Trouble in Paradise: Non-Monogamies and Queer Play in Digital Games

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A Thesis
In
The Department
Of
Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Media Studies)
at Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September, 2021

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Trouble in Paradise: Non-Monogamies and Queer Play in Single-Player Digital Games

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Media Studies)

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Abstract

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C. E. Lyne Dwyer

This thesis uses a combined method of game analysis and play-as-method to investigate the representation and performance of non-monogamies in digital role-playing games. I consider how an array of game elements including rules, mechanics, objectives, win and lose states, characters, and narrative shape the conditions within which non-monogamies are permitted, punished, and proscribed in videogames where players interact with prefabricated non-player characters (NPCs) in single-player worlds with scripted narratives. Through an exploration of the country life simulator and role-playing game (RPG) *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016), I investigate how popular and mainstream videogames both challenge and reinforce compulsory hetero-monogamy as a social institution and how players can resist mononormative and heteronormative tropes, systems, and scripts through queer play. Finally, I compare these titles to a selection of independent, small studio, and experimental titles to signal how alternative ways of designing in-game relationships can explore videogames' potential to act as sites of queer becoming and resistance against compulsory hetero-monogamy.

Acknowledgements

During my time in this program, I've received a great deal of help and encouragement. I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Mia Consalvo, for her support during the research process and beyond. I would not have been able to complete this project without her continued guidance, understanding, and thoughtful feedback.

Thank you also to Dr. Krista Lynes for her support, encouragement, and her role on my examination committee, as well as Dr. Nathan Rambukkana, for both his role on my committee and for taking such enthusiastic interest my work.

I'd like to thank Mircea Mandache for his enduring commitment to helping us all navigate the program and the department.

I thank my MA cohort, who have gone through wonderful highs and most challenging lows in recent years, for their brilliance, their compassion, and their camaraderie.

I also thank my mentors, friends, and colleagues at the mLab and at the Technoculture, Arts, and Games (TAG) lab at Concordia, whose presence and support and within both academia and my day-to-day life has been invaluable.

My partner, Troy Bordun, has been with me as a friend and source of motivation, and so I thank him and all other others of significance who have come, gone, and grown with me.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), without which this project would not have been possible.

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Single Players Making Moves: Literature and an Introduction of Non/Monogamy to the Field of Queer Game Studies

While many of the rules and systems that shape our interactions in digital game worlds are inviolable by design, socially constructed rules that delimit our encounters with objects and others in "meat-space" are inevitably broken, adjusted to suit new contexts, or else twisted and left bent at unfamiliar angles (Stone, 1995). Just as other queer histories and discourses are inseparable from forces at work within a heteronormative and cisnormative world, disruptions and rejections of monogamy have existed for as long as monogamy itself. As Nathan Rambukkana has observed, monogamy and non-monogamy are "two sides of the same socio-cultural coin" (2015b, p.4), an enmeshed system of non/monogamy[1] around which particular politics, practices, and forms of intimate privilege materialize – sometimes unexpectedly.

My interest in studying digital media coincided with several aspects of my "coming out": By the time I had become a graduate student, I was openly bisexual,[2] realized that I do not fit within the purview of a gender binary, and discovered that being non-monogamous provided alternatives to flattening interplay between these aspects of myself. Straying from the well-worn and signposted path of heterosexual monogamy eliminated my fear of having to choose a single someone and, by extension, of having to check the rest of myself back into "the closet." After attending the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon) at Concordia University in 2018 and connecting with new knowledges and communities of queer students, researchers, and game developers, I became eager to answer Bonnie Ruberg's call for not only more diverse representations of gender and intimacy in videogames, but to explore how their "invitation to rethink the mechanisms of desire" could bring about unexpected dimensions of queer potential (Ruberg, 2019, p. 2). I began to question how games that had accommodated some aspects of my queerness (such as same-gender relationships) had also imposed troubling conditions on the development of consensual multi-partner intimacies. For example, my player-character in *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, et al., 2004) could marry multiple NPCs, but the game isolated them from one another in separate homesteads, denying any possibility of intimate interactions with partners outside the realm of coupledom. Although this reinforcement of compulsory monogamy arguably limits *Fable*'s queer potential, Shaw's article on this game's normative slant does not consider monogamy beyond mentioning that multiple marriages are technically possible (2013).

Game studies scholars have examined gender and sexuality (Consalvo, 2003a, 2003b; Shaw, 2014; Wysocki & Lauteria, 2015; Shaw & Friesem, 2016), desire and pleasure (Phillips, 2017; Gabel, 2017), love and attachment (McDonald, 2017; Burgess & Jones, 2020; Grace, 2020), and touched on how these subjects intersect with gender, race, and ability (Chess, 2017; Russworm, 2017; Murray, S. 2017; Hutchinson, R., 2017; Nakamura, L., 2002, 2007). While Meghan Blythe Adams and Nathan Rambukkana (2018) provide a short but rigorous overview of tropes of monogamy in a selection of popular videogames, most accounts of non/monogamy in games (such as Mia Consalvo's (2003b) analysis of sexuality in *The Sims* (Maxis and Electronic Arts, 2000) or Ruberg's (2019) chapter on *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Andrews & Schmidt, 2014)) mention non-monogamies only tangentially in broader discussions of gender and sexuality. Compared to other aspects of intimate relationships, non-monogamies in games are understudied and remain a fringe topic. My thesis engages this gap in research on digital intimacies by investigating how an array of game elements shape the conditions within which non-monogamies in videogames are permitted, punished, rewarded, and proscribed.

Taking up the country life simulation and role-playing game (RPG) *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016) as a case study, I use a combination of game analysis (Fernández-Vara, 2019) and play-as-method (Aarseth, 2003) to consider how videogames can challenge and reinforce compulsory hetero-monogamy as a social institution. I ask: Do representations of both non/monogamy in *Stardew* reproduce power and intimate privilege across identities and orientations?; How can players resist normative tropes, systems, and scripts to explore in-game relationships through queer play?; Finally, how can applying queer theory to non-monogamies in games help us to locate them within queer politics and possibility? By exploring how non/monogamy emerges through a focus on aspects of "design-in-progress that have cultural, ethical, and political resonances" (Flannagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 33), I point to how future game creators can design non-monogamous player-NPC relationships to better resonate with the kaleidoscopic complexity and multiplicity of queer intimacies.

Stardew, which was inspired by and modelled after the popular Japanese videogame series *Harvest Moon* or *Story of Seasons* (Victor Interactive Software, 1997), was originally released by solo game developer Eric "Concerned Ape" Barone in 2016. Core gameplay involves restoring and managing a farm in a small town while building relationships with the locals. The game has a total of 41 NPCs. When a player interacts with 33 of these characters by speaking to

them or giving them gifts, this can result in a boost or deduction of points toward a Friendship score that is represented and tracked on a meter made up of 10-14 red heart symbols. With a high enough Friendship score, 12 of the villagers in Pelican Town (6 bachelors and 6 bachelorettes) are available to date or eventually marry. The game breaks these activities into continuous cycle of approximately 13-minute-long days that make up an indefinite number of 28-day Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter seasonal rotations. *Stardew* is currently available in multiple languages and across a wide variety of platforms (including PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation Vita, Nintendo Switch, Microsoft Windows, MacOS, Android, and iOS) and has surpassed 10 million copies in sales (topping charts for the game publisher and distributor, Steam) ("Press – Stardew Valley" n.d.; McAloon, 2020). Since the game's release, it has undergone three major updates, been adapted into an official board game, and added local co-operative play to its existing multiplayer mode. *Stardew* fans are highly active and include a sizeable community of players modifying (or modding) aspects of the game to generate a unique playthrough experience beyond what was possible in the original text, making it a significant site of cultural production on multiple fronts.

In the following section, I provide an overview of the queer game studies literature that informs my analysis of non/monogamy in *Stardew*. I then draw connections between recent social scientific research on non-monogamies in order locate open (i.e., consensual) non-monogamies within that research model.[3] After reviewing extant analyses on representations of non-monogamies in videogames and providing rationale for using *Stardew* as a case study, I provide an outline of the queer theoretical foundations that form the basis of my inquiry, namely, queer failure (Halberstam, 2011), orientation/disorientation (Ahmed, 2006), and an emphasis on what Alexis Shotwell has termed "relational significant otherness" (2017). After putting these theories into conversation with my methodology and introducing a tool adapted from Consalvo & Dutton's (2006) methodological toolkit I call an Orientation Journal, I conclude with a few notes on the enduring importance of studying single-player games apace with research on non-monogamies in peer-to-peer contexts.

In my first chapter, I provide an overview of my playthroughs with a particular focus on how Stardew reproduces hetero- and mono-normativity (Warner, 1991, 1999; Piper & Bauer, 2006), as well as how the game's association of monogamy with the "wholesomeness" and "high moral value" of an idyllic rural life sustains and naturalizes the dominance of heterosexual and

monogamous intimacies over other identities and orientations (Sutherland, 2020). In my second chapter, I discuss opportunities for queer play that arose during my six in-game years of pursuing NPC romances, examining how the game responded to my resistance against hetero- and mono-normativity through queer uses of time, memory, and magic, as well as the limitations of those queer playing strategies. I finish this chapter with a discussion of how *Stardew*'s game elements can both reorientate players toward hetero-monogamy and generate opportunities for queer play, problematizing the demand for queer players to do the labour of making space for themselves in games. In my conclusion, I signal how future single-player videogames could be designed not just to include many simultaneous relationships, but to support many "overlapping networks of relationality" in their systematizations of various intimate orientations and practices (Shotwell, 2017, p. 285).

Queer Games Studies

Understanding how non/monogamy is implicated in queer game studies begins with a review of the field. Broadly speaking, queer game studies is a cluster of work that converges upon an aim to unsettle dominant theories and practices surrounding games and play, reject demands for an objective definition of what constitutes a game, and challenge the power and authority of hegemonic game cultures. Since the establishment of the Queerness and Videogames Conference in 2013, a steady increase in interest in the relationship between games and queerness is indisputable (Sakar, 2013). There have been special issues on the subject published by two academic journals, including *Game Studies*' "Queerness and Videogames" (2018) and *First Person Scholar*'s "Queer Game Studies" (2019), as well as an anthology of the same name by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017). [4] Shaw and Ruberg's introduction argues for "the scholarly, creative, and political value of queerness as a strategy for disrupting dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played" (2017, p. x).[5] This deliberately nebulous definition reflects their anthology's incorporation of a variety of scholarly, journalistic, historical, community-oriented, and creative approaches for understanding videogames.

Queer game studies is necessarily opposed what Janine Fron et al. (2007) have referred to as "the hegemony of play," an exclusionary logic that shapes games themselves as well as game industries, audiences, and cultures by prioritizing the preferences of a presumed white, cissexual,

heterosexual, male, and "hard-core" player base (Ruberg, 2019; Aarseth, 2007). This self-perpetuating order gatekeeps against perceived outsiders, that is, sexual and gender minorities and other supposed outsiders who, in actuality, make up a significant portion of the gaming population (Fron et. al., 2007). A queer theoretical lens helps us to draw connections between presumptions of male and heterosexual being and desire and how videogames tend to presuppose particular fears (such as homophobia and transphobia), values (such as an investment in realism or completionism), and goals (such as winning or achieving happiness (Juul, 2013)), that contribute to their construction as texts that are ostensibly "straight" (Ruberg, 2019).

The hegemony of play is also evident in a well-documented history of games and tech industries and cultures excluding and directing hostility toward marginalized and underrepresented genders and sexualities (Jenson & de Castell, 2008; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Such issues are exemplified by, but certainly not limited to an onslaught of targeted harassment as well as racist, misogynistic, and transphobic abuse levelled primarily against women, transgender people, and people of colour within academia and the games industry in connection with the hashtag #GamerGate. This miasma did not emerge in a vacuum and is indicative of deeper issues related to the belief that games and other technology inherently belong to a realm dominated by white, heterosexual, and cisgender men (Chess & Shaw, 2008; Nakamura, 2013; Mortensen, 2016; Chang, 2017; Massanari, 2017). Along these lines, queer game studies aims to reject and counter toxic gamer cultures.

There are reasons to be optimistic despite the dangers, barriers to access, and harmful attitudes and assumptions being fomented. For example, the amount of explicitly LBTQ-focused content that amateur, solo, and small-studio developers are contributing has only grown over the course of the last decade (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). In addition, the success of organizations and events geared toward supporting gender and sexual minorities in making games (such as Pixelles, GAMERella, We Need Diverse Games, and the Rainbow Game Jam) stands as a testament to a need to continue combatting prevailing inequities through a combination of community and industry support, the creation opportunities, and the redistribution of resources.[6] Several academic interventions have also devoted attention to these issues, including Shira Chess' *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (2017), Mia Consalvo's "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture" (2012), and Kishonna L. Gray's *Intersectional Tech: Black Users and Digital Gaming* (2020).

However, quoting Lauren Berlant's work on aesthetic and affective responses to crises, Lisa Nakamura argues that a cruel optimism is still at work within the dynamics of games and gaming in that "the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (2011, as cited in Berlant, 2017, p. 2). In response, my analysis of non-monogamies in *Stardew* through a queer game studies lens is not an exercise in critiquing inclusion in videogames at the level of representation, for example, by simply evaluating how many NPCs players are permitted to date at one time. Rather, this project performs necessary groundwork, enacting resistance by playing against the text to understand how games might embody queerness in a way that is "procedurally relevant" and demands the "full, dimensional, consequential, variegated, and playable queer experiences, lives, bodies, and worlds" that are displaced when queer identities and sexualities are cruelly figured in as a simple box to be checked (Chang, 2017, p. 13, 22).

The Queer Potential of Non-Monogamies

Locating non-monogamy's queer potential in videogames requires an of understanding compulsory monogamy's role in reinforcing heterosexuality as a norm from which queer sexualities deviate. Compulsory heterosexuality involves the perpetuation of men's economic and social privilege over women, taken-for-granted physical access to women's bodies as property, and the use of mechanism of control that keep women isolated from one another through obligatory participation in patriarchal social and political institutions (Rich, 1980; de Beauvoir 1949/1989; Barker, 2014). Compulsory monogamy is deeply entangled with reproduction of these systems and privileges. For example, by establishing a "tight relationships between sexual desire, reproduction, and parenting" compulsory hetero-monogamy ensures the protection of patriarchal patrilineage, that is, a given family line (Engels, 1884/2010; Shotwell, 2017; Willey, 2016, p. 3). Further, pressure from social and political institutions to make co-investments in/with a single person is often applied asymmetrically across binary constructions of gender: While women's overinvestment (i.e., the concentration of their labour) in one relationship has historically worked to men's advantage, it has come at the expense of women's capacity to form friendships and communities with one another or to form political solidarity with other gender and sexual minorities (Willey, 2016, p.7; Rosa, 1994).

A social constructionist approach to gender and sexuality, one that recognizes our relationships, desires, and selves as constituted through contact with whatever concepts and systems are available to us (Weeks, 2003; Butler, 1990), reveals how the uneven investments and outcomes of compulsory hetero-monogamy manifest as a gendered double standard in our attitudes toward and expectations of who gets to have intimacy (and in particular, sex), with whom, and how. The rules of monogamy have, historically, been flexible for men and rigid (if not draconian) for women, a power imbalance that persists even in current sex cultures (Mint, 2007a). Examples of non-monogamy including patriarchal polygamy and polygyny, swinging, sex parties, and the free love movement of the 1960s and 1970s, have all tended to sustain views of the openness and frequency of men's sexual encounters as dimension of their power and masculinity while regarding women's sexuality as a binary of virtue (Madonna) or promiscuity (whore), justifying the use of mechanisms of control that ensure women don't have "too much" or "the wrong kind" of sex (Mint, 2007b; Farvid, et al., 2016; Sheff & Tesene, 2015). The gendered double standard of compulsory monogamy also associates the virtues of monogamy with white and middle-class womanhood and alternatives to it with deviance and impropriety through the systemic deployment of racialized and classed signs of non-normative femininity (Young, 1996; Frankenberg, 1997; Willey, 2006). This framing is the product of a deeply racialized history of social and scientific discourses differentiating between the civilized "naturalness" of white and Christian monogamy and the deviant sexuality of non-white races such that monogamy is taken for granted as the norm and championed as a feature of white superiority (Willey, 2006, p. 531-532).

In the 1990s, critical stances on monogamy were led by queer, lesbian, and bisexual women who took issue with sexual and gendered double standards and sought out alternatives (Rothschild, 2018). Some feminist authors have even argued that polyamory —the desire, practice, and/or philosophy of having multiple intimate relationships that all partners are aware of and consent to— is useful for resisting patriarchal hetero-monogamy (Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Jackson & Scott, 2004). Other authors that have discussed non-monogamy in relation queer and transgender issues (Richards, 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995), bisexuality (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Moss, 2012; Estep, 2006), and recognize non-monogamy's potential to "transcend dichotomies of sexuality and gender through enabling the same person to relate to differently gendered people in differently gendered ways" (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). The

non/monogamy entanglement is relevant to queer and feminist problematics because compulsory monogamy's control of women's relationships and the suppression of non-normative sexualities comes at the expense of a multiplicity of possible intimate connections and coalition building.

Yet, the prospect of including non-monogamies under the LGBTQ2SIA+ umbrella is not free from criticism.[7] Besides there being no agreement on whether open non-monogamy is an identity, a sexual orientation, an ethical framework, or a set of practices, there is also debate on whether non-monogamy is itself queer, often grounded in concerns that heteronormativity would only be perpetuated under the pretense and moniker of queerness (Wilkinson, 2010). For example, Mint (2007c) acknowledges that polyamorists specifically are a sexual minority, face discrimination, desire recognition, model their movement after queer activisms, and are often LGBTQ2SIA+, but argues that since heterosexual polyamorists do not experience the level of discrimination faced by more visibly non-normative sexualities, this overlap is not enough for polyamory itself to be queer. Mint's logic supports erecting boundaries between LGBTQ2SIA+ and polyamorous movements because those with heterosexual intimate privilege would take up space and resources by labeling themselves as members of an oppressed group, performing victimhood, and decentering already marginalized voices.

It is true that not all polyamorists self-identity as queer and not all queer people who practice open non-monogamy call it polyamory. Further, many non-monogamies can support rather than resist sexual norms, by either reproducing gendered double standards (as I have already described) or else by safely embodying an assimilationist and unthreatening "polynormativity" (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 351; Anapol, 2010).[8] For example, some polyamorous arrangements (and self-help style literature on the subject) place a great deal of emphasis on an exceptional capacity for love in meaningful and long-lasting relationships; this reproduces heteronormative sex negativity by organizing intimacies into a hierarchies of privilege that value good (normal and moral) romantic commitment to future-orientated relationships over bad (abnormal and immoral) short-term intimacy, sexual pleasure, or experimentation (Klesse, 2011; Wilkinson, 2010; Rubin, 1994). In non-monogamous arrangements that organize partners into hierarchies of importance (e.g., "primary" and "secondary" partners) or operate as a practice that couples do together, heterosexual intimate privilege is reproduced in that participants continue to conform to a monogamous "style" of relating (Finn and Malson, 2008; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010; Zanin, 2013; Shotwell, 2017). According to Alexis Shotwell, such

arrangements tend to "pretend to the throne of liberatory relationality while retaining the forms of monogamy in holographic colour" (2017, p. 282). Additionally, some open non-monogamous arrangements involve rule-making schemas that mirror's compulsory monogamy through the strict policing of intimacies through a control-based approach, but obscure this through language stressing the importance of individual growth, personal agency, and freedom of choice, (Petrella, 2007; Klesse, 2007).

Still, we must acknowledge that these assimilationist logics are not unique to open non-monogamies. Citing Judith Butler's (2002) argument that gay marriage has the potential to support rather than challenge conservatism and Lee Edelman's (2004) position on how "reproductive futurism" implores queer assimilation into heteronormative culture through an investment in marriage and reproduction, Sara Ahmed points out that deviance from the norm is not necessarily radical or progressive on its own, and so argues that the disappearance of queer desire through assimilationist appeals to sameness made across epistemological categories establishes particular identities and orientations as being close enough to the norm to be considered socially acceptable and desirable (2006). Akin to her example of how homonormativity serves to "straighten up queer effects," polynormativity works in a similar way to erase markers of difference by "following lines that are given as the accumulation of points" such as customary relationship milestones like getting married and raising a nuclear family (p. 173). Monogamy and non-monogamy are both capable of "challenging some forms of privilege while potentially reifying others" (Rambukkana, 2015b, p. 10), and so neither are harmful or unproblematic in absolute terms.

For this reason, I agree withs scholars who locate the queerness of non-monogamy not in the act of having multiple partners (referred to by some as "Pokémon polyamory" (Mariposa, 2013), but in how people of all identities and orientations reject monogamy as a political act in solidarity with other non-normative forms of intimacy (Wilkinson, 2010; Noël, 2006; Shotwell, 2017).[9] Taking cues from Rambukkana and adopting Lauren Berlant's definition of the intimate as sex, romance, kinship, friendship, and other forms of connection that "*impact* on people and on which they depend for living" (1997, p. 284, as cited in Rambukkana, 2015b, p. 27), I argue that non-monogamy's queer potential is enacted through affinity, community, and coalition building with others who find themselves disorientated by how our relationships are organized by the dominant social relations of compulsory monogamy. Non-monogamy's breaking down of

an inflexible binding together of intimacy, marriage, reproduction, and coupledom can be understood as what Jack Halberstam (2011) has termed "queer failure," revealing how abandoning hetero-monogamous ideals and mononormative assumptions of monogamy as the most normal, natural, moral, and healthy type of relationship can be generative and desirable (Pieper and Bauer, 2006).

