

# Designed & Discovered Euphoria: Insights from Trans-Femme Players' Experiences of Gender Euphoria in Video Games

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## Abstract

Many transgender (and cisgender) people experience gender euphoria – satisfaction and relief caused by self-actualization and gender congruence – a term that has been overlooked by the design community. Video games create intense experiences involving identities, bodies, and social interaction, providing opportunities to empower people through gender euphoria. We develop themes for creating and supporting gender euphoria in games within the Design, Dynamics, Experience Game Design Framework from a reflexive thematic analysis of 25 games, with an in-depth analysis of four of them. The analysis combines the authors' positionalities as trans gamers with close reading and content analysis of the games, employing perspectives from critical discourse analysis. We contribute an operational understanding of gender euphoria to support design, in-depth case studies of particularly euphoric game experiences, and identify themes that designers and researchers can use to develop new games and analyze existing ones.

## CCS Concepts

- Human-centered computing → Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms; User centered design; HCI theory, concepts and models;
- Applied computing → Computer games.

## Keywords

gender-inclusive design, game design, trans game studies, transgender gender euphoria

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## 1 Introduction

*Gender euphoria* refers to a distinct feeling of satisfaction and relief resulting from the congruence between one's gender identity and experiences [7, 19, 26, 136]. Gender euphoria has recently entered the academic vernacular, but has long been used by the transgender community as a way of highlighting the distinct joys that can come from gendered experience by trans- (and cis-) people [19, 41, 107]. It is the positive homologue (but not opposite) of *gender dysphoria* – the feeling of distress caused by the incongruence between one's internal and external experience of gender, which ranges in severity from temporary discomfort to enduring trauma [6, 11, 90, 91, 143]<sup>1</sup>. The prevailing discourse surrounding trans people is damage-centred, with research topics that address content or themes that cause harm [3, 77]. This positions trans people as vulnerable and associates us with hardship and distress that calls for inclusive design (e.g., [91, 170]). Video games offer intimate experiences that support exploration [13, 16, 60, 96, 121, 152], which we argue makes them powerful engines for gender euphoria (and dysphoria). In human-computer interaction (HCI), the absence of understanding on transgender gender euphoria may perpetuate the emphasis on negative experiences, and could neglect promoting design for positive gender experiences for trans resilience.

We contribute an initial understanding – one that is useful to designers, yet necessarily incomplete – of how games can invoke gender euphoria for trans-femme people and how to design such games. Our goal is not positivist – we do not aim to develop objective truths about the nature of design – but, rather, identify useful approaches to game designs that will render them more inclusive. We must first establish mechanisms for how games can offer gender euphoria:

**Research Question (RQ) 1:** How do transgender people derive gender euphoria from game play?

<sup>1</sup>Although we expect that many trans readers will grasp this concept easily, we acknowledge that those who have not knowingly experienced gender dysphoria may struggle to fully appreciate it. For further background, we suggest the following: [11, 129, 143].

We answer RQ1 through a reflexive thematic analysis [27–30] of games that we experience as gender euphoric, while employing prior work on gender euphoria. We engage in first-person research [51] that values our positionality [14, 69] as both trans-femme people and well-played [2, 47] HCI researchers. A central element is respect for the lived experiences of trans people. To render this analysis useful, we ask:

**RQ2:** How can we design games to facilitate gender euphoria?

Answering RQ2 then involves reflecting back on the data from RQ1 to understand what design elements facilitate gender euphoria experiences, a process of inductive coding. We reify our understanding of euphoria in games and render it useful; we build up concrete design and analysis themes deductively within the established *Design, Dynamics, Experience (DDE)* game design framework [160]. Working within this framework supports designers in creating more inclusive gameplay while supplying designers and researchers with vocabulary to better articulate trans experiences in designed artifacts. Further, in performing our analysis, we uncover two common patterns for producing euphoria through design.

Our contributions are:

- providing a foundational understanding of gender euphoria for HCI;
- case studies of popular published games that develop gender euphoria; and
- themes to ground discussion of gender euphoria (four relating to DESIGN, four DYNAMICS, and five EXPERIENCE) and highlight how they may be reproduced and implemented through design; and
- two prominent patterns of themes that may be useful for further exploration through design.

These contributions can help support trans players by novelly including gender euphoria design elements, enhancing the trans community's mental well-being and overall playing experience, as well as enabling trans-euphoria-related HCI projects.

**Trigger Warning:** The present research discusses both trans gender euphoria and transphobia in detail. Readers may find this triggering. If, as a reader, you find yourself in an unexpected emotional state, please, step away and take care of yourself.

## 2 Background

The present research is situated in trans identities and game design. In this section, we provide a primer on queer and trans terminology. We then engage with gender euphoria, which heavily informs our thematic analysis. We finally briefly address game design, as the Design, Dynamics, Experience framework [160] is central to the project and serves as the vector by which it may be taken up by designers and researchers.

### 2.1 Trans Terminology Primer

Based on scholarship in transgender studies [11, 104, 129, 141, 143], a *trans* or *transgender individual* is one whose gender identity does not match with the one assigned at birth, while a *cis* or *cisgender individual* is anyone else. We use

"trans" as inclusively as possible, including *any* gender not assigned at birth; while this runs counter to some lived experience [11, 114], it is presently best practice [129]. A significant number of trans individuals (but not all) experience *gender dysphoria* and/or *gender euphoria* [11, 141]. *Gender dysphoria*, a medicalized term, is distress relating to a mismatch between gender and gender presentation, while *gender euphoria* is the joy when they align and represents self-actualization and gender congruence [68, 139].

The concept of *cis* / heteronormativity combines and identifies two forms of *normativity* – deeply ingrained societal assumptions about what people should do or be that influence daily social interactions, system designs, laws, etc. *Heteronormativity* refers to much of society's expectations centered on long-term man-woman pairings, while *cisnormativity* refers to the assumption that it is "normal" to identify with one's gender assigned at birth and that being transgender is "abnormal" [85, 123, 130, 168]. These two norms are intertwined and we take the convention of combining them into *cis* / *heteronormativity*.

"*Othering*" refers to divisive strategies that a dominant social group (the *in-group*) employs against less-powerful groups (*out-groups*) based on factors such as gender or ethnicity [79]. In a *cis* / heteronormative world, trans people are othered.

The presently dominating anti-trans rhetoric is the product of the othering of trans people, which is usually the source of trans dysphoria experiences [91]. In video games, *cis* / heteronormativity promotes anti-trans rhetoric through designs that portray and frame trans identities as stereotyped, stigmatized, objectified, and abnormal [91]. In media, *trans narratology* [116, p. 134] enables trans people to tell our own stories to break out of the confines of dominant *cis* / heteronormative discourse.

The concept of "passing" is another product of othering transgender people. *Passing* refers to the notion that trans persons who do not display any visible signs of their assigned gender at birth "pass" unnoticed (as cisgender) [20, 132, 157]. The experience of not being seen as "passing" often leads to trans-hostile outcomes, including death [4, 17, 63, 105]. *cárdenas* [36], as a strategy for trans groups to achieve safety and freedom, describes how trans people can resist norms by "shifting" [92]. The *shift* is a trans operation of modulating one's perceptibility between visible and invisible for survival [36, pp. 72–77].

## 2.2 Gender Euphoria

We synthesize multiple definitions of gender euphoria and how it relates to transgender people. We connect this with multiple mental health studies that help to understand the theoretical underpinnings as to why video games and other media play such an important role in invoking gender euphoria.

**2.2.1 [Transgender] Gender Euphoria.** Gender euphoria is an emerging topic in studies of psychology and mental health care [7, 9, 19, 23, 120, 136]. *Gender euphoria* is a feeling of satisfaction and relief resulting from the congruence between one's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth, and is considered the important factor for trans mental health [7, 19, 26, 136]. The use of the term dates back to at least 2001 [99] and sees use within marginalised communities [19, 41, 107]. Beischel's [19] research to understand

the experience of gender euphoria develops three sources of euphoria, which are foundational in the present work:

- EXTERNAL – gender euphoria in relation to a range of external or physical aspects of a person's gender, such as seeing body shape changes;
- INTERNAL – self-affirmation from thinking of oneself in certain gendered way and/or engaging in certain behaviors; and
- SOCIAL – affirming experiences from interactions with others.

These types of transgender gender euphoria are not mutually exclusive and often intermingle [19]. Similarly, Skelton [136] interviews trans people to identify four themes of trans gender euphoria as products of self-understanding, receiving affirming care, close interpersonal relationships, and interactions in the broader community.

Austin [9] searches for how gender euphoria comes about, a key element in the present research. They identify four key processes associated with euphoria experiences:

- being exposed to a gender affirming antecedent – any experience that validates, enhances, or supports an individual's authentic gender identity and preceded positive thoughts to the gendered self;
- having an affirming thought – thoughts or self-talk that precedes and/or contributes to the positive emotional reaction, or meanings ascribed to them by the individuals that leads to feelings of gender euphoria;
- feeling a positive emotion – a constellation of emotional reactions, such as happiness, deep relief, and feeling empowered, to affirming experiences; and
- experiencing enhanced quality of life – behaviors and/or lives had changed as a response or result of gender affirmation.

**2.2.2 Psychological Parasocial Relationships.** A *psychological parasocial relationship* [40, 49, 50, 94] is one of the important supporting perspectives for analyzing the self-reflection mental processes from the interaction between players and non-player characters (NPCs) – a central element of the present research. Parasocial relationships are one-sided psychological relationships that people establish with media personae [50, 75]; activities that came from these relationships (e.g., observing, imagining, interpreting) are *parasocial interactions*. Parasocial relationships are a useful framing to analyze relationships between an audience or player and media figures (e.g., fictional characters, NPCs, talk show hosts, celebrities). *Self-discrepancy theory* [74] suggests that individuals typically possess an ideal self that represents their desired self-image, where discrepancies arise when comparing and contrasting these actual-ideal selves [100]. One primary motivation for individuals to initiate and cultivate a parasocial relationship is the spontaneous desire to reduce self-discrepancies when they find the media personae reflecting or embodying their ideal selves [50].

