Politics, pronouns, and the players: Examining how videogame players react to the inclusion of a transgender character in World of Warcraft.

Abstract

Despite being released in 2004, it was not until 2020 when the online videogame World of Warcraft (WoW) introduced its first transgender character (WoWHead, 2020). This paper examines how players responded to this new character – named Pelagos. I analyse official WoW fora to explore how many players were for/against the inclusion of Pelagos, how these views were constructed, and how posters interact with each other. The data demonstrates a surprising backlash to transphobia and overwhelming support for the inclusion of a transgender character. Those who were against the inclusion of Pelagos framed their arguments in terms of objections to political correctness, arguing that gaming should remain politically neutral. By contrast, those in favour of including Pelagos argued that videogames are political by nature. I also examine the second person pronouns used for Pelagos and note that he is very rarely misgendered. I argue that such a positive response has implications for research into Critical Discourse Studies and for videogame companies.

Introduction

Since 2004, Blizzard Entertainment have released various expansions and updates for their Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), World of Warcraft (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-present). WoW has been incredibly successful – with reports suggesting that the most recent expansion, Shadowlands, sold a record breaking 3.7 million copies on release day (Minotti 2021). Given the continued success of WoW, it is unsurprising that the MMORPG has been the focus of extensive academic research. Previous work has used data from WoW to model infectious diseases (for example, Balicer 2007; Lofgren & Fefferman 2007), understand theorycraft (player's application of theoretical mathematical models to in game results) (see Paul 2011), and explore how communities of players construct ideologies about gender and sexuality (see, for example, Ensslin 2012; Braithwaite 2014).

Importantly, I argue that those who regularly play WoW are part of a 'community'. One could argue that such repeated engagement (often with similar players) constitutes an 'imagined community', which refers to 'groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination' (Kanno & Norton 2003:241, adapting Anderson 1991). Alternatively, some might conceptualise such a community as a 'community of practice', which 'involve[s] participating with other members in a variety of practices that often constitute linguistic, gender, and other social identities and relations at one and the same time' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1999:91). In this sense, players of WoW would be viewed as a virtual community of practice (see Thomas 2005).

Members of this community have multiple ways to voice their ideologies about concepts which are represented in WoW. For example, players can use in game chat functions, comment on live streams, and post on the official WoW fora. This paper is particularly interested in looking at how ideologies towards the representation of gender are constructed on the official WoW fora. Previous research (see, for example, Braithwaite 2014) has examined how players of WoW have presented ideologies towards feminism, following changes to one character's gender stereotyping dialogue. Braithwaite's work highlights how players who posted on the fora simultaneously argued that Blizzard should retain gender stereotyping language and that those who welcomed Blizzard's decision to change this language needed to focus on feminist issues in the 'real' world. In the present study, I examine how members of the same community responded to the inclusion of WoW's first transgender character in 2020. I start by contextualising this character before situating the current research against a backdrop of previous literature and discuss the research methods implemented in this paper. Key findings are discussed before some concluding remarks are provided.

Shadowlands, Bastion, and Pelagos

In the Shadowlands expansion for WoW (Blizzard entertainment 2020-present), players travel to the afterlife. Within the story, players find out that once a Non-Playing Character (NPC) dies, they are sent to one of five locations, and four of these locations are run by 'covenants' (one location, the Maw, does not have a covenant). Of these five locations, the most relevant to the current paper is 'Bastion', which hosts the 'Kyrian' covenant. Each covenant has a series of quests that contribute to the overarching narrative of the Shadowlands storyline. Players must complete the predetermined key quests in each of the five zones to progress through the Shadowlands storyline. Once the player has completed all of the quests in each of the five zones, they are presented with a choice. Players must select

which covenant they would like to align themselves with. Once the player has aligned themselves with a covenant, they are able to pursue additional storylines within that zone (called the 'campaign').

Within the quests offered in Bastion, players meet a character called Pelagos. If the player chooses to join the Kyrian covenant and play the Kyrian campaign, they can use Pelagos as a 'soulbind' – i.e., they are able to travel with Pelagos and gain new abilities from him. (Note, I use male pronouns for Pelagos because all characters within the game refer to him with male pronouns and official Blizzard sources have used male pronouns for him, though Pelagos does not explicitly tell players his pronouns). Once Pelagos becomes a soulbind, the player is able to 'talk' to him by clicking on him. When the player clicks on Pelagos, they are presented with a screen of written dialogue and options for how they would like to respond (responses are pre-scripted and the player must select what response to use). If they keep talking to him, after three different dialogue screens (i.e., selecting the appropriate dialogue response to Pelagos' on screen prompt), the player is shown the following conversation:

