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## User Perception of Gender Studies in Video Games

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User Perception of Gender Portrayals in Video Games

by

Quinn T. Gienapp

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program

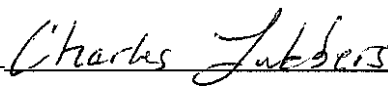
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Department of Honors  
University of South Dakota  
May 2024

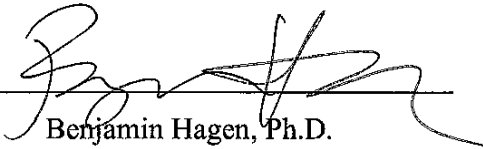
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## Abstract

Alongside the increase in video game popularity, a subclass of games was formed that offer very unconventional gaming experiences. These games offer different stories that differ greatly from games made on multi-million-dollar budgets. Many of these types of games exist on the fringes of the industry and portray LGBTQ+ themes through their writing or gameplay. One of these games uses the medium of video games to process their trauma by relaying their own story. The game "*He Fucked the Girl Out of Me*" is an autobiographical video game that highlights the story of the Author and their experiences with transitioning and participating in sex work. Their story discusses managing their self-esteem and trauma as well as figuring out how to adapt to an ever-changing identity. Themes of gender portrayal have been studied since the advent of video games. Games like this showcase a discussion about gender identity only it is about a real-life person rather than a character. That simple change in who the subject is makes the game much more personal and rarer to see discussed in a literary sense. The experience left me wondering how other players would react especially given its unconventional nature and strong subject matter. 279 user game reviewers were collected and analyzed for thematic elements occurring in response to the game. The results of the review analysis found that players were generally positive towards the experience and talked mainly about the content of the game, such as the story, as well as how they felt playing it. Several reviews also questioned the need for the story to be a game in the first place. This research is important as it shows how users may respond to stories from diverse audiences as well as how interactive narratives can convey lived experiences.

KEYWORDS: Trans, Video Games, Unconventional, User Perception, Video Game Studies, Review Analysis

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## **Introduction**

Storytelling has greatly changed throughout human history with different advances in technology changing the way we interact with stories. One such advancement is the internet which has allowed for instantaneous access to thousands of different stories with widely different subjects. Alongside this increased intake of different stories came the ability for people who liked to explore how they felt about the story to vocally discuss them with a larger range of people. The ability to critique is a skill that has been nurtured within human society since the times of the ancient Greeks who would often review each other's writing (Ford, 2002). With the advent of the internet, the number of stories society has access to has increased exponentially. Across these new stories, now available, are recorded experiences that describe the lives of people that others could never fully comprehend simply because they have separate lived experiences. These certain life experiences differ according to location, race, economic class, and even gender. These stories give readers the chance to better understand the lives of others as well as being an informative demonstration of life (Eastmond, 2007). This study hopes to discover, through observation of these types of stories, if a story can successfully reach out to someone emotionally and cause them to re-evaluate their prior feelings. More specifically, the research highlights an unconventional narrative video game that chronicles the life of a trans person who is also the author.

## **Literature Review**

### **Player Reception**

Video games exist as a form of storytelling that mirrors the narrative groundwork of other mediums including books, movies, or even plays (Egenfeldt, 2012). Games can also offer the

chance for interpretation and response similar to these other forms of storytelling albeit with potentially more elements to consider. This form of analysis was not commonly associated with games until the popularity of the internet made it so more people could express their feelings towards certain titles. The novel *Cybertext* (Aarseth, 1997) was one of the first to acknowledge, from a literary standpoint, the potential of video games to depict stories and compare how they capture the narrative interactivity of other classic forms of literature. From this potential also comes a unique response to a story told by a game as it asks how someone responded to a story and how all the elements of a game shaped their opinion.

The story of a game does not only exist within its text but in all the assets that form it as well. This gives way to more interpretive reactions that are constantly updated as a player progresses and encounters new elements. This can be compared to how movies are analyzed on elements such as lighting and cinematography rather than what is solely said in the work. Knowing the genre further assists in analyzing a video game as this sets a groundwork for how the narrative will be presented and generally how a player will interact with the game. A fantasy setting tells us that will interact with elements similar to that of fairy tales while a first-person shooter tells us we will be solving most problems through the barrel of a gun.