**2.2.3 Reference Groups.** Studies of reference groups (e.g., [35, 101, 133, 135, 149]) show that individuals tend to evaluate themselves based on the groups they believe they belong to, whereas the reference groups became their frame of source for

reflecting their own qualities, values, and behaviors [149]. The positive and authentic portrayal is especially important for individuals to build confidence and enhance self-evaluation when the reference groups involve racial and gendered identities that are usually considered stigmatized [169]. *Role models* are important to affirming identity, especially for those who are socially isolated. Role models tell people within a group who they might become [70, 126] and whether society has a place for them [169]. Authentic and positive in-group representation can not only provide a positive group-based identity but also be reflected in a healthy self-evaluation [103], as many works (e.g., [138, 164]) proved how positive representations can significantly create positive experiences for disenfranchised audiences.

**2.2.4 Identity Safety Cues & Safe Spaces.** *Identity safety cues* are crucial prerequisites for providing trans affirming care. Identity safety cues refer to aspects or elements in an environment or setting that indicate to marginalized groups that the risk of facing discrimination is minimal in that environment and their social identities are respected and valued [37, 117, 140]. Targeted identity safety cues aimed at a particular group may assist persons with stigmatized identities in mitigating or diminishing health inequalities resulting from stresses connected to their identity [66, 97, 158, 167]. A space featuring identity safety cues is a *safe space*. The concept of safe spaces in mental health geography studies is used to explain the therapeutic experience of spaces [61, 65, 155, 166], which we draw on in video games.

## 2.3 Game Design

The DDE Framework [160] is a game design and analysis tool that formalizes the properties of games. It extends and iterates Hunnicke's popular and useful *Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA)* Framework [76]. A key element in both is how they characterize player emotional responses as second-order effects of elements that the game designer develops. In the MDA Framework, *mechanics* describes game components that a designer creates and controls, *dynamics* are the behavior of player interactions with the mechanics, and *aesthetics* are players' emotional responses and experiences evoked from the interaction. DDE is a newer extension of MDA, which addresses some shortcomings, while retaining the overall structure [160].

The DDE identifies DESIGN as anything that the designer has direct control over. While this was the definition of MDA's "mechanics", we generally consider *game mechanics* to be designed loops in which players observe game state, make a decision, enact the decision, and observe the outcome [80, 127] – a subset of DESIGN. DYNAMICS remain the same between the two, being a combination of the designer's intent and the player's choices that lead to particular game states. DYNAMICS are influenced by the game DESIGN, but are not directly controlled. Finally, responding to confusion about the meaning of "aesthetics", DDE replaces it with EXPERIENCE, a broader term for the range of emotional outcomes players may encounter as they take the game through its DYNAMICS.

We choose the DDE Framework as our lens for presenting design advice for both designers and researchers – each of the types of elements has a clear place in game design processes.

While interesting and valuable, the present work does not engage deeply with DDE's sub-elements – each of the high-level components are subdivided in the full framework.

Characters are a central element in many game designs, often forming the locus of control for a player [16]. In the present work, we distinguish between player characters (PCs) and non-player characters (NPCs). PCs are any narrative element that is controlled by the player [42]. PCs might be first person, third person, a group of characters, and/or a rotating set of characters [59, 91]. NPCs are any characters that the player does not control, but interacts with throughout the game [42].

### 3 Methodology: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

We conducted a qualitative study to understand how games support trans inclusivity through gender euphoria experiences. The process is a form of reflexive thematic analysis [28–31], applied to game design (e.g., as in [91, 153]). This section lays out our positionality, insights into our dataset, our ways of knowing, and our thematic analysis approach.

The present research was performed by four researchers. The project began in February 2024 and analysis was performed until June 2024. In July–September 2024, we finalized the framework and wrote this report. The work was initially completely inductive, but later came to be a combination of inductive and deductive, described below.

#### 3.1 Positionality Statement

In reflexive, first-person research, the researchers, themselves, are a critical component of the work being undertaken [14, 27–30, 69]. Our experience, understanding, and positioning with regards to the data are a strength of the approach and it is thus critical for the reader to understand our positionality in order to contextualize the work. This supports the reader in understanding the foci and perspectives we bring to the present work, as reflexive thematic analysis expressly calls the researchers' framing to bear [30]. Researchers with different positionality and/or alternative data are expected to derive different themes, a point that we return to.

The present research was undertaken by a team of four trans feminine researchers – two in the United States of America (USA) and two in Australia. One of the lead authors was born and raised in China; the remainder are from the USA. The two team members in Australia spent much of their lives in the USA and part of our move was for safety. The fourth is in the process of moving to Japan to escape anti-trans persecution in the USA<sup>2</sup>. Some of the group are trans binary, some not. Our group is diverse in terms of race, nation of origin, native language, and socio-economic class. The group is neurodiverse [46], with members identifying as autistic, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizoid personality disorder, and/or borderline personality disorder, which is important to trans representation because there is significant overlap between the trans community and neurodivergent community [162].

The researchers study games within the context of HCI and practice a combination of qualitative and critical/cultural

approaches to understanding game designs, which we bring to bear on the present research. All of the team members are *well-played* [2, 47] – we bring decades of experience with gameplay and game culture to the research. This experience, though not easily developed into a scientific way of knowing, informs our viewpoints as researchers and enables us to better identify games for inclusion in our dataset. All four researchers have experience designing and developing small-scale video games, and three bring commercial game development experience.

Notably, the team is not gender-diverse, leaving an open space to expand the dataset and themes discovered in future work. While we have some non-binary representation, there is no trans-masculine representation. Further, gender euphoria is conceptually valuable to those questioning or exploring their gender, as well as cis people [128], but these perspectives are not considered.

#### 3.2 Building a Dataset

Games with gender euphoria experiences are not a genre or category; there is no existing dataset for the present research, a challenge when undertaking this kind of analysis [153]. Some games are designed to elicit gender euphoria, and these form a starting point. Notably, games with gender euphoria experiences or trans themes – trans characters or stories – do not have to be developed by trans developers. Further, such developers do not inherently guarantee the presence of trans euphoria experiences. Therefore, to be added to the dataset, games needed to be reported by at least one of the researchers as eliciting euphoria.

To build our dataset, we first brainstormed and considered games that we identified as providing gender euphoria from our positionality and our personal playing experience (e.g., [G2, G3, G7, G12, G16, G23]), and then we enriched the dataset by considering and investigating games with trans themes – for instance, games from known trans or trans-ally developers (e.g., [G1, G5, G9, G14, G21]) [36, 125], and games with trans stories or trans characters (e.g., [G8, G10, G15, G18, G22, G25]) [15, 33, 55, 67, 81, 87, 102, 110, 113, 115, 124]. We also examine how trans game creators think about joyful playing experiences (for both trans- and cisgender players) in their games [55, 67, 71, 150, 159].

During this process, some games were ultimately not included in the dataset, even if they involved trans themes (e.g., [5, 8, 21, 106, 156]). This is because either the authors did not find gender euphoria when investigating the games (e.g., [106, 156]) or to avoid harm from potential sources of dysphoria triggers (e.g., [5, 8]) [86, 91]. *Dragon Age Inquisition*, notable for its trans-masculine representation, was notably not included out of concerns of triggering dysphoria [21]. *Tell Me Why* [G8], another game notable for its trans masculine representation, is included in our corpus. The decision not to use *Tell Me Why* as one of our main case studies was an intentional one; the trans-feminine authors felt trans-masculine scholars are better equipped to write about this title. We further address limitations in Section 6.3.

From this combination of personal playing experience, community suggestions, and media attention, we developed a ludography of 25 games with gender euphoria design elements for further study; when we cite a game in the Ludography, it is

<sup>2</sup>This author's perspectives inform our writing on transgender legal issues in Japan, contextualizing our relatively optimistic outlook.

prefixed with a “G” (e.g., [G14]). The ludography is laid out in Table 1, with more detail in the Ludography section. This dataset is not exhaustive, but it was sufficiently useful to examine the present phenomena and start the conversation of designing and discovering euphoria elements in games. We acknowledge that euphoria is idiosyncratic – every euphoric trans person experiences it differently – people with different gendered experiences are expected to derive different themes, a strength of reflexive thematic analysis [30]. Beyond the present dataset, there are more games that are worth studying and analyzing to expand our understanding of gender euphoria in design.

### 3.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

We follow Braun et al.’s [31] approach to reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is iterative, so the phases are not a chronicle, but a high-level description of the activities that we engaged in within each phase. We leave out a description of Phase 6: Writing Up as it was primarily writing the present manuscript.

**3.3.1 Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Dataset.** We began this project seeking to understand, from our positionality and individual gameplay experiences, how gender euphoria comes about in games, and describing in our initial notes. An essential challenge was to operationalize how our transitions influenced our reads [146] of gameplay.

We used close reading (of games) to develop insight into the games in our dataset, which establishes our initial understanding that is threaded throughout phases of the reflexive thematic analysis process. *Close reading* is a process of playing and documentation to understand the nuances of interactive encounters in games [22, 146]. In the present research, individual researchers, often more than one, played each game in the ludography and assembled notes on the elements that produced gender euphoria. Tables 1 and 3 provide insight into who played which game, while Table 2 identifies initial notes from the researchers. We played games; reflected on play; and developed context, including trans and queer theory, gender euphoria studies, mental health care studies, and articles about individual games.