> Pelagos: I appreciate your listening. Truly. As soulbinds, I know I can trust you.
>
> \<Pelagos takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly.\>
>
> I had a female form in life. I don't recall my former name, or even my race, but I...never felt like my physical form represented who I was inside. It never felt as clear to me then as it does now. I struggled with that identity for my entire life...
>
> [the player can close the chat window at this point]
>
> Player: \<Continue to listen.\>
>
> Pelagos: But when I arrived in Bastion I became an aspirant that looked like, well...
>
> \<Pelagos gestures to himself.\>
>
> This! A male form! I felt...comfortable! Excited! Like who I was inside matched what others saw for the first time! All of those feelings in my life finally made sense. (WowHead 2020)

The above interaction reveals that Pelagos is transgender, though he was only able to achieve the body he felt most comfortable with after death[1]. Nevertheless, the way the players discover that Pelagos is transgender requires a considerable amount of work and the interaction where he explains his identity, even though he does not specifically use the term 'transgender', links to the notion of 'the gay button' (see Krampe 2018). 'The gay button' is the concept that queer content is only shown to players if they press particular buttons – rather than being shown it without a choice. Throughout this interaction, there are several

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[1] While there may be some debate over the appropriateness of using the label 'transgender' as opposed to terms such as 'transexual', the former term is used throughout this paper in a similar sense to Zottola (2018: 51-52), who notes: 'This choice mirrors the preference to employ the term transgender in its umbrella/inclusive sense, comprehensive of identities labels such as transsexual, trans, MtF, FtM, and more generally speaking all those people, regardless of the label they choose to identify with, whose gender identity or expression do not conform with the gender assigned at birth.'

opportunities for the player to not learn about Pelagos' identity, and indeed, only through selecting a series of options does the player learn this information. In addition, it is only people who decided to take part in the Kyrian campaign who have access to this information. Ultimately, WoW's first transgender character is a minor one, and the way a player finds out about his identity is convoluted and filled with optional dialogue options.

To date, there has been some media attention related to Pelagos. Before the release of Shadowlands, there were a few articles mentioning him across different fora (see, for example, Rossi, 2020). However, much of this was released by Blizzard Entertainment (or affiliated media outlets) rather than by external media organisations. One of the most common internet searches for Pelagos is a story from WoWhead (a popular website dedicated to archiving all aspects of WoW). In this post, WoWhead discusses the fact that he is WoW's first transgender character (see Wowhead 2020). Elsewhere, in a statement for LGBTQ+ pride month, Lydia Bottegoni, the Executive Vice President for Story and Franchise Development at Blizzard Entertainment, wrote about the need to include more transgender characters like Pelagos (Bottegoni 2021). Thus, there seems to be prominence given to stories about Pelagos from Blizzard Entertainment rather than how transgender media critics (or related communities) respond to this character. In addition, no article has yet mentioned how WoW players responded to such inclusion (though, these groups are not mutually exclusive).

The WoW fora
Having now discussed Pelagos and where he is situated within the MMORPG, this section turns to discuss the official WoW fora. There is a growing body of research that examines how members of virtual communities of practice construct ideologies of gender and/or sexuality (see, for example, Potts 2015; Mackenzie 2018; Coimbra-Gomes & Motschenbacher 2019; Heritage & Koller 2020; Wright 2020). Given the limitations of space, the research into virtual communities of practice and the construction of gender/sexuality is too vast to fully appreciate in this paper. However, it should be noted that a wide range of different fora have been used as data collection sites. The research previously conducted on virtual communities acknowledges that only a select number of members post their thoughts about particular topics. In other words, while some communities might be thousands of members large, not all members will contribute to certain discussions – and this is particularly important given the size of the community of WoW players.

Some communities (for example, those researched by both Heritage & Koller 2020 and Wright 2020) gather around their gender identity and how they view other gendered social actors. For example, there is a growing body of research that looks at masculinity in online contexts and how certain groups of men form online misogynistic communities (see Ging 2017; Lawson forthcoming). Other communities, like the one presented in this paper, gather around different identities but discuss issues related to gender and/or sexuality. For example, Coimbra-Gomes and Motschenbacher (2019) examined a community which gathered around their identity as having OCD. This research focused on how normativity regulated member's discussion about SO-OCD (Sexual Orientation-Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and involved mainly men talking about their obsessive-compulsive anxieties around their sexuality.

With regards to the WoW fora, Braithwaite (2014:704) argues that fora specifically for MMORPGs, 'help to foster – and police – a sense of community and commonality beyond the game itself.' Several studies, based within videogame research, have used the WoW fora to recruit research participants (see Bergstorm 2017 for a full discussion). However, as Bergstorm (2017) notes, there is a general hesitancy and resistance from

members of the WoW community to reply to questionnaires disseminated on the official fora. Bergstrom found that posters on the WoW fora felt as though too many questionnaires were being given to the community and so were reluctant to respond to any. To avoid contributing to this ever growing discontent with researchers, in this paper, I examine how ideologies about gender are constructed in posts on the fora, rather than gathering data through questionnaire based methods.