Mononormativity in Videogames

By the 1990s, a combination of the advent of the internet and queer feminists bringing discussions of non/monogamy into the public arena initiated the rapid development of polyamory in particular as a new "sexual story" (Plummer 1995; Rothschild, 2018). Non-monogamies in general have not exactly lacked representation in public discourse; indeed, "the tricky thing about non-monogamy" writes Rambukkana, "is that once you start looking for it, you see it everywhere" (2015b, p. 6). According to Ritchie and Barker (2006), mainstream media's reproduction of sexual and romantic relationships through a language limited to a dualism of monogamy or the catastrophe brought on by its failure —for example, infidelity, jealousy, or sexual and romantic unfulfillment— maintains monogamy's hegemonic dominance over other sexualities by positioning viable alternatives at the "outer limits" of discursive possibility (Rubin, 1995; Shaw, 2015). Stories about desperate or underhanded cheaters, the tension of love triangles, and will-they-won't-they progress narratives about finally finding "the one" or losing "the one that got away" are all too familiar.

Videogames are no exception. To date, the most detailed account of non-monogamies in videogames is Adams and Rambukkana's article in *Game Studies* focusing on tropes of non-monogamy in "AAA" RPGs, specifically *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2017) and *The Witcher* franchises (CD Projekt RED, 2007-2015) (2018). [10] Tracing representations of non/monogamy back to the overcoming of obstacles to unite heterosexual couples in long-standing "rescue-the-princess" narratives (e.g. *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo et al., 1981)) and early examples of sexual non-monogamy that sets up eventual monogamous romantic commitments such as *Leisure Suit Larry and the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra Entertainment et al., 1987), the authors found that non-monogamies in the mainstream today are growing in number but are still overwhelmingly normative. Based on their observations, I identified three noteworthy trends that are relevant to my analysis. First, games that allow players to date NPCs tend to structure

relationships such that they reach an eventual point of mutual exclusivity. For example, games might limit players to pursuing one NPC at a given time by locking them into a relationship after passing a particular threshold of engagement (as is the case in many RPGs made by the Canadian developer BioWare, such as the aforementioned *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age* (2009-2014), and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2003). Alternatively, core gameplay can revolve around narrowing down a selection of unique relationship candidates until players commit to one partner per game ending, as is the case for many dating simulators (including in RPGs and visual novels).[11]

Second, Adams and Rambukkana note that players' efforts to resist monogamy are often corrected, for example, by cutting off access to desirable game content when a relationship with an NPC fails (2018). The authors take as their example *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), a game where the player's failure to choose between two NPC love interest triggers a cutscene in which the two women trick the protagonist, a monster hunter named Geralt, into believing they are interested in a threesome and leave him cuffed to the bed alone as revenge for attempting to romance them both. I argue that the game's handling of this moment as a sort of dramatic "anti-achievement" for pushing against the boundaries of monogamy (para. 25), along with Geralt's admission that he should have known the threesome was "too good to be true," attests to Ritchie and Barker's claim that dominant media cultures often dismiss open non-monogamies (specifically, polyamory) as "childish, neurotic, and even boring in comparison to infidelity" (2006, p. 587). Adams and Rambukkana also call attention to how the "juxtaposition of sexual abundance and romantic scarcity" in this sequence frames casual sex as less meaningful or important than future-oriented monogamous commitments, pathologizing open non-monogamy as something that is incompatible with romantic love and long-term happiness (2018, para. 17). This framing, which has also been identified by Ritchie and Barker (2006) and Deri (2015), is evident in how *The Witcher* franchise routinely encourages casual sex with NPC women but prohibits simultaneously romancing the two women with whom Geralt has a potential future in the story. Players are punished for attempting consensual group sex with a game ending where Geralt finds himself lonely and reminiscing about "the life he might have lived instead" ("Endings," 2020).

Finally, Adams and Rambukkana observed that while open non-monogamies are rare in videogames, those that do make an appearance center "the man's role in more complicated relationship forms regardless of other possible dynamics" (2018, 24), a pattern that effectively

reproduces videogames' presumption of heterosexual male desires and interests (Fron. et al., 2007). For example, in *The Witcher* series, *Jade Empire* (BioWare and LTI Gray Matter, 2005), and *God of War: Ascension* (Santa Monica Studio, 2013), male protagonists' sexual encounters with multiple NPC women tend to glamourize men's power and sexual potency while fetishizing women's intimacy with other women for the consumption of a straight male audience. Casual sex also regularly replicates patriarchal gender roles by having active (usually male) player-characters court receptive (usually female) NPCs, often using sex as the pretext for rewards such as advancement to another stage or level, items or collectibles, and achievements (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018; Hart, 2015; "Binders Full of Women," 2014).[12] For instance, in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018), a player can sometimes recruit NPCs they have romanced as a new member of their ship's crew but cannot interact with them beyond assigning them as a lieutenant to boost their statistics (health, damage, armour) or summon them as a decoy in battle. While my analysis contradicts Hart's claim that sex in videogames is detached from the "reality" of monogamy, I agree that sex in videogames often involves "only the immediate needs and desires of the individual" without much consideration for "lasting repercussions and responsibilities," specifically, the impact of sex and other forms of intimacy on one's NPC partners (2015, p. 58), seriously limiting the radical potential of sex-positive and pleasure-centered intimacies in games.

Whether in-game relationships are sexual, romantic, or both, the hierarchical organization of players over NPCs, sometimes relegating them to the level of non-agentic "background decoration" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 51; Feminist Frequency, 2014), also raises troubling questions of how videogames can obscure, misrepresent, or altogether overlook dynamics of communication and consent. Games with dateable NPCs often diminish aspects of communication and negotiation between intimate partners, for example, in how limited interactivity and the diffuse distribution of *Fallout 4*'s (Bethesda Game Studios, 2004) NPCs (including main companions) across the Wasteland excises most opportunity for players' partners to communicate with one another (Cross, 2015). In a similar fashion, *Fable*'s confinement of multiple spouses to disconnected domiciles effectively shackles the multiplicity of players' desire to property ownership, reproducing the intimate privilege that comes with the accumulation of wealth and access to private space (Klesse, 2013). In either case, the abundance of tension and conflict that

could be playfully explored is lost when negotiation and consent between NPC partners is figured into neither story nor gameplay (Cross, 2015).

In some videogames, the erosion of the dynamics of communication and consent is more explicit. For example, when role-playing as the Grove Street Families gang leader Carl "CJ" Johnson in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), NPC girlfriends' unawareness of a player's relationships with other women is included by design. Being caught by one girlfriend while on a date with another triggers a chase sequence where players must escape the wrath of the jealous party. In the open-world fantasy RPG, *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), players who marry NPCs are locked into that relationship permanently. With no option to negotiate the terms of the relationship or even agree to part ways amicably to pursue a different partner, players who want to remarry must murder their current spouse to reset their relationship status to "single" such that serial monogamy literally requires becoming a serial killer. I will note that these issues are not limited to mainstream videogames. Even lesser-known indie titles that revolve around queer characters, such as the gay dating simulation and visual novel *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps, 2017), do not allow players to mutually agree upon the dynamics of a non-monogamous arrangement with NPCs. The only NPC whom the player-as-daddy has the option of romancing non-monogamously is Joseph, a Christian, closeted, and married man. Successfully romancing Joseph requires that players help him cheat on his wife, Mary, and some game endings involve him promising to divorce her but breaking up with the player when he doesn't follow through (Curio, 2019).

Each of these examples demonstrate how intimate interactions with NPCs tend to "foreshorten the role of personal agency in structuring relationships" and so "erase the reality of [open] non-monogamous lived experiences" (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018, para. 31). Videogame systems and narratives "force players to be either monogamous, cheaters, or creeps" by denying opportunities for them to mutually and collectively communicate and renegotiate their wants, needs and boundaries with NPC partners (para. 26). As Sheff argues, the act of taking on multiple intimate partners (whether through serial monogamy, cheating, or involvement in trendy configurations of polyamory that reproduce compulsory monogamy's gendered double standards) is not at all uncommon, and so what actually makes open non-monogamies radical is honesty (for example, honesty with one's partner about experiencing attraction to others (Clement, 2002)), consent and negotiation, women's access to multiple

sexual partners, and the way that open non-monogamy challenges the idea of the nuclear family (2020; Zanin, 2013). These are the aspects of non-monogamies that mainstream videogames, so far, seem to lack. Recalling Rambukkana (2015b), neither monogamy nor non-monogamy is wholly radical or wholly problematic; "cheating" and other violations of boundaries and trust can occur in any relationship configuration, including in videogames. Accordingly, considerations of non-monogamies in games that move beyond demanding the surface-level inclusion of multi-partner intimacies requires questioning how honesty, consent, and negotiation is worked out through performances of intimacy within overlapping power relations.

Game Selection

Since role-playing through an avatar shapes the ways that players perform identities and orientations (Krobová et al., 2015), my analysis accounts for how different game elements work together to orientate players within the non/monogamy paradigm by bringing embodied interactions with NPCs to the fore. *Stardew* requires that players assume the role of "the farmer," whose name, gender, and appearance are customized before they begin building relationships with Pelican Town's residents through iterative and reciprocal action, specifically, conversation and gift giving. Role-playing as "the farmer" allowed me to observe how *Stardew*'s systems interpellated me as a particular kind of sexual subject, the outcomes that resulted from my decisions and playstyle, as well as how I could act as an agent of change within the game world and find ways to abide by or defy the rules of monogamy. A focus on role-play also lends itself to an assessment of the affordances and limitations of queer playing strategies (such as role-playing, modding, and stylized performance) that have already been identified by Youngblood (2013), Krobová et al. (2015), Phillips (2017), Deshane and Morton (2018), and Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) when they are applied to the performance of open non-monogamies in particular.

In part, I've also taken up *Stardew* as a case study because it occupies a curious interstice between independent and mainstream game production. A solo-developer's passion project that exploded in popularity, *Stardew* topped the hosting platform Steam's best sellers list the year it was released and has been referred to as "the unlikeliest independent-video-game triumph since *Minecraft*" (White, 2018, para. 4). In this sense, *Stardew* is a mainstream and commercially successful game that conceivably has "the greatest social currency and the broadest impact and reach" while the text and its modding community also provide insight into how independent

game creators and fans envision what is possible and desirable for RPG dating mechanics (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018, para. 5). Choosing a game that reaches a wide audience across multiple platforms does limit my analysis in that this excludes titles with explicit sexual and erotic themes and images, such as pornographic games.

To best synthesize my observations with the theories of non-monogamy that inform this analysis, I also chose *Stardew* because it was produced within the context of the Euro-American games industry. Non-monogamies are not solely a western phenomenon, but "how they play out in western spheres does have its own unique character" when it comes to trends and dynamics of power, gender, race, and sexual orientation (Rambukkana, 2015b, p. 6). Japanese *bishōjo* and *otome* visual novel style games, for example, exist within a specific cultural context of game production and audience reception that lies outside the scope of this project. Many games with NPC dating use systems resembling "harem" style games in that players engage in a process of strategic move-making to elicit the desired responses from prospective partners that narrow down a pool of candidates and eventually results in a monogamous coupling, a structure that Adams and Rambukkana notes makes the pursuit of each potential partner a source of replay value (2018). However, without substantial evidence to suggest that these qualities are borrowed directly from Eastern games cultures, I am more inclined to compare these qualities to the rules and selection systems in media created within western cultural spheres, such as the reality television dating games *The Bachelor* (Fleiss, 2002-present) and *The Bachelorette* (Gale, 2003-present). *Stardew*'s dating mechanics do not neatly map onto the rules of these game shows, but the emphasis on monogamy and leveraging of romantic scarcity that is evident in many dating games is reflected in how the show involves a group of contestants competing in challenges to prove their compatibility with a single man or woman who then end the season by getting engaged. Dating games from South Korea (such as *Nameless* (Cheritz, 2013) and *Mystic Messenger* (2016)) and Japan (such as *Catherine* (Atlus, 2011) and the *Persona* franchise (1996-2020)) do make up a significant portion of the games being played by people in North America, but research on non-monogamies that attends to these titles should devote particular attention to the proliferation of Orientalist tropes of sexuality in an internationalized videogame market (Said, 1978; Nakamura, 2007).

Stardew differs distinctly from the AAA RPGs discussed in Adams and Rambukkana's (2018) in terms of genre, structure, scope, goals, and core mechanics. While intimate encounters

with NPCs in action RPGs such as *Mass Effect, The Witcher*, or *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* are arranged within open worlds with bounded stories, *Stardew* is a small-scale and closed-world game wherein relationships grow and change over an indefinite period within the bounds of a tight-knit seaside community. Building relationships with the villagers requires earning Friendship points by learning their schedules, likes, dislikes, and role in the community in order to interact regularly, give their preferred gifts, and respond favourably when they ask questions. As a player's Friendship score with a given NPC increases, sequences called "Heart Events" are triggered, which flesh out a given villager's values, attitudes, desires, and interests through a combination of cutscenes and periodic opportunities for dialogue. An emphasis on ongoing and time-sensitive maintenance of one's property and community makes *Stardew* a productive departure from previous analyses of non-monogamies in that I draw attention to how NPC relationships work in tandem with a variety of game elements ranging from crafting, collecting items, and cooking, to combatting monsters, exploring forests and caves, and completing (sometimes mysterious or magical) quests. Compared to other RPGs with dating mechanics, *Stardew* is also relatively understudied. While there is writing dealing with *Stardew*'s dating mechanics (Lange, 2017) and the farmer's role with respect to the game's small-town agrarian values (Sutherland, 2020), I will be expanding on these as well as non-academic critiques of the game's normative understanding of queerness (Cole, 2017a, n.d.).

I will also note that there are popular and relatively successful titles developed by small- and mid-sized independent studio teams that are pushing back against compulsory monogamy (for example *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2018) and *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021)), however, I will discuss these titles alongside "scrappy, impactful, and indeed revolutionary video games that relate directly to lived LGBTQ experiences" from what Ruberg has termed the "queer games avant-garde" in my concluding chapter (2019, p. 210; 2020).

The Queer Spatiality, Failure, and Disorientation of Non-Monogamies

My theoretical foundations first draw on applications of Ahmed's (2004, 2006) queer spatiality in digital games by Sundén (2012), Youngblood (2015), Ruberg (2019), and Adams and Rambukkana (2018), the latter of whom describe non-monogamy as a form of transgressive play that queers game progressions by simultaneously pursuing multiple paths. For Ahmed (2006), orientation is not an inherent quality but an alignment of bodies and space that is

informed by what is proximate to us and, by extension, toward who and what we can direct our energy and attention and how. Whether or not we define non-monogamy as a sexual orientation per se, Ahmed's claim that sexual subjectivity is shaped by what is within or beyond the reach of our "bodily horizon" suggests that the desire and practice of doing non-monogamy is a matter of how particular social formations situate others as being "reachable as love objects" or not (p. 55, 94). Through a queer phenomenological lens, the non-monogamous player is transgressive in that they embrace disorientation in a mononormative world by refusing to adhere to prescribed (singular) pathways and points of contact with other bodies.

Applying Iser's (1974) concept of the implied reader to videogames, Aarseth understands transgressive play as a struggle against the game's "implied" heterosexual and male player, "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (2007, p. 132). This suggests that games address the implied player through a set of controlled textual effects that set up a particular field of possible action. However, as Kubowitz suggests, textual structures do not just call for a particular role, rather, the one heeding the call is also presumed to possess "default settings," or, a shared heterosexual political and social "matrix" with the text (2012, p. 207; Butler 1990). It follows that transgressive play does not only involve an individual's endeavours to break out of the "prison house of regulated play" (Aarseth, 2007, p. 133), but can also mean refusing (or failing) to be hailed so that the presumed "default settings" of the matrix are themselves interrupted or discarded.

This is supported by Sundén's assertion that theories of the implied player are limited by how the actual "social aesthetics" (or "settings") that players bring into multiplayer online games do not concretely map onto the social and political matrix that the game presupposes (2012, p. 3). I argue that this holds true in single-player contexts as well: Players' "settings" work in tandem with game elements that orientate them toward some bodies and away from others within a particular *aesthetic of sociality*. Transgressive play, then, is not always a clear-cut recognition of who the implied player is and an intentional struggle against "him." Rather, it can be the shattering of a default social and political matrix that occurs when a player "is unwilling or simply unable to embody 'his' position" because of the dissonance between what is presumed and what is actually desired or done (p. 3). Resultantly, I am not only interested in how games anticipate transgressions against monogamy with designed content (for example, in *The Witcher*

3's threesome cutscene or *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*' jealous girlfriend sequences), but in how players' failure to be adequately hailed by the game's normative matrix "shapes the bodies at play differently" so that they become disorientated, and so perform rather queerly because their social and sexual registers do not line up with the presumed field of possible action (p. 7).

Theories of queer spatiality undo assumptions about identity and orientation as stable categories by stressing how the formation of the self is "an effect of work, which is often hidden from view" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16). It follows that taking up a queer phenomenological lens refuses the dematerialization of the diverse body work that is performed in digital media, what Burrill calls "a corporatist, homogenous, objectified, universal body that fits all systems regardless of how many 'choices' of avatar the user is afforded" (2017, p. 9). The lens accomplishes this by emphasizing how the context- and material-specific performances of queer bodies disrupt and reconfigure dominant social relations (Hayles, 1993; Butler, 1990, Haraway, 2003). Sexual subjects form when they become orientated by "making the strange familiar through the extension of the body into space" and disorientated "when that extension fails" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 12), turning toward some things and away from others. Along these lines, the player/avatar is a historically constructed and hybridized subject whose body takes on a social form over time and through "digital and real labour" (Burrill, 2017, p. 28).

As Ahmed notes, dominant social formations pressure the body to reproduce certain inherited lines rather than generate new impressions, demanding "that we return the gift of the line by extending that line" (2006, p. 17). Mononormative media cultures, then, are a product of how "subjects reproduce the lines that they follow" so that monogamy is "naturalized as a property of bodies" (p. 17). Compulsory monogamy becomes woven into the social fabric of videogames such that their "response-inviting structures" (Iser, 1974), or game elements, propel bodies in "some directions and not others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58.) The non-monogamous player, disorientated by the presumption that they share in the game's mononormative socio-political matrix, can find ways to evade or transform the "straightening devices" that reinforce mononormative ways of relating (p. 66). My performances as "the farmer," then, became queer when they did not line up with the social dimensions of the in-game spaces that I was inhabiting so that I began operating "out of line with others" and that aesthetic of sociality (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107).

For these reasons, I consider playing non-monogamously to be an example of "queer failure" (Halberstam, 2011). In *The Queer Art of Failure,* Halberstam pushes back against calls to embrace queerness as wholly unproductive made by Edelman (2004) and other proponents "anti-social thesis" of queer theory (Caserio et al., 2006). Instead, Halberstam takes up Stuart Hall's "low theory" (1986), calling for the adoption of counter-hegemonic epistemes that are accessible flexible, adaptable, and open to unpredictable outcomes. Refusing high theory's hierarchies of knowledge, teleological thinking, and elimination of ambiguity, Halberstam suggests that radical queer negativity can be generative and future-oriented, proposing that "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, [and] not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2011, p. 3).

Ruberg takes up theories of failure by Halberstam (2011) and Juul (2013) to argue that queer failure in videogames involves playing through an approach that "defies normative notions of desire and success" and provides "a mode of resistance against a game's heteronormative systems of value" regardless of whether a game deliberately includes LGBTQ2SIA+ content (2019, p. 137).[13] Macklin affirms Ruberg's stance that videogames are inherently a queer medium by arguing that failing at games can encourage transgression and experimentation by giving us "the space to explore unfamiliar pleasures and desires" (2017, p. 256). Queer play, then involves embracing failure as a generative phenomenon that can take us into "overt and covert queer worlds" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 21), refusing to favour what is familiar, cohesive, stable, and discrete over that which is disorientating, unsettling, slippery, multifaceted, and unpredictable. Specific to non-monogamies, a framework of queer failure and disorientation resonates with what Shotwell has termed "relational significant otherness" (2017). Shotwell conceives of responsibility (or "response-ability") in all intimate relationships as a matter of recognizing and being open to respond to desires, boundaries and expectations that are not fixed values and so cannot be stabilized, controlled, or consistently accounted for. Embracing queer failure and disorientation is one way of probing into how "an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness" might be expressed in games (Haraway, 2003, p. 3).

