

# Blue House Monthly

Volume 3 Issue 3

May 1, 2024



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## About the Cover

“Cat Party” by Nico (@slug2thecore)

“Cat Party” is a digital artwork portraying a fun, energetic and lively scene. Using contrast and perspective, the celebratory atmosphere feels not only realistic, but pleasant to the eye. Every inch of the artwork is filled with detail, allowing the viewer to explore all corners of the illustration, while being pulled deeper and deeper into the artwork, same way one might be pulled into a party. Instead of using humans, the subjects of “Cat Party” are, as the title suggests, cats. The reason as to why is to make it possible for anyone to identify with the characters; anthropomorphized animals are a great way of portraying the same scenarios as humans, while being universal. While preparing the concept project I’ve decided to include a laser-like, blue, and pink light. With the artwork being specifically made for the purposes of a zine made by transgender people, I felt the need to express that genderqueer iconography without being too on the nose. The decision of making the two most prominent colors of the artwork be two colors linked with gender, was a conscious effort to include an homage to the ones for whom the zine is made. The artwork is an invitation for the viewer to reach for the publication and explore it’s contents, same way one may explore a party.

## Community News for April 2024

- Phe got into grad school and will be studying electrical engineering
- There were a number of high profile community member birthdays celebrated this month including Melodie, Kira, Hayy, and Nora
- Jess stepped down from her staff position to focus on her career. A big send off party was held for her and Blue House wishes her the best in her endeavors :)

## About Next Issue

Astute readers may notice the background color for Blue House Monthly is slightly different. As pointed out by Blue House server member Brooke, the previous color did not pass some web accessibility standards for background color to text contrast ratios. The new hexcode is #005999 and is classified as a medium-dark shade of cyan-blue. This new background will be the standard going forwards in the BHM pdf and website. A citation standard has also been established for all future submissions. Any material necessitating a citation will be followed by a number in parentheses corresponding to a numbered link in the article’s source section. When a type of source cannot be directly accessed via link such as an interview or physical book the citation will default to AMA format. This new style was selected for ease-of-access, readability, and the fact that Blue House Monthly is a web-based publication. A more in-depth description of the new citation standard can be found on the BHM website.

## Hormones and Dry-Eye

By Ellie (@eleanor.)

*Disclaimer: I have zero ophthalmic qualifications*

We know that hormones affect pretty much every aspect of our bodies (thank god), but often overlooked is the effect hormonal changes have on our eyes. That's why your transgender know-it-all unqualified eye chick (me) is here to tell you all about it! Let's talk about dry eye disease. DED, also called keratoconjunctivitis sicca, is an annoying and unpleasant condition that is surprisingly common and perhaps disproportionately so in transgender women.

The two main things that are associated with DED are meibomian gland dysfunction (MGD) and blepharitis (inflammation of the eyelids). There are also a lot of external factors that can play a role in developing DED like too much screen use or bad hygiene with makeup. Folks with oily or dry skin tend to be inherently more susceptible to DED. Other biological factors also play a role, and I would argue that male to female hormone treatment increases the risk of developing it. MGD is all about our meibomian glands. We have these glands around our eyelids, and they produce oils that help to keep tears on our eyes longer. MGD is a blanket term for when these glands don't function as they should. They can often get clogged and stop producing the amount of oils our eyes need thereby making our tears evaporate faster than they should, causing dry eye. When that happens our eyes feel gritty, our vision feels intermittently blurry, and our eyes water. To put it simply: things get goopy and grungy. If our meibomian glands are dysfunctional for long enough, they'll shrink, and we never develop new ones. Over time MGD can compound and become significantly more of an issue.

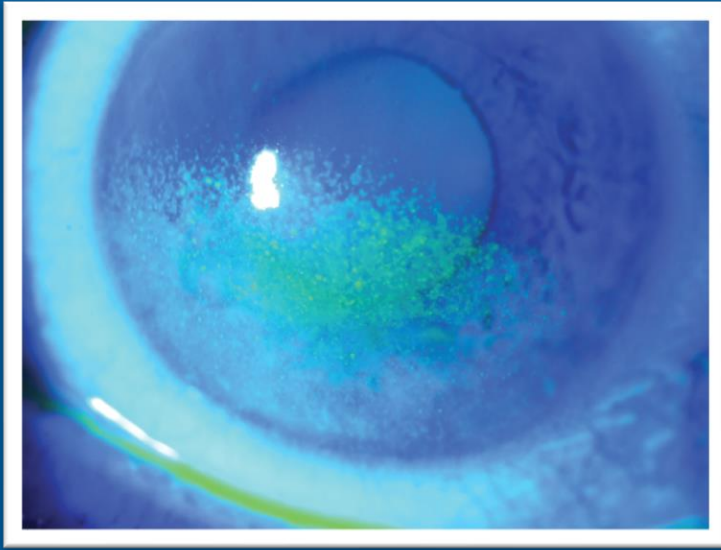
Androgen and estrogen both affect the function of meibomian glands, especially androgens. Androgens encourage these glands to function and reduce inflammation, estrogen increases inflammation. It's been proven that folks with low androgens/androgen insensitivity have a higher association with MGD. Taking anti-androgens and estrogen makes us a higher risk demographic for MGD. Androgen and estrogen also play a key role in the health of our tear film<sup>1</sup>. (1, 2) Fluctuations in these hormones is a common factor in most HRT related DED for women going through menopause. As our hormones change and our levels adjust, so does our tear production. (3) Our androgen levels are on average lower than that of a cis woman and the stability of our estrogen levels tend to veer towards erratic. Considering young, rowdy trans women don't always have the healthiest habits or

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<sup>1</sup> According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology "Tears are made up of three layers: the oily layer on the outside, the watery layer in the middle, and the inner, mucus layer. The three layers together are known as the tear film."



ideal self-care, I'd say our regiments are considerably less consistent and stable than those of menopausal cis women.



*Moderate to severe dry eye shown with fluorescein staining (7)*

The literature directly linking HRT to dry eye is sparse, though in respects to cis women in menopause it is there. One study found for every 3 years on HRT, the risk of DED increased by 15%. (4) Another study found the increase in DED for menopausal woman on HRT was greater when they took estrogen alone opposed to estrogen and progesterone. (5) Keeping in mind this is a webzine and not a medical journal, there's intriguing stuff out there but all of this is in no way conclusive.

As we all know making sure our hormone levels are in a stable and healthy range is huge for our health across the board. For those of us that take anti androgens or monotherapy without progesterone, it's worth keeping a closer eye on our eyes and knowing how to treat DED. (6) If your eyes are dry and you needed that extra push to try progesterone? Now you have it.<sup>11</sup>

DED is something that for a large swath of the population is simply an inevitability of life. It's something that in most cases has to be treated indefinitely and will never truly go away. Optometrists tend to not discuss DED very thoroughly with their patients if their practices aren't specialized, leaving it to specific dry eye clinics which further compounds the issue of the general lack of awareness of DED in the population.

Below are some common treatments that get recommended for DED:

*Bruder mask:* These are eye masks that provide warm heat to the front of the eye, encouraging our meibomian glands to express more oils and help to restore normal function. If money is tight, a hot, wet face cloth can be used, but be sure to rewet it quite a bit. They don't stay hot long enough and a consistent 40°C is needed to liquify those oils. 10 minutes a day every day is recommended to reap the full benefits, not to mention its relaxing.

*Lid wipes/eye cleanser:* You can get special eye wipes to help keep bacteria buildup around the eyelids down and to reduce inflammation of the lids. If you notice some crusty buildup often these are great solution. There are alcohol-based ones and more expensive water based ones out there. Which one you should choose depends on how they affect your skin and your budget. This is a great option for blepharitis control plus a nice little massage of

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<sup>11</sup> This is not medical advice and there is no conclusive evidence supporting the use of progesterone as a treatment for dry eye.

the lids at the end of the day after you've removed your makeup feels pretty good in my opinion.

*Omega 3's:* fatty omega 3's have been shown to promote a healthy tear film, not to mention they're good for you too. You'd need roughly 2000mg a day every day, and it takes 6 weeks to start working on a cellular level, so you have to be in it for the long haul.

*Eyedrops:* eyedrops never address the underlying causes of dry eye - they just address the symptoms when they flare up. I recommend preservative free artificial tears because the preservatives can cause inflammation of the eyelids with overuse which can exacerbate dry eye. At the end of the day though, really anything OTC will do fine. Blink, Systane Complete, i-med are all good, albeit expensive options, however, I'd stay away from Visine drops. 💧

*Source Material for this article can be found starting on page 35.*



# Trans Representation in Pre-2000 Video Games

By Daya (@dayasan)

Transgender representation within video games is a much-discussed topic today. These days, transgender characters enjoy a seemingly ever-increasing presence in the medium across the board from flagship releases to small indie projects. However, it was not always this way and those of us who have been gaming a long time may recall that representation was rather sparse back in the 2000's, and before then was almost nonexistent- but its these early occurrences that, because of their rarity, are something truly special and worth talking about. To best illustrate this, readers should understand the current state of the industry and how gaming communities approach gender, both now and pre-2000.