The official fora are a space where players can reflect on both the content and ideas presented within the game (see Ensslin 2012; Braithwaite 2014). What differentiates discussions on the WoW fora to websites such as Reddit is that the WoW fora are dedicated specifically to WoW and all discussion threads on the fora relate to WoW (while other fora such as Reddit allow for a discussion of several videogames and initial impressions of videogames from trailers etc). This also means that posters have ostensibly played the game – and continue to do so. Reflecting on the data (discussed in a subsequent section), this is obvious through two notable ways. First, players reference in game phenomena which require specific knowledge only obtainable and fully appreciated through playing the game. Second, when a player leaves a comment, their character's avatar is placed in a small box. Information, such as the character's name, guild (i.e., the in game community they are also part of), and level are displayed. All posters in the fora were above level 1, and most were level 60 (which is the maximum level, only obtainable if the player has played through Shadowlands). However, it should also be noted that there is no way to know the relationship between those who post on the fora and the broader user base. There are many 'silent' players – i.e., those who only play the game and do not post on the fora, whose voices and opinions might not be heard. To that end, it is important to remember that those posting on the fora are possibly a broader reflection of the larger player base, but caution is needed in the degrees to which the findings elicited from this kind of data are representative of the ideologies held by all WoW players.

Research into the representation of gender/sexuality on the WoW fora is extensive, though there are three particular studies that are most relevant to the present paper. First, Braithwaite (2014) conducted a close analysis of posts related to Blizzard's decision to change the language used by a male character who flirts with players who control a female avatar. Braithwaite argues that while the language used by this character was problematic, the response to Blizzard changing the language sparked antifeminist discussions (noted earlier). The second key piece of research about gender/sexuality on the WoW fora is Ensslin's (2012) case study. Ensslin argues that female characters on the fora were discussed less in terms of their backstory and conformed to a limited range of stereotypes. In particular, female pronouns were less frequent than male pronouns, and they collocated with a narrower range of verbs than male pronouns (meaning that representations of women were less complex than representations of men). The final example comes from Pulos' (2013) work on heteronormativity on the WoW fora. Pulos argues that:

> the larger WoW community has not only accepted an intolerant framework but that it encourages it in all parts of gameplay. By lowering the LGBTQ communities to a resource for slander and demeaning language to the broader WoW environment, a heteronormatively dominant culture is continually enforced and elevated while the position of the LGBTQ communities relegated to a fringe position. (Pulos 2013: 86-87)

To that end, Pulos' work suggests a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people, not just within the MMORPG but also on the official fora.

The WoW fora are not just rich sites for data, they are also important because they are a way for Blizzard Entertainment to see what changes are viewed positively by the community and what players actively dislike (see Braithwaite 2014:709). Blizzard are able to use the comments on the fora to gauge and understand current attitudes, and as such they are able to adjust their game. On the flip side, such fora act as a reflection of the ideologies which are viewed as acceptable. This is particularly important with regard to social issues, such as transgender representation.

Transgender representation
There is a wealth of research that has looked at the representation of transgender people in different forms of media, such as on YouTube (see Horak 2014), in films/television shows (see Miller 2012; Hess 2017; see Katsiveli, 2021 for televised news interviews), in online dictionaries (Turton, 2021), and in videogame communities (see Shaw & Friesem 2016). However, representation can cross communicative modes. Specifically turning to the research within linguistics (and language as a communicative mode), the paper presented here appears to build on to what Zimman (2020) calls 'trans linguistics'. Work in trans linguistics focuses on how transgender people use language – such as studies looking at how transgender people construct their own identity (see Zimman 2019; Jones 2019; Ryan, 2019, 2020a, 2020b), discuss their bodies (see Zimman 2014, 2017a), or the phonological features of transgender people's voices (see Thornton 2008; Zimman 2017b). Underpinning trans linguistics is notion that researchers should both empower and support trans people through approaching analyses from an activist standpoint (Zimman, 2020). While scholars in trans linguistics call for researchers to focus on trans people's experience (see Zimman, 2020), in the case study presented here, there were no comments where trans people indexed their identity and the trans person being spoken about is fictitious. Nevertheless, I would argue that trans linguistics can include work on (media) representations, especially when discourses in this text type might contribute to the disempower of trans people outside of the game context. Approaching the representation of trans people within media discourse is an important starting point for the greater goals of equality and social justice and thus contributes to Zimman's call to approach such analyses from an activist perspective. Thus, although the language used by trans people is not explored in this paper, this research contributes towards work in trans linguistics examining how transgender people/characters are represented (by people who are presumably not transgender).