## **Stereotypes in Video Games**

### ***Male and Female Representation***

Games with this subject matter have the power to make members of the LGBTQ+ feel seen or help people better understand who they are (Brooks, 2021). With this in mind, it is important to find what gender studies have already been conducted with video games as well as how, historically, gender has been represented in games. This starts with basic male and female

roles as with the creation of the medium, video games were often perceived as a male-dominated market base even by those as young as kindergartners (Wilder, 1985). As such, this belief led to blatant segmentation between males and females in the games. The first type of gender studies widely done was noting the difference behind the design processes of male and female game characters. Early video games did not often consider the design of women in characters when compared to their male counterparts and instead were almost mirrored images of male characters. A 2019 article reviewed the gender stereotypes that plagued the industry in its early years including female character design (Bristol, 2019). These stereotypes also persisted in how games were marketed with many “girl video games” consisting of activities that would be traditionally female-oriented such as cooking, dress-up, or helping with animals. The rise of female-oriented video games often aligned with gender stereotypes of the time as the industry did not see females as a predominant market. These games included stereotypical activities such as cooking, grooming, pet care, and other female-coded activities while the game sported pink packaging.

These gender trends within the industry were cultivated from the belief that video games were a hobby geared more toward boys (Drenten, 2019). Older studies conducted in the 90s indicated that boys were the demographic who were more often gifted games and more likely to play them extensively. (Colewell, 1995). With the turn of the millennium, the video game industry continued its trend of heavily advertising gender stereotypes. Early 2000s video game marketing was plagued with images of hyper-violent masculine men and slim “sexy” female characters both greatly exaggerating their respective genders (Dill, 2007).

Negative gender representation has been a prevalent issue within video games but that is not to say that there have not been any improvements. Since 2006, the industry has seen fewer egregious depictions of female characters (Lynch, Tompkins, 2016). This could be due in part to



the growing audience of female gamers as well as female developers. The 2010s would also see the release of titles starring a variety of strong female leads. Some of these games include *The Last of Us* (2013), *Life is Strange* (2015), and *Celeste* (2017). Each of these titles depicted female characters which contrasts how female characters were portrayed in the early years of the industry. The portrayal of women within video games has improved over time with the removal of prominent gender stereotypes and moving past the belief that males only play video games.

This correlates with, research revealing that 45% of gamers classify as female proving against the stigma (Kuss, 2022). Despite this evidence, the industry is still challenged by lingering stereotypes and a toxic culture present in certain player communities. Challenging this form of gender perception is also a rise in female developers who are slowly closing the gender gap that has prevailed in game development since its inception (Styhre, 2016). These factors have led to the continued push towards video games becoming all-inclusive and gamers being no longer designated to one identity.

### ***LGBTQ+ Representation***

As games became more widely used as an avenue to tell stories, topics of LGBTQ+ slowly began to populate certain titles going as far back as the 1980s being the first source of representation within the medium. Early LGBTQ+ games would often use popular genres of the time, such as point-and-click, and tweak them to center around a queer narrative. These narratives were often personal experiences or about larger events unfolding at the time. The earliest example of such a game is *Caper in the Castro* (1989) which centered around a queer noir-narrative set in the LGBT-friendly Castro Street in San Francisco. The game was made in response to the ongoing AIDS epidemic with all the proceeds earned going toward helping

victims. (Ruberg, 2022) This is an example of an explicitly queer narrative that has been highlighted for its bold subject matter and historical significance but there exist other titles that have been heavily analyzed even without clear signs of LGBTQ+ content.

In recent years, researchers have begun to apply a unique form of the queer lens to games that seemingly contain no queer text. The structure of some of these studies was heavily inspired by the literature *Between Men* (Sedgwick, 1985) which sought to explain how sexuality is a social construct that can be observed in popular literature. This sort of lens was used for a variety of games with the intent to find hidden queer meaning in specific characters or even gameplay mechanics. Some examples presented were how *Tetris* can inspire intimacy, how *Miss Pacman* could be viewed as the first trans character in games, and how *Portal* could have representations of a same-sex relationship. (Ruberg, 2019). This form of research does not claim that these ideas were present when the games were being developed; instead, that is how they could be perceived.

