaymer” identity. The other big cluster investigates modes of queer play and formal properties of queer game. Basically, all current ethnographic and audience-focused research revolves around mainstream videogame depictions, with little attention given to indie and underground scenes - those games are mentioned only when authors deal with possible ways of queer gaming.

Moreover, there is no body of work that would deal specifically with transgender identity and videogames, and transgender is almost never talked about outside the general queer umbrella term. This is somewhat unsatisfying and limits the application of findings to the research aims of this thesis.

Queer representation and structural issues

Shaw and Friesem used a grounded theoretical approach to classify LGBTQ content in videogames as a whole, identifying nine different categories. Their analysis consisted of more than 300 games, with more than 500 examples of LGBTQ content (Shaw et al., 2016). They document the presence of transgender and gender non-conforming characters. Transgender males are scarce, while transgender females are often treated as a problem or joke. There are few genderqueer and non-binary characters. Shaw and Friesem (2016) show few examples of transgender and gender non-conforming sex workers and note three games (Dys4ia, Lim, Mainichi) that deal with transgender woman experiences and gender passing. They also add examples of games that contain transphobia (Shaw et al., 2016).

By analyzing literature, interviewing videogame creators and journalists, reading press articles and message board discussions, Shaw (2009) outlines structural reasons why is queer content relatively under-represented in mainstream videogames (at the time of writing). Rather than simple xenophobia, Shaw shows four structuring factors: a) political/commercial/personal interest of motivated producers b) audience and its construction c) public backlash, industry-reprisals such as rating and censorship d) structure and funding structure of the industry, e) means of representing queer identities. (Shaw, 2009). As for the developmental side, Freedman (2018) dives deep into questions of platforms and proprietary engines to uncover, how those constrain and limit possibilities for queer gaming modes.

Queer games and queer play

A large part of queer game studies focuses on finding and interpreting certain mechanical aspects of games as queer - those authors focus mostly on games, that

somehow present the possibility of traversing play and subsequently social normativity. Drawing from literature, film, and other media, they also try to pinpoint what makes a game queer. A common theme emerges - trying to find and theorize titles which do not adhere to various gender conventions and open up spaces for critical or subversive experiences.

Primarily queer theoretician Jack Halberstam shows how games like *Thomas Was Alone* or *Monument Valley* as a subtle tension between wanting to win and reaching other goals (Halberstam, 2017). Halberstam says that those games challenge players not by skill, but by questions of space, time, the transformation of characters, and their relationships. He calls for investigating new modes of play beyond winning/losing and assumed purpose of games. Christopher Goetz (2017) sees the potential for queer games in “sideways growth” (a term borrowed from queer theory), the process characterized by non-reproductive joy, back-and-forth movement, vitality, energy, one that is building extensive connections. Looking at queerness in games through this lens uncovers the role that tension between adolescence or childishness and adult world can play in crafting games, that “don’t want to grow up” (Goetz, 2017, p. 240) and how they can disrupt stable modes of playing and game design (Goetz, 2017).

“Games are queer because they provide us with notably different ways of looking at and living in the world,” says Macklin (2017, p. 257). She cites *Dys4ia* as a prime example. *Dys4ia*, according to her, subverts the role of power we expect in videogames. Because the player’s input cannot influence the outcome of the game, we realize that because *Dys4ia* is an autobiographical story of a trans woman, it is not our story to tell. It is author Anna Anthropy asks us to live her experience with estrogen with her, not as her, presenting a radically different type of embodiment that mainstream avatar-immersion model presents. (Macklin, 2017) Macklin goes on to explain four types of queering videogames that can happen: a) queerness in characters and worlds (inclusion of not only LGBT characters, but also asexuals, non-binary people and so forth), b) game mechanics (questions of power in titles as *Dys4ia*), c) queer game authors, d) queer game communities. Crucial for Macklin is the notion of game failure. By failing to play/make/understand the game in the traditional way, we can envision new ways for queering play (Macklin, 2017). Also,

as Bonnie Ruberg (2017) shows by analyzing concept for permalife, necropolitics and biopolitics can also present queer possibilities.

“Even with no LGBTQ characters on the screen, any game has the potential to become a disruptive site of queer subversion when we choose to play in our own way, the wrong way,” adds Bonnie Ruberg in her investigation of “no-fun” games (Ruberg, 2015). She investigates several games that do not employ the same pleasure-inducing principles as mainstream videogames and thus, according to Ruberg, participate on queering videogames as a medium by subverting its conventions. She draws on work of queer theorist Jack Halberstam to show how affects of hurt, boredom or anger can contribute to meaningful and essentially queer game experience (Ruberg, 2015). In a similar vein, Knutson (2018) reads *adventure Life is Strange* in opposition to temporal dimensions of professional gaming. Building on the theory of chrononormativity, he goes on to show how *Life is Strange*’s time-manipulation mechanics provide space for different modes of play temporality that is in opposition to efficiency, accuracy and rapid decision-making logic of high-profile e-sports. (Knutson, 2018). Kara Stone (2018) exemplifies this when describing her developing of an upcoming queer game as a healing practice and using concepts of from queer temporality theory. (Stone, 2018)

Chang (2017) outlines a model for queergaming practices, drawing heavily from Galloway’s model of counter gaming. She talks about queer design (organizing queer characters not only around sex and romance), queer play (focus on tranquility, peace, love instead of rush and action) and queer remediation (modding, referencing, appropriating). Envisioning queergaming as able to create new queer futures, he posits it as a form of radical counter gaming that deconstructs and actively overthrows dominant modes of design, writing and affective dimensions of videogame mainstream. (Chang, 2017)

Burrill (2017) suggest that queer studies should overcome narratology and ludology schism³ by applying a meta-hybrid approach, deconstructing methods themselves.

³ “In the early 2000s, when video game studies first became an important area of emergent research, many scholars found themselves locked into the question, “Are video games narratives?” The debate, in many ways, was a worthwhile one, acknowledging the necessity of nuance when approaching video games from formalist perspectives. However, it quickly became polarized, and

Burrill views videogames as embedded in media matrix or market forces, social pressures, capital incentives and desire-inducing imperatives. For Burrill, queer games can disrupt this logic. In his article, drawing from feminist scholar Judith Butler, he envisions body as a possible conceptual grounding of queer game studies. Understanding how bodies and their parts are always discursively situated, we can then imagine another game worlds that “celebrate difference, without sacrificing fun.” (Burrill, 2017, p. 31) This phenomenological digital embodiment looks promising. For example, a transgender body is a site of considerable focus, but Burrill’s article is more a call-to-action that structurally coherent work. Chess (2016) also deals with ludology/narratology debate and considers it unproductive, because of narratology’s embeddedness in hetero-ideologies. He notes that videogames offer alternative pleasures beside reproductive climax, instead offering other pleasures than merely winning or resolving the narrative. Chess (2016) then argues for a middle ground where queer potentials may flourish.

Zoya Street calls for putting queer into queer history. Not just including queer games, but also deconstructing and critiquing modes of archiving and understanding game history. (Street, 2017). There is a tendency to talk about queer readings of existing (and historical) games as an alternative, but James (2018) talks about queer Easter eggs⁴ in mainstream games, reading present heteronormative hierarchy of queer Easter eggs as something hidden. Engel (2016) then goes on to construct a prototype of a queer alternative-reality game, inviting players to inhabit spaces of queer history and thus constructing a queer urban space via gaming means.

Gabel (2017) speculates if a tradition of literary ludics (by analyzing a novel by George Pererc) can inspire queer game making, hypothesizing that using playful and metaphorical language that conveys eroticism but can “slip under the radar” can help create space spaces for queer videogame content. (Gabel, 2017). In a

many academics found themselves in one of two camps: the more traditional Aristotelians (or “narratologists”) who referred to video games as “cyberdramas” and the “ludologists” who suggested that video game studies should not be analyzed through traditional textual-centric academic disciplines.” (Chess, 2016)

⁴ “Easter eggs are hidden artifacts--such as people, messages, places, scenes, or items--that players are not likely to come across in normal play and that require some sort of special attention, game hack, or obtuse combination of player actions to discover.” (James, 2018)

similar vein, Hjorth and D'amazing (2017) use ethnographic method do find out parallels between selfie-taking and modes of play, suggesting former to be an example of ambient play, a digital queer performative practice. They see it as an expression of mediated queer identity politics (Hjorth et al., 2017).

Rather special attention to transgender videogames is given by Pozo (2018). Although they are mainly interested in haptic videogame design and how it is applied in several queer, but non-transgender games, in one section of their article they deal with transgender-related videogames from the standpoint of empathy theories. Notably, Pozo deal with videogames *Dys4ia* and *Mainichi*, both written from the standpoint of the transgender identity. They then go on reviewing the debate about videogame empathy, mentioning critical points that intertwine with both *Dys4ia* and *Mainichi*. On the one hand, videogames allow for empathy because they can make us aware of how bodies and technology merge and what and how they represent. Pozo (2018) then goes on to describe how such empathy interprets such titles as providing marginalized experience for a mass audience (in this case cisgender) while forgetting how they work in the direction of transgender players. They illuminate the way how empathy in gaming presents a double-edged sword and that when applying such concepts, one has to be cautious. (Pozo, 2018)

Queering mainstream

A significant part of current queer videogame scholarship deals with queer interpretations of mainstream videogame narratives and characters. One such example is a study of *Bayonetta* by Amanda Phillips (2017). Borrowing concepts from feminism horror theory, she goes on to show that *Bayonetta* may appear as a typical videogame example of the so-called male gaze, but actually presents what Phillips calls as femme disturbance and contains queer elements. Phillips shows how femininity is expressed through visuality, narrative and controls (by analyzing controller movements during a boss fight and linking them to vaginal stimulation). Her understanding is multimodal, working with software, hardware or player expectations and ultimately rejecting simplistic frames like the male gaze (Phillips, 2017) In similar vein, Youngblood (2017) argues for queer reading of Raiden's story from *Metal Gear Solid* as a narrative that employs failure (of character, power

or masculinity) and how it connects with queerness present in high-budget videogames.

Moreover, by interviewing queer players, Krobová, Moravec and Švelch (2015) uncovered main strategies of queering heteronormative mainstream game Mass Effect. They found three: imaginative play (queer reading of heterosexual or unspecified character), stylized performances (using stereotypes such as color to mark a character as queer) and role-playing a queer character. This resistance to heteronormative gaming spaces can also take the form of fan modding, for example, changing the sexual orientation of game character, as shown by Lauteria (2012).

Similar is an introspective study by Todd Harper, who illuminates how playing popular RPG Mass Effect with main character Commander Shephard as a closeted gay man (the interpretation not present in the game, but only in Harper's own narrative framing) functions as a way to queer mainstream games. He concludes that such narrative shifting has the potential for further queer game analysis. (Harper, 2017). Gregory Bagnall then goes on to investigate how gender binary continues to be inscribed in gaming hardware and non-binary and queer types of peripherals might be constructed (Bagnall, 2017). This topic is also taken up by Marcotte (2018), who analyses and queers five aspects of videogame controllers. He is complemented by Chang's study of representational logits of FrontierVille and World of Warcraft. By inquiring into character creation process or special St. Valentine's event, Chang concludes that even though those game are to some extent open and allow for some representation, they still operate according to heteronormative logic and refuse or disable queer possibilities in their design (Chang, 2015)

Shaw (2017) then warns us that community is a slippery concept, one that can be too assuming and normalizing. By pointing out that some new communities (say, queer) now exist, we tend to erase already existing history (say, of queer gaming). She calls for more careful framing of such discussions revolving around scenes and communities.

Sundén, in his paper submitted to DiGRA, illuminates what happens inside a queer-friendly guild in World of Warcraft, framing it as a transgressive play that has the potential for crafting queer-friendly spaces inside the heteronormative culture. (Sundén, 2009)

A few articles deal with transgender identities to a larger extent. One of them is an investigation into gender normativity within female gaming clan PMS by Gabriela T. Richard (2017). She finds that in order to become successful, PMS started adhering to principles of heteronormative masculinity. Not only were expressions of (homo)sexuality to some extents suppressed, but when communicating with trans females (about joining a clan), Richard shows that clan actually adhered to very biological and limited understanding of gender identity, discouraging AFAB trans person without sex-reassignment surgery to be accepted. She goes on to conclude that even though non-masculine places like all-female clan are beneficial, unless there is a greater understanding of queer identities within the videogame community, they can still uphold heteronormative and normalizing values. (Richard, 2017)

Queer game studies: conclusion

Current research is unable to answer any of the initial questions of this literature review. There is no study dealing with transgender people's attitudes towards videogame representations. When looking for concepts that could be used in the queer analysis of trans-related videogame, one is left with a number of articles dealing with the too-broad notions of queerness, with no hints on the applicability of concepts for transgender-specific titles.