Not insignificantly, Halberstam's theses of queer failure also echo Sheff's assessment of what actually gives open non-monogamy the potential to be radical: a refusal of mastery (negotiation and consent); an acknowledgment that one's knowledge of the world is limited and partial (communication); and, finally, doing away with grand logics and refusing the inheritance

of social lines that demand the reproduction of monogamy, heterosexuality, and the nuclear family (Halberstam, 2011, p. 9-15; Sheff, 2020). By disrupting logics of success and winning by choosing to "refuse the game" and rewrite it, queer failure parallels open non-monogamy's redefinition of what makes intimate relationships good or successful in the first place (Halberstam & Juul, 2017, p. 202; Sheff, 2015). Understanding the queer potential of non-monogamies in videogames through queer spatiality, disorientation, and failure, requires that we question not only whether multiple simultaneous relationships are possible, but also how one "'faces' the world or is directed toward it" through "shared struggles, common grounds, and mutual aspirations, as bonds that are created through the lived experience of being 'off line' and 'out of line'" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 68, 103). According to Ahmed, "risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer…" (2006, p. 21). Straying from one straight (monogamous) line to walk an unfamiliar and variegated path can generate additional queer lines to be follow in turn. These modalities are characteristic of a "queer interface" in that they unpredictable and hold "the promise of a future uncontained in the repertoire of present possibilities" (Ilomen and Juvonen, 2015, para. 17; Tuhkanen & McCallum, 2011, p. 271, as cited in Ilomen and Juvonen, 2015). I argue that if even small acts of resistance create new impressions and to make sense of the world where "the un/well/come begins to take the form of well/come" (para. 18), then we must include challenges to mononormativity in how we envision and enact anti-oppressive queer politics and imagine queer futures.

Methodology and Positionality

Videogames are varied in form, genre, and the communities and cultures that condense around them, and so queer game studies requires varied methodological approaches. In recognition of videogames as "messy hybrids of a variety of previous media forms" and to account for how play "functions across worlds and across bodies" (Keogh, 2014, p. 10), I take up a combination of play-as-method and game analysis (informed by Clara Fernández-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2019)) involving close readings my play sessions through a variety of queer theoretical texts. In keeping with Aarseth's assertion that play itself is essential for studying games (2003), I conducted regular play sessions of *Stardew*, taking screenshots and writing about how different game elements acted as orientation devices that shaped my

interactions with and position in relation to NPCs. I documented my responses to these orientation devices in order to identify emergent opportunities to resist mono- and hetero-normativity over the course of over 200 hours of gameplay wherein I courted a total of 14 NPCs. Due to time constraints, my playthroughs included the completion of all 12 possible romantic progressions (and associated friendships) and the game's main story quest, but exclude the changes introduced in update 1.5 including access to Ginger Island as this update was released after I had completed my data collection (on December 21, 2020). Throughout my notes, I described my playing strategies as well as how the games anticipated, responded to, or neglected to account for my meandering from hetero- and mono-normative paths.

Since games are processual research objects, "moving targets, capable of generating new, emergent effects that then inform the following instances of the game" (Malaby, 2007, p. 103), I explored all possible results of each games' NPC relationships, but only saved (read: locked particular decisions in) during runs where I made a conscious effort to play non-monogamously —in other words, to fail queerly— as much as possible. Any details of these interactions that I could not capture during playthroughs by saving my game, reloading it, and then documenting the result of alternative choices has been supplemented by information gathered from paratexts such as Let's Play videos, official wikis, walkthroughs, player guides, and online forums. I did not need to create more than one farmer avatar to complete my analysis because *Stardew* structures relationships with NPCs such that players can make and unmake decisions about which villagers to date or marry with some short term consequences but no long term effect over possible future interactions, leaving much room for experimentation. My playthroughs resulted in both a wide dataset that illustrated the larger possibilities of NPC relationships in these games, but also a unique game file that reflected the "digital and real labour" of my own context-specific performances (Burrill, 2017, p. 28).

While he advocates for play-as-method, Aarseth contends that researchers analyzing their own performances should combine that information with other sources in order to attend to the potential impacts of their biases on the direction, depth, and quality of that analysis (2003). Along these lines, Consalvo and Dutton (2006) note that game analyses often hinge on the assumption that researchers play games with care and rigour without actually detailing how they play. I have sought to address these concerns and situate myself as a researcher by organizing my data through an adapted version of Consalvo and Dutton's methodological toolkit called an

Orientation Log. The authors originally propose four areas for doing qualitative games research: the Interface Study, an examination of players' points of contact for effecting change in the game world; the Interaction Map, which assesses players' interactions with each other and NPCs; the Object Inventory, a catalog of in-game objects detailing their properties and uses; and finally, the Gameplay Log, which considers emergent and unexpected behaviors or situations.

Rather than documenting play sessions according to these discrete areas of interest, I structured my Orientation Log as a journal documenting my process and providing an account of my contact with objects and others as the farmer, using a sort of "thick description" to contextualize my efforts, intentions, strategies, desires, pleasures, frustrations, disappointments, and changes in playstyle, often from the first-person perspectives of a hybrid player/avatar subject (Beyen, 2015). I then drew connections between this data and the queer theoretical frameworks outlined in previous sections by reflecting on my writing and coding it according to the four areas outlines in the toolkit. The Orientation Journal supports a mode of game analysis that both provides the necessary means for examining how game elements coalesce into "semantic architecture" that encourages "alertness toward aspects of a design-in-process that have cultural, ethical, and political resonances" (Flanagan et al., 2014, p. 34), and also actively recognizes games as contingent, recursive media artifacts that are "grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore always in the process of becoming" (Malaby, 2007, p. 103).

In kind, my performances and interpretations of intimacies in *Stardew* will bear impressions left by the non-monogamous lines I have followed for the majority of my adult life. It is crucial that I acknowledge that this analysis will not be unaffected by my own experiences. However, a lack of impartiality due to my personal investments in the research subject is not a defect or weakness, but a contribution of knowledge situated in the experience of one bisexual and transgender non-monogamist (Haraway, 1988). This is only one of many possible forays into non-monogamies in digital games, a partial perspective that, while limiting in some respects, is valuable in its own right because it brings additional queer voices into the field and generates new lines that others might turn toward in their own way. I do not claim to be objective or uncontestable and recognize the intimate privilege that I carry because of my age, whiteness, citizenship status, and access to resources such as financial capital and private space. Due to overlapping social and cultural power relations within the non/monogamy paradigm, intimacies that might be liberatory for some actually trigger oppression for others (Rambukkana, 2010). For

this reason, I am committed to consulting and incorporating viewpoints that extend beyond my own approach to non-monogamy to open myself up to a fuller understanding of how intimate privilege exists selectively and unequally across identities, orientations, and sex cultures, and will continue to do so as I build on this thesis in future research.

Videogames as Sites of Queer Becoming

Exploring non-monogamies in videogames by considering what emerges when players fail to be hailed by mononormative tropes, systems, and scripts, choosing instead to turn in different directions and develop new pathways, can build insight into how desiring and doing intimacy differently results in "other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" in digital media (p. 169, 18). I cannot deny that the ways that non-monogamies develop between players are important considerations; The shape and visibility of non-monogamies varies depending on its intersection with other identity markers and so future research should continue to interrogate who has access to meaningful representation in games as well as the materials that one must have access to in order to play. However, if it is true that games provide opportunities to play with a multiplicity of intimacies, identities, and orientations "without steep initial identity commitments" (2018, para. 2; Rambukkana, 2007), then single-player games afford fields of possible action that can differ from those in multiplayer contexts. Queer play, including non-monogamous play, can shape how a person might become something new, perhaps even something other than straight, through unexpected affinities with those who also do not follow well-trodden paths.

Making a Non-Monogamist: Mononormativity and Playersexuality in Pelican Town

The story of anyone who takes up the mantle of the farmer in *Stardew Valley* begins with an inheritance. On his deathbed, the protagonist's grandfather passes along an envelope containing a gift he says that the player will be ready when they feel "crushed by the burden of modern life" and their spirit is overcome with a "growing emptiness." Time flashes forward and the player's custom avatar is stationed as one of many low-level employees working for a big-box entity called Joja Corporation. The emptiness that Grandpa warned of is palpable: Workers toil away in rows of dingy-looking and heavily surveilled cubicles while Joja Corp's slogans loom overhead commanding "Smile: You're with Joja" and "Join Us. Thrive." Upon opening Grandpa's letter, the player is told that they have inherited the deed to his property in Pelican Town, a quaint village on the Southern coast of Stardew Valley. The means of escape from this bleak and hollow existence become clear. Grandpa confesses that he, too, yearned for change after neglecting what matters most, namely, "real connections with other people and nature." He concludes the letter by confidently assuring the player that they, too, will "honor the family name" and find a sense of belonging when they begin life anew on the farm.

This introductory cutscene (non-interactive sequence) depicting the journey from dreary desk-job to fixer-upper farmstead effectively establishes some of *Stardew*'s central themes, specifically, the importance of carrying on tradition and family legacy, connections with one's community and nature, and the intrinsic goodness of going "back to the land" to live a simpler life. According to Lee-Ann Sutherland, these emphases figure into how *Stardew* reinforces the tenets of classical American agrarianism: a political and social philosophy that understands farming practices as "inherently wholesome and of high moral value" and farmers as the backbone of a prosperous and well-run society (2020, p. 1157). In this chapter, I discuss how *Stardew* incorporates a deeply heteronormative construction of compulsory monogamy into the player's role in restoring wholesomeness and moral value to the valley. While *Stardew* does not presume that players will follow the rules of monogamy, non-monogamous intimacy is made incompatible with communication and consent by design. Moreover, non-monogamy is framed as a manifestation of "the burden of modern life," a distinctly urban sexual perversion that is antithetical to the revitalization of an idyllic rural community.

In the following sections, I begin by describing character creation and role-play in *Stardew* and profiling the game's 12 bachelors and bachelorettes. I then detail how theories of

role-play (Harper, 2017) and the body (Sundén, 2003; Burrill, 2017) informed my approach as I engaged with the town's non-player characters (NPCs). Finally, I write through the encounters that were recorded in my Orientation Journal to analyze how game elements supported and limited non-monogamies. By playing through *Stardew*'s romantic progressions as a new and openly non-monogamous community member in Pelican Town, I explore how compulsory monogamy is implicated in *Stardew*'s distinct construction of what it means to live a "good life" in alignment with small-town values and tradition. I argue that *Stardew*'s representation of compulsory monogamy, heteronormative couplings, and marriage as wholesome and moral societal ideals perpetuates the privileging of normative, white, and middle-class intimacies over deviant, including non-monogamous, relationships in the rural idyll.

Character Creation and Role-play

Before commencing the transition from urban to rural existence, the player must create a custom avatar: a virtual body for playing out the role of the farmer and effecting change in the game world. The character creation interface includes 24 skin colours, 116 articles of clothing, 73 hairstyles, and 20 accessories (including make-up, jewelry, and facial hair) that are available to both female and male avatars. Sliders can adjust the colour of the avatar's eyes, hair, and pants. The avatar's binary gender, male or female, determines what pronouns (she/her or he/him) other characters use to address them. Gender also determines whether bachelors and bachelorettes recognize relationships as straight (opposite gender) or not (same gender) and can be changed later in the game. Finally, the player must select a farm type (standard, forest, riverland, hill-top, or wilderness), an animal companion (cat or dog), their favourite thing, and a name. Farm types do not directly impact social relationships (only the resources and activities that are available nearby the farmhouse, such as fishing or monster hunting), and so I chose the standard farm.

I modelled my avatar after my own appearance at the time: light-skinned, brown haired, and somewhat masculine presenting. Because there was no non-binary option, I chose a female avatar so that my interactions with NPCs would reflect how new social contacts in public spaces often address me using she/her pronouns and more accurately account for interplay between mononormativity and gender binarism in the game. The name I chose, Allyn, is one I already use with my real-world partners and close friends.

Figure 1

My customized avatar, Farmer Allyn.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

The character customization menu supports a degree of self-expression, but these choices have little to no impact on NPC behaviour or what the player can do.[14] Instead, the farmer's identity is an emergent expression of the player's engagement with the game world through projects, dialogue, quests, and gifts (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 120, 177). After the introduction has set up a larger narrative arc and given the farmer a simple backstory, their role in the community is expanded and refined as the player expresses themselves through their preferences and playstyles, making them a combination of mouldable avatar and pre-designated player-character (Miller, 2017; Fernández-Vara, 2019). While the player is encouraged to reach some milestones (for example, those that unlock new content or make the game easier), play is largely goal-oriented in that the player sets and work toward their own objectives. The open-ended structure of the game invites the player to define and re-define things like progress and success for themselves (something I examine in more detail in Chapter 2).

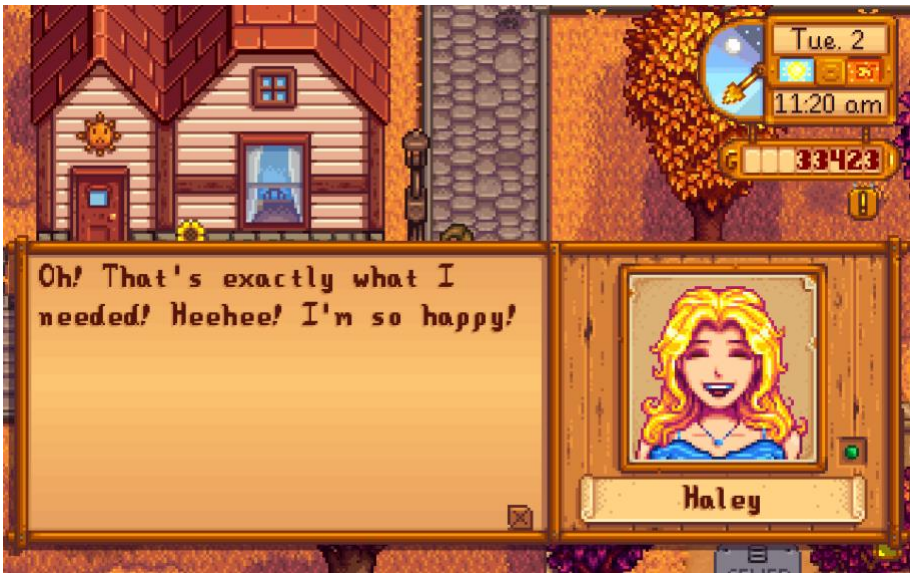
Leah Miller notes that the decisions that have the most concrete and substantial impact on social life in the valley are those related to forming and maintaining romantic relationships. For Miller, romance is "the emotional lodestone that guides the player's engagement," an invitation into an aesthetic of sociality that distinguishes my Farmer Allyn's progression from what would occur in any other playthrough (2017, p. 162). Pursuing romance with NPCs provides

opportunities to enact agency in the game world in that the decisions that players make along the way have clear (and sometimes irreversible) impacts on game outcomes and ongoing relationships. Decisions about which villagers to romance, how many to romance at once, where and when to find them, methods for scoring Friendship points, how to respond in dialogue, and whether to "go steady" and get married (or not) all inform how the player works out the emerging role of the farmer in relation to the valley and its inhabitants.

It is possible to deprioritize dating or even forming friendships, but the player cannot fully isolate the farmer from the wider community. For example, I could aim to achieve certain house and farm upgrades within a limited time frame, catch one of every fish, or cultivate the highest quality produce, but activities and quests are usually connected to NPCs. Basic tasks like growing crops and improving farm tools require contact with the townspeople, Friendship points are often generated upon the completion of quests, and the villagers will randomly give gifts to the player in the mail along with letters offering advice or making polite conversation. For this reason, romance may be an "emotional lodestone" (Miller, 2017, p. 162), but NPC relationships cannot be separated from the systems and mechanics involved in doing other projects and activities. Role-playing as the farmer, essentially performing a particular orientation to *Stardew*'s characters, is integral to one's experiences of the game.

Figure 2

Completing a quest for Haley earns gold (75g) and Friendship points (+150).



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Role-playing games (RPGs) come in many forms but share some common features including a game world, participants, characters (player and non-player), a game master, interaction, and narrative (Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Digital RPGs contrast their non-digital counterparts (such as table-top RPGs and live-action role-play or LARP) in that they impose hard-coded limitations on what players can and cannot do. Rules cannot be altered spontaneously and play often involves binary outcomes (such as success or failure) with little room for improvisation or ambiguity (p. 16). Using role-play as a queer lens for doing game analysis involves the reinterpretation of readymade game content and the subversion of these hard-coded rules, systems, and definitions of what counts as a successful playthrough. For example, Todd Harper's exercise in role-playing as a closeted gay Commander Shepard in the action RPG series *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) recontextualized his relationships with NPCs and resulted in unique resonances between the player and the player-character. For Harper, intentionally playing a role from a queer subject position allowed him to observe "seemingly unimportant choices" and "reinterpret a perceived social norm in queer terms" (2017, p. 127, 134). By role-playing as a bisexual, non-binary, and non-monogamous Farmer Allyn, I sought to find and generate new meaning through the subversion and reinterpretation of game elements, even though the game's original code provides every player with an "identical base experience" through "dialogue, events, [and] character reactions" that are functionally equivalent (p. 127).

Harper (2017) also found that the resonances between himself and "ClosetShep" resembled "bleed," a phenomenon where the player's "real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters and vice versa" (Bowman, 2015, para. 1; Waern, 2011). In non-computerized role-play, bleed is often associated with immersion in that the more a player is aware of the boundary between what they do and what their character does, the weaker bleed becomes (Bowman, 2015). Yet, Harper's analysis suggests that the bleed-like effect that he experienced while role-playing a queer character was not dependent on a low-level of awareness of the boundary between actual and virtual. Rather, it was an awareness of similarities and differences between himself and different versions of Commander Shepard, resonances *and* dissonances, that caused new meaning to surface as he engaged the game's rules "in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups…" (Consalvo, 2009, p. 416). Waern's analysis of romance and role-play in *Dragon Age* also supports Harper's assertion that a bleed-like effect

results when players set specific goals and knowingly project desires and identities into NPC romances (2009). The accumulation of experiences that players actively bring with them into digital RPGs do not inhibit bleed (or whatever players and/or scholars choose to call its digital equivalent) but actually contribute to creating affective interplay between players and the roles they embody in game worlds, interrelated entities that come together to produce a "range of meaning" by co-creating a unique iteration of the text (Schröder, 2008, para. 44; Keogh, 2014).

When I role-played as Farmer Allyn, my connection to my customized avatar was not dependent on my ability to fully immerse myself in them and their world. The act of doing research (as opposed to solely playing for fun) made it impossible to fully "lose myself" in the role of new community member seeking love connections. I had to play through the game's main story in its entirety and document romantic progressions from beginning to end, fully aware that I was testing specific boundaries and behaving in ways that were not always consistent with my actual identity, orientation, and preferred practices. (For example, finding out how the game would respond when the farmer dates every bachelor and bachelorette was unlikely to happen outside of a research context.) At times, these extra-diegetic motivations required making strategic moves but did not jeopardize the role of the farmer or compromise the fiction. I set my own goals, playing as non-monogamously as the game would allow in order to reinterpret videogames in queer terms by posing a "what-if" in the context of the game world's culture and value systems (Harper, 2017, p. 127). My position as a researcher was just another dimension of how I engaged actual and virtual worlds "co-attentively" as I played, understanding *Stardew*'s hard-coded rules and systems as intertwined with the contexts in which the game is made, played, and remade (Keogh, 2014, p. 13).

Because the body is central to Ahmed's understanding of orientation (and queerness as disorientation), I consider role-playing as Farmer Allyn to be an embodied practice wherein my orientation in relation to NPCs is gradually shaped by "the repetition of work" and the accumulation of encounters with different kinds of social and systematized pressures (Ahmed, 2006, p. 57). Following Sundén's efforts to resist discourses of disembodiment in discussion of what unfolds in virtual spaces, I argue that this process of doing work under pressure in digital contexts, including digital role-playing games, is neither fully untethered from social realities nor determined to create a copy of them (2003). The orientation of Farmer Allyn's body is produced through a combination of "the social pressure to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of

life, and even to produce that life…" that I have brought into the game as a researcher as well as how I continue to encounter those pressures while playing a role that has already been carved out within that virtual space (Ahmed, 2006, p. 17). My self-as-farmer has a unique "bodily horizon" that offers a field of possible action shaped by these forces (p. 58). Doing non-monogamy through queer role-play involves critically engaging with what happens in this field of action to consider how the game puts open non-monogamy within or beyond my reach.

New In Town: Getting Orientated in Stardew Valley

Stardew begins by establishing four key overlapping gameplay elements: production, expansion, exploration, and socialization. As I arrived at the town bus-stop, I was greeted by Robin, the local carpenter, who led me to Grandpa's ramshackle farmhouse. There we met Lewis, Pelican Town's Mayor. Lewis immediately offered up some helpful tips, quickly assuming a patriarchal role as overseer of the town's day-to-day affairs and a guide for getting started. First, he mentioned that Robin sells house upgrades, a service that was promptly connected with a nearby shipping bin into which I was told to deposit items that would be automatically sold overnight for the in-game currency (gold or "g"). Lewis also recommended that I go exploring and introduce myself to the townspeople. My first quest, ("Introductions"), was marked in my quest journal with an exclamation point (!) indicating that it was ready to be activated. After speedily surveying the property, I set out to familiarize myself with the layout of the valley and start making friends.

The Mayor's first three instructions function as what Ahmed calls "orientation devices" by giving me a direction to move in and outlining fields of possible action (production, expansion, exploration, and socialization) that anchored me in the game world (2006, p. 3). Since "we only know which way to turn once we know which way we are facing" (p. 7), the points of contact Lewis establishes (Robin's carpentry shop, the shipping bin, the countryside, and the townspeople) informed the alignment and direction of my body in this virtual space. Opening the game menu —which contains an inventory tab, skills tab, social tab, crafting tab, collections tab, and a section for adjusting game options (such as graphics, controls, sound, etc.)— I referred to the map, where my location was represented by an icon of my avatar's head. Hovering over some locations on the map revealed the names of every villager who occupied a given residence. Some residences, such as the general store, clinic, ranch, forge, fish shop, carpenter's shop, and

Stardrop Saloon double as a place of business. Non-residential buildings include the Community Center, Adventurer's Guild, museum, and spa. Other areas the player can explore at this stage include the mines, railroad tracks, backwoods, beach, and Cindersap Forest.

