



Trans women and transfemininity

Best practice guidelines

Recommended supplement: Pronouns and gender inclusive language

Content warning

Surgery is referenced (in-text only, no images).

Trans women are women

As a baseline, trans women should be treated and presented in the same ways as cis women as the difference between the two is largely irrelevant for most media. Many trans women are indistinguishable from cis women in almost all circumstances, and making your characters visibly trans requires elegance and nuance to create positive representation that avoids reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Definitions

'Transgender' (or **'trans'**) is a term used to describe someone whose gender does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth. The opposite term is **'cisgender'** or **'cis'**, used for someone whose gender does correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth. You can use the word 'transgender/trans' as an adjective describing a person (e.g. 'transgender woman', 'trans girl', etc). 'Transgendered', 'a transgender', or 'transgenders' are not grammatically correct usages of the term.

'Transfeminine' (or **'transfemme'**) is a term used to describe trans and/or nonbinary people who were assigned male at birth and whose gender is feminine or expressed in a feminine way.

- 'Transfeminine' may describe a **trans woman**, someone who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman. **'MTF'** (an acronym for **'male to female'**) is also sometimes used by trans women. MTF is usually used to describe the self rather than others since it also carries the connotation that one used to be male, which some people do not identify with their experiences.

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- ‘Transfeminine’ may also describe a **nonbinary** person—a person whose gender experience is neither strictly male or female—who was assigned male at birth and identifies with femininity in some way. They may use the pronoun ‘she’, but they may also use the gender-neutral singular ‘they’, or other pronouns called ‘**neopronouns**’.
- Note to remember: Though ‘transfeminine’ can be a useful catch-all term for both groups, some trans women or feminine nonbinary folks may not identify with the term transfeminine. It’s best not to use the term towards an individual unless you know they identify with it.

Other key terms

‘**Femininity**’ defines the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of girls and women, and anyone of any gender can identify with it. It is also a fluid concept that may mean something different to everyone. Just as there is no one way to be feminine for cis people, the same goes for transfeminine people, too.

‘**Gender dysphoria**’, often simply referred to as ‘**dysphoria**’, is a term used to describe the feeling of discomfort when someone senses that their body, their gender presentation, or the way in which their gender is perceived and described by others, does not match their gender identity. On the flipside, ‘**gender euphoria**’ is a term that is used to describe the feeling of euphoria or elation someone feels when they are affirmed as their true gender.

‘**Passing**’ is a term used to describe a trans person ‘passing’ and being perceived as cis in the gender they feel they are. The appropriateness of this phrase is debated in the trans community itself. GLAAD (2016) advises not to use this term in mainstream media unless it’s in a direct quote. An alternative could be ‘not visibly trans’.

‘**Stealth**’ or ‘**living stealth**’ is a related term to ‘passing’, in which some individuals who ‘pass’ might choose to live a part or all of their life without allowing others to know they are trans, such as at college or at their workplace. Reasons may include safety concerns, personal preference, avoidance of dysphoria triggers and avoidance of possible discrimination or prejudice.

‘**AFAB/AMAB**’ or ‘**DFAB/DMAB**’ are initialisms for ‘**assigned female/male at birth**’ or ‘**designated female/male at birth**’. Typically this terminology is only used in situations where it is specifically relevant, such as in medical situations.



These initialisms are much more accurate and respectful than phrases such as 'biological female/male', 'natal female/male', 'female/male-bodied', and 'born female/male' because it acknowledges:

- that sex is not the same as gender
- that the gender and sexual characteristics of a person may not be the same as when they were born
- that a person's sexual characteristics do not define whether their body is male or female; this gives people the autonomy to define their own bodies

Not all trans people are comfortable using this terminology. It is respectful to avoid asking questions about or referring to a person's assigned gender. You should always check how an individual prefers to be described, and avoid making assumptions about someone's sex as it was assigned at birth.

Deadnames

A '**birthname**' or '**deadname**' is the name that a trans person used to go by but no longer uses. Often this name may be a source of discomfort or dysphoria for a nonbinary person.