The progression of queer representation in video games in the early 2000s consisted of small “treats” for players or hidden subtexts within its writing. One could call this progressive for its time but still left much to be desired in terms of positive representation. In her book *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw gives examples of early queer reps in the 2000s and how insubstantial they are compared to modern sensibilities. *Fable 2* was noted for allowing players to marry same-sex characters but there was little substance to this decision as it acted the same as a heterosexual relationship. The game would also allow the player to dress in drag which would cause some NPCs to be disgusted at your presence. The video game franchise, *Mass Effect* is also notable for having same-sex relationships but is similar to *Fable* as these relationships are surface value only showing players one intimate scene and flavor text to go with their choice in a

partner. (Shaw, 2015). Past the early 2000s, queer representation in gaming began to grow at a more exponential rate including a wider range of different sexualities and more balance between the types of representation present (Utsch, 2017). The 2010s would see a consistent rise in these representations with more cases of explicit representation rather than implicit ones. The trend also revealed how the RPG genre is the genre most likely to house these types of representations which falls in line with where queer representation was found in older video games.

As queer reps continued to become more prominent within the AAA game space, the 2010s would also see a large influx of independent queer games. A reason for this is the increased accessibility of game-making tool kits such as *RPG Maker* and *Twine*. These game engines give users tools to allow for the creation of simple designed games. The tools in question are a series of pre-made assets that users can use and modify in any way they see fit. These engines give those with little knowledge of game development the chance to make a game of their own. As a result, these types of game engines have been host to many different types of queer video games given their general push towards telling a story rather than delivering complex mechanics (Braganca, 2016). Many of these titles are made to be free for those who wish to experience them with the option to donate if a player desires. Some of these indie games, such as *Quing's Quest VII* (2014), were made in response to the misogyny and transphobia present in the industry by making fun of people who hold these beliefs while also including more positive queer characters. The space for games like this has continued to grow from the release of free game-making software slowly making up for the lack of representation that gaming suffered with for so long. The subject of this paper aims to analyze the reception of one such game like this.

### ***Representation in Game***

The story highlighted in this paper is an independent video game called *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* (2022; HFGOM). This is the latest game made by Taylor McCue in a series of games chronicling and examining their life as a trans person and trans experiences overall. This game reflects on the author's experience living as a trans person in the 2000s and includes serious and important topics such as depression and sexual assault. As a non-trans person, after experiencing my first playthrough of the game I felt I came to understand better the emotions behind the hardships and joys that come with being trans. Simply engaging in a story does in no way mean I can fully understand what it is like to be trans but it made me more sympathetic as I was oblivious to what trans people may have to go through to live how they want. Different stories make people react in different ways and not everyone will react in the same way I did. One of the goals of this research is to analyze the reaction users had to this unconventional video game using the context of secondary literature on more obscure video games. The goal will also be achieved by examining what studies have been conducted within the games industry about how gender and sexuality have historically been portrayed. This will be accomplished by collecting reviews for the game found on different websites that host user reviews. Each review will then be individually examined and categorized in a variety of ways that relate to reviewers' thoughts on the game as well as what type of language they used.

Since the formation of the video game industry, fringe titles have existed that are hardly noticed outside of those who seek them. With the number of titles being published increasing every year, it is to be expected that certain games will not be noticed by a larger audience. Within this area of obscurity, there exists a culture of artists who go beyond the boundaries of what a game can be. These developers can tell unconventional stories without having to answer

to shareholders or worry about making a profit. Within this culture of games, a large portion of the titles include topics of LGBTQ+ or have the developers themselves adapting their life stories within the medium. Taylor McCue's HFGOM is a title that is indicative of this subclass of video games and is a harrowing experience within the genre.

HFGOM is a game that recounts McCue's life in the 2000s and their struggles with transitioning, sex work, and how they felt about themselves and others around them. A glaring reason this game is not talked about more, besides its emotional title, is its sensitive content. Before you begin playing, you are offered a list of trigger warnings some of which include "nudity, rape, transphobia, and body dysmorphia." These subjects can be extremely difficult for some people, leading to a less active discussion of titles that include these topics. With how slow it is to respond to societal changes; the video game industry has not seen many examples of representing heavy subjects related to LGBTQ+ experiences. Numerous titles attempt to approach heavy subjects with many of the popular subject matters often being about war, depression, or loss and grief. Even when a title has these ideas as a subject matter they may not always be handled in the best way. HFGOM as an experience does not hold back on displaying its harsh topics by directly telling players what had happened to the author. It is a game that manages to talk about so much despite its 40 to 50-minute playtime.