In 2020 the first AAA game with a transgender lead came out with Tyler Ronan in Tell Me Why, (1) developed by DONTNOD & published by Microsoft. Throughout its creation developers worked closely with various LGBTQ organizations to ensure LGBTQ topics were approached with ample sensitivity (2) which would be widely noted by media outlets at the time. (3) The Last of Us Part II followed later that same year, introducing a transgender character, Lev, to largely negative reviews with some parts of the LGBTQ community not being pleased with the depiction, claiming “many trans players were offended by the game’s use of Lev’s birth name and the brutal torment he suffers for his identity.” (4) Cyberpunk 2077, also released in 2020 and got a mixed reaction with its attempt at trans representation. On the positive end there was the review that described the game’s trans character as “...one of the most [well] rounded trans characters I’ve seen anywhere.” (5) Conversely, there was also considerable criticism elsewhere for what many

saw as the “fetishization of trans people.”(6) Still other gamers said Cyberpunk was disgusting for its attempt at politicizing what should have otherwise been a fun experience. (7) The other major example of recent trans representation in games is Baldur’s Gate 3, released in 2023 and sporting a trans supporting character called Nocturne (voiced by Abigail Thorn aka Philosophy Tube). (8) There are of course many other examples and frankly too many to list but by now readers should be more or less familiarized with the current industry landscape.<sup>III</sup>



*“In-terior crock-o-dile alli-gator,” a meme featuring Bridget from Guilty Gear and queer icon, Neco-Arc*

Beginning to wind back the clock now, the 2010’s also had significant representation but not insignificant controversy. Dragon Age: Inquisition notably introduced Krem, a transgender mercenary that BioWare designed “to come across genuine and be as accurate as possible representation for the LGBTQ community.” (13) Baldur’s Gate: Siege of Dragonspear’s character, Mizhena, caused transphobic online review bombing as a form of retaliation for their mere

inclusion in the first place. (14) Among the decade’s vast number of supporting transgender characters, Guild Wars 2 introduced an NPC whose “transition from male to female [is shown] over the course of the story.” (15) Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege had 2 transgender characters (wow!). (16, 17) Mass Effect: Andromeda made an attempt that was poorly received before making edits in a patch. (18) Destiny had some token representation in the attached lore of the expansion pack, The Taken King, with a character that was established as transgender but failed to actually appear in-game. This led some people to lament that the only reason why “people have not made a big fuss about it is largely because nobody knows it’s in the game.” (19) Apex Legends Season 15 introduced Catalyst, a trans woman. When creating her, the design team consulted with GLAAD, a famous LGBTQ advocacy organization, to ensure the character was represented “genuinely and authentically.” (20) Even Pokémon X/Y managed to include an NPC who was transgender in the Japanese release, but ended up being made cis in the West due to censors.<sup>IV</sup>

<sup>III</sup> Notable mentions include Ladiva in Granblue Fantasy Versus, whose inclusion was not “...a humorous prop or a half-assed cipher for trans struggles...”(9) and Pelagos in the expansion pack Shadowlands for World of Warcraft who “represents a win for representation in a game that hasn’t always done the best job.” (10) Additionally, the DLC released for Guilty Gear Strive confirmed Bridget, a character from previous entries, was transgender,(11) and media was released which has canonized the already rumored transgender status of Chromie in World of Warcraft. (12)

<sup>IV</sup> Games with minor inclusions include Watch Dogs 2, (22) Runescape, (23) Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, (24) and Dishonored 2 (25)



Representation in the 2000's as mentioned previously, was sparse. An infamous mention that should be included here is Persona 3. The game's original release in Europe (that I played) included a transgender NPC and some incredibly transphobic dialogue accompanying them. (26) Interestingly the dialogue has since been removed from its recent remake and could be a sign maybe that these things are being identified and rectified. An unusual inclusion here is Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door that included a transgender character named Vivian whose appearance in my opinion in the Japanese release was very well done but was cruelly removed by localization censors for the Western release. (27) This is a reoccurring issue and is something I look forward to discussing in depth at a later date in a future article. Other games in the decade had, while maybe not explicitly 'transgender' characters, had non-cisgender representation including Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories (which was terrible), (28) Final Fantasy IX, (29) and Mother 3. (30)

The lack of transgender representation, especially in the past, could perhaps be down to a lack of transgendered representation within the gaming industry as a whole. Retro Gamer has an insightful interview with Rebecca Heinman, a transgender coder who worked on many game series including the likes of Medal of Honor and Goldeneye, where she admits "I knew there were plenty of transgender coders in the industry but I also knew most of them had had bad endings." She went on to say "the majority of the industry would've isolated me [upon transitioning]." (31) Transgender representation within gaming media is itself risky as well, with transgender game reviewer Carolyn Petit being called an "abomination freak" for only rating Grand Theft Auto V a 9/10 and for pointing out its "problematic gender politics" in an article she did in GameSpot. (32) Transgender individuals getting involved in public discourse about gender in video games have been hit with "extreme transphobic abuse," been referred to by disgruntled cis people as "trannies that no one should give a fuck about," and even more colorfully, as "retarded...autistic fucks." (33) This kind of abuse is often minimized by people online and all too often gets glossed over by the media. When speaking to the press about GamerGate in interviews, Zoë Quinn had specifically mentioned trans women as having been targeted for abuse but those parts of the interviews often ended up on the cutting-room floor and failed to make it into final reels. (34)

Statistically, "boys and male youth are far more involved in video games than are girls" (35) with males being almost 3 times more likely to play video games daily and 3 times as likely to play for over 2 hours a day. (36) This gap, while perhaps not completely, is at least partly due to there being so few examples of female characters not solely made for male consumers. (37) Women usually appear in video games as "damsels requiring rescue" (38) or are too often hyper sexualized. It is therefore natural that if quality cis-female representation in video games was (and to a point still is) so rare, quality transgender representation is going to be even more uncommon. With this player demographic, a lack of transgendered individuals within the video game industry, and rampant transphobic abuse in gaming circles, its unsurprising that "games themselves follow a type of masculinist logic" (39) that causes video games as a medium to "simultaneously overlap, resonate, and clash with trans issues." (40)

Prior to 2000, physical monthly video game magazines still dominated gamer discourse. I, myself was an avid reader of Official Nintendo Magazine UK and PlayStation Official Magazine UK, however, as would probably be expected, this media was riddled with transphobic and misogynistic jokes. Terms like “transgender” and “transvestite” were used to insult a video game character or used as a general attempt at a laugh. For example it was implied that any male who used Princess Peach in Mario Kart was “harbouring transsexual inclinations.” (41) Another character was described as “probably a secret transvestite with a major drug problem and a thing for horses.” (42) These are just two examples of what was an incredibly widespread phenomenon.<sup>v</sup> When those magazines were making those jokes to their predominantly teenage male readership, it is little surprise they had no inclination to accept transgendered characters (or players for that matter). Notably these jokes even occurred in the official magazines of console companies (43) which seems unthinkable today given how sanitized corporations’ official statements and social media feeds are.

Given just how hostile the environment was, when analyzing pre-2000s transgender video game depictions its important view their existence in the context that any transgender depiction that wasn’t outright hostile was in itself a small win for managing to exist at all even if it was handled clumsily and with clunky language or occasional misgendering. Below, and in the follow up article for this series next month, I will identify and analyze occurrences of transgender characters chronologically starting from the very first known appearance along with how they were received by players and gaming media. Any other pre-2000 media, such as books or comics, if deemed relevant will also be briefly discussed. Additionally, any information that came to light post-2000 that specifically deals solely with the pre-2000 inclusion (such as an interview with the director regarding their original intentions) will also be covered. Any remakes, ports or otherwise re-releases post-2000 will not be included. Lastly, I intend to dedicate at least one future installment to discussing the occurrences of genderqueer or agender characters with the same parameters as above.

## Katherine

Katherine is the earliest example of a transgender character in a video game. Outside Japan, Katherine is known as Birdo, the pink dinosaur which resembles Yoshi. The character retains the name Katherine within Japan but for ease of understanding, this article will use the name Birdo when referring to them. Birdo made her debut in 1987 in the game, 夢工場ドキドキパニック [Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic] for the Famicom (which was released in a slightly different form in the West as the Nintendo Entertainment System, NES). This game is not a Mario game (which is where most people know the character Birdo from), but that can be discussed later. Birdo has no dialogue in Doki Doki Panic,

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<sup>v</sup> To give an idea of how widespread this was, it was prevalent from the very beginning of the 1990s (44) across the middle of the decade (45) and peaked just prior to 2000. (46, 47) Some magazines are notable for a very heavy frequency of this kind of material, especially 64 Magazine, (41, p.58)(42, p.74)(48, p.64), PLAY, (49, p.83)(50, p.25) Playstation Plus, (51, p.73)(52) and Playstation Pro. (53, p.29)(54)(55, p.58) This was not something localised to just the USA and UK. Both Australia (56, p.178) and Spain (57, p.177) had similar issues.

instead merely acting as a mini-boss within levels. The character's transgender status comes from the manual that comes with the game, where Birdo's entry states "I think I am a female."<sup>VI</sup> This is the only mention within the manual with no mentions being present on the box or within the game. If you played this without checking the manual entry, you would not know Birdo was transgender. There does not seem to be any specific reason for this inclusion, nor can I find any mention within Japanese media at the time about the inclusion. With this merely being a mention in a game manual, no mentions actually being present in the game itself, Katherine is notable only for being the first.

The original Super Mario Bros released in both Japan and the West in 1985. Super Mario Bros 2 was released in Japan in 1988. For reasons still disputed today,<sup>VII</sup> the game was not concurrently released in the west, instead being released years later. In its place, Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic was overhauled (59) and released as Super Mario Bros 2 in the USA for the NES in 1988. It is here where the situation becomes interesting, the US Manual entry for Birdo stated "He thinks he is a girl and he spits eggs from his mouth, He'd rather be called 'Birdetta'" (60) which thereby confirmed Birdo as a transgender character in both releases, complete with a new preferred name. In 1989 however this entry is changed and the USA manual from 1989 onwards omits the "He'd rather be called 'Birdetta'" portion. (61) When the game was released in Europe in 1989, this newly trimmed entry was the standard in the manuals. (62, 63) There is no known reason for this 1989 amendment but judging from the many occasions of localization censorship, it would seem that the name preference was just considered 'too far.'

