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Transgender Character Representation and the Gender Binary:

Theorizing a Philosophy for Transgender Character Construction in Video Games.

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Introduction/Rationale

Transgender bodies in video games are met with negativity despite increasing positive queer representation. Said negativity may emerge from the gender binary being normalised within Western politics, which isolates and others the transgender body and experience for not conforming to the gender binary norm. In becoming the other, the transgender body is met with violence and harm in media representation, utilising harmful practices to further dehumanise the transgender body and experience, perpetuating a cycle of harmful representation and public perception.

Through personal identification with the transgender protagonist of the video game *Celeste* (Thorson, 2018), I began to question why its nuanced and humanising representation was not more common. However, *Celeste*'s protagonist: Madeline was not always intended to be transgender (Thorson, 2020), only hinted at in an update to the game released a year after its original release. Thus, Madeline's humanised representation was built up through being treated as human before being transgender and led to asking additional questions. How is gender identity treated in video game character development? And how does one construct a nuanced transgender character in video games intentionally so that the audience can still identify with and embody them?

Thus, I examine *Celeste* and replicate what elements I believe humanise the transgender body within my creative work and research the reasoning behind such beliefs. Through this, I aim to construct and justify a philosophy for transgender character construction in video games. Thus, my creative component and philosophy's goal is the disruption of cyclical harmful representation and practices enabled by a binary view of gender assumed to be an encompassing norm.

Research Question

How can the process of constructing a transgender character and story in a video game be crafted into a philosophy which criticises and disrupts the gender binary's cyclical negative effects on transgender character representation and perception in video games?

Case Study: *Celeste*

Celeste is a two-dimensional precision, twitch skill platformer video game[1]. Madeline, its protagonist, is a short transgender woman in a blue puffer jacket, long brown pants, with long red hair, and a large backpack. Her goal is to climb Mount Celeste to find a challenge that will make her feel something her mundane life cannot provide. However, upon reaching the mountain, its magical properties emerge, granting Madeline strange powers, but also manifesting her anxiety as a twisted mirror image driven to stop Madeline's climb and make her return home. Through advancing in the game's seven main levels, Madeline meets several characters who contextualise Madeline's relationship with her mirror image, eventually leading to making amends with her and finishing the climb.

[1] These types of games typically exhibit steep difficulty curves and require precisely coordinated sequences of button inputs with narrow timing windows to navigate the game's environment.

In the farewell content update released a year later, Madeline deals with her grief over the death of her guide on the mountain: Granny, through her dreams and is hinted at being transgender in the final illustrations rewarded to the player for completing the level.



Figure 1: The second of the final illustrations. note the pride flags under Madeline's monitor.

This re-contextualises how Madeline's identity and the game's story can be interpreted as metaphor for transgender experiences. This re-contextualising and humanised depiction of a transgender character resulted in personal reflection on my own identity and questioning why I related to Madeline so much. This analysis is functionally a close reading of *Celeste*, deconstructing its plot, design and mechanics to extrapolate subjective meaning as outlined for video games by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum in *Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences* (Jim Bizzocchi & Joshua Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 289). Bonnie Ruberg further contextualises a queer close reading as a 'Too-close reading' due to the potential violence with which queer readings are met for a supposed implanting of queerness in a heterosexually dominated medium. This is further applied in later case studies as outlined in Bonnie Ruberg's *Video games have always been queer* (Ruberg, 2019).

Madeline's journey and relationships

Within the prologue, Madeline meets the Bird and Granny. Granny at first appears to be antagonistic towards Madeline, irritating her through being cryptic but becomes a guide and motivator to Madeline and maintains a playful back and forth of agitation with her. Granny sees a younger version of herself in Madeline, a motivated yet misguided and unsure woman who is too headstrong to notice when she's out of her depth.

In the first level: Forsaken City, Madeline meets Theo, an amateur photographer who comes to the mountain to take photos for his blog and figure out what he wants to do with his life. He and Madeline meet up on the climb at multiple points, sharing personal stories and bonding, resulting in a long-standing relationship seen in Farewell's ending. Theo acts as an emotional guide for Madeline, being more understanding than Granny's tough love and helping Madeline with her anxiety. Through conversations with Theo, we learn more about Madeline and her experience with depression, elaborated upon later within the context of Farewell. At the conclusion of Forsaken City, Madeline finds a monument dedicated to those who perished on the climb and begins to worry if she's made a mistake.

Within the following level: Old Site, Madeline sees the monument with its text illegible from its characters rapidly changing and advances to find a strange mirror underground which awakens her twisted reflection referred to as Part of Madeline. For simplicity, she will be referred to as Badeline. Badeline looks identical to Madeline but with a purple colour scheme and red eyes. Badeline has the most complex relationship with Madeline which develops over each level in different ways and highlights Madeline's growth motivated by how others affect her. Badeline is a manifestation of Madeline's anxiety, telling her she can't climb the mountain and should go home, threatening Madeline by chasing her toward the climax of the level where she awakens Madeline with a monster, revealing it was a dream. Badeline acts as the primary antagonist beyond the challenge of climbing the mountain itself, but her role shifts to working with Madeline to finish the climb. This shifting relationship highlights Madeline's internal growth in accepting the negative parts of her persona. This is a struggle many transgender players resonated with and led to early queer interpretations of Madeline's climb before Farewell's release (Kat Bailey, 2019).

In Celestial Resort, Madeline meets Mr Oshiro, the ghostly owner of the hotel implied to be closed and ruined by the mountain's power. Mr Oshiro acts as a mirror for the relationship between Badeline and Madeline, mumbling to himself in distinct aggressive and defensive tones which mirror Madeline's arguments with Badeline. The climax of the level surrounds Badeline insulting Mr Oshiro, resulting in him transforming into a large monster that chases Madeline out of the hotel. Mr Oshiro becomes a threat to those around him when anxious, mirrored by Madeline's anger at others when pressured. However, Badeline did the right thing. Madeline would be stuck in the hotel and unable to leave and climb or return home without Badeline's intervention. This shows that Badeline does seem to have Madeline's best interests in mind but enforces them harmfully.

In Golden Ridge's climax, Madeline and Theo take a gondola between two peaks of the mountain, but when Badeline sabotages it, Madeline begins to have a panic attack. This reveals purple tendrils matching Badeline's hair filling the screen, representing her grip on Madeline. Madeline blames Theo for suggesting the gondola and it's breaking down, but Theo helps Madeline calm down with a technique the player replicates mechanically. Madeline imagines a golden feather floating in front of her and, through controlled breathing, needs to make it rise and fall. The player presses up and releases the analogue stick to accomplish this until Madeline is calm.

The pair arrive at the next level: Mirror Temple. The main motif of the level is a dark environment with broken mirrors and many eyes in the architecture. This level introduces the mirror monsters,

many-eyed creatures that chase Madeline upon gaining sight of her, implied to be a manifestation of her thoughts. Encountering Badeline, Madeline thinks the monsters are her doing, but Badeline mocks Madeline saying the mountain is using Madeline to do this, but she doesn't listen to Badeline. Madeline questions why Badeline wants to hurt her if they're part of the same person. Badeline calls out Madeline's self-victimisation and that she never listens, mocking Madeline for wanting her help even though she treats Badeline like a monster.

In Reflection, Madeline begins speaking to Theo after he wakes up from being saved in the Mirror Temple. Here the player can select dialogue options for both Madeline and Theo to discuss different topics, solidifying their friendship. Madeline and Theo reveal that they are tired of everyday life, Madeline's reason being that she's fixated on the past and has trouble keeping up appearances while it feels like she's falling apart. Madeline also reveals what her experience with depression is like, describing it as being at the bottom of the ocean. It's cold, dark, and claustrophobic yet exposed. No matter which way she goes, it feels like going nowhere. Theo asks Madeline if she wants to destroy Badeline but theorises it may hurt Madeline too. Madeline says she must not be bullied and controlled any more. Badeline is a twisted defence mechanism and Theo suggests taking control away from her.

After they converse and go to sleep, Madeline awakens to a golden feather. She uses it to fly upwards where she encounters Badeline and an argument ensues. Madeline is going to abandon Badeline on the mountain, but Badeline takes back control. The purple tendrils of her hair re-emerge and drag Madeline down deep into the mountain after Madeline tries to use Theo's technique to fight her. After moving within the mountain, Madeline monologues admitting Badeline was right, she can't climb the mountain, but realises Badeline is a part of her, she can't be abandoned. Later Madeline finds Granny who encourages her to keep going. Granny is aware of the mountain's power and Badeline, telling Madeline to go find her and truthfully talk to her. Madeline advances to chase Badeline through several screens, mirroring their previous chases but with Madeline in control. Eventually, Badeline stops running and reluctantly agrees to stay on the mountain. However, Madeline refuses, saying she needs Badeline's help but knows she's scared and that fighting will get them nowhere. Badeline agrees and the pair embrace. Badeline transforms into balls of light in the same pattern as the death and respawn animation but instead flies into Madeline. The words 'Level Up' appear above Madeline and her hair changes to bright pink, doubling the dash mechanic and her ability to navigate the mountain. With this new skill, Madeline and Badeline work together to escape the cave. Madeline reconvenes with Granny and Theo, shedding her bag representing literal weight, before advancing to the summit.

In the Summit, Madeline and Badeline converse between the larger individual areas which each represent the levels that came before. Slowly, Badeline agrees with Madeline about being able to climb to the peak, both being able to appreciate the beauty when they finish the climb. Yet, Badeline is still scared since once they leave, she can't talk to Madeline anymore, but Madeline reassures her saying she will listen to Badeline and work together from now on. The Core level, occurring a year later chronologically when Madeline returns to the mountain, shows she always has pink hair, indicating she and Badeline are one, unable to be separated by the mountain anymore.

Madeline becoming one with Badeline takes place after much denial and planning on abandoning Badeline to pursue becoming more normal or stable. This pursuit endangers Madeline through ignorance and harms the process of accomplishing her goal of having more positive feelings about her life. These notions of denial and acceptance of identity run parallel with many transgender people's thoughts of themselves. The ignorance of queerness and fears of embracing it are mirrored in a queer reading of Madeline's ignorance and Badeline's fear of consequence respectively. However, before Farewell, this reading was personal and speculative, beginning to feel more connected with the main game through the revelations of Farewell and Maddy Thorson recontextualising her identity through Madeline after development had ended (Thorson, 2020).

Even though Madeline wasn't always intended to be transgender, her journey mirrors facets of being transgender before recontextualising her identity. The reason I find Madeline so impactful is due to the position she occupies as a transgender character who wasn't originally intended to be queer and how it adds complexity to *Celeste* when examined in the new queer context.

Mechanical metaphors

Celeste contains multiple metaphors in its gameplay mechanics which link to both the story and Madeline's identity in different ways.

First, the dash is introduced to the player by the bird within the prologue. This begins a trend of the bird acting as a guide for the player much like how Granny is Madeline's guide. The dash itself could be a symbol of Madeline's determination, the ability to gain a short burst of speed in any direction is a vital tool for climbing the mountain and its strange architecture. However, it can also get the player into worse situations or killed if used incorrectly, which mirrors Granny's comments about having trouble telling the difference between stubbornness and determination.

The mirror monsters are introduced as Madeline's dark thoughts. Their many eyes may be metaphorical for Madeline feeling like others are watching or judging her life. Being transgender, Madeline may feel this judgement comes from a lack of public acceptance for transitioning. However, in controlling the mirror monster, the player may note the similarity in mechanics between Madeline and the monster. Both having dashes reinforces the mirror monster's internal origin, potentially being Madeline's anxiety internalizing her negative view of other's gazes.

The golden feather is mechanically contextualised in two ways. Introduced by Theo, it's a way for the player to experience how Madeline controls her breathing to calm down. However, in typical gameplay, the golden feather transforms Madeline into a ball of light with free range of movement and flight for a few seconds. This may represent Madeline unconstrained by anxiety, gaining a form of metaphorical freedom when she's calm, albeit temporarily.

After Madeline embraces Badeline, her hair turns pink and she gains the ability to dash twice in one movement, potentially covering twice the distance. This double dash represents her growth in accepting her flaws, effectively gaining twice the motivation or determination to finish the climb.

Shortly after gaining the double dash, Badeline emerges as the purple orb mechanic. Touching a purple orb shows Badeline appearing to give Madeline a boost upward. Badeline acts as a safety net

but only if Madeline willingly comes to her, reflecting their new cooperative relationship.

Both mechanics highlight Madeline fully realising her identity and it presents the player with new means of traversal, forcing them to engage with the changes to Madeline's story and character. The potential of mechanical metaphors lies in their ability to communicate themes differently than through text alone, which is desired within my creative work.

Farewell's aesthetics

Farewell's appearance of crumbling rocks and structures floating in the darkness of space reinforces the overall visual theme of ruin also present in the crumbling structures of the prior levels. This reinforces the mountain's power to break things down like it does to Madeline, but more concerning is the combination of underwater and outer-space themes. Underwater life like coral reefs and fish with stars and black holes returns to Madeline's description of depression being like the ocean floor now mimicked by the emptiness of space. This level is a dream where Madeline is dealing with the grief of Granny's death. It highlights the depressive state it leaves her mind in, crumbling as she moves to chase an image of Granny which Badeline tries to convince her to leave behind, fearing Madeline will spiral further down into depression.

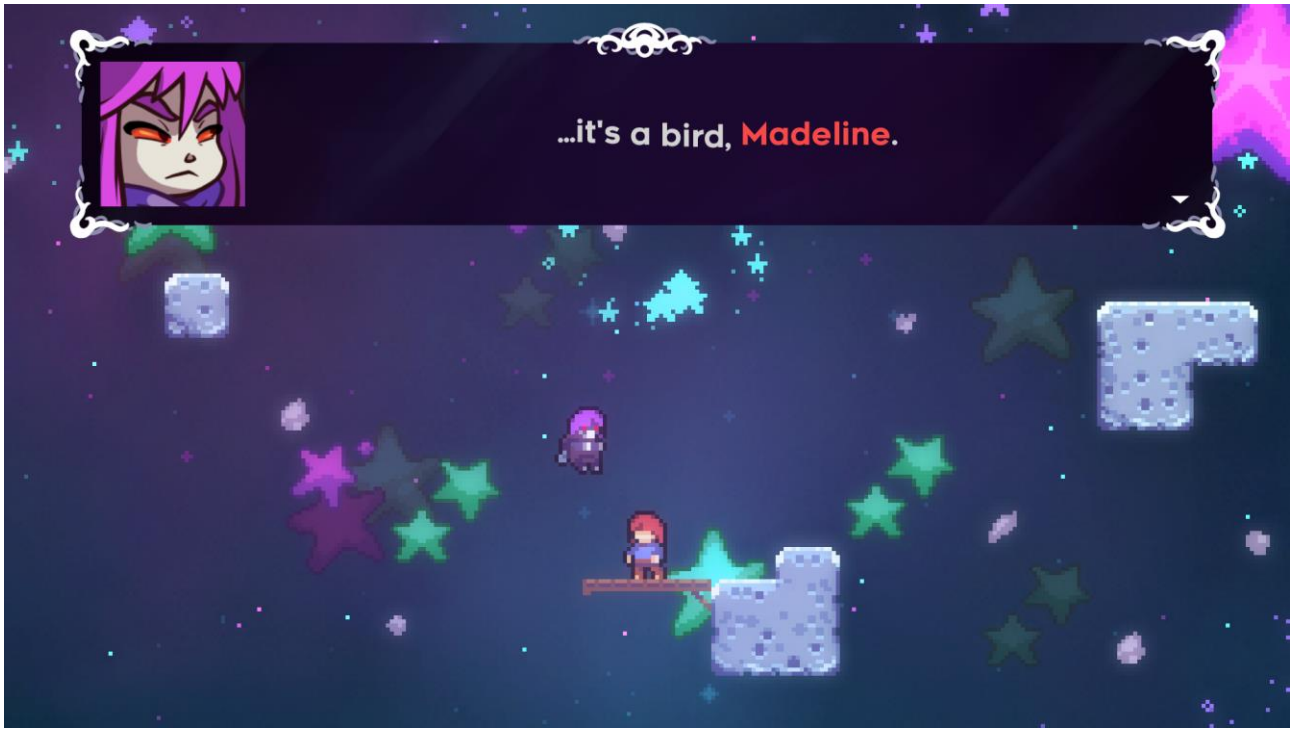


Figure 2: Screenshot of conversation between Badeline and Madeline at the beginning of Farewell.

