Developing A Video Game with Gender Euphoria Themes: A Postmortem of *Rainborough*

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Abstract. This paper presents a postmortem of *Rainborough*, a video game prototype developed to explore how transgender gender euphoria themes can be implemented into game design and development. While studies on trans identities have often emphasized gender dysphoria, recent scholarship highlights gender euphoria as an important yet understudied phenomenon linked to affirmation, resilience, and well-being. Building on previous theoretical work, *Rainborough* was created by a team of queer and trans developers, incorporating lived experiences into its narrative and mechanics. The game combines simulation and interactive novel elements, with design choices that aim to foster expression, affirmation, and destigmatization. Using a postmortem approach, we reflect on the design and development process, examining what worked well, where challenges emerged, and what might be done differently. Our analysis contributes to designers and developers by demonstrating how the gender euphoria topic can be enacted into interactive media practice, and by offering insights for future designers and researchers interested in creating inclusive and affirming game experiences.

Keywords: Transgender Gender Euphoria · Gender-inclusive Design · Trans Game Studies.

1   Introduction

The mental states and lived experiences of transgender (or "*trans*"[3] for short) individuals have long been central to scholarship in minority psychology and gender studies, and, among these, the concept most frequently highlighted in mainstream discourse is *gender dysphoria* — the distress that arises from the incongruence between one's internal and external sense of gender [32,20,18,3]. As scholars in recent years have critiqued [1,21,7,2], this persistent focus on dysphoria has perpetuated prevailing discourses that associate trans identities primarily with suffering, trauma, and vulnerability, thereby reinforcing the narratives of hardship while leaving scant space for considering positive dimensions

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[3] In line with present best practice [30], we use *trans* to encompass any gender not assigned at birth .

of trans identities. Correlated, *gender euphoria* [4,31,10] is defined as the distinctive feeling of satisfaction or relief that emerges when one's gender identity and lived experience are in congruence, and has increasingly gained attention as an equally significant, though underexplored, phenomenon. Gender euphoria has been recognized as a key factor in supporting the well-being, mental health, and resilience of trans communities [4,10,16]. Like dysphoria, however, it is deeply idiosyncratic: individuals from diverse backgrounds experience and articulate it in varied ways. Because of its transformative role in shifting attention from negative to affirmative aspects of gendered experience of trans identities, scholars have begun to examine how gender euphoria manifests and what conditions may foster or evoke it [4,7,21,31].

To explore the practical application of the topic of gender euphoria and its potential to foster well-being within trans communities, we drew on our own perspectives and positionalities as queer and trans individuals to develop a video game prototype, *Rainborough*. This project incorporated themes of gender euphoria in game design, as identified in the previous study [21], seeking to address the underexplored field of design and development practices that engage with this concept in games and interactive media. The narrative and characters in *Rainborough* were written by trans members of our team, who grounded the storytelling in their lived trans experiences, with a focus on binary trans identities (i.e., trans feminine and trans masculine). Consistent with earlier scholarships [21,4,7], we recognize that gender euphoria is highly idiosyncratic; thus, our intent was not to create a universally euphoric experience for all trans identities through *Rainborough*. Rather, the goal was to examine the feasibility of applying the concept of gender euphoria to tangible practices in game development. By reflecting on the design and development of *Rainborough* through a postmortem lens, we aim to offer insights and possible guidance for future designers and developers interested in exploring gender euphoria topics in games and interactive media.

We propose a panel discussion featuring core developers who contributed to the creation of *Rainborough* to provide insights into the design and creation of the game. The discussion will be guided by a list of postmortem questions that critically examine what went right, what went wrong, and what can be done differently. We also plan to engage the audience by hosting a live question-and-answer session, allowing us to tailor the discussion to the audience's needs and interests. At the same time, to make these findings and lessons accessible to the audience who cannot attend the conference and for future reference, we have formulated this paper based on a preliminary study using a collective autoethnographic approach. The panel discussion and the preliminary study contribute to serious and applied game design for social good and inclusivity, as well as cast insights into the approach of critically examining the game development process.