The information in the US 1988 manual made it rather clear Birdo was trans and its fair to say even post revision, US manual and the European manuals hinted there was something altogether not cis-gender afoot. All of this, while being major enough to talk about in an article thirty years later flew enough under the radar at the time that no outrage or even mention within the gaming media occurred. Maybe this was because Birdo was a minor boss with no dialogue, or perhaps because it was just a single entry made in the manual and not visible in the game itself. The fact Nintendo used male pronouns in the manuals is probably also contributed to the magazine articles at the time following suit, as visible in (official) Nintendo Power (65) and Club Nintendo Classic, (66) and the third-party (67) and Nintendo Magazine System. (68) Foreign language magazines did the same thing.<sup>VIII</sup>

Subsequent strategy guide magazines continued the trend of using male pronouns for Birdo (78, 79) along with the slightly more formal strategy guidebooks. (80, 81, 82) In fact I can only find a single mention of Birdo not being gendered male which was in a strategy guide

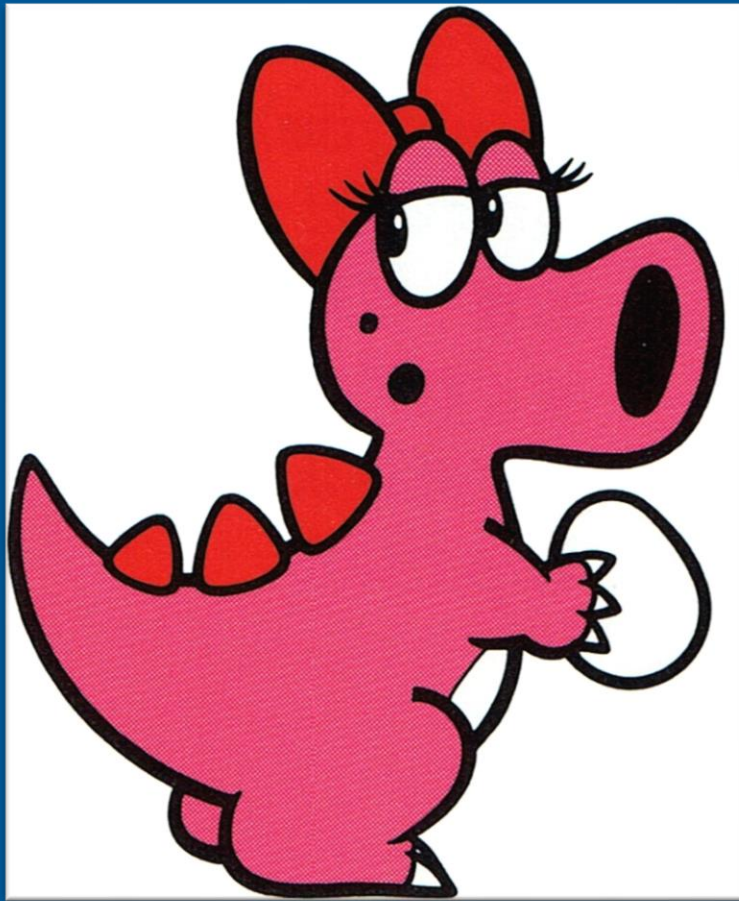
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<sup>VI</sup> The manual uses the phrase "自分をメスと思いこんで口からタマゴなどをはくヤツ" translating to "He thinks he is a girl and he spits eggs from his mouth" (58, p.35)

<sup>VII</sup> It has been rumored that this was due to Super Mario Bros The Lost Levels being deemed "too hard for westerners" (64) however there has been no proper confirmation of this.

<sup>VIII</sup> Magazines and guides in various European countries used male pronouns for Birdo. 2 Dutch magazines using the word 'hij'(69, 70) which is a male pronoun. (71) A French magazine did similar, one using 'le'(72), a male pronoun. (73) A German language one using the 'ihn' as opposed to 'ihr' (74) another male pronoun. (75) An official Nintendo German language guide also used 'ihn' (76) Similarly to the English language manuals, the German language game manual used 'Er,' (76) another male pronoun. (77)

book where despite all characters and enemies in the 'Main Characters' list having gendered language used, Birdo is instead called "this animal." (83) The other enemies are all called 'He'.



*Katherine/Birdo (116)*

When Nintendo themselves removed the name preference of Birdetta from US manuals, when they changed changing the feminine name Katherine to the ambiguous name Birdo in the first place, and when male pronouns were used in the all official outlets (game manuals, official magazines and official strategy guides), they set the example that third party publications would go on to follow. This shows what happens when a character's non-cis-gender status is not made completely clear. The developer/publisher needs to take the lead, follow correct gendering, and ensure all official channels follow suit. If possible, they should also ensure the gender status is mentioned within the game, so it is not relegated to just a line in a manual which may be overlooked.

Following the release of Super Mario 2, a few items of media were released that offer some further insight. In 1989 Nintendo uses female pronouns to refer to the character called Birdo, but with a caveat. This was with the release of children's TV show, The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!, being initially released in the USA and of course licensed by Nintendo.<sup>ix</sup> The very first episode, 'The Bird! The Bird!' was focused on Birdo, with the Toad character kidnapped by a giant Birdo who mistook Toad for their child. Birdo has repeated dialogue in this, and has a feminine voice, supplied by Jeannie Elias. (84) This Birdo is referenced with female pronouns within the episode (85, 15:22) and the rear cover of the VHS release uses female pronouns also with "her missing baby." (85) However readers should note this same cover also uses the phrase "a Giant Birdo," indicating this Birdo is indeed one of a species, and may not be the Birdo from the original video game. This is seemingly confirmed within another episode, Jungle Fever, where multiple Birdo are present. (86,

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<sup>ix</sup> The first VHS for example was released in 1989, for the above mentioned episode 'The Bird! The Bird!', the rear cover of this VHS release clearly states "The Super Mario Bros. Super Show is a registered trademark of Nintendo of America" (84)



06:37) In the episode “The Unzappables,” a dancing background character Birdo is presenting as male, complete with tuxedo and moustache. (87, 13:32) With this seemingly a male Birdo, it at the very least contrasts with the Birdo present in the Super Mario Bros. 2, who is presenting on the feminine side (with long eyelashes and a red bow) as opposed to having a moustache. A subsequent minor piece of media released just after was in 1990, when an official Nintendo calendar was released, again using male pronouns. (88)

The first transgender character in a video game had a complex beginning. In 1992 Super Mario Bros. 2 was itself released in Japan, however due to that name already being taken by the prior Japanese only game, this release was called Super Mario USA. The manual for it again says “He thinks he is a girl,” (89) with the entry almost identical to that found in the original Japanese manual for Super Mario Bros. 2. 1993 saw the release of Super Mario All Stars for the Super Famicom (aka SNES in the West) which was a bundle of Super Mario Bros 1, 2, 3 and Lost Levels. Little changed regarding Birdo because now four game manuals had to fit into one, meaning information deemed unimportant was removed and with it the information regarding Birdo’s (Katherine) transgender status. (90) The western manuals removed the pages containing enemy information, meaning Birdo was removed altogether. (91, 92, 93) In the official Nintendo strategy guide for this game (94) Birdo still remained along with Nintendo’s use of male pronouns and the presumption they were still transgender from previous information. As expected and previously noted, where Nintendo set the example, third party media follows suit. (95) The subsequent re-bundle of Super Mario All-Stars with Super Mario World in 1994 were accompanied by the manuals with no Birdo information. (96) Birdo’s inclusion in the puzzle game Wario’s Woods in 1994 added no new information, with Birdo not being listed as playable character or an enemy. Birdo’s next notable appearance wouldn’t be until BS Super Mario USA Power Challenge (ＢＳスーパーマリオＵＳＡ パワーチャレンジ), a ‘sequel’ of sorts for Super Mario Bros. 2, released exclusively in 1996 for the Satellaview, an add-on for the SNES (essentially it functioned partly as a satellite modem). The games had no manuals or boxes (as they were essentially streamed via the Satellaview connection) however unlike the original, this release had voice actors. Its here that we find something interesting for Birdo/Katherine. 3 Birdo’s showed up in the game in 3 different colours, and all had different voice actors, Jun, Rika, Akemi, as shown in the credit sequence.<sup>x</sup> Additionally a name pops up in the credits in the special thanks section, “白い部屋,” (97) translating to Shiroi Heya (White Room). Shiroi Heya was a transsexual entertainment club in Tokyo<sup>xi</sup> and oldest archive of the staff page from 2002 for it just so happens have 2 performers under the names of Rika and Akemi. (99) Fan-translation of the this game’s credits include the visuals of the credits, including pictures of the voice actors. The pictures for Jun, Rika and Akemi all have non-standard pictures, with two wearing non-professional clothing. (100) It does seem Nintendo went out of its way to use transgender voice actors to voice the Birdos, which was something that actually managed to be picked up by various contemporary websites. (101)

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<sup>x</sup> The website referenced lists the voice actors for the 3 Katherines as “吞奈 純” “梨花” and “あけみ”, which translate to Jun Nonna, Rika and Akemi

<sup>xi</sup> The website is now invalid, however archived versions do confirm Shiroi Heya advertising itself as such (98)



With all that was being done, it's fair that to assume Nintendo was still considering Birdo as a transgender female.

In 1996, *Super Mario RPG* was released for the SNES in both Japan and the US. In it Birdo appeared as a boss along with some dialogue but had nothing related to gender or indicated pronouns. 'Canonically,' it is unknown if this is the same Birdo from *Super Mario Bros. 2*, the accompanying manuals (102, 103) including no information one way or the other. One might be inclined to believe this was maybe an attempt by Nintendo to quietly distance itself from the matter altogether, but at this point something else interesting happened. Nintendo started to use she/her pronouns for Birdo in written media, specifically a strategy guide from the same year as the release. Birdo is referred to using only female pronouns, (104) despite the game not using any itself. Third party media written the same year still used male pronouns,<sup>xii</sup> but that's understandable given Nintendo only first opted to use female pronouns in September. The relevance of this is dependent on whether this is the same Birdo, however it looks identical.