Farewell and re-contextualising Madeline's identity.

The illustrations rewarded to the player after finishing Farewell show Madeline waking up in her bed with tears in her eyes. Bedside her bed is a portrait of Madeline's mother with a male child. Madeline does not allude to having siblings and there is a transgender pride flag under her computer

monitor. Thus, Madeline is theorised to be transgender, later explicitly confirmed by lead developer Maddy Thorson in her blog, who states Madeline is transgender, but it wasn't always intended (Thorson, 2020).

This re-contextualises Madeline, the story, and metaphors of the game in multiple ways. First, one could read the struggle in climbing up the mountain as a struggle with identity and the journey of transitioning and the changes it brings to the body. Badeline becomes an image of dealing with anxiety, but also visual identity and being able to be perceived as a woman. The memorial dedicated to those who perish on the climb at the end of Forsaken City becomes a solemn reminder of the violence the transgender community faces among individual members. Madeline's relationship with her reflection being one of conflict and eventual acceptance may hint at gender dysphoria, a common problem faced by transgender people regarding self-image. Dialogue reinforces these notions depending on the character: Granny enforces thoughts of facing the truth and being ready for it, Theo discusses self-image and motivation, and Badeline confronts returning to safety and allowing fear to rule over decisions, highlighting potential de-transition.

However, my personal reading of Madeline occurs in Badeline's role. Despite not being intended, I find it strange Badeline as a representation of Madeline's anxiety never addresses her body or uses it against Madeline, which highlights an interesting form of confidence Madeline may have in her appearance. A potential reinforcement of this is in the first conversation between the pair. Madeline describes Badeline as creepy-looking, which seems to strike at Badeline in a way unseen in the rest of the game. Badeline can normally retort to any comment Madeline makes, but here she tries to shift the conversation even after Madeline apologizes. Badeline does not want to converse about something she can't use against Madeline. Later in the Mirror Temple, the level most concerned with reflections and mirrors as a metaphor for self-image, Madeline asks Badeline why the environment appears as it does. Badeline answers that she isn't in control of the reflections, Madeline is in control. So, maybe Madeline isn't perfectly confident in her appearance, but it takes something far stronger than herself to highlight that sentiment.

My interpretation of Madeline's journey makes her positive transgender representation as her transitioning isn't presented as a struggle. Instead, Madeline's story is achieving balance and understanding of our negative traits and growing while being queer, making her appear less like a token of obvious queerness and making queerness itself appear more normalised in being understated. Either interpretation of the climb as a metaphor for transition or anxiety highlights Madeline's struggle can be related to, making her a beacon of humanised transgender representation. Her strengths and flaws show nuance instead of making her problematic or stereotypical. Madeline's journey affected me greatly when I originally played *Celeste* despite not understanding why at the time, but returning to Farewell and understanding why I had empathised with my new understanding of Madeline led me to question if I had to climb the mountain she had already conquered.

Creative component

Celeste's usage of metaphor and different interpretations of Madeline which make her nuanced transgender representation serve as the main inspiration for my creative work with a fully intended and revealed transgender protagonist, story, and metaphors true to my experiences. Additionally, as *Celeste*'s representation is not common, I question how the assumptions of the gender binary as a norm for gendered representation can affect the way an audience relates to a character. This is to then construct my own character as humanised transgender representation that critiques the gender binary itself, and its harm on transgender characters. My creative component itself is a game design document and corresponding gameplay demo, named Sunset Red, made within the Unity engine. This highlights my design decisions in mechanical, character, aesthetic, and audio design to reinforce how my game operates as a critique of the gender binary norm whilst queering normative design expectations to highlight the fallacies which other the transgender body and experience. It is then distilled into a philosophy for transgender character construction and justified through a literature review to display where the gender binary causes harm and why representation against it is important.

Story, characters, and metaphor

My personal experience with being transgender is one of liberation and autonomy but also fear of heteronormative expectation twisting what others see me as. I fear my transgender identity is discovered by my heteronormative, Christian family and I am subsequently abandoned for 'killing their son'. Many transgender people share a similar fear of family scorning their quest for happiness and autonomy as a killing of the outward-facing identity they claim ownership over. The parental bond with normative identity often overshadows the desire to see a queer child happy as a family becomes attached to an expected and normalised performance of static identity. When such an identity is often tied to gender, transitioning itself becomes read as discarding the old persona, a murder, and a crime. Yet, the body and child are still alive but become dehumanised and made the other in shifting identity. My greatest fear is that revealing myself means I will no longer be seen as family or even human by those who have raised me because they think I killed their son and will consequently be abandoned or shown violence. My quest for joy and autonomy becomes a crime and I feel guilt for wanting it because it affects others.

This metaphor of crime, murder and guilt emerges within the central story of my own game through its protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist: Ms Red, is an imprisoned woman and the antagonist: Mr White, is the ghost of the man she had killed now haunting her. The beginning of the story shows the woman attempting to escape her cell through a tunnel which leads to a strange ethereal landscape and dialogue implying she has attempted escape here many times before. However, the player experiences the shift in narrative as a mysterious mechanical object resembling a hammer and traffic light appears, granting the ability to move into further rooms, beginning the protagonist's escape.

The dialogue between the protagonist and antagonist is akin to Madeline and Badeline's arguments, establishing each as headstrong for opposing reasons: the protagonist wants freedom above everything, and the antagonist questions her lack of restraint and calls for a return to safety. The protagonist desires freedom but is imprisoned through the guilt she feels in transitioning while the antagonist is the dead identity convincing her that de-transition will save her. However, the transgender truth behind each character's goal is not elaborated upon until the conclusion of the story. Instead, ambiguity is used within the dialogue to establish a relationship which isn't explicitly queer. This is in an attempt to utilise the normative expectations of the gender binary to highlight how such expectations can shift the meaning behind queer experiences in a harmful manner because the transgender body and experience can't be encapsulated by current gender binary norms. I expect the gender binary normative interpretation of my characters' relationship to be an unhealthy heterosexual marriage with a dominant and controlling male figure killed by a dominated but violent female figure for limiting her freedom, this is expanded from mariticide occurring in reality and crime fiction[2]. Through dialogue, I want to establish the protagonist as limited in her freedom through being expected to fit in with her husband and his family. In reality it's the transgender protagonist's old identity and its corresponding expectations of performing masculinity in her family. The antagonist then questions why she wanted more freedom instead of safety and security. In reality, it's the limitations I face in coming out as it would remove my safety, thus questioning why I would take such a risk and feeling guilty for doing so. As the game progresses, the protagonist reveals she felt like an extension of the antagonist instead of her own identity and could only overcome this through 'killing' him, which should appear like a leap in logic the player should question.

This questioning and other ambiguity through never confirming a heterosexual relationship should increase player intrigue and highlight that the player needs to consider different interpretations of the story. I believe that heteronormative players who do not acknowledge transgender identity will not be able to interpret the story as transgender metaphor, reading the ambiguity as unnecessary or badly constructed dialogue. Instead, the opposite is true because the dialogue is carefully constructed to encourage multiple interpretations until the final reveal of the true transgender subject matter. I believe that the normalised gender binary makes queer readings appear less legitimate or disallows queer readings because they are not commonplace or negatively represented in media. Thus, highlighting the harm the gender binary has in affecting how the transgender body is read when harmful stereotypes aren't used or when queerness isn't obvious. So, the norm assumes heterosexuality as default which then harms the representation and construction of character identity as the research question supposes.

However, obscuring the true transgender subject matter is dangerous and advantageous. In presenting a transgender story and experience through the metaphor of crime, an audience not accustomed to explicit transgender media or not seeking it out can participate through play and discover the true subject matter. Thus, accommodating more players and allowing for them to re-

[2] Mariticide like the femme fatale in the noir genre, and multiple Agatha Christie novels feature a female character often suspected of or responsible for the murder of her spouse.

examine their notions about the transgender body and experience, much like my experience with *Celeste*. However, this may result in backlash from transphobic audience members believing they had been deceived into playing a queer video game regardless of its other qualities. I believe this kind of audience member cannot be convinced otherwise because of their opposition to transgender people alone, which could result in negative reviews, or threats of violence if my game were to see commercial success. Instead, I aim to use the obscuring of the transgender experience like *Celeste* but intentionally, thereby encouraging the player to examine their view of the transgender body after relating to and embodying a transgender character, potentially humanising their views in reality and media.

However, how do I expect a player to relate to the character? The themes of crime and allegories of abuse or unhealthy relationships may not be relatable to a wide audience. Instead, the reasoning for the protagonist's crime being a quest for freedom from expectation is what I expect will relate to a wide portion of the audience. Those who feel constrained in their expression of autonomy in societal or familial spheres should feel catharsis in getting freedom alongside the protagonist, meaning they embodied and related to the character. Therefore, the player and character's desires were aligned through their expression of agency being similar in getting to the end of the story. This leads to empathy in a desire to see the protagonist happy by solving her problem or that the ambiguity of the narrative caused intrigue which the player then wants to see revealed and concluded. Regardless, linking the player and character through story and agency expression by making the story a problem to be solved enables the ability to empathise with the transgender experience, humanising transgender character representation and hopefully changing how the player views transgender bodies in reality.

Yet, presenting a character's central problem as the story occurs for both the protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist's problem of attempting to claim freedom is limited by the antagonist's problem of wanting safety, making their goals directly oppose each other. This means of constructing character through problem is inspired by the techniques of author Chuck Wendig whom I had learnt of through my undergraduate studies and affected my understanding of character construction. His techniques present the advantages of leading to increased relatability with characters and making the story feel more personally driven through highlighting the interplay between character traits and the story as a solvable problem. His techniques are expanded upon within the literature review.

Establishing opposing traits

To establish the protagonist's and antagonist's roles, their dialogue should imply a difference in traits that makes their problems oppose each other. Within the normative view of binary gender and its stereotypes, the antagonist may appear to be stereotypically male through being stoic and logical, prioritizing sticking to the plan. While the protagonist may appear stereotypically female through being emotional and taking risks; freedom is her priority no matter the cost. However, with the transgender reveal, their relationship is the result of discarding male-associated traits to feel joy in femininity, yet suffering occurs because of the guilt she feels in her transition being visible and

doubling down to ‘pass’ as female. This passing isn’t the solution to her problem. Instead, she needs to realise the guilt she feels isn’t her responsibility, her identity and self-image need to be hers alone no matter the associations it carries or safety it discards. The limits on my autonomy are what motivated this solution being core to the character. I am willing to discard my safety if it means my voice is heard and I get the freedom I long for.

Like *Celeste*, I believe that the player grows alongside the character they control by relating to their positive and negative traits. Madeline is anxious yet determined but blinded by stubbornness. Likewise, my protagonist is headstrong and defiant but troubled by her past which leads to ignorance. Thus, requiring slowly finding her way through the darkness to realise her mistakes. The quest for freedom coming with misguided motivation should be more relatable to players despite the negativity presented in failure because a player can see themselves within a character in different ways, so this belief should be utilised to create a realistic humanised character with flaws.

In using stereotypical assumptions to make a transgender character seem stereotypically cisgender, it supposes certain traits belong to each side of the gender binary and exist to oppose one another. Revealing the protagonist as transgender then aims to show nuance and interplay between traits assumed to be in a binary relationship as not exclusive in constructing identity. However, using stereotypes may be problematic as it could enforce gendered stereotypes further if the player doesn’t understand the transgender reveal or reach the conclusion, thus not questioning or critiquing the gender binary norm.

However, as the player’s understanding cannot be predicted, their complete understanding does not hold influence over the content of Sunset Red and its ability to communicate themes and their relation to stereotypes. I personally avoid stereotypically depicting logic against emotion and make the desire for safety and freedom the opposing core values of the characters because they are less linked to the gender binary, even accidentally. This avoidance of stereotypes in multiple ways is important for my upcoming philosophy regarding how the gender binary can be critiqued through highlighting flaws like stereotypes.

The importance of the reveal

Regarding the reveal of the transgender subject matter and emotional climax of the plot, I want to differentiate my game from *Celeste* and contextualise the ambiguity in the dialogue discussed above to reinforce how heteronormative views assumed as the default affects the way one interprets media. This reveal needs to be emotionally strong and succinct to reward the player’s efforts and feel satisfying but also re-contextualise the dialogue and story directly. Therefore, the dialogue between the characters needs to be presented and explained. Within Figure 1 of the appendix is the full excerpt of dialogue, summarized below.

As the player and protagonist advance out of the room with the hammer she acquired, she has her choices questioned by the antagonist who attempts to justify his beliefs by telling the protagonist her journey will be fruitless and dangerous. However, the protagonist remains defiant and disagrees with the antagonist while elaborating on her experiences with him as an attempt to justify why she

needs to escape him and this ethereal place with which he appears to be linked. As this back-and-forth debate continues, the protagonist reveals more and more that she strives for freedom away from being linked to the antagonist as an extension of his persona, yet when arriving at a room with an impossible-to-attain solution, the player needs to attempt to solve it repeatedly to reinforce that they aren't in control, and neither is the protagonist. She grows more emotional as she fails and monologues for the player to see.
She is then confronted by the antagonist who tells her she should have listened, causing anger to rise as they argue. With her last words, she slams the hammer into the floor and the ground crumbles, leading to her falling into the darkness below. Awakening alone in the dark she begins to find her way up, not knowing what else to do. She considers her actions while climbing and comes to the realization she needs to make amends. She reaches the room from before with the antagonist still there and they begin to converse without arguing.

The antagonist then disappears, and a new power is granted which allows the player to solve the puzzle and continue advancing. This mirrors *Celeste*'s notion of self-acceptance being required for growth but grounds the transgender identity within it as an acceptance of traits instead of thinking one needs to become the very opposite of the identity which was killed. In my view, identity is fluid and should not be directed by how others perceive us, as these would be external limits that remove autonomy in identity construction.

After a few more rooms where the player gets to use the new mechanic, the protagonist escapes the prison and the game ends. In not displaying life outside the prison, I hope the player would interpret it as mental and constructed by guilt which limited her freedom in being who she wants to be. I find placing these final moments before more gameplay lets the player process the experience more while playing and shows the impact of growth as a requirement to escape the dark place the protagonist finds herself in. Her final two lines are ones I wish I could speak aloud myself, admitting a truth I have kept hidden. Yet through play, I wish to at least embody the freedom I strive for and hope someone else can do the same.

Aesthetics

Concerning the aesthetics of the game, I plan to replicate *Celeste*'s theme of ruins and Farewell's dreamscape with modern structures such as concrete, brickwork, signs, and lamps one could find in a city, but broken down in an abstract space comprised of bright colours and solid shapes. This is meant to emphasise that the game occurs as an internal conflict and is not tied to real-world locations, symbolizing the world the protagonist comes from is 'broken' in her view due to how she's treated.