Notably, close reading of games is not concerned with uncovering objective truth [43], but, in contrast, is for scholars to exert efforts to provide substantiated assessments that contribute to the field’s comprehension of games as textual entities and as experiential phenomena [44, 146]. Therefore, the use of close reading in our analysis aims to understand, extract, and record the interactive experiences to facilitate uncovering gender euphoria as revealed through play. To illustrate our close readings and to explain the resulting themes, we later develop our readings into case studies.

**3.3.2 Phase 2: Coding.** Our coding process began with descriptions of euphoric experiences drawn from close readings and design elements or euphoric sources involved drawn from further engagement with the games and contextual sources. We take these elements of games in our dataset to be the primary pieces of data. To gain insights to these data, we employ additional ways of knowing drawn from game studies and sociology: content analysis [44, 53] and perspectives from critical discourse analysis [25, 52, 56, 165]. These analysis processes were intertwined with

the close reading and the reflexive thematic analysis and were used to frame, extract, describe, and develop codes and themes. We identified play that, to us, developed into euphoria, as laid out in Table 3. This play coalesced into labels for the data as inductive codes [31]. We coded games based on how they engaged with trans topics (e.g., dealing with discomfort, changing pronouns); how they employed game mechanics to make opportunities for identity exploration (e.g., promoting character creation); and how they enabled the player to engage with a game through a gendered, social body.

*Content analysis* [44, 53] served as a key point of entry to understand how design elements connect with gendered experiences, as well as the part of inductive analysis, following the close reading of games. In addition to analyzing game content, we analyzed the contents of developer and community discourse; for example, developer comments substantially influence Section 5.4. The goal of using content analysis here is to investigate and interpret the closely read interactive experiences that occur in the game. As we unpacked design elements within euphoric game content, we grounded our observations in prior theory. We consider the language-centered components (e.g., narration, speaking characters, backstories) of games in our dataset. This process included unpacking game events using trans and queer theories, gender euphoria theory, and mental health studies. The goal was to identify where gender topics or identity-related features emerge and how games affirm or disaffirm trans players through the design elements.

In reflexive thematic analysis, a scholar’s choice of interpretative lens fundamentally shapes their interpretation. Our lens was shaped by perspectives from critical discourse analysis [25, 52, 56, 95] to understand and interpret how social structure and normative power can produce cis / heteronormative othering, stigmatization operations, expression restriction, and the euphoria that comes from challenging it.

**3.3.3 Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes.** During the processes of coding and generating initial themes, we realized that some codes focused on design aspects, while others highlighted playing experiences. Meanwhile, we noticed the interplay and differences between the designs leading to euphoria and euphoria coming from ways of interactions, which required us to distinguish and organize the themes into categories.

During the process of extracting and categorizing themes from our codes inductively, we sought out ways to make our findings useful to developers. Therefore, we looked to established frameworks into which our inductive codes could be fit, to strengthen our work’s applicability and practicality. We thus switched from purely inductive coding to a combination of inductive and deductive coding using established game design frameworks. We initially employed the MDA Framework [76], then transitioned its more expressive iteration, the DDE Framework [160], as high-level deductive codes. We considered how our inductive codes fit within the DDE Framework:

- DESIGN – an element of the game that the designer has intentionally constructed;
- DYNAMICS – game states arising from a combination of DESIGN, the player, and the player’s background; or

**Table 1: Ludography arranged alphabetically by title with insights into each game.**

Title	Release Year	Platform	Add Date	Add By	T. Id.	T. St.	T. Dev.	Relevant Comm.
<i>428: Shibuya Scramble</i> [G20]	2018	Windows	Mar. 28	RB				
<i>Animal Crossing: New Horizons</i> [G16]	2020	Switch	July 15	SL				[89, 93, 109]
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i> [G13]	2023	Windows	Mar. 28	MC, PT	✓			[115]
<i>Celeste</i> [G14]	2018	Windows	Apr. 3	SL	✓		✓	[12, 45, 134, 150]
<i>Cyberpunk 2077</i> [G6]	2020	Windows	Mar. 28	SL	✓	✓		[72, 78, 108, 115]
<i>Dysnia</i> [G1]	2012	Windows	July 25	SL	✓	✓		[125]
<i>Elite Dangerous</i> [G11]	2014	Windows	Mar. 28	MC				
<i>Etrian Odyssey Nexus</i> [G2]	2019	3DS	Apr. 6	PT				
<i>Fairune Collection</i> [G19]	2018	3DS	July 8	MC, PT				
<i>Fallout 4</i> [G4]	2015	Windows	Mar. 28	MC				
<i>Gender Dysphoria</i> [G10]	2020	Windows	Apr. 6	SL	✓	✓	✓	
<i>I Was a Teenage Exocolonist</i> [G17]	2022	Windows	Mar. 28	MC	✓			
<i>If Found...</i> [G9]	2020	Windows	Apr. 3	SL	✓	✓	✓	[137, 148, 161, 163]
<i>Mainichi</i> [G5]	2012	Windows	July 25	SL	✓	✓	✓	[36]
<i>one night, hot springs</i> [G18]	2018	Windows	Apr. 6	SL, RB	✓	✓	✓	[55, 67, 81, 102, 131]
<i>Pokémon Sword and Shield</i> [G12]	2019	Switch	Mar. 28	RB				
<i>Project Zomboid</i> [G24]	2011	Windows	Mar. 28	SL				
<i>Second Puberty</i> [G21]	2021	Windows	July 25	SL	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Stardew Valley</i> [G3]	2016	Windows	July 25	SL				[48]
<i>Starbound</i> [G7]	2016	Windows	Mar. 28	SL, MC, PT				
<i>Tell Me Why</i> [G8]	2020	Windows	Apr. 6	SL	✓	✓	✓	[15, 113, 115]
<i>The MISSING: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories</i> [G22]	2018	Windows	July 25	SL	✓	✓	✓	[33, 87]
<i>The Sims 4</i> [G15]	2014	Windows	Apr. 6	SL	✓	✓	✓	[38, 151]
<i>Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege</i> [G25]	2015	Windows	Mar. 28	SL	✓		✓	[110, 124]
<i>VA-11 Hail-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action</i> [G23]	2016	Windows	Apr. 6	RB, PT				

Add Date: The date on which the game added to the dataset (all dates are in 2024).

Add By: The author(s) who reported this game as having euphoric experiences. SL, MC, RB, and PT are the authors' initials.

T. Id.: Does the game directly include at least one trans identity or imply one? (Check mark (✓) indicates affirmative.)

T. St.: Does the game directly include the trans story? (Check mark (✓) indicates affirmative.)

T. Dev.: Is there evidence that the game was developed by trans or trans-ally communities? (Check mark (✓) indicates affirmative.)

Relevant Comm.: relevant visible community commentary that addresses trans or queer groups in relation to the game.

- EXPERIENCE – the emotions felt as a result of the DYNAMICS.

**3.3.4 Phase 4: Developing & Reviewing Themes.** In parallel with our reflexive thematic analysis, we were undertaking a literature synthesis on gender euphoria as understood through the academic research outside of design. In learning about gender euphoria, we looked at Beischel's types of gender euphoria and at Austin's euphoria processes (both discussed in Background). As we further inductively and deductively developed our themes, we heavily leveraged the terminology from these recent works on gender euphoria as a lens for this work. We reframe each of DESIGN, DYNAMICS, and EXPERIENCE as questions, which are answered through our themes:

- DESIGN: “What DESIGN elements (e.g., narrative, mechanics) enable or nourish trans players’ euphoria?”
- DYNAMICS: “What game states can move a player toward euphoria and how are these influenced by DESIGN?”

- EXPERIENCE: “What types of transgender gender euphoria EXPERIENCES are produced through the DYNAMICS, and how do they align with the outcomes of previous gender euphoria studies?”

To complement and deepen our thematic analysis, we developed case studies from the analysis of four games: *Cyberpunk 2077* [G6], *Celeste* [G14], *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [G16], and *one night, hot springs* [G18]. We selected these games because they included a diverse range of euphoria design elements and encompassed different development backgrounds. These encompass:

- one popular game with the positive trans character involved and DESTIGMATIZATION DESIGN [G6];
- one popular game with euphoria from its multiplayer setting and OFFER EXPRESSION DESIGN [G16];
- one trans-developed game without ostensibly showing trans identity or story as DE-OTHERING DESIGN [G14];
- and, one trans-developed game that focusing on trans narrative with SELF-DISCLOSURE DESIGN [G18].