HFGOM follows the author, Taylor McCue, called Ann in the game, as they navigate a very formative time during their college years. The player controls a little ghost avatar which is how McCue has chosen to represent themselves. The ghost avatar may tie into the game's narrative with Ann not being comfortable in their skin and struggling to relate to others emotionally. The gameplay is minimal with the player being asked to only move around with the arrow keys and respond to certain text-based options with the A button. The game, at times,

demands you to respond to a piece of dialogue by making you choose between several options only to tell you that you truly had no choice in the manner. There are several scenarios where a choice does affect the outcome of a scenario and reveals more about Ann's mental state and how they view relationships. The game's look is heavily inspired by retro Gameboy graphics with the entire game adopting a simple pixel look reminiscent of older games. With this limited graphic style, Taylor was able to create unique sprite work and color patterns that showcase the intense emotions described in the story. Often, characters are made to look deformed as a way to embody the description of a feeling or action. Another important aspect of this game is that the game is free to download with no profits being made from it. This is due to McCue wanting full control over how they tell their story and giving anyone the chance to hear it.

The story starts with Ann recounting the times they told their "friends" about their horrible time with sex work. The game's unique pixel style is showcased with each of the "friends" bodies contorting to their emotions like lust, disapproval, or hate. The dialogue shows the negative reaction some people have towards the lives of trans people and sex workers alike with the line "He developed an erection while listening to me" being especially harrowing. When Ann was 19 and beginning to transition into a woman, the cost of living and estrogen were extremely high and they could not pay for both without sacrificing the other. To help them pay for the estrogen, Sally, a fellow trans woman, and Ann's love interest, suggests that they should try courting older men like her, something Ann reluctantly agrees to try.

From here the game has you navigating the sexual experience Ann had with a much older man and the fallout of doing so. You see firsthand the raw emotions from such a traumatic experience and how these feelings persisted even years after this experience. This is prevalent within the few diverging choices in the game revealing Ann's complicated feelings about being

affectionate even with those she has feelings for. The story then describes feelings of gender dysphoria, social anxiety, and extreme self-esteem issues. Ann makes it apparent that they are in no way discounting sex workers as she claims there is a lot of freedom to come from such lines of work. Instead, the game is a way to help process this trauma while also bringing to light how trans people are viewed within certain communities both on and offline.

It has been shown that representation is something video games have struggled with since their inception. Improvements have been made, primarily in the indie game field, that showcase meaningful representation allowing more players to be seen within the medium and removing the stereotypes that video games are only a boy's hobby. This improved inclusion also leads to an increased number of titles that discuss LGBTQ+ topics leading to more variety in narrative in games. This updated variety means that new people will experience these topics through the lens of a video game for the first time. These research questions form the basis for identifying how people respond to these types of video games.

**R1:** How do players respond to games that contain marginalized identities?

**R2:** What are the common themes of the reviews towards games with LGBTQ+ representation?

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

All user reviews (279) were pulled from the websites *Steam* and *Backloggd* from users who have played or have claimed to have played HFGOM. These websites were chosen based on their popularity and the large variety of users. The two sources differ widely in the number of users and demographics. Steam alone includes 120 million active monthly users. Steam is not

solely a review site as it is foremost a digital storefront where users can buy games. The service encourages users to compose reviews for games they own through a myriad of different interfaces. Backlogg'd is primarily a review and catalog website consisting of 12 million user ratings and over a million written user reviews. The site has a major emphasis on interacting with reviews whether it be writing your own or reading and rating other reviews.

To help with the analysis process, themes were created that represented aspects of each review. Many of the qualities of a traditional review can be boiled down to whether they like it or not. While the indicator for positive and negative reviews is in place, the code words are also used to highlight what specific parts of the game are mentioned in the writing. These code words, coupled with the listing of the tone on specific reviews help to efficiently identify the contents of each review. This then allowed seamless research to be done on what the general feelings of the game were and what aspects of it users talked about the most.