Research that has looked at the linguistic representation of transgender people has typically focused on press representations (see Baker 2014; Gupta 2019; Zottola 2018, 2021). The work on press representations of transgender people can be divided into two camps: the first focuses on how transgender people in a general sense are represented (see Baker 2014; Zottola 2018, 2021). The second camp focuses on how specific transgender people are represented (see Gupta 2019). The research in the former vein has found that transgender people are typically represented in negative ways: such as performing inauthentic styles of masculinity/femininity or that they are medicalised – i.e., spoken about using highly medical terms. Within the work which looks at the representation of specific transgender people, Gupta (2019) notes the importance of pronouns in media reports. The use of correct pronouns for transgender people serves to legitimise their identity; when transgender people are misgendered through the use of incorrect pronouns, this can demean the individual being spoken about.

Importantly, press representations are constructed from those in inherent positions of power (see Jeffries 2007), especially given the regulatory practices established by the press and how they can normalise ideologies more broadly. With regards to transgender

representation, less work looks at how people who are not bound by media regulations construct such representations. One possible exception is Webster's (2019) work looking at the construction of transgender identities on internet fora. Webster looked at the language used by (primarily) transfeminine people who were undergoing (or who were intending to undergo) medical surgical interventions to align their physiology and identity. Webster draws particular attention to the kind of pronouns that the transgender people used, noting that the first person pronoun *I* was primarily used by members of the fora, but *they* was used more for references to out groups, such as medical gatekeepers (see also van Dijk, 1998 for a discussion of *us* vs *them*).

The work noted above has used corpus linguistic methodologies (see Baker 2014; Gupta 2019; Webster 2019; Zottola 2018, 2021). This could be because the data used typically comes from newspapers (though, see Webster 2019 for an exception). While such an approach is useful for processing large amounts of data, less work has been conducted on different forms of media. Therefore, this paper seeks to counter this gap in the research by examining the representation of a transgender character in online fora. In addition, while I do use some corpus methods, these are triangulated with a close reading of the interaction between posters, given the small size of the corpus (discussed in the subsequent section).

Methods
Before discussing the methods employed in this paper, it is worth discussing the four research questions which this study seeks to answer:

1) What proportion of posters are for/against the inclusion of Pelagos?
2) How do posters frame their arguments for/against the inclusion of Pelagos?
3) What pronominal constructions are used to refer to Pelagos?
4) How do posters interact with each other on the fora with regards to ideologies towards transgender representation?

Research question 1) lays the foundations of the paper and explores whether transphobic ideologies come from a vocal minority of posters or if such ideologies are presented on the fora. Research questions 2) and 3) are concerned with the ways in which such ideologies are linguistically constructed. Finally, research question 4) examines how differing ideologies might be challenged.

In order to answer these questions, I took the main thread on the WoW fora about Pelagos' inclusion. The data were manually extracted and coded for post number and poster. One issue with threads on the fora is that different people can reply at different points in the thread, and so I further coded who said what to whom. The document was coded in a way that resembled the fictitious extract below:

<23_06Serro>

I like Pelagos, he's blue and has nice wings

</23_06Serro>

<24_07Impex>

I don't know why people are so horrible about Pelagos, but I disagree with them – he's the best minor character

</24_07Impex>

<25_08Allev = reply to 23_06Serro>

What you don't know is that he's not just blue, he's not turquoise, he's not lapis, he's actually cerulean

</25_08Allev>

In total, there were 747 comments from 151 posters. Collectively, these comments created a corpus of 39,804 tokens. The data were structured using XML tags in a way that is appropriate for corpus based methodologies (see Potts & Formato 2021 for a discussion of XML mark up in corpus approaches to gender and sexuality studies). In other words, the data were coded in a way that corpus linguistic (computational) software could read. This mark up allowed for more contextual information, particularly as it related to how frequently individuals posted and how replies were formulated.

At this point, I wish to draw attention to the scholarly debate around corpus size (see McEnery & Hardie 2011). While smaller corpora do exist (see Cutting 2000; Koester 2010), the size of this corpus is very small compared to other corpora – but arguably too large to manually identify all linguistic mechanisms (though, not necessarily too large for content analysis). While the corpus is small, it is still a representative sample, given that it contains all the publicly available data. However, from an analytical point of view, I would argue that corpus methods should only be used when they are appropriate in answering research questions. Given that there are a wide variety of different ideologies presented in the corpus (discussed below), the subcorpora of posts in favour of/against the inclusion of Pelagos would be too small to warrant some corpus methodologies. Thus, in this paper, I only use concordance line analysis through looking at keywords in context (KWIC) but do not use the statistically driven elements of corpus linguistics, such as collocation or keyword analysis.

Once the data were collected, the analysis was approached in three different ways: first, each comment was coded for whether it was for the inclusion of transgender characters, against the inclusion of transgender characters, or whether the comment was neutral (i.e., not implicitly or explicitly related to the representation of transgender characters). During this stage, the data were read through several times and I noted the salient phraseology used to establish ideological positioning. The corpus tool #Lancsbox (Brezina, McEnery, and Wattam 2015) was used to see if similar phraseology was used anywhere else in the corpus (and who used such phraseology). Second, the concordance lines of third person pronouns were examined. Finally, I used XML tags to look at how (dis)agreement was negotiated throughout the corpus and triangulated these results with a close reading of the first 100 comments and replies. The first 100 comments were selected for a closer qualitative reading because this was a manageable amount, and comments after this were more likely to be off topic.

