

A QUEER DUOETHNOGRAPHY OF FINAL FANTASY VII

The queer orientation of gameplay across time, space, and context

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Keywords

Trans, games, duoethnography, queer phenomenology, transformative play

Summary

This article recommends a queer duoethnographical approach to the study of often marginalized LGBTQIA+ and specifically trans people's engagement with games. Centering an understanding of the queer phenomenology of orientation (Ahmed 2006) in games (Dalby 2024), we present our feminist and queer theoretically inspired duoethnography of a single scene in the video game, *Final Fantasy VII*. This case study demonstrates the value of duoethnography to account for differences and commonalities of queer experience of games across time and space. We find that a duoethnographical approach to game studies allows for a nuanced consideration of the multiple intersecting influences on game interaction, particularly for marginalized players in contexts which would otherwise limit their expression and identity.

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Denna artikel förespråkar ett queer duoetnografiskt perspektiv för att undersöka LGBTQIA+ och mer specifikt trans personers (transformativa) engagemang i spel. Genom presentationen av vår duoetnografi om en specifik scen i spelet *Final Fantasy VII* argumenterar vi att denna ingång i spelstudier möjliggör en nyanserad analys av multipla intersektionella influenser i interaktionerna i spel, inte minst för marginalisrade spelare i en kontext där deras uttryck och identitet annars blir begränsade.

A QUEER DUOETHNOGRAPHY OF *FINAL FANTASY VII*

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JOSEPHINE BAIRD AND KAMYAB GHORBANPOUR

On an episode of the podcast, *It Is Complicated* (Baird and Harrison 2023), in which the co-hosts interviewed actor Samantha Béart, Josephine Baird briefly mentioned a particular quest from the iconic Japanese role-playing game, *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). On the mere utterance of it, Samantha Béart called out enthusiastically “Oh, that scene is notorious!”

The scene in question involves the protagonist, Cloud, the very definition of what Raewyn Connell called “hegemonic masculinity” (2005 [1993]): he is brooding, masculine, aloof, a warrior, and his narrative is melodramatic and world-defining.

However, relatively early in the game, the action stops for a prolonged period during which Cloud is required to rescue a team member held at a local crime-lord’s hall, where he only admits women. At the door, Cloud is turned away by the crime-lord’s guards, and instead of attacking them – which he would

have done in nearly all other aspects of the game – the hero is stumped as to what to do. His companion, a woman called Aerith, comes up with the plan of disguising Cloud as a woman. This is achieved to great success and frees Cloud to roam around the town at his leisure, being recognized as a woman in every respect, until the player chooses to have him continue on with his mission.

Bloggers, commentators, and queer players online seem to agree that the scene is ‘iconic’ (Carney 2020; Smith 2020; Wysor 2020). However not everyone holds the same opinion as to its implications, with some pointing to what they considered problematic elements in representations of gender and sexuality in the original version of the game and/or a recent remake (*Final Fantasy VII: Remake* 2020). But in each case, the scene’s influence is well noted because of how it was received by queer and trans players across time, place, and context; despite no overt trans or queer expression within the game or scene in question.

Neither of us were aware of this when we played that scene not long after the game’s launch in 1997. Instead, we played it isolated from discourse about it including any queer/trans understanding. This was in part because we both lived in environments that were hostile to queer and trans identity and expression. Despite this, and living in entirely different contexts and cultures, with Josephine in the UK and Kamyab in Iran at the time, we both had similar experiences to those who found that scene to be so very queer and trans in nature.

We would not realize this until we met in 2021 and Kamyab attended a lecture by Josephine in which she described her queer, trans, and transformative experience with the game. What followed was a series of conversations to determine why and how we, and apparently so many others, had such a similar experience with that scene.

We realized that the place we had been in, both physically and socially (our orientation), did and did not have an impact on how we experienced that scene. We embarked on a duoethnography to reflect on the question of why and how a game inspires such a consistent experience for queer and trans players across time, place, and context, realizing only later how apt the method was to our question; with both the subject of study and the method of duoethnography being vivid examples of queer phenomenology at work.

This paper therefore is an argument for the value of duoethnography as a methodology which emphasizes the relative orientation of the researchers when examining queer and trans experiences with games. It is also a demonstration of how those experiences can be understood in terms of the queer phenomenological account of orientation in relation to the consistent queer function of gaming irrespective of overt queer/trans content or lack thereof.

Autoethnography and duoethnography as queer feminist methodologies

Methodologies for examining game design are often drawn from other disciplines or conducted in interdisciplinary ways (Holopainen and Jakobsson 2012). The focus of study can be related to specific elements of game architecture (Mifrah 2023), but it is often centered on player experience and examining games as a form of literary art (Consalvo and Dutton 2006).

Investigations into player experience (especially in relation to reflective, socially and/or personally transformative experience), Väkevä, Mekler and Lindqvist (2024) suggest, have most often been conducted with retroactive third-person methods in which players are surveyed/interviewed about previous gameplay. Citing psychological and healthcare research methodology, Väkevä, Mekler and Lindqvist (2024) argue that relying on retroactive interview/survey methods may limit the breadth of reported experiences.