**Table 2: Dataset with initial notes and observations on how we describe the emergence of gender euphoria inside these games, informed by our positionality and individual gameplay experiences.**

Game	Initial Notes / Observations of Euphoria
[G20]	RB: "Moments in Maria's story were things I always wanted to do growing up but never could and there was vicarious joy in that."
[G16]	SL: "I can wear whatever I want for my gender expression in a safe environment with my friends!"
[G13]	MC: "The game offers multiple body and voice options without sex markers associated. Regardless of whether I play a visibly trans character, the game's world can contain them."
[G14]	SL: "The character is trans, but it isn't important and eye-catching! I feel that being trans is not a big deal; being trans is normal and is just one identity of who I am."
[G6]	SL: "The character Claire is so cool, and I feel euphoric whenever I interact with her."
[G1]	SL: "I feel my struggle is recognized from the reading of another trans person's experience."
[G11]	MC: "The game allows for a lot of customizations for your ship; one of them was pink and purple (bi-pride colors), which felt euphoric that was bi-trans euphoric!"
[G2]	PT: "Freedom to change avatars for all characters to any avatar. All pronouns to refer to the player characters are they/them."
[G19]	PT: "You start as this young woman in a dress just walking through the world while you can pick up the sword and get clad in armor."
[G4]	MC: "You just get to be you and like build a lil house and then go stomp around exploring"
[G10]	SL: "Though it portrays gender dysphoria experiences, I feel my trauma and pain are seen and recognized!"
[G17]	PT: "Players can be trans, and other characters will support them. It meant being trans was a meaningful choice, which was powerful."
[G9]	SL: "The trans story in the game is so resonated with me, and its fantasy and idealism encouraged me!"
[G5]	SL: "This story tells exactly what daily safety concerns I'm facing and violence I have met before."
[G18]	SL: "I read the affirmation of the real trans experience that is mixed with both comfort and discomfort from another trans story, and I feel my similar experiences are recognized."
[G12]	PT: "You can experiment with cute clothes and is totally fine no issue."
[G24]	SL: "You can choose your clothing style freely and safely in a world where no one else will judge you, and experience the freedom to go out on the street."
[G21]	SL: "The game's trans self-narrative resonated with me. I feel someone understands me!"
[G3]	SL: "I can be myself, wear the clothes I want, and enjoy my personal world without worrying about the outside real world or discrimination."
[G7]	MC: "You're just free on a planet, and you can be and do whatever the heck you want."
[G8]	SL: "Though it's a trans masculine story, I somehow read encouragement from such a well-rounded trans character."
[G22]	SL: "It's a story about trans painful struggles and experiences that are so real that I feel someone understands me."
[G15]	SL: "I saw trans characters living in the digital community with my character, and their trans identity is not a big deal or causing trouble, but one of their personalities that shapes their uniqueness."
[G25]	SL: "The character Osa is really my ideal representation. I feel encouraged by seeing her and reflect myself."
[G23]	RB: "I felt a strong (trans) sense of empathy from the protagonist Jill." PT: "I really liked this one because I got to kind of just like... live the single girl life, and it was SO happiness-inducing."

Due to the scarcity of previous studies on trans euphoria in games, it was crucial to examine each game thoroughly, necessitating the focus on a detailed presentation of a small number of games.

**3.3.5 Phase 5: Refining, Defining, & Naming Themes.** We combined the components of that analysis to assemble clear themes and identify their meanings for a trans audience. Throughout this phase, the researchers actively participated in multiple iterative discussion sessions to investigate the connection between the found themes, the afforded interaction dynamics of these themes, the types of euphoria experiences that emerged, and community descriptions. We deliberated on what is the most effective approach to implement our comprehension of the events occurring in these games, with the intention of rendering it useful to others.

## 4 Gender Euphoria Themes

We develop our themes and organize them into DESIGN, DYNAMIC, and EXPERIENCE, to render them useful to designers and researchers. Tables 4, 5, and 6 describe the themes within our euphoria DDE and Figure 1 shows a diagram form.

### 4.1 DESIGN

DESIGN themes (Table 4) are directly controlled when making games; the themes presented here can be used as the basis for designing games (and other interactive systems). We found DESIGNS to be the most open-ended because of the variety and ever-changing nature of game designs and presentations. For instance, one can be terrified by many different elements, yet the feeling of being terrified and the process of being terrified can be

**Table 3: Inductive codes from early phases of thematic analysis and playtime in hours, by author. Some games had been played prior to the study and some for the study; when playtime is approximate, it is noted with an asterisk (\*). As analysis progressed, these codes were merged or reformulated for accurate description in the subsequent initial themes.**

Game	TIME (WHO)	INITIAL CODES
[G20]	4h (SL); 41h (RB)	Self projection, being in norms.
[G16]	19h* (SL)	PC customization, friendly world, expression, undoing norms, interpersonal pleasure, shift†.
[G13]	14h* (PT); 38h (RB)	PC customization, pass, expression, being in norms, friendly world.
[G14]	21h* (SL); 2h (PT)	Undoing norms, trans story, authenticity, safety, being in norms, invisibility.
[G6]	11h* (SL); 41h (RB)	Trans story, authenticity, relation with NPC, role model, NPCs encouragement, undoing norms, self-accept.
[G1]	0.5h (SL); 0.25h (RB)	Trans story, authenticity, resonance, dealing discomfort, self-accept.
[G11]	146h* (RB)	PC customization, expression, freedom feeling.
[G2]	100+h* (PT)	PC customization, changeability, expression.
[G19]	12+h* (PT)	Being in norms, self projection, undoing norms.
[G4]	20h* (SL)	PC customization, expression, being in norms, self projection, friendly world, freedom feeling.
[G10]	1h (SL)	Trans story, authenticity, resonance, dealing discomfort.
[G17]	10h* (MC)	NPCs' affirmation, trans option, expression, interpersonal pleasure, self-accept, trans story.
[G9]	3.6h (SL); 1.5h (RB)	Trans story, NPCs' affirmation, self reflection, resonance, dealing discomfort, self-accept.
[G5]	0.5h (SL)	Trans story, authenticity, resonance, dealing discomfort, self-accept.
[G18]	1h* (SL); 1h (PT); 3h (RB)	Trans story, authenticity, self reflection, NPCs encouragement, dealing discomfort, resonance, self-accept.
[G12]	5h* (SL)	PC customization, friendly world, expression, being in norms, safety.
[G24]	10h* (SL); 27.5h (RB)	PC customization, expression, undoing norms, safety, freedom feeling.
[G21]	1.5h (SL)	Trans story, self reflection, authenticity, resonance, dealing discomfort, self-accept.
[G3]	31h* (SL); 20+h* (PT)	Ideal body, self projection, being in norms, friendly world, expression, freedom feeling.
[G7]	3h* (SL); 25h (PT)	PC customization, friendly world, expression, freedom feeling.
[G8]	12h* (SL); 2.4h (RB)	Trans story, authenticity, NPCs encouragement, NPCs' affirmation, dealing discomfort.
[G22]	10h* (SL); 1.5h* (RB)	Trans story, authenticity, self reflection, NPCs encouragement, role model, resonance.
[G15]	12h* (SL)	Undoing norms, PC customization, pass, NPCs' affirmation, friendly world, freedom feeling.
[G25]	4h* (SL)	Role model, self reflection, pass, undoing norms.
[G23]	8h* (SL); 6h (PT)	Self projection, being in norms, self reflection.

†This specific use of the “shift” [36] here for the game [G16] is to describe the euphoria revealed from the safe feeling of changing identity between visible and invisible in its multiplayer game setting.

similar. From our data, we have identified four DESIGN themes, which we use as the basis for the case studies. The DESIGN themes are: DESTIGMATIZATION, DE-OTHERING, OFFER EXPRESSION, and SELF-DISCLOSURE.

## 4.2 DYNAMICS

DYNAMICS (Table 5) result from players, their choices, and the game DESIGN, making them hard to tease out. DYNAMICS address the reasons for and processes of achieving euphoria EXPERIENCES produced by DESIGNS. They are the interplay between DESIGNS acting on players and players’ ascribed meanings or inferences by themselves, thus, leading to a constellation of emotional reactions. DYNAMICS can only arise as the combination of DESIGNS that promote them in concert with player choices that lead to them. One DESIGN can have multiple DYNAMICS to explain its euphoria-producing process. Our DYNAMICS include TRANS TRUST, SAFE SPACES, CONTINUUM OF COMFORT, and SELF REFLECTION.

## 4.3 EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCE (Table 6) describes trans players’ euphoric feelings produced by the DYNAMICS. When making games, designers seek

to evoke particular EXPERIENCES. In our analysis, we carefully considered the current work in gender euphoria [19, 136] and used it as the basis for identifying potential EXPERIENCES. Prior work identified types of euphoria, including *intrapersonal*, *interpersonal*, *institutional*, *external*, *internal*, and *social*. Our resulting themes include: SELF IMAGE, EXTERNAL, SOCIAL, PARASOCIAL, and INSTITUTIONAL. Notably, *social* gender euphoria can be produced by single-player DESIGNS, because the interaction between the player and other humans can be simulated between the player and the NPCs or between the player and the game creators.

## 4.4 Observations on Patterns between DESIGN, DYNAMICS, & EXPERIENCES

We urge caution in considering particular patterns of DESIGN to DYNAMICS to EXPERIENCES, a point that we return to in Discussion. However, retroactive analysis of our themes did reveal two common patterns that occurred in multiple games. This suggests that these patterns were effective in producing euphoria EXPERIENCES, so we highlight them here as a design space that is worth further

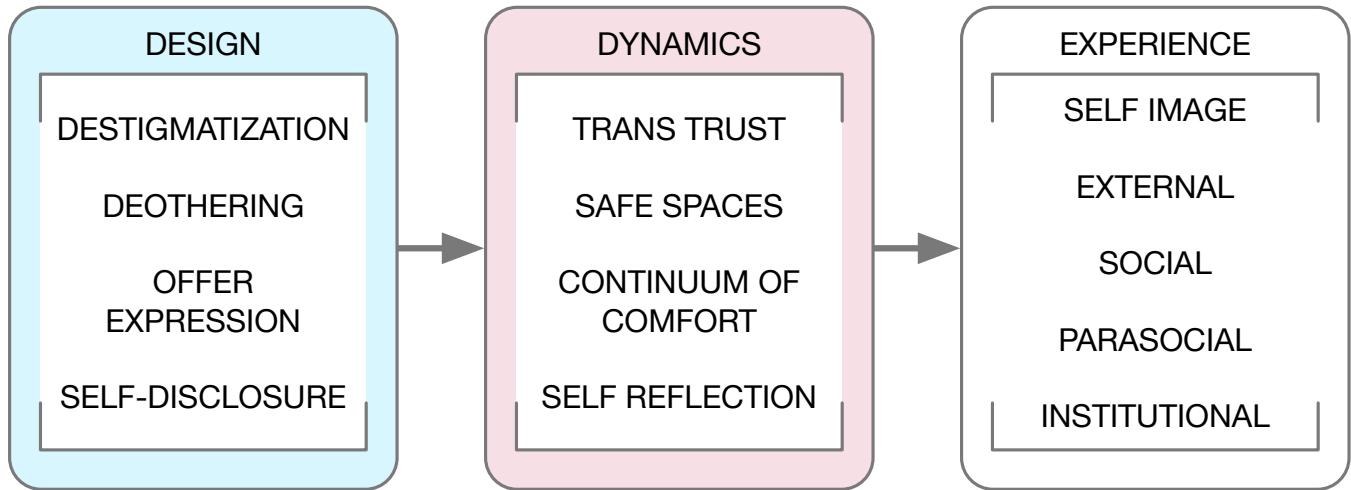


Figure 1: The themes from the present research, organized under DESIGN, DYNAMICS, and EXPERIENCE.