Analysis

The proportion of posters for/against the inclusion of Pelagos
Before discussing the frequencies at which posters were in favour of/against the inclusion of Pelagos, it is first worth noting that some stances were coded because of implicature. For example, some posts called those who were against the inclusion of such a character 'bigots'. While these kinds of posts did not actively state that they were for/against the inclusion of a transgender character, they expressed a stance in line with/against transphobic ideologies. A category for 'neither' was also included for comments which were either unclear in their

stance or if no stance was taken (some comments asked questions for clarification or were off topic – e.g. *'do you mean in Stromwind?'*). The quantified results were normalised and are reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1. Normalised frequencies of comments in favour or against the inclusion of Pelagos

For	Neutral	Against
41.5%	40.9%	17.1%

These normalised frequencies reveal that the majority of comments were in support of including transgender characters. This is surprising because it contradicts the findings of previous work, which suggested that the fora are a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people and that gender roles are viewed as quite traditional within this community (see Pulos 2013; Braithwaite 2014). One might expect traditional views towards the transgender community, but this does not appear to be the case and there appears to be strong support for Blizzard's decision to include Pelagos. Importantly, there were several comments which challenged transphobic ideologies. When one person posted something transphobic, three or four others would usually comment to explain why that comment was problematic.

However, while these normalised frequencies are useful, they do not necessarily explain how frequently individual users might have posted on the fora. For example, one poster might be explicitly transphobic and post 200 times (and thus equate to about 25% of the data). To address this, I quantified how many comments from each poster demonstrated a stance for/against the inclusion of Pelagos and then categorised that poster into one of five categories on a Likert scale. This Likert scale had the following categories: 'very for', 'for', 'neutral', 'against', and 'very against'. In order for a poster to be considered 'very for' or 'very against', 50% or more of their comments had to express their support/opposition for Pelagos' inclusion. 'Neutral' was used for posters who did not indicate any preference for Pelagos' inclusion, or whose comments were not related to the topic (i.e. 0% of their posts showed a preference). Similar to the earlier categorisation, implicature was also taken into consideration. The results of this categorisation are demonstrated below in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of posters in favour or against the inclusion of Pelagos

Very for	For	Neutral	Against	Very Against
50.99%	7.85%	26.59%	2.65%	11.92%

At this point it should be noted that there were a handful of posters who only commented once. This means that they were placed in the 'very for' or 'very against' category, despite only providing a single comment. In order to address this, I removed those who only posted once. The results of this amended coding revealed that the differences were negligible (the greatest change to any category was +/- 2%).

The table above suggests that not only are the majority of comments in favour of Blizzard including this transgender character, but also the majority of people posting on the fora are in favour of transgender characters being included in videogames more broadly. While the above analysis provides useful quantitative data, it does not reveal anything about how language is used to convey ideologies about transgender people.

Politicising transgender identities

This section explores the language used by posters to demonstrate their stance towards the inclusion of this transgender character. I start by discussing salient phraseology in posts that opposed the inclusion of Pelagos before discussing posts that supported his inclusion.

Posters who disagreed with Pelagos' inclusion framed their criticisms in terms of opposing 'politics' (in videogames) or 'political correctness' – claiming that including Pelagos in the videogame was an unwelcome political act. For example:

(1) They just want more money [..] **its new politics**, old blizzard is gone.
(2) Blizz just being **politically correct** and caving to the green/pink hairs of our society

By politicising the inclusion of transgender characters, those against the inclusion evoke a moral panic (see Hines 2020) and suggest that large companies are only pandering to typically left leaning ideologies (indeed, 'green/pink hairs of our society' in example (2) is a metonymic reference to those with left wing ideologies[2]). This notion also reproduces moral panics around 'political correctness' (see Cameron 2007). Whenever 'political correctness' is used by posters with these views, they suggest that Blizzard has only included Pelagos to appease people with different ideologies, and that they should not have to see the fractals of these ideologies within the game.

The framing of videogames as apolitical is problematic from a game studies perspective. A wide range of research argues that videogames are a site for the normalisation of social identities, which are interwoven with political ideologies (see, for example, Murray 2017; Heritage, 2020, 2021). Social movements such as #Gamergate – where women in the videogame industry were the victims of targeted (sexual) harassment (Massanari 2017) question the degree to which videogames, and by extension gaming communities, can ever be apolitical. Indeed, as Baxter (2008) notes, writers' identities are performative, and ideologies of identity (conscious or not) will be written into texts. This concept is also, therefore, applicable to the writers of videogames (see also Heritage 2021). Thus, while some posters argue that they want their games to be detached from political issues, this will never be wholly possible.