The lack of transgender focus is surprising. There is a clear tendency to group both sexuality and gender identity, and it is hard to uncouple those two, suggesting that further lexicological clarification is needed. There is a very limited focus on audience-related studies, with a significant prevalence of theory-based works which try to outline basic concepts of the field. Those are scattered, probably due to the youth of the field. There seems to be no clear conceptual, methodological apparatus in place.

The ways queer games and queer play are analyzed in the current discourse are nevertheless worth reiterating - even though they do not specifically deal with transgender, they project paths for future and more concise analyses.

Queerness in videogames is mainly characterized by opening-up spaces for subversive modes of play, experience and game design. What follows is a quick summary of sites of queerness located by each author included in this review:

- instead of skill, opening questions of space, time, character transformations and relationships, beyond winning/losing duality (Halberstam, 2017)
- sideways growth, childishness, adolescence (Goetz, 2017)
- characters, worlds, power relations, queer communities, queer authors, failure (Macklin, 2017)
- necropolitics, biopolitics (Ruberg, 2017)
- hurt, boredom, anger instead of fun (Ruberg, 2015)
- subversive temporalities (Knutson, 2018)
- healing, modes of development (Stone, 2018)
- countergaming, tranquility, peace, remediation, queer futures (Chang, 2017)
- disrupting capital and desire-inducing logic, body (Burrill, 2017)
- alternative pleasures other than climax-like ones (Chess, 2016)
- queering history (Street, 2017)
- deconstruction of heteronormative hierarchies (e. g. Easter eggs) (James, 2018)
- queer space (Engel, 2016)
- playfulness, metaphor (Gabel, 2017)
- ambient play, digital performance (Hjorth et al., 2017)
- empathy, haptics (Pozo, 2018)

There is also strong potential in queering mainstream games, but they fall a little too far out of focus of this research. A work by Marcotte (2018) is nevertheless inspiring by focusing on hardware queerness, Sundén's (2009) concept of transgressive play could be useful even outside the mainstream.

Despite all that, two interesting takes on specifically transgender videogames are present. Macklin (2017) talks about *Dys4ia* and how it subverts the role of power in videogames (instead of avatar embodiment, we are partners, onlookers on a journey through transition). In his article about empathy, Pozo (2018) talks about *Mainichi* and *Dys4ia* as well. According to their analysis, they can make us aware of how technological representation works in conjunction with our notions of corporeality.

4.2. Into the trans vlogosphere

As is evident from the previous section, queer game theory and research that aims specifically at transgender subculture is very scarce. Transgender videogame research, apart from some accidental observations, does not reflect the autobiographical side of transgender videogame production. To try to answer introductory theoretical questions, the scope of this research was broadened to include literature about transgender vlogs.

For the initial literature review, relevant databases were searched with combinations of following key phrases and various Boolean operators:

TRANS, TRANSGENDER, TRANSSEXUAL, VLOG, DIGITAL, SOCIAL MEDIA, YOUTUBE

Even though there is a large amount of work done on digital transgender experience, including self-representation on social media, restricting analysis only to literature dealing with vlogging makes the most theoretical sense. Vlog as a form and as a cultural artefact most closely resembles videogame such as *Dys4ia* - it is audiovisual by nature, autobiographical, a site of both education and self-representation. Thus, social-media related studies were omitted, or only parts that dealt specifically with YouTube/vlogging were used. Since blogs are non-audiovisual and textual by nature, they were also excluded. Final literature selection includes 13 articles that are dealing specifically with transgender and vlogging.

Current trans vlogging research is not particularly extensive, but promising, with several key authors and areas emerging and opening other possible paths for future work. It is also by its nature very interdisciplinary, with authors combining concepts and approaches (not exclusively) from queer theory, cultural studies, film theory and ethnology. All papers and articles presented in this literature review deal with vlogs hosted on YouTube social networking site, the most significant place for transgender vlogging scene, and therefore draw on findings by other scholars dealing specifically with YouTube. Overall, what is important for this research, is that the platform itself plays only a complementary role in the current research,

which analyzes cultural artefacts and production itself without (for purposes of this work) too myopic focus on affordances of the YouTube platform. Although the following scholarship is necessarily bound by the nature of its affordances, presented findings are still rather general and extrapolatable.

As the initial research question is about uncovering plausible theoretical and conceptual approaches to studying and understanding transgender autobiographical videogames, a brief overview of vlogging as a genre and media form is included, followed by sub-chapters each dealing with conceptual themes and approaches that show up in current trans vlogging research.

Overview

Current research is most interested in YouTube trans vlogs not as single videos, but as a continuous production by given YouTuber that represents his/hers/theirs - using YouTube terminology - channel. This specific nature of YouTube allows trans vlog channels to function as an archive (Raun, 2015) and allows for different modes of viewing, chronological or reverse (Miller, 2017). This continuous nature of YouTube channel and vlog form as a whole should not be underestimated, as it is something that current researchers deal with very extensively, often citing it as an important aspect of YouTube trans experience.

Two basic types of videos exist in the vlogosphere: a) talking head format (Raun, 2010) where vlogger presents his/her/their comments, advice, replies or experiences and feelings, usually in mundane settings, with somewhat low quality (using laptop webcam for example) and b) retrospective format, slideshow depicting transformation of the self (mostly visual and bodily) across longer time (Raun, 2010). As Miller and Brandon (2017) note, in terms of topics, the top four categories (in 15 most viewed videos of 8 most popular trans vloggers) include just general life updates, beauty/make-up/shopping tips, general trans-related posts or hormone-related posts. As for trans-specific issues, the most prevalent topics include male/female stereotypes, family relations, passing (being recognized as visibly transgender), bullying, dating or disclosure. Physical transition topics most often include hormones, surgery or hair growth.

Another more specific inquiry into ways transgender people use YouTube is presented by O'Neill (2014) in his analysis of five identifiable narratives among trans youth YouTube users:

1. Transitional videos (from birth to transition slideshows, compilation videos)
2. D. I. Y. gender (tips how to be a girl, how to be a boy etc.)
3. Trans video blogging (life-event updates, hormone changes, mundane events)
4. Trans anti-bullying videos
5. Celebrity trans video blogging (O'Neill, 2014)

These categories are not exhaustive, and O'Neill deals specifically with trans youth, but they nevertheless help to outline how YouTube trans mediascape looks like.

While studying current transgender vlog research, one duality is very noticeable. Almost in all aspects, these vlogs work in two ways - first as a self-reflection tool of their authors and second as a media to be consumed by their audience. Raun (2012) calls this aspect a combination of inside and outside perspective (of transition). There is a slight prevalence of articles that deal specifically with trans male vlogs.

Multimodality

Aforementioned entanglement of various media affordances is characterized by Raun (2014) as multimodality of transgender expression of YouTube. This concept serves to elucidate various ways the gender performance, role of the camera, visual style and surrounding properties of YouTube videos (comments, views, title etc.) work together in the final perception of trans vlog and how vloggers can use various tools to describe their lives. In this regard, Horak (2014, p. 578) describes how "because so many strategies are mobilized simultaneously, the video instantiates the body even when the viewer's vision fails." Vloggers strive for visibility, but accidental failures of vision are made acceptable by purposefully redundant, multisensory forms of witnessing. Raun (2014) thus views trans vlogs not only as single-dimensional videos but as cultural artefacts situated within a web of diverse media practices and processes. He interprets this multimodality as eliciting a sense

of embodiment and being in space with vlog authors rather than them simply representing themselves.

Raun (2014) specifically mentions the longevity and continuity as crucial modalities that go beyond traditional literary autobiographies. By capturing trans experience and transition in various points in time and focusing on topics and issues as they arise, according to Raun, trans vloggers “dilate the purpose and scope of literary autobiographies as well as the modernist mode of storytelling”. (Raun, 2014, p. 371) Thanks to the unique nature of vlog format and YouTube as a platform, they are able to overcome linearity present in written autobiographies and portray their lived experiences in more fluid and multitudinous way - something that, as Raun suggest, might, in the end, mean more democratic subcultural practice in representing broader spectrum of transgender identities. Some of those modalities, most expressed by Horak (2014) are also to a lesser degree texts or illustrations that direct the viewer. Those are most prevalent in time-lapse, retrospective videos.

Talking head, camera, visual style, the technology of the self

This multimodality is closely connected with another topic that is investigated most by Raun - an inquiry into particular affordances of the vlog itself. Horak (2014) and Raun (2010, 2014) identify several “tropes” or genre characteristics that define most transgender videos. They are (in no particular order): talking-head aesthetic, low-quality visual style, camera working as an important technological means of framing and focusing viewer’s gaze. Those tools serve to both capture vlogger’s thoughts and potential bodily changes. Raun (2014) calls this technological re-embodiment a technology of a self, that is, a set of modalities that allows self-expression. He goes on to describe a certain haptic quality which results both from the distinctive visual style and depicted activities - applying testosterone, documenting bodily changes like visualizing hair growth or muscles. Performance and documenting meet each other to construct a biomedicalized body as a visual vehicle and spectacle, as an evidence of gender transition, both for vlogger him/her/themselves and the audience. (Raun, 2014)

Raun (2010) and Horak (2014) use a concept of mirror image (by Jacques Lacan and Walter Benjamin, in order) to analyze how camera functions inside a video blog. Raun (2014, p. 368) writes: “I understand the vlogs as attempts to connect with one’s visual self, and to self-reflect and to see oneself travelling through the gaze of the Other (that is YouTube audience, note by author).” Thus for Raun (2014), YouTube presents a unique experience of seeing oneself and being seen as constituting self-image. Practically, that means that transgender vloggers do not only represent themselves and possibly educate others, but also construct themselves through this dual interaction. Combined with longitudinal nature of most trans YouTube channels and continuous nature of constructing such image, Raun (2010) calls this a screen-birth, describing a unique nature of identity being born in such interactive and double-screened way. According to him, this process is essentially a semiotic one. “YouTubers are born online as media-bodies, using blogs to dismantle certain gendered signifiers and creation of others.” (Raun, 2010, p. 124) This is mirrored by O’Neill (2014) in his study of narratives of trans youth YouTube users. He presents the idea of semiotic self that combines actual and aspiring values of gender performance as semiotic signs within their videos. Raun (2014) also interprets vlog as a procedural medium that can capture the process of becoming, of transitioning via continuous nature of YouTube channel.

Laura Horak (2014) also extensively deals with formal aspects of videos, taking into account both classic vlog updates and retrospective time-lapse videos. She describes how domestic setting creates authenticity and intimacy, amateurism, close framing, and directly addressing the audience “make the claim that this person is real and their statements true.” (Horak, 2014, p. 575) According to Horak, the viewer becomes a secret confidant. As compared to documentary, Horak argues that we perceive less distance when we look at vlogger. She interestingly notes, that vlog induces a feeling of reciprocity, while being only an illusion and actually one-to-many kind of communication. Raun (2012) adds that vlog simulates face-to-face communication, enabling affective communication and feedback, feeling of intimacy with complete strangers.

Trans temporality

There is one particular aspect of YouTube videos that is allowed by affordances of YouTube platform as such - temporality that arises from transgender-themed channels. Raun (2015) and Miller (2018), but especially Horak (2014) and Eckstein (2018), analyze how different modes of temporality arise from the continuity and longevity of vlog posting activity.

Raun (2015) points out that trans male vlogs of people going through hormonal transition are often organized according to testosterone itself. Be it monthly or annual updates, videos to celebrate three months on testosterone and so forth give rise to something that both Miller (2018) and Horak (2014) describe as hormone time. According to Horak (2014), testosterone is very often the point zero of transition, that then follows a linear fashion and therefore is at odds with a queer studies concept of queer time, which is characterized by back-and-forth movements, sudden ruptures and trajectory that diverges from traditional heteronormative understanding of time that flows in almost pre-given chapters (childhood-adolescence-maturity-family). Miller (2018) uses this perceived linearity as an example of transnormativity (discussed in another sub-section), one that constructs the “ideal” transition progress, moreover in the case of compilation videos that document changes from the start of transition towards the desired “ending”. Horak (2014) interprets transition time-lapse videos as embodying this teleological nature hormone time.

Eckstein (2018) disagrees with such reading and, while acknowledging linearity as one temporal dimension, views trans male channels as being entangled within several temporal modes. He finds asynchrony, the fact that hormone time is asynchronous with cisnormative temporality by presenting something akin to second adolescence and causes expansion and contraction of time of testosterone users, one which is also proclaimed by vloggers themselves (Eckstein, 2018). He goes on to describe a temporal entanglement of past, present and possible future that happens in the context of a whole vlog and also in the case of compilation videos. By acknowledging their pasts (archiving them via YouTube), transgender people can reject “birth” metaphor of finally becoming a true person while

undergoing hormonal treatment that is often ascribed to transgender persons by the cisgender public (Eckstein, 2018). According to him, those temporal relations are the dimension of queer world-making, which resists the teleological understanding of transition and is in line with the concept of “transing” as a more ambiguous, fluid understanding of transition and identity construction.