Table 4: DESIGN themes, which can be directly controlled by the designer when making a game. Games that featured the DESIGN theme are listed next to the theme.

<b>DESTIGMATIZATION</b>	[G6, G8, G9, G17, G25]
An authentic representation of trans characters that includes social acceptance and avoids misrepresentation. For instance, in games [G6, G8, G25], the trans identities of the characters are clearly stated, but not portrayed in stigmatization such as sexualized, objectified, or stereotyped ways [91, 147]. DESTIGMATIZATION expressly calls out trans identities to counteract anti-trans rhetoric.	
<b>DE-OTHERING</b>	[G14, G15, G25]
A focus on trans inclusion in social groups and activities such that we are not a separate group outside a norm. DE-OTHERING is not explicit in the way that DESTIGMATIZATION is. For instance, in games [G14, G15], trans identities are implicitly expressed or de-focused, thus creating identity invisibility or diluted and fitting in the societal structure, gameplay, or narratives.	
<b>OFFER EXPRESSION</b>	[G2–G4, G7, G11–G13, G15–G17, G24]
Develop many options for self-expression through the game, such as avatar customization [G13, G15], apparel changes [G12, G24], and space design [G3, G16]. This is effective in single-player games, yet, notably, in environments of multiplayer settings, this may have risks of the “visibility traps” [73, 84, 119, 122], whereas strategies such as gender-neutral settings or anytime-customizability have adopted by games (e.g., [G16]) may help on ensuring the safety.	
<b>SELF-DISCLOSURE</b>	[G1, G5, G6, G8–G10, G18, G21, G22]
Modulating what the player knows about characters and ensuring that trans characters have control of their disclosures. For example, in games [G9, G18, G22], trans characters or game narrators share their stories and disclose trans experiences candidly and authentically.	

investigation. We name the two patterns **A PLACE OF MY OWN** and **REFLECTIVE ROLE MODELS**.

**4.4.1 A PLACE OF MY OWN.** The chain of OFFER EXPRESSION → SAFE SPACES → SELF IMAGE & EXTERNAL appears in a number of single player games in our dataset, what we name **A PLACE OF MY OWN**. Games with the **A PLACE OF MY OWN** pattern develop a sense of control and psychological safety for the player, who need not worry about dangers from other people. Our experiences of these games were often a sense of calm and a lack of pressure.

In games with the **A PLACE OF MY OWN** pattern, the player has a great deal of control over their PC's appearance and manner and/or a personal space to inhabit. Diverse PC customization options enable the player to develop a PC that matches their

interest or exploration (e.g., exploring non-binary ways of dress, playing with makeup and hair). Options to construct a personalized space enables players to inhabit a virtual world that brings them joy (e.g., adding cutiesie posters, displaying a weapons collection). In game worlds with the **A PLACE OF MY OWN** pattern, players are shielded from gender-based harassment or transphobic threats from other players or NPCs, which means they offer a **SAFE SPACES DYNAMIC**.

By offering **SAFE SPACES**, trans players' euphoria **EXPERIENCE** of **SELF IMAGE** and **EXTERNAL** can come through. Players are able to craft personas and spaces that reflect their sense of self (**SELF EXPRESSION**) and these can be shared with (or are private from) NPCs and other players (**EXTERNAL**).

**Table 5: Themes for DYNAMICS – the emergent game states arising from the combination of DESIGN and the player. Games that featured each DYNAMICS theme appear to the right of the theme.**

<b>TRANS TRUST</b>	[G6, G9, G15, G17, G22]
Game scenarios in which a bond forms between characters, such that they share information and/or work with the PC.	
<b>SAFE SPACES</b>	[G2–G4, G7, G11–G17, G24]
Game spaces in which a character is safe because there is no judgment about group identity and/or the player has control over disclosures. SAFE SPACES cannot truly be DESIGNED because the player must be able to feel safe.	
<b>CONTINUUM OF COMFORT</b>	[G1, G5, G9, G10, G18, G21, G22]
The possibility of encountering pain, hope, sadness, and/or joy through the game DESIGN. In cases of CONTINUUM OF COMFORT, players are not expected to encounter dysphoria triggers [91], but may encounter unhappy experiences. It is also expected that players should equally encounter joyous experiences, representing a range.	
<b>SELF REFLECTION</b>	[G1, G5, G8–G10, G18–G23, G25]
The possibility of evoking resonance, self-understanding, or recalling players' life experiences. SELF REFLECTION DYNAMICS can be triggering moments of discovery.	

**Table 6: EXPERIENCE themes describe ways that DESIGN and DYNAMICS can be received by players. Games that feature a particular EXPERIENCE are to the right of the theme.**

<b>SELF IMAGE</b>	[G2–G4, G7, G12, G13, G15–G19, G23, G24]
Observations of self identity (in the real world or in-game representation) that bring joy.	
<b>EXTERNAL</b>	[G2–G4, G7, G11–G13, G15–G17, G24]
Joy derived from showing identity to others in the world as the authentic self.	
<b>SOCIAL</b>	[G6, G9, G15–G18, G22]
Experiences with how others (e.g., NPCs) take up an identity and/or respond to identities.	
<b>PARASOCIAL</b>	[G1, G3–G10, G15, G18–G23, G25]
Vicarious and/or one-sided relationships with PCs or NPCs and joy through them and/or a relationship with them.	
<b>INSTITUTIONAL</b>	[G6, G8–G10, G14–G17, G25]
Experiences involving larger social structures. These might be supportive institutions or joy can derive from subverting and/or challenging unsupportive ones.	

We identified the following games as exhibiting the A PLACE OF MY OWN pattern (though some include other themes): [G2–G4, G7, G11–G13, G15–G17, G24]. Notably, the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [G16] is an exception in that it is a multiplayer game, but its game mechanics and design allow trans players to adjust their avatar customization to manage identity visibility, and to decide their own gaming fields to create SAFE SPACES, which will be explained in detail in the following case studies.

**4.4.2 REFLECTIVE ROLE MODELS.** A number of games in our dataset develop trans stories, associated with the SELF-DISCLOSURE DESIGN, in which a trans PC or NPC is revealed to the player. The chain of SELF-DISCLOSURE → CONTINUUM OF COMFORT & SELF REFLECTION → PARASOCIAL appeared in a number of games. Our themes suggest these games offer a character that the player may compare themselves against and/or develop a PARASOCIAL [EXPERIENCE] relationship with – a pattern of REFLECTIVE ROLE MODELS.

Trans players playing and reading these shared stories can possibly encounter emotions from the series, evoke DYNAMICS of

SELF-REFLECTION and resonance with the character or the game creator. Further, these stories can reflect a combination of joy and pain, creating a CONTINUUM OF COMFORT that may help the player to understand their own situation. Through these DYNAMICS, players develop a PARASOCIAL EXPERIENCE with the character that SELF-DISCLOSED to them. In addition, though less prominent, a SOCIAL EXPERIENCE can be produced when the narrative involves interaction and support from other NPCs (e.g., [G9, G18, G22]). The games that developed REFLECTIVE ROLE MODELS included [G1, G5, G8–G10, G18, G21, G22].

## 5 Case Studies

We present case studies to illustrate how gender euphoria DESIGN elements bring about DYNAMICS that produce gender euphoria EXPERIENCES. While we summarize the game for the reader, this is not a substitute for playing them. Each case study begins with a description of the game and the relevant DESIGN elements. We then present one or more euphoria DYNAMICS emerging from the DESIGN and analyse the types of euphoria EXPERIENCES produced.

## 5.1 DESTIGMATIZATION in *Cyberpunk 2077*: NPC Claire Russell

*Cyberpunk 2077* [G6] is an open-world first-person action-adventure role-playing video game, taking place in a dystopian, technology-infused near-future world. *Cyberpunk 2077*'s trans representation has been cited for both its strengths and weaknesses. It has been praised for trans-inclusive character customization, allowing extensive options for facial features, skin tone, body type, and genitalia. Conversely, it has been criticized for including in-game assets that objectify trans bodies [91]. This case study focuses on a well-received [72, 78, 108, 115] aspect of the game's trans representation: the trans feminine NPC Claire Russell (Figure 2).

**5.1.1 DESIGN (DESTIGMATIZATION & SELF-DISCLOSURE).** We primarily view Claire's DESIGN through the lens of DESTIGMATIZATION. We argue that Claire's design promotes gender euphoria predominantly through what it *avoids*: negative tropes about trans experiences (e.g., [91, 147]) that contribute to stigma. This reveals that euphoria and dysphoria can be linked: some euphoric experiences arise from the simple absence of dysphoria.