Figure 3

The map of my farm and the wider area surrounding Pelican Town.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Using the heads-up display (HUD) in the upper-right corner of the screen to track the season, date, time, weather, quest journal, and gold (500g to start), I spent the remainder of the 28-day Spring season rotating back and forth between doing farm chores and making my introductions. In the mornings, I cleared debris, cut down trees, and worked on a small parsnip garden in front of the farmhouse (using seeds that Lewis gave me as a gift). Afternoons and evenings were spent exploring and socializing. Since I needed to regularly buy seeds to keep up with crop rotations, I used Pierre's general store as a hub for meeting the villagers, many of whom would come there to either buy groceries or attend church in the back room. Pierre's storefront also displays a seasonal calendar (complete with birthdays and town events) and a bulletin board where the player can accept four types of Help Wanted quests: Gathering, Slay Monsters, Fishing, and Item Delivery. Each these quests earns gold and Item Delivery quests earn Friendship points with whoever posted the ad.

Figure 4

A Help Wanted quest (delivering Joja Cola to Shane) and the reward (75g).

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Story Quests, which are activated when players trigger a cutscene or when villagers make personal requests, provide information about villagers, where they go, what they like, what they do, and their relationships with one another. For example, villagers living on the outskirts of town, such as Wizard and Willy the fisherman, sent me letters in the mail that activated quests that took me to the Wizard's tower and fish shop respectively. Completing these quests can earn gold, boost Friendship points, trigger cutscenes that advance the story, and provide access to previously locked locations. Together, Help Wanted quests and Item Delivery quests encouraged me to become acquainted with the villagers while also discovering new places and trying new activities. Monetary rewards also gave me more opportunities to socialize because I could afford to spend less time gardening and selling produce.

Pierre's shop is also where the inciting incident for *Stardew*'s main story takes place. During the first week of Spring, Morris, the manager of the local JojaMart big box store, made an underhanded attempt to poach Pierre's customers by offering them a 50% discount. This cutscene sets up the struggle between Joja Corporation and the wellbeing of the valley as a significant source of conflict in the game, positioning small-town values and local business as good/moral and shady corporate dealings controlled by big city capitalists as bad/immoral. The villagers are easily swayed by Morris's discounts, essentially supporting the soulless corporate entity that the farmer came to the valley to escape. This scene establishes the farmer's role as a "moral compass" and agent of change upon whom the community depends to preserve the high

moral value of meaningful connections between people to each other and to the land. This framing raises the stakes of the player's decisions, in particular, the choice between restoring the Pelican Town Community Center or completing the Joja Community Development Form (thereby converting the Community Center into a Joja Corp warehouse). As Sutherland notes, "The player's escape from urban life has not led to complete separation from Joja Corp; by positioning JojaMart as the villain, the narrative prompts the player to make that disconnection complete" (2020, p. 1165). By making the farmer a steward of the community, the game encourages the player to bring the valley back into alignment with Grandpa's ideal vision of "what matters most."

Figure 5

Morris taunts Pierre after stealing his customers for the JojaMart.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Restoring the Community Center is also encouraged by the game's systems. Unlike choices that can be reversed by quitting and starting a game day over again (for example, picking an unfavourable response while in dialogue with an NPC or accidentally killing a vegetable patch), the choice between the Community Center and the JojaMart are mutually exclusive routes that require committed action over time. This means that the player would have to create a separate save file and start over if they wanted to explore both options. Additionally, a JojaMart membership initially costs 5000g (a steep financial investment early in the game) and then

requires incrementally larger sums of gold to complete each development project (135,000g in total). Alternatively, restoring the Community Center requires donating items by engaging in varied projects and practices, a path that is much more accessible because player can begin making the appropriate donations right away (including a much smaller sum of 47,000g). So, while the JojaMart route could be more suitable for some players (for example, those who are not invested in the narrative or who want to specialize in one type of production, such as animal husbandry), the game motivates players to choose to fix the Community Center.

By the end of my first Spring, I had introduced myself to all 28 villagers, earning100 Friendship points with each ("Quests," 2021). All of the villagers' Friendship meters go up to 10 hearts and each heart represents the accumulation of 250 Friendship points. As a villager's Friendship meter increases, the player periodically triggers Heart Events: short sequences that reveal more intimate details about the villager in question and contribute to their character development over time. The player can only fill all 10 hearts with the bachelors and bachelorettes if, at eight hearts, they are gifted a bouquet (which can be purchased at any time from Pierre's general store for 200g). Under the social tab, these romanceable villagers are distinguishable from the other villagers because their Friendship meter is labeled as "(single)." The player can give bouquets to more than one romanceable villager and this action changes their social tab label from "single" to "boyfriend" or "girlfriend." After reaching 10 hearts, the player can propose marriage by gifting a boyfriend or girlfriend an item called a Mermaid's Pendant. Non-romanceable villagers will refuse both bouquets and pendants and react with confusion ("Is this a joke? I don't get it.")

If the player clicks on an NPC to speak to them, they earn between +10 and +20 Friendship points ("Friendship," 2021). If a multiple-choice text box appears during Heart Events, the player has a chance to gain or lose Friendship points depending on which option they select. These text boxes also appear when romanceable villagers ask the player a direct question. For example, when I crossed paths with Sebastian one day, he asked me about my reading preferences:

SEBASTIAN: "**yawn*... I was up until 3 reading this new book... Do you read, Allyn*?"

- "Yep. The classics." (-30 Friendship)
- "Only Sci-Fi and Fantasy." (+30 Friendship)
- "I like a good romance." (no effect)

- “No, I don’t read books.” (-30 Friendship) (“Sebastian,” 2021)

To earn Friendship points with Sebastian, the player would need to select the literary genre that best aligns with his interests (science fiction and fantasy). Sebastian would then relate to the player through that shared interest (“Oh yeah? Well, did you read the new 'Cave Saga X'? I won't spoil it for you, but oh man..."). Unfortunately, I said I was a fan of “the classics” and his lukewarm response confirmed that I had shifted further out of alignment with him (“Oh yea? Hmm... Not really my thing, but everyone's different I guess.”). Despite losing Friendship points, I still learned about Sebastian by identifying something he likes (reading) and something he dislikes (“the classics”) so that I could better relate to him when our paths crossed in the future. This point system is laid out on the game’s official wiki but players who do not consult it rely on context clues and guesswork.

Aside from conversation and quests, the fastest and most dependable way to earn Friendship points is by giving the villagers gifts. Gifts are given by selecting the item, standing near the NPC and right clicking to interact with them. If the item can be gifted, it will appear in the avatar’s arms as a ribbon-wrapped present. Each villager has their own orientation toward or away from giftable items and will have one of five reactions: love (symbolized by a heart emote), like, neutrality, dislike, and hate (symbolized by a dark scribble emote). For example, Haley loves sunflowers and pink cake but hates most edible foraged items such as dandelions and mushrooms. Leah, however, reacts positively to most foraged goods but hates starchy and processed foods like pancake and pizza. The player can give one gift to each villager per day and is limited to giving two gifts per villager in each week.

The more a villager likes a gift, the more Friendship points are awarded to the player. According to the game’s official wiki, gifts influence Friendship points as follows: loved gifts (+80); liked gifts (+40); neutral gifts (+20); disliked gifts (-20); and hated gifts (-40).[15] These values are multiplied on a villager’s birthday (×8) and during an annual secret gift giving event (×5) (“Friendship,” 2021) To eliminate some of the guesswork involved in giving gifts, the game keeps track of the gifts each villager’s liked and loved gifts on a page in the social tab. Players can also consult the wiki for a detailed breakdown of how each villager would respond to a given giftable item. The game also rewards the players curiosity by hinting toward each villager’s loved gifts in Secret Notes that are scattered throughout the valley.

Friendship points do decay over time, but the process is slow and decay stops after the player reaches a certain threshold on the villagers' Friendship meters. Not talking to a villager results in a decay rate of -2 points per day. Friendship with non-romanceable villagers stops decaying when all 10 hearts are filled while decay for romanceable villagers stops after eight hearts are filled. Changes in relationship status also put pressure on the player to interact more consistently by negatively affecting these decay rates. For example, the penalty becomes more severe after the romanceable villagers are given a bouquet (-10 points per day) and after marriage (-20 points per day). These decay structures imply that while strong platonic friendships are more secure, romantic commitments require paying one's partner more consistent attention to maintain the relationship. That said, unless the player repeatedly gives a villager disliked or hated gifts or ignores them on purpose, it is easier to gain Friendship than lose it.

Figure 6

Emily receives her preferred gifts and her Friendship meter increases.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Stardew's romanceable villagers have backstories and traits that set each progression apart from the others. Both the official *Stardew Valley* wiki and Barone's blog feature short biographies describing these villagers personalities.[16] The bachelorette's include: Haley, a bubbly (and seemingly superficial) trend-setter; Abigail, an eccentric flautist with an interest in adventure and the occult; Maru, an inquisitive scientist who works at the local clinic; Penny, a wholesome bookworm and "girl-next-door" type; Emily, Haley's seamstress sister with a passion for dance; and Leah, a talented artist with a love of the outdoors. The bachelors are: Alex, a confident athlete who dreams of playing professionally; Sebastian, Maru's brooding and

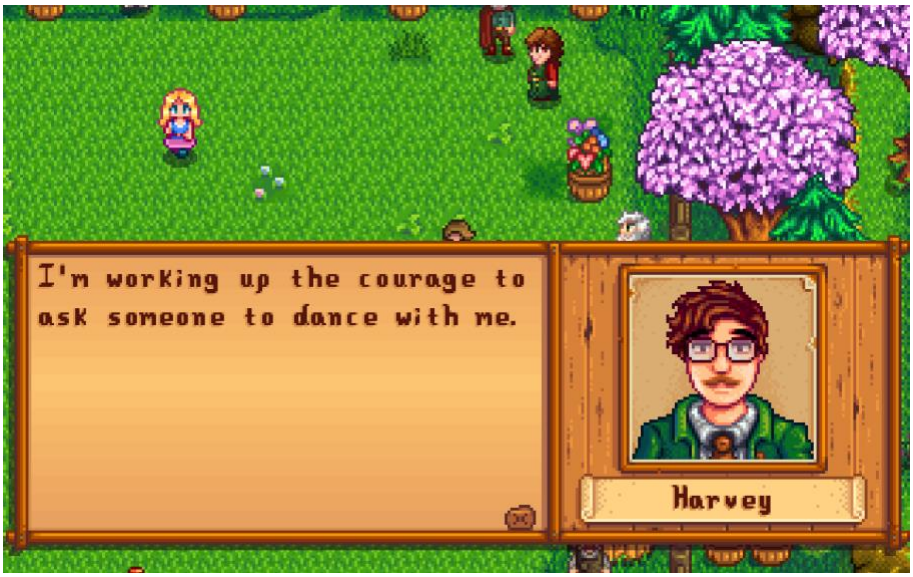
introverted half-brother; Harvey, the town's shy, middle-aged doctor; Shane, a standoffish barfly with a love for animals; Sam, a forgetful musician with an enthusiasm for skateboarding; and Elliot, a sentimental writer in search of a muse. Apart from Harvey, all of the romanceable villagers are young adults. Many of them live with their parents or other guardians. The romanceable villagers are also nearly always light-skinned, except for Maru, whose father, Demetrius, is the only other Black character in the game.

Players can date any romanceable villager regardless of their avatar's gender, yet *Stardew* wastes no time in establishing compulsory heterosexual monogamy as a long-standing tradition in the valley. The game explicitly initiates the player into this tradition through the Flower Dance. Drawing on flowers as a symbol of fertility, virginity, and feminine sexuality (de Beauvoir, 1989), this annual event closely resembles the "heterosexual matrix" of a high-school prom (Butler 1990; Pascoe, 2007). On the 24th day of Spring, Mayor Lewis sent me a letter inviting me to join the townsfolk in Cindersap forest. (It is possible to skip the dance, but all businesses and residences are locked.) Once I entered the forest, the path home was blocked, forcing me to go into a clearing full of flowers. The passage of time was suspended (as is the case for all community events) and so I took the time to interact with each villager and understand their relationship to the dance.

Among the non-romanceable villagers in attendance, the married couples (Pierre and Caroline, Robin and Demetrius, Evelyn and George, and Jodi and Kent) were all heterosexual. Jodi was alone, but the map's description of her residence revealed that her husband, Kent, was out of town. "Are you going to be dancing today, Allyn?" she asked with a giggle. Several of the other non-romanceable villagers drew attention to their own lack of a dance partner and, in many instances, established men as active sexual subjects who court women and women as receptive to that courtship. Marnie the rancher bemoaned being uncoupled at her age ("*sigh*… Love is in the air… And I'm still single.") while Marlon, the head of the Adventurer's Guild, stood nearby and confessed to me that he was attracted to her. In another corner of the clearing, Clint, the blacksmith, stared at Emily while debating whether to ask her to dance. After asking each of the romanceable NPCs to be my dance partner (and being rejected by everyone because I had not earned enough Friendship points), I found that some bachelors (Sebastian and Harvey) turned me down by expressing plans to dance with someone else; The bachelorettes expressed no such intention.

Figure 7

Harvey works up the courage to ask his crush, Maru, to dance.



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Elsewhere, Alex and Haley carried on this highly gendered courtship dynamic. Haley warmed up by frolicking in the grass. “I’m practicing my dance moves. It needs to be perfect,” she told me. “I’ve been the flower queen for the past 5 years and I’m not ready to step off the throne just yet!” No one mentioned a flower king and the terms of the competition for title of flower queen were unclear. However, Haley, the embodiment of hegemonic femininity —young, white, and thin (Schippers, 2007)— is established as the town’s ideal candidate. As she practiced her performance, Alex looked on and chuckled that he was “just enjoying the scenery.” Not far away, the only two children in Pelican Town, a girl named Jas and a boy named Vincent, played together. “Someday, I’m going to be flower queen!” Jas assured me. Vincent protested. “That’s not fair… why can’t I be the flower queen?” I felt sorry for him as, much like Haley, he rehearsed the role that corresponded with his assigned gender and chased after Jas, the future flower queen, in tiny circles in the grass.

When the dance began, the bachelors and bachelorettes arranged themselves into two horizontal lines that were separated by gender. Their clothes had changed: The bachelorettes wore white dresses that suggested purity and virginity and the bachelors were dressed in identical blue suits (Valenti, 2009). Haley, who had managed to keep her title as flower queen, had a

crown of white buds atop her head. The bachelors faced the bachelorettes, their faces obscured as they "danced," slowly advancing forward toward the women. The two lines of bodies drifted closer together in unison to a whimsical, music-box-like tune until the bachelorettes finished in a pose where they held up their arms as if ready to be swept off their feet.

Figure 8

The bachelors and bachelorettes at the Flower Dance.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

I watched from the sidelines as the dancers replicated movements that were steeped in tradition, reproducing the lines they literally inherited and were "becoming straight" by "not deviating at any point" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16). There is no "queer geometry" in this ritual (Ruberg, 2019, p. 47): the vectors of desire expressed in the dancers' uninterrupted, linear movements assumes heterosexuality as the point of both departure and arrival. This heteronormativity is inseparable from compulsory monogamy: One active masculine subject asks one passive feminine subject to dance so that there is no space for triangles or quadrilaterals on the dance floor, let alone a messier muddle of unpredictable intimate connections. There are only straight lines connecting two points that are defined by the gendered difference between them. The game seems to ask that we participate in the Flower Dance in order to "return the gift of the line by extending that line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 17). My eyes darted back and forth between the dancers and their parents and grandparents, their coupledom attesting to the fact that compulsory

monogamy and heterosexuality have always been the norm in the valley and, lest a newcomer break from tradition, always will be.

According to Janet Murray, videogames can act as a "cultural ratchet," perpetuating certain practices and social structures by "transmitting general habits of imitating, sequencing, and synchronizing actions" (Murray, 2006, p. 196).[17] Rituals like school dances institutionalize heterosexuality through and monogamy "symbolic, bodily performances that reinforce particular values, morals, and dominant race, gender, and class structures" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 40). Much like a school dance, Pelican Town's annual Flower Dance is "heterosexualizing process," arranging the bodies of the dancers and their observers so that specific performances of masculinity and femininity, including the privileging of dyadic heterosexual pairings, are constructed as natural and normal (Renold, 2000 cited in Pascoe, 2000, p. 26; Butler, 1993). Since Demetrius describes the dance as originating as an "ancient fertility ritual," this tradition establishes explicit connections between heterosexuality, monogamy, and sexual reproduction, emphasizing the essential role of heterosexual gender difference and dyadic pairings in the continuation of family lines (Warner, 1991; Willey, 2016). Whether or not the player decides to romance villagers of the same gender (or, in my case, role-play a non-binary and bisexual farmer), the game gestures toward hetero- and mono-normative marriage and child-rearing as the ideal final destination for romantic relationships.

I argue that this hetero-monogamous identity is a key part of how *Stardew* reinforces the foundational ideals of what Sutherland has termed "classical American agrarianism": discourses which center around "the value of hard work, [the] centrality of farming to other occupations, the economic independence of the farmer, and the inherent goodness and moral value of farming as an occupation" (p. 1168; Flinn & Johnson, 1974). According to Sutherland, these representations are characteristic of a genre of media geared toward the "deskchair countryside," a generation of users who remotely access an idealized depiction of country life through their computer screens (Sutherland, 2020, p. 1156).[18] *Stardew* uses idyllic ruralism as both the framing device and setting for doing farm work as well as that work's social and reproductive rationale. Heteronormative monogamy, marriage, and child-rearing explicitly figure into Grandpa's conception of what counts as a meaningful connection and "that we return the gift of the line by extending that line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 17).

Consequently, escaping what Grandpa described as the "burden of modern life" involves not only turning away from an oppressive and alienating white-collar job in the city and toward blue-collar labour of building back the farm from the ground up, but also establishing oneself as a new community member by answering an implicit question: What will you do with your inheritance? Will you embrace tradition and align yourself with the kinds of "meaningful connections" Grandpa intended? Or will you deviate from what is normal and (re)productive in favour by seeking out more unusual and unexpected pleasures from a life in the countryside? Queer, new in town, and without a dance partner, I was unsettled by the lines I saw being traced and retraced all around me. Heterosexuality is not technically compulsory in the valley, but my first Spring suggested that queerness would be tolerated rather than truly celebrated in public life. It was time to break away from tradition.

Compulsory Monogamy and Restoring the Rural Idyll

As I discussed in the previous section, building intimacy with *Stardew*'s NPCs involves the player taking actions that bring them in or out of alignment with that person. For myself, this process involved taking what knowledge I had of each villagers' interests and preferred gifts and using that information to build habits that kept up with their day-to-day routines. Each villagers' routine is unique and varies depending on the season, weather, and day of the week. Aligning one's day with those habits reveals information about their lifestyles and wider social networks.

Sometimes, I would cross paths with a villager unintentionally. For example, I learned that Harvey likes to spend days off at the museum after running into him there one weekend and that Haley likes to do photography in the woods after seeing her in the forest while gathering wood. Other times, I would learn about villagers by deliberately following in their footsteps. For example, by following Abigail on a Friday night, I learned that she is close friends with Sebastian and Sam and that they play pool in the Stardrop Saloon every week. I could also infer where a villager might be based on their preferred gifts. For instance, villagers who like beer or wine often go to the saloon in the evenings. I mostly relied on my own notes and memory to keep track of everyone's schedules but consulted the wiki in situations where I needed to find someone quickly, such as dropping off a birthday gift or complete an Item Delivery quest before time ran out. Because each game day is short and all the buildings in Pelican Town have specific

opening and closing times, I often maximized my chances of finding everyone I wanted to visit by socializing during the day and doing chores and other activities at night.

The romantic connections that I prioritized quickly shaped day-to-day operations on the farm. First, they impacted building upgrades. Since many villagers have a favourite food, I purchased an upgrade that added a kitchen to the farmhouse within my first year. To widen the selection of meals I could make for my dates, I also invested in a Big Coop (for chickens, ducks, and rabbits), a Big Barn (for goats, cows, and pigs), and a Mill so that I could produce eggs, milk, cheese, truffle oil, wheat, sugar, and rice for new recipes. Social relationships also directly influenced the crops I planted. I was particularly drawn to Abigail and Harvey: I related to Abigail's dislike of the Flower Dance and her frustration with her parents' expectation that she conform to traditional gender roles; I also identified with Harvey's struggle to manage the pressure of his role as a caretaker of Pelican Town's residents ("I feel responsible for the health of this whole community… it's kind of stressful."). To get to know these two better, I grew plenty of grapes and other fruit so that I could make wine for Harvey throughout the year and stocked up on pumpkins for Abigail.

Figure 9

I harvest a pumpkin patch I planted for Abigail.