Regarding character design, the protagonist is presented as feminine with long hair and a dark red prison uniform. Red is often associated with the concepts of love, passion and violence or bloodshed. The protagonist's determination, assumed heteronormative relationship and being a murderer makes this colour choice appropriate as it contextualises the violence in the murder metaphor and her passion or desire for freedom. Dark red specifically stained into her clothes symbolizes the time that has passed since the 'murder' and further represents her guilt covering her

bodily image. Similarly, the use of red to signal danger links back to Ms Red's origin akin to the femme fatale, but this is of less importance than other symbolism.

The antagonist, being a ghost, uses a transparent white colour associated with both purity and death. He contrasts the protagonist in being transparent and opposes the associations of red meaning life, passion, crime, and blood. His role as the victim in the initial normative reading reinforces purity in being killed and the victim, yet in the transgender truth he is hollow in being an identity not made itself but expected by others and not fully realized. This is reinforced by dialogue implying his life lacked passion and emotion which the protagonist now embodies. His protectiveness also highlights a guardian angel role, a different kind of love expected of a heteronormative relationship but also made hollow through the motivation behind his protectiveness being selfish and contrasting the love being unrequited over time, turning to violence.

In the climax when the antagonist fades away and the protagonist gains the final skill needed to advance, I want her colours to shift to pink. This is a combination of red and white indicating unity without destruction or violence like red alone represents. She develops her new identity through incorporation and not disassociation. While pink may be stereotypically female, I believe its reveal and placement at the climax can re-contextualise the colour as a symbol of unity rather than only femininity.

Genre and mechanical metaphors

I selected video games due to my experience in their development through my studies and belief that increased focus during play and embodiment of character leads to an increased relatability and empathy with a character that is capable of humanising transgender representation, much like *Celeste* did with my play experience. Yet, this requires questioning how systematic and mechanical metaphors develop within video game design to emphasise the message of the story.

Like *Celeste*, I use the primary genre of two-dimensional platformer but with the puzzle sub-genre. The game is split into multiple consecutive rooms each containing a puzzle the player needs to solve through planned traversal to open the exit on the right side. While platformers typically aren't considered narratively dense, I believe that slowing the pace down with puzzles will better accommodate the dialogue since the story is key to Sunset Red. As a result, dialogue cannot be skipped and acts as a shift from typical gameplay to allow the characters to be more expressive and queer the notion of controlling character identity. Instead, the player can only see it play out. Ideally, this acts as a break from and reward for the mental task of puzzle solving and shifts towards unpacking the narrative which requires careful distribution to maintain player interest throughout the game.

Regarding difficulty, *Celeste*'s emerges through the challenges within having decreasing room for error as the player progresses, sometimes requiring entire screens to be cleared in a single sequence of movements with no real breaks. I believe this matches the game's aesthetic choice of mountain climbing as a difficult and dangerous activity within its design. However, within Sunset Red, I wish to establish mental difficulty through the processing required to solve puzzles. This leaves the

player thinking more than executing but creates a positive response when a chain of actions and choices solves a given puzzle. This mental strain is meant to mimic my protagonist's mental strain fighting herself and her guilt now manifests as the antagonist.

Regarding mechanically represented metaphors, the primary mechanics of the game concern time manipulation: stopping objects' movement and making them move backwards (or rewind) through time by reversing along the path of motion they had recently taken. The order of button inputs determines what set of objects is affected by each mechanic. This allows for multiple routes to solving the puzzle of navigating a given room.



Figure 3: Screenshot of standard gameplay with early visual elements.

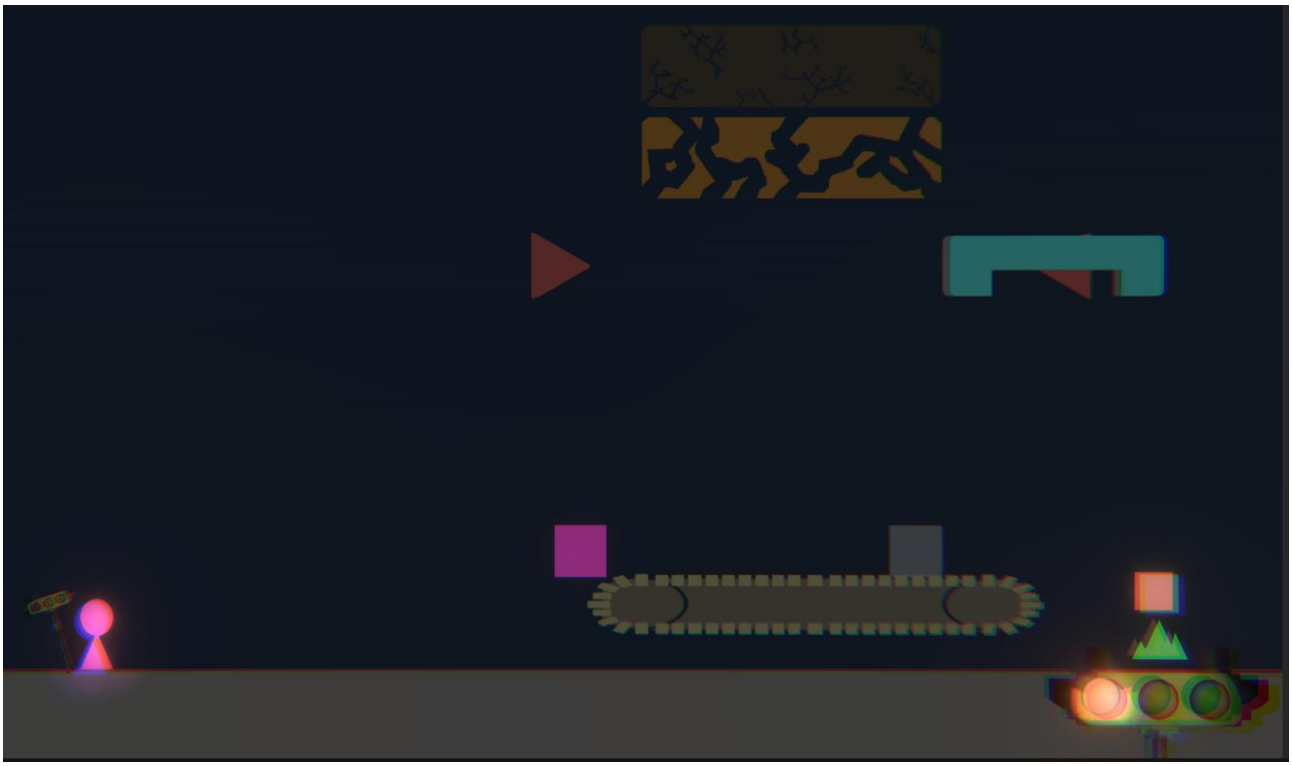


Figure 4: Screenshot of the 'Stop' ability being used, the objects within the current room cease being affected by physics forces and pause any unique behaviours.

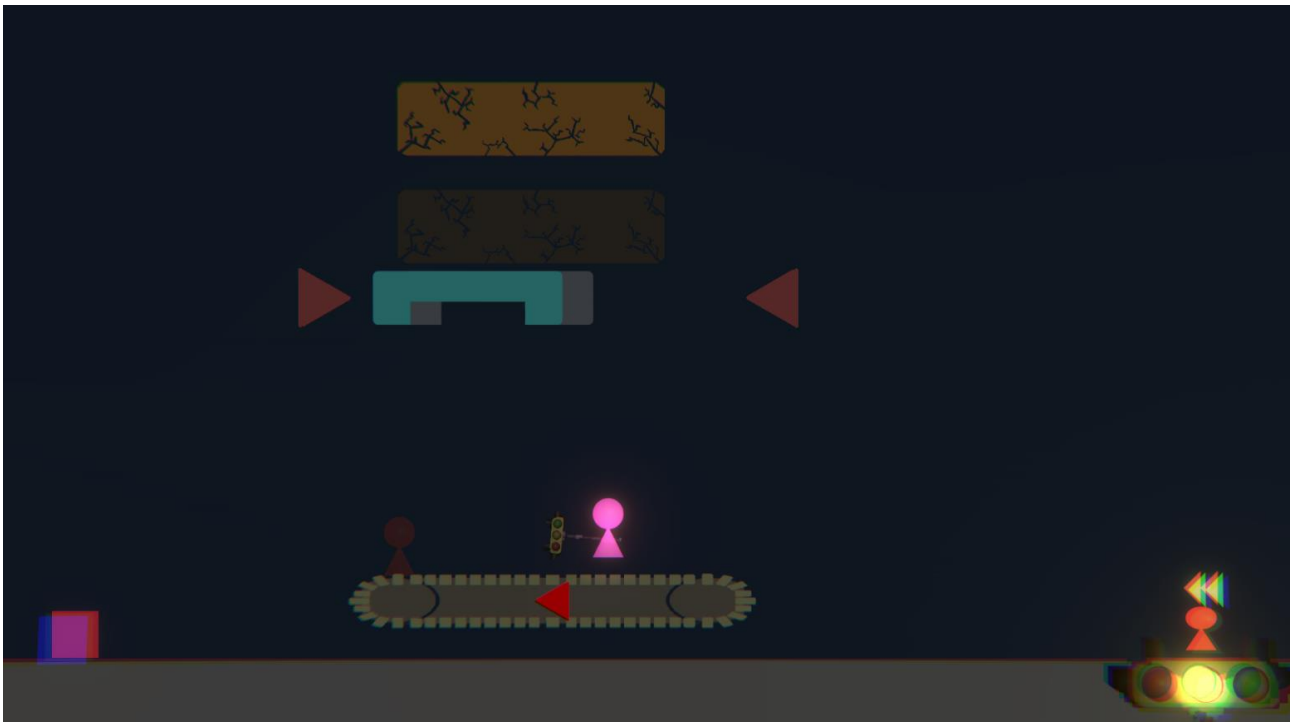


Figure 5: Screenshot of the 'Rewind/Go Back' ability being used, the player moves backwards along the path they had just taken while this button is held.



Figure 6: Screenshot of 'Stop' and 'Rewind being combined to make objects in the environment move backwards along the path they had taken or perform their unique behaviours with inverted values or in reverse.

After the climax the third ability is added which allows the player to place a copy of the protagonist that follows the player's inputs identically, letting them be in two places at once. This extends the avenues for puzzle solving and interacts with the other two abilities, being able to be stopped or rewound to further increase the complexity of puzzles and their solutions[3]. This set of mechanics is selected for the metaphors of process and reflection as transitioning itself requires time to pass and identity to change in some way, seeing the reflection of the body in the mirror change along with it. Stopping and rewinding show how the protagonist looks back and stays in the moment but never for too long as time will inevitably pass, planning out their movement through a room but also thinking back on their past and how it led them to where they are now. The third ability duplicating the protagonist is not only a physical reflection but doubles her capabilities, effectively giving her more time to do something. This emulates *Celeste*'s idea of making amends leading to a power-up but also doesn't conform to the expectation the other time-based mechanics had set by not concerning manipulating the environment, like speeding it up. Instead, the third ability interacts with the environment like the protagonist would and can be manipulated through the other abilities, indicating the reflection is edited by her perception.

Regarding the antagonist chasing the protagonist akin to Madeline and Badeline, the ghostly antagonist can appear in select rooms before the climax and can fly directly toward the protagonist in short intervals, resetting the room when it touches her. This makes the antagonist's presence

[3] See Appendix Figure 2 for Ability execution flowchart and Design Document for detailed functionality.

more physically threatening and changes the pace of gameplay to keep it from getting monotonous.

The hammer alluded to prior is the tool which enables and displays the time manipulation mechanic through its design. Resembling a traffic light and its standard three lights, representing the stop, rewind and copy mechanics respectively with a large handle the protagonist swings it with. Each light visually communicates which ability is active with a corresponding unique swinging animation from the protagonist and additional icons when abilities are combined in specific orders. This layers the visual feedback and the ability to swing the hammer is what enables the protagonist to hit switches in the environment to interact with objects directly and then manipulate them with the time-based mechanics.



Figure 7: Image of the 3D model used as the hammer's sprite within Sunset Red.

Movement and jumping are the mechanics afforded to the character's body while the fantasy elements are present in the hammer. I chose this to represent the use of tools as an extension of character thought processing which highlights autonomy and the mental ability over the physical. The use of autonomy is a concern of the transgender body as a means of expression through changing the body itself, similar to cyborg fiction. This is highlighted by Steve Fuller's comparisons between the liberation of form and gender in *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era* (Fuller, 2019, p. 119). Both the cyborg and transgender body experience dehumanisation by opposing the biological norm. Highlighted by Judith Butler's examination of transgender bodies' complex politics in *Undoing Gender*, (Butler, 2009, p. 4) and Andrew Goatly's notions of dehumanising the body through machine-based metaphors in *Washing the Brain – Metaphor and Hidden ideology* (Goatly, 2007, p. 104), I believe further research can justify the use of the cyborg body as a transgender metaphor to queer and disrupt its current normative understanding.

Lastly, concerning queer design and loss, the normative reading of loss in a video game is the failure to meet a condition or challenge. However, as my protagonist is queer and opposes the norm

of gender, I don't want to position being transgender as failure in the binary. So how do I represent failure in a queer way? I believe that the normative use of failing to complete a challenge can still be kept, with an additional player-selected failure. For example, if the player dies attempting to complete a puzzle they should retry as a matter of convenience and showing the protagonist's determination isn't easily stopped. However, failure should have consequences when the player willingly chooses it. Following platformer conventions, the goal is to the right of the screen so the player advances the character to the right, this is true of my game as well. However, if the player decides to move past the left edge of the screen they will be questioned if they want to leave and only warned once. Should they walk further left, the protagonist will return to her cell, removing all their progress, and forcing the player to start the game again. This queers the expected notions of failure and moving left being of less consequence in platformer video games, but also positions accepting the guilt and blame the protagonist faces as real failure. This presents the return to the norm through implied de-transition as losing instead of queerness, as a queer identity is the goal to be realized. This opposes the notion of queerness as a failure in the norm's views as established in media through queer-coding, further researched later.

Sunset Red itself utilises the advantages of mechanics, embodiment, and increased engagement to implant transgender metaphors within the game to be processed and experienced by the player. This should make them empathise with a transgender character and potentially humanise their view of transgender bodies in reality. In highlighting this is possible and utilising other facets of the gender binary norm to my advantage, I aim to displace it as an encompassing norm and display the harm it has caused to transgender representation through positive representation and critique. Thus, answering the research question's first segment.

Making a philosophy

As I chose which elements of *Celeste* to replicate or avoid to achieve my personal design goal of positive transgender representation, I found that a philosophy could form from my creative component and review of academic literature. This inspired and aligned with my creative component, forming a research question. Answering the research question through a literature review and case studies would justify that my design goals translate into an ideology that others could use. Thus, having a wider positive impact on transgender representation in video games.

Regarding the literature covered, the topics of gender, queerness, metaphor, identity, and character construction are the primary concerns for the philosophy and what I feel it needs to question and discuss. This is to enable better transgender character construction and representation capable of critiquing harmful gender binary norms.

Judith Butler's works form the core understanding of gender and gender politics within my philosophy as their position on the instability of gender norms and the ability to reclaim power through said instability enables autonomous construction of the self. Through constructing a transgender character that subverts the understood context of binary gendered traits, the character becomes designed to highlight and critique the othering occurring in the inconsistent ideology of gender norms. This critique acts as a reclamation of power from the norm precisely because the transgender body paradoxically replicates and disposes of the norm's facets.

Avoiding and questioning gender-based stereotyping is imperative to my goals and philosophy as I believe it leads to reinforcing both gender and sexual roles which marks the transgender body as the other. This is according to Butler's beliefs that the transgender body is capable of simultaneously reinforcing and opposing gender norms and this paradoxical queer position results in othering (Butler, 2009). Through reproducing gender norms, the transgender body is said to 'pass' as cisgender. This term is mentioned by Bonnie Ruberg in *Video games have always been queer* (Ruberg, 2019) and it carries the connotation that appearing normative avoids violence and harm (Butler, 2009). Thus, the transgender body becomes the other for a reason beyond gender performance itself which paradoxically marks them as a subject of and against binary gender norms (Butler, 2009).