This is a critique levelled more generally at traditional social science methods by feminist and queer epistemologists, finding certain perspectives are marginalized or erased entirely by research approaches which reproduce hegemonic societal structures. Autoethnography may be particularly well suited to express them (Allan and Piercy 2005; Jones and Harris 2018) not least because it requires a researcher to critically examine their own experience through the understanding that all knowledge is partial (Allan and Piercy 2005; Ettorre 2016; McArthur 2019).

Ettorre (2016) notes that wider feminist epistemology has long since challenged social science to include the 'I' of its production, critiquing the presumption that objectivity can somehow be achieved by excluding the socio-cultural influence on the researcher. Socio-cultural influence must instead be accounted for in all research practice and data, which Ettorre (2016) suggests autoethnography can achieve by considering the embodied experiences thereof and subsequently provide insight into societal values and discourse. Ellis (2004) argues that built into the autoethnographical approach is the insistence that the researcher make visible their positionality and how it impacts their study; something McArthur (2019) suggests is often missing in wider games research.

As a methodology, Jones and Harris (2018) note, autoethnography has seen a rapid rise in interest, including as a specifically queer and feminist approach; in that it not only allows for the access to otherwise obscured knowledge but emphasizes its potential to provide socio-cultural critique with the goal for societal transformation (see Ettorre 2016; Jones and Harris 2018; Väkevä et al. 2024). In this sense, autoethnography functions as a scavenger methodology. Originating from feminist and especially Black feminist theorists, scavenger methodology

seeks out existing voices from communities that are historically unrepresented or misrepresented in more traditional science and methods (Niang 2024).

In game studies, McArthur (2019) notes that autoethnographic approaches have been used most often in relation to MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) wherein a researcher will engage in social play with other players to consider the experiences thereof. There are, however, those who have more recently sought to apply it to the examination of gender and sexuality in games for social and personal transformative purposes. These theorists highlight the reflective nature of autoethnography as particularly useful to the examination and challenge of the reproduction of cis/hetero-sexist culture in games (Borchard 2015; Adams 2024; Väkevä et al. 2024). They argue that autoethnography functions as an opportunity to consider the layers of identity that occur between the player and the avatar in particular as it relates to gender (McArthur 2019; Kout 2023). It also allows for a salient opportunity to examine transgressive play, which involves specifically playing against the ideal or assumed normative player/playstyle of a game (Sundén 2009, 2012).

It is this aspect of transgressive and transformative play that so intrigued us as researchers in relation to our own experiences with *Final Fantasy VII*; namely, the opportunity to engage with a medium that has up until most recently not included LGBTQIA+ themes (Shaw and Friesam 2016; Látl 2022). This is achieved through “queergaming” (Chang 2017; Ruberg 2019), a practice by which queer players purposefully include themselves by interactively renarrativizing (Dym et al. 2018) or disidentifying (Chang 2017) with the game so that initially non-queer coded elements become understood as such (Ruberg 2019). This is also enacted by modifying (‘modding’) games structurally by players to include hitherto excluded LGBTQIA+ themes (Welch 2018). This represents a development of queer and trans game studies beyond an initial consideration of the lack of (positive) representation of LGBTQIA+ people in games to a consideration of games in terms of their potential queer function.

Dalby (2024) conceptualizes this shift in orientation away from an engagement with representation and towards the potential queerness of gameplay itself in terms of Ahmed’s (2006) queer phenomenology. Ahmed (2006) considers orientation in the sense of sexual orientation but also in terms of spatial orientation as a factor in how bodies access phenomena in their given context. Being oriented with one’s environment is to feel comfortable and at home to the point where it feels so normal that the process of orientation itself becomes intangible. For example, if when going to the gym, one is confronted with two changing rooms and feels perfectly comfortable entering one of them with no fear of reprisal or rejection, this is being oriented. When orientated it is hard to

imagine that reality and our relationship to phenomena in the world could be any different. Being disoriented by contrast would mean that neither bathroom felt like it fit one's gender expression or felt safe to enter. Disorientation is not fitting in and/or realizing that the environment was not created to be accessible for your subjectivity and is experienced by those othered and marginalized in society. Queer phenomenology reveals those social relations as functioning in spatial arrangements and how they can be disrupted with an understanding of queer reconceptualization within that space.

It is this element of queer phenomenology that lends itself to reflective approaches in which the researcher narrativizes their location and experience in the world, and particularly for those who examine gender and sexuality (Ettorre 2016, Jones and Harris 2018). The difference in peoples' access to the world based on their orientation in culture, time, and space is highlighted in the practice of duoethnography; which is a collaborative version of autoethnographical practice and has seen significant feminist methodological application in the 2020s (see Rutter et al. 2024; Briscoe et al. 2025).

Feminist duoethnographers document the multiplicity of relational truths in an immediate juxtaposition of researchers differing orientation to a given subject/object (Del Negro et al. 2019; Benjamin and Schwab 2021; Valdez et al. 2022; Hardin et al. 2023; Gao and Sai 2024). By engaging in autoethnographical practice in dialogue, this relationality and orientation is put into sharp relief. It can be effective in demonstrating the differences and inequalities in cultural access across not only gender and sexuality but also race, disability, age, and class amongst other factors intersectionally (Hardin et al. 2023). The potential for that dialogue to be transformative is of particular interest to those who see it as an opportunity to develop radical empathy and collective voice through the engagement with their co-authored partial truths (Valdez et al. 2022).