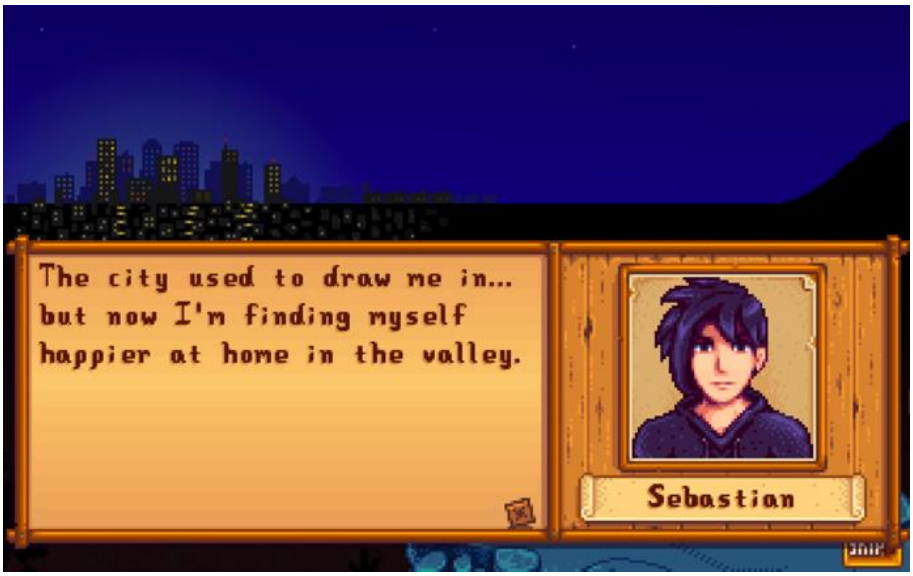
Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

As part of an effort to try out a wide range of activities and encounter as many different giftable items as possible, I chose to repair the Community Center instead of becoming a JojaMart member. After donating all the required items by the end of my fourth year, the Juminos —forest spirits who had taken up residence in the abandoned building— rewarded my contributions by fully repairing the Center and bringing the community together again. In a climactic cutscene, Morris interrupted the town's celebration by threatening to undercut Pierre's prices again. The player can end this storyline in one of two ways: Either the villagers unite through their newfound sense of community and boycott JojaMart, or Pierre settles things "the old-fashioned way" and ejects Morris from the center by punching him through the ceiling. Either way, the JojaMart is shut down and Morris, the embodiment of corporate greed and the evil of valuing a high quantity of customers over quality connections with the townsfolk, is driven away so that the threat that the urban posted to an idyllic rural lifestyle is neutralized (Sutherland, 2020).

Citing Halfacree's (2010) modes of consuming idyllic ruralism in the media, Sutherland argues that this resolution of *Stardew's* main conflict figures into classical agrarian narratives by presenting the rural idyll as "a precious castle to be fortified and defended from invaders, particularly big-box development" (p. 1168). I found that the player's role as the community's protector also extended into the game's romantic progressions. Heart Events often involve the villagers' intimacy with the player motivating them to overcome adversity and become their best selves. Haley, who was initially materialistic and told me I smelled bad, became more selfless as she grew to appreciate the smell of dirt and what country living had to offer her. Sebastian, who dreamed of running away to the city on his motorcycle, decided that our connection made staying in Pelican Town worthwhile. The farmer also improves people's lives and careers as more Heart Events are unlocked: Leah claimed she only succeeded as a sculptor because I helped her to become a "real" artist, Elliot only overcame his writer's block and became a well-known author because I inspired him, and I convinced Shane that life was worth living so that he could overcome his alcoholism and become a successful chicken rancher. The game effectively affirms an agrarian emphasis on "the centrality of farming to other occupations" by framing intimacy with the player as a source of positive transformation (Sutherland, 2020, p. 1168).

Figure 10

Sebastian decides to stay in Stardew Valley with the farmer.



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Leah's 10-Heart Event is particularly illustrative of how mononormative tropes (specifically jealousy and competition as "natural" responses to a threat (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587) are used to establish the farmer's role as the rural idyll's protector. In this sequence, Leah's ex-partner, Kel, unexpectedly interrupted our romantic picnic in the woods. Kel tried to convince Leah to move back to Zuzu City with them, framing themselves as the superior choice in romantic partner by playing into harmful stereotypes about farmers and insulting my intelligence ("Seriously, Leah… What are you doing out here with this simple-minded bumpkin?"). Leah rebuked Kel for only reaching out after she had become a successful artist despite never supporting her before. She then defended the quality of my character, contrasting the quality of our relationship with the empty gestures of shallow city-folk. Competition between the player and a lover's jealous ex-partner reproduces the agrarian narrative of a rural community as "a precious castle to be defended from invaders" on the level of individual intimate connection (Sutherland, 2020, p. 1168).

The game did allow me to buy multiple bouquets and be in several official romantic relationships at once, but also regularly reinforced that people living in the valley were expected to eventually settle down monogamously. For example, during my third annual Stardew Valley Fair (a point at which I was dating Abigail, Harvey, Maru, and Haley), a fortune teller asked me, "Are you playing games with those who would put their trust in you?" and warned that I would

leave my dates with broken hearts. Additionally, helping villagers solve problems sometimes centered around the idea that romantic relationships should be monogamous. For example, Clint's Heart Events revolved around helping him ask Emily on a date. However, if the player reaches Emily's 8-Heart Event before they reach Clint's 6-Heart Event, he will walk in on them sharing a tender moment with her, express his congratulations (to the player for "winning" Emily but not to Emily herself) and leave in disappointment. Dating some villagers also resulted in them avoiding their other crushes. Haley, who was clearly infatuated with Alex, changed her responses from asking me to say "hi" to him for her to requesting that I tell him that she's busy (with me). When I started dating Alex, he passively avoided Haley as well.

Figure 11

Clint suggests that I won a competition for Emily's exclusive affections.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Unfortunately, this period of conflict-free courtship was short lived. In a duplicate save file, I not only dated every romanceable villager but also filled all their Friendship meters to the maximum capacity before marriage (10 hearts). In doing so, I encountered a threshold in the game's code that triggered two sequences (one for the bachelors and one for the bachelorettes) in which my partners confronted and punished me for betraying their trust and failing to make an exclusive monogamous commitment.

During my fifth year, I entered the Stardrop Saloon to buy a coffee for Harvey. Because I had unlocked every bachelor's 10-Heart Event, this action triggered a sequence in which the bachelors gathered in the pool hall to confront me for trying to date them all at once. My avatar jumped in surprise and tried to walk away with a nervous sweat drop emoji appearing above their head, but the bachelors demanded that I stay put. "Never thought you'd find all your 'boyfriends' in one room, huh Allyn?" asked Sam. They then took turns scolding me. Harvey accused me of tricking all the men into thinking they loved me while Alex asked if I was just using him. Shane asked if I was happy that I destroyed his "last shred of hope." In a multiple-choice text box, the game then prompted me to either apologize (in which case I was told that this was not enough to make up for the betrayal) or attempt to explain myself by selecting one of the following options:

- You were all too pushy with me! You made it difficult to say 'no'!
- Pierre pressured me! He wanted to sell more bouquets!
- (Start crying)

If I accused the bachelors of pressuring me or blamed Pierre for selling me the bouquets, my boyfriends disapproved of my refusal to take responsibility for my actions. If I cried, I was accused of putting on an act. Every choice resulted in the bachelors deciding to punish me by giving me "the cold shoulder."

Figure 12

Sam lets me know that the bachelors will be socially ostracizing me.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

A similar sequence was triggered when I entered Emily and Haley's house. My avatar expressed the same guilt and shock upon being "caught" and the bachelorettes took turns reprimanding me. "Thought you'd sample the whole buffet, huh? What a sleaze…," said Maru. Penny asked how I could do this to her while Emily lamented that our relationship was a lie. Like the bachelors, the bachelorettes would not accept an apology. If I tried to explain my actions, the game offered a different selection of three excuses:

- I thought we were just friends! I didn't know it was so serious!
- Pierre pressured me! He wanted to sell more bouquets!
- Ladies, this is completely normal, it's just a 'lifestyle' choice…

The third option intentionally misrepresents closed or secret non-monogamy as a matter of "choice" and "lifestyle," weaponizing the language of open non-monogamies like polyamory to gaslight the bachelorettes into believing that a total lack of communication and consent in intimate relationships is "normal" and even desirable. It is unfortunately true that some people's actual experience with open non-monogamy, including my own early experiences of polyamory, have involved intimate partners (and heterosexual men in particular) using a language of ethics,

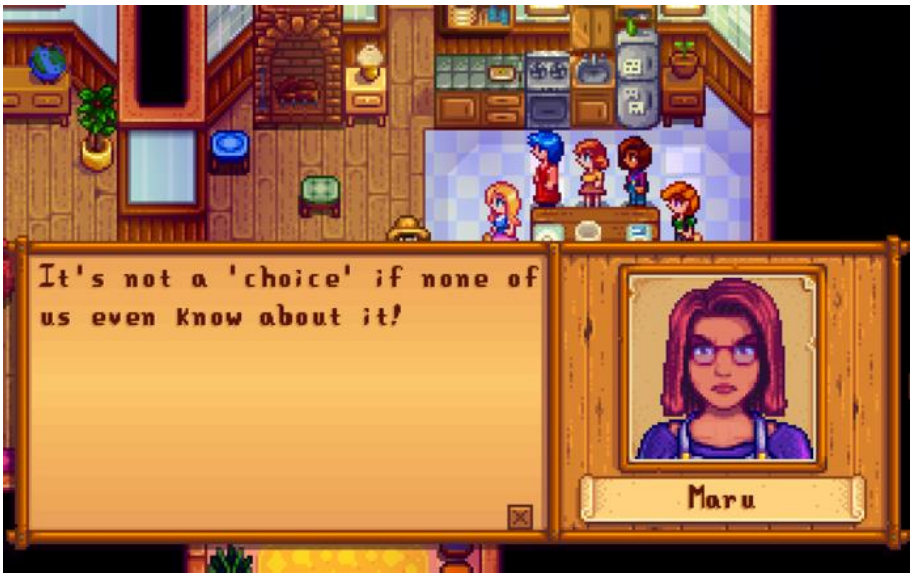
open communication, and personal growth to justify dating multiple people without their consent (Anderson, 2018). However, these narratives can also be used to dismiss open non-monogamies as a legitimate way of doing relationships and the possibility that it is practiced by honest and considerate people who clearly express their intentions and respect others' boundaries.

For those reasons, these two sequences contribute to mononormative constructions of multi-partner relationships as arrangements that can only be maintained "in the context of dishonesty and secretiveness" (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 589). Maru's grievance when I selected this response, stating outright that "it's not a choice if none of us know about it" is, of course, correct. As I highlighted previously, the game's gifting and text box mechanics never gave me any opportunity to ask for the villagers' consent to date multiple people. I did take measures to my try to get a sense of whether they would approve or be uncomfortable with the prospect, for example, by giving out bouquets in full view of the boyfriends and girlfriends I already had, which yielded no negative reactions. Taken together, open non-monogamy does not really exist in the game world. The game's code only accounts for committed relationships with more than one person as the shameful revelation of a lie that serves as dramatic narrative twist.

It is also noteworthy that the available responses in each confrontation presume a heterosexual relationship dynamic by playing into harmful gendered stereotypes. In the sequence with the bachelors, the option to explain one's infidelity involves crying rather than taking accountability for one's actions, reproducing stereotypes of women as weak, indecisive, and/or overly emotional. The option to tell the bachelors that they made it difficult to say 'no' also gives players the option of using an assumption that these men took an active, leading role in our relationships (and that I was only following their lead) as a defense for their infidelity (Beres, 2014). In the sequence with the bachelorettes, the option to excuse one's behaviour as something women should expect, evoking the tautological argument that "boys will be boys," reproduces gender essentialist discourses that understand men as active sexual subjects who will inevitably do whatever is necessary satisfy an insatiable and immutable need for access to women's sexuality (Lorber, 1991; Beres, 2014; Willey, 2016). If the player is using a male avatar, this is further supported by Leah's statement that she thought the player was "different from other men." The player's option to claim they "didn't know it was so serious" also reinforces stereotypes of men as preferring casual relationships and being reluctant to make romantic commitments and women as being more emotionally invested.

Figure 13

Maru challenges the idea that my non-monogamy is a "lifestyle choice"



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

To communicate that the player has, in the words of the fortune teller, "played games" with the people who trusted them and should have known better, the game draws on the injustice of how the "rules" of monogamy have historically applied asymmetrically across binary constructions of gender to characterize the farmer as deceptive, irresponsible, and exploitative (Willey, 2016). It is possible that Barone did not mean to erase open non-monogamy altogether. A generous reading might interpret this the sequence as a feminist commentary on how the women in the valley are empowered to stand up to a lover who was been manipulative at worst and careless at best. However, Penny's response when I used my non-monogamous "lifestyle choice" as a defense for dating everyone confirmed that failing to be monogamous is equivalent to failing to embody the farmer's role as a protector of the community: "I don't care what's considered normal in Zuzu City, but I'm definitely not okay with this arrangement!" This remark makes clear that these choices have made the player an outsider to the community and that non-monogamy —what is ostensibly "normal" for urbanites— is incompatible with "the good life" being lived by virtuous people in the countryside.

Unlike how *The Witcher 3* punishes players for being non-monogamous by locking them out of certain game endings, triggering either of these sequences and getting the "cold shoulder"

treatment has no long-term consequences. Restarting the game-day and avoiding the saloon and Emily and Haley's house would be inconvenient (especially if these are locations that the player wants to continue to access) but, at worst, the bachelors and/or bachelorettes will shame and ignore the player for an in-game week (about an hour and a half of gameplay) before everything returns to normal. Everything is forgiven and the incident does not impact anyone's Friendship meter. Making the player re-start an open-ended game and lose a potentially enormous investment of time and energy that was put into their farm and social network would be a harsh punishment for pushing against a hard-coded boundary that they could not have known was there. Since the sequences can only be triggered once, I was able to keep all my boyfriends and girlfriends without having to worry about another confrontation in the future.

The player can also strategize to bypass these consequences of doing non-monogamy altogether. For example, if their luck stats are being boosted by a rabbit's foot in their inventory, the threat of boyfriends and/or girlfriends finding out that they are all dating the same person is counteracted. When I entered the sisters' house while carrying a rabbit's foot, the bachelorettes included me in their gossip session. When I entered the saloon, the bachelors invited me to play a game of pool. Side-stepping the consequences of sexual deviancy becomes a sort of alternative win-state by allowing the player and keep on "sampling the whole buffet" while their boyfriends and/or girlfriends are none the wiser. These confrontations and their lucky loophole establish compulsory monogamy as a social rule while still allowing the player to have fun role-playing the taboo by either waiting out the villagers' bitterness or "getting lucky." Consequently, these sequences still function as "anti-achievements" for pushing against the boundaries of mononormative codes (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018). They teach the player a lesson about the community's attitudes toward non-monogamy in general but also reward them for seeking out or stumbling into the drama of infidelity by unlocking new game content outside of day-to-day activities.

In these sequences, non-monogamy is shown to be antithetical to wholesome small-town values and incompatible with communication and consent. Additionally, the game suggests that non-monogamy is only unacceptable once people achieve a level of intimacy that, in a mononormative world, necessitates "settling down" and making a long-term and exclusive commitment to one partner. Put differently, "playing the field" is allowed but only as a temporary phase that a person is expected to grow out of. Lastly, since I could only communicate

with my dates using the pre-written scripts offered in multiple-choice text boxes, there were no opportunities to tell my partners who I was dating, get their informed consent to go on dates with other people, or negotiate the boundaries of our relationships.

Marriage and Mononormativity

By the time my experiment in dating everyone in town was over, I felt polysaturated: 12 connections were too many for me to comfortably maintain and so I was more exhausted than excited by my relationships. To remedy this, I broke up with several of the villagers by giving them a wilted bouquet (an item symbolizing the death of the relationship that is made by burning a bouquet in a furnace). Ex-boyfriends' and ex-girlfriends' Friendship meters are reduced to five hearts after a breakup, but the open-ended structure of the game does not close off the possibility of earning back Friendship points and dating them again. I continued to date Abigail and Harvey, the two villagers to whom I had been attracted since my first year in the valley, as well as Maru and Haley, who had grown on me over the years. Eventually, I decided to find out what life would be like if I proposed to Abigail.

To get married, the player must visit the Old Mariner, a man who appears at the beach on rainy days and offers to sell them a Mermaid's Pendant (the equivalent of an engagement ring) for 5000g ("Ah, I can see it in yer eyes… There be a special someone in yer heart. Just so happens I'm sellin' a 'Mermaid's Pendant.' Give that to yer intended and they'll know exactly what you mean."). If the player has not yet filled 10 hearts in any romanceable villager's Friendship meter, the Old Mariner will tell them they are not yet ready to own this item. He will only sell the player one Mermaid's Pendant at a time and will not sell a pendant to a player who is already married. The player must also have purchased the first house upgrade so that the spouse can access the kitchen and share the farmer's bedroom. While marriage is not technically compulsory, it is presented as the only logical and valid way to progress through romantic relationships. Aside from the many married and monogamous couples in town who exemplify what a legitimate partnership and family look like, the social obligation to marry is also sustained by a letter from Lewis and a library book called "Marriage Guide for Farmers" that each detail how to find the Old Mariner, what to do with the pendant "when you're ready to pop the big question," and how to keep spouses happy (i.e., continuing to give them gifts). Players can propose to boyfriends and girlfriends that are the same gender as their avatar.

Figure 14

The Old Mariner tells me to show the Mermaid Pendant to "the one."

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

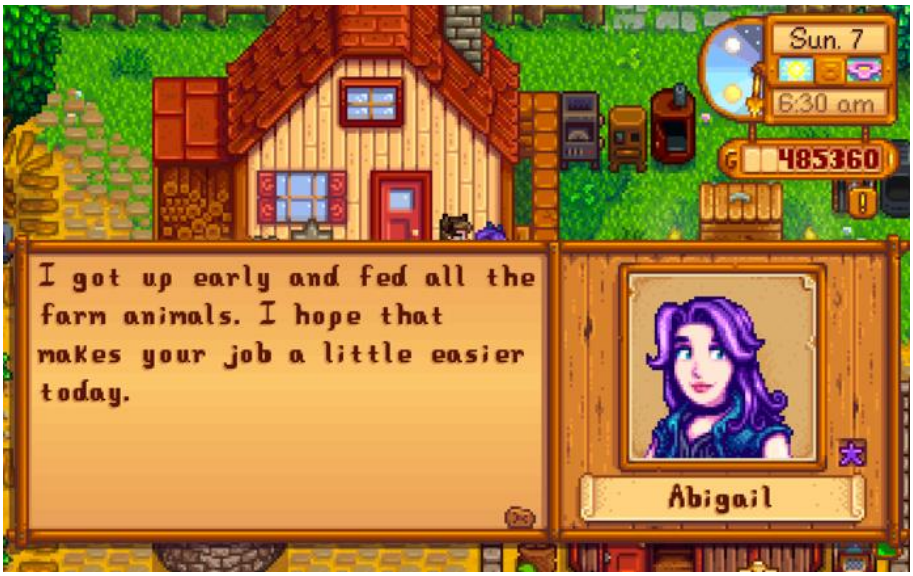
I was familiar with Abigail's routines and so I met her in the town's graveyard one evening to propose. She accepted as all romanceable villagers do and, three days later, the whole town came to our wedding. My boyfriend, girlfriends, and (many) ex-partners were in attendance, but since there were no objections before, during, or after the ceremony, it seemed as though their collective disapproval of non-monogamy had eased off and I had their implicit consent. During Mayor Lewis's officiating speech, he mentioned that marrying Abigail had legitimized me as a full-fledged member of their community even though the townsfolk were initially unsure that I would fit in. Marriage, then, is a ticket to social acceptance that finalizes the player's transformation from disaffected urbanite to "pillar and savior of the community" (Sutherland, 2020, p. 1168). After Lewis pronounced us wife and wife, our new relationship status was reflected in the social tab and Abigail automatically moved into the farmhouse.

When the player marries a villager, the farm undergoes several significant changes. First, two new areas are added that give spouses space for their own activities: a room adjacent to the player's bedroom that resembles the spouse's former lodgings and a small space in the backyard. Abigail's new room contained her videogame console, drum set, guinea pig, and sword, and she would occasionally go to the backyard to play her flute. While these spaces and new post-

marriage dialogue allow the player's spouse to "retain their unique personality" to some extent (Lange, 2017), I was perturbed by how much Abigail's investment in our relationship tied her to my role as the farmer. Like all spouses, Abigail's role in my life was instrumentalized in service of my ongoing agricultural project. I had been looking forward to going on new adventures with her, but she wasted no time in directing my attention back to my daily chores "The wedding was wonderful, wasn't it dear?" she said immediately after the ceremony. "Well, we can't forget about the farm… time to get to work." When I checked in with her after waking up every morning at 6:00am, she would give me meals to keep my energy up throughout the day and tell me how she'd tended to the crops, animals, and fences on my behalf. Even kissing her by clicking until her scripted replies for the day were exhausted replenished my energy bar. The transition from girlfriend to wife was also a transition from partner to farmhand so that the player is rewarded for investing time and resources in courtship, house upgrades, and pendants.

Figure 15

Abigail lessens my workload by taking care of chores around the farm.