This coding system was heavily inspired by research conducted to classify different types of reviews and how games can be viewed through a variety of critical lenses (Zegal, 2009). This article is constructed with the intent to better understand the importance reviews have within the medium of video games and how they are most commonly written. The article's main focus is on the quality and accessibility of "expert reviews". These expert reviewers write for various media outlets while other types of reviews, such as customer reviews on Amazon or other consumer websites, could be considered "amateur". This is mentioned as very few media outlets have covered HFGOM due to its obscurity and subject matter, meaning all of the reviews that were collected and analyzed can be considered amateur reviews. Thus, the quality of each review varies wildly.



Before explaining the review themes, it is important to consider the general mindset that goes into video game reviews. Reviews are primarily designed to inform players if a product is worth their time and money. Official games journalism emphasizes concise highlights of what is good or bad about a game and usually ends their reviews with specific recommendations to play the game or not.

The development of online spaces, such as *Backlogg'd*, where anyone can critique a piece of media has led to a divergence from more traditional review journalism. These spaces are often composed of people who understand a fair amount about the pop culture they are referring to even rivaling the words of so-called “expert reviewers”(Kammer, 2015). This has become more apparent as these review sites increase in popularity and offer more thoughtful analysis of games that contain less traditional content such as HFGOM.

### **Grounded Theory**

The basis for the following qualifiers and research data utilizes the Grounded Theory (Glasser,1998) approach which also influenced how the data was acquired. This theory of research was chosen due to each review having been pulled from the websites where they were posted. This methodology allows for a deeper analysis of each review collected as well as the possibility of noticing multiple trends throughout the data. Simple in nature, Grounded Theory gives way to streamlining a data set that is easier to understand and leaves room to consider each data entry as stated in. Given the subject of this research is a very human story, it is important to consider the human responses as they are. Associating too much terminology with each of the reviews could potentially lead to losing focus on what was said in the reviews in favor of a more numbers-based approach.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

The first quality of a review that was observed was what the reviewer's basic thoughts on the game were and whether they would recommend it. This quality was divided into three potential types of responses. *Positive* where the user had a good experience, *Negative* where the user had a bad experience, and *Neutral* where the user gives no clear sign if they enjoyed it or not. After the initial thoughts of the game were recorded, each review was looked at more in-depth to find the specific words used to describe a user's experience with the game.

It's one thing for someone to say if they liked a game or not but to specifically look at what aspects of the game users talk about allows for a better understanding of what resonates most with players and what players might focus on the most while playing. From here, to further analyze each review, themes were created and divided into seven different codes that helped describe the content of the review. It is important to note that a review can consist of more than one of these codes depending on what is discussed.

### *Experience*

The theme *Experience* refers to when the reviewer explains how they related to the game in some way. The story's focus on different forms of trauma and mental health issues was the source of many of these themes with users relaying how they went through trauma themselves. It is a trans narrative as well, which led to some talk of feeling represented or of the reviewer's own experience with trans people. Example: "*i don't even know what to say. edit: as a trans person, a lot of the desperation hit home. it's a raw and deeply upsetting game, but i think it's something a lot of people should play -- trans or not.*"

### ***Content***

The theme *Content* has the reviewer talking about the non-player-controlled elements of the game. These elements can range from the graphics, the story itself, or even directly quoting dialogue from the writing. For this study, *Content* is an overview of the product on hand, which is the basis for many of the reviews. Example:

*-Do not go into this game without reading the content warnings and being aware that the content may be difficult to get through!- Part documentary full of real-world images made into Game Boy screens, part fictionalized telling with out-of-body experiences and dreamlike environments, but all done in an artful and sincere way. This game may not be for everyone, but it's impossible to say that playing through its story won't give insight into some of the most genuine struggles a trans person could face when the world makes it practically impossible for them to just survive as themselves.*

### ***Feeling***

The theme *Feeling* is when a reviewer describes an emotion they had while playing the game. While similar to relaying personal experiences, this theme only looks at specific emotions users potentially could have had. This theme would also apply to reviews that described certain actions that users took that were affected by emotions. Example: *“I don’t know if there’s much I could say that the other reviews here haven’t already said. I genuinely felt a little sick playing through this, which goes to show just how poignant it all was. Fuck Man”*