2   Background and Related Work

To better situate our work for the reader, this section outlines key areas of related work that inform and contextualize the design and development of *Rainborough* and its postmortem. We begin by introducing scholarship at the intersection of game and trans gender studies, with a brief summary of emerging work on the concept of gender euphoria, which served as both the theoretical background and motivation for our project. We then highlight the game postmortem as a means of understanding and a form of reflective knowledge production that examines the design and development processes, which we adopt in this paper to analyze and share insights from our own creative practice.

2.1   Trans Game Studies

Video games, as a powerful interactive medium, provide players with opportunities to explore the digital characters, experiment with forms of representation and ways of expression, and engage with complex and dynamic mental experiences [26,15,9,37]. Such capacity has made video games a central site for examining how the digital realm intersects with discussions of identity. Scholarly reflection on these intersections has been situated within the paradigm of *queer game studies* [27,26], which investigates how games can challenge binary understandings of gender, engage with queer identities, and expand critical theory in the context of game design and analysis [17,28,6]. This paradigm critiques the marginalization of gender-diverse identities in mainstream games while foregrounding the new perspectives and methodologies that queer designers and players bring to both design and interpretation. Within this broader paradigm, *trans game studies* has emerged as a distinct and closely related strand, centering the lived experiences of trans groups as sources of reflection, critique, and creative innovation. Their work highlights the critiques of exploitative depictions of trans identities [20,22,15], supports of trans creators [29,5], and emphasizes design practices that foster comfort, affirmation, and recognition for trans audiences [21]. *Rainborough*, which we developed and presented, can thus be understood as part of this intellectual and creative lineage, informed by the commitment to designing game experiences that engage with and examine the possibilities of gender euphoria.

2.2   The Trans Gender Euphoria Concept

Within scholarships on fostering affirmative and positive experiences for trans communities, the concept of trans gender euphoria stands out as one of the most directly tied to trans identities and well-being. Previous works by Beischel et al. [7] and Skelton et al. [31] have been widely discussed in identifying and categorizing sources of gender euphoria, in which the former proposed three euphoria sources as external, internal, and social sources, while the latter expanded with four types, including self-reflection, healthcare outcomes, close relationships, and community support. Complementing these works, Austin et al. [4] theorized gender euphoria from the perspective of the process of gender euphoria generation,

which involves exposure to affirming antecedents, having an affirming thought, experiencing a positive emotion, and enjoying an enhanced quality of life. In terms of evaluation, Blacklock et al. [8] developed the *Gender Euphoria Scale* (GES), a protocol designed to measure euphoria among trans individuals. Additionally, the connection between gender euphoria and video games has also been explored. Liang et al. [21] developed a theoretical framework for gender euphoria game design themes by analyzing a series of existing games. This framework comprises thirteen themes in total: four related to design (elements controllable by designers), four concerning dynamics (emergent from player-game interaction), and five concerning experiences (arising from those dynamics). While Liang et al.'s work [21] provides a foundational framework for researchers and designers, it remains primarily situated at the level of analytical abstraction. Built on these perspectives, while aiming to take a step forward, our work on *Rainborough* extends this trajectory by examining how such themes can be implemented within the concrete practices of game development.

2.3   Game Postmortem

In engineering, a postmortem is often conducted to analyze a past incident, outage, or project failure, with the purpose of identifying root causes, drawing lessons learned, and identifying actionable items to prevent recurrence and improve processes. This activity is adopted by game developers to document and summarize the positive and negative aspects of the development process. Game postmortems do not have a strict structure; instead, game developers can add or remove sections as needed. For example, for games that are under continuous development, developers often include sections on their next steps and describe the plan for future development.

The history of game postmortems can be traced chronologically through several formats and platforms. One of the earliest media for developers to publish effective articles on their projects is Gamasutra, which was launched in 1997 and was later renamed Game Developer in 2021. Around the same time, Game Developer magazine established a recurring print column featuring structured postmortems with a consistent "5 wrongs, 5 rights" format, which remained influential until the magazine ceased publication in 2013 due to the decline of print media. Beyond print and editorial blogs, postmortems also became a significant part of game industry conferences, particularly the Game Developers Conference (GDC), where developers presented their reflections live, many of which were later made available online as recorded talks or YouTube playlists. In 2018, the indie-focused platform *Itch.io* introduced a dedicated postmortem tag in its blog section, further broadening access to these developer reflections. Collectively, these structured magazine columns, editorial blogs, live conference presentations, and tagged blog entries demonstrate that the evolution of game postmortems is a central mode of knowledge sharing in the field of game development.