It is an approach not often applied to digital games from a queer/feminist perspective (see Sundén and Sveningsson 2012). Rather it is the form of dialectical method that we find useful to our collective experience with *Final Fantasy VII* as it highlights our orientation and difference in access to the game. It also provides an opportunity to consider our similar engagement in transgressing its seemingly cis-heterosexual content to find its queer function.

In her wider work Josephine argues that games provide an opportunity to explore, express, and embody (trans) gender subjectivities in a way that might be difficult or impossible in everyday life. Drawing from live action role-playing (larp) theory, Josephine argues (Baird 2021) that this is because games can function as safer containers of play (Bowman and Hugaas 2021) that create a

space outside of everyday life where there are other rules. This provides alibi (Deterding 2018) to behave in ways that one would not normally do with fewer social consequences for those acts (because ‘it’s only a game’). An experience within such a safer container of play can influence the player in their everyday life through the function of bleed (Bowman 2013). In the case of someone whose experience is otherwise marginalized in everyday life, they can play for and experience emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017, 2020). Through these combined processes, the player can practice difference (Turkington 2016) in the game so that they can then be more able to embody their (trans) gender subjectivity in everyday life (Baird 2021).

Method

Autoethnography as a method can draw from narrative/autobiographical, ethnographic, and arts research traditions (Cooper and Lilyea 2021). As a narrative approach, autoethnography utilizes a dialogue between the self and/or others along with memory recollection to form a cohesive narrative of experience (Butler-Kisber 2010). Others approach from a more traditionally ethnographic perspective, presenting self-narratives as a source of cultural analysis and a record of pivotal events (Chang 2008). Finally, as Cooper and Lilyea (2021) note, autoethnography draws from arts-research traditions emphasizing the value of narrative interpretation to find potentially obscured/discursive meaning and socio-cultural commentary.

Methodologically, we apply all three approaches, drawing initially from our own personal memories in dialogue. We recognize that memory can be a challenging source for purely-factual accounts in autoethnographies as it is for any method that relies on it, such as interviews (Thomsen and Brinkmann 2009) or the gathering of oral histories (Janesick 2010). However, as with those methods, the gathering of recollected data proves valuable, as noted above, especially as it pertains to tracing the impact of culture and the recognition of marginalized experience as long as one also traces the impact of the speaker’s context and positionality (their orientation).

We triangulated this data with a more immediate ethnographical approach as Chang (2008) describes, by replaying both versions of *Final Fantasy VII* intentionally for this research project. This was done to highlight the change in our orientations in relation to the game in dialogue with our present contexts. As such, we took notes during our replays and engaged in continuous dialogue about our experiences throughout. The notes from our playthroughs and dialogue formed the second part of our duoethnographical method.

In compiling our duoethnography, we applied a narrative thematic analysis recommended by Cooper and Lilyea (2024) inspired by Janesick's method (2010), which involves:

- The collating and categorization of major themes, key terms, and repeated instances.
- Consideration of notable points of inconsistency or conflict with those categorizations.
- The utilization of narrative technique and metaphor to express emotional experience.

The analysis below was thus constructed in an analytical-interpretative form, which involves interweaving analysis and theoretical connection with the autoethnographical report (Chang 2008). This approach was chosen as our duoethnography is informed by the queer phenomenological understanding of orientation (Ahmed 2006). It is an examination of how such transformative play may be an act of queergaming that occurs in similar ways depending on the person's orientation to their context and the game itself.

Additionally, we applied an artistic interpretation on the data we collected; akin to the autoethnographical approach that Cooper and Lilyea (2021) describe. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a thorough close reading (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011) of both games, but we present some of our personal queer experience as an example of how a duoethnographical approach functions to draw out data that would be difficult to obtain otherwise. Not least because in our case it might have been impossible to get the same information via interview or survey. The next section is the duoethnography of our orientation to *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* in both the late 1990s and the 2020s to demonstrate its function across space, time, and context.

Josephine

In 1988, the year I moved to the UK as a child, a law banning “the promotion of homosexuality” by any governmentally funded agency (most notably in schools) was made law. Section 28, as it came to be known, was the culmination of the antigay election-winning promise for the Conservative Party at the time. Fear-mongering the HIV/AIDS crisis and positioning opposing political parties as ‘pro-gay,’ then prime minister Margaret Thatcher launched that campaign with a now infamous speech at the 1987 Conservative Party Conference by claiming that “Children are being taught they have an inalienable right to be gay. All of those children are being cheated of a sound start in life.” (Thatcher 1987).

Though homosexual sex had been decriminalized in 1967, there continued to be a plethora of legal forms of discrimination which were used to vilify and prosecute gay people (Severs 2024); especially if they expressed themselves in public. Section 28 instituted that practice on a governmental scale and remained public policy for the entire time I was at school in the UK. Statutes that addressed anti-trans discrimination only started to be legislated in 1999 and trans people would not be able to change their gender officially (or be allowed to marry and have other rights) until 2003 (Burns 2018). Whilst gay people, still discriminated against in law and in public discourse in the 1990s, were more visible, trans people were still hidden and discounted.