### ***Gameplay***

*Gameplay* is when a reviewer talks about aspects of how the game is played. This mainly pertains to how players physically interact with the game and how it is generally

designed. This theme looks at the title through the lens of how games are typically analyzed, through their gameplay. Problems that occur such as control issues, some aspects of the game that make it physically hard to play, and game issues, such as glitches, are also included under this theme. Example: *“i was enjoying this (even though my hands were getting sore with the clunky controls) but then my tab accidentally got closed and i was too far in to start again because it was a pretty slow burn. so, sad i never got to finish this but i did like what i got to read. the graphics were very effective.”*

### ***Author***

The theme *Author* has the user give some sort of comment about the creator of the game. The comment in question can be directed solely at the creator and can range from giving their opinion on the creator's life story or even simply thanking them. Example:

*“He fucked the girl out of me is an autobiographical game which affected me deeply. Not only as a game, but across all media. A really personal story about the life of a trans woman who was severely traumatized by sex work. As a straight cis male I really appreciate getting a glimpse into a reality of life that is so far away from my personal one. It is so important that projects like this exist. Because I don't think most people have someone in their life who could tell them about such issues. I won't presume to say I can relate to the author's feelings. I just want to thank her for giving me a glimpse into her inner life and hope that this game has helped her to further process her experiences. Thank you.”*

This quote was chosen not only for its summation of the *Author* theme but also for its example of the emotional writing present in a number of the reviews. It is an example of how the LGBTQ+ narrative had an impact on someone who does not identify as queer.

### ***Humorous***

The theme *Humorous* includes reviews that contain some manner of writing that can be perceived as the user making a joke. Example: “*Wait just one damn minute, this isn't Pac-Man!*”

### ***Miscellaneous***

The theme *Miscellaneous* consists of reviews that do not contain any other themes. These reviews are consistently short, often only containing a little more than 10 words that offer the users quick thoughts on the game. Example: “*I feel like I shouldn't say anything about this game, but I would recommend playing it.*”

### **Quantitative Results**

As noted in Figure 1, the vast majority of the 279 reviews collected, consisted of positive language, nearly a fourth of the reviews used neutral language, and the remaining were negative. Some of the most glowing reviews for the game consisted of many different review codes as passionate reviewers talked about almost every aspect of the game. Neutral reviews were listed as such due to the vagueness of their writing which did not immediately clarify what their general thoughts on the game were. Specific codes in the review were not taken into account as this data only looks if there is positive language or not. The use of specific online terminology in some neutral reviews could be considered positive given their use but were not listed as such because of their overall vagueness. Negative reviews, while not as frequent, used more aggressive language. A portion of negative reviews listed legitimate issues with how a player could interact with the game and the contents of its story. A few of these complaints questioned why HFGOM needed to be a game instead of some other form of visual media. Given its short

length and limited controls, some users felt the story might have been more impactful in another medium. The remaining reviews consisted of transphobic language or humorous jabs directed at the aspects of the story and the author.

As noted in Figure 2, the largest category of reviews (132, 47%) talked about the specific *content* that appeared in the game. Most often it was discussing the story and serious topics of the game, which was expected. A study shows that Steam reviews that when in-depth about game narratives were more regularly seen as helpful (Eberhard, 2018) Given that the story is the primary focus of the game, reviews would want to include it in their writing to be considered more helpful for readers. Many of the responses in this category mentioned the story and the heavy subjects included. Users would often give trigger warnings to either explain concepts in the game or prevent people from playing the game without any prior knowledge.

The theme *Feeling* was the second most used theme, with many reviewers giving their initial or long-lasting feelings about the game many of which describe it as a harrowing experience that impacted them in some way. Reviews that talked about the author, were often thanking them for having the courage to speak about their life or wishing them the very best. *Gameplay* was not brought up nearly as much as other categories given the game's limited interactivity. When it was brought up it was mostly done to discuss how limited the controls were or the game's length. The *Experience* theme was brought up with reviewers when they felt a connection or related to the events in the story. Many of these reviewers who had this theme are members of the LGBTQ+ and relayed their own stories of struggling with their identities and coming out to others. Even reviewers that are not a part of this group, related to the topic of how we view ourselves and toxic relationships. *Humorous* writing was mainly used to belittle the game and the trans-theming around it. There are a few reviews that only consisted of jokes such

as “not as good as Mario” that did not necessarily provoke a negative response and instead were listed as neutral. The reviews with no previous codes were listed as *Misc.* and consisted of a few words describing a reaction or a call for other people to play the game.