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

The transformation of one's spouse into a farmhand is a feature of that carries over from the popular farming and life sim *Harvest Moon* (Victor Interactive Software, 1997), which Barone used as a template while building *Stardew*. According to game developer Amanda Lange, marriage in *Stardew* is more inclusive than *Harvest Moon,* which only included a male

protagonist and female love interests, or even its spin-off *Harvest Moon for Girl* (Victor Software, 1997), which concludes a woman farmer's story and ends the game when she gets married. However, despite supporting same-gender romances and allowing players with both male and female avatars to continue the game after marriage, the overall form that married life takes in *Stardew* retains these games heteronormative and patriarchal relationship dynamic in that all spouses leave much of their old lives behind to essentially take on the archetypal role of "the farmer's wife."

Figure 16

Abigail and Harvey both take on the role of wedding planner and farmhand.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

Second, Abigail's activities and social contacts outside the farm were severely restricted. Spouses do continue to move around the valley somewhat after marriage and those with jobs in town (such as Harvey, Maru, Emily, and Sam) continue to go to work, but they all spend most of their time at the farmhouse. Abigail used to visit a variety of locations every day but, after getting married, she only left the farm on two days each week. The number of locations she visited were also significantly reduced. I was glad to see that she continued to spend Friday nights with Sebastian and Sam at the saloon, but her rotating seasonal schedules were replaced with an unchanging, year-round routine wherein she no longer travelled to the carpenter's shop, the library, the Wizard's tower, the lake by the mountain, the beach, the bus stop, or the railroad tracks. When I interacted with her, she would speak enthusiastically about living on the farm and mention going exploring from time to time, but I never saw her leave the house or her small area in the backyard, even just to visit other parts of the property.

Finally, marriage seemed to override Abigail's own ambitions and passions. During her 6-Heart Event, she had told me that she wanted to go adventuring as she practiced with her sword and defied Pierre's demands that she be more domestic and help her mother in the kitchen. I wanted her to join me on my adventures in the mines, but she would only ever ask me about my own adventures, tell me to bring her a souvenir, or give me gifts to help fight off monsters while she stayed at home, did farm chores, and made me meals. If she did appear in the mines, she would give me a useful item but never team up with me against the monsters. The only ways to do activities together were to wait for annually recurring events (such as the Flower Dance, the Stardew Valley Fair, or the Spirit's Eve Festival) or buy her a ticket for the cinema that had replaced the abandoned JojaMart. The resolute and rebellious woman to whom I had grown so attached was now fully invested in running a household and doing agricultural labour to provide me with a social and economic advantage.

Figure 17

Abigail assists me in doing other activities while she stays home.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

As I explained previously, spouses' Friendship levels decay over time and they become unhappy if the player does not interact with them regularly. Relationships with friends and dates are secure once a villager's Friendship meter is filled, but marriage requires ongoing engagement from the player. When more hearts were filled and Abigail was content, her replies tended

toward praising the farm, expressing devotion to our relationship, and commending me for my hard work. However, when I neglected to pay her enough attention and her Friendship levels dropped too low, she would become unhappy and tell me she was bored or that I was taking advantage of her labour ("I used to be special to you, your best friend... now you only seem to put up with me when I make a hot dinner."). Calling back to tropes of hetero-monogamy in mononormative media, she would also tell me that our relationship was a mistake and that she should have chosen Sebastian ("I wonder if I could have done better. I was very good friends with Sebastian before we met. He was probably the one…"). The game strongly implies that Abigail and Sebastian have a mutual crush on one another: The two are friends, play in a band together, and they choose each other at every Flower Dance unless the player intervenes. Abigail is also the only person other than the player who spends time with Sebastian one-on-one in his bedroom. However, the player's orientation toward the villagers overrides the possibility of those NPCs forming multiple romantic connections with each other. Abigail stops visiting Sebastian in his room once the player fills his Friendship meter above six hearts, suggesting that their alignment with Sebastian supersedes hers. Again, the game presents romances as mutually exclusive connections where following one pathway closes others off altogether.

While married to Abigail, I continued to date Harvey, Haley, and Maru. Since I could not trigger any more of their Heart Events without marrying them, our dates mainly involved me visiting them in their homes or favourite haunts to give them gifts (which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2). Abigail did not react when I gave gifts to non-romanceable villagers, but she would often become jealous when I gave gifts to the bachelorettes, whether I was dating them or not. For example, when I gave a gift to Haley, Abigail became frustrated, gave me the "silent treatment," and refused to get out of bed for the rest of the day. According to the wiki, there is a 20% to 40% chance that a spouse will become jealous if the player gives a gift to a romanceable villager of the same gender and, just like in the sequences where I was confronted by my partners, these odds are influenced by the player's luck stat ("Marriage," 2021).

Figure 18

Abigail is suspicious that Haley received a gift and refuses to get out of bed.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

Deri describes jealousy as an entanglement of intersecting emotions that involve "embodied manifestations of social practices and are subject to intersecting power relations" (2015, p. 20). Within mononormative discourses, notions of jealousy tend to focus on the threat posed by a third-party "rival" who challenges the exclusivity of the monogamous relationship (p. 21). *Stardew* perpetuates this stereotype by coding jealousy into NPC interactions as a consequence for the player continuing to give gifts to villagers who the game recognizes as their spouse's competitor. While my partners had previously confronted me for becoming too intimate with too many people at once without settling into a monogamous partnership, spousal jealousy occurs when the game registers a particular action (gift giving) directed toward a particular kind of person. This jealousy mechanic does not take degrees of closeness into account. Rather, the game equates giving gifts to single villagers with the player's intent to court them and so suggests that investing one's time, labour, and material goods in an uncoupled person while married is not socially acceptable behaviour.

Figure 19

Abigail is jealous of the bachelorettes (whether I am dating them or not).

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

As Ahmed writes, "if orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of the body into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (2006, p. 11). *Stardew*'s depiction of jealousy as the "natural" and respectable response for Abigail to have when I showed affection to others so that "relationships outside this partnership are categorized as 'infidelities'" was disorientating to me for several reasons (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587). Although I had been attempting to role-play as an openly non-monogamous farmer by interpreting my partners' lack of objection at my wedding as tacit (though inadequate) consent, Abigail's jealous responses left me extending myself out into the game world to contact other bodies but failing to find responses that were familiar or desirable. First, since jealousy is only linked to giving gifts and not conversation, intimacy is treated as a uniform commodity rather than distinctive connections generated through the player's engagement with each person over time. Giving gifts to villagers is necessary for every social connection, but giving a gift to any bachelor or bachelorette is an object-oriented investment into a prospective partnership, and so attempting to invest in someone else when already married is understood as an effort to continue following multiple lines when one has already committed to a singular path. Despite the player getting to know the villagers, their troubles, and their aspirations, these relationships are reduced to a transfer of material goods from one person to another. Gifts become an expression of disloyalty that undermines the player's role as wholesome force of righteousness in the community.

I was also disorientated by the fact that any romanceable villager who occupies the same binary gender category as the player's spouse qualifies as a threat whether or not that NPC is labeled as an official boyfriend or girlfriend in the game menu's social tab. This flattens and

straightens out the complexity of non-normative ways of relating by reinforcing that "people are expected to have one 'lover' and anyone else should fall into the category of 'friend', with strict cultural rules around what behaviour is appropriate in friendship" (Barker, 2005, p. 81). Just as the sequences where my partners confronted me for dating multiple people were only triggered if I dated either all the bachelors *or* all the bachelorettes and separated their reactions according to gender, this spousal jealousy mechanic also presumes that the player is role-playing the farmer as either straight, lesbian, or gay without accounting for plurisexual orientations (for example, bisexuality and pansexuality (Galupo et al., 2015)). In my case, this bi-erasure persisted no matter who I was married to. For example, Harvey was at ease when I gave gifts to the bachelorettes whether they were labeled as my girlfriend in the social tab or not but became jealous if I gave a gift to another single man.

Overall, these jealousy mechanics limited my strategies for role-playing a non-monogamous farmer because they excised significant parts of what makes open non-monogamy a distinctly queer experience for me from the game's systems and narrative. While being able to date villagers regardless of their gender allows the player to role-play non-normative orientations, the game's separation of characters into bounded categories of male/female and friend/lover impeded the potential for non-monogamous intimacy to "transcend dichotomies of sexuality and gender through enabling the same person to relate to differently gendered people in differently gendered ways" (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). There were also no opportunities to address my spouses' jealousy in dialogue; I could not explain to Abigail that Haley was not a threat to our relationship or even use mononormative language and insist that Haley and I were "just friends." I could only bring myself back into alignment with a mononormative construction of married life by giving Abigail enough gifts and kisses to earn back the Friendship points that I had lost. Marriage condemned me to the life of a scoundrel whose every gesture of affection ran the risk of making my spouse jealous. Other than avoiding the risk of jealousy entirely by accepting a spouse's refusal to recognize my bisexuality and never dating a villager who shares their gender, the game offers no clear mechanisms with which I could reorientate myself.

Jealousy is not solely a monogamous experience, but different ways of doing intimacy generate incommensurable experiences and understandings of what constitutes jealousy, what jealousy means, and how to navigate a partner's discomfort, insecurity, fears, etc. (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Research shows that openly non-monogamous people do experience jealousy, for

example, stemming from situations where their partner's partner (or "metamour") "was too similar to themselves, [and] when there were overlapping roles" (Deri, 2015, p. 21). However, *Stardew* does not present spouses' discomfort with other relationships as normal insecurities that can be worked through together. Rather, jealousy is a one-dimensional, "natural," and morally correct response to non-monogamy. Even in intimacies that do not involve the player directly, jealousy in *Stardew* is both a natural response and a grotesque tragedy. For example, the Wizard talks about a time when he cheated on his wife and she literally turned green with envy, transforming into a witch who flies over the valley casting curses. Abigail's mother, Caroline, mentions that she's hidden her visits to the Wizard from her husband Pierre due to his "jealousy issues," leading fans to speculate on whether Abigail is secretly the Wizard's daughter and Pierre's family line is fraudulent ("Caroline," 2021; "Wizard," n.d.).

After marriage, a villager's Friendship meter is extended by four hearts so that the player can continue to earn Friendship points and unlock their climactic 14-Heart Event ("Marriage," 2021). It follows that *Stardew* motivates the player to get married if they want to see each romanceable villager's story arc through to its conclusion. When we consider that being confronted about my non-monogamy led to a period of social ostracization in combination with Lewis's remarks about me only becoming a bona fide member of the community after marrying Abigail, monogamy is implicated in the game's heteronormative vision of what constitutes a successful relationship. The open-endedness of the game may support the player in dating anyone and everyone, but the game still insists that being a good person and treating others well requires dating one person at a time. So, while marriage is not mandatory, the fact that every romantic progression ends with monogamous marriage as the ideal invites the player to conform to heteronormative ways of relating by perpetuating a cycle of serial monogamy. This type of serial monogamy has previously been identified in analysis of other games that are known for including non-heterosexual player-NPC relationships. For example, Consalvo notes that in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), marriage is an "event" that players can create conditions to repeatedly trigger rather than a permanent state in the game (2003b, p. 23).

Stardew's mononormativity straightens queer aspects of player-NPC relationship dynamics, and so each villager's heteronormative narrative denouement ties the restoration of Grandpa's farm to the reproduction of a traditional nuclear family (Ahmed, 2006). Happy spouses automatically ask the player if they want to have children and while the gender of the

first child is random, the second child will always be their sibling's opposite so that every family can have one boy and one girl. This normativity impacts the shape of domestic space itself: The second house upgrade available for purchase automatically includes a nursery with two children's beds that serve only to draw attention to the absence of children until they are born. Consequently, heteronormative monogamy is constructed as an essential part of maintaining an idyllic rural lifestyle and serves as the rationale for developing the family property, extracting and selling resources to buy a bigger home, and working toward building a bigger family.
To fulfill Grandpa's expectation and "honor the family name," the player must "desire what the family desires: the reproduction of its line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74). Even though there are 12 unique characters to learn about and experience intimacy with, every relationship moves in the same direction and shares a common destination. Romantic progressions all move up a "relationship escalator," a default set of expectations for the trajectory of intimate relationships where exclusivity, merging identities and assets, marriage, and child-rearing are obligatory life stages (Veaux & Rickert, 2014; Gahran, 2017). As a result, *Stardew*'s core dating mechanics reproduce "the "life-long or serial monogamy with 'the one' perfect partner" as the ideal relationship model *ad infinitum* (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 587).

Discussion: Mononormativity and the Limits of Playersexuality

As Murray notes, playing games is a "means of elaborating and practicing rituals of social organization" that preserve and rework larger attitudes and patterns of behaviour over time (2006, p. 199). The arrangement of objects and others in game worlds and the contexts in which contact between them is made possible can sustain or disrupt the reach of culture, myth, and dominant social constructions of gender and sexuality. It is noteworthy, then, that *Stardew*'s "sexual story" privileges particular constructions of queerness that are familiar and nonthreatening within hetero- and mono-normative cultures (Plummer, 1995). By only telling stories where non-monogamy is secret and harmful, *Stardew Valley* sustains compulsory monogamy's dominance over other ways of doing relationships by making alternatives to it incompatible with what it means to live a "good life" in the best of all possible worlds. Sutherland's article on classical agrarian narratives in *Stardew* suggests that integrating romance and dating into the "good life" genre can results in an "uncritical backdrop" that idealizes country living and it is true that the player's role in helping romanceable villagers to overcome obstacles

and improve life in the valley makes intimacy in the game resonate with this idealization (2020, p.1156; Peeren & Souch, 2019). In some ways, the game also challenges idyllic ruralism by implicating the player in the villagers' struggles with issues such as poverty, substance abuse, and homelessness, raising the stakes of the player's actions by highlighting how their choices impact others. However, for all the potential that *Stardew* has to complicate and challenge the conventions of the "good life" genre, the game routinely groups non-monogamies in with negative aspects of life in the valley that were brought on by Joja Corp, an alienating big-box entity standing in as a metonym for the encroachment of the urban on the rural. Just as the game encourages the player to save the Community Center and reject membership with Joja Mart, non-monogamy is presented as a misalignment, a corrupt sexual identity that the player must performatively reject —by marrying, apologizing, and explaining it away— in order to cement the farmer's role as a liberator and protector of the rural idyll.

In email correspondence with Lange, Eric Barone explained that he actively sought to decenter his own attitudes and preferences when designing the bachelors and bachelorettes:

> What I tried to do was to make the characters act in a realistic way for their character, and not necessarily what I would find most attractive (in the case of females) or what I might do (in the case of the males). So in some ways I was writing outside of 'what I know,' which I think worked out fine. (Lange, 2017, p. 62)

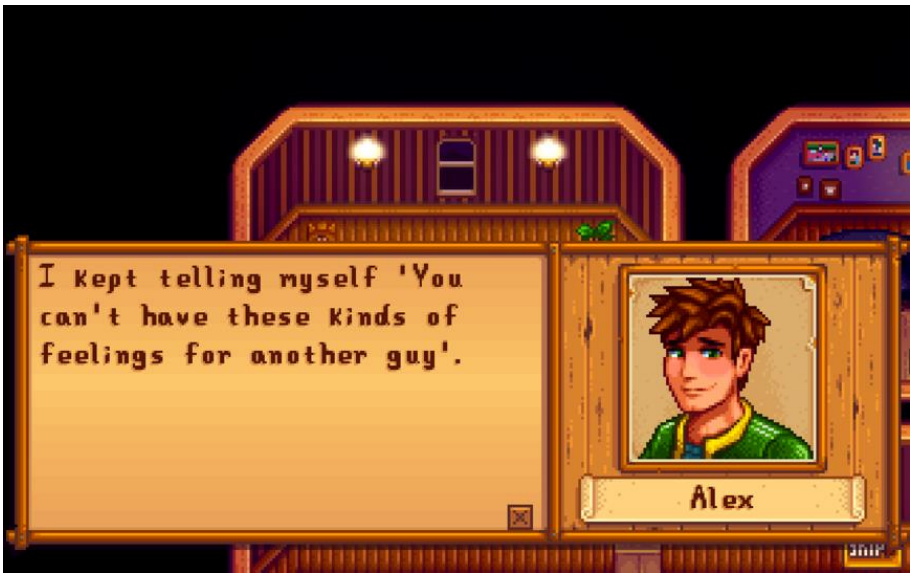
Barone succeeded in designing complex and captivating romanceable characters whose dreams and struggles connect with larger antagonistic forces at work in the game world. Yet, it is telling that Barone writing "outside" his experiences as a cissexual and heterosexual man resulted in a game world where queer people exist but queerness can only be expressed according to a hetero- and mono-normative design.

To gesture toward how future game makers can incorporate more diverse ways of doing intimacy rather than defaulting to mononormative tropes, systems, and scripts, I will finish this chapter by connecting *Stardew*'s privileging of monogamy to its reliance on "playersexuality" (Cole, 2017a, 2017b). Playersexuality refers to when NPCs are attracted to the player regardless of their gender so that if the player initiates an intimate relationship, the NPCs response will complement that intention. In *Stardew*'s highly heteronormative game world, these bachelors and bachelorettes are playersexual in that they are all sexually and romantically orientated

toward the farmer as long as the player earns enough Friendship points and chooses the appropriate dialogue options. Some villagers (including Abigail, Alex, and Sebastian) do explicitly recognize their relationship with the player as being queer during their 10-Heart Events, but these lines are rare and these character's queer becoming is never revisited. Playersexuality includes queerness so that "it is hidden, it is optional, and it relies on the player to bring it to life" (Cole, 2017a, para. 5; Shaw, 2014). Creating playersexual NPCs eliminated the need for Barone to write and code intimacy in non-normative ways by technically adding queer representation but erasing any relationship dynamic that is identifiable as queer by making all relationships functionally equivalent.

Figure 20

Alex explains that he had never been attracted to other men before meeting me.



Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

Because playersexuality serves as a device that "straightens" the complexity of queer desire through "the erasure of signs of difference," it limited my non-monogamous playthrough of *Stardew* in three key ways (Ahmed, 2006, p. 96). First, playersexuality informed the content and structure of *Stardew*'s jealousy mechanics. As Ritchie and Barker explain, "constructing jealousy as a 'negative' emotion whilst describing it as a 'natural' response to infidelity, serves to maintain the dominance of monogamy…" (2006, p. 586; Robinson, 1997). *Stardew* constructs jealousy as a "natural" response not only to infidelity but to the mere threat of disloyalty posed

by single villagers with whom the player chooses to socialize. The fact that jealousy is expressed by spouses but not by boyfriends and girlfriends also normalizes jealousy as a sign that one's partner is loyal and invested in a "serious" committed relationship. As I detailed previously, the gendered dynamics of these jealousy mechanics overlooked bisexuality as a socially legible sexual orientation in this game world. Even the geometry of the Flower Dance reinforces year after year that it is not possible for desire to pull us in more than one direction. Rather, "'difference,' described in terms of opposition, keeps each sex in line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 97). Because all Stardew's romances take for granted that all relationships follow the same course up the "relationship escalator," playersexuality eliminates any need to incorporate aspects of communication, negotiation, and informed consent into the game. Relationships are either on or off, advancing or suspended, but their terms can never be adjusted based how characters develop over time. The game elements that support player-NPC interactivity (i.e., dialogue, gift giving, and Heart Event sequences) allow for only one type of intimate relationship. Since the endpoint or win state of courtship is identical in every situation, there is no need to check in with partners or clearly communicate one's own desires and intentions.

Importantly, monogamy is normalized in *Stardew*'s narrative but not fully enforced as compulsory by its systems. *Stardew*'s classical agrarian framing device positions the farmer's success as the key to the vitality of the wider community, and while the farmer's economic independence is entangled with monogamy, these privileges also give the player the ability to circumvent its rule. Married players can continue to date boyfriends and girlfriends as long as they pay enough attention to their spouses and give them gifts to offset jealousy. Additionally, the profits and rare items derived from the farmer's labour can be used to pay for divorce, erasing an ex-spouses' memories, or to disappear children from previous relationships, encouraging the player try a life with someone new without having to restart the game and potentially undo years of game progress. While those who lack social and economic advantages like job security, a stable income, community support, and access to private space are more likely to be discriminated against because of sexual stigma, the farmer can leverage these privileges in order to continue enjoying expressions of non-monogamy that "pass as sexually or relationally conventional" (Sheff & Hammers, 2011, p. 199, 210; Rambukkana, 2010; Klesse, 2014). As long as the player has enough gold and time —and maybe a lucky rabbit's foot or two—there are no transgressions against monogamy that cannot be forgiven, forgotten, or

otherwise offset. The game is consistent with other mononormative media in that "whilst infidelity as a form of (non-consensual) non-monogamy is possible within western cultural discourses, open polyamory is not" (Ritchie & Barker 2006, p. 587).