In becoming paradoxical, the transgender body gains the ability to disrupt the binary gender norm by highlighting its paradoxes which define the transgender body as other (Butler, 2009). To establish these paradoxes and unjust dehumanising of the transgender body, an examination of the gender binary norm's origin and reinforcement of ideology is required to determine where questioning and critique can be made. I believe this occurs best through re-contextualising normative expectations to highlight similarities to the transgender body or experience, which is only made the other paradoxically because it is not normalised for exhibiting queerness (Butler, 2009). Thus, I argue that characters should define their identity through internal decisions instead of external associations of gendered traits which often exhibit stereotypes or harmful group dynamics. These group dynamics are outlined by Tanya Graham within the perspective of psychology and Adrienne Shaw interrogates the player's relationship with identity and why internal selectors of

identity are important in consuming media (Graham, 2016a; Shaw, 2010). This makes the transgender identity one of autonomous construction and individualised understanding and performance of gender norms. Subsequently granting the transgender body power and recognition in being able to reinterpret normative expectations for positive identity rather than harming its construction (Butler, 2009).

However, the characters themselves should not be flawless. Ernest Adams and Chuck Wendig draw attention to humanised character construction in video games and literature respectively. (Adams & Rollings, 2010; Wendig, 2017). Representing the transgender body as perfect or greater than the normalised body would only further isolate it and introduce new problematic elements. Instead, flawed characters appear more realistic and human, increasing the likelihood that players would be able to relate to them, such as Madeline and her anxiety (Shaw, 2010; Wendig, 2017). Additionally, negative traits should not be tied to queerness to avoid the connotations of queer-coding which Kim Koeun introduces through its origin in film-making negative and tokenistic queer characters. (Kim, 2017). Having both positive and negative character traits allows for different possibilities in relating to a character and affecting the story of the video game regardless of their identity (Adams & Rollings, 2010; Shaw, 2010; Wendig, 2017).

Metaphor should be used as a tool to present the transgender experience in a context more easily understood by a wider audience due to its political nature. Jeffery Scott Mio presents an origin for the architecture of metaphors and their capability for making the politically complex understandable (Mio, 1997). In using an existing and understood metaphor, audience members not familiar with or not seeking out transgender experiences can begin to understand them through context provided by existing knowledge structures (Mio, 1997). This highlights the paradoxical othering the transgender body faces despite its similarities to normative expectations (Butler, 2009). However, the use of metaphor also brings its reveal into question. Revealing the truth behind a metaphor can reinforce queer meaning and display the transgender body as understandable but it also presents the dangers of angering players opposed to queerness itself and meeting creators with violence. (Butler, 1990, 2009; Ruberg, 2019). Hiding transgender themes through metaphor is a difficult decision but I believe it will lead to wider audience appeal beyond transgender or queer players which is balanced out by the decision of revealing the true subject matter (Shaw, 2010).
The difficulty in deciding to include a reveal of queer truth is tied to the problematic past of such reveals in film. Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies (Vito Russo, 1987)* addresses the way American Cinema used revelation scenes to reveal a homosexual truth and position it as horror through shock value (Vito Russo, 1987, p. 146). Such a reveal contextualises the queer as alien through opposing heteronormativity (Vito Russo, 1987, p. 146) for which violence was the most frequent response, subsequently protested by gay people (Vito Russo, 1987, p. 91). However, through a positive ending in Sunset Red, I wish to avoid the negative connotation of the reveal.

Yet, this means metaphor requires a large amount of research regarding how metaphor operates as a tool and what makes it and specific examples effective to justify my belief in its use. Regardless, not every player will understand with or without explicit reveal of the subject matter and this is the

reality of any artwork. Andrew Goatly expands upon Mio's writing and presents examples through machine descriptors as dehumanising metaphors (Goatly, 2007), which leads to my discussion of the cyborg and transgender bodies' similarities and possibility as metaphors. This is elaborated by Donna J Haraway's position of the cyborg story as a tool for feminist liberation (Haraway, 1991) and Steve Fuller's explicit links between the transgender and cyborg bodies (Fuller, 2019) further justifying the potential of metaphor as a tool.

Finally, in the use of video games as the selected medium, the literary and game design techniques related to story, character and gameplay systems design are all considered for their possibility to utilise and reinforce selected metaphors (Adams & Rollings, 2010; Ince, 2006; Wendig, 2017). Additionally, a balance of normative and queer design techniques should be utilised to maintain both audience appeal (Adams & Rollings, 2010) and unique possibilities in queering expectations and potentially harmful practice (Ruberg, 2019). This balance is like the transgender body itself, presenting its paradoxical position as advantageous (Butler, 2009).

Simplifying the above points in addition to my considerations for the creative component results in a philosophy comprised of the following:

- The designed transgender character shouldn't exhibit stereotypically gendered traits or stereotypical aversions to existing stereotypes which could reinforce harmful representation.
- The character's story and gender presentation should queerly utilise the gender binary to portray a nuanced transgender identity that disrupts and critiques the norm by highlighting its paradoxical fallacies which dehumanise and other the transgender body.
- The character should exhibit positive and negative traits which affect the story and enable different ways for the player to relate to them.
- Player and character agency should be aligned through a mirroring of goals and choices to enable increased relatability and embodiment.
- The character's identity should be designated through autonomous activities and not prescribed by external group associations to avoid group dynamics which could mark them as the other.
- The use of metaphor should be carefully considered to make the transgender experience easier to grasp and relate to for a wider audience due to its difficult politics. However, one should also question revealing the true subject matter of the metaphor, which can make the story's message clear but also risks violence.
- Both literary and game design techniques should be used to reinforce metaphor and character nuance through a balance of both normative and queer design techniques. Normative design maintains expectations and audience appeal, while queer design presents uniqueness and makes the design process like the transgender body itself by disrupting normalcy.

With the philosophy constructed, the research question needs to be answered by proving the

philosophy is capable of critique through its use. While my creative component satisfies part of this use condition, justification of my philosophy needs to occur through a literature review to contextualise my beliefs and understanding through existing academic theory. Additionally, I believe an examination of existing video game characters can further highlight how the gender binary covertly operates and negatively affects the representation of transgender and cisgender characters alike. *Apex Legends*' (Respawn Entertainment, 2019) Catalyst is a playable transgender woman in a successful online first-person shooter and one of the newer and more publicly seen transgender characters. Her representation is positive and highlights a unique interaction between embodiment leading to positive player reaction and community belief through 'meta' strategies. *SOMA*'s (Frictional Games, 2017) playable protagonist Simon Jarett is assumed to be a cisgender and heteronormative man who must grapple with the themes of identity in the cyborg body. However, the story and his character construction never note or address the mistreatment of the exclusively female bodies he inhabits, highlighting how normalised expectations of gender can harm the potential message of a game. Both characters are examined through the above points of the philosophy to test if it is capable of adequately distinguishing between nuanced and limited considerations of gender within video game character construction and representation. This is followed by using the philosophy on my protagonist from my creative component as a final test to answer the research question.

Literature review

Gender, queerness, power, and recognition underpin the entire creative component and research question by concerning the gender binary norm and its effects on queer representation, focussing on the transgender body and experience.
Metaphor is concerned for its ability to obscure queer subject matter and make the complex position of the transgender body in politics humanised and more easily comprehended for a wider audience than just transgender people. This extends toward the specific example of the cyborg body and technology in my creative component. This is due to my observations that the transgender and cyborg bodies have political and philosophical similarities in their perception and representation of autonomy and humanity.

However, none of this is effective if the player cannot relate to and embody the character within my creative component or constructed with the philosophy. Thus, examining how players identify with characters and what techniques create relatability is imperative to humanising transgender characters. This occurs within literary and game design techniques to ensure the written idea of a character translates into the ludic space effectively. Thus, ensuring the embodiment and engagement in video games is utilised. This utilisation occurs through the control of a character leading to relating to a character, letting implanted metaphors within the game design be unpacked through play, hopefully affecting the player's views. Queer video game design is also present to question and queer normative design and its effects to form a better understanding of how queerness in games operates.

Ultimately, this should result in humanising the transgender body and experience while being able to critique and question the gender binary norm, displaying that the constructed philosophy is justified as an approach to curb existing harmful representation and practices.

Gender, queerness, power, and recognition

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) and Undoing Gender (Butler, 2009) utilise feminism to position the transgender body and queerness within the gender binary and its structuring of politics. This presents a means for the transgender body to reclaim power and recognition by displacing the norm from within.

Butler highlights gender as performative, requiring an audience to perceive and mark said performance as understood, even when this audience is individually internalized (Butler, 1990, p. 1). However, if Westernised society expects a performance of binary gender, it questions how a transgender performance is interpreted and subsequently treated. Butler argues that the transgender performance becomes inappropriate as it doesn't reflect normalised values or expectations of performance, becoming dehumanised and unrecognised as a gender (Butler, 2009, p. 2). Thus, performances of gender are not exclusively decided by an individual and because of external perception, gender has its expectations performed upon the body itself. In the Westernised norm of

binary gender, individual traits are read as masculine or feminine and are supposed to highlight the biological sex of the performer. Yet, establishing a presupposition means opposition like the transgender body becomes the other to the binary, removing power, humanity, and autonomy (Butler, 2009, p. 2). The norm of binary gender dismantles other performances of gender and their legitimacy, resulting in harm through dehumanised representation and violence. However, transgender bodies can also replicate normative gendered performance through the interpretation of norms (Butler, 2009, p. 3), so there are other mechanisms at work which make them paradoxically the other.

Defining the norm and its effects

As the transgender body becomes paradoxical in its performance of norms, one questions what is not accomplished by the performance preventing it from being normative and accepted. Butler presents the origin of the gender binary norm to highlight where the transgender body becomes paradoxical, but also displays this position has the advantage of highlighting fallacies within the norm that can grant the transgender body power and recognition. By representing the transgender body in media, my research question and philosophy seek to use these paradoxical advantages as a means of critiquing the norm's harm to transgender representation.

Butler states that sexual difference is core to the perception of bodies and the use of language (Butler, 2009, p. 176). This position within language makes sexual difference reinforced as a norm and makes it difficult to argue against or critique (Butler, 2009, p. 176). Language itself then displaces the transgender body as it opposes the current use of sexual difference as core to language. This becomes problematic for the transgender body's attempts to establish recognition in definition and explaining autonomy, highlighted in pathology which Butler addresses later. Referencing Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Luce Irigaray, 1993), Butler presents the first fallacy of the gender binary norm: sexual difference as a fixed structure. Butler notes that sexual difference as a norm itself has questionable relevance and origin (Butler, 2009, p. 178). Sexual difference in Butler and Irigaray's views stem from the patriarchal origin which excludes feminine and queer bodies (Butler, 2009, p. 179) through positioning the male as default and signified, marking the non-male as other. This is an exclusionary practice which uses group dynamics to define the other through negative association and limits the ability to construct identity autonomously (Graham, 2016b, p. 339). This is a form of phallogocentrism which defines the phallic as origin, utilised by Donna J Haraway to advocate for the cyborg body as a departure from normative gender construction in feminism, addressed in subsequent literature (Haraway, 1991). As equality is realized with time, the patriarchal origin of defining gender norms becomes questionable. Feminism and queerness then emerge to establish accommodating definitions for the feminine and queer identity (Butler, 1990, p. 7). As the transgender body suffers exclusion from both halves of the gender binary norm, it becomes unrecognisable as the norm and thus the other. Yet, in being made the other in and outside of the binary, it becomes paradoxically recognisable through not being granted recognition otherwise. Butler argues that this position is not permanent because definitions and criteria of the norm can be re-appropriated and reclaimed (Butler, 2009, p. 179), especially within the unstable gender binary norm. Thus, the transgender body as a paradox in

an unstable definition of norm gains the ability to destabilize the norm through highlighting fallacies as a form of critique. This critique occurs through the personally constructed definition and depiction of a transgender character in my creative component and philosophy, highlighting the self-made definition which opposes the gender binary norm through existing within it. As my character appears cisgender in her characterisation and ambiguous use of stereotypical expectations, I utilise the norm to present the transgender body as normalised through paradoxically performing its expected criteria. Thus, highlighting how the transgender body is paradoxically made the other as an advantage.

However, the gender binary and sexual difference also gain their normalcy by linking heterosexuality to gender. Heterosexual reproduction, and by extension: male and female reproductive organs, are the current medical requirement for population growth and sustainment, becoming synonymous with the idea of human culture (Butler, 2009, p. 118). Mirrored by Foucault, gender and sexual reproductive roles become linked by various external power structures like religion and higher society (Butler, 1990, p. 47; Foucault, 1978, p. 17). Butler directly links religion to sustaining normative human culture by referencing the Vatican's attempts to redefine gender according to sexual differences. Homosexuality in their beliefs had become a new gender in disposing of heterosexual reproduction and being opposed to culture growth (Butler, 2009, p. 182). Not only does this return to the patriarchal view of sexual hierarchy defining the feminine as necessarily maternal (Butler, 2009, p. 182), but it supposes sexuality itself has become a proliferation of gender (Butler, 2009, p. 183). In becoming queer, one is no longer a man or woman due to no longer contributing to heterosexuality that promotes human culture growth (Butler, 2009, p. 183). Therefore, in transgressing the boundaries between masculine and feminine biology, the transgender body is queer and opposes the norm, making it the other. Even if it performs gender binary norms and or could perform heterosexual reproduction through medical advancements.

This is an extension of the increasing differences between normalised heterosexual marriage and other sexualities noted by Foucault (Foucault, 1978, p. 40). As the sanctity of marriage was prioritized in the 18th century, it was carefully watched and became normalised. The violation of this sanctity through either established laws or implicit rules was faced with punishment (Foucault, 1978, p. 37). Breaking the established rules of marriage or deviating from the norm was treated equally due to the means of breaking naturalness not being focussed upon (Foucault, 1978, p. 38). Linked to intersex bodies and later, transgender bodies, the hermaphrodite's existence was criminalized as it "confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union" (Foucault, 1978, p. 38). However, as discourse began to shift into the 19th century, homosexuality became a focus through those beginning to make their voices heard despite being condemned. This autonomous action began to separate homosexuality from other criminalized sexual activity and a separation occurs in its treatment as unnatural as it opposed marriage and then 'natural' biological functions (Foucault, 1978, p. 39). Here 'homosexual' becomes a separate identity as it now splits cultural norms of religion and the supposed 'natural' sexuality of biology and introduces paradoxical inconsistency within a norm much like the transgender body.

In opposing the norm itself, the transgender body faces violence through its paradoxical

recognition. The term transgender itself implies a possibility between binary genders (Butler, 2009, pp. 42–43) meaning its performance of gender is recognised as affecting the norm. Otherwise, it would have no definition or recognition. For both transgender and cisgender performance, this recognised interpretation of the gender binary norm then becomes defined as an example of normalised performance, yet it cannot be distilled into a definition of the norm itself (Butler, 2009, p. 48). Instead, this example represents enough facets of a given norm which becomes an abstract and 'correct' performance (Butler, 2009, p. 50). This produces the problem of regulation within recognition that leads to exclusion. If one cannot adequately determine what is and is not normative or transgender performance, how is the individual transgender body defined as 'correct' and given recognition in societal and medical spheres? These are two important struggles that can harm the transgender body and experience (Butler, 2009, p. 40). Regarding societal recognition, if transgender is defined as being different to the gender binary norm, it becomes a definition of the excluded. In supposing the excluded or other can shift the norm, it disrupts the position of those already included in the norm. These normalised identities may react to the transgender body with harm for its disruption, such as physical violence or other political harm through media (Butler, 2009, p. 180).