Claire Russell is designed so that her transgender status is not immediately obvious (she "passes" as a cis woman; see 2.1). This automatically avoids many negative tropes about trans women, as many of them focus on visual appearance [91, 147]. The most salient visual representation of trans status is a pride flag<sup>3</sup> on her truck, a symbol the trans community designed for ourselves.

Claire is an interactable NPC who works with the player in multiple optional quests after meeting in a required quest. This further DESTIGMATIZES her by declaring her worthy of the player's time and attention and portraying her as capable of accomplishing her own goals. Claire's narrative design presents her personality and interests first: she is a sociable bartender who loves cars, i.e., her interests do not fit narrowly into a gendered box. If the player progresses in Claire's quest line, she will begin to speak candidly about her transition – a DESIGN for SELF-DISCLOSURE. This timing avoids making her identity the only thing that matters about her.

**5.1.2 DYNAMICS (TRANS TRUST).** The DESIGN of DESTIGMATIZATION in *Cyberpunk 2077* develops a TRANS TRUST DYNAMIC by building a relationship between the PC and Claire [40, 49, 50, 94]. The DESIGN encourages this TRANS TRUST by introducing the player to Claire early on in a main quest. This TRANS TRUST DYNAMIC provides PC with the opportunity to see and interact with their positive and authentic in-group representation. Although there is no distinct "relationship system" coded into the game, this relationship is signposted in both the progression of a linear quest sequence and in the narrative. Claire lets the player into her world progressively, e.g., physically letting them visit her garage and emotionally opening up about her transition.

**5.1.3 EXPERIENCE (SOCIAL, PARASOCIAL, & INSTITUTIONAL).** Claire functions as a role model (see 2.2.3) for the trans community to convey information about the possibilities for their futures [169], which is at the center of the euphoric EXPERIENCES that come out

of her DESIGN. We support this "role model" interpretation by observing she first meets the PC when the PC needs help. Moreover, Claire mentors the PC through the world of racing, where she has expertise the PC lacks. This role model has a relatively stable life: a steady job, home, social relationships, and enough money to race. This implies that trans players can aspire to similar level of stability. Part of Claire's stability arises from how the PC and others treat her in the game, developing a form of SOCIAL EXPERIENCE. She is a part of the trans community, showing success within the "in-group."

In addition, Claire's character offers PARASOCIAL euphoric EXPERIENCES. Claire is interactable, the PC spends time with her, and game choices involve her. Players can, effectively, form a relationship with her via their PC, even though it cannot be reciprocated. In this PARASOCIAL relationship, feeling comfortable with the relationship and believing in an authentic and ideal self-image embodied by the NPC can promote assimilating the ideal image's positive qualities to the self and thus improve self-esteem [57, 58] and lead to broader positive psychological effects [27, 54, 64, 88]. This positive influence is particularly effective in marginalized groups that are prone to low self-esteem [50] due to the long-existing social stigmatization associated with their identities. Claire allows trans players to be seen.

Moreover, the INSTITUTIONAL euphoria can also be EXPERIENCED. Because Claire's DESTIGMATIZED representation challenges institutional cis / heteronormativity, the INSTITUTIONAL euphoria comes from when PC feels they are challenging gender norms and perceptions [18] by being or seeing gender role models who are considered gender deviant but living authentically.

## 5.2 DE-OTHERING in *Celeste*: PC Madeline

*Celeste* [G14] is a two-dimensional platform video game in which the player controls the character Madeline to jump between platforms to climb Celeste Mountain. Each level is a form of puzzle and is extremely difficult, but at the same time offers players accessible control options [134].

The PC, Madeline, is a trans woman, however her identity is not explicitly disclosed in-game, nor is the game ostensibly about trans identity [45]. Shortly after release, the gaming community noticed subtle indicators implying Madeline's trans identity. These include a cutscene that shows a transgender pride flag, a bottle of pharmaceuticals (e.g., hormone replacement therapy), and a photo of Madeline with shorter hair on her desk (e.g., showing a, possibly, more masculine image of her) [12, 45, 134]; Figure 3 shows these DESIGN elements. Despite the production team's initial silence, a year later the game's director and writer acknowledged Madeline is a trans woman in discussing her own transition [150].

**5.2.1 DESIGN (DE-OTHERING).** Although *Celeste* is not apparently a game about transness, it offers a half-hidden and de-focused view of transition, which enables it to *be a game about the challenges of transition* without being obviously so. This is the primary difference between the visible trait of the DESTIGMATIZATION of Claire's DESIGN and the invisible trait of the DESIGN in *Celeste*. In enabling Madeline to be a PC, who also happens to be trans, the game DESIGN develops a form of DE-OTHERING that reduces the differences between identity groups to the same horizontal

<sup>3</sup>The transgender pride flag consists of five horizontal stripes: light blue, pink, white, pink, and light blue.



**Figure 2:** In-game screenshots of Claire Russell during her quest line: *The Beast in Me*. Left: Claire speaking with the PC and describing her gender transition. Right: The interior of Claire’s vehicle, showing the transgender pride flag painted across her center stack. Screenshots taken by the authors.

identity formation [39], and, therefore, eliminates the othering constructions by the prevailing norms and promotes trans inclusion. Further, the player inhabits this trans PC, yet Madeline is just a normal<sup>4</sup> human embarking on a quest. Bailey [12] writes that “movies and television have a long and sordid history of presenting a character’s transgender identity as a shocking twist, which the [*Celeste*]’s development team worked diligently to avoid.” Because of this, Madeline is an icon for transgender gamers [12, 45, 134].

**5.2.2 DYNAMICS (SAFE SPACES).** The SAFE SPACES DYNAMIC comes from the DE-OTHERING DESIGN of *Celeste*, which takes the spotlight off the trans identity and reduces groups with constructed identities to the single group of being players. The game’s content is complete even without awareness or understanding of trans identity topics, making the trans identity “shift” [36] into imperceptible and invisible to cis / heteronormativity, and integrating it as SAFE SPACES into public to counter marginalization. Notably, this SAFE SPACES DYNAMIC of DE-OTHERING is not divided from but nested in the broader public spaces, where the invisible trait of the DESIGN is the identity safety cues to make the setting of the safety.

SAFE SPACES are invisibly merged with the public space, therefore, it allows the trans identities to retake and inhabit the public space dominated by cis / heteronormativity. Social normativity automatically provides safety and comfort for in-groups while causing discomfort for those who are othered [34, 104, 142, 144]. DE-OTHERING provides opportunities for “queer comfort” [1] of retaking and shaping spaces; this DYNAMIC enables the challenging of the institution in an invisible mode to provide euphoria EXPERIENCE.

**5.2.3 EXPERIENCE (INSTITUTIONAL).** *Celeste* offers INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCE – a world in which transness is unremarked and unremarkable. It is the euphoric feelings of fitting in with societal structures and downplaying identities to resistance to social norms. This kind of INSTITUTIONAL euphoria EXPERIENCE derives from the

normality of Madeline in acknowledging that many of the sources of dysphoria derive from how larger societal structures treat trans people.

### 5.3 OFFERING EXPRESSION in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (AC: NH) [G16] is a social-life simulation game in which the PC is a customizable human character who relocates to a deserted island. The PC is encouraged to engage with anthropomorphic animal NPCs, complete designated objectives, personalize the island, and transform it into a community.

In AC: NH, play happens in spaces on multiple islands: the one customizable island owned by the player; vacant, procedurally generated islands that the player can visit to harvest resources and meet other NPCs; and islands owned by other players that can be visited (through a device’s internet connection) with their permission. The player’s island and vacant islands are private spaces for single-player experiences, while visitable islands of other players are social interaction spaces that are created by mutual consent.

**5.3.1 DESIGN (OFFER EXPRESSION).** AC: NH offers extensive options for player customization of their PC and their spaces. These include: the PC’s hairstyle, face, and clothing; house decorations and furniture; and landscapes. Notably (in the English version of the game), all PCs are gender-neutral – players simply choose (and can change) their appearance, which allows players to manage their identities’ visibility for AC: NH’s multiplayer setting and promote SAFE SPACES DYNAMICS. Moreover, players are not limited to styles provided by the game designers – they can draw and create pictures and textures for their in-game items. Such design around spaces and customizability has been praised by the queer and trans gamer community (e.g., [89, 93, 109]). The rich tools and game mechanics provided by AC: NH OFFER EXPRESSION to players who can build and selectively share their selves and spaces with others.

<sup>4</sup>Like many PCs, Madeline has superhuman jumping capabilities and lives in a fictional, pixelated world, but she is presented as a normal human.



**Figure 3: In-game screenshots of the cutscenes of *Celeste* Chapter 9: *Farewell*, where many places imply Madeline’s trans identity. Left: A transgender flag and a rainbow flag on Madeline’s desk, and a bottle of pills on her bedside table. Right: The photo in the middle of the left bedside table shows Madeline as a child with short hair. Screenshots taken by the authors.**

**5.3.2 DYNAMICS (SAFE SPACES).** *AC: NH*’s customizability creates a safe space for queer self-expression [24]. We consider SAFE SPACE as a DYNAMIC because creating such spaces necessarily involves the perspective and involvement of the player. *AC: NH* develops private spatial gameplay within a world populated by supportive NPCs – collectively these elements form identity safety cues (see 2.2.4) for marginalized groups like trans players, where such environmental setting can assist them with relieving identity-based stresses. All playing activities can take place in private spaces, which provide the source for solitude, a DYNAMIC of SAFE SPACE.