All of which meant that the first time I heard that trans people even existed was from a daytime TV talk show as a teenager when I was still in high school. I happened across a program in which a trans woman was describing her experience (Baird 2009). She was literally hidden behind a partition with her voice changed, because she was so afraid of being recognized.

There was no readily accessible Internet, no books or public information to access, and so from this TV show I finally learned there were others like me. I also learned that we were so detestable we literally could not show our faces in public. This knowledge was devastating and almost impossible to handle. I had no outlet and no one to talk to. I had to go on trying to reproduce masculinity to the best of my ability. And I was not very good at it.

Boys were supposed to be tough, unfeeling, and strong. They were supposed to withstand hardship and abuse. Everything in my world at the time taught me that, including the media I was exposed to. TV news shows and politicians were still debating the dangers of ‘modern sensibilities’ about ‘sensitive men,’ and what was seen as the deeply problematic blurring of gender roles from women working outside the home.

I was bullied relentlessly throughout school for not meeting expectations of masculinity by students and teachers. When I could, all I wanted to do was hang out with the other girls. This was, of course, not in any way acceptable. But even then, I was not actually bullied for being trans. Rather I was called gay, because that was the only available rhetoric at the time for deviant gendered behavior. Trans experience remained unthinkable.

There was no intellectual, physical, or emotional room (no orientation) to consider being anything other than the boy I was supposed to be. This was the state I was in when I found myself one day playing *Final Fantasy VII* not long after it came out in 1997.

What I remember most about playing the game at the time is a single scene. Until recently, I could barely remember the story of the game, despite having

completed it. I could recall some characters and narrative moments at most; those that have become the subject of Internet memes (Jurkovich 2018) in game communities and paratexts which still surround *Final Fantasy VII*. I could remember the antagonist character, Sephiroth, and the death of another character, Aerith. I could not have told you what the overall story arc was. I could not even remember the ending.

But I did remember the moment when Cloud, the playable cis man protagonist, is required to dress and present himself as a woman. Until very recently, I did not even really remember the plot-reason for this. All I remembered was how I felt playing it, which was terrified. Even in the privacy of my own home. I had not expected this from what seemed otherwise to be quite a recognizable genre of role-playing game. Cloud is a mercenary hired by a group attempting to challenge the world-ending machinations of a super-corporation trying to strip the world of its life-sustaining magic. Perhaps an unusual story, but with a highly recognizable format.

I could not remember the narrative reason for Cloud to dress as a woman nor the actions he needed to take to present as such. On replaying it recently, I found that the game requires the player to guide Cloud around a market to collect, barter, or work for different items of clothing to form a proper ensemble. Having done so, and adorning himself with all this apparel, his appearance is commented on positively by Aerith, the shopkeeper, as well as random passers-by as he walks to the crime-lord's hall. Mechanically, the game requires the player to simply walk to the hall once the character has changed to engage in the next story element.

Instead, when I first played the game, I recall lingering. Indeed, this is the element of gameplay I remember most clearly; wandering around the marketplace, contrary to what the game urged me to do to continue the adventure. I remember feeling overwhelmed but also recognized oddly by the game, the non-playable characters, and environment. I mentioned this in a previous article, in which I consider how profoundly transformative games can be (Baird 2021). I wrote that in this odd, private, yet precarious instant of playing the game, I felt I could be this character and be recognized as the woman he was just for that moment. I was able to embody myself and the taboo, with the alibi of the game, in the relative safety of the boundaries of the game itself. The memory was so strong, it would linger with me for years and become the basis of my research on how games provide environments to explore gender subjectivity.

Considering it now, I realize that Cloud, who up until that point in the game could surpass any obstacle with violence, had his access curtailed due to his gender. In this case, perhaps for the first time, being a cis man meant he could

not easily enter an environment based entirely on his identity. In order to move forward he had to present as a gender that was acceptable to that space. Once he had done so, his orientation became free once more and not only that, his appearance was commented on positively and he was recognized as the woman he purported to be. In that moment, Cloud's orientation was freer than my own in our respective environments. And I wonder now if that was why I lingered in that scene much longer than the game intended. It had become a queer function for me to actualize the experience of being oriented within my environment, whilst I felt so disoriented in my everyday world outside of the game.

It functioned as a safer container of play for me to practice my identity, somewhat unconsciously, in a way that I did not have words for at the time. And I certainly could not have verbalized why Cloud's orientation was so important to me in relation to my disorientation in everyday life; that his access to the world is what I wanted. I wanted an opportunity to express my subjectivity, but also to navigate space in a way that was not curtailed.

This lack of verbalization or conscious steering of role-play (Kemper 2017, 2020) to an emancipatory end was something that Kamyab also related to me when we spoke about his engagement with that scene in the late 1990s.

Kamyab

Like Josephine I didn't quite understand the impact that *Final Fantasy VII* had on me at the time of playing it. I was in a very different cultural context, but in a similar way to Josephine I was in a different version of reality that I felt disoriented in, and *Final Fantasy VII* provided a brief moment of orientation that was confusing but ultimately transformative.

Final Fantasy VII was released around ten years after the end of Iran-Iraq war and Ayatollah Khomeini's cultural revolution which aimed to purify Iran of any Western or secular influence. As a result, in 1983, the newly-established Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance banned the personal use of many forms of technology to control what people were consuming. The bans didn't end at technology as many forms of gaming such as card games and chess became banned as well, which is ironic since many of such games originated in Iran itself (Atwood 1983).