Regarding medical othering, the normalised definition of transgender must be met to be granted recognition and access to medical resources that enable autonomy. Butler presents the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition (DSM-IV) and its definition of Gender Identity Disorder to establish the double-edged nature of being 'diagnosed' as transgender. While the DSM-V is the current version and has differing definitions, Butler utilises the definition available at the time to highlight the harm and othering in pathologizing the transgender body and experience. Diagnosis itself makes the transgender experience pathology (Butler, 2009, p. 77) through stigma by supposing difference from the norm of binary gender is a failure to meet it due to emotional or mental instability (Butler, 2009, p. 82).

This extends from Foucault's identification of pathology defining heterosexual norms after the church had appeared to become lax. Instead, certain sexual practice was defined as "incomplete" as it opposed the norm and so the othered category gained definition through its opposition (Foucault, 1978, p. 41). This opposition is labelled as 'still in development' or a 'disturbance of the natural' establishes a stigma and its subject (Foucault, 1978, p. 41).

This pathologizing doesn't consider that the norm itself harms individual identity construction through limitations of acceptance (Butler, 2009, p. 76) and so removes the legitimacy of the transgender experience as an attempt to claim autonomy despite the harm it faces (Butler, 1990, p. 17). The transgender body is paradoxically expected to dispose of autonomy to be diagnosed and viewed as a failure in replicating the norm, while believed to be able to normatively perform the gender they align with (Butler, 2009, p. 91). Yet, this exchange in types of autonomy and willing alignment to failure does not guarantee safety from violence and being made the other. Thus, the transgender body is still harmed in seeking recognition and autonomy because it is not normalised. Butler extends this point through language use itself, linking back to the inability to dispose of sexual difference due to its reinforcement in language (Butler, 2009, p. 176). As one needs to meet

the criteria of the normalised or ‘correct’ example of transgender pathology, one may have to lie to meet the diagnosis criteria (Butler, 2009, p. 91). This required explanation of experiences dehumanises the transgender body in not recognising the desire for autonomy as human, implying the transgender experience isn’t recognised without justifying human experiences (Butler, 2009, p. 30).

This dehumanising again aligns with Foucault’s notion that the recognition and categorization of the new othered subject meant they could be punished and therefore stigmatized (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). Homosexual sexuality became a non-human identity as it was thought to have affected every part of life; “the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). While this was thought to even affect anatomy and physiology (Foucault, 1978, p. 43), the transgender identity’s often direct opposition to natural anatomy compounds upon this dehumanising effect through direct opposition.

As the spheres of society, religion, medicine, and language converge in the gender binary norm, the harm the transgender body experiences in being made other and dehumanised becomes evident within media that represents the transgender body. However, the position of the transgender body as a paradox within the gender binary highlights the fallacy of the gender binary becoming normalised as it cannot adequately contain the transgender body without harm and paradoxical criteria. Thus, the gender binary itself should receive critique through transgender representation that discards its normalcy and grants positive recognition. Thus, my creative component’s climax of self-made identity and the philosophy utilise an internal and individualised origin of transgender identity to discard exclusionary practices and group dynamics which harm the transgender body. However, this requires further examination of politics and metaphor in media to justify its prominent use in my creative component and consideration of it as a tool in the philosophy.

Metaphors, political understanding, and the cyborg as metaphorical mirror

The power of metaphor

Jeffery Scott Mio's *Metaphor and Politics* (Mio, 1997) highlights the possibilities of using metaphor within media to understand political subject matter. The transgender body becomes political through its displacement of the gender binary norm. Therefore, the use of metaphor within my philosophy and creative component serves to make the transgender experience more understandable to a player through comparison to already understood phenomena. Mio states that the political landscape is complex and reduction through metaphor makes the political subject more appealing and understandable to the public (Mio, 1997, p. 114). This encourages their participation and makes politics itself easier to manipulate (Mio, 1997, p. 114). Media serves as a filter for how and what politics are discussed through displaying relevance. This is potentially able to directly influence what people think as they focus on relevant topics to feel politically active (Mio, 1997, p. 118). As media often depicts the transgender body negatively, this negative opinion can form in the audience and so they may replicate, enforce, or discard the political opinion to feel a sense of belonging to relevant groups (Graham, 2016b, p. 339).

Mio notes that the human brain has limits in information processing which requires a filter to form which makes information more readily understandable. These filters are schemas which compare new information to existing understandings to reduce processing (Mio, 1997, p. 117). Metaphors operate on the same level of comparative logic and are incorporated within schemas to allow one's understanding of politics to feel more accurate (Mio, 1997, p. 118). However, metaphor within schemas requires establishment and reinforcement through repetition, often through media (Mio, 1997, p. 121). Through enough repetition, metaphors themselves become political symbols of their subjects and can appear to follow a narrative (Mio, 1997, p. 119). As the politically powerful hold biases which make their way into the media they create or promote, the audience begins to form biased schemas without awareness (Mio, 1997, p. 130). So, sexual difference and binary gender are a long-standing metaphorical symbol for normalised society in language (Butler, 2009, p. 176) and have become a schema for a wider population. When the transgender body then contests this schema, it is viewed as an incorrect understanding of the schema and metaphor. Thus, it is discarded, made other, dehumanised, or met with violence by those who do not want their schema or norms to shift (Butler, 2009, p. 180). This is due to a threat to a collective natural order. Foucault notes that the church reinforcing heterosexual reproductive norms through marriage leads to a sexuality that's viewed as economically and culturally viable (Foucault, 1978, pp. 36–37). Therefore, the emergence of the transgender body into accepted norms constitutes a shift to norms that would threaten the safety of the current norm and it is thus protected through vocal or physical displays of non-acceptance.

This formulation of schema and metaphor has already occurred in media through queer coding linking evil traits to stereotypically queer traits. When the stereotypically queer antagonist is punished, queerness is also punished (Kim, 2017, p. 158; Vito Russo, 1987). Metaphor was used due to the Motion Picture Production Code from 1930 banning homosexuality from being depicted

and later amended in the 1960s to specify that homosexuality and deviancy were not to be treated with care (Kim, 2017, p. 158; Vito Russo, 1987). This has perpetuated into modern contexts and media representations by cycling between harmful representation and negative perception. I believe schemas have not shifted in favour of the transgender body because the gender binary is a metaphor for normative culture. This is why video games as a newer medium may still face negative audience feedback despite increasing positive queer representation. In my creative component, I use metaphor, symbolism, and schema to highlight how the transgender experience can utilise and shift existing normative metaphors, symbols, and schema to make the transgender body and experience more readily understandable. This highlights the transgender body's position as the other is paradoxical because it can already operate within existing schemas without discarding them.

However, Mio's definition of media concerns television and public speech, where he describes their framing of politics as 'episodic' due to lacking a larger context which makes forming schemas more difficult (Mio, 1997, p. 127). This subsequently questions my choice of video games as the media in the creative component and philosophy. Beyond my familiarity with video game development, I believe that the increased engagement expected of the player leads to embodiment. As the player focuses on play and begins to embody the character, they become grounded in their context and may become more aware of complex topics through theme and metaphor. This may lead to an improved understanding of the presented topics which can shift the player's existing schemas. I believe if the player can relate to the transgender protagonist of my own game, it humanises their representation through embodiment and makes room for the transgender experience in the player's schemas. This is accomplished using metaphor capable of being interpreted as both normative and transgender, highlighting that this interpretation should be accepted and not paradoxically made the other. Metaphor making the political more easily understood also means a wider audience can examine the displayed transgender experience and question existing harmful representations. Thus, the philosophy utilises both video games and metaphors to highlight negative representation as paradoxical, criticising the gender binary norm and its role in enforcing harmful metaphors, schemas, and stereotypical representation.

Andrew Goatly's *Washing the Brain – Metaphor and Hidden Ideology* (Goatly, 2007) provides further justification for utilising different interpretations of metaphor within my creative component and philosophy: the conventional and original metaphors. Both types are made of Target and Source: the Target is the new object or subject which becomes like that of the Source (Goatly, 2007, p. 11). For example, queer-coding made stereotypical queerness, a deviation from the norm the Target, and evil the Source (Kim, 2017, p. 161). Conventional metaphors are current conventional understandings of what a metaphor means (Goatly, 2007, p. 11). Original metaphors are newly constructed relationships which require more mental processing to be understood (Goatly, 2007, p. 22). My creative component uses interpretation to establish and utilise the advantages of both types of metaphor. For both conventional and original metaphors, my Target is 'crime', and the Source is the guilt felt for desiring freedom in an unhealthy relationship and guilt for transitioning respectively. Guilt becomes a metaphor for literal imprisonment through the restriction of actions. Regarding conventional metaphor, Goatly states: "In fact, it is precisely because they are conventionalised that they may achieve the power to subconsciously affect our thinking, without

our being aware of it." (Goatly, 2007, p. 22). This links to Mio's notions of symbol and metaphor operating subconsciously as they become normalised through repetition (Mio, 1997, p. 119). The original metaphor then contains power in the ability to displace existing knowledge and ideologies by displaying new possibilities for understanding (Goatly, 2007, p. 28).

Through using both types of metaphor within the creative component, metaphor becomes a powerful tool that operates similarly to the transgender body itself in displacing norms. The conventional metaphor of heteronormativity appears unassuming as it operates covertly. So, its re-contextualising through the emotional climax reveals the transgender original metaphor. This disrupts the normalised expectation and marks it as incorrect, displaying how it can harm media legibility and depictions of transgender subject matter. This highlights the gender binary and its role in marking the transgender reading as paradoxical and incorrect or unexpected. Through revealing the transgender metaphor, the player hopefully re-contextualises their schemas to include the transgender body as a possibility instead of the other. This would be a reclamation of power, recognition, and humanisation through metaphor present in positive transgender representation. Thus, advocating for and justifying metaphor's use as a tool in the philosophy to disrupt cyclical harmful representation and assumptions under gender binary norms.

However, this questions what specific metaphors can be re-contextualised or made. While I cannot discuss all the possibilities as they are as limitless as language itself, I can argue for the use of the cyborg and technological enhancement as metaphors for the transgender experience within my creative component. Goatly highlights many examples which compare the human to the machine negatively (Goatly, 2007, p. 106) which often depersonalize the body (Goatly, 2007, p. 105) through verbs such as 'seize up', 'breakdown' and comparing body parts to utensils (Goatly, 2007, p. 104). Media often portrays the cyborg and artificial with the fear of machine takeover and somatophobia: the fear of the body. This treatment of the mechanical as less than human is much like the treatment of the transgender body as both transgress the expected norms of bodily autonomy. Yet, in establishing autonomy there is self-granted recognition and power in making the physical form match the mental image. This takes the conventional use of fear in the cyborg metaphor as anti-human and links it to the dehumanised transgender body. However, through a positive lens, the autonomy of the cyborg body becomes an original metaphor for the transgender body. This destabilizes normative use and expectations of the cyborg within my creative component to display how metaphor can operate as a powerful tool within my philosophy.

Justifying the cyborg

Utilising Donna J Haraway's: *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Haraway, 1991) and Steve Fuller's: *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era* (Fuller, 2019) and their positions on the cyborg body, its construction and origin within autonomy, I aim to reinforce the cyborg as a metaphor for the transgender experience.

Haraway's position originates within feminism and concerns the defining of self, similar to Butler's

proposition (Butler, 1990, p. 7) but through exploring the construction of the cyborg identity in science fiction (Haraway, 1991, p. 6). Haraway presents the cyborg as separate from heterosexual and organic reproduction expected of the biological body through being mechanical (Haraway, 1991, p. 6). Thus, departing from the patriarchal and phallogocentric origins of culture and its effect on gender in Western society (Haraway, 1991, p. 7). The cyborg becomes like the transgender body for both are paradoxically recognised as human-like, but not human because of not participating in reproductive norms. The cyborg also breaks the assumed limits of humanity through the fusion of body and machine, a fusion of fantasy with reality as technology becomes more advanced (Haraway, 1991, p. 14). This is similar to Butler's notions of the relationship between fantasy and reality, not as isolated spheres but where fantasy dictates reality in being the excess of current possibility (Butler, 2009, p. 28). When the fantastical becomes possible it becomes reality (Butler, 2009, p. 28). The transgender and cyborg bodies accomplish this as what was once deemed impossible or unchangeable is enabled by technological and medical enhancement through transitioning and prostheses. Additionally, Butler considers this attaining of fantasy for the transgender body as not luxury but "as crucial as bread" (Butler, 2009, p. 29). It enables recognition of fantasy as possible, leading to safety and survivability for the transgender body (Butler, 2009, p. 29).

As the cyborg is paradoxically human-like but not human, it begins to simulate the organic body's attached politics, allowing for different interpretations to emerge (Haraway, 1991, p. 32). Haraway uses this opportunity for interpretation to establish technology as a core to a feminist definition of self. This is because advances in technology allow for global communication between women to remake and reclaim the definition of woman itself (Haraway, 1991, p. 33). Haraway therefore notes that feminism should be defined **like** the cyborg itself, not become the literal cyborg. Communication as the source which keeps power afloat (Haraway, 1991, p. 34) matters to making a new definition and disrupting prior definitions of the female self. This is similar to Butler's use of language as a tool for establishing power and the recognised subject (Butler, 2009, p. 176). Additionally, as Mio notes language and metaphor gain narrative through a political lens (Mio, 1997, p. 119), Haraway positions story as how the cyborg has gained power and justifies its importance within my creative component and philosophy by extension. "Cyborg writing is writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other." (Haraway, 1991, p. 55). This is also similar to Butler's notion of using language for the sake of achieving recognition through sacrificing autonomy (Butler, 2009, p. 218), but also the ability to reclaim power through shifting norms (Butler, 2009, p. 179). In my view, the cyborg and transgender body receiving similar treatment under the norms of biology and gender makes the cyborg a capable Target of the transgender metaphor. Story and metaphor then become a powerful tool in their ability to reclaim power and disrupt the gender binary norm's harm which marks the transgender body as other.

Finally, Steve Fuller (Fuller, 2019) contextualises Haraway's writing through the physicality of transhumanism and the cyborg body, instead of only its mental construction. Fuller notes that Haraway herself rejects the physical cyborg, considering it a fetishizing of technology (Fuller, 2019, p. 115). This is why I position Fuller as an additional justification for the transhuman and cyborg

body as a metaphor for the physical transgender body. Fuller acknowledges gender performativity and positions the transgender body as a gateway to the transhuman (Fuller, 2019, p. 117). Fuller also references Martine Rothblatt, stating that identity is a series of connections between data which becomes embodied through the biological or silicon body, regardless of gender (Fuller, 2019, p. 117). It is the communication of this data and identity that matters more than the body which stores it (Fuller, 2019, p. 118). Referencing Erik Davis to further contrast Haraway, Fuller notes that the cyborg and transhuman is not a fetishising of technology as the silicon body can enhance human features, not only discard them (Fuller, 2019, p. 116). This shifting of material is what Fuller calls 'morphological freedom', and the transition between genders can be seen as an early form of this freedom due to their similarities (Fuller, 2019, p. 117). When data is treated as the locus for identity, the changing of form to match this identity is an autonomous activity that can match the fluidity of identity itself (Fuller, 2019, p. 119). As the quest for autonomy, display of fluid identity, changing of form, and performance matter to both the transhuman and transgender body, the philosophy and physicality of both bodies begin to align. Thus, I utilise the themes of technological enhancement in my creative work and advocate for the use of metaphor in my philosophy. This is to display what nuance is possible when a metaphor is queered for a transgender context. The cyborg itself as a popular concept in video games also leads to my queer examination of existing cyborg-like characters through case studies. This is to determine how the cyborg body and gender are treated to highlight similarities to the treatment of existing transgender video game characters.