Notably, privacy is not the whole story of having the SAFE SPACES in *AC: NH*. Players can visit friend’s islands, under mutual consent, forming protected, customizable social spaces. Blanco-Fernández [24] describes how LGBTIQA+ players treat *AC: NH* as a safe space to shelter from gender oppression in society, where “players maintained connections with people they already knew through *ACNH*” to activate the safe space’s social functions. The social functions are similar to those of real-world safe spaces [155]. Players’ private spaces and protected social spaces collectively build SAFE SPACE.

**5.3.3 EXPERIENCE (SELF IMAGE, EXTERNAL, SOCIAL, INSTITUTIONAL).** Much has been noted about how *AC: NH* is beloved by the trans community. Deriving from how it develops SAFE SPACES, *AC: NH* can provide SELF IMAGE, EXTERNAL, SOCIAL, and INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCES. EXPERIENCES of euphoric SELF IMAGE come through how players think of their PC and how it represents themselves. The ease with which the PC is changed enables players to reflect themselves and/or experiment with different looks – a form of EXTERNAL euphoria. These self-expressions are then reified in a game world that treats the PC with respect and affords a form of SOCIAL euphoria. Multiplayer play also enables opportunities for EXTERNAL and SOCIAL euphoria EXPERIENCES. The larger social structures of the *AC: NH* world do not impose any gendered expectations or restrictions on the player, enabling INSTITUTIONAL euphoria.

#### 5.4 SELF-DISCLOSURE in one night, hot springs

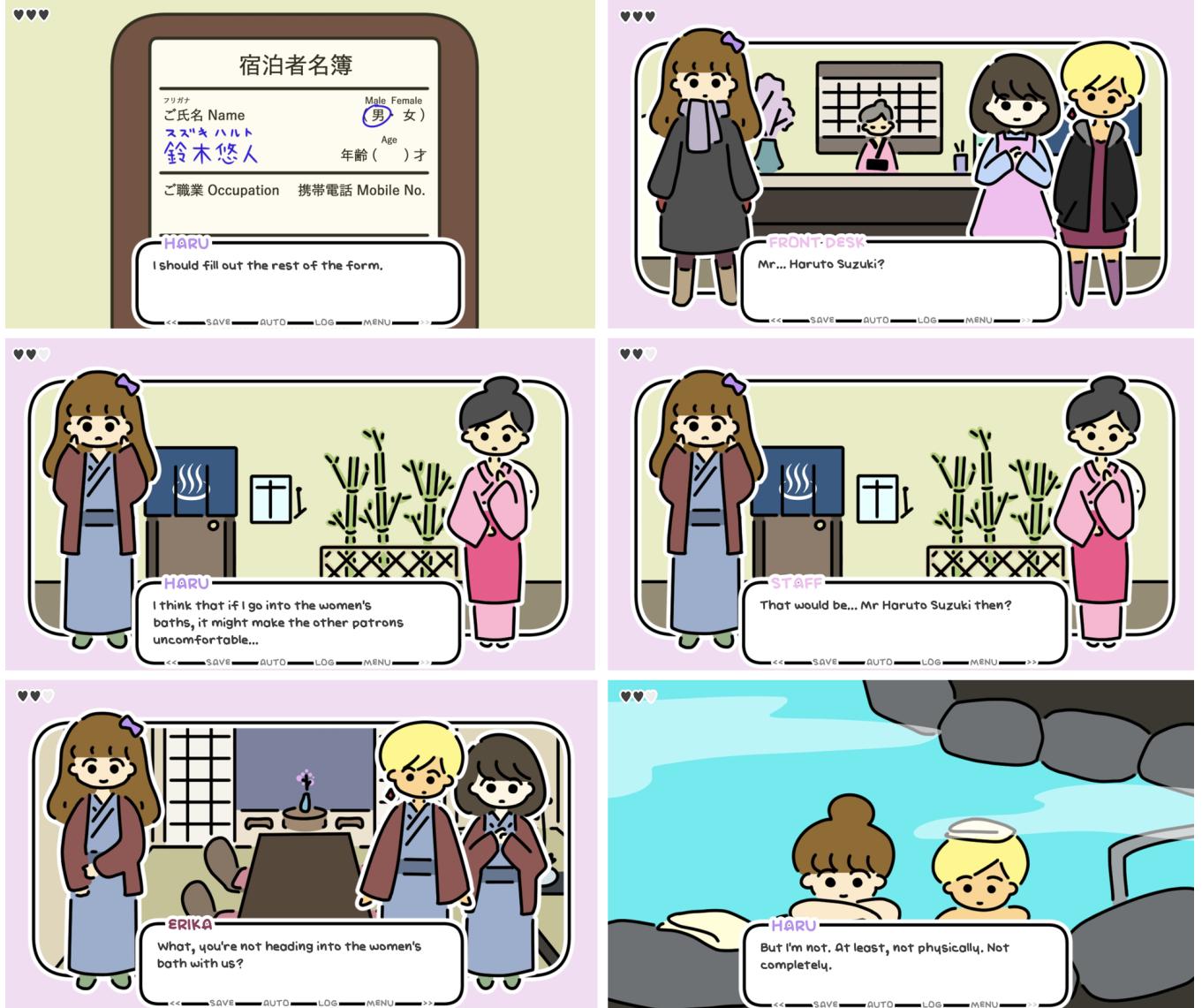
*one night, hot springs (on, hs)* [G18], part one of *A YEAR OF SPRINGS*<sup>5</sup>, is a self-published, independently-developed visual novel game that has received significant positive attention [55, 67, 81, 102, 131, 159]. The story revolves around the PC Haru, a Japanese trans woman, who is invited on a trip to a hot spring by a close cisgender female friend, Manami. Manami also invites Erika, her own cisgender female friend. In *on, hs*, Haru’s identity documents list her as legally male and she has not finished gender affirming surgery, so she feels substantial anxiety about navigating gendered spaces, drawing attention in public, and being compelled to explain to cisgender NPCs about present-day trans issues (Figure 4). Players guide Haru in making decisions to respond to the difficulties she encounters.

Yet, the game is also filled with trans comfort and heartwarming moments. For instance, Haru’s cisgender female friends always support her, the hot spring staff is willing to help Haru navigate this gendered space, and no character treats her with hostility (Figure 5). The narrative of *on, hs* is one where the marginalization of trans people coexists with joy and comfort.

**5.4.1 DESIGN (SELF-DISCLOSURE).** Haru’s story is based on the personal experiences of npckc, a Japanese queer, nonbinary person [112], as well as being inspired by real-world events [55, 57, 67, 81, 159]. *on, hs* offers a SELF-DISCLOSURE DESIGN wherein the player navigates sharing information with NPCs. This SELF-DISCLOSURE is a form of trans narratology (see 2.1). Though *on, hs* is not autobiographical, it is full of its author’s emotions surrounding real events close to their community.

**5.4.2 DYNAMICS (CONTINUUM OF COMFORT & SELF REFLECTION).** The CONTINUUM OF COMFORT DYNAMIC provides a strategy for evoking comfort without erasing pain. Developer npckc stated [55]:

<sup>5</sup> *one night, hot springs* is styled in all lower case, while the series of games is styled in all capitals: *A YEAR OF SPRINGS*.



**Figure 4:** A series of screenshots depicting the difficulties and uneasiness that Haru encountered when visiting the hot springs.). Upper Left, Upper Right: When Haru was asked to fill in the legal information upon entering the hot springs, she filled in the legal information as male. Middle Left, Middle Right: The hot spring staff is trying to figure out why Haru was hesitant to enter the women's baths, and Haru speaks out her concerns. Bottom Left: Haru's friends ask why Haru will not go to the women's bath with them. Bottom Right: Haru opened up about the fact that she has not yet gotten gender affirming surgery. Screenshots taken by the authors.

I hope that whoever plays any of my games feels better after playing it than they did before. I never want somebody to come out of my game feeling beaten down or defeated. While I do discuss heavy topics at times, I don't ever want that to be the sole focus of any game.

The topics are indeed heavy. npckc was inspired to develop *on, hs* based on media reports that police were called on a trans woman visiting a hot spring [67]. Conversations between Haru and Erika reflect npckc's own frustration with the state of Japan's laws in

2018 [55]: legal gender change required sterilizing surgery at the time. Even at the time of writing, same-sex marriage is provided only by certain local governments, which induces restrictions on transgender rights on the national level. The game is meant to be personal and sensitive [111].

These heavy topics are balanced against the kindness of friends and the assistance of hot spring staff (Figure 5). These everyday kindnesses embody hope for the future in the face of inequality. Quoting npckc [55]:



**Figure 5:** A series of screenshots depicting the trans comfort and heartwarming moments that Haru experienced.). Upper Left, Upper Right: The hot springs staff try to make convenient for Haru. Bottom Left, Bottom Right: Haru's friends try to comfort and support her to open up to tell her feelings and experiences. Screenshots taken by the authors.

I hope that in the future I'll be able to say that *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* as a series is no longer a “factual” [depiction] because the statements I mention above are no longer true.

Just as *on, hs* has multiple endings, this quote reflects that the future is yet undecided. Indeed, the legal facts underlying *on, hs* have changed since the time of its release, yet remain in transition. In July 2023, the Supreme Court of Japan ruled that trans people have a right to equal bathroom access in the workplace [145]. In July 2024, they ruled in favor of a transgender person seeking legal gender change without surgery<sup>6</sup> [82]. Depicting uncertain futures is important because it provides an alternative trans narrative to the binary choice between despair or utopia: believable euphoria.