To recap- in the first 1987 appearance, Birdo is clearly identified as male-to-female transgender, localization said the same and then removed the line about name preference. Subsequent official written media up until 2000 almost entirely used male pronouns, but other media complicated the situation. The lack of outrage or any real mention of Birdo's gender situation in media at the time would indicate this messy situation was not due to pressure, but more caused by Nintendo's clumsy localization coupled with misgendering within Japan, ultimately taking 9 years for Nintendo to use female pronouns for Birdo (TV show notwithstanding). With Birdo being such a minor character, Nintendo spent more time self-censoring and confusing the situation than seems reasonable, as even given the jokes in the gaming media at the time about transsexuals/transvestites, I don't personally believe there would have been any major pushback had Nintendo made Birdo's transgender status more clear and used correct pronouns within official channels. It feels the original gender statement in the manual was possibly intended in a lighthearted way as opposed to any genuine attempt at inclusion. Then going forward, further shall we say, "plot development" was somewhat constrained due to Birdo having no dialogue. The *Satellaview* game using transgender voice actors though does seem to indicate Nintendo was continuing with the internal canonicity that Birdo was transgender.

Further appearances, which I will not go into any detail about as they are post-2000, do confirm Birdo's transgender status more firmly with there being female pronoun usage both in games and manuals, and even references in the games alluding to Birdo's transgender status. One game even took this further and made the transgender status of Birdo a plot point, however that is something for a future article. What is clear though, is that Birdo was the first known transgender character in a video game and is widely referred to as such today. (109) It took a while but there was a gradual shift by Nintendo into using correct pronouns. An interesting proposal around this is that this was Nintendo being deliberate

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<sup>xii</sup> Two Italian magazines(105, p.96)(106, p.78) used the term 'Colpitelo' to refer to hitting Birdo, this being the male version of the word. The female version would be 'Colpitela.'(107) An English guide similarly used male pronouns also (108, p.91)

and then adopting female pronouns over time before finally slowly dropping transgender references in an attempt to show a transition having been completed with Birdo being fully in the female gender by the end. (110) Personally, this seems unlikely to me and gives Nintendo too much credit for what was realistically a muddled, badly-handled mess. Begrudgingly however I will admit that by taking the lead with open discussion of Birdo's gender status within games, (110) and Nintendo's choice to use female pronouns within official media, (111) The corporation made Birdo's male-to-female transgender status blatant and obvious which led to third party media for the most part using female pronouns for Birdo post 2000.<sup>XIII</sup>

Birdo's appearance as the first transgender character in video games was a mess, with seemingly little reasoning, a lack of a clear unifying message or overall plan, and was further hampered by over-zealous localization censors. This is something which is in no way unique to Birdo in terms of transgender status. Birdo's status as transgender at all however was, pre-2000, relegated to mere mentions within video game manuals and only became more overt in future games. I do not consider their inclusion particularly pioneering due to this, but it did show that transgender status can be attributed to a character within Japan on repeated occasions and not cause any pushback. Nintendo re-released the statement from the original Japanese manual on many occasions without issue. It did however show a hesitancy in localization teams to keep a character's transgender status which is something which happens again, including to characters in the next article. Whilst not negative representation, the above article does show there is more to inclusion than a line in a manual and that it takes a more prominent, developer led approach for genuine inclusion which has since happened for Birdo. Though maybe an egg-spitting pink dinosaur is not what we would want for representation? 💧

*Source material for this article can be found starting on page 36.*

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<sup>XIII</sup> Most third party publications were using female pronouns within the 2000s, (112, p.38)(113, p.53) and whilst misgendering of Birdo sometimes did occur, (114, p.101)(115, p.280) it is rather infrequent.

## Canada's Protected Land

Shot with a Praktica Super TL1000 on Kodak 35mm Speed Film  
by Heather (@ironicdetachment)



*a mountain on the very border of Canada's protected land, just out of view is a mining operation  
that has completely destroyed a mountain and its hiking trails*

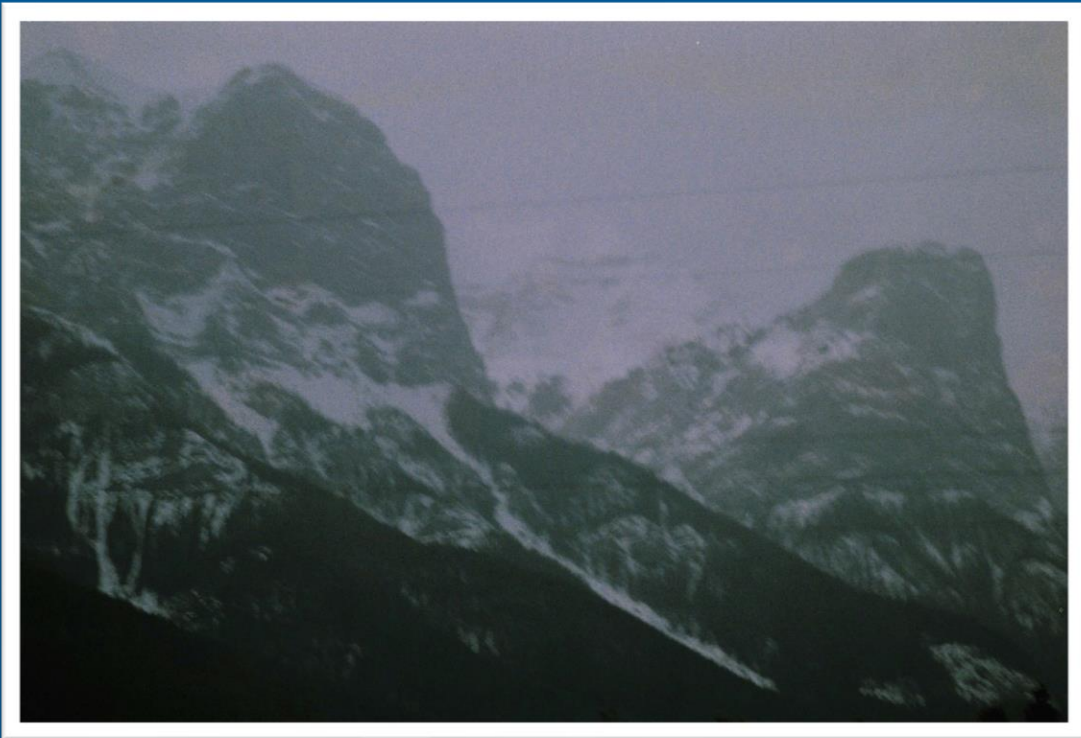




*frozen lake with an ever so slight glimpse of 2 mountains*



*herd of wild fawn resting on a football field*



*Mountain, quality degraded by motion*



*rolling hills at the end of the mountains, last terrain before entering the prairies*





*a blurry, out of focus train*

In 2020 Alberta attempted to cancel its “Coal Policy” which had been place for almost 50 years and served to protect large portions of the province’s mountains from pit mining and other forms of heavy extraction. Doing so would have opened up some of the most ecologically sensitive areas of the province to industry and exploitation.<sup>xiv</sup> In 2022 after considerable and popular pushback, the Albertan government decided to keep the policy in place.<sup>xv</sup> Industry and nature can coexist, but the environment has no means to speak up for itself. The people who hike its forests, climb its mountains, and breathe its air need to speak for it. 💧

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<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-coal-policy-rescinded-mine-development-environmental-concern-1.5578902>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canadas-alberta-province-expands-restrictions-rocky-mountains-coal-mining-2022-03-04/>



## 2 Years of Blue House Monthly

by Poliwhirl (@Poliwhirl61)

Blue House Monthly began a little over two years ago with the idea that there is dignity and honor in creation and the belief that leaving Blue House's internet footprint only as a Discord server was wasted potential. I don't think it's vain to create something that you care about, and to give a platform for others to follow along with you, and encourage them to do so.

The initial plan was for BHM to be a scrappy type of online zine. A type of publication that a few decades ago you may have found hand-written and hand-illustrated, photocopied at a local print shop, stapler-bound and left for free at cafes and indie bookstores. That didn't really work out. The online format didn't lend itself to marginalia scribbles and crusty art and articles. The volunteer contributors also had different ideas in mind, bending the course ever slightly in new directions.

The first year, back when we hosted BHM on [bluehousemonthly.squarespace.com](http://bluehousemonthly.squarespace.com), was entirely a trial- if it was only me writing in the void; if it was just an expensive blog; if it just didn't work out. I was prepared to shut it down and leave it as worthwhile attempt at something different but after examining the first year, I decided that it was still worth it. Even though every issue may not have been better than the last and even though the quantity and quality of submissions wavered. I understood that the inertia needed to be built. Building a corpus of work is work, and creating something is sometimes the only and best reward of the task.

From the start, this has never been a profit-making endeavor, and there are no plans to transform this into one. There is no sponsored content. There are no ads. Much as an author whom I deeply admire once said of their ad-free podcast, "... we remain, as ever, committed not to sell socks or mattresses or online therapy platforms."<sup>xvi</sup> It is my pleasure to maintain this site and to be a co-editor of BHM along with Lapis Lazuli, who with her charisma and dedication to her own articles has brought BHM into its current standard of quality. We now have the [bluehouse.lgbt](http://bluehouse.lgbt) domain secured until 2028. We have no plans of going anywhere but up.

## Death of a King

It's an often said remark that print media is dying. That's true. I don't think that anyone can stop that. What we can do is emulate the best qualities from the print media era and stop ourselves from repeating the worst.