The entanglement of non/monogamy in *Stardew* unfolds in a "flow of power" wherein hierarchies of privilege and power play out unevenly not only across lines of gender, sexual orientation, and class, but also race (Plummer, 1995, p. 31). For example, the game's reliance on playersexuality sustains what Scott Morgensen has termed "settler sexuality," or, western conceptualizations of sexuality and gender that continue to be imposed on Indigenous peoples through settler colonial violence (2011). As Kim Tallbear has noted, compulsory monogamy stems from the imposition of "settler sex" that continues to wield marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family as violent tools for settler-colonial nation building (2018). Since all but two of the villagers in the valley are white, Demetrius's remarks about how the Flower Dance stems from the people of the valley's "ancient traditions" naturalizes and dehistoricizes predominantly white, working-class people's connection to the land so that hetero-monogamy is incorporated into Stardew's escapist agrarian fantasy (Tallbear, 2018). The game reproduces settler sexuality in that "modern sexuality comes into existence when the heteropatriarchal advancement of white settlers appears to vanquish sexual primitivity, which white settlers nevertheless adopt as their own history" (Morgensen, 2011, p. 19). It follows that the game's normative rendering of queer relationships echoes Morgensen's observation that "when modern sexuality queers white settlers, their effort to reclaim a place within settler society produces white and non-Native queer politics for recognition by the state," in this case, representations of queerness that are legible within hegemonic white settler colonial discourses of sexuality (p. 19).

Overall, this intervention has shown that by tying intimacy to classical agrarian ideals, *Stardew* weaves compulsory monogamy into the social aesthetic of a successful society. While *Stardew* allowed me to be non-monogamous under some specific conditions, my interactions with the villagers regularly reproduced mononormative assumptions of monogamy as the ideal way of doing romantic and sexual relationships, often by associating monogamy with the "moral nature of agricultural life" (Sutherland, 2020, p. 1157). Since the farmer is a "moral compass of the community," failing to adhere to compulsory monogamy is treated as betrayal of everyone else's wholesome, small-town values and even consensual non-monogamy is lumped in with the values of Zuzu city and the "burden of modern life" the Grandpa warned would crush our spirits

(p. 1168). When the player fails to behave in ways that reproduce those values, essentially squandering the opportunity to build "meaningful" connections that was provided to them through Grandpa's inheritance, they are put out of alignment with the community so that compulsory monogamy is secured as an essential feature of the rural idyll through social exclusion. *Stardew* precludes the possibility of doing non-monogamy consensually and, when non-monogamy is not being outright pathologized as a practice that scrupulous people should avoid, it treated as a taboo that is only permissible as long as it is enjoyed in secret. The player can also only role-play as an unequivocally (cisgender and gay or lesbian) queer character by doing intimacy hetero- and mono-normatively. The game's reliance on playersexuality to include queer representation shapes constructions of intimate privilege in the game world and consequently results in a deeply heteronormative, mononormative, and white understanding of what is moral and immoral, fair and unfair, acceptable and offensive, wholesome or perverse.

Of course, just because *Stardew* normalizes mononormativity does not mean that players cannot push back against the text. Relying on playersexuality to approximate diversity work in videogames results in a narrow and stifled vision of queerness, but players can and do intervene by straying from inherited lines, finding non-normative sources of pleasure, and redefining what it means to desire others and for intimacy to flourish. As Ruberg writes,

> …queerness can also be a way of playing —one that challenges widely accepted notions of desire, purpose, and agency in video games. In this way, queer play resists normative expectations both in and out of the game and establishes its own, emergent rules for how the game should be played. (2019, p. 136)

Hetero- and mono-normativity may be central to *Stardew*'s agrarian escapist fantasy, but its player communities still find ways to deviate from those norms. In Chapter 2, I will direct attention to how players can enact various queer playing strategies to reject normative lines, embrace failing at hetero-monogamy, and seek out ways to "live life otherwise" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2).

Playing the Field: Queer Failure Against Mononormative Systems

In Chapter 1, I showed how dating in *Stardew Valley* sustains compulsory hetero-monogamy by positioning non-monogamies as a threat to the moral and social fabric of Pelican Town and as an intrinsically unethical way of doing relationships. As well, I discussed how secret non-monogamy functions as a privileged alternative to monogamy that the player can access by gaming the system to operate as an exceptional agent who may bypass compulsory monogamy's rule. The conditions under which *Stardew* makes non-monogamy possible exist within hetero- and mono- normative matrices that specifically drive consensual alternatives to monogamy into the "outer limits" of what is intelligible or desirable within hegemonic discourses of sexuality (Rubin, 1995). Yet, as I discussed in my introduction, players are not confined to these matrices. The game's main story and each of its 12 relationship progressions are bounded by hard-coded pathways and dialogue options, but players are not required to perform as the farmer in a way that reproduces Grandpa's conservative, patriarchal small-town values.

Putting aside what *Stardew* suggests people who live a "good life" should do in their intimate relationships, the questions of what players *could* do with Grandpa's inheritance, which lines to follow and how far to follow them, are open-ended ones. In this chapter, I put Ahmed's (2006) writing on the queer phenomenology of disorientation and theories of queer failure in games (Halberstam, 2011; Macklin, 2017; Ruberg, 2017; Chang, 2017) into conversation with my play sessions to explore how players might refuse, repurpose, and remediate elements of play in order to bring consensual non-monogamy into the text. Through a series of short case studies, I discuss how players can interrupt or discard the presumed normative settings of the game through modding, sexual illegibility, waste, and the pursuit of alternative forms of kinship. I argue that while the queer playing strategies I describe are a powerful way to counter the normativity of playersexual intimacies (Chang, 2017), we should also continue to be critical of overly celebratory narratives wherein queer players are counted on to do the creative labour of bringing representation of their own desires and experiences into videogames. I then conclude by indicating how future researchers and game developers should seek not to include non-monogamies in games by checking another box on a list of marginalized groups within conditions set by dominant discourses of sexuality and intimacy, but to instead consider how games can act as sites where "relational significant otherness," or the possibility of supporting

many kinds of intimate connections within "overlapping networks of relationality" can flourish (Shotwell, 2017, p. 285).

Queer Failure in Games

In "Finding the Queerness in Games," Colleen Macklin proposes that rather than trying to locate the queerness of games in the development process, in communities of play, or in game content itself, a more generative approach is to "ask, 'Where is the queerness?' and answer 'In games!'" (2017, p. 256). This re-framing of questions of queer representation is apt when we merge it with this project's phenomenological foundations. Macklin's answer conveys that the queerness of a given game world pre-exists any explicitly queer interpretation of that game's ludic and narrative elements. Take, for example, Ruberg's description of queer modes of play in the extreme racing console game, *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion Games, 2005). At face value, a game about speeding around in cars with the goal of crashing and causing as much destruction as possible has no clear-cut queer representation; The appeal of carnage in videogames is well-established and familiar. However, the pathway to succeeding at *Burnout* can be disrupted and re-worked to introduce a "failure to play well — or… the success of playing so badly it becomes absurd" (2019, p. 145). Ruberg found pleasure and humour in the absurdity of driving with caution and self-restraint in a world that was designed for collision and mayhem, embodying a queer orientation to the game that abandons the inherited lines established within the conventions of this videogame subgenre by rejecting the "right" way to engage with the hard-coded rules. For this reason, much recent queer game studies research explores queerness even in games that "do not, at first glance, appear to include explicitly LGBTQ content" by playing against the text (Ruberg & Shaw, 2019, p. xv).

In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed begins by describing the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl's attention to "the lived experience of inhabiting a body" and emphasizing that our world and our orientation to what we encounter in that world take shape as a result of "repeated and habitual actions" (2006, p. 2). This post-structural framework points toward the "always already" there-ness of queerness in a text: It is not a thing that is included or excluded so much as "how one 'faces' the world or is directed toward it" (p. 68). A game's meaning is not immutable and queerness cannot be fixed in place. Rather, a game "becomes queer, in a sense, when we experience it queerly," as players engage with a game's presumed normative matrices

of gender, sexuality, and intimacy in ways that are atypical or irregular so that new kinds of meaning are activated (Ruberg, 2017, p. 200). How can we be certain that *all* games can offer such opportunities for queer intervention? For both Macklin and Ruberg, the answer lies in the power and pleasure of failure. Failure in videogames is "a spectacular, masochistic mode of resistance" that invites us to flirt with the unconventional and, as a result, face the world differently, explore unfamiliar orientations, or become disorientated (p. 198; Macklin, 2017).

Ruberg and Macklin build on theories of failure by Jack Halberstam (2011) who, as I detailed previously, understands failure as queer because it serves to disturb normative and prescriptive logics of success and heterosexual (re)productivity. While Juul's (2013) understanding of failure in *The Art of Failure* is that failure and frustration are necessary stepping-stones we use to overcome our inadequacies and eventually win at games, Halberstam contends that playing to lose undermines the heteronormative imperative to do well, advance, and be productive. In doing so, the "overt and covert queer worlds" that open up through our failure generate alternatives to hegemony (p. 21). Drawing on Moten and Harvey's (2004) theses on the importance of anti-disciplinary approaches in the academy, Halberstam argues for the potential of failure to generate new knowledges through the refusal of mastery, the potential of stupidity to bring us outside of "certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing," and the rejection of grand logics and already-established archives —or, to use Ahmed's terminology, inherited lines (p. 12). Ruberg understands failure in games as a queer mode of play that "disassembles normative expectations in and out of the game world" (2017, p. 198). The queer possibility of failure thus lies in its potential to bring into encounters with other bodies in unexpected ways, participating in new dynamics between bodies, and finding enjoyment in situations that are brought about through discord, inconsistency, and whimsy.

Failure is also a vital part of what Edmond Chang calls "queergaming": an approach to games that asserts the "heterogeneity of play" through "the articulation of and investment in alternative modes of playing and ways of being" (2017, p. 15-16). He writes,

> Queergaming dances with the possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits, and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure. (2017, p. 17).

Queergaming involves countering videogames' normative matrices through alternative approaches to design, play, and remediation that engage "different grammars of play, radical play, not grounded in normative ideologies like competition, exploitation, colonization, speed, violence, rugged individualism, leveling up, and win states" (p.19). By challenging videogames' "technonormative matrix" (p. 15; Butler, 1990, 1993), queergaming disrupts the reproduction of dominant ways of organizing and regulating gender, sexuality, and intimacy.[19]

Importantly, Chang understands queergaming as a utopian exercise; When we re-make the game, we re-imagine new kinds of queer futures. There is a tension here between queergaming as a utopian project and failure as a form of anti-social, radical queer negativity. For many proponents of the anti-social thesis of queer theory, queerness involves an outright refusal to invest oneself in heterosexual political imaginaries in favour of "the proudly sterile and antireproductive logics of queer relation" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 108; Caserio et al., 2006; Bersani, 1988). However, as Loubert notes, games are simultaneously utopian and bursting with opportunities to undermine straight logics through failure and other disidentificatory queer survival strategies (2019; Muñoz, 2009). Quoting José Esteban Muñoz, he points out that these strategies of disidentification with straight logics do not only "tear down the majoritarian public sphere," but also "disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 196 as cited in Loubert, 2019, p. 14). Queergaming is transformative and utopian because it "lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" by failing to identify with dominant ideologies and choosing to accept and re-work that failure (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1, as cited in Chang, 2017, p. 21).

Taken together, the queer subject is one who disidentifies with the "regulatory ideals" of gender and sexuality, destabilizes them, and so reimagines and remakes bodies and social relationships (Butler, 1993, p. 1-2). In this sense, Muñoz's theories of disidentification resemble Ahmed's description of disorientation as a failed orientation. "If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of the body into space," she writes, "then disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (2006, p. 11). Consider how *Stardew* initiates the player into a rural community through the first annual Flower Dance. Since the game world "acquires direction through how bodies inhabit it" (p. 12), then it is through the Flower Dance (and the repetition of other hetero- and mono-normative encounters) that the valley takes on a hetero-

monogamous identity. As a queer subject, I found that the game world gave me "a place" but I could not help but feel "out of place" in my dating life, marriages, and friendships (p. 12).
In the following sections, I draw on examples from my own playthroughs of *Stardew* to demonstrate how a disorientated queer subject might find ways to "reground themselves" in a hetero-monogamous game world in order to "form new patterns and new ways of making sense" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 158, 171). What do the loss and frustration that comes with failing at monogamy in Pelican town add to our understanding of how playersexuality limits intimate relationships in games? How do we transform the game and imagine new queer futures by throwing ourselves off the hetero-monogamous relationship escalator, squandering Grandpa's inheritance, and redefining what it means to succeed at finding and supporting different kinds of intimate connections?

Playing the Game of Love to Lose: Failing at Monogamy in *Stardew Valley*

In recent years, queer game studies scholars have identified a variety of queer modes and strategies of play in digital games. For example, in an article examining queer play within heteronormative games culture, Krobová et al. (2015) describe three kinds of strategies that queer (specifically, LGBT) players used to connect more deeply with their avatars and work around game elements that interfered with their ability to experience and take pleasure in the game on the same level as non-queer players. Understanding avatars as "access points for the creation of a player identity" that "are also subject to the rules of heteronormative representation" the authors claim that queer play can be done through both interpretation and performance (2015, p. 40). They found that one approach players commonly use is Stephen Greer's (2013) concept of imaginative play, which involves intentionally taking up an "oppositional" queer reading of the text (Hall, 1980). Often, these queer readings rely on players picking up on queer-coded characters and interactions (for example, interpreting a male superhero in tight clothing as gay) and using the ambiguity of those identity markers to insert queerness where none had been explicitly coded in the game. According to Greer, imaginative play involves using the game's affordances (opportunities for action) to ascribe queerness in situations where it was not explicitly written out of the game's code. For example, this strategy was also identified by Amanda Phillips (2017), who re-interpreted the hyper-visible feminine sexuality of Bayonetta (the protagonist of a hack-and-slash game series of the same name) not as

a titillating appeal to a heterosexual male gaze, but as an agent of queer disturbance who "actively refuses gestures of heteronormativity" without being explicitly written as a queer woman (p. 115).

Krobová et al. (2015) identified two additional strategies the players in their analysis used to perform queerly. The first of these is stylized performance, which involves players marking their own avatars as queer using various visual cues or object interactions. By getting creative with the colour and style of clothing, tattoos, or objects such as vehicles, players queer-coded their avatars (and, by extension, their roles in the game world) by transgressing against an expectation that we aesthetically adhere to rigid, traditional gender roles. The third and final strategy that the authors describe is role-play itself. Role-playing as a queer character can be limited in single-player videogames because it is dependent upon the kinds of interactions and options that come pre-written in the game's code. The authors found that retaining any semblance of a non-straight orientation sometimes required an aversion to heterosexual relationships rather than the pursuit of queer ones, effectively restricting player choice rather than introducing new kinds of possibility. Additionally, queer players tended to only be enthusiastic about role-playing as gay or lesbian when those romance options "fit their player characters in terms of narrative" and usually only seek them out when their inclusion was explicit and known ahead of time.

Because these three queer playing strategies (imaginative play, stylized performance, and queer role-play) are specific to playing as lesbian, gay, or bisexual player-characters by resisting heteronormativity and gender essentialism, they each take on new limitations in the context of openly non-monogamous play in a mononormative game. For example, while there are subcultures and terminology specific to consensual non-monogamies like polyamory, it is difficult to communicate this orientation to others through character creation menus and mechanics, for example, by adjusting the colours of clothing and items. (Short of wearing a shirt with "I am polyamorous" emblazoned across the chest, there are few common visual markers one could use to signify that one is orientated toward multi-partner relationships.[20] Still, knowing what will emerge requires going through the motions. The game's affordances are "often subtle and open for interpretation" and so the degree to which we can engage them to fail at monogamy queerly depends, in part, upon each player's strategies (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018, p. 178). Below, I explore my own attempts to bring consensual non-monogamy into *Stardew*, describing

how I negotiated and resisted the game's attempts to re-orientate me back toward living a virtuous, monogamous life.

Modding Against Mononormativity

In their analysis of queer playing strategies in the action RPG franchises *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age,* Krobová et al. (2015) observed that their research participants were often hesitant to use the queer playing strategies outlined in the previous section.[21] They argue that that this implies a disconnect between one's actual queerness and one's identity as a "gamer" in predominantly heteronormative game cultures. However, one aspect of digital games and game cultures that challenges this purported disconnect between queer players is the practice of modifying (or "modding") games. Modding is an example of what Jenkins (1992, 2006) calls a participatory culture wherein actors not associated with a game's original production process break the code to appropriate and re-work the text as it existed upon its official release. According to Tanja Sihvonen,

> Modding refers to various ways of extending and altering officially released computer games, their graphics, sounds and characters, with custom-produced content. Modding can also mean creating new game mechanics and new gameplay levels (maps) to the point where the original game transforms into a completely new title. (2011, p. 12).

*Stardew'*s reliance on playersexuality involves including non-normative genders and sexualities on normative terms, and so modding is one method that players can use to alter the game's code and create something new or transform what already exists. Modding can also eliminate undesirable game elements that prevent players from experiencing queerness in games beyond throwaway lines and relationship dynamics that too closely resemble the trappings of a heteronormative relationship escalator.

Many of the re-workings that are available in *Stardew*'s modding scene add to, adjust, or completely overhaul player-NPC relationships. These changes include but are not limited to: adding new romanceable characters (e.g. the Shiko mod); expanding on interactions with existing characters through new dialogue and Heart Events (e.g. the Sebastian Expansion, Penny Expanded, and Canon-Friendly Dialogue Expansion for All Friend-able Characters mods); allowing the player to date, marry, and have children with previously non-romanceable villagers like Linus and Pam (e.g. the Looking for Love mod); finally, adding emote reactions and

changes to Friendship points when the farmer takes actions nearby NPCs (e.g. the Part of the Community Mod) (Thomas, 2021). The largest mod currently available, Stardew Valley Expanded, also offers new locations, characters, dialogue, story content, and town events ("Stardew Valley Expanded," 2021).

Stardew's modding scene also exhibits a clear demand for a version of the game where it is possible to have multiple intimate relationships that go beyond non-consensual performances of non-monogamy. On Nexus Mods, a website that allows users to upload, rate, and install mods for free, user aedenthorn's "Multiple Spouses" mod has been downloaded over 170,000 times and been endorsed by nearly 3,500 site members to date ("Multiple Spouses," 2021).[22] This particular modification makes it possible for players to date or marry multiple villagers, have amicable divorces, have children with non-spouses, and romance some of the previously non-romanceable villagers. Once this mod is installed, spouses no longer become jealous when the player gives gifts to villagers of the same gender. The fortune teller at the Stardew Valley Fair also speaks positively of the player's multiple partnerships rather than rebuking them for being unfaithful. If the player dates all six bachelors or all six bachelorettes, the confrontational sequences I discussed in Chapter 1 are replaced with scenarios where the villagers are happy about the player's additional partnerships (a reaction more closely resembling "compersion" or "frubbling" (Ritchie & Barker, 2006)) and suggest that you all get married. This mod also transforms the farmhouse into a space where spouses and roommates are equally welcome, opening one's home and family life up to those who are not guaranteed to play a direct role in carrying on Grandpa's family legacy by continuing family lines. Close companionships are thus recognized as significant relationships that marriage does not supersede and take priority over.

Figure 21

Several partners get cozy in the farmer's bed with the Multiple Spouses mod.

Note: From Multiple Spouse Mod, by aedenthorn, Nexus Mods (www.nexusmods.com/stardewvalley/mods/6227?tab=posts).

Modifications like this can "offer meaningful political alternatives to these commercialized and normative manifestations of LGBT content…" (Lauteria, 2012, p. 27). As Katelyn Campbell notes, directly altering the game code allows players to expand or otherwise transform the game's affordances rather than simply work within their limitations (2020). She writes,

> These actions challenge the developer's authority and even authorship over gameplay more directly than queer play, therefore challenging their authority and ability to regulate queerness out of games or define queerness on their terms. Through acting directly on a game's source materials, these modders are putting queerness exactly where the industry often insists it is not wanted and therefore cannot be. (2020, para. 12).

Arguably, *Stardew*'s capacity for modification through downloadable game file data, content patching software, and SMAPI (a mod installer and file manager) has played a role in maintaining the game's popularity and keeping player communities active. As long as "home-brewed" videogame content does not come into conflict with the commercial and creative interests of the game's original creators, modding can assume "a peculiar place among media fans because of the mutually beneficial relationship with game developers" (Sotamaa, 2011). Although it is not yet possible to modify console versions of the game (e.g. the Nintendo Switch version), *Stardew*'s official wiki encourages Mac and PC users to tinker, even offering an entire page instructing players on how to create, install, and use mods ("Modding: Player Guide/Getting Started," 2021).

Still, even queer playing strategies that directly alter game code have limitations. As Tanja Sihvonen notes, modding has historically been an "elite activity" taken up by (usually male) hardcore gamers (2011, p. 32). Modding is not accessible to all players because it often requires specific tools, skills, and resources (such as free time and disposable income) to support people in their endeavors to independently develop new game content. Modding can also be restrictive in that it often involves remixing or building upon a game's pre-existing assets, maps, and mechanics. If games are "cultural ratchets" that iterate on previous forms (Murray, 2006), then just as *Harvest Moon*'s heteronormative and patriarchal way of structuring romantic relationships carried over into Barone's more inclusive *Stardew,* the game's modifications can retain properties that keep the normative relationship escalator running smoothly. For example, while the Multiple Spouses mod allows the player to date and marry multiple villagers without jealousy or punishment, the player's bed is still reserved for villagers to whom they are married and, by extension, remains tied to sexual reproduction. The bed itself gets bigger, but premarital sex is still not allowed. The mod also rotates through the farmer's spouses so that there is a new "primary" partner each day, perpetuating a monogamous "style" of relating wherein partners are organized along a hierarchy of importance that can privilege dyadic pairings (Finn & Malson, 2008; Wilkinson, 2010).