Many of the posters who were in favour of including Pelagos (and transgender characters more broadly) argued that different political views were represented in the game and that, by extension, those against Pelagos' inclusion were specifically upset because he is transgender. Posters who made this observation noted how those against the inclusion of transgender characters did not appear to have a problem with other political issues. For example:

(3) oh noes politics in muh video games […] they was always **political** you just didn't notice because you agreed with the politics'
(4) You cannot have a game based on factional conflict […] in an **apolitical** setting.'

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[2] In the conceptual model held by those with certain right-wing ideologies, hair colour can indicate political ideation. Those with unnatural hair colours are seen to be more politically liberal.

Posts like these seek to problematise the notions presented by those who frame Pelagos' inclusion as a political choice. These posts also argue that those against the inclusion of Pelagos are selective of what politics they want to see represented in the game.

Similar themes emerge across posters who are in favour of Pelagos' inclusion, with other posters arguing that transgender and other LGBTQ+ rights should not be a political issue and that exclusion is also a political choice. For example:

(5) Trans and gay people are not a **political issue**. Irrespective of politics, they exist. Period.
(6) Omitting these groups from the game is the **political choice**.

The first framing of trans and 'gay' rights is interesting because it legitimises the identities. LGBTQ+ people have been politicised for decades across the world and in a range of different cultural contexts (see, for example, Baker 2008; Singh 2021). In this example, the poster appears to separate the politicisation of LGBTQ+ people with their existence, possibly as a way of depoliticising LGBTQ+ character inclusion. Thus, while it is not the case that this happens in other forms of media, it happens here to undermine opposing arguments. The second example here is also important because it reiterates the notion that normative discourses are still politically inspired: that normativity is a choice when producing texts such as videogames.

Pronominal constructions

As noted earlier, one way for tacit transphobic ideologies to be lexicalised is through the use of incorrect pronouns. Indeed, as Wayne (2005:87) notes, pronouns are important in how transgender people are constructed because 'if transgendered people cannot speak, they are nonetheless spoken to and about.' As such, pronominal constructions were examined to see whether Pelagos was misgendered.

In order to investigate this, I searched the corpus for the gendered third person pronouns *he/his* and *she/her* as well as the third person gender neutral singular pronouns *it/its* and *they/theirs*. While *it/its* is typically used for objects, it can be used to dehumanise non binary or transgender individuals, and so it was included in the analysis (this has been particularly shown in work on constructions of out groups, see Pennebaker 2011; Markowit & Slovic 2020). While work on neo pronouns, such as *ze* and *xe*, is a growing line of scholarly inquiry (see Hekanaho 2020), these did not appear in the data.

There were 115 occurrences of *he,* 21 instances of *she*, 772 cases of *it*, and 292 hits for *they* in the corpus. (*his* occurred 68 times; *her* 15 times; *its* 56 times; *theirs* 1 time). After manually analysing each concordance line, it was discovered that Pelagos was only referred to with third person gender neutral pronouns twice (both occurred within a single example through the use of with *it*). With regards to third person male/female pronouns, there were a total of 4 instances where Pelagos was misgendered (of the 115 instances of *he*, 78 referred to Pelagos):

(7) they overtuned **him/her** whatever **it** is, because **it** is trans[3]
(8) is it in the game that **she** is now really a **he**?

Within both instances above, Pelagos is misgendered but also used in tandem with the appropriate pronoun. Part of this could be that there might be confusion about the correct

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[3] Overtuned means to have made something very strong, usually to a point where the advantages of using it make it one of the best options.

pronouns to use for transgender people (indeed, example (8) appears to be seeking clarification). However, it could also be argued that constructions such as 'it is trans' reflect a negative view of transgender people through using *it*.

Importantly, correct pronouns (*he/his*) were used for Pelagos across different posters, regardless of their view about the inclusion of transgender characters. In other words, while some people might have been actively transphobic and disliked the inclusion of this transgender character, they used the correct pronouns for him. For example, one of the most frequent posters within the 'highly against' category wrote:

(9) **He** isn't a good addition just because you say so

Thus, while different framings of Pelagos and his inclusion are used to index transphobic ideologies, such ideologies do not often appear to manifest through (incorrect) pronominal constructions.

This raises important philosophical points for critical discourse scholars and those interested in examining the representation of identity from a critical discursive perspective. Typically, critical discourse studies are seen to have an 'emancipatory agenda' (see Breeze 2011; Richardson 2017; Catalano & Waugh 2020). Indeed, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), as a field, has been critiqued in the past for focusing on problematic representations of identity – with scholars noting that CDS is often deconstructive rather than constructive (see Barlett 2012; Catalano & Waugh 2020). According to Catalano and Waugh (2020), many of the criticisms of CDS have coalesced and have made others develop the field of 'positive discourse analysis'. Those who conduct positive discourse analysis are more concerned with how critiques can effectively be operationalised into constructing positive and demonstrable change in the 'real' world. In the vein of positive discourse analysis, Haig (2004) has argued that scholars also need to examine texts which are ostensibly positive, such as inspirational speeches. The kind of data presented here, however, is different. While I started with an emancipatory agenda (in line with ideas which underpin both CDS and trans linguistics), predicting the delegitimisation of transgender identities through misgendering strategies such as incorrect pronoun usage, it is (pleasantly) surprising to see that these strategies are infrequently reproduced in this context. Such a 'positive' feature is equally as important as features that might need to be challenged or critiqued.