The closest thing to BHM in the physical print media world is the extinct zine ecosystem and the still surviving free magazines at cafes and diners. Looking through three examples of those, conveniently gathered when I didn't feel like cooking breakfast, revealed expected results- over half of it is ads. One weekly publication had an issue with about 55% of the page space covered by ads, and another issue with about 64% covered in ads. Another monthly publication, had roughly 36% of pages covered in ads. That number is betraying, as about half of the articles seemed to be advertorials – advertisements disguised as editorial content. Including those in the ad count, that would mean roughly 60% of that publication is ads. While the weekly publication has a consistently higher ad count and ads that are decidedly trashier, such as dispensaries and smoke shops, the original articles hit much harder. There's some real journalism going on that is frankly quite admirable. The monthly publication, on the other hand, has more polish at first glance. It's far more well-laid out and has a smattering of good articles. Digging a little deeper reveals that although this publication looks better, it really is a vehicle for ad and advertorial delivery. Inquiring with the chief editor and publisher confirmed that the credited cover artist used AI generate images which they stitch together to make the cover.<sup>xvii</sup> This is highlighted by the publication's staple-bound glossy high resolution print quality compared to the weekly publication's low-quality newspaper style folding and printing. The lower quality non-gloss printing makes for easier reading, while the high-gloss high- quality printing makes for

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<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.hellofromthehallowoods.com/post/pride-a-retrospective>

<sup>xvii</sup> Richard Markosian (email communication, 01 May 2024)

more impressive advertising. If this is the standard, then BHM – as it stands now – nearly meets or does meet those standards for free media. The goal now is to exceed them and do so in our own way and in our own style.

## Birth of a New Era

BHM started before machine learning, or AI, tools became widely available. Now, with a few Github links and a free day, you could generate an entire magazine of content in a day and ten while you sleep, complete with fake ads if you wanted. And it would be entirely worthless. There would be no context and no meaning. It would be an imitation of something that in another universe could have been and can be thrown away and discarded just as easily as it is created. While there's always ethical and legal issues concerning AI-generated content, the most glaring one is this: it's usually not that good. For the effort you go through to make it good, you may as well have just made it from scratch in the first place. Once you sacrifice authenticity, it's hard to get it back.

As co-editor and owner of this website, I will never allow AI-generated articles to be published here. In the beginning, when the webzine needed icons for submissions with no images, I used emojis, which had free license and were in the public domain. Less than a year later, I began tinkering with some image generators to make icons when those were novel curiosities. Now, best practice at BHM is to use media created by our community or sourced from the public domain – such as the Wikimedia Commons – with full attribution.<sup>xviii</sup>

## Final Remarks

Eventually, our pipe dream is to create a small printing run of BHM. Compiling most or all of the submissions to date, binding them, and distributing them to as many authors as we can. Small run printing would be an investment, much like domain registration and website hosting, but well worth it when the time comes for that. Lapis Lazuli and I have cooperatively managed this during ups and downs in our workloads and responsibilities. Between the founding of BHM and now, I've started and finished graduate school while working full time. If we can manage to grow BHM while juggling responsibilities like that, then the future is bright for BHM. I'm proud of how far BHM has come since Spring of 2022. I'm especially proud of everyone who has contributed, even if your submission did not make it into publication. Some authors have fallen into busier times of their lives and can no longer contribute. Some authors have disappeared, and contact is practically lost. This makes their contributions all the more valuable. What little time they could spare, or how little time we knew them, they chose to spend it joining in on this little project. You should be proud, too. Not just for making all of this effort feel worthwhile, but joining in on this fanciful idea that we can make something if only for the desire to create; to reclaim portions of our mind from advertisement saturated media with little earnest intent behind it. Thank you for sharing space on the page. 💧

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<sup>xviii</sup> <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Welcome>

# Hijacking a Tragedy:

## The Media and the Death of Nex Benedict

by Lapis (@lapis\_lazuli.)

In 1967 during the backdrop of rising political unrest in Paris, Guy Debord published what would come to be his most famous work, “La Société du spectacle” (the Society of the Spectacle). In this text Debord, a Marxist who drew inspiration from movements like dadaism<sup>xix</sup> and surrealism<sup>xx</sup>, “elaborates the ways in which commodity fetishism and reification<sup>xxi</sup> have infiltrated and colonized all areas of life.” (1) Drastically oversimplified, the spectacle’s “most glaring superficial manifestation” is mass media. (5) A commonly cited example of reification and spectacle in the modern day is school shootings, in which tragedy, victimization, and grief are commodified into content and farmed for airtime, views, and engagement by news networks. (6) To Debord, “economy, politics, social life, and culture were increasingly dominated by forms of spectacle.” (7)

Politics in the United States has long since become intertwined with spectacle and there have certainly been masters of the craft. Ronald Reagan before becoming president was an actor. (8) According to the famed American academic and professor at UCLA, (9) Douglas Kellner, who authored *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*; “[Reagan] [e]veryday performed his presidency in a well-scripted and orchestrated daily spectacle. Reagan was trained as an actor and every night Ron and Nancy reportedly practised his lines for the next day’s performance as they had done in their Hollywood days. Reagan breezed through the day scripted with a teleprompter for well-orchestrated media events, smiling frequently, and pausing to sound-bite the line of the day.” (7) Another “master of media spectacle” that Kellner cites in his book who like Reagan, excelled in tailoring a positive personal brand and image is none other than Barack Obama. (7)

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<sup>xix</sup> Dadaism, or more simply Dada was a “nihilistic and antiaesthetic movement” (2) that produced “anti-art that deliberately defied reason” (3) that flourished in many cities in western Europe and in New York City in the early 20th century (2)

<sup>xx</sup> Surrealism was a movement in the arts and literature that succeeded the prior Dada movement “Surrealism’s emphasis was not on negation but on positive expression. The movement represented a reaction against what its members saw as the destruction wrought by the ‘rationalism’ that had guided European culture and politics in the past and that had culminated in the horrors of World War I” (3)

<sup>xxi</sup> Reification in Marxist theory is “the conversion of the subject to an object, as when the worker becomes a commodity” (4)



Prior to 2016 the political provocateur archetype in US politics already existed, the most famous perhaps being republican CREEP<sup>XXII</sup> man Roger Stone of Watergate fame and his contemporary, the “dirty trickster” democrat, Dick Tuck. (10) With the election of Donald Trump however, the nature of the master of media spectacle in politics changed and with it the role of political provocateur went from pawn to queen. Regardless of one’s opinion of Donald Trump, his presidential campaign was undeniably effective and deceptively brilliant in the way it rage-baited the media. Returning to Kellner, “Trump ran his 2016 presidential campaign as a media spectacle with daily tweets that became fodder for TV news, and with rallies where he would make outrageous comments that would be replayed endlessly on cable and network news. Trump thus dominated news cycles by creating daily spectacles of political attack, insulting and negatively defining opponents, thus helping to construct daily media events through which he was able to define the news agenda.” (7) In literature the ‘anti-hero’ is defined as “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (12), so has Trump, in contrast to Reagan and Obama, come to define the “anti-” master of media spectacle. His ability to play ringmaster to the media circus almost certainly helped give him the presidency but more than that, it also defined a new sort of 21st century populist meta through which to achieve political success.

This is a story about spectacle.



*“Intoxicating Medias” was a protest poster from the 1960s Paris Riots. (92)*

<sup>XXII</sup> Short for “Committee to Re-elect the President”, CREEP was formed to ensure Richard Nixon would get elected to a second term by any means necessary. The committee was responsible for the wiretapping and harassment of Nixon’s opponents and alongside the equally infamous Special Investigations Unit, a.k.a. “The Plumbers” would go on to bug the Democratic National Committee’s (DNC) offices in the Watergate leading to the scandal that ultimately brought down the Nixon presidency. (10, 11)

## Goading the Crowd

A person would be forgiven for not immediately being able to name the head of their state's Department of Education. It's not a position that tends to court the public eye. There may even be an argument to be had that this is ideal, because while the position is often an elected one and therefore "political", striving to ensure children receive an adequate education is a nonpartisan issue. A head of a state's Department of Education succeeding in their job may not be glamorous or controversial enough to warrant major media attention, especially national media attention. To put it more simply, in the wise words of the animated series, *Futurama*; "When you do things right, people won't be sure you've done anything at all." (24) For example, Massachusetts consistently ranks in the top five states for education (25, 26, 27) and in 2024 ranked first in math and reading and second in median ACT score (27). The former and current Massachusetts Secretary of Education<sup>xxiii</sup>, Jim Peyser (28) and Patrick Tutwiler (29) respectively, however seem to largely stay out of the national media spotlight despite their success. (30) Ryan Walters is not like Jim Peyser or Patrick Tutwiler.

After being appointed in 2020 to be Oklahoma Secretary of Education by the state governor, Kevin Stitt, then being subsequently elected to State Superintendent of Public Instruction<sup>xxiv</sup> (31), Walters has repeatedly "courted controversy" over his "rhetoric about transgender students and so-called woke teachers [and] his management of the State Department of Education" (32) Following Trump's example, Walters has established himself as a kind of "anti-" master of media spectacle and harnessed outrage for attention and to exert a level of control over the media agenda, possibly with more grandiose political ambitions in mind. Using the public platform afforded to him as superintendent, he has politicized the office and attempted to leverage his position and call for changes that at best are only tenuously related to education. (35, 37, 38) What he is most known for, however are his outspoken views on "gender ideology" and his belief that gender is defined by one's sex and birth and is therefore immutable. (36) His administration has taken steps to implement policies in line with this ideology in schools across the state including in July of 2023 with the release of a "public service message" via the Oklahoma Department of Education official YouTube channel where transgender students are painted as a being a

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Different states have different bureaucratic structures, titles, and positions for their de-facto departments and department head of education. The Massachusetts Secretary of Education "directs the Executive Office of Education, which oversees early education, K-12, and higher education" (29) making the position the "head of education" for the state or the roughly equivalent "state superintendent of public instruction" position found in other states.