Depictions of queerness and Identity in and through video games

Existing negative transgender representation

To compare the transgender body to a queer interpretation of the cyborg, transgender characters in video games need to be examined. While video games are my selected medium for the potential of humanising and highlighting positive transgender characters, negative representation does occur. Additionally, how embodiment is achieved needs to be questioned from both the player and game designer's perspective. Adrienne Shaw's: *Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Content in Digital Games* (Shaw & Friesem, 2016) highlights the negative and positive ways queerness emerges in video games, through problematic examples of transgender characters and metaphors in design respectively. This begins to justify my emphasis and use of metaphor while displaying my belief that the gender binary as a norm harms transgender representation. Thus, justifying my philosophy and creative component's importance as an exploration into highlighting the gender binary norm and curbing its harm.

Regarding transgender characters in games, Shaw states: "There are many more transgender women in the games we have researched, though in many cases their gender is treated as a problem to be dealt with by other characters." (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 6). Highlighting *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra On-Line, 1993), the protagonist's goal of having sex is disrupted by a transgender love interest: Shablee, who is treated as a lose condition when discovered as transgender (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 6). Her performance of gender in sexuality becomes a problem for both protagonist and player because she is a woman but not enough so because she does not align with filling the win condition. In making her oppositional to the goal, her representation becomes a gamified justification and enforcement of transphobia (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 9). This operates as a form of queer coding as she opposes the player's goal and normative expectation of heteronormative sex, making her an antagonistic figure.

Another example in Shaw's: *Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience reception study* (Shaw, 2010) is Poison from *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1989). Poison is a muscular transgender woman in revealing clothing, acting as a minor antagonist physically fighting the male protagonists. Japanese development sketches refer to her with the derogatory slang for transgender women: 'newhalf' (*Capcom Classics Collection Vol. 1*, 2005) and English localization is theorised to make Poison transgender to avoid backlash for displaying gender-based violence (Retro Gamer, 2007, p. 52). In both cases, it's implied that physical violence against a transgender woman is acceptable for the normative audience as she isn't woman 'enough' or humanised. Reading Poison's visual design as self-expression creates a powerful image of being both comfortably feminine and muscular in revealing clothing. Thus, opposing the normative expectation of women and questioning the relationship between strength, violence, femininity, and queerness. Yet, viewed as an antagonist and under the male gaze, Poison becomes a taboo sex object to be punished with violence for her opposition to the norm. Paradoxically, Poison is sexualised as a woman but not considered a victim of gender-based violence because she is transgender.



Figure 8: Concept image of Poison from the original Final Fight.



Figure 9: Image of Shablee in the make-up room from Leisure Suit Larry 6.

Modern negative perception of transgender characters still occurs as players often negatively react to transgender characters almost regardless of how evident their transgender identity is, leaving negative reviews or enacting violence and harm as a result. *Celeste* has received such negativity in reviews for its portrayal of a transgender and mentally ill character[4] and Apex Legend's introduction of a transgender female character has been met with the most negativity[5] in its cast of characters despite many of them being openly queer.

Some may argue that these examples don't reflect or result in harm to transgender bodies in reality. However, Shaw notes that the normative audience has an outcry and enacts violence against positive queer representation for a supposed political agenda while remaining ignorant to the negative queer representation of the past functioning identically as agenda (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 9). This paradoxical reaction is like the resulting anxiety Butler describes when norms begin to shift, becoming a means to prevent gaining legitimacy in queer representation (Butler, 1990, p. 17, 2009, p. 180). Yet, positive queer representation still occurs through mechanics and direct queer narratives. Shaw notes these are the rarest form of queer representation as of her writing, emerging from queer game designers sharing personal experiences (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 9). Mechanical representations of queerness such as changing gender and relationship or romance options (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 8) are some of the direct examples, but later literature regarding queer readings

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4 Within the online video game store-front: Steam, sorting *Celeste*'s reviews by negative highlights several transphobic reviews which appear to use ironic and hateful language and cry political agenda to justify portraying the game itself in a negative light. https://steamcommunity.com/app/504230/negativereviews/?browsefilter=toprated&snr=1_5_100010_

5 As of December 2023, Catalyst's story trailer has over 58000 dislikes indicating a 42% dislike ratio for a passing comment about her transition. This makes it the most controversial trailer released to this date (Dislike statistic from https://jabrek.net/dislike-en/?url=https://youtu.be/8E9p5r0icpw)

elaborates that almost any mechanic can be queered (Ruberg, 2019).

Highlighting negative representation contextualises my belief for why its causes should be questioned through my creative component and philosophy. However, further examination into video game players is required to determine how a relatable character can be constructed able to affect the player's views. While I acknowledge some players will be unaffected due to pre-existing negative opinions of queerness, I primarily target non-queer players who are unaware or indifferent to the transgender experience. Therefore, my method of construction should lead to a humanising depiction of the transgender body that highlights the harm of the gender binary norm.

Types of identification and relatability

Interviews conducted by Shaw in *Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience reception study* (Shaw, 2010) highlight how the player views and relates to characters in video games and how it affects them. For my creative component and philosophy, examining this relationship informs the game design and literary techniques. These techniques are then used to craft a relatable and humanised transgender character for a wider non-queer audience, which could positively affect their views of transgender people. Through positive representation, I aim to highlight the paradoxically negative representations of transgender characters and the role of gender in character construction.

As I aim to represent queerness, some would consider my work to show diversity, but Shaw notes this term has a misunderstood interpretation. Often pluralism occurs rather than diversity, which is defined as the incorporation of different identities in media for the sake of market appeal, not questioning if the representation is nuanced or displays stereotypes (Shaw, 2010, p. 9). True diversity instead "requires that audiences are confronted more directly with different types of characters, stories, and experiences." (Shaw, 2010, p. 9) and is capable of educating the audience (Shaw, 2010, p. 11). Confrontation and education are sentiments mirrored by Butler, Mio and Goatly in de-constructing the norm by highlighting fallacies, and how metaphor accomplishes this in media through affecting schemas (Butler, 2009, p. 179; Goatly, 2007, p. 28; Mio, 1997, p. 121). Shaw notes that her interviewees intuit when pluralism occurs instead of true diversity as they avoid media in which they identify tokenistic, stereotypical, or pandering characters (Shaw, 2010, p. 190). For my creative component and philosophy, the use of the original metaphor and nuanced transgender character is to avoid notions of pluralism and highlight true diversity. This potentially educates an audience unaware of how transgender characters are treated and humanises their representation. Additionally, creating more positive and diverse representation for transgender audience members can curb an internalized and normalised negative view of the self and media representation (Shaw, 2010, p. 238). This is important because Shaw notes media enforces social reality as representation signals a path toward social equality (Shaw, 2010, p. 241), aligning with Mio's notion of media affecting the political subject (Mio, 1997, p. 130). However, this occurs regardless of the quality of representation, both positive and negative representations can become normalised with enough reinforcement. Thus, I position my creative component and philosophy as positive transgender representation which opposes pluralistic depictions and uses the potential proliferation of media to affect the audience and enact positive change. My concern over the lack of

positive representation and desire for it to become more commonplace is what motivates my philosophy's concern with media. If my philosophy were carefully crafted, justified, proliferated, and repeated elsewhere through media such as my creative component, it may gain the ability to enact social change which humanises transgender representation.

Regarding identification and relating to characters, Shaw notes two different types that players fulfil: identification *as* a member of the group to which the character belongs, and identification *with* a character's similar traits (Shaw, 2010, p. 132). Identification *with* characters is the primary concern of my creative component and philosophy as relating to a transgender character shouldn't necessitate identifying *as* transgender. This is because such identification will exclude audience members, making its goal of proliferation and positive change less likely as a result. Using the example group of 'gamers' Shaw notes that her interviewees are discouraged from identifying *as* a group member due to external power dynamics such as the connotations of belonging to such a group (Shaw, 2010, p. 114), or the feeling that one doesn't meet normative expectations of group members (Shaw, 2010, p. 110). While the consequences of identifying as a gamer aren't equitable to identifying as transgender, the use of stereotypes in queer representation makes 'queer' a pluralistic group. This discourages audience identification *as* a member through wanting to avoid the connotations of membership (Shaw, 2010, p. 253). For transgender people as a group, these connotations are currently harmful and negative representations, being met with violence and made the other. Instead, my creative component and philosophy position relatability and identification *with* a transgender character as more likely because it avoids problematic group dynamics.

Shaw notes through her interviewees that identification *with* characters occurs when certain mental and physical traits align with the player's self-determined important traits (Shaw, 2010, p. 132). Meaning identification *with* characters doesn't require alignment of all traits, nor only positive traits like identification *as* a group member (Shaw, 2010, p. 135). When traits are identified *with*, feelings of empathy and sympathy emerge for the character within the audience member (Shaw, 2010, p. 135). I seek to enable this identification through play and embodiment in video games regardless of character and player gender or queerness to humanise my transgender character's representation. if my creative component achieves this, it can be replicated within my philosophy. This identification occurs with Madeline as a humanised depiction of a transgender character and mental illness is an aspect players review positively. Thus, highlighting the impact of her characterisation without an indication of player gender and signifying what identifying with her mental illness reflects upon the players themselves[6].

Lastly, Shaw notes the complex relationship between the audience and media, especially regarding the presentation of gender (Shaw, 2010, p. 250). Referencing Julie D'Acci's paradox of representation (D'Acci, 2004), Shaw notes that gender identity in media needs to have its representation interrogated whilst also celebrating nuanced representations of marginalized

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[6] As of December 2023, *Celeste* has 97% of its Steam reviews listed as positive with many players noting the impact of the story and themes on their experience despite the game's difficulty and marking these reviews 'helpful' as a sign of agreement. https://steamcommunity.com/app/504230/positivereviews/?browsefilter=toprated&snr=1_5_100010

identities (Shaw, 2010, p. 250). Displaying how gender is constructed while avoiding stereotypes established by the gender binary recognises the harm done by the binary while dismantling it (D'Acci, 2004, p. 380; Shaw, 2010, p. 250). This aligns with Butler, Mio and Goatly in destabilizing the norm (Butler, 2009, p. 179) through media as a political tool (Mio, 1997, p. 118) and re-contextualising normative understanding with original interpretations (Goatly, 2007, p. 28). The idea of celebration also justifies the need for positive transgender representation as a means of acknowledging the transgender body and experience as accepted in media, additionally displacing the gender binary norm that conveys the opposite belief.

Through replicating the above phenomena in my creative component and philosophy I not only begin to understand how a player relates to characters but also note how my means of representation combats the gender binary through media itself. Acknowledging the gender binary causing harm through paradoxical representation means acknowledging where stereotypes need to be avoided, but also not enforcing paradoxical stereotypical aversions. Stereotypical aversion occurs as the means of avoiding a stereotype becomes more common, it may become a symbol of the stereotype itself, and therefore an accidental reinforcement occurs. This is why the first point of my philosophy specifies avoiding stereotypes both ways to ensure the creative component and philosophy aim to be a celebration of nuanced transgender representation without accidentally reinforcing harm.

Creating relatability: balancing literature, normative and queer game design

With the perspective of the player considered, an examination of the design techniques used to create a relatable character within literature and game design is required. Literary technique reinforces the origin of my philosophy and character construction as a written process which becomes a game design process by reinforcing written metaphors with mechanics. Yet, in creating a queer video game character, I believe a balance of normative and queer design is required to appeal to a wide audience but also queer existing techniques. This makes my creative component and philosophy like the transgender body: able to disrupt the gender binary norm through practice and representation.

Literature techniques

Chuck Wendig's *Damn Fine Story: Mastering the Tools of a Powerful Narrative* (Wendig, 2017) is a set of literary techniques which I learnt during my studies which were used to construct my creative component's protagonist. Wendig presents the technique of using a core, personal problem to position the character in the story, the solution to said problem being the events of the story itself. Through creating a personal problem, Wendig argues that the audience begins to relate to the character and story itself through being made up of personal stakes (Wendig, 2017, p. 59). However, the problem itself is not static and shifts as events change or when character weaknesses emerge, which Wendig calls a 'complication' (Wendig, 2017, p. 65). The role of the author is to build the character and their problem with complications and character growth, thus creating the path the story follows (Wendig, 2017, p. 65). Character weaknesses themselves are not necessarily negative traits, instead being any trait with the correct context that shifts the solution out of the character's grasp (Wendig, 2017, p. 69). Within *Celeste*: Madeline's kindness is contextualised as a weakness by not refusing Mr Oshiro who wants her to stay at the resort, which would delay her solution of climbing the mountain to get rid of Badeline at that time. Within my creative component, I contextualise my protagonist's determination as positive, but also negative for moving toward danger. Likewise, my antagonist's protectiveness becomes negative through the reveal that it harmed the protagonist.

This interaction between character traits and problem is a form of conflict (Wendig, 2017, p. 63). By making this conflict personal and affect the story, it becomes noticed and more relatable to the reader (Wendig, 2017, p. 64). Additionally, contextualising traits positively or negatively doesn't reduce audience identification with characters as noted in Shaw's observations. Both positive and negative traits can be identified *with*, indicating that the audience relates to a character (Shaw, 2010, p. 135).
Regarding the conflict between characters, Wendig argues that their problems interact in two ways without specifying the character's role in the story. These interactions have the namesake of different line orientations. Parallel problem interaction is not akin to conflict and instead has characters' solutions take similar paths, but not directly interacting or changing said paths (Wendig,

2017, p. 77). Perpendicular problem interaction is where conflict occurs as the paths to solutions meet and disrupt one another, requiring the conflict to be solved. At least one character's path to the solution changes as a result (Wendig, 2017, p. 78). Within my creative component, like Madeline and Badeline's relationship, my protagonist and antagonist express both problem interactions. Perpendicular problem interaction occurs until they make amends in the climax, switching to parallel interaction. This is because the antagonist cannot inhibit nor directly solve the protagonist's problem or reach her goals, rather working alongside her to find her solution.

I find this quote interesting regarding character problem and story from the audience's perspective, which matters to game design storytelling later: "Remember what I said about us seeing our stories inside the stories of our characters? They are how we relate. They are our vehicle to empathy." (Wendig, 2017, p. 64). This aligns with Shaw's perspective of creating empathy (Shaw, 2010, p. 135) but also highlights the term 'vehicle' as a character in video games becomes a vehicle to experience the story through being embodied and controlled. This is elaborated by Steve Ince and his techniques for writing video game stories (Ince, 2006, p. 65).

While the techniques one uses to write a character are not a concern of the philosophy, I elaborate on my use of Wendig's techniques to establish links between his beliefs and other reviewed literature as a means of justifying how my creative component operates. This subsequently leads to the philosophy and my position that the gender binary can be made a component of the character's problem and story, having critique emerge through storytelling. Yet, video games and their construction and control of characters need to be discussed to further justify my use of the medium in enhancing relatability and identification with characters through embodiment.

Ludic construction

Both Ernest Adams' *Fundamentals of Game Design* (Adams & Rollings, 2010) and Bonnie Ruberg's *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019) matter to my creative component and philosophy. Adams' techniques have become normalised academic and practical understandings of the development process which are utilised to conform to player expectations, to not isolate normative audience members, and appeal to a wider audience. However, relying on Adams' understanding alone presents a normalised notion of development processes which neglects the possibilities of implanting queer metaphors and readings within games. Thus, justifying the inclusion of Ruberg's re-contextualising of video games and their design. In balancing both positions, my design process and philosophy become like the transgender body itself in displacing normative convention but still being intelligible from adapting the norm for its own needs.