The reviews collected were a mixture of these different types of review styles. Some users emphasize whether it is worth experiencing or not and whether the medium of video games is being put to good use. Other reviewers, however, instead of giving their recommendations talked about their experiences and looked critically at the story and artistry of the game. Players would analyze the game in the same manner that movies and books are critically looked at. It calls into question what sort of review style best fits this type of game as its unconventional nature makes it more difficult to review as you would a simple product. The divergence in review types stems from the fact that some reviewers could not review it as something to be played but instead as something to be observed same as you would a piece of art in a gallery. Some reviewers opted out of giving a rating for the game as a result of them recognizing how untraditional of an experience it was: “honestly it kinda seems impossible to write a review for a game like this, it even feels wrong to give it a rating because it feels like im rating someone's life suffering, but i guess what i have to do is just congratulate and thank the dev for getting their story out there.”

Another fact to consider when looking at the divergence of types of reviews and feelings about HFGOM is its LGBTQ+ representation. The medium of video games, as young as it is, does not have the long history of LGBTQ+ representation that other forms of storytelling have. Specifically, titles that house queer narratives are a rarer form of representation within video games. These titles are often called indie games and can consist of smaller budgets or are passion projects from single-person developers and would be predominantly played by those in queer

communities. There are a few cases where these types of narratives break into the mainstream, the game *Gone Home* (2013) being one of the biggest examples (Shaw, 2016). The highlight and feedback HFGOM have gotten, show that these types of games no longer exist entirely on the fringe. Online services such as Steam and Itch.io have allowed these types of games to reach a wider audience for better and for worse. With a larger audience, there comes the inevitable negativity brought by users who do not handle the content of the game maturely or are hostile towards what is being represented. The game being free to play generates a wider audience which increases the potential for such an event occurring since the bar for entry is extremely low.

### Discussion

The data and analysis conducted from this research resulted in answers to the previously stated research questions. RQ1 asks how users responded to games that contained marginalized identities which is the main subject of HFGOM and what the narrative circles around. Looking at the reception, the data revealed that the game was well-received with 200 (72.2%) of the 279 reviews using words that praised many aspects of the game. Users responded favorably to its unconventional subject matter with words such as “brave” and “eye-opening” used to describe it. The discussion of the game was centered around the powerful themes the narrative presented and its honest trans representation. A surprising result of the discussion stemmed from the large number of reviews that talked directly about the author with it being the third largest theme at 72 reviews (25.8%) out of the 279 collected.

These users were willing to respond to the author’s story on a personal level revealing a different form of discussion within gaming. The *author* theme trumping over *gameplay* shows



that there are players who are willing to analyze video games outside of the traditional ways the medium has been interacted with. Titles like HFGOM have the potential for players to relate to the experiences of a creator who uses the medium as a form of artistic expression. This form of analysis does not exist as frequently within the more popular AAA game space as game studios can consist of hundreds of employees resulting in a non-singular vision. A smaller or single-person team often leads to games that contain elements that relate to the creator's own life similar to how HFGOM presents its narrative.

The responses in the data also answer RQ2 which asks how games with LGBTQ+ themes are generally reviewed. The response to LGBTQ+ video games correlates with the improving gender portrayals in the medium. Early forms of queer representation were met with very little feedback as their titles were not at the forefront of game discussion due to their fringe status and general obscurity. As the medium grew, this discussion would shift to the poor representation found in larger titles that used stereotypes of queer people. AAA titles would use queer characters as set dressing or as a gameplay mechanic, such as same-sex marriage in games, rather than including narratives that centered around LGBTQ+ identity. The bereftness of this type of representation in games is one of the leading discussions in the reviews for HFGOM and other similar titles.

The intensely honest and intimate setup for the story resulted in a lot of emotional responses from players with *Feelings* being mentioned in 126 (45%) of the 279 reviews collected. These types of reviews refer to the emotions players had while playing the game with many of them being very descriptive of their thoughts. The reviews contain words and phrases that match the intensity of the game with talk of players feeling sick or sad being a common mention. Some players used the review space to not only discuss the game but also relay their

own experiences with LGBTQ+. Users who discussed the game in this manner viewed the title as an informative view into the life of a trans person while others were elated to find representation in video games. An excerpt from one of the reviews collected sums up this form of discussion:

Firstly I'm openly reflecting upon this game so that people know that if you care about LGBT autobiographical trauma games this is a very significant one to get to. My guess is that if you follow LGBT people, including me, you're going to see this on a lot of 'end of year' lists. Now one thing I want to point out that is interesting is that due to how emotionally affecting this is, most people have gone on to speak about how it made them cry or reflect their own experiences. Even from people on here actually known for usually writing more erudite reflections. This speaks to the power of its performance, but I'll be the one to highlight how.