Prior research on game postmortems has explored educational interventions, compared game development practices to those in software engineering, and

identified general patterns within the game development industry. Educational intervention studies show that postmortem reflections improve student learning, skill development, and peer learning [35,34,23]. Examining the game postmortem dataset in vocational training also provides insights into game pedagogy [12] Software engineering–oriented research contrasts games with traditional software engineering practices and catalogs domain-specific challenges (e.g., feature creep, scope, tooling) with proposed remedies [19,14,33]. Analyses of professional postmortem corpora have produced taxonomies and recommendations, emphasizing management challenges over technical issues, recurrent under-testing, and the causes of crunch [36,25,24,13].

Building on prior efforts in postmortem practice within the industry and scholarly analysis, our work contributes to empirical research by implementing postmortem analysis in the format of a panel presentation and a paper. We also contribute to the exploration of epistemology in academic games (defined as games used and developed within academic institutions for the generation, evaluation, or dissemination of knowledge) [11], as we generate knowledge from analyzing the process of creating the game.

3   The Game *Rainborough*

The game *Rainborough* was developed by a team of six developers over 11 weeks from May to August 2025, and released as a demo on the *Itch.io* platform. The game demo is accessed at `https://rainborough.itch.io/demo`.

Rainborough combines simulation with interactive novel mechanics, featuring gameplay in room customization (Fig. 1), town navigation (Fig. 2), social interaction (Fig. 3), and resource management (Fig. 4).

In *Rainborough*, players can expect a life-simulation experience that balances creative expression, relationship-building, and everyday survival. Core gameplay revolves around managing six key character stats: empathy, emotional control, manners, creativity, vitality, and strength, which are shaped and influenced by career choices, interactions, and activities. Players decorate and personalize their home, travel through the town to access new locations, and engage in dialogue with non-player characters (NPCs) whose relationships evolve depending on choices made. Careers such as barista, programmer, or floral designer influence stat growth and open new opportunities, while shopping, working, and social interactions require careful resource management.

Trans gender euphoria game design themes are enacted through game mechanics and narrative. The room customization system enables players to acquire, customize, and position furniture in the room, providing a space for players to express themselves (OFFER EXPRESSION theme). The trans identities of the characters in Rainborough are depicted with the intention to avoid stereotypical or objectified portrayals (DESTIGMATIZATION theme) and integrated into the in-game society as ordinary existence (DE-OTHERING theme). Throughout the player's exploration, these trans characters gradually share their experiences

Fig. 1. Room customization system where the player edits furniture, wall colors, and layout.

Fig. 2. Town navigation menu that allows the player to choose and travel to different city locations.
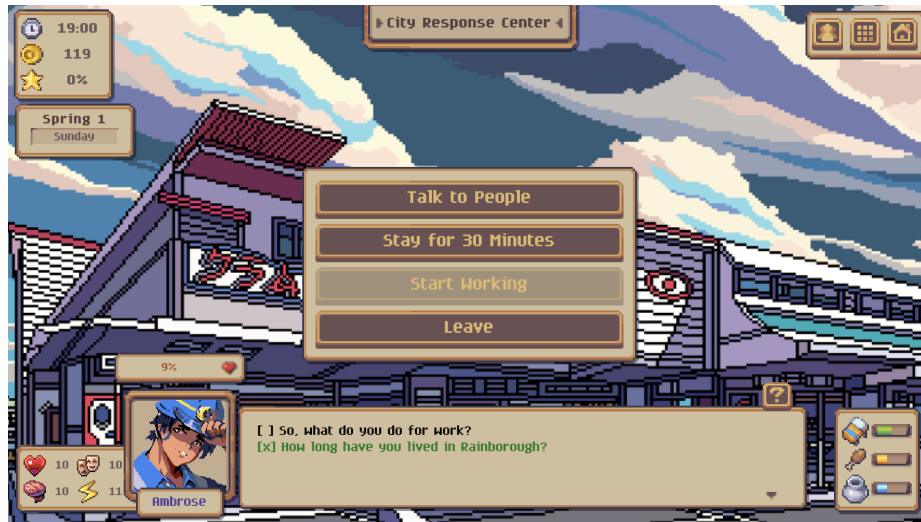
Fig. 3. Social interaction scene showing dialogue choices and relationship progression with NPCs.