Normative game design

Regarding characterisation, Adams states that games should: "include complex characters who aren't heroes or villains but fall somewhere in between, characters designed to intrigue the player or make the player think" (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 127), aligning with Shaw and Wendig's notions that complex characters can affect how the player thinks and plays (Shaw, 2010, p. 9) regardless of their role in the story (Wendig, 2017, p. 62). However, a character should maintain consistent core values to ensure the player finds them believable and therefore relatable and able to be embodied (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 128). Yet, this becomes difficult the more complex and human-like the character becomes (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 128). Madeline is an emotionally complex character but has her emotional state made obvious to maintain relatability and embodiment. Similarly, in my character construction, I reduce my protagonist's goal, traits, and problem to be concerned with gaining freedom and let complexity emerge in what that freedom represents as a transgender metaphor.

The method with which the player controls the character is also a concern. Direct and indirect control are differentiated by directly steering a character through button inputs (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 131) or prompting the character to perform an action and seeing if and how they do so (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 131). Both change how a character feels to the player: indirect control makes the player feel more akin to a guide, but makes the character appear more human, while direct control makes the character akin to a vehicle (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 131). This returns to Wendig's notion of vehicle and Steve Ince's statement that control is "the feeling that the player character is an extension of herself" (Ince, 2006, p. 65), meaning the player places themselves within the character's context through embodiment, allowing for relatability and identification (Ince, 2006, p. 65). To somewhat queer this idea of control, I present moments of dialogue like *Celeste* in my own game to change the mode of play and remove an element of choice from the player's hands by only being able to advance dialogue. Similarly, before the climax and fall of the protagonist, the player's control is made mute as they cannot solve the puzzle and must repeatedly fail before letting the protagonist express herself again to advance. This humanises her through queering the expected direct control by introducing indirect control and having the character refuse

the player's prompts.

This begins to highlight the difference between agency in literature and games. Wendig notes agency as the character's ability to make choices which affect the story and problem (Wendig, 2017, p. 109), while Adams' notion of agency is the player's choice of actions which makes up their entire play experience, not only actions which affect story (Adams & Rollings, 2010, p. 160). Ince links player and character agency by aligning their goals (Ince, 2006, p. 66), such as the desire to go to the same location or see the specific outcome of an event. Even as the player doesn't physically move the same way a character does, the same reasons for performing certain actions expresses the agency of both parties. Within my creative component and philosophy, aligning player and character agency is imperative to increasing relatability and embodiment, leading to empathy as noted by Wendig and Shaw (Shaw, 2010, p. 135; Wendig, 2017, p. 64). *Celeste* accomplishes this through the player and Madeline wanting to climb the mountain as it presents a challenge both emotionally and mechanically through directly controlling Madeline. Within my creative component, I use the theme of freedom and overall mystery to enable interest in the player, hopefully leading to embodiment through play and wanting to see the outcome of the story.
As the protagonist reveals her identity, the player's different means of identification *with* her traits or story should make the climax and reveal of the transgender truth impactful. This impact should make the protagonist's experience humanised, thus humanising the transgender body and experience itself. In humanising the transgender body and positioning the gender binary as dehumanising in my creative component and philosophy, I achieve a means of critiquing the gender binary's unexamined and normalised harm.

Queer design and reading

Bonnie Ruberg presents a transgender reading of direct control which highlights one way queerness emerges in games through analysis. *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014) and its purposefully cumbersome movement mechanics highlight the protagonist's difficulty 'passing' off as a human while being an octopus (Ruberg, 2019, p. 85). The term 'pass' links to the transgender experience of performing expected gender norms to the extent one's body is read as cisgender, circumventing the violence faced in being perceived as the other (Ruberg, 2019, p. 85). *Octodad* accomplishes this by making 'passing' a stealth mechanic and linked to the win condition. However, difficulty emerges because of the unwieldy physics-based movement mechanics opposing the normative convention of mechanics becoming naturalized through play (Ruberg, 2019, p. 86). By extension, Octodad and the player find difficulty in 'passing' and surviving in a human world (Ruberg, 2019, p. 101), aligning their agency within a queer theme and made normalised and acceptable by mechanical metaphor. In Octodad and the player's agency aligning, it displays the player can identify with humanised non-human characters. Additionally, through a transgender reading, Octodad operates similarly to my metaphor of the cyborg and transgender body, indicating metaphor is an effective tool within my philosophy and creative component.
However, "games that are designed using counterhegemonic thinking are still games." (Ruberg,

2019, p. 125) and the players exhibiting agency within the conventions of normative consumption and play can break queer design (Ruberg, 2019, p. 124). I believe this is unavoidable as I cannot fully predict nor control player agency in my philosophy or creative component. This is why I position both normative and queer design as necessary. In making queer design decisions and re-contextualising normative decisions, I make normative design paradoxically queer. Elements of my design appear normative to not alienate the corresponding audience, but like the transgender body, the question of whether the design is normative or queer is only revealed when the norm is questioned. This questioning reveals that some elements of design are paradoxically queer because they are under-represented. Within my creative component, I queer the convention of failure and death within platformers as a genre through a perma-death mechanic. As the player moves the character to the left boundary of any room, they will be warned their decision cannot be reversed. If they continue, they acknowledge this decision as a real failure and consequential, unlike dying. With this they are taken back to the cell at the beginning of the game, having all their progress erased. This represents the protagonist giving up and presents a return to normativity as the failure condition, unlike other media which portrays queerness as negative or failure itself.

Regarding queer readings, Ruberg presents the 'too-close' reading of video games which counteracts hegemonic denotations by examining connotation (Ruberg, 2019, p. 57) such as with *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*. This disrupts denoted meanings to establish new interpretations which allow the under-represented to reclaim power through a subjective and queer lens (Ruberg, 2019, p. 58). However, as the largely heteronormative male audience wishes to avoid political subjects (Ruberg, 2019, p. 60), they defend the denoted facets of a game as the only correct readings, dismantling the legitimacy of subjectivity and queer readings (Ruberg, 2019, p. 58). This apolitical agenda is countered by Mio as it would diminish the power of media and interpretation in making the political understood through forming schemas (Mio, 1997, pp. 117–118). Thus, queer readings also become like the transgender body because of the assumption that heteronormativity is the default of content in games, thus opposing queerness with othering and violence. This violence being shown highlights the transgender body and queerness does affect the norm through re-contextualising its facets. This further motivates and justifies my inclusion of 'too-close' readings of case studies and the use of queer construction in my creative component and philosophy. This presents the means to dismantle the gender binary norm and its harmful effects on transgender existence both in constructing and reading media.

Case Studies

To test how existing characters and games operate within my philosophy, case study analyses of *Apex Legends'* Catalyst and *SOMA*'s Simon Jarret are performed. Both games are selected for their use of technological enhancement and how gender may affect the themes of body and identity for a transgender woman and cisgender man respectively. Catalyst highlights a positive transgender woman with nuanced construction and interesting interactions with player positivity through 'meta' play. In comparison, Simon may present a problematic view of heteronormativity and its subsequent treatment of the feminine form which harms the game's themes of consciousness and identity. After contextualising each character, I place them within my philosophy point by point to highlight where it succeeds and fails in considering characters I had not developed myself. This is to theorise if my beliefs align with positive representation and oppose negative representation to prove the philosophy can answer the research question and to what extent.

Apex Legends: Catalyst

Catalyst's story and role are subject to change as *Apex Legends*' seasonal updates adjust its lore and characters. Therefore, my understanding of Catalyst is accurate as of December 2023.

As cited prior, Catalyst's initial reveal trailer which confirms her as transgender had faced the largest community backlash of any characters within *Apex Legends*. Many other, now-deleted social media posts from players confirm this negativity emerged due to the display of a transgender body itself before she had become playable. This is despite six other characters being queer with one of the flagship characters: Bloodhound being non-binary.

In an interview with developers and consultants responsible for Catalyst's representation, her construction is intended to make her "inescapably trans" (Alyssa Mercante, 2022). GLAAD, an organization focused on nuanced queer representation worked closely with the development team to turn their transgender members' anecdotes, experiences and feedback into a character who is proud of her transgender identity and that it emerges in all facets of her character (Alyssa Mercante, 2022). Meli Grant, the transgender woman who provides Catalyst's voice, cites the development experience as unlike others in her career. The development team ensured Catalyst is humanised and her representation of transgender experiences is cared for (Alyssa Mercante, 2022).

Tressa Smith, the identity behind the legend exhibits her autonomy and pride in being transgender through being Catalyst in the Apex Games as a hero-like figure. Her sardonic sense of humour is a defence mechanism in reaction to the constantly politicised transgender existence. The development team hopes that highlighting her transition as successful adds weight to her representation and resonates with players (Alyssa Mercante, 2022).

While this highlights the development process of Catalyst, her later story also needs to be considered. Her current story arc concerns the protection of her home planet: Boreas and its crumbling moon Cleo. She joins the workforce attempting to rebuild Cleo and establishes a life there, but when the Apex Games arrive and begin to undo her work, she joins the Games to earn

money for her livelihood. Catalyst opposes Seer, another legend and Boreas native, believing he had brought the games to Cleo despite the danger. Seer attempts to reason with her, communicating he was manipulated into believing he was enabling growth on Boreas. Catalyst does not believe him at first but later begins to make amends with him after updates to the game (Respawn Entertainment, 2019). This humanises Catalyst as her protectiveness is justified yet her anger is misplaced, and she later realises this and makes amends.

However, much of this narrative is external to the game, presented in comics or animation. Within the game, Catalyst's voice lines are the best indication of her character development and identity. It's unclear if her abilities and their mechanics are also influenced by her identity, but I utilise the 'too-close' reading to establish a link between the two.
Catalyst is described as a 'techno-witch', a combination of magic through astrology, and technology through ferrofluid, which highlights the fusion of fantasy and reality addressed prior (Alyssa Mercante, 2022; Butler, 2009, p. 28). This is akin to the cyborg through Catalyst's autonomous use of technology. Catalyst's use of ferrofluid encompasses both offence and defence within the game, placing rows of spikes to harm enemies, reinforce or build doors to protect teammates and conjure a large wall which slows attackers and gives teammates safe passage behind it. Catalyst's decisions in the use of the ferrofluid highlight the strength of her fluid identity and autonomy through mechanics, making it a transgender metaphor.

I had mentioned prior that catalyst enables a unique form of embodiment through 'meta' strategies and play. As players became accustomed to her abilities, they found she was a powerful defensive character who outclassed the other 'controller' type legends, even after balance changes as her selection rate remains the highest[7]. As the goal of *Apex Legends* is to defeat other players and emerge victorious with your squad, performing well is essential for the player. Having a character perform well on both offence and defence means the player utilising Catalyst believed they were more likely to win and continued playing her. Thus, both player and character have their goals aligned, leading to players forming positive opinions of Catalyst through embodiment and subsequent victory. This humanises Catalyst differently than players' identifying with her traits and story but still aligns with my philosophy's goals.

Catalyst's story, development and mechanics align with my philosophy's goals with some facets displaying unique alignment I had not considered prior. Below is my reading of catalyst within my philosophy point by point.

- Catalyst becoming a new archetype of design through the 'techno-witch' avoids stereotypically gendered traits and accidental reinforcement through stereotypical aversion.
- Catalyst queers the idea of magic and technology by becoming the 'techno-witch' and in being proud of her transition, she opposes the negative stereotypical representation of transgender characters. While this doesn't critique the gender binary and its paradoxical fallacies, Catalyst is a nuanced and humanised example of transgender representation.

[7] Legend selection rates and graph courtesy of https://apexlegendsstatus.com/game-stats/legends-pick-rates

- Catalyst exhibits both positive and negative traits through her abilities and story with Seer. This portrays her with human-like realism that doesn't necessitate identifying as transgender to relate to her.
- The player and Catalyst's goals are aligned in the desire to win, and her abilities strengths highlight a way players can embody her strength through play, leading to increased relatability and embodiment.
- Tressa Smith chooses her own identity in becoming Catalyst the legend and 'techno-witch', displaying her autonomy, and thus avoiding harmful group dynamics. This includes the dynamics related to witchcraft due to the fusion of sci-fi and fantasy in making a new archetype.
- My view of Catalyst doesn't use metaphor to make understanding a transgender experience easier because she has already undergone transitioning and its difficulties. Instead, her design highlights the metaphor of strength in adaptation and fluidity. This isn't revealed either as it is my interpretation, but I believe Catalyst's metaphors do not extend any harm to her transgender identity.
- Through the metaphor of fluidity and technological enhancement of autonomy like that of the cyborg, I believe Catalyst's mechanical and literary design utilises both normative and queer design as a strength. Normative design established by the 'meta' nature of Catalyst's strengths makes her appealing to players who wish to succeed. Yet queer design emerges in the use of astrology and magic to contextualise technology through a new archetype. Through selecting Catalyst, her beliefs and pride in being transgender are made known and embodied through play. Therefore, the embodiment of queer design with normative goals balances Catalyst's appeal and makes her like the transgender body itself, disrupting the expectation of negative transgender representation.

SOMA: Simon Jarret

In an interview with *SOMA*'s director: Thomas Grip, he reveals the main theme of the game is consciousness. By embodying the character in first person, the player's control is meant to blur the boundary between player and character, enabling questioning of the self and free will (Andy Kelly, 2013). While I believe this central theme is a strength of *SOMA*, the neglect of the body and gender within the game begins to highlight problematic depictions of femininity. I use the 'too-close' reading to establish the source of such depictions being unexamined gender binary norms.

Simon Jarret is a brain scan from 2015 awoken within a diving suit in 2104 after a rogue artificial intelligence attempts to preserve humanity after the apocalypse. Simon appears to be a stereotypical cisgender man who suffers from anxiety due to irreparable brain damage, leading to the brain scan to theorise treatment that gains sentience. Within the ocean-floor scientific research base: Pathos II, Simon meets Catherine Chun, a scan of the leading scientist who wishes to launch the last scans of

humanity into space to live in a simulation of paradise (Frictional Games, 2017).

Simon is an inconsistent character. His anxiety and discomfort only emerge through conversation with others and are neglected when alone. While expressing emotional vulnerability to others is against stereotypical male stoicism, it makes his emotions appear fake by only emerging when questioned and not being shown to the player internally. This makes it appear as if Simon has emotional outbursts instead of processing them when alone, countering the reading of him being emotionally vulnerable.

This inconsistent display of emotions through outbursts becomes problematic when Simon's treatment of Catherine and female bodies is considered. First, Simon does not have a male body, both bodies he occupies in diving suits have female corpses within them. He never addresses the difference in shape nor how he feels about controlling them as corpses or as women. Simon's normalcy in inhabiting these bodies could enable a transgender reading of his character but I believe an ironic lack of somatophobia emerges in Simon's lack of considering his proximity to the dead. Simon **is** the corpse, he cannot avoid the decay most are uncomfortable with, and his feeling of discomfort should be compounded by embodying the corpse. This highlights a lack of vulnerability and enforces stereotypical stoicism to an extreme degree. However, it also disregards the female body itself. Simon's lack of addressing his new body supposes that the male persona is enough of an indicator to assume a male form. It makes the reveal of the female bodies nothing but a cheap shock to the player who would otherwise assume a default male body as they are never addressed further.

Second, Catherine has no autonomy despite being the story's driving character because Simon would progress nowhere if he had not met and agreed to help her. Catherine's goals and desires motivate Simon to advance, but Simon is the only one with true autonomy because he is able-bodied. Catherine is uploaded into his Omnitool which he uses to open doors and communicate with her, if Simon refuses to do any action, Catherine is powerless to do otherwise. Therefore, she becomes a victim to his whims. Both the physical and mental feminine form appears to be treated like a tool for the male persona to dominate, highlighting potential metaphors of abuse or gender-based violence. I question if female players' feelings about such a reading were considered or if gender itself was considered in these relationships between character and body. Regardless of the intent behind treating the feminine form this way, I believe it highlights phallogocentrism in acknowledging the masculine overriding unacknowledged femininity (Haraway, 1991, p. 7).