The emotions present in the reviews match how the game emotionally presents itself revealing the lack of a discussion towards more traditional game topics such as gameplay mechanics or graphics.

Up until now, it has been said how unconventional HFGOM is as a game compared to the majority of what the medium holds. This is due in part to how it exists as a form of artistic expression that challenges many the norms set by the gaming industry. Outside of the topics present, HFGOM does not exist as a game to be enjoyed in the traditional sense but rather instead as a harrowing short story you would sit down to read. The limited gameplay functions of the game add to this comparison, as the narrative does not call for you to complete bombastic actions but instead to bear witness to an author opening up their soul. HFGOM reveals the different roles video games can serve outside of being a means of entertainment and instead exist as a source of artistic expression. Artists use all manner of outlets to let loose their emotions as a

means to understand themselves better and create something unique to them within their chosen medium(Hospers, 1971). Taylor McCue used their artistic expression to create a piece of art wholly unique to themselves and showcase how other creators can use video games to tell their own stories as well. HFGOM reveals the viability of games to tell queer stories and have people respond in a meaningful way that matches the emotional maturity of the game.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

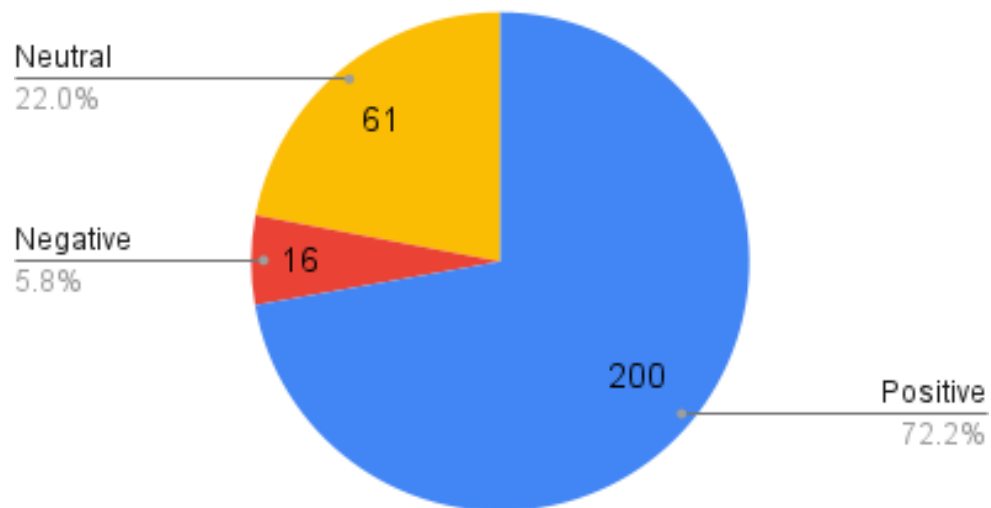
Regarding the data collected, there is potential to include additional reviews as, since the collection, additional reviews have been added to the sources that were used. There is also the potential to add a new source with the website *Itch.io*, which has many user responses and was the site where the game was originally posted. Additional data would strengthen the information presented as well as potentially lead to additional themes. Some of these themes would include whether a reviewer would, in writing, recommend the game or not. Another measurement that could be included is the ratio of players that identified as LGBTQ+ or not. This data would reveal exactly what type of audience this game is reaching and resonating with though it would take a lot of work to collect this information.

HFGOM was the main subject for this research paper and is what inspired the research in the first place, as a result, this was the main video game talked about with similar titles only briefly mentioned. An extension of this paper would include a deeper discussion of these other titles and what unique elements they include. This would also be a further analysis of more modern forms of gender representation in video games.

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**Appendix A: Tables and Figures****Figure 1: Feelings****Figure 2: Themes/Codes**