Vlog as archive and autobiography

As Raun (2014, p. 369) notes: “The camera acts as a ‘mnemonic tool’ (van Dijck, 2007: 124), and the vlogs become sites of remembrance that enable one to reconnect with one’s past, but also sites for producing future memories.” Vloggers use them as evidence of growing themselves, of projecting some future self-development timeline. Raun (2014) frames this as personal media practice, that connects past and present selves, both orally and visually. In this regard, vlogs are similar to other autobiographies - they create a unique narrative of given vlogger while needing the audience (or as Raun notes even the camera itself) to tell the story to. Raun aligns this autobiographical approach (together with most blogs being honest and forward) with the general need to craft a personal narrative, a need that is imposed upon transgender people in order to get access to healthcare. Thus, both documenting and performance happens at the same time. (Raun, 2014) At the same time, this archiving happens on a platform that is driven by the imperative of visibility. Raun (2015) notes that this compels the vloggers to develop strategies to increase viewership. Nevertheless, he calls trans vlogs living archives, places of shared and embodied trans knowledge that was previously inaccessible or even not possible to capture. Issue of public accessibility is also crucial, because many queer histories have been lost, censored or never collected.

The conversation around hormone time would then be a special aspect of archiving, one that is elucidated by Raun in his study of performative documentation of testosterone effects (Raun, 2015). He interviews a YouTuber Skylar, who uses the archive as a backdrop to project his future. “Each vlog serves as a kind of snapshot or audiovisual “proof” of how he looks and sounds at a specific time, steppingstones to a transformed, “masculinized” self,” writes Raun (2015, p. 705) and notes, that by combining numerous clips together and using a camera to draw attention to

bodily changes, Skylar's blog has performative dimension. According to him, the camera works as a masculinizing instrument, enabling to see the effects of the drug. Vlog is thus both site of preservation and at the same time creation of transition. In his earlier work, Raun (2012) interprets vlogs as a testimony to the process of scarring and healing. This claiming and conveying of trans identity through one's blog is framed by Raun as empowering political act. Drawing from Foucault, he interprets the action of confessing one's trans identity as a subversive act in confessional society, that demands confessions but presents trans confession as the Other, antagonistic towards mainstream society. In Raun's eyes, trans vloggers are confessing, but outside of this totalizing logic, effectively intervening in the mainstream discourse of transgender stories that are heavily influenced by medical and other authorities. (Raun, 2012)

Representation, counterpublics, resistance, collectivity

Raun (2012) also draws attention to how creators of such videos feel the need to represent diverse transgender experiences and note their own importance of watching others. Making vlogs and watching others becomes visual as well as a narrative map that enables self-construction and self-reflection (Raun, 2012). This enables more people to claim trans identity, resulting in creating a counterpublic, the loose collective that is being antagonized by the mass public (Raun, 2012) He also adds, that, more precisely, vloggers constitute an affective counterpublic, due to their focus on feelings, affect. Drawing from work of Gould, he goes on to call this pedagogy of feeling, disclosing "affective dimensions of oppression." Raun (2012, p. 166) also frames trans vlogging as continuous self-disclosure, akin to Freudian associative flow, but without power structures surrounding psychoanalysis practice. He discusses that vlog has strong similarities with personal, emotional sharing in real life, consciousness-raising groups, creating a sort of space between public and private spheres. (Raun, 2012)

As O'Neill (2014) shows, YouTube presents promising media space especially for trans youth, who are "not finding sufficient culture base in either the mainstream community or the broader trans community," (O'Neill, 2014, p. 40) therefore forced to use new and emerging media. Drawing from the work of queer theorist

Nakamura, O'Neill uses the concept of trans social milieu to describe collective experience and feeling that arises from trans youth engagement with YouTube. They create space to discuss difficult issues that are not necessarily pronounced in more policed and mainstream channels. (O'Neill, 2014)

According to Raun's (2012) findings, narratives constructed within blogs can serve as corrections to mainstream depictions of transgender people, and every vlogger is, therefore, part of a practice that is also political in its essence. As Horak (2014, p. 577) notes: "[Vloggers] exploit this inclination differently than mainstream media have, using formal strategies to create and affirm trans bodies rather than display them as oddity or puzzle." What is interesting is that this political aspect often emerges over time. According to Raun (2015, p. 703): "As my virtual ethnographic studies on YouTube show, many trans people did not initially intend their vlogging to be an educational and political project."

This happens on many levels. One of them is the issue of the body, in Raun's (2015) case the transgender male body. When depicted in transition vlog, the trans male body becomes desirable, admirable and challenges widespread images of pathologized trans male visibility. Such blogs become sites of negotiation about how should trans body look and a place, where trans audiovisual vocabulary is created. According to Dame (2013), trans visibility becomes trans visibility - but not only projecting futures, but also creating norms.

Rachel Reinke (2017) comes to a similar conclusion: "It becomes an explicitly political act for trans people to speak their feelings publicly and of their own accord" In her close-reading of a single video of Pakistani trans boy and his experience, she situates trans vlogs firmly as a media resistance towards mainstream transgender depictions. YouTube allows trans youth to claim their own narratives, without the interference of outside expert as its usual in mainstream media. She also notes that many transgender depictions show happy, well dressed, surrounded with friends. Trans vlog allows for the more nuanced image, highlighting discomfort of transgender people, showing aspects of transness that are like to be subdued in mainstream media (Reinke 2017). She also sees YouTube

vlogs as an entry point for collective resistance with the possibility of transforming into a broader organized political context.

Education

Although the educational function of transgender vlogs is presumed in all of the quoted works, the study of Miller (2017) stands out as the only attempt to quantify such content via content and theme analysis. For Miller, trans vlogs can function as means of intergroup communication, because, as they put it, many individuals do not have frequent or meaningful real-world contact with transgender persons. Miller hypothesizes that thanks to the linked nature of YouTube (that is for example recommended videos shown next to currently playing video), transgender vlogs can have a wider audience than other transgender-themed media. He is supporting this hypothesis by his topic analysis - according to them, most YouTubers' channels' topics span from make-up tutorials to funny stories. (Miller, 2017)

Although Miller (2017) recognizes that transgender-themed vlogs are primarily important for transgender people; he concludes that they might serve an educational purpose for cisgender people also. He is drawing from existing transgender education research, mentioning that videos documenting other's experiences may serve as encouragement or even as a transition guide. He puts significant weight on the ways the offline and online worlds overlap and - stating that "Transgender individuals may have experienced unique experiences of prejudice and violence that are not mirrored by many outside this particular community. Therefore, the collective sharing of experiences in a mediated format may aid in the healing capacity for these individuals, as well as educate the mainstream about transgender physical safety." (Miller, 2017, p. 4) Raun goes on to call vlogs sources of knowledge and DIY activism. He views them as sort-of communal self-treatment/self-therapy, blurring power relations and access to trans-related knowledge, creating unique pedagogy of affect. (Raun, 2012)

Prior to their content analysis, Miller (2017) emphasizes the humanizing element as important for educational value. He cites existing research that proved that showing the human side of transgender minority proves to be crucial to increase

positive attitudes towards transgender persons. He offers a hypothesis that it is because transgender vlogs are very personal, that they might have similar humanizing potential. (Miller, 2017)

Transnormativity

Although noted a few times in other articles (most notably by Horak, 2014), this useful concept is in length discussed by Miller (2018). Although limited by his own experience and almost activist tone, Miller's article problematizes other research. "The samples used in prior research (including the one used in this literature review, note author) focused on the most popular trans vloggers, most of whom are white and binary," writes Miller (2018, p. 5) and analyses several channels that overcome dangers of transnormativity. Transnormativity describes a set of tendencies and practices that, in the end, tend to generalize and flatten transgender experiences and omit issues of race, income and present a rigid definition of transness. This happens at the level of temporality, language or YouTube algorithms that tend to select the normative YouTube channels - Miller's article frames transnormative tendencies as part of cissexist systems of power, using methodology from transfeminism and cultural studies. Transnormativity allows the diminishing of experiences of non-binary, genderfluid or genderqueer people as well. Horak (2014, p. 576) also notes, that "most popular trans vloggers look "all male" or "all female" and mentions ethnicity as a variable affecting popularity. Attractiveness structure viewer's encounters with such videos and might uphold existing social hierarchies. As Horak (2014, p. 582) concludes: "The popularity of transition vlogs, and of hyper attractive, predominantly white vloggers, institutes hormone time, beauty, gender cohesion, and whiteness as uncomfortable norms."

Reinke (2017) also deals with transnormativity to some extent, considering mainstream depictions of happy transgender people with little to no visible signifiers of transness upholding transnormativity. According to her, transnormativity expressed by mainstream media "would rather posit transgender youth as "just like everyone else" or comfortable when their transness is not noticed." Transnormativity, therefore, works not just within a transgender

community itself but is inseparable from mainstream media narratives as well. (Reinke, 2017)

Self-commodification, micro-celebrities

Role of YouTube as a platform is to some extent articulated in most of the current research (e.g. in questions of archiving, linked nature being beneficial to audience size as noted by Miller (2017), but not really problematized. In this regard, the most recent article of Tobias Raun (2018) stands out. He specifically deals with how being embedded in the capitalist structure of YouTube affects trans vloggers. By focusing and close-reading work of one particularly famous trans vlogger (Julie Van Vu), he goes on to explore concepts of micro-celebrity and self-commodification and how they relate to issues of trans representation and notions of affect, intimacy. At the heart of Raun's critique is the monetary imperative of YouTube - increased viewership means increased possibility of sustainable ad revenue, which forces YouTubers to employ different techniques. Raun (2018) characterizes those as kinds of labor, most notably emotional and affective labor. For Raun, performing intimacy, authenticity, and so forth are both means of claiming trans identity and at the same time ways how to connect with the audience and fulfil the expectations to keep viewers interested. "Intimacy becomes a currency in the social media sphere," writes Raun (2018, p. 108), working both as economic and social capital. This results in tensions within the trans community as this blurring of labor and authentic transgender-related information dissemination is not seen by many as fruitful - many transgender vloggers feel that vlogging should be self-commodification-free, working for the common good, in critical relationship to capitalist logics and structures (considering how these same structures may work to curb possibilities for trans people elsewhere, as in access to medication and care). (Raun, 2018)

Raun (2018) explicated the changing nature of trans vlogosphere, calling it transgender archive in flux. He notes that transgender YouTube has changed from a community-based platform into "being a broadcasting channel where trans related issues are produced by and for multiple actors and purposes". Raun (2018) At the same time, this professionalization of transgender YouTube is not one-sided. Julie

Van Vu may combine self-reflexive content and supportive videos with sponsored/commercial tips and tricks or beauty videos, but Raun explains that “Vu’s self-commodification is called for by the changing touch and feel of YouTube as a platform and on the other hand is taken up by Vu to reach a broader audience and hence disseminate the transgender cause and obviously to earn or supplement an income.” (Raun, 2018, p. 100)

Expertness

Dame (2013) helps to shed light on how expertness is generated through vlogging. He is in agreement with Reinke (2017) that YouTube allowed trans people to be seen as experts of their own lives. Although Reinke deals with youth videos, her and Dame’s findings are similarly important for transgender vlogging research as a whole. Dame (2013) uses terms and concepts from expert theory to talk about how trans individual gain automatic, phenomenological trans expertness. One that in opposition to medical expertness gained by formal education, which is most supported by lived experience. For Dame, such expertness is most prominent in the types of videos she analyses - she offers her reading of a few videos that are about correcting failures of cisgender people and reacting to comments on a YouTuber's channel. She analyzes discursive practices of such videos and finds, even though they might seem like a one-way media device, that they actually elicit a mediated ongoing social relationship and are active, open communication channel. (Dame, 2013).

Limits of current research

Considering that vlogging is in itself very important for transgender people in their informal education, representation and empowerment, it is commendable that current research, albeit limited, is promising. However, it also has its limits. This subsection is then not primarily meant as a criticism but as an effort to project possible trajectories for future research.