<sup>xxiv</sup> "The Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction is an elected executive position in the Oklahoma state government. The superintendent is the chief education officer of the state and is responsible for giving advice and making recommendations to the State Board of Education regarding the public school system and the State Department of Education" (33) while the Oklahoma Secretary of Education is a different position gained by appointment from the governor and confirmation from the state senate (32) and its purpose is to "Oversee the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability", monitor public school districts to ensure compliance with state education provisions as well as periodically publicly comment on the effectiveness of and progress made by state board of education, state department of education and office of state superintendent of public instruction. (34)

threat to cisgender girls in school bathrooms<sup>xxv</sup>. (39) In the video Walters also indicates his strong support of a state law forcing students to use the bathrooms that correspond to their sex at birth. It should be noted that these policies have since been enforced. (40)

The video is a prime example of the kind of gratuitous stunts Walters likes to pull that are designed to be deliberately controversial and inflammatory so, like Trump, he can play ringmaster to the media circus courting outrage and indignation for airtime and press coverage. The biggest such stunt and the one that would perversely net him the biggest success was when he appointed Chaya Raichik, the owner of the Twitter account “Libs of TikTok”, to serve on the Oklahoma Library Advisory Committee in January of 2024. The purpose of the committee according to the superintendent’s office is to “remove pornographic or sexualized content from public schools in the State of Oklahoma.” In a statement that neither the likes of Jim Peyser nor Patrick Tutwiler would ever give, Walters told USA TODAY “Chaya Raichik and I have developed a strong working relationship to rid schools of liberal, woke indoctrinators, union smut peddlers, and Epstein Island advocates<sup>xxvi</sup>. Oklahoma is ground zero to take back our schools from the radical leftists. I am proud to have her as a fierce defender of conservative values.” (41) To truly understand why this stunt “went viral” on a national scale when so many of his previous ones, while heinous, didn’t, it’s important to understand who “Libs of TikTok” is.

Before Chaya Raichik had an outsized influence in right wing politics, she was a real estate agent by day and a wannabe conservative social media influencer by night. (13) Raichik originally made the Twitter<sup>xxvii</sup> account that would come to be known as “Libs of Tiktok” (@libsoftiktok) in November of 2020, first tweeting under the tag “@shaya\_ray”. While most of her tweets from this time have since been deleted, archives show she originally used it to frequently reply to posts from prominent right-wing figures and as well as live tweet from the riot at the capitol on January 6th<sup>xxviii</sup>. (14) From there, over the next few months Raichik made repeated attempts to rebrand and grow her platform to middling success. First, she switched to “@cuomomustgo” where she peddled COVID-19 conspiracy theories and demanded that (now former) New York Governor Cuomo<sup>xxix</sup> resign. After that

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<sup>xxv</sup> The video, called “Protecting Students from Leftist Social Experiments by Upholding the Law” can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHxuHyqTkcY>

<sup>xxvi</sup> Jeffrey Epstein was a wealthy and well-connected financier who was exposed for running a child sex trafficking ring with connections to several high-profile figures via his island in the Caribbean, Little Saint James. He died under what have been widely regarded as mysterious circumstances while awaiting trial. (42) Walter’s use of the phrase “Epstein Island Advocates” when contextualized with his position as superintendent and the rhetoric of Chaya Raichik is likely a dog whistle implying that LGBTQ teachers are pedophiles

<sup>xxvii</sup> Twitter rebranded to “X” on July 23rd, 2023 following its acquisition by tech-billionaire, Elon Musk (15)

<sup>xxviii</sup> Per Encyclopedia Britannica, on January 6th, 2021 “a mob of supporters of Republican Pres. Donald J. Trump” in Washington D.C. “disrupted a joint session of Congress convened to certify the results of the presidential election of 2020, which Trump had lost to his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden. Because its object was to prevent a legitimate president-elect from assuming office, the attack was widely regarded as an insurrection or attempted coup d’état.” (16)

<sup>xxix</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo garnered national attention for his daily briefings to New Yorkers about the pandemic and the controversial steps his administration took to ensure it was weathered. (20)

she rebranded to “@houseplantpotus” where she briefly parodied Joe Biden before in April of 2021, she finally switched to the tag we know her by today, “@libsoftiktok”, whereupon she found her market niche- targeting LGBTQ people with an emphasis on trans people and LGBTQ educators. Following a shout out from ex MMA fighter turned podcaster, Joe Rogan, a glowing interview with then Fox news host, Tucker Carlson, and more than a little support from Donald Trump Jr. and television host Laura Ingraham, Raichik finally had the platform she craved and the ability for better or worse, to make an impact. (13)



*Ryan Walters posing for a picture  
with Chaya Raichik (93)*

There are a couple things about Raichik’s brand of content that are worth mentioning to better help readers understand her role in the upcoming performance in this article. Libs of TikTok garners its success from appealing to conservative displeasure at “wokeness”. In this way, similar to how news networks profit from coverage of school shootings, there is a perverse incentive to harness shock and outrage in order to garner engagement. Unlike larger organizations however, Raichik is only accountable to herself and is not tempered by any larger bureaucratic apparatus beyond the social media platforms she operates on. In practice social media platforms by their nature, especially X, dance to the same dystopic carnival music as Raichik. Per the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a non-profit dedicated to protecting human rights and civil liberties online, (17) “our research shows that there is a depressingly banal answer to why Elon Musk would reinstate the accounts of self-professed Nazis, disinformation actors, misogynists and

homophobes — it’s highly profitable”. (18) Raichik’s methodology is to take original, albeit perhaps “cringe” content from LGBTQ people that either she or one of her followers find via web trawling then editorialize it in such a way as to imply the person in the video is extremely mentally ill, a pedophile, or is otherwise corrupting children. (19) This gets her the attention she desires at the cost of the reputation and even safety of the people she reposts. It could be argued that this is in large part due to the “funhouse mirror” kind of way she distorts them to her audience. Many of the people she has posted have been doxxed, received death threats and been driven from their jobs by the cascade of harassment they and their employers receive. In at least one case, a high school art teacher in Canada who was lambasted by Raichik for being openly nonbinary at work attempted suicide. (19) Beyond posing a risk to trans and queer people individually, her actions are strongly correlated with a more existential threat. As of February 7th, 2024, “NBC News identified 33 instances, starting in November 2020, when people or institutions singled out by Libs of TikTok later reported bomb threats or other violent intimidation. The threats,



which on average came several days after tweets from Libs of TikTok, targeted schools, libraries, hospitals, small businesses and elected officials in 16 states, Washington, D.C., and the Canadian province of Ontario. 21 of the 33 threats were bomb threats, which most commonly targeted schools and were made via email.” (21) These associations have led the media to controversially allege she engages in a form of “stochastic terrorism”, which is “the public demonization of a person or group resulting in the incitement of a violent act, which is statistically probable but whose specifics cannot be predicted”. (22) During an interview with Taylor Lorenz, the Washington Post reporter who first put a name and face to the Libs of Tik Tok account, “Raichik smiled and said she’s proud of being called a stochastic terrorist”. (23)

Now that the irresponsible antics of Ryan Walters have been contextualized and given the high-profile notoriety of Chaya Raichik it begins to become clear how what was happening in Oklahoma garnered national attention and managed to ignite a media firestorm. While both Walters and Raichik were eager participants in this, the state’s LGBTQ students and staff never volunteered to play the martyr or villain on the national stage, but for better or worse, play they would.

## **A Tragedy Turned Puppet Show**

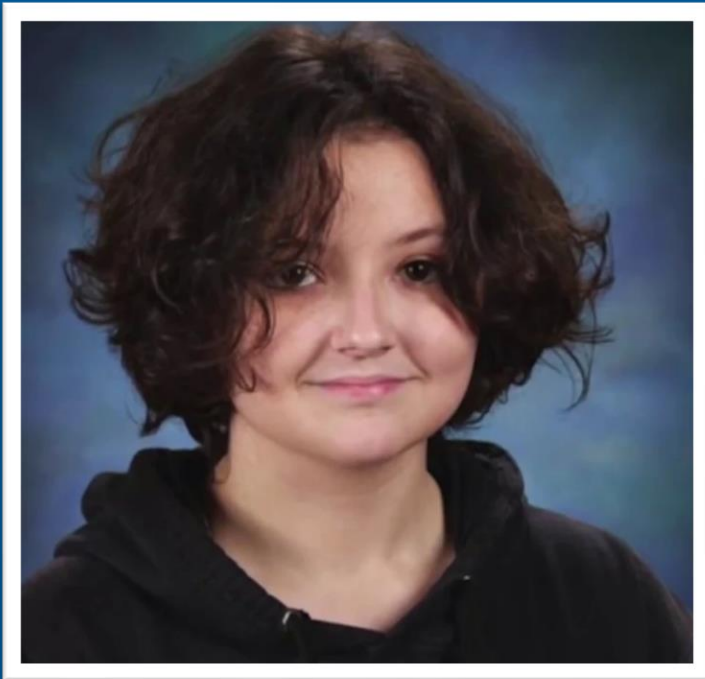
Nex Benedict was born in El Paso, Texas in 2008 and was raised by their grandmother since infancy. They identified as non-binary from a young age (43) and preferred gender neutral and masculine pronouns. (44) Nex had a number of interests. They enjoyed television, especially AMC’s The Walking Dead. They had a cat named Zeus, liked to draw, and enjoyed playing video games like Minecraft and Ark. (45) None of these, however, are why Nex is remembered.