By the late 80s, and the end of the Iran-Iraq war, things started to slowly change and the robust underground market became more and more accessible. Many young Iranians of the middle-class in Tehran had access to clones of *Famicom* and *Super Famicom* (known as the *Nintendo Entertainment System*, and *Super Nintendo Entertainment System*, respectively, outside of Japan) alongside *SEGA Mega Drive 2* game consoles. The game cartridges, however, were quite

limited and expensive. Therefore, Iranians did not have access to most games that were played.

The release of the *Sony PlayStation* in the mid-90s changed the gaming scene in Iran forever. The expensive and limited cartridges were no longer an issue as CDs were cheap to produce and *Sony*'s inexperience with CD protection, and console design in general, led to mass importation of modified consoles that played a great many titles that were all pirated and burned onto CDs.

After just a few years, *Sony PlayStation* wasn't simply a popular gaming console but was considered gaming itself. The biggest hits of *Sony* entered the country such as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, *Crash Bandicoot*, *Resident Evil*, *Driver 2*, and of course, *Final Fantasy VII*. Many such Japanese-made games with their fair-looking men did not fit well within Iran's modern reconstruction of masculinity and what a man should be.

In pre-revolutionary Iran, the urbanization of the country led the middle class to adopt many of the attributes that were considered 'modern' or 'Western' such as wearing make-up or accessories. The late rule of Muhammad Riza Pahlavi brought many concepts that did not sit well among a great many people, from the right-wing Mullahs who saw it as an insult to their tradition to the left-wing intellectuals who saw it as a form of bourgeois degeneracy. Both groups saw femininity as a representation of the Pahlavi Dynasty and the American interest in Iran which had swallowed their autonomy, culture, and economic agency (Balslev 2019).

Even the leftist parties that did not share the conservative and misogynistic views of the Mullahs promoted an ideal look that was closely akin to hypermasculine guerrilla fighters such as Che Guevara. As a result, an intellectual woman was the one who did not have time to be feminine and indulge in bourgeois consumerism but rather someone who wore pants and looked a lot like their male comrades. The post-revolutionary Iran which utterly destroyed the leftist agenda continued and enforced such gender viewpoints from an Islamic and traditional understanding. The concept of Western femininity which included well-dressed and well-shaved men were considered 'taghut-i' or 'demonic.' To this very day, you can see Iranian politicians not wearing ties or fully shaving their faces to not look feminine (Najmabadi 2005).

However, when it comes to younger men, things can be a bit complicated since for most of its history, Iranian culture cultivated a form of great love and affection for 'fair-looking' young men. A noticeable portion of Persian literature centers around such a concept. The famous Iranian-American historian, Afasaneh Najmabadi (2005) mentions that 'beautiful' men and women were depicted with very similar facial and bodily features in Persian literature. From

the 1920s, as Iranians were introduced to Western culture, the concept of male femininity being beautiful started to fade and it was seen as an example of our ‘barbaric past.’ However, some traces of it remained in society. For example, in Iranian mosques, usually, a young man with a fair voice is picked to call for the prayer as it is considered more beautiful to hear (Zia-Ebrahimi 2018).

I grew up in a middle-class family in Tehran. I was a fair-looking boy with bright hair color and red lips which were considered feminine by Iranian standards of the time. I was sometimes mistaken for a girl when I was a child and I was mocked many times by my peers in school, but also, I was sometimes praised for my looks by adults.

I grew up right around the time when *Sony PlayStation* became a big hit in the country and almost every kid in our private school wanted one - middle-class families usually send their kids to a private school in contrast with the public school which was considered by the middle-class and the petty bourgeoisie to be for poor people with troubled kids.

Much of the media I consumed at that time was Western and almost all had the ideal vision of Western masculinity in them such as Superman, Batman, or G.I. Joe. A ‘cleaner’ version of the masculinity I perceived in my own culture. Both cultures, in my eyes, promoted a man to be strong and big while looking down on men who were fragile or feminine. A great example of this is in my favorite childhood movies such as the dichotomy of Mufasa/Scar in *The Lion King* or Hercules/Hades in Disney’s *Hercules*. Femininity was always evil, while masculinity was always good (see also Griffin 2000).

This vision was in contrast with what I was seen as by most people. Even when I was praised for my looks, I was praised for the ‘wrong’ attributes. I was much closer to the feminine-looking villains than the hypermasculine heroes I wanted to be like.

However, my vision was heavily challenged when I started to consume more Japanese-made products, especially *PlayStation* games. One that stood out the most was *Final Fantasy VII* and a specific scene that the protagonist, Cloud, goes through.

Final Fantasy VII had a substantial influence on me regarding how I perceived games as a kid. Before *Final Fantasy VII*, digital games of my life were summarized into skill-based platformers and management-oriented survival horrors. The most RPG-esque game I experienced at the time was *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, which had a straightforward story and very few lines of dialogue. As a result, games hardly were about grand stories for me and were mostly there to put my skills and/or knowledge to the test with limited mechanics presented at the beginning.