Interaction between posters
While it is useful to understand the language used by individual posters, such a focus does not necessarily account for how users try to convince others that their ideologies are problematic. Thus, this section examines how posters interact with each other. In order to investigate this, I noted salient phraseology used to signal (dis)agreement across posters and explored such phraseology in the corpus more broadly. In this section, I also compare the broader trends in how (dis)agreement is lexicalised to a closer analysis of 100 posts.

Posters who disagreed with Pelagos' inclusion replied to those who supported his inclusion by claiming their arguments were 'emotional' or 'illogical'. While the lexis for such framings varied across posters, the repeated near synonyms and sentiment of each statement positioned those who disagreed with transphobic ideologies to provide poor/illogical arguments. For example:

(10)   You're doing the whole arguing from science thing a massive disservice by adopting **the argumentation strategies of an 8-year-old girl**

(11)   You always think this "Lack" of inclusion is a personal attack on your beliefs, gender or race, IT'S NOT. **Your emotional brain can't get that through**.

In both examples and instances where similar disagreement was negotiated, posters would attack the intellectual capabilities of those who supported Pelagos' inclusion, thus diminishing their contributions to the discussion. In example (10), the poster uses implicature to compare those they disagree with to 8 year old girls by implying that 8 year old girls cannot form a rational argument. In example (11), the poster makes the argument that those in support of transgender characters are driven by emotion rather than rationality (i.e. the difference between Aristotle's notions of pathos and logos – see Braet 1992 for a discussion of these argumentation strategies). Such a way of positioning those who actively disagree with transphobic views resonates with the way women have previously been viewed in essentialist ways – as emotionally driven and empathetic (see Cameron 2007).

The above arguments also imply that opposing the inclusion of Pelagos is logical. However, this implicature of logic is later contradicted by those who support the inclusion of transgender characters. For example:

(12)   fact is you're making a value judgement statement […] **You have to assume that there is an LGBT agenda** to entertain it, and then use such of proof of such an agenda existing. **It's logically absurd**.

Posters also make comparisons to other groups, whose representation does not seem to spark controversy. These posters argue that by logical comparison, those who position the inclusion of transgender characters as 'unbelievable' or 'political' should also be offended at the inclusion of other identities and political stances. For example:

(13)   **There has been always theme of social issues** in fantasy games because that is what makes game interesting […] if you want to **talk about racism** then Harithos story was about it and it doesn't matter if you will insert **Black skined, Asians or Elves** there. […] , yet you open emotional thread here ranting about something YOU have issue with.'

These posters draw attention to elements of WoW which are unbelievable: the videogame is filled with different fantasy races (such as elves and orcs), people with magical abilities, and the ability to never truly die. Yet, an identity from the 'real' world (in this case, being transgender) is seen to be unbelievable. This poster also reiterates what others have mentioned about games being cultural artefacts imbued with political ideologies.

Posters who were for the inclusion of transgender characters would regularly call those against it 'bigots' or make a note of how their ideologies are a product of the past. For example:

(14)   [in reply to a transphobic post] Translation: 'Not bigoted, but…REEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

(15)   <Poster 32>

These threads are excellent for bringing out all the dinosaurs

</Poster 32>

<Poster 33 = reply to Poster 32>

Don't insult dinosaurs, please, they were not transphobes

</Poster 33>

In the first example, the poster uses an intertextual and interdiscursive reference to the 'angry pepe' meme. This onomatopoeic meme has been popularised by those with extreme right wing and white nationalist ideologies on websites such as 4chan (see Quinones Valdivia 2019). On these websites, users 'navigat[e] normativities' (see Hall, Levon, and Milani 2019) and position themselves as nonnormative. This positioning is done through labelling those who conform to normative ideologies as out group members. In example (14), by using the intertextual reference to the 'angry pepe' meme, the transphobic poster is positioned as nonnormative and politically right wing. This reply also mocks the transphobic poster which, taken together with the positioning of them as nonnormative, delegitimises transphobia. Example (15) draws on the idea that transphobia is an outdated concept – and that those who hold these views are comparable to dinosaurs. The posters in example (15) mock those with transphobic ideologies by implying that even dinosaurs from millennia ago were more progressive than transphobes. Both examples demonstrate how mockery is used to signal disagreement with transphobic ideologies.