Nex had been getting bullied ever since they’d started their sophomore year this last fall at Owasso High School, and it wasn’t just a single group of kids that were doing it. (46) “Nex Benedict was frequently targeted by bullies at their Oklahoma high school because of their gender identity.” (47) Throughout early February and possibly late January, a particular group of girls had been antagonizing Nex and their friends. While Nex had told their guardian about some of what had been going on, Nex didn’t go to school administrators because they “didn’t really see the point.” (48) On February 7<sup>th</sup>, while attending a school disciplinary program, Nex and a friend who was also transgender were mocked by the previously mentioned girls because of the way they dressed. (46) Later in the women’s bathroom (that Nex, by law had to use) (49) in Nex’s own words “We were laughing and they had said something like, ‘Why do they laugh like that?’ And they were talking about us in front of us... and so I went up there and I poured water on them. And then all three of them came at me.” Nex then proceeded to shove one of the girls against a paper towel dispenser at which point according to Nex, “they got my legs out from under me, got me on the ground, and started beating the shit out of me.”<sup>xxx</sup> (50) During the fight Nex

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<sup>xxx</sup> Police bodycam of Nex Benedict being interviewed in the hospital by Owasso High School resource officer, Caleb Thomas, can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNmsRO2KmuI>





*Nex Benedict (94)*

received cuts and bruises on their face, head, chest and limbs in addition to hitting their head on the bathroom floor which thereupon caused them to “black out”. (51) The fight was then broken up by other students who were present in the women’s bathroom at the time before a nearby member of school staff took over. (54) Surveillance footage provided by the Owasso Police Department shows a video of Nex on their feet walking from the Nurse’s office to the Principal’s office while being escorted by school security.<sup>xxxI</sup> (52) Sue Benedict, Nex’s grandmother, “was soon summoned to the school and advised to take Nex to

the hospital, where she called the police.” (53) Nex received a 2-week suspension for their role in the fight. (46) Later, Sue Benedict alongside Nex were informed by the school’s resource officer while at the hospital (the bodycam of this visit is where Nex describes what happened as quoted in this article) that Nex “essentially started it’ by throwing the water.” (48) The officer went on to say “The way the courts are going to look at it is it’s a mutual fight... both parties are victims, but both parties are also suspects in this” before seemingly attempting to dissuade them from pressing charges and then promising to follow up the next day. (48, 50) The next day at around 1 PM a 911 call was made by Sue Benedict from the family home. (48) Shortly after Nex would be pronounced dead after having overdosed on a combination of Prozac<sup>xxxII</sup> and Benadryl, the combination of which likely having induced severe serotonin syndrome<sup>xxxIII</sup> resulting in death. (55)

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<sup>xxxI</sup> Surveillance footage of Nex being escorted from Nurse’s office to the Principal’s office can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwUU7kHd2cI>

<sup>xxxII</sup> Fluoxetine, also called Prozac, “is a type of antidepressant known as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI). It’s often used to treat depression, and sometimes obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD] and bulimia. It works by increasing the levels of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is thought to have a good influence on mood, emotion and sleep.” (56)

<sup>xxxIII</sup> “Serotonin syndrome is a serious drug reaction. It is caused by medications that build up high levels of serotonin in the body. Serotonin is a chemical that the body produces naturally. It’s needed for the nerve cells and brain to function. But too much serotonin causes signs and symptoms that can range from mild (shivering and diarrhea) to severe (muscle rigidity, fever and seizures). Severe serotonin syndrome can cause death if not treated.” (57)

The following day on February 9<sup>th</sup> a GoFundMe<sup>xxxiv</sup> was created on behalf of Sue Benedict titled “Dagny Benedict” (Nex’s deadname) with a fundraising goal of \$15,000 and a description as follows:

*It is with great sadness and a heavy heart that we have to share the unexpected passing of Dagny Benedict on Febuary 8th, 2024. Dagny was a daughter, sister, cousin, and aunt. She was a 16 year old 10th grader from Owasso Oklahoma.*

*With all the emotional pain and stress death brings, it also brings unexpected financial burdens. We would like to raise money to help take care of any funeral expenses.*

*It is in times of sadness and loss when people can come together to help one another make it through. Any support you may be able to provide would be greatly appreciated. Please keep Dagny’s family in your thoughts and prayers.*

*Thank you in advance for your loving kindness. (58)*

That same day, KJRH 2 News Oklahoma would put out an article titled “Police investigating 16-year-old Owasso student's death” where it said that a girl (misgendering but not naming Nex) died after the day before having been involved in a fight at school. Another woman that according to the network “claimed to be the mother of the victim’s best friend” who also remained unnamed told the network that three older girls had been beating the victim [Nex] along with the woman’s daughter in the girl’s bathroom. The woman was quoted as saying “I think complications from brain trauma, head trauma, is what caused it,” and later “I know at one point, one of the girls was pretty much repeatedly beating her head across the floor.” According to the woman, Nex couldn’t walk to the nurse’s station on their own and staff had not called an ambulance when they should have. Despite the woman’s clearly evident opinion on the nature of what transpired, KJRH refrained from weighing in on the issue substantively and avoided alleging any crime had taken place. KJRH also made no mention of Nex being nonbinary. (59) Despite the apolitical nature of the coverage, this appears to be where the idea that Nex was murdered was first floated in the media.<sup>xxxv</sup>

On February 16<sup>th</sup>, the misinformation and obfuscation would begin in earnest. While I can’t say conclusively that it started with the Medium article on the 16<sup>th</sup>, it, and its twin on the author, Sue Kerr’s, personal blog, Pittsburg Lesbian Correspondents, are the oldest record I could find (after some extensive web trawling<sup>xxxvi</sup>) that begin to overtly politicize Nex Benedict’s death and all but allege murder had taken place under the clearly opinionated headline: “Grieving Nex Benedict: the Brutal Killing of 16 year old Nonbinary Student in an Oklahoma High School”. It appears the woman quoted by KJRH was taken at face value and the allegations of murder were reified and taken as fact. (60, 61) It’s also worth noting that the author of these articles, while having done good work in the past like founding

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> The GoFundMe for Nex can be accessed here: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/dagny-benedict>

<sup>xxxv</sup> Important note: I cannot guarantee there wasn’t older content that did it first that hasn’t since been edited, taken down, or made private.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Important note: I cannot guarantee there wasn’t older content that did it first that hasn’t since been edited, taken down, or made private.

various LGBTQ charities and being recognized by the likes of GLAAD, LGBTQ Nation, and the Advocate, is being sued for defamation<sup>xxxvii</sup> for another incident around the ProtectTransKids project. (62) Sue considers her blog (which has the same article that she wrote for Medium) to be a form of “activism rather than journalism” and according to her she has never identified as a journalist and “does not have training in journalism” (63) This is interesting because if googled, the first thing that comes up is “Sue Kerr – Journalist”. (64) When I reached out to her to inquire about the claims that she made in those two articles, their validity, and how she sourced them, Kerr didn’t respond to comment.

By the 18<sup>th</sup>, news had spread to X and began to be widely shared with Kerr’s article being cited as a source (via direct link or screenshot) alongside captions including “Grieving Nex Benedict: the Brutal Killing of 16 year old Nonbinary Student in an Oklahoma High School - Pittsburgh Lesbian Correspondents” (65) and “...Nex Benedict (they/they) was a nonbinary child. They were beaten, viciously in a high school bathroom of Owasso High School. They died the next day in the hospital...” (66) It should go without saying at this point that both of those claims as they are portrayed are false. Nex was not brutally killed and Nex did not die in the hospital as a result of the beating as implied<sup>xxxviii</sup>, but the people reposting and sharing them may not have even known the information wasn’t confirmed as factual. Their repackaging and sharing of this misinformation to their platforms may have not been because they were “bad actors”, but merely because they were negligent ones who took something they read online from a “journalist” at face value. It should be starting to become clear how the gears of the great misinformation machine began turning, each one powering two more and both none the wiser how the previous started to move; their combined cacophony being mistaken for legitimacy. The post implying they died in the hospital because of the beating would go on to be reposted over 3,000 times. (66)

By February 19<sup>th</sup> the story was going viral and began to permeate other social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. “Nex Benedict was a 16 yo non binary student in Oklahoma who was murdered in the girls bathroom by fellow students...” posted to Instagram by an account with 54k followers would eventually garner 6.3k likes (67, 68). “...My heart breaks for Nex, a 16 year old non binary student who was killed by violence in a school bathroom in Oklahoma...” posted to Instagram by an account with 127k followers would eventually garner 77k likes. (69, 70) On TikTok, a person with an account with 3.1 million followers made a video that would eventually get over 350k likes. (71, 72) In it the presenter, like so many others took the theory that Nex was murdered as fact, and implied

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> Important note: being sued does not necessarily mean being guilty of anything.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Important note: after swallowing the pills, when Nex was eventually found by Sue Benedict and emergency services arrived, they were rushed to the hospital whereupon they were pronounced dead. (73) This is more or less standard procedure as “Generally a physician must make the determination that a person is dead. The physician then makes a formal declaration of the death and a record of the time of death.” (74) Ambulances are typically staffed by EMTs and paramedics (75) meaning a person is often only declared dead once they reach the hospital and a physician is present even if they ceased to be alive at the scene of the emergency or enroute. The statement “They were beaten, viciously in a high school bathroom of Owasso High School. They died the next day in the hospital” draws a clearly visible (and bad faith) causal connection that was impossible to verify at the time and ultimately not reality. I was unable to confirm where exactly Nex was first thought to be dead and if it was different from where they were pronounced dead.

the police, by refusing to conclusively affirm Nex was murdered were in fact attempting to do a cover up.<sup>xxxix</sup> It's worth mentioning here that the when the Owasso Police Department (who are by no means perfect) stated they were "waiting on medical reports before releasing more information," (59) they were in fact following policy by refraining from making a judgement call on the manner of death. In Oklahoma this, by law, is the role of the state medical examiner (Oklahoma Statute §63-942). (76)

By February 22<sup>nd</sup> Nex's death was on CNN (77) and had gained national attention. Over the next week Oklahoma schools would be put under the microscope with the likes of ABC news and the Hill drawing a connection between the tragedy and the antics of Walters and Raichik (78, 79) then (deservedly) putting them on blast. The story went on to dominate national headlines for days competing for airtime with the Israel-Hamas war. The crowd booed and the now nationally known Superintendent and ringmaster, Ryan Walters, bowed. In a prepared statement he went on to say, "The safety and security of our students is my top priority as well as the first responsibility of Oklahoma schools. I mourn the loss of our student in Owasso and pray for God's comfort for the family and the entire Owasso community... We have witnessed the radical left and their accomplices in the media use the tragic death of a student to push a political agenda and a false narrative. It is despicable and harms our students and communities. I will continue to fight for parents and will never back down to the woke mob." (79) This statement, to say the least, is rhetorically notable. First, he does the obligatories expected of him due to his position- safety and security are the top priority and how he mourns for Nex's death. Next, he calls out the radical left, seizing on the tragedy to appeal to his far-right base, then and most interestingly, he points out how Nex's death was being used to push a political agenda and a false narrative. Even a broken clock is right twice a day. What Walters doesn't acknowledge, however, is his complicity in fomenting outrage and turning an aspect of the community that is largely meant to be apolitical into a battleground in the first place. His statement was just as tone-deaf and hypocritical as the media he critiqued.