Deadnames should not be used and should never be brought up without the trans person's consent, as they are personal and private. Mentioning a trans person's deadname can out them to people who do not know they are trans, undermine the authenticity of their new name, and even put them in danger of violence or discrimination. The act of revealing a trans person's deadname without their permission is often referred to as the verb '**deadnaming**'.

When representing trans people in media, it is important to mirror the gravity of deadnames in relation to characters. Being flippant about revealing or asking about deadnames in media without any consequences is an inaccurate and potentially harmful portrayal, as it teaches the audience that this behaviour is acceptable.

Note that not every trans person has legally changed their name from their deadname, for a number of reasons. It's a difficult process, and it's not always available to people. This is important to consider if you are involved in managing a workplace, organising an event, or otherwise are required to see a person's identification. A trans person's legal identification may not match their name, and it is important to provide them with a safe space so that they are not required to have their deadname on official materials like email addresses or name tags. It is also important that event volunteers who are checking tickets



against identification cards understand that there may be a mismatch between names and are respectful in dealing with this.

Direct language

Use direct language.

- Say 'Jane is a woman', not 'Jane identifies as a woman'
- Say 'Can I check what your pronouns are?' or 'What pronouns would you like me to use?', not 'What are your preferred pronouns?'

Terms like 'identifies as' or 'preferred' create distance between a person and their gender, and some people feel that it implies their gender is less valid.

Tucking and padding

Many trans women and transfeminine nonbinary people tuck their genitals and pad their shape to create a more traditionally feminine appearance. However these are fairly private parts of one's presentation especially as they relate to genitals and shouldn't be portrayed without specific contextual advice from transfeminine team members or consultants.

Transitioning

Social

A '**social transition**' or '**socially transitioning**' is when a person transitions to living as their true gender in social settings, perhaps being referred to by a new name or new pronouns, changing the kind of clothes they wear, using makeup to change how others perceive their gender, and so on. This can be a sudden change or take place gradually, and trans people will often come out in some settings before others - for example, starting to use she/her pronouns and dress more feminine around friends while continuing to present as a man at work.

These social changes can relieve dysphoria and produce feelings of gender euphoria, and may make it easier to access medical transition in countries where medical gatekeepers require trans people to 'live in role' as their gender for a certain amount of time before referring them for hormones or surgery.

Medical



'Medical transition', or **'medically transitioning'**, refers to any medical changes the person may make to relieve gender dysphoria, feel gender euphoria, and/or make their body align more with how they want to be perceived. Not every trans person decides to or is able to medically transition, and whether they do or not is a private concern.

You should never ask somebody about whether or not they are medically transitioning, the procedures or processes they have been through, or what they are planning, unless it is with their explicit consent.

It is important to remember that people may pursue whatever medical procedures they need in whatever order they choose, including HRT but not surgery, or surgery but not HRT, or no medical procedures whatsoever. Whatever decision someone makes about their medical transition is completely valid. Medical transitioning is not a requirement for a trans individual's identity to be 'valid' or 'legitimate'.

There are various procedures that a trans woman or transfeminine person may pursue:

- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- Hormone or puberty blockers
- Breast augmentation
- Bottom or lower surgery (varies from person to person)
- Voice training/therapy
- Facial feminisation surgeries (FFS)

'Hormone replacement therapy', shortened to **'HRT'**, for trans women or transfeminine people involves **'estrodiol (estrogen)'** to induce feminine secondary sexual developments, usually an **'anti-androgen'** to reduce testosterone levels to halt further 'masculinisation', and sometimes **'progesterone'** as it is anecdotally associated with breast development. These effects may not all occur or take longer to occur for some.

Some people may take HRT at a low dose to control which effects develop, and some may start taking it and stop for various reasons including accessibility, social safety, personal preference and ability to afford therapy. Although prescribing guidelines vary between countries and regions, it's very rare for anyone under 18 to be prescribed HRT for gender transition purposes (despite misconceptions that children are being rushed into medical transition). Instead, minors may be given reversible hormone blockers such as Lupron to allow them to delay puberty of any kind until they're older.