Fig. 4. Shop interface where the player can purchase food and items to manage resources.

and stories candidly as close friends (SELF-DISCLOSURE theme), in which these stories were developed by trans writers drawing upon their own lived experiences.

4   Postmortem of *Rainborough*

4.1   What Went Right

All the game developers are currently studying in a game development program. We went through ideation to releasing a game demo on Itch.io in 11 weeks, thanks to the fact that every developer is a veteran in game development and has received formal production training in the field. The experience in game development projects contributes to a shared set of language (e.g., design pillars, worldbuilding) in communication, as well as a manageable and dynamic scope.

The timing and pacing of the development process make sense and avoid major burnouts. The majority of the development work took place during the summer break, when everyone has less workload compared to the academic year. While the dedication to the project is lower than that of a full-time job, it is also significantly more than the amount dedicated to a normal game jam or course assignment project. This has contributed to a steady pace in making progress on the development. Minor burnouts and crunch were unavoidable, but they were manageable.

We used lived experience as inspiration and motivation. Everyone on the core developer team has lived experience, either personally or closely, with the trans gender community. The game design process, particularly the main story and character development, is informed by these lived experiences. Additionally, the relatedness between team members and shared experiences recognized during the development meetings has fueled the motivation and synergy that contribute to high team morale in developing *Rainborough*.

Research-led game development has been proven to be a good and reliable source of ideation. The initiation of the project is to serve as a research instrument for testing and validating the trans gender euphoria game themes identified in an award-winning research article. It outlined designing themes under the Design, Dynamics, and Experience framework that contribute to the positive feelings of euphoric moments. These have later been used as the design guidelines in the development and creation of the game, providing a good, reliable foundation for streamlining the work distribution among writers.

We made compromises in cutting features to ensure completion, while also being stubborn in keeping the key features to demonstrate the research themes. Simulation games are hard to design and balance as they introduce dynamic and complex systems. A lot of the systems were simplified or

omitted in the released version. For example, we had expected to connect the home customization to serve as a bonus to the six stats. This would contribute to a long-term reinforcement loop, benefiting from room customization. We did not implement it, as the current version focuses on the short term (i.e., within one hour of gameplay). That being said, we have spent effort introducing immediate visual and audio feedback (also known as "juicy") elements to enhance short-term engagement. We ensured the development and inclusion of all themes from the previous literature, as one of the core purposes of creating this academic game is to serve as a research instrument for validating the performance of the transgender euphoria game design themes.

4.2   What Went Wrong

Using art assets acquired or purchased online reduces the liability of art and limits the artistic directions. Because we prioritized developing the functionality and narrative to showcase the design themes, we purchased and used pre-existing art assets from online stores. However, it wasn't until we reached the public playtesting phase that we noticed some of the art assets may have been co-created with generative AI, which was not our intended use. In general, using existing art assets also constrains the style and cultural representation. The background art assets we purchased represent a modern Japanese building style, although we were not initially designing for that specific culture.

Due to time constraints, the code was not well-structured and may hinder further development. Admittedly, the project is over-scoped and the timeline did not leave any space for proper structuring or restructuring of the code base. Emerging functions were only introduced at the middle or late stages of development. For example, Laila, one of the main NPCs, wants to give an object as a gift to the player. This feature was added later on in the development process, and we had to hard-code some functions to make it possible. Code refactoring is necessary for further development.

The style of writing across writers and the depth of character narratives can be further enhanced. The writing tasks were divided among three writers: two focused primarily on the main characters, while the third handled all other NPCs. As with the programming process, a consistent writing style and narrative structure were not established until late in production. Furthermore, standards for defining the depth and richness of character development emerged only during the development process, leaving little opportunity for calibration or adjustment.