However, that was not the case for *Final Fantasy VII*. This was my first game that focused so heavily on the story and demanded that the player invest in the narrative, characters, and the world.

English is not my first language and while I grew up learning the language, I was not able to speak it fluently when I was 7 - when I played *Final Fantasy VII*. The language barrier provided a great challenge for me and some of my friends who were also interested in playing the game. The aesthetics and the departure from the games we were accustomed to, motivated us to play it with an Oxford English Dictionary. It took us a year to finish the game as a result. By using the dictionary, I altered my orientation to the game. By learning different conceptualizations of what masculinity and femininity could be, and that in this moment they might be malleable (see Butler 1990, 1993), gave me pause to reflect on my own incongruence. I was at once lauded for my feminine features and in other ways shunned for them in my everyday life. Here was Cloud, able to easily use them to his advantage, to change the ways in which he moved through the world.

The struggle with the language barrier as well as the undiscovered genre of RPG made *Final Fantasy VII* one of the most engaging gaming experiences of my life.

Playing the scene where Cloud is asked to dress as a woman, I remember Cloud's initial disagreement with the idea, but being persuaded by Aerith's charm to go through with it. I remember interpreting the process as something fun that Cloud and Aerith participated in. It felt like a journey through uncharted territory. To realize that this form of expression is not morally wrong or something that I, much like Cloud, should be ashamed of. As powerful as the scene was for me at the time, ever since I was a child, I had a lingering thought that this initial interpretation was my outlandish conception of the scene, because I did not adequately understand it and wanted it to be something I could relate to. Perhaps, I thought at the time, the scene was nothing more than a gag, just like my own expressive being.

In this sense, the game provided a shift in orientation that I couldn't quite rely on yet. It would take more time and reflection - and physical distance from the place I was living in - to integrate the experience of being able to feel more oriented in my own world. In part, I needed to go elsewhere and be among those more like the characters I saw in the game.

Josephine

The current political climate in the UK (and other parts of the world) is disturbingly similar to what it was in 1988, despite an interceding time when

LGBTQIA+ and especially trans people saw advances in social awareness and legal recognition. For example, in 2023 a law very similar to Section 28 was proposed again in the UK, but this time specifically targeting trans people (Stonewall 2023). In the US several Section 28-style laws, dubbed 'don't say gay' laws, are already being enacted along with a swathe of other anti-trans and wider anti-LGBTQIA+ laws (Goldberg 2023; Peele 2023). In the US, a staggering anti-trans sentiment has built up over - and following - their 2024 presidential election (Strangio 2025). This backlash against gender diversity and trans identity (Madrigal-Borloz 2023) reminds me of the ways in which gender non-conformity and gay identity was repressed in the UK thirty years prior (Faye, 2018).

Coincidentally, a new version of *Final Fantasy VII* was released around the same time (*Final Fantasy VII: Remake* 2020). I would not suggest any kind of link between the two events. However, it made me consider that as I play the new version, I play it in an oddly similar political climate. And yet I am not the same. Nor is the media landscape. Nor the representation of trans and queer lives. Including in *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*.

Playing this new version, I have been an out trans woman for twenty years. I no longer need a digital space to express myself as I find I can broadly do so in everyday life. I am, however, exhausted by the current deluge of anti-trans sentiment, and so seek out positive representation and refuges wherever I might find them. Digital games have only in the last decade started to significantly include overt LGBTQIA+ themes and characters (Shaw and Friesam 2016). Prior to which, LGBTQIA+ themes were cursory or generally negative if included at all (Lálat 2022).

Even in the reiteration of *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*, there is no overt inclusion of LGBTQIA+ themes. However, the scene in which Cloud dresses as a woman is still included, even significantly enhanced and extended. The remake includes a new lavish section in which Cloud attends a nightclub called the Honeybee Inn. The space features several highly camp characters, not least the host, Andrea Rhodea, who is presented in a fur-collared strappy top and embroidered trousers whilst he seems to openly flirt with Cloud. This scene culminates in the player guiding Cloud through a spectacular dance duet with Andrea (the only one of its kind of interactions in the game), which includes suggestive and intimate poses between the couple throughout. At the end of which Andrea forms a heart shape with his hands towards Cloud, and says "Honey... I'm in love," before agreeing to make him over as a woman.

This makeover is enacted by another highly camp character in top hat and tails, who insists, "You were born for this." Cloud is then presented in makeup

and a glorious frilly gown to the overt appreciation of the audience. A final brief duet with Andrea ensues, which concludes with Andrea dipping Cloud and, with their lips suggestively close together, he calls Cloud, “Perfection!”

When I recently presented my understanding of this interaction as stunningly queer in a lecture on representation in games, a student argued that they could not see a queer reading of the scene at all. I, on the other hand, could see no other. This is also in part because the in-game trophy earned by the player for completing this section is entitled, “Dancing Queen,” and because once Cloud is presented to the audience, Andrea gives a brief speech, in which he says:

True beauty is an expression of the heart. A thing without shame, to which notions of gender don't apply. Don't ever be afraid, Cloud. (Final Fantasy VII: Remake 2020, Andrea Rhodea)

When I played this scene for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was struck by how directly the character Andrea seemed to be speaking despite ostensibly talking to the crowd and Cloud. Andrea is framed as speaking to the viewer in first person. I understood this as Andrea speaking to the player directly. Making a statement about gender and expression, and specifically to not be afraid of it.