Nex's death continued to fuel speculation in the news until on March 13th a summary report was released by the medical examiner ruling Nex Benedict's death to have been a suicide citing an overdose of Prozac and Benadryl (as previously mentioned in this article) to be the cause. The medical examiner then promised a full report would be released in about 10 business days. (80) What followed was about 48 hours of intense coverage with various media organizations issuing statements, hedging about the veracity of the autopsy report and/or pivoting their focus to the mismanagement of Oklahoma schools and their seeming permissiveness of transphobia and bullying. (81) For example, GLAAD<sup>xl</sup>, in an article discussing the report on March 15th, even went on to seemingly attempt to discredit the Oklahoma Medical Examiner instead of backpedaling, claiming the office hadn't been accredited for 14 years and pointing out past allegations of misconduct. On the surface

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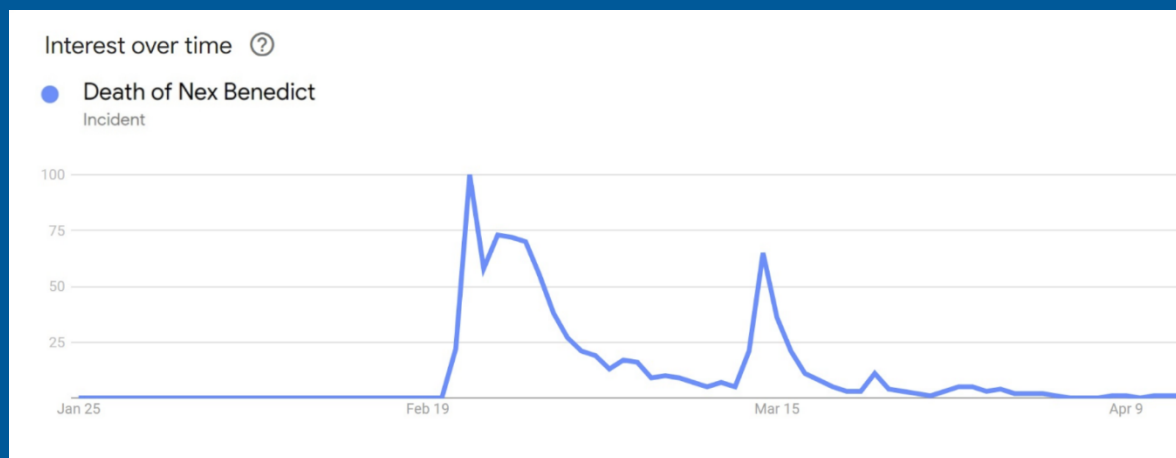
<sup>xxxix</sup> The TikTok video in question can be viewed here:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@underthedesknews/video/7337490310752128299?lang=en>

<sup>xl</sup> Per GLAAD's 'about' page, "Founded in 1985, GLAAD is a non-profit organization focused on LGBTQ advocacy and cultural change. GLAAD works to ensure fair, accurate, and inclusive representation and creates national and local programs that advance LGBTQ acceptance." (89)



these seem to be valid concerns but surprisingly, in a way that at this point in the overarching narrative shouldn't be very surprising, closer examination of the source material proves the claims to be unreliable or even outright misleading. The claim that the medical examiner hadn't been accredited for 14 years was sourced with an article from 2009. While accreditation had been lost, the same source article went on to say "It should be noted that the majority of the deficiencies were related to the facility and staffing... The inspector recognized the quality of work done by your [the office of the Oklahoma Medical Examiner's] dedicated staff, when death investigations and autopsy pathology are performed, despite the deficiencies." (82) Additionally, even a cursory look through state medicolegal records will reveal that the toxicology lab (the part of the office of the medical examiner that determined overdose by Prozac/Benadryl combo) as of 2022 is actually accredited and has maintained their accreditation throughout by the American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT). (83) The allegations of misconduct brought up by GLAAD are also sourced with an article from 2009 and referenced *former* Chief Medical Examiner Doctor Collie Trant, who the same source article admits was fired as a result of one of the controversies (by GLAAD's own count, 14 years ago). The state's current chief medical examiner, Dr. Eric Pfeifer, is a forensic pathologist with over 27 years of experience in the medical field, (85) 14 of which with the world-renowned Mayo Clinic<sup>XLI</sup> in Rochester, Minnesota. (85) When it comes to grasping attempts to save face like this, especially after weeks of fueling speculation, GLAAD was almost certainly not the only offender in this regard- just a major one.



*Web interest over time, generated by Google Trends (95)*

Once all the reflexive articles and statements about the autopsy report were done, the amount of attention Nex's death received took a nosedive only briefly resurging to do the same albeit, in a more muted fashion, when the Tulsa County District Attorney's office released a statement indicating no charges would be pressed over the fight that took place

<sup>XLI</sup> The "Mayo Clinic is a nonprofit worldwide leader in medical care, research and education for people from all walks of life." (87) The clinic is among the most prestigious in the United States where it is ranked (as of 2023-2024) first in Diabetes and Endocrinology, Gastroenterology and GI Surgery, and Pulmonology and Lung Surgery among a plethora of other awards. (88)

in the school bathroom or Nex's death.<sup>XLII</sup> (86) The fight that took place, due to Nex having poured water on the bullies, was ruled an instance of "mutual combat". According to the DA, "'I do not have a reasonable belief that the State of Oklahoma could sustain its burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt if charges were presented for prosecution.'" (86) Then the story was done. Sure, there were occasional follow up articles, but the media was largely finished with Nex Benedict- the spectacle moved on.

## **What Happens After the Circus Leaves Town?**

The media, in attempting to sensationalize what happened to Nex, devalued the actual tragedy that occurred. The story became inconvenient when it became undeniable that Nex Benedict wasn't murdered, but the end result was still the same- a child was dead. Worse than that, a child's death was reduced in the public consciousness to a political gaffe by the left. In the rather apt words of one news anchor for the Hill, "Its kind of gross.. this person died... and there's a New York Times headline with their picture saying this kid killed themselves." (90) The limelight has a harsh glare.

It could be argued that Ryan Walters and Chaya Raichik when all was said and done came out on top, in part due to just how badly the media fumbled its reporting on Nex's death. Walters is now undisputably a national figure who has gotten his name out there enough to possibly be a future contender in national politics. Raichik has achieved the same, and on top of that has, ironically, been able to use this to paint herself as a victim of persecution, tweeting "BREAKING: The medical examiner just released Nex's cause of death. She tragically died from an overdose. The Left used this tragedy to attack LoTT [Libs of TikTok] and the media lied about this story for weeks, insisting that I was somehow responsible for Nex's d\*ath." (91) She is wrong about being a victim but in a way is right about a couple things. The media did lie, and both her, Walters, and dozens or perhaps even hundreds of others all hold a degree of culpability for what happened. Taking advantage of "the Culture War" to scapegoat the minority of the day for some easy brownie points with your base while simultaneously playing ringmaster to every media outlet that is on the other side of the political spectrum undisputably works. The fact it does work incentivizes the legal ostracization of vulnerable groups. In Oklahoma this was most visible with trans people and inevitably the mentality of "othering" trickled down to daily interaction in schools. The girls that beat Nex in the bathroom aren't the disease, they're a symptom. They are immature, impressionable teenagers who learned to bully trans people from watching adults do it on TV every day.

What will become of the Benedict family has yet to be seen. They were made into something to be ogled at and pitied by activists and pundits who said they had the family's best interest at heart, all the while twisting the truth of what happened to suit a wider agenda. A year from now when the news will have ten times since moved on to the "next

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<sup>XLII</sup> The statement from the District Attorney can be found here:

<https://bloximages.newyork1.vip.townnews.com/tulsaworld.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/d/52/d52d0b18-e7cf-11ee-9b5d-274336138874/65fcb0794d268.pdf.pdf>

big thing,” Sue Benedict will still be missing her grandchild, Nex’s siblings will continue to go to school and grow up existing in the wake of all that has occurred and a nonbinary kid that loved to play Minecraft and draw will only be remembered for how they died instead of how they lived. The show’s over.

## **Final Thoughts & Some Miscellaneous Commentary**

I fully understand the subject material of this article was sensitive and I did my best to approach it with delicacy and ample sourcing. As a transwoman who is painfully aware of the precariousness of trans rights in America, the last thing I want to do is undermine the movement. That said, I am a firm believer that the pursuit of trans rights while earnest, needs to be honest. We can’t achieve true queer liberation while hiding aspects of who we are as a community merely because they are politically inconvenient. Likewise, we can’t mold narratives and misrepresent the facts of something to make it more impactful because doing so risks making our plight seem phony. I want to make it clear that GLAAD and many other LGBTQ focused nonprofits and publications who got caught on the wrong side of all of this are not bad organizations. Personally, I think they have done a lot of good things for the LGBTQ community, but sensationalizing necessitates rebuke.

Also, if you live in Oklahoma, I strongly suggest in the next election cycle you make your vote count by voting out Ryan Walters. More generally, if you live in a place where someone as selfish and egotistical as him is running for office, recognize their rhetoric for what it is and don’t just not vote for them. Do your homework. Speak up. Write. Protest. Even get involved in local politics. It takes more than complaining on twitter or taking a picture in front of a rainbow wall and posting it with the hashtag “#transrights” to make difference. Change comes from the actors, not the audience.

This article is dedicated to Spencer. We miss you buddy. 💧

*Source material for this article can be found starting on page 42.*

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## **Hijacking a Tragedy: the Media and the Death of Nex Benedict**

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