'GRS' or 'Bottom surgery' is another form of gender affirmation, commonly known as genital surgery for trans women or transfeminine nonbinary people. It usually consists of either orchiectomy or vaginoplasty.

Finally some trans women and transfeminine people may undergo voice training to make the sound of their voice more similar to that of cis women. Some also undergo vocal surgery to alter their vocal chords to achieve similar effects.

Representation in media

In terms of queer representation in games, trans people are still relatively rare. A lot more trans representation is needed, but this also means that this may be one of your players' only impressions of them, and so your portrayal must be written with care.

Here are some tips:

- Give trans characters a more diverse range of traits and aspirations than just their gender and transition, reflecting them as complex human beings.
- Be aware of **intersectionality** in how a character experiences trans womanhood and transfemininity when it comes to race, sexuality, disability, faith background and more.
- Be careful about perpetuating harmful stereotypes about a certain marginalised people or culture being transphobic, homophobic, sexist, bigoted, or ignorant. Consider consulting someone who also exists at the intersection of those identities to look over your writing.
- Have your character acted or voiced by someone of the same gender (e.g. a trans woman character voiced by a cis/trans woman); a trans female or transfeminine character acted or voiced by a man may imply to your audience that trans women and transfeminine people are essentially men in one form or another.
- Gender is represented and understood in different ways in different regions in the world, so discuss with your localisation teams how your trans character is going to be portrayed in different localisations of your game. (e.g. the Italian localisation team for Neo Cab had to create a new set of pronouns for their nonbinary character, since there are no gender-neutral pronouns in Italian) (Bortolotti 2019).

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- Gender is also understood by trans people through different language at different times in history. Authenticity is important, but we don't want to casually use language which at one time was in common use but is now used to harm or humiliate. Instead consider showing the individual's trans identity through consistent character interaction, presentation and other statements. For an example from history, Dr James Barry (1795-1865) is widely acknowledged as a trans man. Despite modern gender terms not existing in English at his time, he lived his entire adult life using masculine modes of address, altered his clothing to change his silhouette, fought a duel when he was accused of being 'unmanly', among other personal assertions of his gender. Consulting with trans historians for historical settings can be invaluable, especially if your game intersects history and culture.
- Do not hide transgender representation in avoidable dialogue branches. Make it explicit so that players won't have the chance to miss it.
- Do not include transphobic dialogue options, unless you can make sure that choosing that option is met with serious consequences and/or dialogue that educates both the player and their character, and consult trans people to ensure you're not glorifying transphobia or cheapening trans experiences of discrimination.
- Consider how gender works in the universe of your game. If your universe involves a gender binary, characters might use terms such as 'trans' and 'cis' to describe themselves. But if your universe's conceptualisation of gender is more expansive, you might prefer to not use those terms, since their usage indicates the presence of a gender binary, when it might be the norm in your universe for people to claim their gender at a certain age, or to not have a gender and instead identify with their role in society. There are arguments for having explicitly trans representation in your story and using terms that are familiar to your audience, and there are also arguments for not using those terms and finding other ways to show that your universe has a different culture around gender.
- If you decide to portray medical transition in your game, it is important to portray it accurately and not sensationally.

Empowerment

If you want to explicitly highlight that a character is trans, make sure that it is done in a way that is empowering to that character. Any distinguishing traits such as their height or the tone of their voice

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should be presented as positive traits and in a light that is affirming of their gender (e.g. for a trans female character a deep voice might be 'sonorous and beautiful' and a tall character might be 'elegant and statuesque').

Any discussion of elements of the character's history relating to their trans status, such as deadnames or recollections of trauma should place the power in the hands of the character and be for their benefit. These recollections should not be for the sake of other characters or for the sake of the audience as this disempowers the character.