Regarding the cyborg body, it appears to be treated negatively through somatophobia. The rogue artificial intelligence attempting to keep humanity alive uses modified technological and organic sludge to interface between the two. This then overrides failing organic parts and provides mechanical lifelines in addition to making scans implanted in mechanical bodies believe they are human. They are treated as enemies, obstacles, or lost souls consistently throughout the game. This establishes the cyborg body as lesser than the human because Simon can kill them on his way to launching the satellite despite it also being founded on a false sense of humanity through simulation. This treatment of the cyborg is like the transgender body's paradoxical dehumanisation, further justifying its use as a metaphor which can be re-contextualised.

Condensing this examination into my philosophy, it can be seen how my reading of *SOMA* opposes my beliefs of critically examining the gender binary as a means of bettering transgender representation.

- Simon exhibits stereotypically masculine traits in an inconsistent manner that highlights his masculinity as harmful to others like Catherine through his superior autonomy and jurisdiction over life and death.
- Simon gets close to displaying emotional vulnerability which opposes stereotypical male stoicism and the strange lack of addressing the female body could enable a transgender reading. However, his inconsistent character traits and the game's treatment of the female form continue to reinforce problematic aspects of the norm instead of critiquing it through a transgender Simon.
- Simon does exhibit positive and negative traits such as philosophical introspection, motivation, anxiety, anger, and ignorance which affect the story and provide different opportunities for players to relate.
- I would argue that players will more likely align with Catherine's goals as she directly motivates Simon's goals. Simon is how those goals become attainable and so the player's control of him aligns these goals. Even when Simon's personal goal of discovering why he was awakened is answered, he still needs to assist Catherine. This personal goal could be relatable for one who wants to find their place in the world but when it falls away *SOMA* loses much of its personal problem which keeps it relatable.
- Simon does construct his identity autonomously. He doesn't consider his new bodies or their context, highlighting an interesting alignment with my beliefs. Simon believes he is not alive because he lacks the context he once lived in, yet he continues to try to find a new context and 'live'. He does not let the external define him unless he agrees with what it provides, highlighting his autonomy.
- In treating the cyborg body and female form negatively as sub-human and dominated respectively, the game's potential links to gender and transgender metaphors become negative. Instead of enabling an improved reading of a transgender experience, *SOMA* would reinforce problematic politics if my reading of its potential transgender metaphors were revealed. However, this would most likely not result in violence because the game would reinforce negative perceptions of the transgender body, thus aligning with current norms instead of disposing of them.

- *SOMA*'s writing and dialogue inform the player about the setting and characters in a compelling manner, but its simplistic mechanics serve as a vehicle to experience the story rather than extend metaphors. The normative horror and stealth genre fusion comes from the developer's prior games and so reinforces the formula which players are accustomed to. Thus, I don't believe there is reinforcement of a transgender metaphor unless one considers the mundaneness of the movement to be a metaphor for comfort in a woman's body. This reading would disrupt the norm and queer the naturalness of movement, but I believe the problematic treatment of the feminine form muddles this queer design reading.

Both Catalyst and Simon demonstrate different ways a character's narrative and mechanical design can change the way their respective game's central themes operate or feel for a player. Within my philosophy, it becomes clear that examining the gender and body of a character through the lens of gameplay can highlight how gender itself is treated as a part of character construction beyond surface-level relatability. Catalyst exhibits multiple properties through gameplay that highlight the importance of her gender beyond words in a biography and make her feel like a fully realised and positive example of transgender representation. However, Simon appears to be the locus for a larger issue surrounding the treatment of bodies and gender in *SOMA*. Regardless, when examined within my philosophy, both Catalyst and Simon exhibit properties I was not originally considering that still highlight the strength of being able to adapt the philosophy. Catalyst occupies an interesting position as positivity is drawn from 'meta' motivated play and she displays strength after transitioning instead of the struggles during it. Simon displays an unshakeable autonomy in trying to find a new context to living but not letting the new digital nature of living impact his persona.

In examining both case studies, a pattern would form within the use of my philosophy on Sunset Red. Unexpected phenomena would emerge from my examination of both mechanics and narrative within my development process. However, neither game includes the reveal of a transgender truth which still needs documentation and exploration.

Reflection/Conclusion

The process of developing my creative component and its documentation alongside my dissertation and philosophy has resulted in multiple changes to both over time. Initially, Sunset Red's concept centred around time manipulation mechanics before my research, but as I changed, so too did the story and characters. As I played *Celeste* and questioned why its positive representation was not more common, I wished to create my own. Sunset Red evolved into a personal story about the fear and guilt I experience being transgender which I wanted players and understand, but I began to question how I would make the player aware of transgender experiences.

Through my research, questioning queer representation and perception's ties to gender and normativity led to my questioning of other transgender characters in media and how said media operated. This led to the topics of politics and their metaphors, further leading to implanting metaphors within literature and games as a means of affecting the player. Finally, I considered what kind of characters the player would relate to and how I could make my own. With the research parallel to the development of Sunset Red, a set of considerations was beginning to form. These became the philosophy: a set of requirements I would use within my continued development to create a transgender character and game which would use my research to avoid the problems I discovered and justify my beliefs.

However, this questions if my iterative development process and the subsequent philosophy do enable critique of the gender binary. Additionally asking if it disrupts harmful practices that negatively represent the transgender body in video games. While Sunset Red and its protagonist do fit into the philosophy, the gameplay elements and usage of metaphor may be lacking. Yet, I acknowledge that the process of creating art does not lead to a perfect product nor would any video game perfectly fit into my philosophy because of subjective, qualitative analysis. This is evident through my selected case studies highlighting both positive and negative cases of fulfilling and disputing the philosophy respectively. I don't consider my development nor the philosophy itself a failure because of this, rather it highlights how subjectivity will ultimately leave something unaccounted for in an unexpected way and the philosophy will therefore never be truly perfect. Rather I position it as a tool one can use to consider where their construction of a transgender character may be harmful or positive.

To reflect on Sunset Red's development in more detail, it needs to be contextualised within my philosophy. Below is a condensed version of its analysis from Sunset Red's design document.

- While it could be argued Ms Red's depiction as a symbol of stereotypical femininity is harmful, I argue the use of symbolism establishes her femininity without questioning if the details of her performance are adequate or not. She appears to exhibit stereotypically feminine emotional response, but this trait is shared with her dead identity Mr White, indicating it belongs to the identity itself and not the gender. However, the anger she displays may be read as stereotypically masculine and could harm the perception of her transgender identity by making her violently male, but I present anger as a necessary negative trait for both characters in the story. Determining whether these facets are read as

stereotypes will largely depend on the player understanding their context through play.

- The story twists the dynamics of a stereotypical unhealthy heterosexual marriage into an unhealthy relationship with one's identity. This is due to similar negativity surrounding controlling relationships and the external view of transitioning as both concern external control of self-expression. Taking normative stereotypes and utilising them in a queer narrative recontextualises them and highlights how queer readings often aren't considered unless made obvious, despite their similarities to normative phenomena. This highlights the paradoxical nature of the gender binary's norms reinforcing accepted and discouraged readings despite their similar construction. Ms Red also learns autonomous identity construction to be free of the external associations of her traits. This makes the gender binary itself an antagonist which she overcomes because of its direct effect on her identity.
- Ms Red is rash, emotional and angry but also passionate, headstrong, and self-reflective. She begins the game flawed but grows to discard external limits on her identity and achieves self-actualisation through being humbled by her flaws. Her drive for freedom is the primary characteristic which I suspect most players will relate to regardless of her gender, but both positive and negative traits are also contextualised as isolated from gender to achieve the same effect. Thus, increasing the likelihood that a player relates to any of the traits.
- Ms Red's goal of freedom and the motives for her crime being unclear should increase the player's desire to reach the game's conclusion. Completion of the game means bringing catharsis for both Ms Red and the player through solving her problem and answering potential questions respectively. As the player progresses alongside Ms Red, their goals are aligned but with potentially different motivations with the intent of increasing relatability and empathy. However, the success of this intent relies on the player finding the gameplay or story compelling and this isn't guaranteed for a variety of reasons dependent on individual player mindsets.
- The plot itself concerns how Ms Red learns to autonomously craft her own identity and escape the guilt from the external associations of being transgender. She begins the game treating herself as the other due to internalized negative associations but incorporates parts of her past identity to craft the new self regardless of their gendered associations. Thus, she displays autonomous identity construction.
- The mental processes behind Ms Red's construction of identity are made manifest through the time manipulation mechanics utilising them as metaphors. Their non-linear use in puzzle solving highlights the back-and-forth process Ms Red undergoes in constructing her identity. I hope the dialogue reinforces this metaphor, but I believe it may not be read as queer or related to transgender identity due to how long the transgender truth remains covert. Ultimately, I believe it adds more weight to the mechanics by using an integral theme of identity construction even if it doesn't appear to be obviously queer. However, this covert nature further highlights how the paradoxical othering of the gender binary norm occurs since the story and mechanics can be recontextualised easily after the reveal of the

transgender truth.

- As mentioned above, the mental processes of identity construction emerge in gameplay mechanics and story, both directly influencing Ms Red's character traits. While normative design is more present than explicit queer design, I believe the recontextualising of normative design through a queer lens keeps the gameplay accommodating for normative players and their expectations. However, in antagonising normativity in the narrative and mechanics by moving left, I expect players to be surprised by such subversion while presenting queerness as the solution to the problem. This subverts queer-coding portraying queerness as negative and so Sunset Red begins to disrupt norms and becomes like the transgender body itself in utilising a queer lens.

Originally, there were problematic elements to my protagonist's characterisation that were unintentionally harmful and needed correction. This was due to Ms Red's motivation for freedom being the complete separation from her prior masculine identity. This supposed that her femininity was only an escape from external association and not autonomous, ironically returning to external readings of gendered traits. This became a stereotypical aversion to stereotype and was not the message I wished to convey and thus required correction. Her solution was rewritten to focus on autonomous identity construction by discarding external associations of traits. Ms Red considers all her traits isolated from external gendered associations to achieve her definition of feminine self. This highlights that even in creating my philosophy, I had not noticed I was accidentally perpetuating harmful ideals until a more careful examination of my work resulted in corrections.

I feel that the weakest part of Sunset Red is the use of metaphor within mechanics. The use of time manipulation mechanics to convey non-linear mental processing of queer identity emerges within the design but is not explicitly revealed in gameplay. Subsequently, this metaphor may not be read as queer because it doesn't strongly link to the transgender reveal in the conclusion. Thus, a player may be less likely to notice the links to identity formation in a transgender context.

I believe Sunset Red's story, the construction process of Ms Red and my philosophy have cyclically influenced each other throughout development, which results in a design that critiques the gender binary's normalcy. The philosophy itself proves it is capable of determining positive and negative phenomena which affect transgender character representation and can subsequently lead to improved representation through use. However, this is speaking from personal experience, but I believe continued use of the philosophy and refinement of Sunset Red will lead to improvements for both. This is evident through curbing the harm I accidentally perpetuated during my process. Likewise, the philosophy's use by other parties of writers and developers can further improve it and curb harmful representation if its use were to become widespread.

Therefore, the cyclical process of developing Sunset Red and my philosophy have strengthened both in their ability to critique and disrupt the cyclical harm of gender binary norms. Subsequently being able to positively affect transgender character representation and perception through a video game development philosophy.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Emotional climax dialogue interactions

Ms Red reaches a room with two switches that both need to be hit in quick succession to open the door to the exit. A pile of rubble sits near the door and a raised platform is between both switches. She doesn't have enough time to reach the switch no matter the mechanics used.
She begins to give up and monologues with panic increasing every few failed attempts.

Ms Red

Why can't I do this?

I MUST be missing something.

Th-this can't be the only thing here.

She refuses to cross the boundary to the left if the player tries to give up. Which produces this dialogue:

Ms Red

No, no I can't leave NOW.

Mr White reappears after enough failed attempts occur.

Mr White

You should have listened to me.
I told you your plans and heart would end up broken on the floor here!
Now you're stuck and can only go back.

Ms Red

Were you really trying to protect me?!
If that were true maybe you wouldn't just shout at me!
Or ignore me and my presence for so many years!

Mr White

All you do is listen to your heart and make mistakes because of it!
People saw I changed because of you!
That's why we're both here!

Ms Red

And you just expected me to be your reflection forever?!
Swallowed up by my own mind like you?
Stuck in your world while I wanted to be free?
Why couldn't I just be myself?!

[She slams the hammer into the ground near the rubble]

Why did you always need to compare us?!

[She slams the hammer again]

A crack opens up in the ground and it collapses. She falls in and Mr White stays floating beside the hole. Ms Red wakes up far below the hole, its far darker than before, a small amount of light comes from above. She now needs to progress vertically to move back to where she was before. As she progresses, the light gets brighter along with the rooms, and she begins to monologue. At first, she isn't too serious, but she gets more introspective and considers the weight of her actions every room she climbs.

Ms Red

That...
That was close.
But I'm okay.
Just a little hurt.

[Pauses]

The…
Hammer? is fine at least.
Thankfully I can still get out with it.

A new room

I should have calmed down.
That was way closer than I think it was.
I'm lucky I can get out.

A new room

Maybe he was right.
At least a little.
Some patience meant I wouldn’t have argued with him,
Or made that hole.
[Pauses]
But it wouldn’t have changed the past.
I had to do it.
I couldn’t just pretend I was okay with how I was treated.
I took a stand rashly and for myself.

A new room

But I know I did a lot wrong.
I could have waited longer,
But it feels like that would have gotten me nowhere.
It had been years.
I didn’t want to waste any more.

A new room

So what if it was a big change.
It was for me,
For the real me.
Not the me that everyone had been blocked out from because of him.
I can't go back to that now.
I can't sacrifice myself like that.

A new room

But it’s still because of him I got out.
He was suffering too.
He didn’t understand it,
But he felt it.
And when I fought back it made sense,
But it was too late.

A new room

And without considering him,
I wouldn’t be here at all.
I can't make him the villain for not knowing.
I need him to know me now.
[Pauses]
I need him to know myself.

Ms Red escapes and emerges back on the side of the hole that Mr White was on.

Ms Red

You didn’t come down for me?

Mr White

There was no point.
I wouldn’t have been able to help you out.
You were stuck there just like you were before.
[Pauses]
Why are you so hell-bent on doing this?

Ms Red

[Calmly/slowly]
I’m just not you anymore.
I’m not made of those rules you internalized.
[pauses]
I had to break them, I had to break you.
[pauses]
Why were you so unhappy and angry with me?
You kept ignoring all the answers I had to all the questions you couldn’t answer about yourself.

Mr White

[Calm and solemn]
You ask like I have an answer you don’t know.
I was scared of losing the love others had for me.

Ms Red

But I’m not scared anymore.
I’m still a lot of what you were.
But I’m not you.

[Pauses]

I’m not a man anymore,

[Another pause]

I’m just me.

Mr white remains silent and fades away again. To the left of Ms Red is the raised platform from before, here the Green light can be found, unlocking Move on. Move on makes Ms Red a bright pink colour and using it splits her into herself and a more human looking Mr White who mirrors her movements. Here the player can make distance between them and hit the switches simultaneously. Allowing her to leave the room.
From this point, the puzzles increase in complexity and use all 3 hammer abilities in various ways to reach different solutions with each environmental mechanic. Soon she reaches a room with a large wall of light located three quarters to the right of the screen. When the player holds right and walks beyond it. The screen fades to white and the game ends.

Figure 2: Ability use flowchart.