A throughout review of current transgender vlogging-related research shows an incoherent set of methods and topics. On the one hand, the work of Raun (2010,

2014, 2015) is based mostly on ethnographic methods, with other authors (Eckstein, 2018, Avery, 2013 and others) opting-out for close-reading approaches, complemented by only a single study (Miller, 2017) that tries to quantify phenomena present with transgender vlogs. Authors of those articles use various concepts, ranging from those related to feminist, queer theories, employing techniques for studying discursive practices and using theory developed in media studies, critical studies or philosophy. Understandably, such a young and by the nature of its subject interdisciplinary field would be somewhat unsure about its methods - after all, every author presents a valid point of view from which future research can be projected.

As for methodology, one pitfall that even researchers themselves seem to be aware of, are limited sample sizes in current qualitative studies. As both Raun (2014) and especially Reinke (2017) point out, further research is needed to into vlogs of trans people of color, differing ethnicities, disabled persons or transgender people from other marginalized communities. With every transgender-focused research, one faces the ever-present danger of upholding transnormativity just by the selection of respondents. This concern is present in the current research but needs to be properly addressed.

What is concerning due to the nature of the topic of this thesis is the insufficient attention given to the recipients of transgender videos. No current study deals directly with them, giving slight hints about the reception side from interviews with creators or from paper author's angle at best. Considering interesting arguments about temporal natures of transgender videos, problematic aspects of transnormativity, their perceived educational value, there is a visible need to compare them to actual and empirical experiences of viewers that consume those materials. This, of course, presents another set of methodological problems such as sample selection and categories for it or the exact experiment mechanisms, but recipient's side is mostly overlooked. Heavy use of ethnographic methodological approaches is fruitful, but employing descriptive techniques is another way forward that could shed more light in terms of exact numbers and content present in those videos.

Prevalence of close-reading method makes obvious sense and considering the proclaimed identities of many cited researchers is definitely promising, but it also has its limits. One of them being the insufficiency of this method to address broader structural forces at play in the YouTube platform as a whole. Raun (2018) in his latest article Capitalizing intimacy offers an interesting perspective on vlogging as embedded in capital-accumulation logic of YouTube, but even though this economic (or rather political-economic) angle is present or unarticulated in many works quoted in this literature review, it still remains mostly hidden. Opening up this research space for such critical inquiry would probably require a new conceptual register.

Additionally, as O'Neill (2014) himself notes, more inquiry is needed into ways not only adult users, but trans youth users work with YouTube. Most of the current research is focused on either adult vloggers or does not take age differences into account. Also, current research is skewed towards AFAB content - more studies examining the specifics of AMAB videos and vlogging practices are needed.

Transgender vlogs: conclusion

A set of key themes emerges from the current research. For authors of those studies, what is important is multimodality (Raun, 2014) and richness of vlog as a media form. There is a strong focus on ways the technological affordances and devices such as camera help to structure it as a genre. All authors agree that vlogs are also defined by YouTube as a platform, with its structural design and imperatives inherent to its monetary model. Nevertheless, they view transgender YouTube scene as serving a double purpose - self-affirmation by YouTubers themselves (Raun, 2015) and as a site of education, activism and empowerment for transgender people and cisgender public (Miller, 2017). There is a tendency to conceptualize transgender YouTube as a counterpublic, with potential for other political organizing, one that is correcting mainstream depictions of transgender persons. (Raun, 2012) Transgender vlogs have a distinct temporality (Eckstein, 2018), ways of depicting transition and since they are by nature normative, there is a danger of upholding transnormativity (Miller, 2018) - that is not only describing, but prescribing how trans bodies and transition should look like, and trans people

should feel. Issue of self-commodification comes into play as YouTube trans scene professionalizes and starts adhering to YouTube visibility imperative. (Raun, 2018)

There are certain methodological fallouts, that is not enough focus on viewers of trans vlogs, prominence of transmasculine content studied in current research and underrepresented people of colour and more variable trans identities (non-binary, genderfluid etc.). Future avenues for research might include more profound insights into structuring principles of YouTube itself, self-commodification or specifics of AMAB vloggers.

All in all, transgender vlogs are a hugely important part of transgender mediascape, serving as tools for self-expression, self-documentation and performative space where people going through the transition can track their own feelings and (any) personal changes, while serving to educate, empower (minority and majority) publics.

4.3. Literature review: Conclusion

As this research shows, transgender videogame research is scarce. When broadening the scope of this literature review to include queer game studies as a whole (excluding sexuality-specific content), a rather scattered set of developing approaches and methods emerges. Most fruitful are those dealing with questions around what constitutes a queer game and queer play. In particular, those lines of thought are the most compelling as they relate to some tenets of trans experience and are supported by findings present in trans vlog research.

Halberstam (2017) talks about queer as opening new spaces, time modalities, character relationships and transformations beyond winning and losing dichotomy. Ruberg (2015) offers hurt, boredom and anger instead of fun as queer affects. Considering the transphobia prevalent throughout western societies, this optic might be certainly useful. Knutson (2018) talks about chrononormativity and how queer might mean subverting dominant modes of time - something that is echoed by Raun (2015), Eckstein (2018) and Horak (2014) in their work about specific temporality of vlogs. Transnormativity is anti-chrononormativity, and this link might be used to analyze transition depictions and other phenomenological trans videogame experiences. Vlogs are technological re-embodiment (Raun, 2014) and the technology of a self that allows for the construction of a performative biomedicalized body. When reading through Burrill's (2017) contemplation on queer videogame bodies, one feels the pressing need for a more comprehensive theory of videogame embodiment. One of the reasons this need is essential is frequent importance of bodily affects to transgender experience (in case of gender dysphoria and being recognized as transgender or various transition points).

However, queer is also playful and fun, adolescent and sideways growing (Goetz, 2017, Gabel, 2017). Make-up tutorials, anecdotes that spread on trans vlogs bridge those worlds (Miller, 2017). Fun presents a point of view that could be fruitful in analyzing videogames that use fun and humor as a transgressive device. Raun (2012) talks about confessions and how those are tied to dominant powers in society, a critique that is echoed by James (2018) and Burrill (20116) who both articulate the need to deconstruct heteronormative discourse surrounding

videogame. As Raun repeatedly notes (2010, 2014), the vlog is a site of claiming trans identity. Videogame can be the same.

This synthesis is not exhaustive. Other authors certainly present interesting approaches as well. Be it analysis of technological affordances by Horak (2014), which directs our attention to the media itself, or haptics and empathy debate by Pozo (2018), there are many ways vlogs and videogames may intersect and at the same diverge. The ones presented here are those most relevant for this thesis. Nevertheless, what is the most important take from trans vlog research that can be inspiring for future transgender videogame scholars is the scope of many cited articles. The multimodality perceived by those authors stands in stark contrast with a somewhat limited angle of many queer game studies articles, which deal with singular topics. Authors such as Raun (2012) offer analyses that try to encompass the richness and many affordances vlog has as a medium, and ways through which it conveys trans experience, while never forgetting about its grounding in YouTube platform politics. Despite the fact that videogames are conceptually much richer and more diverse, broadening the scope to include both technology and politics, ludology and societal pressures, mediation and self-expression and many other conceptual devices could benefit videogame research greatly.

A scholar wanting to learn more about how to study transgender identity in (autobiographical) videogames will find herself/himself/themselves in a little uneasy, but an undoubtedly inspiring situation. The field is virtually non-existent. Even though there are promising insights into the area of queer game studies, there is very little trans-specific knowledge. When inquiring into transgender vlogs, authors of analyzed studies present interesting ways of looking at trans subcultural production, ranging from focusing on its temporal dimensions, relationships with larger structural and economic powers, the tension between self-expression and education/empowerment or political nature of such act as speaking out publicly about author's identity. In order to craft truly trans-specific videogame conceptual register, any future research will necessarily have to try to synthesize those two worlds further.

Concepts used in during research

The aim of literature review has not only been to map out the current state of knowledge in the field of trans queer game studies, but also to look for interesting conceptual perspectives that could be used to structure empirical research in this thesis and analysis of collected data. In this regard, the following concepts were used when constructing methodology and interpreting results:

Multimodality

Following Raun's (2014) conception of vlogs as a medium which combines various (technological, discursive and other) factors, Dys4ia is also conceptualized as such. When constructing research design, questions of its formal properties, as well as surrounding media ecology and aesthetics, were taken into account.

Transnormativity

As Miller (2018) writes, any trans work can be read as transnormative, prescribing the "correct" ways of being trans. This aspect is also pronounced in Dys4ia. Despite the author including disclaimer (see Description, Fig. 2) this was also mirrored in the final research design.

Education

The educative potential of trans vlogs is twofold - it can be informative towards trans people while serving as education for cis persons as well. (Miller 2017). Even though research question underlying this study was not specifically concerned with the pragmatic value of Dys4ia, different modes of education (particularly towards trans people in differing individual states of transitions) were included in the research.

Queer characters and power roles

In accordance with Macklin (2017) and in addition to questions concerning procedural rhetoric of Dys4ia, the structure of the interview was altered to include

inquiries about player-avatar, player-immersion relations. Since Dys4ia is a videogame with a distinctive way of working with players' agency (Macklin, 2017), this perspective could not have been omitted.

Other theoretical approaches were used were applicable during data analysis.

5. Research Design

As is apparent from the literature review, trans queer game studies is lacking in empirical research data. Even though the authors mentioned do present compelling theoretical approaches, they are not grounded in any actual observations. Since the aim of this thesis is to provide exploratory insights into how trans people react to trans representation in a videogame, an ethnographical approach has been chosen. Coupled with the experimental method and firmly set in the grounded theory approach, it did not assume any prior hypotheses to be tested. Instead, research presented here aimed to map out respondent's opinions and to formulate possible theoretical directions for further, more focused research.

Sampling

Ten transgender-identifying subjects were selected to participate. The number has been chosen in accordance with perceived work's length and time/resource constraints. Due to the content of *Dys4ia*, being written from the point of view of AMAB author; a choice was made to include 5 AMAB 5 AFAB persons to address the issue of cross-gender views. Since this decision is debatable, as it defines participants by the gender they no longer use, it bears pragmatic purposes for this research - by including people coming from both ends of gender spectrum in regards to their social conditioning and role in which they underwent transition, it helped to account for differing modes of perception. In the final sample, this ratio was adhered to, including five transmasculine persons, three transfeminine persons and two non-binary transfeminine persons.

A combination of random sampling and snowball method was used, via open invitation posted on social media, in social media groups and orally. Participants in the earlier stages of research were asked about possible candidates, providing contact information if able. The only sampling condition was that the participants could not have had any gameplay experience with *Dys4ia*, a crucial factor for the success of the proposed experimental part of the research (see below).

Experiment and Semi-structured interviews

A combination of ethnographic and experimental method was used. Participants were met in person, first asked to complete a simple demographic questionnaire (see attachment below) including their transgender media experience, gameplay experience and gender identity. They were assured about interview anonymity. In a controlled environment, they played *Dys4ia* on a researchers' laptop and headphones. During the experiment, no communication relating to the subject matter of the research was allowed, and the researcher did not watch participants playing to sustain the most authentic atmosphere. The experimental part of the research was meant to assure that participants came with a fresh knowledge of the game and had no previous prejudices regarding its content or role.

After playthrough, a semi-structured interview was conducted. Informed by theoretical background presented in the literature review section and game theory concepts, the basic questionnaire was constructed to capture basic categories needed for elucidating the role of videogame such as *Dys4ia* both as a single procedural artefact and as a part of the broader trans mediascape. These included sections dealing specifically with: procedurality and procedural rhetoric, immersion and identification, comparison to other transmedia forms, aesthetics, potential community usage, transgender experience and transition representation, limits of such depiction, emotional impact on participant and, in case of AFAB people, their thoughts on cross-gender applicability. During each semi-structured interview, the basic structure of the questionnaire (see below) was always adhered to, with clarifying questions asked where suitable. Participants were able to diverge from those basic points, but unrelated topics were taken out of transcription and subsequent coding. Total of 495 minutes (8 hours 15 minutes) was recorded.

Most of the questions inquired about general attitudes towards *Dys4ia* or videogames as general, not mentioning any specific game parts. In the last fourth of the interview structure, a sequence of 12, procedurally rich game screens were included to draw the attention of participants to particularly semiotically complex levels. Participants were presented with the simple definition of procedural rhetoric

(as presented in the theoretical chapter) and then asked to comment (generally) on each screenshot of a particular scene (see below)

Coding and grounded theory

Inspired by approaches prevalent in other game studies areas, for example, in Aupers et al. (2017), data from the audio recordings were transcribed and then coded in a multi-step fashion. Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used as the main approach due to the exploratory nature of research. Open-coding was used as the first-line coding methodology as no prior theory was being tested and allowed for new theoretical concepts to emerge during the coding phase.