To recognize hope without erasing pain, branching narratives like *on, hs* are an effective tool because they emphasize the passage of time, allow diverse events within that timeline, and codify the uncertainty of the future. *on, hs* develops a **CONTINUUM OF COMFORT DYNAMIC** by deliberately presenting joyous, safe moments as well as uncomfortable ones where the PCs transness collides with cis / heteronormativity. In designing toward a **CONTINUUM OF COMFORT**, trans creators provide opportunities for self-exploration and understanding dysphoria [10, 83, 98] through play.

<sup>6</sup>The 2024 ruling stopped short of overturning the underlying law, reinforcing the notion that transgender rights remain in a state of change as of this writing.

Developing a **CONTINUUM OF COMFORT** enables real feelings in a fictional context so that audiences can reflect on themselves while sidestepping real threats to safety [62] – a second dynamic: **SELF REFLECTION**. The **SELF REFLECTION DYNAMIC** in *on, hs* presses players to resonate with PC Haru’s experiences of injustice. For instance, the PC can share painful memories with the supportive-but-underinformed cisgender NPC Erika. *on, hs* lets trans players receive affirming reflection from cisgender NPCs while recounting painful feelings from a safe distance.

**5.4.3 EXPERIENCE (SOCIAL, PARASOCIAL, & SELF IMAGE).** *on, hs* centers a trans PC and addresses how NPCs accept or react to the PC’s identity. The kindness and support that NPCs express for the PC’s identity is also projected onto the players. NPCs in *on, hs* function as the primary source for the players to engage in **SELF REFLECTION** within **SOCIAL EXPERIENCES** of the PC with NPCs, as well as **PARASOCIAL EXPERIENCES** through the PC. Players can further build one-sided relationships with NPCs and PC, seeing kindness from NPCs, feeling encouraged by the PC’s authenticity or self-advocacy, and enjoying the relationships through playing, a **PARASOCIAL EXPERIENCE**. **SELF IMAGE EXPERIENCES** arise from the **CONTINUUM OF COMFORT** – as the player inhabits the PC’s world, they are able to look to the hope it provides, even in the face of discomfort.

## 6 Discussion

We press for more inclusive design, specifically transgender inclusivity. To our trans positionality, the importance of these gender euphoria design themes is clear, though they are easily overlooked within cis / heteronormative design environments. We bring the concept of gender euphoria from the trans community and nascent literature [19, 154] to incorporate it into the design of interactive systems. In this section, we first offer answers to our research questions from our findings. Below, we briefly address our research questions. The remainder of the section expands our understanding from the answers, starting with operationalizing gender euphoria for designers and describing what this means for trans players and trans resilience, as well as offering advice on how to use the themes in design. We explain our limitations and point to how future work may proceed from our work here.

**RQ1:** How do transgender people derive gender euphoria from game play?

Our reflexive thematic analysis developed a number of gender euphoric **EXPERIENCES** that come out of game play. Because games are so intimate and intertwined with identity, they can create powerful opportunities for euphoria. **EXPERIENCES** are the emotional and transformative outcomes of play. Our close readings drew out how the player's choices and background, in concert with the **DESIGN** choices, lead to states that positively promote euphoria.

**RQ2:** How can we design games to facilitate gender euphoria?

The DDE Framework (and its parent, the MDA Framework) serve as a useful tool for designers and researchers. We use our analysis of games to draw out particular **DESIGN** elements – DESTIGMATIZATION, DE-OTHERING, OFFER EXPRESSION, and SELF-DISCLOSURE – that can be used in service to designing for euphoria (or, at least, avoiding dysphoria). Our **EXPERIENCE** themes offer targets for designers – ways they can frame their own thinking about what they would like for the player to come away with.

### 6.1 Operationalizing Gender Euphoria to Design for Inclusivity, Joy, & Resilience

Gender euphoria is transformative and is experienced by trans [19] and cis people [128] alike. It is a worthy design goal in interactive systems overall, not just games. While we observe gender euphoria in the trans community and, less so, in the academic discourse, it has not yet been realized as an element of design. Certainly, the potentials for triggering dysphoria have been recognized (e.g., [91, 170]), but the present research is the first step toward offering ways of designing that support trans resilience and joy. Our intent, here, is to put the term into use within HCI – explaining it, demonstrating it, and showing how it can be targeted through design.

For researchers, our themes serve as descriptive tools. They provide a language to formulate why and how a particular combination of designs could be a source of gender euphoria. This can facilitate communication and ground evolving research interests in trans-positive experiences. The development of this framework is a response to the call of positive psychology [118] for paying attention and language building surrounding minority

social locations. It can provide the basis for future qualitative and quantitative HCI research on the positive aspects of gendered experiences of trans people.

### 6.2 Designing with Gender Euphoria Themes

Built on a functional understanding, we drew out themes to support design. The value of DDE resides in the ability to conceptualize desired play outcomes and trace back to design decisions, with an understanding that there is a point at which the designer no longer has control. In laying out our findings as **DESIGN**, **DYNAMICS**, and **EXPERIENCES**, we offer designers a framing for their work. This framing is not only useful for ideation on how to build a game, but also for identifying, naming, and describing particular characteristics that come out of observations of game play. As an example, consider a character-centric narrative-oriented game. A designer might seek to develop a **SOCIAL** euphoric **EXPERIENCE** in which the player works to subvert a transphobic **INSTITUTION**. Achieving such **EXPERIENCES** are nontrivial, and the designer then needs to think about what they can **DESIGN** to facilitate that happening through the **DYNAMICS**.

Our sense is that building experiences for transgender gender euphoria will be game-specific. We assert that this specificity is rooted in the idiosyncratic nature of euphoria and dysphoria and would caution that designers take care when considering how best to support players. We do not prescribe particular **EXPERIENCES** that would be derived from **DYNAMICS** derived from a particular **DESIGN**. However, when we look at our dataset and the themes that emerged, we observed two common patterns – **A PLACE OF MY OWN** and **REFLECTIVE ROLE MODELS**. The prominence of these patterns suggests that they are worth exploring in a game design process, as they were successful according to our data.

The role of our framework is to serve as *silence-breaking language* to turn attention in interaction design from perpetuating trans harm and negative experiences to the promoting trans-positive experiences and resilience. We believe that this language can support future designs and projects for trans affirmation. The themes here – and potentially more – serve as building blocks. **DESIGNS** are the elements over which the designer has control and our themes can be used directly in this way. We expect, too, that, beyond games, considering how interactive systems might serve gender euphoria is a valuable exercise.

At the same time, our DDE themes do not narrow the design space. We do not close off avenues of interesting experiences, but offer means to include trans identities meaningfully. The themes can be taken up and function alongside other designs, dynamics, and experiences that developers engage with.

### 6.3 Limitations & Future Work

Notable limitations of our team composition include the absence of trans masculine and cis researchers and researchers who are working from locations outside the USA and Australia. Researchers from these groups may bring different research insights due to the dependence of trans experience on gender and place, as well as its dependence on all other intersections of identity, some of which are inherently unrepresented on any team [32]. Even within the authors' own subcommunities, we respect diversity of perspectives

and priorities. It is our earnest endeavor to build language and trans discourse that all trans people can use, and we are optimistic about the generalizability of our framework because Beischel's work [19], foundational to ours, has diverse representation of trans-masculine, nonbinary, and trans-feminine subjects. At the same time, we call for further research that focuses on many intersections of identity.

Our perspective as trans-femme people means particular EXPERIENCES that bring *us* euphoria (e.g., playing a game with a trans woman role model) are likely different from those of other gender minorities. This means that new datasets are possible, along with additional themes that would bring richness to the design space. We believe our EXPERIENCE themes are broad, especially since we ground them in the broader academic discourse [19], but expect that there is room to grow.

We used a small dataset so that we could evaluate each game in depth, enabling us to develop new theory and new language. We call for future work to use this language for larger dataset studies to determine the breadth and prevalence of euphoria design elements. Moreover, our future work also involves using the trans gender euphoria design elements and gender euphoric mechanics framework to build projects, games, and simulators that are expected to be able to reproduce or reappear the euphoria experiences, as well as user surveys surrounding these experiences.

## 7 Conclusion

We develop the concept of the gender euphoria for human-computer interaction, in general, and games, in specific. We identified themes and patterns that engage gender euphoria to support designers in understanding why and how a particular combination of designs could be a trans euphoria source. We provide the analysis of how these design elements are contextualized as DESIGNS that enable the DYNAMICS for players to produce types of euphoria EXPERIENCES. The euphoria design elements and the gender euphoric mechanics framework are grounded in close readings and content analysis of four popular games, with the analysis of popular and academic discourse, filtered through the perspective of the authors, who are all trans women. Because gender is nuanced and personal, and we have seen that some euphoria elements can be so individualized in our own experience, it is explicitly not our goal to capture all potential euphoria elements in one study. Rather, we have provided the language to assess instances. This language suggests the turning of attention in interaction design from trans negative experiences to trans positive experiences and resilience, and can support future new designs and projects not only for trans affirmative care but also merging into various common gameplay without narrowing the breadth of virtual experiences.

## Acknowledgment of Use of Artificial Intelligence

No form of generative artificial intelligence was used in the production of research or the writing of this work.

## Land Acknowledgment (Liang, Bohrer)

WPI acknowledges the painful history of genocide in the U.S. for native and indigenous peoples. As a public statement that honors the indigenous people as native inhabitants on this land, WPI honors

and respects the many and diverse tribal nations who were forcefully removed from their sacred lands.

WPI would like to recognize the people of the Chaubunagungamaug and Hassanamisco Nipmuc Tribe as the traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We take this moment to honor their elders, past, present, and emerging. WPI strongly advocates for higher education professionals to honor the land, the original tribal occupants, and the history of where they are located.

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