This felt profoundly important in the socio-political climate at the time and now. I was tremendously gratified to see my favorite scene expanded into something that felt so clear, if still not entirely explicit. *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* is a very popular game, played by many people across the world. Knowing that this was included and seen by everyone who played it, felt very positive.

That is not to say it is without its faults. Not least because queerness is not stated explicitly, only alluded to. Also, in the following scene at the crime-lord's estate, Cloud, his lost team member, and Aerith are presented to the crime-lord to choose who to spend the evening with, implying sexual coercion. This included, I felt, the implication that Cloud's gender could be revealed and the potential for transphobic violence to follow.

Nonetheless, I experienced Cloud's transformation as a camp, fun, kind, celebration of queer gender and expression. Something that was sorely missing in much of mainstream media and politics, including games, at a time when I could not leave the house and could not experience queer community in person; including spaces like nightclubs which are important for us to play in, meet, and be together (Baird 2021). The pandemic had put me in a similar position to when I played the original, in that I could not access communities in-person and could only seek them out in digital space.

I played the game also with a sense of recollection of its previous iteration and of who I was and what it meant to me in the late 90s. As I played the new version, I was looking for this scene, hoping it had been done well and hoping it would still hold meaning for me.

And it did hold meaning for me. Meaning that was formed by a confluence of factors, such as the new yet similar socio-political climate I was in; my personal history with the previous iteration of the game and games in general; my age and life-trajectory at the time; my access to LGBTQIA+ communities; the change in the game itself; and my ability to reflect more on how I read those elements personally as well as in a theoretical way.

That was the orientation that I could not explain to my student at the time of my lecture. In hindsight, their orientation to the game might have been quite different. With this understanding, that they did not experience the same scene the same way made more sense. My orientation was one that craved queer and trans space and recognition. I needed, once again, a place to orient myself when my environment had been restricted by the pandemic. What I insisted was the blatant queer coding of Cloud and his environment presented just that. Once again, he could walk around town looking fabulous and being recognized for who he was, comfortable and oriented in a way that I was not. Yet, that was my understanding, from my orientation. Which I presume was not the same as my student's, who could only understand Cloud as the pragmatic soldier and hero who was doing what he needed to save his teammate. My orientation was also not the same as my co-author's, yet we again had a similar experience with the remake as we did with the original.

Kamyab

Playing *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* as a young adult was an interesting experience for me, as I found myself caught between different times, generations, and cultural shifts. The cultural landscape when the remake was released was significantly different from the one I had experienced in the 2000s. Femininity was no longer just an attribute that had been both praised and demonized by different segments of society due to historical trauma. Instead, it had evolved into a complex socio-political concept encompassing the broader international culture war. For example, while being trans has posed significant challenges in Iran since the 1979 revolution, there had never been a serious political or religious discourse surrounding 'transness' comparable to the British or American public discourse. For instance, it was taken for granted that trans women should use the women's bathroom, and it was never a matter of debate.

However, in the late 2010s to early 2020s, a Western transphobic discourse began to gain traction in popular cultural arenas in a way that it had not before (Saeidzadeh 2016; Vafai 2018; Ghorbanpour 2023) including in areas regarding the arts and entertainment (games). Consequently, I found that the *Final Fantasy VII* scene in question was inevitably viewed through that lens on social media by the younger generation who are heavily involved with this new version of a Western culture war.

The 'Lagbat/لگبٽ' phenomenon is a cultural wave that has gained prominence in recent discussions. Since 2021, the term 'Lagbat' has become increasingly popular among online right-wing communities. It is a derogatory Persian misreading of 'LGBT' and is part of Gen Z's far-right radical language. In contrast to the conservative term 'hamjensbaz/همجنس‌باز,' which can be roughly equivalent to the derogatory term 'faggot' in English, Lagbat represents a departure from the old-fashioned homophobia of previous generations. It highlights the influence of online Gen Z movements, often imported from the West and integrated into Iran's own reactionary landscape. As opposed to the traditional religious homophobia of the older generations who adhered to a fundamentalist reading of the Koran and the Hadith, Lagbat phenomenon is often part of a greater secular anti-feminist, anti-communist, anti-Arab, anti-black ethno-nationalism that also opposes political Islam as well as the religion itself. The Lagbat's quarrel with the LGBTQIA+ movement is less religious, and more ethno-nationalist.

The significance of Lagbat in our discussion lies in its overwhelming association with East Asian pop culture. Japanese and Korean media, in particular, are viewed as vehicles for promoting LGBTQIA+ identities and agendas in part due to their popularity in Iran.

When *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* was released, the phenomenon of using Lagbat as a derogatory term started to spread online and across social media. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when it started, but it seems like the pandemic had a significant influence on its inception or, more precisely, its popularization. The original *Final Fantasy VII* was not perceived as a 'Japanese' game in Iran, unlike in many parts of the world, such as Western countries (Consalvo 2016) or Singapore (Wai-ming 2001). Even if it was considered a threat, it was indistinguishable from other Western games in popular discourse. However, this is in sharp contrast with the remake. Not only is its 'Japaneseness' acknowledged in the country, but it is also seen as a unique threat coming from the East, especially among the Gen Z segment of society.