Character creation

Trans women and transfeminine people may want to see themselves represented when creating a character in games. Here are some suggestions for how you could do so, depending on the structure and aims of your game:

- Allow players to assign their character a gender **regardless of the character's appearance or voice**.
- Let players assign characters with a **pronoun set or appearance style**, rather than a gender. (e.g. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, players are asked to choose their character's style, with two options of a short-haired character and a long-haired character, and clothing options are not restricted by gender).
- Give players the ability to **decide the sexual capabilities** of their characters, such as the ability to be pregnant (e.g. In *The Sims 4*, players can decide if their character can 'Become Pregnant', 'Get others pregnant', or 'Neither', as well as whether they can use the toilet standing or not, regardless of the character's gender, as shown below).



(Maxis 2014)

- **Include nonbinary gender options.**
- If a player's dialogue options imply the player character does not know about or understand trans issues, this may be at odds with a player's perception of their character being trans.
- **Dialogue options** could give your player the choice to come out in the game.

Transphobic violence and death

Trans representation is inundated with stories of violence and death, in fiction and in real life, often caused by transphobia. It is often used for shock value or to stir empathy in a cis audience. It is often seen as particularly tragic when trans characters are hurt or die because they are/were already fighting and surviving the oppression of transphobia.

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Consider your trans audience when you are having your trans characters suffer or die.

- Is it reminiscent of the transphobia they likely face day to day, and therefore a potential trigger of trauma? Is a trigger warning or content warning necessary?
- Is the aim of your game to provide **escapism** for your audience, and would the violence towards trans characters undermine this for trans players?
- If there is suffering of trans characters in your game—especially if it is transphobic—consider the impact of a hopeful ending or resolution for those characters as opposed to a tragic one.

Safe spaces

- Do not **out** somebody as trans without their permission.
- Refer to people as the gender they want you to identify them as, regardless of how they look or sound.
- Keep legal records strictly confidential, particularly legal names and legal gender. If someone wants to be referred to as certain pronouns or names (even if the name just seems like a nickname for their legal name), always refer to them by those things, regardless of what is written in their legal records.
- Do not ask personal questions about someone's gender transition or sexual habits, unless they indicate to you beforehand that they are comfortable discussing these topics.
- Encourage employees to wear pronoun badges or stickers or sign off their email with their pronouns. It's especially effective if cis people normalise this, but take into account that people who are questioning or not out may not feel comfortable doing this and so should not be mandatory.
- Make sure **sanitary bins** are provided in all restroom stalls, as people who menstruate may need to dispose of any related products in whichever restroom they choose to use.
- Have **gender-neutral restrooms**. Male and female restrooms can simply have new signs put up stating whether they are a 'restroom with stalls' or a 'restroom with urinals'. This is more

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accessible and eliminates/reduces the concerns of facing personal antagonism for using the bathroom. Ensuring you have gender neutral facilities also eliminates the unnecessary strain on disability access bathrooms (which are a medical necessity) when they are the only neutral facility.

- Ensure accountability, consequences, and apologies for transphobic comments, writing, and actions committed by staff, streamers, developers, or anyone in your gaming community.
- When making initiatives aimed at gender equality in gaming, clarify who you are targeting. Although aiming such initiatives at 'women and nonbinary people' or 'non-men' is inclusive of trans women, it can be alienating and misgendering for trans men and transmasculine nonbinary people. If you want trans men and transmasculine people to be included, you can use the terms '**marginalised genders**' or '**underrepresented genders**'.

Questions to avoid

There are a number of key things to never ask somebody—whether they're nonbinary or not. These include:

- A person's gender assigned at birth
- Whether they have had surgery
- Whether they are on hormones, or have ever been on hormones
- Anything about their body composition
- What their deadname is, or any previous names they have gone by

Resources

Mayo Clinic: Gender Dysphoria

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/gender-dysphoria/symptoms-causes/syc-20475255>

Gender dysphoria, and related medical procedures and treatments

Tell Me Why: FAQ

<https://www.tellmewhygame.com/faq/>

Deadnames, and why *Tell Me Why* developers did not deadname their character Tyler.

References

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