While exploring how disagreement is signalled across the corpus is useful, a number of comments (d)evolved into off topic conversations after about 100 comments. (Note, this is not to say all comments after this were off topic, but that there were comparatively fewer off topic conversations in the first 100 comments). In order to examine the comments that were specifically about the topic (and remained so), I triangulated these findings with a smaller sample of the first 100 comments. Within this sample, those who opposed transphobia actively engaged with and supported each other. For example, one poster replied to two others:

(16)   [name redacted] and [name redacted], I just ran out of likes… I'll be back'

By contrast, this kind of support was not expressed by those who shared similar transphobic ideologies. Those with similar transphobic ideologies did not address specific people, rather reiterated similar ideas.

Elsewhere, those who support the inclusion of transgender characters actively call those who do not support it 'transphobic', or sometimes 'homophobic' when referring to those who are prejudice against gender, sexual, and romantic minorities more broadly. For example:

(17)   you're super upset over 1 NPC being trans and only would affect your

         experience […] anyway, **transphobia doesn't belong anywhere but in the bin**.

(18)   Character: Litterally just exists.
         Homophobic/Transphobic people: "a character like that doesn't make sense"

Throughout the comments that disagree with transphobic statements, posters explicitly call the ideologies transphobic. Both examples (17) and (18) are used to mock those who are transphobic, which bears some similarities to how disagreement was signalled in examples (14) and (15). Taken together, this could indicate that one way those in favour of including transgender characters negotiate disagreement is through mockery, which in turn delegitimises transphobic views.

Discussions and conclusions

This paper has looked at some of the ways people constructed support/opposition for the inclusion of a transgender character in World of Warcraft. While previous research has typically shown an antifeminist and anti LGBTQ+ stance on the same fora (see Pulos 2013; Braithwaite 2014), this work has argued that the posters are, on the whole, in favour of including transgender characters. This work has demonstrated the complexities of how transphobic ideologies are expressed through language, and how such ideologies are challenged in an online context.

As a CDS scholar, I initially sought to emancipate the data. This was also in line with the call from Zimman (2020) to take an activist stance towards such data. However, a deeper exploration revealed that there were several progressive representations of transgender characters, and transphobia was regularly challenged by other members of the community. In CDS, there is a tendency to focus on how language is used to construct negative representations (see Breeze 2011; Catalano & Waugh 2020). While not all members of this community supported the inclusion of a transgender character, a large proportion did. This is somewhat surprising and might not necessarily resonate with why a researcher might examine such a topic within a similar data set. Thus, I would argue that this data demonstrates the need to also praise communities when appropriate.

It was also surprising that, regardless of ideological views towards transgender characters, posters on the fora regularly used the correct pronoun for Pelagos. One might have expected those with transphobic views to misgender Pelagos, given that transphobia is regularly enacted through the process of deadnaming and using incorrect pronouns (see Gupta 2019). One reason for posters using the correct pronouns might have been because he was introduced as male from the beginning of the story, and so less cognitive work is required of players to change pronouns that they might be used to. Furthermore, Pelagos is framed in terms of having 'completed' his transitional journey, meaning that such a journey has come to a culturally normative 'end'. Such a representation might be more readily accepted by this community as opposed to representing a character undergoing a transition. However, this is possibly a line for future inquiry should Blizzard decide to include a character undergoing this process in future expansions.

Pelagos is only a minor character, meaning that (without prior knowledge) there is a slim chance that players will come across the revelation that he is transgender. Therefore, it could be that this lack of prominence to the story makes the inclusion of Pelagos more palatable to a community that has previously been known to hold problematic ideologies towards LGBTQ+ people. The fact that Pelagos is a minor character is also important because such representations might be more acceptable than if a main character were to come out as transgender and start their transition. Members of the community might have responded differently if they had known Pelagos before playing Shadowlands. It could also be the case that Pelagos is more readily accepted because he is transmasculine and different responses might have been elicited if he were transfeminine. A good amount of previous research into the representation of transgender people in different forms of media has focused on transfeminine people (see Baker, 2014; Gupta, 2019; Webster, 2019). As a transgender character, the discussion of Pelagos thus differs in a range of different ways to those explored before, and much more could be done to how he was represented in comparison to other transgender characters (including transfeminine characters).

While this paper has addressed some key issues about how people responded to the inclusion of a transgender character, there are still several directions for future research. First, I have only analysed data from one register, and more online fora could be examined in

tandem with the data presented here. More user generated content – such as YouTube videos, tweets, and blog posts could be analysed to gain a better understanding of more people's reactions. Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct questionnaire or interview based research to see how a greater proportion of the player base view Pelagos. Indeed, work is also needed to explore how transgender people reacted to the inclusion of this transgender character.

While it took a long time for Blizzard Entertainment to include their first transgender character, this research shows a general acceptance of this decision. Such findings have implications for other videogame companies, who might still be hesitant about including transgender characters. This is particularly important because it shows a move towards acceptance and provides a basis to start changing the negative and underrepresentation of transgender characters in videogames more broadly.

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