In the open-coding step, each line and part of the reply was coded in-vivo, using topics already found in the data. Then axial coding was used to create more general concepts. From those, a coding tree was crafted, giving rise to four main theoretical and topical areas which constitute the central part of this research. Since no new data were gathered after coding due to the resource constraints, no selective coding tested on new data was used. Instead, concepts found during axial coding phase were iteratively compared to original data and codes from the open coding phase. Coding tree branches (four main categories as presented in following chapter) were compared between each other to account for relationships and possible dependencies. There is no way to form casual links in research like this, but this way, ideas for possible future research to confirm or disapprove of proposed connections formed.

Resulting coding trees formed the skeleton of the theory presented in analysis chapter of this thesis, creating four main chapters corresponding to different conceptual registers: immersive identification, procedural engagement, transgressive aesthetics, transgender politics.

Pilot

Prior to this research, a pilot study including only two participants (one AMAB and one AFAB) was conducted. It was used to refine questionnaire questions, look for

inconsistencies in wording, clarity of question meanings and possible blind spots in the focus of the interview structure. Most notably, sections dealing with abstraction and identification were expanded and new questions about community usage were added. Moreover, apart from refining vocabulary, pilot research showed that the inclusion of procedural-related questions is potentially fruitful, serving as a testing ground for the research goal of this paper.

Confidentiality

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of data collected, all participants' names were anonymized. Pseudonyms were chosen instead of the real names, and the full transcript has been omitted from the appendix. Pronouns used during analysis are in accordance with pronouns chosen by participants.

5.1. Interview structure

Personal information

Name:

Age:

Gender identity:

Gender assigned at birth:

Education:

Place of living:

Place of birth:

Place during transition or external coming-out:

Individual transition progression:

Transmedia experiences:

- a) In general
- b) During internal coming-out/identity questioning

Videogame experiences:

Playthrough experiment (participants could skip any scene)

Post-playthrough interview structure

- 1) What are your impressions right now, after finishing the game?
- 2) What is your opinion (positive or negative) about Dys4ia?
- 3) What did you feel when playing?
 - a. Can you describe the emotions you felt?
- 4) How this game works, according to you, as a means of conveying transgender experience?
- 5) Do you see any added value in a videogame such as this in comparison with other transmedia?
- 6) What are the limits of the game?
 - a. Which one is the most important?
- 7) (Only AFAB persons) Does Dys4ia work in the context of AFAB trans experience? If yes, how, if no, how?
- 8) What do you think about the way the game depicts transition as itself?
 - a. What are the main limits of this depiction?

- b. What do you think about the game being divided into four levels?
 - c. How is the game's depiction of transition representative according to our own experiences and knowledge?
- 9) Can you compare videogame and other autobiographical transgender media?
- a. (if mentioned during introductory questions) Can you compare videogame and trans vlogs in particular?
- 10) What effect can this game have, according to you, on somebody, who is in the process of internal coming-out or finding out if they are trans?
- 11) What do you think about the game's style? It's tone?
- 12) What do you think about trans experience being expressed in such an abstract and metaphorical way?
- 13) Were you able to identify with the main character or/and its experience?
- a. What role did abstraction play?
 - b. Did it make identification easier or harder?
 - c. Do you see any added value in the game being this abstract and metaphorical?
 - d. If you have experience with trans vlogs or other transmedia depicting the real appearance of its author, can you compare it to Dys4ia?
- 14) Short explanation of procedural rhetoric

“It describes conveying messages using rule systems (for example videogame rule systems) and their interactions, representation (of for example world, experience) via rule-based simulations and not only with text, language or visual material.”

- 15) Can you describe your impressions of the following scenes?
- a. Wall scenes
 - i. Wall 1 (see Fig. 6)
 - ii. Wall 2 (see Fig. 7)
 - iii. Wall 3 (see Fig. 8)
 - iv. Wall 4 (see Fig. 9)
 - b. Breast scenes
 - i. Breasts 1 (see Fig. 10)
 - ii. Breasts 2 (see Fig. 11)
 - c. Bathroom scene (see Fig. 12)
 - d. Misgendering scenes
 - i. Misgendering 1 (see Fig. 13)

- ii. Misgendering 2 (see Fig. 14)
 - e. Clothes scene (see Fig. 15)
 - f. Gift scene (see Fig. 16)
 - g. Visibility scene (see Fig. 17)
- 16) What aspects of transgender experience cannot Dys4ia convey?
- 17) Is there some aspect of transgender experience which can this game convey better than other media?
- a. Do you see any other ways videogames, in general, can be used to express transgender experience?
- 18) Is there any way Dys4ia could be used within the transgender community?
- a. What about empowerment?
 - b. What about education?
- 19) Is there something you would like to add?

Scenes used in question 15

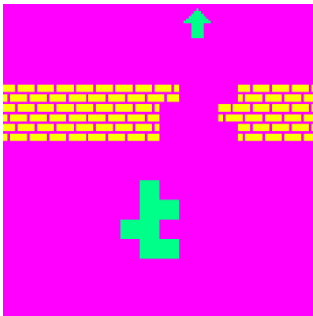


Fig. 6 – Wall 1



Fig. 7 – Wall 2

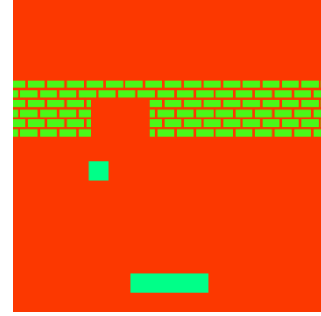


Fig. 8 – Wall 3

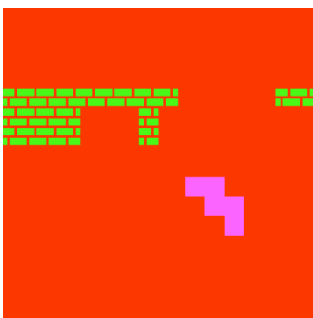


Fig. 9 – Wall 4

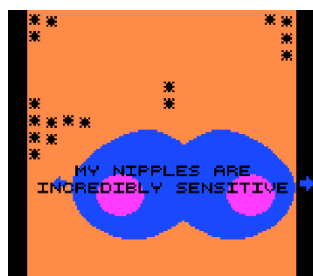


Fig. 10 – Breasts 1



Fig. 11 – Breasts 2



Fig. 12 – Bathroom



Fig. 13 – Misgendering 1



Fig. 14 – Misgendering 2



Fig. 15 – Clothes

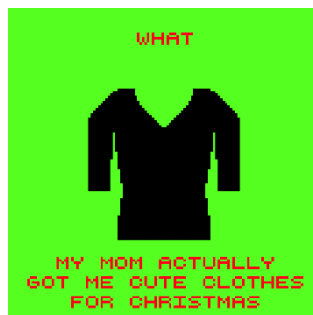


Fig. 16 – Gift



Fig. 17 – Visibility

6. Analysis

Codes found in semi-structured interviews (see Methodology section) reveal four main conceptual categories that emerge when inquiring about participant's engagement with Dys4ia. These relate both to intrinsic properties of videogame Dys4ia itself and broader social function of such media artefact - as related to trans representation, trans lives outside of media ecology, participants' own lives and their media experience. Before presenting a detailed description of each one and talking about particular sub-categories, it will be useful to describe each one and how it is relevant to the research question.

Procedural Engagement

From the very first coding steps, it was apparent, that procedurality (according to Bogost, 2017 as explicated in the theoretical section) is an active topic among participants. This property (that is systemic rule representation) is also inherent to videogames as a form and presents an opportunity to inquire further into videogame-specific properties of Dys4ia - mostly in relation to procedural rhetoric. Thus, procedural engagement is introduced as an umbrella term describing all game-like properties and their reception, be it formally or as a topic that situates Dys4ia in trans mediascape as a whole.

Transgressive Aesthetics

Dys4ia is a game with a distinct aesthetic tone, both audiovisual and textual. It is different from the mainstream trans media genres (as echoed by participants), a difference that is noted by participants, making it category of its own. Sub-categories include graphics, abstraction (more general category), narrative and tone. This section serves to analyze aesthetic properties of Dys4ia and how they relate to game's perceived function as an artefact conveying a transgender narrative - including autobiographic nature of the videogame, which is a strong narrative topic for respondents. The transgressive adjective is added due to the inherently political nature of Dys4ia's aesthetic style, which is differing from mainstream ways transgender bodies are represented.

Immersive Identification

Identification is itself a slippery concept, here used as “some form of projective affiliation between player and digitally-mediated character” (Taylor et al., 2015). Identification thus strongly relates to concepts such as embodiment, immersion and avatar. Immersive identification deals with subjective and visceral reception of the game, in terms of recall (remembrance of own experience), identification (with game avatar) and limits of such identification as related to gender or individual transition experiences.

Politics of Representation

The most prevalent category deals with issues of representation, the function of *Dys4ia* in transgender lives (particularly during individual coming-out), its potential community usage, all in relation to issues of transnormativity, transgender experience as such and emotions being conveyed in the game. This category is not conceptual in itself, but serves as an umbrella term for respondents’ ideas about the way *Dys4ia* frames trans politics representation/identity issues, in accordance with what Raun (2012) calls a combination of inside and outside perspective - a cultural artefact being made as a self-reflection tool and as a media to be consumed at the same time.

These categories are not exclusive and are pragmatic in nature. In the body of text, possible and proclaimed connections (between Aesthetic abstraction and Avatar identification most notably) are drawn where applicable. This structure is then less a coherent theory, and more of a preliminary conceptual map that can be used by future researches. This aligns with the exploratory goals of this thesis.

6.1. Procedural Engagement

Along with Immersive Identification, this category tackles subjects inherent to videogame as a form (with respect to properties of *Dys4ia*). Specifically, procedural engagement is used to describe ways in which *Dys4ia* procedurally (as in Bogost 2017) communicates its topics with players and the effect this procedurality has on reception. It is an assemblage of procedural richness and positive engagement

(perceived procedurally interesting game properties) which makes players engaged, produce a sense of motivation and immersion.

Throughout the research, participants repeatedly mentioned interactivity (in the terminology of this thesis encompassing procedurality) as a key topic when reflecting upon gameplay - either with negative or positive sentiment, which suggests the importance of this aspect. Following sub-sections are dealing with the most important theoretical categories.

Procedural Richness

As defined in the theoretical section, procedural rhetoric is a concept that is used to delimit a specific ways games can be expressive through their game systems, interactions of the rules inherent to the game systems. As argued in the same chapter, Dys4ia is a procedurally saturated game, presenting players with procedural metaphors for different transition and transgender experiences. This issue has been brought to light during interviews, mostly when talking about specific game levels. Procedural richness is an emerging concept that suggests a) procedural saturation b) reception to that formal property.

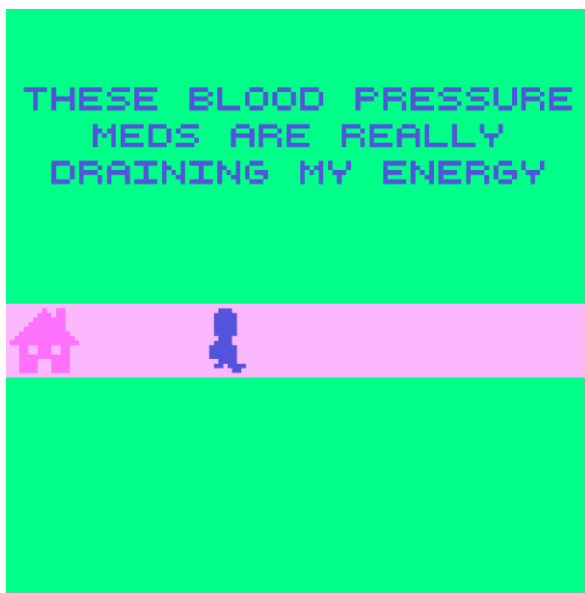


Fig. 18 – Exhaustion (characters speed slows down the closer it is to the house)

Several participants noted various scenes as being gameplay-wise captivating - most notably Wall (three unique mentions – see Fig. 6 - 9), followed by bathrooms (2), misgendering (2) or clinic (1). Or, as participant identified as Jenny notes: “At least he can live through it (transition), in some limited form. It was interesting when she was on the blood pressure meds, when the figure was moving slowly.” (Fig. 18) An interesting line was drawn by participant identified as Steven between the game itself and his experience of being confronted with medical discourse: “Judging from my own experience, you are also playing a game with the sexologists. (...) If you’re non-binary, you can’t say that. They will kick you out.” This (although singular) observation affirms Bogost’s (2017, p. 5) claim that “processes that might appear unexpressive, devoid of symbol manipulation, may actually found expression of a higher order. For example, bureaucracy constraints behavior in a way that invokes political, social, and cultural values.” Framed like this, the remark by Steven becomes significant, as a sign of *Dys4ia*’s ability to serve as a computational-procedural criticism of a real-world procedure (assigning a gender dysphoria diagnosis according to pre-determined, politically charged markers).