The virtual world presents an overly idealized simulation, which may induce a sense of detachment. During playtesting, some players observed that the NPCs are generally too kind, which made the game world feel unrealistic. This created an emotional uncanny valley, where too much positivity led to

discomfort and detachment. While Ambrose, one of the main NPCs, has a more difficult backstory, our future goal is to incorporate more neutral or negative elements to balance the world. We also discussed whether games should instead serve as safe, ideal spaces, where creating a perfect world might benefit some players. In addition, we tested procedurally generated compliment dialogues for NPCs, which offered a wide variety of low-cost interactions but were sometimes seen as clichéd. To improve this system, future work should focus on generating narratives that are more natural.

We lack the skills, experience, or dedication in team and project management. After all, we are students in our 20s (mean age = 24.2, SD = 3.1). The design and production of the game reflect both our past experiences and perspectives, as well as the practical limitations we faced, such as external project priorities and other life constraints. Certain aspects of project management could have been more advanced had this been a full-time endeavor; for example, we did not adopt professional practices such as kanban boards or regular stand-up meetings, and our milestone deadlines remained flexible. While these approaches are less than ideal, they represent areas for improvement that we expect to enhance over time. However, we demonstrated that making games is possible even while developing skills. These limitations should not be viewed as barriers to learning and growth.

5   Panel Composition

While the postmortem section outlines lessons learned during game development, individual perspectives and contextual information are omitted, and it is biased as the first author has led the writing of the submission. Utilizing a panel format, we will bring together all the developers of *Rainborough* to discuss their perspectives and share their opinions and thoughts on incorporating gender euphoria game design themes into the game design, generating knowledge through the process of game creation. The panelists are:

Max Chen (she/they) is a Ph.D. candidate in Computational Media at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Her research lies at the intersection of computational creativity, game design, and human-computer interaction (HCI). She has worked on analyzing patterns and trends in game development practices based on postmortems and studying the balance between creating artifacts and building skills. She is the producer and lead programmer for *Rainborough*.

Shano Liang (she/her) is a Ph.D. candidate in Computational Media at WPI. She is a transdisciplinary researcher who studies the intersection of HCI, human-centered (critical and cultural) computing, data visualization, and interactive media & game studies. She uses interactive media as lenses to explore topics such as digital health, education, communication, culture, design, and marginalized identities, with the goal of generating actionable insights and design solutions for real-world challenges. She is the research director and lead designer for *Rainborough*.

Bastión Toledo-Altamirano (they/them) is a Master of Science student in Interactive Media and Game Development (IMGD) at WPI. They were a game programmer for *Rainborough*. They have an interest in games for education, linguistics, and accessibility. Their latest projects have been focused on Queer representation and exploring the intersection between game design and language learning.

Elizabeth Papa (she/her) is a graduate student pursuing her Master of Fine Arts in IMGD from WPI. She is one of the writers on the team. Her work in this project focused on one of the major characters' narratives, but she also assisted in designing the setting and a few other NPC characters. Generally, as a researcher, her focus is on people's media consumption. Her work as a graduate student is aimed at developing artwork and games to build empathy and media literacy skills in their consumers.

Crow Zubrick (he/they) is a senior at WPI working on their Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Interactive Media and Game Development. He was a writer and designer on the team, focusing on a major character's story arc and dabbling in the design of the game's mechanics. The focus of their current work is on how games influence players' sense of agency, belonging, and identity. In general, his work focuses on building worlds, characters, and mechanics that reinforce one another to create powerful experiences.

Thea Cloyd (they/them) is a fourth-year B.A. student in IMGD at WPI and part of the writing team on *Rainborough*. They contributed dialogue, descriptions, and worldbuilding to the game.

6   Panel Structure

We envision a panel where panelists give brief, 5-minute introductions to their work in the space of inclusivity in games and play and serious game development, with a focus on but not limited to their contributions in the making of *Rainborough*, followed by questions and answers outlined below:

1. What design choices in Rainborough do you like the best, that support themes of gender euphoria and inclusivity?
2. What were the moments when inclusivity goals conflicted with technical, narrative, or production constraints?
3. What strategies did the team find most effective for balancing topics for social good and design for joyful playing experiences?
4. What directions would you like to explore in future games to further expand inclusivity and representation?
5. How can inclusivity in games go beyond representation to influence mechanics, player choices, and systems of play?

These proposed questions follow the postmortem format, asking "what went right" and "what went wrong" questions. We also anticipate active audience participation, inviting them to raise questions to the panelists.

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