There are *TikTok* and *YouTube* videos featuring the cross-dressing scene from the remake, often juxtaposed with K-pop and occasionally J-pop videos. These videos aim to illustrate a perceived plot to emasculate men.

Going back to that lingering thought I had about the scene and my uncertainty as a child, playing the glorified and eloquently remade scene, I felt reassured that it might represent a different way to be after all. While I acknowledge the death of the author (Barthes 1977) and how different readings of this particular scene have affected us, the scene itself and its boldness are, in part, a result of how people read it and how our world has changed; as Co-Director of the game, Motomu Toriyama himself points out in an interview (Motomu 2021):

Fans these days expect stories and dialogue in games to go beyond stereotypical depictions of gender. Through Andrea's lines and the lyrics of the backing track, Stand Up, we tried to build in a positive and supportive message for Cloud during his cross-dressing scene. (Motomu 2021: np)

So, while my interpretation of the scene as a child did not entirely align with the original designer's intentions, I understand it now as part of a collective projection that has led us to this moment. This scene has impacted my orientation insofar as it was part of my journey that led me to question the traditional conceptions of what it meant to be a man or woman. Which in turn, encouraged me to leave Iran so that I could express in a way I could not there. My new orientation in Europe allowed me to reflect on this process and the part this game played in it, which is why I have been able to write this article. For a simple scene that might not have been more than a gag to the developer, it has become an important piece of video game history for many (Carney 2020; Smith 2020; Wysor 2020) and that includes myself. I discovered how many when I attended university in Sweden and began discussing the scene with Josephine. Like her, I sought out a different orientation, in part inspired by scenes like the one in *Final Fantasy VII*, where I could navigate the world without the discomfort of feeling like I didn't fit into the rigid boxes of what was supposed to be masculine and what was supposed to be feminine. Though we had very different orientations to our culture and world, I found a similar story in Josephine's which makes me think that games like this might be more than what they contain and be a space where we can orient ourselves to a different path.

The fact that there is a reactionary backlash against games and this scene in particular in Iran right now (something that did not quite exist during my childhood) demonstrates the potential and possibility of play and games like *Final Fantasy VII*. Something that perhaps even its critics recognize.

Conclusion

Feminist epistemology and methodology challenges science to elevate the voices of those marginalized and to account for the impact of the researcher's positionality (Rooney 2011). In this paper, we have argued that a duoethnography can achieve that in relation to trans and queer experience in games. We have emphasized how such a method highlights the orientation of the players and the impact on their experience and how important it is to account for that in the act of queergaming. We have done this by applying a duoethnography to our own experience playing *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*, exploring how our different orientations in the past and present account for our surprisingly similar experience with the games but also how important it is to consider our diverse orientations and voices. Our argument thus is for the use of duoethnography in analyses of socially and personally transformative play as it can account for the nuance of those orientations.

However, recent developments gave us pause to consider how much more important such an approach might be in the shifting orientation of our current political context. On February 1st 2025, the United States' Center for Disease Control (CDC) ordered its scientists to retract or pause all in-progress publications in order to remove newly legislated 'forbidden terms': "Gender, transgender, pregnant person, pregnant people, LGBT, transsexual, non-binary, nonbinary, assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth, biologically male, biologically female" (Faust 2025). This is part of a wider cultural assault at the time of writing on trans, queer, Black, and other marginalized people in the US and elsewhere in the world (McLean 2021; Bergdorf 2025). It is critical therefore to engage in feminist and queer methodologies which elevate those voices specifically in non-normative ways and non-formal sites which may be less susceptible to official deletion. And also, to demonstrate how games can provide common opportunities to orient the self for people with vastly different socio-cultural contexts; in situations where LGBTQIA+ players may seek out games as a safer space to inhabit in hostile socio-cultural environments (Baird 2021; GLAAD 2024).

Both of us can express and expose our subjectivities, in part, because we have some relative privilege to be visible as queer researchers which allows us to orient ourselves around certain academic spaces. We are also currently located in Western Europe, which as it stands has not had quite the same backlash against trans and queer scholarship. And yet, there is (epistemic) peril in being so visible which could lead to our arguments being discounted by nature of our identities (Baird and Harrer 2024) or other (in)direct discrimination. In sharing our experiences from the past, we expose ourselves

in the present. Even announcing from a relative position of safety that one is trans or has queer experience with mainstream media, including games, is precarious.

Nonetheless, we have argued in our respective research (Baird 2021; Ghorbanpour and Hugaas 2023) that games provide a potent environment for queer players to explore, express, and embody a sense of self. We locate that work in wider emerging queer and trans game studies (Dalby 2024) and, in this paper, to duoethnographic method and queer phenomenology. In her wider work, Josephine (Baird 2021) argues that games provide the alibi, safer container, and opportunity for 'bleed' which allow a (trans) player to enact subjectivity in a way that might not be as possible in everyday life; and in doing so, can explore that further outside the game environment. In this paper, we argue that these safer containers allow us to orient ourselves by inhabiting our identities in space and expressing them; and these opportunities to do so may be even more important in contexts where our erasure is becoming significantly worse.

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Nyckelord

Trans, spel, duoetnografi, queer fenomenologi, transformativt spel

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