Despite the fact that the game is at least by some participants as procedurally rich and interesting, this is to a large extent mitigated by the fact that it was confusing to the most of them (7 unique mentions in total). Confusion, in this case, meant either unclear game-level goal, unclear control or too fast game progression. Even though limits are presented in its own-subsection, one finding is notable in this context - a participant named Veronica, a self-identified gamer, mentions earlier gaming experience as an important principle for being able to understand the game.

Inquiring about procedural properties of *Dys4ia* also proved fruitful for illuminating the way it interacts with player identification (see the section about identification). The formal properties of proceduralism were mentioned several times (4 unique participants) as helping with player’s identification. A dissenting voice is presented by participant identified as Theresa, who claimed that “interactivity is overdone, there’s nothing interesting about it”.

Positive Engagement

As was clear already during the coding phase, *Dys4ia* is an interesting addition to trans mediascape. This is most pronounced in the most prevalent sub-category, motivation. Eight participants mentioned that game motivated them (to play it, to finish it), three found it original and four specifically mentioned immersion as important aspect. Of particular interest, from the point of game theory, is Steven's remark that the game induces a sense of complicity, echoing Juul's model (see chapter 3). He also mentions that the game can work as a tool for younger generations, that are used to interactive media. This is likely supported by feelings of curiousness and anticipation, as mentioned by one participant.

At the same time, four participants talked about the game as accessible, partly due to its shortness. This, coupled with the potential for cross-generational communication, presents a promising avenue for it as transgender representation vehicle. However, when compared to other media forms (in terms of their formal structure, other comparisons can be found in successive chapters), several limits present themselves. Participants of this study mention *Dys4ia* as being blog-like (in negative terms), not as engaging as a video blog, not attractive enough and too simple. Pro-game views are represented by two participants labelling it as "more emotional" and "finished", as compared to long-term projects being abandoned by their creators.

Limits

Even though *Dys4ia* is procedurally rich game, this procedurality has its limits as the game's scope in terms of traditional videogame properties (player's agency most notably) is limited. Thus, the most prevalent perceived limit was lack of free choice (6 participants), not being a game (2) or progressing without players input (2). One participant mentioned missing fail state. Of special (yet singular) interest are remarks by Veronica and Theresa. Veronica mentions that some trans issues (shaving) are shown fully only in repetition and that this potential remains "unused" in *Dys4ia*. Theresa adds that streamlined nature of the game with no branches can induce a transnormative effect, making the transition a rigid, one-way process.

This reservation towards procedural content of *Dys4ia* is at odds with findings of Macklin (2017, p. 257), who finds that it is especially the lack of players agency that makes an important statement about *Dys4ia*'s approach towards power relations. In other words: she claims that because the author does not allow players to influence the outcome of the game, we realize that it is her individual story (as is also explicitly stated in the game's introduction). At least with the current participant group, such appreciative reading of game's limited procedurality has not been mirrored. The same goes for queering of stable modes of design and playing mentioned by Goetz (2017, p. 240).

6.2. Immersive Identification

Identification with the narrative presented in (autobiographical) minority media is not unique to videogames. While identification is an important topic that is present across all four categories, due to the nature of *Dys4ia* and codes found within participants' answers, it is worth delving into in its chapter. To include particular aspects of videogame identification within the concept, this paper introduces the term immersive identification, pointing towards the specific way the player engages with the videogame world. This confrontation immersive, in a sense Murray (1998, p. 98-99) uses the term:

“The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water.”

Murray's definition most closely resembles the colloquial way participants used the term. The same goes for identification, meant as “some form of projective affiliation between player and digitally-mediated character” and more specifically “as a continual, dynamic exchange between the ‘modes of address’ the game offers and the aspects of player subjectivity activated through play (e.g. prior experiences with games, emotional state during play, relationship with co-participants and researchers, etc.)” (Taylor et al., 2015)

Subcategories cover important videogame-related immersive identification aspects (Avatar) and more general issues (recalling of participants' own experiences) while taking into account the autobiographical nature of Dys4ia which has been mentioned often in interviews.

Identification and its limits

Identification is one of the few topics that participants were directly asked about. Their responses to the question "Were you able to identify (with character and/or her experience)?" are as follow (numbers meaning unique participants):

Yes (1 response)

Strongly (2 responses)

Partly (3)

Very Little (4)

No (1 response, ambiguous)

Although due to the limitations of the sample (size and composition) it is unable to draw any significant conclusion, this distribution suggests somewhat mediocre identification potential of Dys4ia. As expected, when asked about factors limiting identification and individual perception of Dys4ia and its content, numerous of them arose.

Before presenting concrete types, it is important to note, that study did not discriminate between perceived limits and potential limits - thus not all limits apply to participants' reception, but present critical remarks about Dys4ia's place in transmedia ecology.

The most prevalent are limits pertaining to the individual traits and aspects of the participant's life. These include individual transgender experience and transition status. Experiential category (7 unique responses) includes issues, emotions and situations encountered in life - for example of being misgendered or encountering medical discourse. Transition status (6 unique responses) encompasses various phenomena related to perceived individual progress in individual transition path - including (but not exhaustively) undergone surgeries, time since hormone therapy,

coming-out towards family and others. Participants suggest that individual perception of transition very much directs reading and opens or closes particular game screens to the identification. Because this part very much overlaps with community use, it is also elucidated in the Politics of representation section (6.4).

The most pronounced (8 unique responses) is AMAB identity of the author. Even though most of the participants agree that the identification despite differing gender identities is possible, it is nevertheless limiting factor, with some of them wishing that “there would exist an AFAB version” as mentioned by AMAB participant Nicky. The amount to which AMAB origin of Dys4ia varies, ranging from “80 % not applicable” (1), to “50%” or “I think it works completely,” as in case of Steven. The analysis thus suggests that even though AMAB origin is limiting factor, it perhaps is not off-putting even to the majority of potential AFAB players.

Other limiting factors include regional differences (since participants all came from Czech Republic and Dys4ia is set in U.S. context), mentioned by 5 participants, amount of transgender knowledge (2) or being only individual experience (1).

Autobiography

What one needs into account, though, is the autobiographical nature of the game. Participants mentioned this aspect often, saying that it directed their reading of the game (4), and they appreciated the inclusion of the disclaimer at the beginning of the game (4). As Mathilde states: “Well, a lot of people could still not identify with the story... but she says so. She’s saying: it’s my trans story and nobody others’. (...) It’s hard to talk about limits because it is the authors’ view.” These responses then suggest that autobiographical reading balances the perceived limits of identification and representation.

Recall, Avatar

An important part of identification is a remembrance of individual experiences. In this regard, Dys4ia seemingly works very well, with all of the participants save one mentioning recalling various aspects of their lives, in accordance with the game’s

content. The most strongly pronounced individually political categories are mentioned in the section about representational politics (6.4.), but include misgendering, as well as their encounters with the medical care system.

The last issue explored in questions of identification is connected to the game avatar, identification and player's position/relationship towards the game's protagonist. Since previous categories have shown somewhat limited identification, it is of no surprise that the embodiment of the avatar is less pronounced as well. In comparison with traditional RPG games, *Dys4ia* character is not really anonymous, as it represents the author of the game and does not allow for any customization and a larger degree of agency. Thus, 4 participants mentioned feeling as "onlookers", playing "with the author". Only one mentioned feeling that he is the avatar, while perceived *Dys4ia* is not containing any identifiable avatar. This somewhat affirms Macklin's (2017) thesis that "it subverts our expectations of control and agency as players. (...) The power is not ours. (...) We can't choose where the story goes. It's not ours to choose, anyway. (...) The game takes control and says, "Here, join me." We fail along with Anna."

6.3. Abstract Aesthetics

Dys4ia is a very aesthetically distinct game, when compared to the most common transmedia forms such as blogs or video blogs/vlogs. the depiction of transgender experience is heavily stylized, both textually and audiovisually. Its procedural vocabulary is coupled with numerous metaphors, 8-bit graphics, an abstract and evocative style with simple shapes and colors with little attempt to act realistically. A stark contrast to typical style of transgender media ecology (as seen in the vlog section of literature review) and participants' numerous mentions of aesthetics as an important part of experience motivated inclusion in a separate category. An abstract adjective is added to draw emphasis towards non-realistic depiction, which is not only familiar to *Dys4ia*, but also to independent videogames more generally. Thus, this choice also represents a stylistic aspect that is more prevalent across the videogame scene *Dys4ia* is part of.

In the case of aesthetics, this category is arguably the most pragmatic one, since aesthetics can never be decoupled from the rest of the artefact. Thus, links towards other categories will be mentioned often.

Abstraction

Arguably the biggest issue that is encountered from the start is abstract nature of Dys4ia. While mainstream videogame production often aims for the most photorealistic depiction, Dys4ia uses a limited color palette with distinctive retrograde style. As it turns out, to this study participants, abstraction is not of much value in itself (only two mention it generally), but enables various functions of Dys4ia, suggesting that abstraction of a such a personal topics bears pragmatic, ludic and receptive value. Only one participant did not perceive the game as abstract, which might present an issue with an understanding of the aesthetic category itself.

The most important from this point of view is perceived intertextual nostalgia (6 unique answers). As Nicky notes: “It returned me to my childhood, when we were playing Tetris and such.” This kind of nostalgic sentiment gets echoed by others, such as Theresa: “I like how 8-bit it looked like. Retro tech is on the rise, anyway.” This suggests that Dys4ia taps into shared collective visual memory, that goes across game experiences and is an example of what Chang (2017) calls queergaming practice of queer remediation - appropriation. Strong recognition of intertextuality can also be framed as an example of what Bogost (2017, p. 14) calls the procedural genres, which according to him “emerge from assemblages of procedural forms” and represent recognized modes of procedural representation. Even though in a game such as Dys4ia it is hard to decouple visual and procedural nostalgia, this reading might suggest a shared procedural memory.

Abstraction is also inviting (1), engagingly ambiguous (2). Not transnormative or not enabling much stereotyping (1). Kurt, a 21, man after the transition, says that it is thanks to abstraction that the game can convey such a complicated process with clarity.

What seems like most important, though, is the abstraction of the authors' appearance. Dys4ia does not include Anthropy's face, often shifts depiction modes, switching from single organs, metaphorized depictions to small figures. A question concerned with the relationship of identification and abstract appearance of the author's face and body was asked during the interviews.

Body, face

Six participants reported, that abstraction of author's face made identification easier. John, a former active author of trans blog, mentions that "it disallows comparing of bodies". Mathilde adds that it, therefore, cannot act transnormatively: "The pictures of people you encounter on BuzzFeed are often the most beautiful ones, almost adhering to cisgender norms. And maybe then somebody can identify more because not everyone has money and can afford cosmetic alterations and so forth." This perceived importance of abstracted face is echoed by Lucy, who, while being done with her own transition, suggests that "appearance of some people can be off-putting, discouraging: if this is what it looks like, then I don't want it," suggesting that abstraction can be more welcoming towards pre-transition trans people. The counterpoint is presented by a single participant, mentioning that visual appearance is important for a sense of hope when undergoing transition.

Abstraction also allows for an ambiguous reading of certain screens, while specifically mentioned only by two participants, it might play a significant role in the perceived open interpretation aspect of the game's narrative as described below.

When reflecting on the work of Raun (2010) and Horak (2014) and their concept of mirror image to describe "screen-birth" (as Raun 2010 calls) of transgender vloggers as using vlogging video affordances to constitute their identity, it seems like Dys4ia presents a rather interesting subversion of this context. Where O'Neill (2014) talks about semiotic self and gender performances of trans youth vloggers, Dys4ia instead omits any visual performance and therefore uses a radically different kind of practice, as is explicated in the transnormativity sub-section of section 6.4., not allowing for kind of norm creation that Dame (2013) mentions when she

describes how vlogs become sites of trans body negotiations. With abstraction present in the game, those potentially normative negotiations can never take place.

Tone (audiovisual and textual)

During interviews, the question of tone popped up numerous times. Most valued is its humor (half of the participants), irony (four), which is according to them in contrast to mainstream depictions of trans narratives, which often presents serious and lengthy depictions. Veronica adds that such irony can have an uplifting effect: “The form, especially in the first two levels, is relaxing. When you can’t do something about trans issues, you have to ironize it, let it go. (...) But this cynical humor only works for somebody who has experience with that (trans) issues” On the other hand, five participants negatively perceived game’s excess, most notably in the scene Breasts (Fig. 10, 11), making them either uncomfortable (“It’s something you don’t wanna look at when you still have them,” Nicky suggesting limits of aesthetic perception due to own gender and transition status) or being visually displeasing (“This was disgusting. (...) It’s closer to reality, than if it were two circles” Veronica).

Graphics tended to be an important topic among participants; three of them mentioned it as a potential limit to game’s reach, four specifically mentioning graphics in a negative fashion. In General, though, the experience was described as fragmentary (1), confusing (2). Entirely positive aesthetic feeling was expressed by two participants, aesthetic disavowal came from two as well.

Narrative

Even though this paper is not dealing with narrative specifically, nor presents any narratological theoretical background, it seemed important to at least partly look upon how game’s narrative in terms of overall, perceived structure works for participants.

An important part of narrative reception was its openness to interpretation (three) or ambiguity in interpretation several of game scenes. Most notably, the scene

Visibility presented (Fig. 17), and differing interpretation - suggesting that personality traits play a role when interpreting game narrative content. Two participants criticized Dys4ia for not being detailed enough, half of all interviewees suggested that the game's shortness is its narrative limit, expressing wish to see a continuation of author's story. The briefness of the descriptions was applauded by two respondents.

This sub-chapter is an only brief summary of findings dealing with narrative in general, other narrative functions and interpretations are presented in the following chapter as they logically fall to the sphere of minority representation/identity politics, media politics in depicting transition and so forth.

6.4. Politics of Representation

Previous categories dealt with formal properties of Dys4ia, but since this research project aims to investigate also the place of videogame such as Dys4ia in the broader minority mediascape, last part of the analysis focuses on ways participants situate Dys4ia in broader, inherently political media ecology. As described in the methodology section, the structure of the interviews took this aspect into account and participants were explicitly asked about their opinions towards Dys4ia's representation of various aspects of trans lived experience and potential uses within a transgender community. Despite this, related topics frequently came forward even in the parts of the interview not specifically dealing with representational politics.

This section outlines basic categories discussed, constructed with adherence to questionnaire structure and participants' responses.

Trans experience and transition

Since Dys4ia is was a) presented to participants as a game about transition and b) the game itself takes transition as its main subject matter, it is not surprising that participants often discussed how the game approaches this subject.

Four consider it a good overview of transgender experience in general (that is being transgender, along with more general aspects of trans lives), five positively reacted to the way Dys4ia depicts transition. As explicated by John: “It very well describes the first steps of transition and your emotion around it.” However, as is apparent from his response, the way Dys4ia approaches transition has its limits. Findings described in the identification section support this suggestion - mainly the gender and individual transition differences. Other participants thus noted that the game presents too minor issues (one), effectively depicting transition worse as it is in general, omitting bureaucracy with name-change (one - subject to regional limits).



Fig. 19 – One of the few screens dealing with social transition

The topic of the complexity of transition depiction emerged during interviews, with interviewees disagreeing if there is enough or not enough social transition. A sentiment echoed by Mark, self-identified trans male, who notes: “The game shows not only how you visit doctors, but also how you confide to your girlfriend...I think this could have been expanded. Because a person doesn’t have only one closest person, he has other people around him or her, friends, family...” (see Fig. 19 for example of relationships depiction) Somewhat conflicted reactions suggest that individual experiences might direct differing readings, but current findings remain (even in the limited scope of this research) inconclusive.

Three participants agree that the emotion specifically connected to transition corresponds to general trans experience; one felt that the game positively presents

important facts. Overall, it seems like that the game is more process-oriented than many of participants would like (see also subsection about representation).

Misgendering, Medical care

Of particular interest are two topics that frequently came up during the interviews, mentioned by participants as strong, important and compelling. These are scenes with misgendering (that is calling somebody by wrong pronouns, see Fig. 13, 14) and aspects of Dys4ia dealing with the medical care system.

Since a large part of the game depicts various medical care encounters, including different aspects of hormonal therapy, medical examinations, depictions of interactions of clinicians etc., the sole prevalence of this topic during interviews was expected. However, what was found during analysis is also the often-pronounced importance that the game includes those scenes. Seven participants noted the inclusion of medical care as politically significant, reflecting their own experiences with the medical system - suggesting that regional differences described in section 6.2. do not overshadow common experiences. Mark notes: “Overall, the game’s progression is the same as the person would progress... I have to find the doctor; I have to get along with all their forms, often people say that you have to lie a little about your identity.” (see Fig. 20 for example of such scene)



Fig. 20 – Topic of medical discourse is heavily pronounced in Dys4ia

Second subjectively important category turned out to be two scenes depicting misgendering (Fig. 13, 14). Nine out of ten participants noted their inclusion as important, showing a critical issue that transgender people face in everyday lives, appreciating not only its presence but the differing tone between two scenes. When specifically asked about this scene, Nicky responded: “The tone is great, I am happy she did this, how they talked to her, but she only came along and then, when she called him out. That was very... it was the most impactful scene of the game, because it’s a thing, which is very precisely depicted, how it really is. I am glad she included this and that she included the contrast because, after some time, you really don’t care anymore.”

Transnormativity

Transnormativity refers to the ways transgender narratives and depictions can create pressure towards other trans people, normalizing some way of transness (the way transition should be, visual aspects and so forth) as the transgender norm. A specific question about game chapters (see Fig. 21) was asked during the interviews due to the perceived possibility of acting transnormatively. This was not echoed by participants, who agreed with the author’s decision to slice transition into four levels. Of special note is the remark by Mathilde: “The fact is that in my own life I don’t necessarily have to come through all the levels she’s talking about, but it’s her game, so I want to go through the levels for her successfully.” Mathilde’s remark suggests that the autobiographical reading and statement at the beginning of *Dys4ia* is of large importance when participants considered its content, but also in the realm of politics of representation. She specifically mentions that the inclusion of the disclaimer (Fig. 22) does not allow the game to work transnormatively.

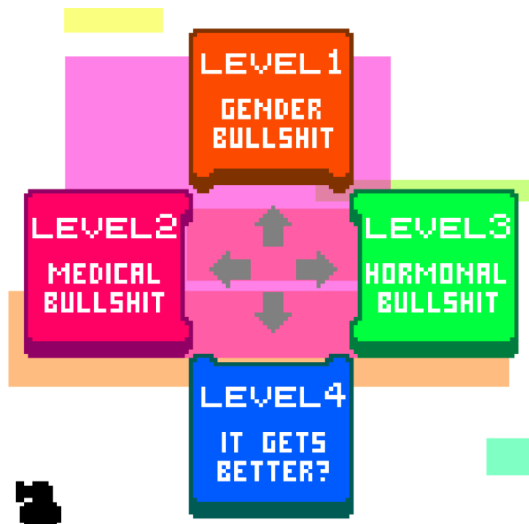


Fig. 21 – Four levels of the game (during the first playthrough they gradually unlock)



THIS IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
 GAME ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES
 WITH HORMONE REPLACEMENT
 THERAPY. MY EXPERIENCE ISN'T
 ANYONE'S ELSE'S AND IS NOT
 MEANT TO BE REPRESENTATIVE
 OF EVERY TRANS PERSON.



Fig. 22 – Author's disclaimer at the beginning of the game

As was noted in section 1 about Procedural Engagement, the limited free choice and branching were perceived by two participants as potentially transnormative; one also added that the fixed narrative is in itself a slightly transnormative device. The only dissenting voice in relation to transnormativity of games chapters was Nicky's: "I think the reality is much more complicated. It's not like you go and say "well today I'm gonna go to do this level and go to the doctor". Reality is much more continuous, entangled; you cannot separate things like that."

Topics related to transnormativity are also present in other categories found during this research - most notably when one participant noted that abstraction of personal appearance works anti-transnormatively, not allowing for direct comparison of trans people playing this game, meaning that the game cannot set unrealistic beauty standards as often happens in the trans mediascape, in accordance with Horak's (2014) reservations about hyper attractiveness and beauty as uncomfortable trans identity norms.

Emotions

This sub-section presupposes that the emotions described by participants after playing *Dys4ia* suggest broader ways *Dys4ia* can function inside transmedia ecology. This is echoed by Raun (2012), who maps how transgender vloggers constitute an affective counterpublic, explicating "affective dimensions of oppression" or as Reinke (2017) notes: "It becomes and an explicitly political act for trans people to speak their feelings publicly and on their own accord." Those views influenced the decision to include emotions as a separate group within the analysis structure.

Two participants reported that the experience was uplifting, suggesting a certain empowerment use (self-described by one of them as well - although direct questions of empowerment are talked about in 4.6.), coupled with two participants mentioning hope and three happiness. Humor mentioned in the aesthetic section can also be political, being a case of transgressive affects, situating *Dys4ia* in a tradition of queer media production unsettling the queer normativity. Other singular, politically productive emotions include anger, visibility (feeling of being seen), change in attitude, social pressures.

One participant noted that the game is too pessimistic and negative; another felt that the author is trying to invoke the feeling of blame for protagonists' hardships, making her conclude that the game is self-pitying. Of interest is Mark's remark that game doesn't show any rejection, for him an important aspect of trans experience: "(The game) doesn't show at all, that there are people who will never accept it (trans identity), which will still cling on the past, never letting the person quotes unquotes

progress. And that he or she needs to cut some connections, be it family or hometown... and this is missing a little, this kind of rejection.”

Coming-out

Participants were also asked to speculate about how *Dys4ia* would be perceived by someone in the process of internal trans coming-out, that is coming to terms with trans identity.

Reports in this area are conflicted. On the one hand, two participants view the game as potentially educative. As Mark said: “I think it can show that person that life can be different... if he or she would be coming through that first hint that maybe he or she doesn’t feel right in the (social) role, the game can show him “this is also the possible path.” This is seconded by Steven: “When some trans person, who’s still in the process of self-discovery, they can go through the game and tell themselves “right, this is still before me.” (...) I guess it can be used more for the beginners or for the undecided, if they’re gonna go through the transition, they can look what it is about in a more engaging way.” Four participants in total mentioned potential use inside the trans community, as a tool for beginning trans people (before coming-out). Others mention empowerment (2), two specifically mentioned that they would have liked to encounter game like this during their own coming-out, one talked about the potential of the game to invoke curiosity.

Dissenting voices mention big limit in AMAB game topics (three unique), two being too pessimistic about to be of any use to people at the beginning (2), possibly dissuading them from transition. As Mathilde notes: “For somebody who’s really lost in it, it can make things worse because things (in the game) can make him more stressful.” Veronica adds: “It’s reductive. (...) A person who at the beginning cannot take much from the game, cannot understand much of it. They will not understand the pressure, and he will not understand estrogen.” As described in section 6.2., a question of how personality traits and trans knowledge comes into play while reflecting on potential coming-out use arises.

Representation, comparison

Even though this whole chapter is devoted to the politics of representation, it made sense to separate depiction of experience and participants' opinions about minority representation in general. Moreover, since a significant number of them (5) considers *Dys4ia* as a valuable part of the trans minority media landscape, with two specifically mentioning its positive potential in representing the transgender minority in media in general. This representational side of *Dys4ia* is multifaceted, ranging from the perceived importance of transgender personal histories as politically significant (1) to showing trans relationships (2). Even though it was not the goal of this study and no question was specifically asked, 5 participants mentioned the potential for educating the cisgender public about transgender lives and experience. Two participants appreciated *Dys4ia* as not being stereotypical towards trans people, one mentioning it being above mainstream standards when it comes to transgender depictions.

This suggested role is somewhat diminished by various limitations, as reported by this study participants. Most prevalent limitation mentioned is in regard to trans knowledge of potential reader/player - one participant mentioned specifically that the game cannot change the attitude of somebody with anti-trans opinions, and also presupposes some previous knowledge in relation to transgender identities. Two participants noted that the game is too trans defined, with a limited range of experiences apart from the transition process itself - echoing the mentioned lack of social transition by some participants in the previous section.

This again reopens problem of transnormativity, when considering more varied identity categories, as mentioned by Veronica: "A game for people of color would be different. A game for a white person too. I don't know the author, the real author, but this seems super white to me. In its depiction. Therefore, (it cannot convey) another, very important identity experience." There is not enough data about this in the current research, but identity limits of trans experience in relation to race and class could be a significant area of further trans queer game studies research.

Community usage

The last aspect of representational politics, which was explicitly addressed during the interview, was related to the pragmatic and actual use of Dys4ia within the transgender community. Results suggest strong potential for community use of a game such as Dys4ia, in two major categories, which were specifically addressed due to the findings of pilot research (see methodology) - empowerment and education.

In the case of empowerment, six respondents expressed the opinion that the game has empowering potential and could be thus distributed in community networks to help trans people. An example of such sentiment is provided by John, who has large experiences with transgender media: “(It’s) In the same way I’m happy that some blogs are distributed, (game) can help those people, I guess. By being empowering, by helping them not to feel alone in it.” One respondent disagrees due to negative tone and message that the game according to him relays; one is ambiguous.

Educative use is less conflicted, with three people specifically mentioning this potential, in helping to show concrete transition steps (such as looking for a suitable clinic) or even specific health-care tips (hormone taking techniques as in Fig. 23). Some of them mention possible use for people coming through internal coming-out, but in this regard, opinions are conflicted, with two participants being able to imagine positive usage of the game for trans beginners and two considering the game too negative. Veronica is most skeptical towards community usage of Dys4ia, stating that: “(The game isn’t) educational at all, information is reductive and also because the way this reduction is used - the very cynical humor works, but only for somebody knowledgeable, for somebody, who’s already going to trans discussion boards, trans websites, trans servers.”



Fig. 23 – One participant applauded such practical advice

Two participants mentioned possible usage for working with kids, as a part of workshops in schools and sexual education classes for education about transgender issues more generally.

7. Towards Procedural-autobiographic Multimodality

All previous findings considered, a holistic image of how Dys4ia works as a transgender media artefact emerges. Since it is composed of various differing functions/formal properties and social-complex, authors of this paper suggest following preliminary model:

Procedural-autobiographic Multimodality

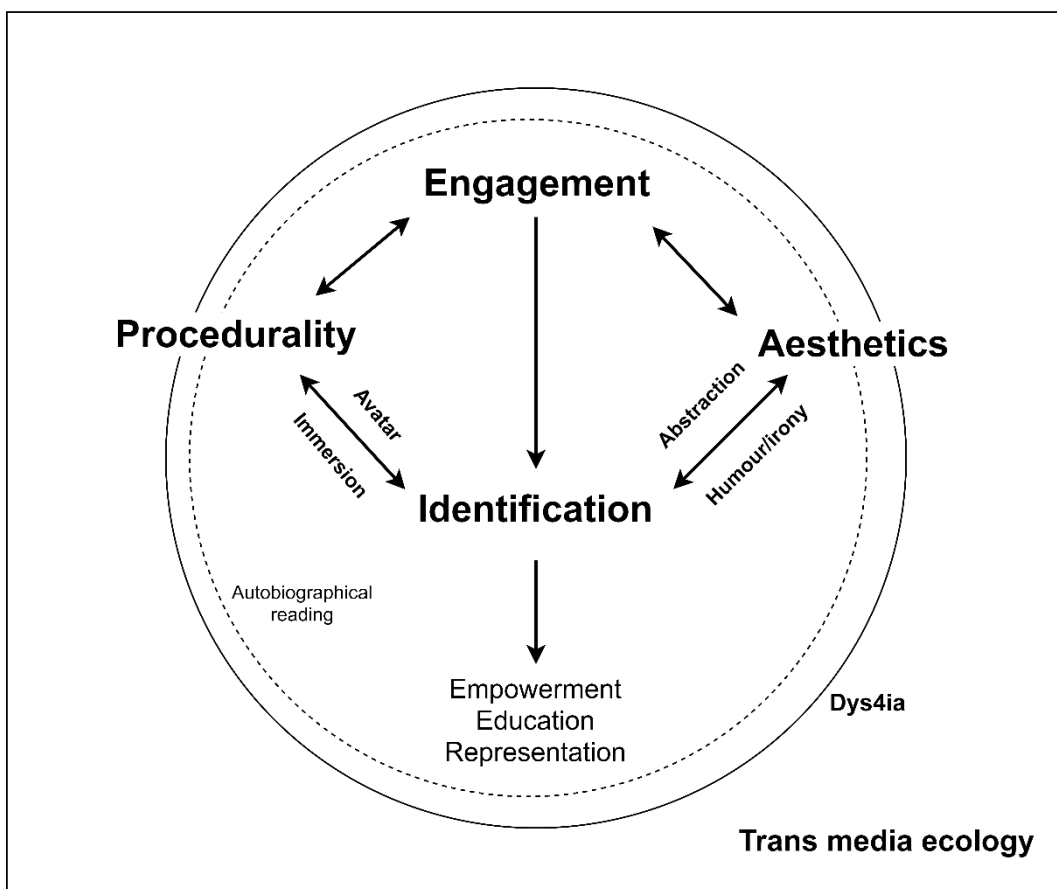


Fig. 18 – Proposed model of Dys4ia's reception

This procedural-autobiographical modality is a model inspired by Raun's (2014) reading of transgender vlogs. Even though videogame such as Dys4ia differs significantly from video blog, Raun's conception of multitudinous expressive means being deployed at the same time is true in its case as well. In the same fashion as Raun (2014) comments on gender performance, camera role or visual style of

videos, Procedural-autobiographical multimodality is defined by multiple media practices intertwining in one artefact and its context.

It takes identification with presented autobiographical transgender experience as a central facet of its reception. This happens after a potential player/reader is engaged by its distinctive aesthetics (audiovisuality and tone) and procedural properties (colloquially: being a game). These two main parts of *Dys4ia*'s formal structure play a role in identification as well, supporting it via abstraction (of transgender experience and appearance), and through irony and procedural immersion and embodying a certain avatar. This identification can then lead to tangible individual and political effects - serving as empowerment, education and representation of transgender and transition experience. Reading of *Dys4ia* cannot be uncoupled from its inherently autobiographical nature, which plays important role both in its aesthetics, identification potential and political ramifications. And lastly, since this research explicitly inquired into situatedness of *Dys4ia* in a larger minority mediascape, which was also often referenced by participants, this text-reader interaction happens within a particular media ecology - namely transgender minority media ecology, along with vlogs, blogs and other trans-authored content.

It must be noted that this is only a suggested model, due to the nature of this research, no firm causal links can be established. Despite those limitations, it is based on data collected and analyzed in this research, supported by the individual responses of its participants, while taking their expressed reservations into account.

Since topic of this paper is directly related to videogames and game studies, it is important to note that procedurality as an inherent property of videogames plays a significant role in this model, but is not central - suggesting that procedurality is more of a tool to be used along more standard and traditional minority media techniques and approaches. This might be due to the fact that *Dys4ia*, despite being somewhat procedurally rich, is also procedurally limited.

8. Research limits

This research is by its nature limited in various ways:

Sampling

Limits of sampling technique are apparent - since it was done through online recruitment and partly snowballing technique, despite researchers' best efforts, it does not include people from rural areas, or, looking at the demographical profile, with lower education. Participants likely belong to a similar or connected queer scenes. Since the question of identity politics cannot be uncoupled from participants' own views, this most likely led to skewed sampling in terms of political orientation.

As was shown during research, individual transition status and experience is important for the reception of *Dys4ia*. Even though the present study includes people of varying transition statuses regarding hormonal and surgical therapy, including even a broader range of experiences could help to clarify limits brought up by participants. The current sample is also limited in identity selection - it includes only two non-binary persons, and since trans category understood broadly (as is throughout this paper) encompasses genderfluid and genderqueer identities as well, future researches could include more respondents from those. Identity diversity also means racial and class divisions, despite being limited in local (Czech) context, future studies could benefit from including people of color, non-major ethnicities or working-class participants with arguably different trans experience.

Since *Dys4ia* talks about such emotionally charged and personal topics, emotional and personal traits of participants could have played a significant role in their reception of the game, as was shown in differing views on positivity/negativity of Visibility scene.

The language barrier, conceptual barrier

Even though the interview was constructed in the clearest way possible and edited after testing out during the pilot study, it is still possible that different participants could have had differing understandings of used concepts and vocabulary - notably identification immersion, limits, process, empowerment or even transition itself. This is likely a limit to comparison and coding used in this research but hopefully, is diminished by the scope of the research sample.

In retrospect, the part of research design including procedural rhetoric could have been omitted, as it turned out out-of-line with aims of the research since no indicators that would capture changed attitudes after hearing the procedural rhetoric definitions were presented to interviewees. At the same time, the definition itself was probably confusing to participants and thus did not serve any actual purpose in the design.

Psychological aspect

The present research is relying only on literal utterances by its participants – a choice was made not to take tone, the emotional charge of their responses or emotional state into account. When talking about such personal topics, these are likely important. Hopefully this omission is understandable due to the scope and available resources, nevertheless, presents an interesting avenue for future research, which could shed light onto identification process in particular and support model proposed in chapter 7 with additional data.

Exploratory nature and limits of the grounded theory approach

Since the Grounded theory is by design emergent, findings in this paper are preliminary by nature. Concepts explicated in the analysis section are subject of future confirmation, rejection or revision, which will be motivated by more focused research questions. This is in line with exploratory aims of this thesis, which will hopefully serve as a groundwork for additional researches.

By using limited grounded theory without iterative conceptual part, during which concepts are being refined by testing on additional sets of data, a more throughout evaluation will have to follow.

9. Discussion and conclusion

By employing grounded theory partly supported by existing research in neighboring fields of study, this thesis aimed to uncover how an autobiographical videogame about transgender experience such as *Dys4ia* can be received by people identifying as transgender. Empirical data gathered during semi-structured interviews during analysis, several promising concepts emerged. They are summed under the umbrella term that describes *Dys4ia*'s reception - Procedural-autobiographic multimodality.

In this preliminary model, the main focus is identification experienced by transgender-identifying persons when playing *Dys4ia*. This is enabled by on the one hand procedural nature of *Dys4ia*, which elicits immersion and avatar embodiment, and by game's distinctive abstract aesthetics on the other. Procedurality also serves as a strong incentive for potential players, keeping them procedurally engaged. Identification can then lead to practical effects of the game - empowerment, education or device of transgender experience representation. Every reading of *Dys4ia* is necessarily directed by its explicitly (stated by the author) autobiographical nature and happens inside existing transgender/minority media ecology, which affects players' expectations and interpretation.

Thus, empirical data gathered in this study suggest that most transgender people see value in the depiction of trans experience in the form *Dys4ia* presents. Despite mentioned shortcomings (most notably limited interactivity, significant importance of one own's transgender experience and gender identity of the character portrayed), they see it as complementary to existing transmedia forms (most notably video blogs), seeing potential in its procedurality and aesthetics. Even though answers regarding possible pragmatic uses are somewhat conflicted, empowerment and representational aspect (in the sense of *Dys4ia* being able to broaden the possible ways of being trans and highlight difficulties of transition) were mentioned as the most promising ones.

This research is limited both in scope and sampling. As a first attempt to use empirical-data research to shed light into the field of trans queer game studies, it

can be a starting point for further inquiry. A lot remains to be uncovered, be it the exact nature of transgender character-transgender player avatar identification or, perhaps most importantly, how well the model presented in this paper applies to a more procedurally rich videogame. As noted in the description, following Juul's (2013) model, *Dys4ia* is a borderline case of a videogame and study participants often mentioned the lack of interactivity or "non-gameness" of *Dys4ia* as a limiting factor. Future research might either use another game including more traditional use of procedurality or focus much more on the particular procedurality present in *Dys4ia*. As Macklin (2017) notes, the limited player's agency is not without its own value: "Our character is Anna, and we're like an empathetic witness, standing in her shoes, retracing her steps. Because of this, I believe it moves us more than if we had full control." Investigating such procedural modes could be interesting to move beyond traditional modes of understanding procedurality of videogames.

Also, since this research has been concerned with outlining a general picture, it could prove worthy to investigate each aspect of the model more thoroughly. Research using psychological methods could uncover more precise emotional effects of *Dys4ia* (or similar game) on its players, helping to elucidate particular ways character-player identification happens on an individual level - with such emotionally-charged topic such as transgender identity, this possible line of research should not be overlooked.

Lastly, special attention should be given to sampling techniques and sample compositions of future research. This study is limited by excluding people from rural areas with different media practices, and even though it takes into account differing gender identities, only two non-binary persons are included. Due to the individual nature of transgender identity, as broad as possible samples should be used. This also applies to race and class aspects. Including people of color, non-mainstream ethnicities and from different (income/social capital) classes would make future findings more broadly applicable.

World of independent queer videogames is still rising - when searching specifically for the transgender tag on prominent web portal Itch.io, which focuses specifically

on independent game creators, 230 results show up.⁵ Videogames might soon become regular means of minority expression, along with vlogs and blogs. This paper is one of the first attempts to investigate how is autobiographical, independently made, transgender videogame received by transgender players. Results show a number of interesting avenues for future research, which will be arguably more and more important in the near future, as videogames will permeate queer mediascape more and more. Even we do not have to agree with Zimmerman's (2013) idea of "the ludic century", videogames being used as media for personal expression are here to stay. And the research possibilities they keep opening, are exciting.

⁵ At the time of writing (July 27, 2019), <https://itch.io/games/tag-transgender>

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