Although removing jealousy from the game takes steps toward representing open non-monogamies as viable alternatives to monogamy, I caution future game makers and modders against idealizing and sanitizing non-monogamous relationship models by erasing these sources of friction. Certainly, it is important to be critical of instances when jealousy exists only to re-assert monogamy's dominance by portraying it as a natural response to cheating or otherwise suspicious behaviors (like gift-giving), but "managing relationships, keeping everyone relatively happy, [and] navigating jealousy and differing needs" can also be a compelling and relatable source of conflict and narrative tension in games (Cross, 2015, para. 14). Interestingly, the Multiple Spouses mod has resulted in at least one instance where a player found themselves navigating insecurity brought on by the dynamics between their virtual intimate partners, an issue that comes up in both monogamous and consensually non-monogamous relationships despite different approaches and interpretations of what jealousy means and what we should do about it (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Under the title "I downloaded the multiple spouses mod and now I'm cursed to a Stardew lifetime of being a third wheel" (2020), Reddit user mira182 posted

an image showing their girlfriend (Abigail) making out with their husband (Elliot). The player's avatar was not directly involved in this expression of affection, and so they drew a playful and humorous comparison between their feelings of neglect to the kinds of questions that populate the Reddit page "r/relationship advice." While opportunities for the player to address their discomfort with being a "third wheel" with their girlfriend and husband through dialogue are lacking, this situation suggests that doing so would generate unconventional and pleasurable opportunities for interpersonal problem-solving rather than detract from players' enjoyment of the game.

Figure 22

A player is troubled by their partners sharing a kiss in the farmhouse.

Note: From I downloaded the multiple spouses mod and now I'm cursed to a Stardew lifetime of being a third wheel, by u/mira182, Reddit (www.reddit.com/r/StardewValley/comments/hhh9qc/i_downloaded_the_multiple_spouses_mod_and_now_im/).

Unruliness and Sexual Illegibility

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam understands discipline as a way of regulating, correcting, and eliminating deviations from (or failures against) standards that serve as a form of social control (2011; Foucault, 1995). Disciplined forms of knowledge make historically contingent and socially constructed understandings of some relations as normal, natural, obvious, and necessary more legible than their alternatives. Correspondingly, the rejection of discipline can bring about "new rationales for knowledge production, different aesthetic standards for

ordering or disordering space, [and] other modes of political engagement…" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 10). Citing James C. Scott's (1999) writing on legibility as a mechanism of control, Halberstam argues that because legibility requires that our movement and thinking be uniform and standardized, activating "overt and covert queer worlds" within normative texts involves becoming undisciplined and therefore illegible, shedding impossible standards by embracing incoherence, nonsense, negation, stupidity, and impotence (2011, p. 21).

Within this model, modding videogames can be understood as a way of making what was once illegible legible within the game's systems in order to introduce queerness where it "is not wanted and therefore cannot be" (Campbell, 2020, para. 12). In contrast, more performance-based queer play questions normative assumptions and "dominant ways of inscribing and imagining 'the player'" by unsettling the lines between what is expected of us and what is odd or inappropriate (Sundén, 2009, p. 7, cited in Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018, p. 179). This mode of play modifies the game without the expertise necessary to change the code outright (Campbell, 2020). Instead of breaking the code, imaginative play and queer role-play can re-signify already existing bodies and the relationships between them.

Some research suggests that avatars in role-playing games (especially ones like the farmer who have simple backstories and few pre-determined and fixed characteristics) are optimal for engaging in signifying and re-signifying practices (Kennedy, 2002; Rehak, 2003; Sihvonen, 2011). In this sense, performance-based queer play in RPGs can be likened to what Ahmed calls improper use or "queer use" of the avatar in the game world (feministkilljoys, 2018). While a straight way of playing the game is maintained through the legibility that comes with frequent and consistent use, a player whose approach does not align with the game's normative matrix disrupts the hegemony of play by transforming the avatar into a sort of perversion "whose misuse of things *is a form of self-revelation*" (Ahmed, 2018, para. 12).

One example of this kind of queer use of the avatar is my active effort to play the role of the farmer bisexually. The game does not account for this orientation; Anyone looking to live "the good life" in Pelican Town is strictly interpreted as being hetero- or homo-sexual with no room for ambiguity. The threshold for the number of villagers the player can date is set at either all six bachelors *or* all six bachelorettes, and so the illegibility of my bisexuality allowed me to date as many as 10 partners before being confronted for my failure to be monogamous and being given the "cold shoulder." The erasure of bisexuality in games should not be taken lightly, but

the failure this resulted in during my play sessions showed how the illegibility of a plurisexual orientation could disrupt the game's mononormative mechanisms of control. How else might the player fail queerly and use the illegibility of their sexuality find "mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, and adaptability" within *Stardew*'s hard-coded rules and systems? (Halberstam, 2011, p. 10)

One possible answer to this question that I found during my own play sessions was to use imaginative play to reintroduce the possibility of having sex for pleasure rather than strictly for the reproduction of the family line. Despite encouraging players to travel up the relationship escalator and enter parenthood, *Stardew*'s depiction of life on the family farm is essentially sexless. What little direct representation sex has in the game is plausibly deniable. Some mentions center on adultery, such as the dramatic reveal that the Wizard is secretly Abigail's father. Other times, the game calls attention to the forbidden fruits of having sex out of wedlock, as is the case if the player discovers Marnie and the Mayor's secret rendezvous in the bushes or completes the quest "The Mayor's Need" wherein they must bring them truffle oil to use as a sexual lubricant. (As the quest description reads, "He won't explain what it's for. Maybe it's none of your business."). There are also 10-Heart Events for some of the romanceable villagers that vaguely hint at characters having sex for pleasure (the player can share a sleeping bag on a camping trip with Emily or crawl into bed with Sam after hiding there to avoid his mother). Overall, sexual encounters with NPCs are implied rather than shown outright. Situations in which the farmer is an active participant in sex are processually tied to marriage and signified by the arrival of a child. The fact that same-gender spouses have children by filling out adoption paperwork also suggests that players in non-heterosexual relationships do not have sex at all.

Figure 23

I deliver a bottle of truffle oil to Mayor Lewis for personal reasons.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

Notably, the *Stardew* modding community has generated numerous explicitly sexual mods, including an abundance of nude character portraits (most often for female NPCs), adult dialogue options (e.g., Entity2004's Abigail's Lewd Dialogue mod), and NPC masturbation (e.g., Girafarig's Horny Bachelors mod (Klepek, 2017)). There are also several mods that allow player-NPC sex as an in-game event, including the now unavailable Alex Sex Event mod (Turin, 2019), the lesbian sex and romance featured in Pseudodiego's XStardew Valley mod (2019), the addition of anal and oral sex with male NPCs in undare's Manly Prostitution mod (Dårlig Ulv, 2020), and sex with female NPCs in bombastick's Horny Girls of Stardew Valley mod (Rastafoo69, 2019). To bring pleasure-centred sex into *Stardew* without modding, however, I had to get creative.

Since my boyfriends and girlfriends were not allowed to enter the farmhouse, I attempted to simulate sex by arranging sleepovers in their homes. Unlike Heart Events (which trigger automatically), this required some planning on my part. Because of how the game structures time, spending an evening in a villager's bedroom when they are home requires entering the building in question before it closes in that day (3:00pm for Harvey's clinic, 6:00pm for Elliot's cabin and Leah's cottage, and 8:00-9:00pm for all other locations). I made a note of these closing times and began planning dates where I would arrive with gifts (often a favourite snack) and chat with my boyfriends and girlfriends by clicking to interact with them until they ran out of dialogue for the day. After that, the dates tended to not be very exciting: We would sit in silence together until 2:00am when my farmer would pass out from exhaustion and be magically

transported back to the farmhouse. These dates resulted in regular financial penalties (1000g) for breaking the game's imposed curfew and requiring an escort home. My dates with Sam differed slightly since he overslept in the mornings and I could give him breakfast in bed (pizza or cola) and lay with him until he began his daily routine.

Figure 24

I fail at having sex during sleepovers with my dates.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

To become an active sexual subject in the game without having to be married, I decided to use one of the interface's existing affordances, the multiplayer chat function, to turn sex for pleasure into an explicit on-screen phenomenon. The game does allow the player to get into bed with an NPC, but they will be unresponsive, and so I would instead type into the chat box (a feature intended for communication between human players in *Stardew*'s multiplayer version) to give the farmer a "voice" where they previously had none. Typing into the box to make text appear at the bottom of the computer screen, I used that voice to flirt ("You look so cute tonight…"), use "dirty talk" ("You know… I'm not wearing any pants ;)"), and re-signify my encounter as though sex had already happened (Shhh! I hope no one heard us haha"; "OMG you're such a good kisser!"). To create a more romantic atmosphere, I would sometimes place torches (which look like small candles) around the room and scatter wildflowers on the floor.

Overall, it would be disingenuous to suggest that these sleepovers were a very satisfying way to bring non-reproductive sex into the game. The absurdity of the situation was humorous, but attempting virtual sex with a mass of static, unresponsive pixels was not my preferred way to experience intimacy in videogames. Additionally, I was uncomfortable with the fact that this

strategy could be used on any villager with whom the player is good enough friends to enter their bedroom regardless of whether they are actually dating said NPC or not, which once again blurs the distinction between consensual and non-consensual intimacy. Still, this virtual sex was illegible and unaccounted for by the game's systems; I cannot imagine the community would think very highly of us all having sex outside of wedlock, but since the game did not anticipate my transgression, there was no punishment in store. By finding queer uses for *Stardew*'s time mechanics, spatial affordances, and the multiplayer chat interface, I was able to resist polynormative assertions that open non-monogamies like polyamory are only healthy and desirable ways of doing relationships when they more closely resemble monogamy, specifically by being the "good" kind of polyamory that is about having more love and *not* about having more (or more varied) sex (Wilkinson, 2010).

No Money, More Monsters: Masochistic Waste

For Halberstam, queer failure is a matter of discovering what is generated when we abandon normative logics of (re)production and wealth accumulation in a capitalist society in favour of "unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, [and] not knowing" as a style or way of living. Respectively, Ruberg describes queer failure in games as a way of "embracing self-destructive agency" in the game world in order to "make a game of dying" (2017, p. 203). The goal is not to win at a game by mastering its systems, but to negate mastery through self-annihilation. This presented me with a problem: Despite the possibility of passing out from exhaustion or being attacked by fantastical creatures until one's avatar body is miraculously transported into a hospital bed, one cannot do as Ruberg suggests and take up the "squandering of extra lives" because the farmer cannot really die (p. 203). The only certain choice the player can make that would destroy their farmer is to take the whole world contained in a save file, the one life each farmer is given, and move it into the trash. Deleting the game data would mean escaping their connection to Grandpa's past by eradicating the future in which his legacy might have been carried on. If the queer player is one who reconfigures the rules and dominant social aesthetic of the game order to express their "desire to live life otherwise" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2), then deleting the game and starting over again does little to address the problem at hand because the farmer would only be saddled with the same set of game options, the same plot of land, and the same expectation to preserve and carry on a family legacy.

As a queer player who found themselves disorientated in this hetero- and mono-normative world, I decided to "live life otherwise" by pursuing other kinds of self-destructive performances. Much of *Stardew*'s story and gameplay hinges on advancement and accumulation: Expanding the farm, saving gold, collecting artifacts, earning Friendship points, and advancing up the relationship escalator with each romanceable villager all appeal to logics of "reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). In this section, I explore examples of how I failed to be a good neoliberal subject who cared not for meritocratic advancement. While Farmer Allyn could not die in a literal sense, I instead played against the game by failing at normative relationships and squandering Grandpa's inheritance.

Ruberg likens a queer player, compelled by loss rather than (re)productivity, to Halberstam's figure of the masochist, who "defines herself not through tenacity and recognition but to embrace pain and death…" (Ruberg, 2017, p. 208). Relating this back to the anti-social thesis of queer theory, this self-destructive approach to playing games is a way of resisting normative configurations of power that are upheld by "the logic of a narrative in which history unfolds the future for a figural child who must never grow up" (Edelman, 1998, p. 25). As Edelman writes,

> On every side, the present enjoyment of our liberties as citizens is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of the child whose phantasmatic freedom to develop unmarked by encounters with an "otherness" of which its parents either do not or should not approve, unimpaired by any collision with the reality of alien desires, terroristically holds us all in check… (p. 25)

Stardew makes this figure of "the child who must never grow up" quite literal (p. 25). If the player accepts their spouse's proposal to have children, those children only ever mature enough to grow from an infant to a toddler before being suspended in time. They live their entire lives in the care of the player's spouse and requiring none of their time or material resources. For as long as these children exist, their only need is for the player to continue to allow that existence. Should the player divorce their spouse and decide they want to start a new family, they can make their children disappear by sacrificing a rare item (a Prismatic Shard) to a magical Shrine of Selfishness. Once the ritual is complete, the children are transformed into doves and no one remembers that they were ever born.[23] Indeed, the role of children in *Stardew* is to stand in as signification that the player is a good reproductive subject who climbed the relationship

escalator, reinvested in the lines they inherited, and brought a child into their "good life." Some players in the Chucklefish Forums have called for subsequent versions of *Stardew* to expand on how the game structures family and childrearing, some even specifying that they want children to be able to inherit property (Justincase, 2018), and Barone has stated that the expansion of childrens' role in the game would be overly complex to implement (Brian, 2020).

While videogames tend not to have a traditional narrative climax (Chess, 2016; Aarseth, 2004), each individual romantic story arc in *Stardew* culminates with this heteronormative "climactic 'discharge' towards the story's end" (Chess, 2016, p. 87). Each climactic moment (in the case of *Stardew*'s romances, repeatedly reaching the top of the relationship escalator) "functions metaphorically, attempting to displace anxiety of death through reproductive acts of narrative consummation" (2016, p. 87). In response to this logic of reproductive futurism, I propose that in lieu of the using up extra lives, the queer player in *Stardew* can express a "self-destructive agency" by choosing to misuse Grandpa's inheritance through active, masochistic waste (Ruberg, 2017, p. 203). If "Perfection" (an actual score that the game tracks) is achieved by completing 100% of the game content across a series of predetermined categories that require mastery, advancement, and wealth accumulation, then one way of re-signifying what it means to succeed at relationships is to make other kinds of connections that result from striving for nothing of the sort.

Take, as one example, the dates I described in the previous section. In my efforts to have pleasure-centered sexual intimacy with my partners, I used up inordinate amounts of my time and gold so that I could spend as much of each night with my dates as the game would allow. Every time, I fell unconscious and awoke back at the farmhouse with a hefty bill for medical services rendered (usually around 1000g) waiting in my mailbox. Although there was no danger of my partners' Friendship levels decaying, I gradually depleted what gold I had saved prior to my marriage to Abigail by lavishing them with their most loved gifts whenever our paths crossed: I showered Maru with diamonds she could use for her inventions rather than selling them to turn a profit; I bought heaps of sugar and flour to make chocolate and pink cake for Abigail and Haley respectively, throwing away wood and stone that would have gone toward upgrading farm buildings to make room for piles of baked goods in my inventory; I even went to the Stardrop Saloon and bought one thousand cups of coffee (300,000g) so that I could bring them to Harvey while he was at the clinic.

Figure 25

I waste huge amounts of gold on coffee for Harvey.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

With so much of my attention going toward my partners, the farm entered a state of chaos and disrepair. My stone fences crumbled so that the animals wandered about freely, but I did not bother to make any repairs. Every tile in my Big Coop was filled with chicken and duck eggs, but it did not seem to bother the animals, so I paid it no mind. As the seasons changed, debris cropped up all over the property, but I did not clean it up. A series of strange purple meteors fell from the sky, blocking tile space that was ripe for land development, but I decided to keep them rather than upgrade my tools to break it apart. Why should I have cared? I was a very busy person with an awful lot of cake to make for my lovers (and multi-player text-box flirting to do). Moreover, neglecting the farm is not a legible behaviour within *Stardew*'s systems. Grandpa's ghost returns to the farm from time to time to evaluate the player's progress, but since his assessment is based on the player's total income and not their work on the land, some have exploited this rule to avoid improving the farmhouse, constructing buildings, or making upgrades, and still be absurdly be praised for how proud they have made their deceased family patriarch (DangerouslyFunny, 2018).

Figure 26

I allow the farm to fall into disrepair in the name of love.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

At this stage in the research process, I no longer desired marriage or co-habitation with a spouse. Now that the "cold shoulder" treatment was over and I was no longer at risk of triggering interventions staged by angry boyfriends and girlfriends, I was enjoying life as an unmarried farmer with multiple intimate partners who did not become jealous over gift-giving. While the game content does not offer any explicit recognition of these connections that confirmed my membership in a polycule of sorts (a network of people in non-monogamous relationships), re-signification through imaginative play had allowed me to have a love life wherein no one became jealous when I gave gifts to others I cared for, none of my partners' movement about town or social connections was being restricted, and no one was being conscripted into being a farmhand. That said, life at the farmhouse had become too solitary for my liking. To remedy this loneliness, I decide to further pervert my inheritance by pursuing alternative forms of kinship. Families in Pelican Town are varied in size and structure, but the game's version of "the good life" only affords players a hetero-/homo-/mono-normative nuclear family with two parents and a maximum of two children (one male and one female) ("Children," 2021). The alternative I sought out was a companionate living situation; I wanted to share my home and life on the farm with a close friend without having to give up my other partners.

I had attempted to initiate this kind of relationship early on in my play sessions with a villager named Linus, an elderly man dressed in a robe of leaves who lives in a tent at the base of the mountain. Linus was reluctant to trust me at first (having been harassed and bullied by some of the townsfolk for living outside and being caught looking for food in the trash) but we often

ran into one another when I was on my way to the mines to find amethysts for Abigail. We shared an appreciation for foraged foods (snacks that me time while I was busy wooing the villagers), and so I gifted him berries and hazelnuts. His Friendship meter was filled to the maximum capacity long before I reached that point with any of the romanceable villagers.

During Linus's Eight-Heart event, I was given the option to offer to invite him to live with me on the farm. If I chose this option, Linus would reject the offer, insisting that I should not pity him because he chooses to live in nature rather than try to meet the social expectations set by the wider community. If I chose not to extend my invitation, Linus would tell me how relieved he was that I did not ask him to cohabitate with me. In a final desperate attempt at a companionate marriage, I tried gifting him a bouquet from my inventory. The gesture made no sense to him ("Is this a joke? I don't get it."). Linus decision not to "keep up with the Joneses" is a kind of queer failure in its own right, but his rejection also preserves the (re)productive climax of the farmer's family story, reinforcing that the family property is reserved for relationships that fit a very narrow definition of what constitutes a family in the first place.

Figure 27

Linus rejects my bouquet.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshot].

As it turns out, *Stardew* does offer the type of companionate living situation I was searching for —just not in the realm of human beings. To find what I was looking for, I had to journey into the shadows or, more precisely, the depths of Pelican Town's sewer system. After

donating 60 items to the Museum, I was gifted a rusty key that opened the sewer's entrance. Inside, I met Krobus, a dark, ghost-like spirit who stood in the corner selling a selection of rare goods. During our first meeting, Krobus revealed to me that their name translated to "bridge crosser." Echoing Halberstam's observations about the queerness of monster stories in film, this fantastical and supernatural story arc about the bonds between humans and monsters uses the player's relationship with Krobus as "a vehicle for the transgression of boundaries" that "interrupts and disrupts more conventional romantic bonds" (2011, p. 45). Unlike the other shadow spirits who dwelled in the mines (many of whom I had slain), Krobus would not attack me. I began visiting the sewer with gifts —their favourites were an odd assortment of wild horseradish, rare gems, pumpkins, and cursed mayonnaise— and conversed with this friendly monster on a regular basis. Krobus will not accept a Mermaid Pendant but, but I offered them a Void Ghost Pendant, which they accepted as a proposition to become my new roommate.

Krobus moved into the farmhouse and, just as an addition appeared in the East wing of the building so that my spouses could practice their hobbies, a part of the sewers was transported inside so that my new companion could move around the house and still retain their ability to retreat into the darkness and lurk there for as long as they desired. Once I exhausted their dialogue options for the day, I could hug them (producing a smiley face emote) rather than kiss them, a gesture of platonic affection my relationships with the romanceable villagers lacked entirely. While Krobus did not explore the rest of the property (they did not feel safe exposing themselves to any of the other NPCs) and mentioned having fun tidying up while I was gone, they did not prepare my meals or assist me with daily chores in any way that helped me to accumulate gold or other resources, making them feel more like a friend than a worker.

Figure 28

I enjoy a new kind of queer life with Krobus as my roommate.

Note. From Barone, E. (2016). *Stardew Valley* [Screenshots].

Not that there was much work to do at this stage; I occasionally went foraging for fruit and mushrooms so that I could earn a bit of gold when necessary, but I had decided to let Grandpa's land grow wild. The game regularly rewards the player for killing monsters, but after Krobus moved into the farmhouse with me, I realized that despite their hostility toward me, these beings were friends of one of my closest friends. Returning to the Witch's Hut, I offered a Strange Bun to the Dark Shrine of Night Terrors, which made it possible for monsters to roam around the farm after sunset. I decided that I would no longer attack them there or back in the mines. My underground visits were much shorter after that (and cost me a great deal of gold due to the repeated hospital visits) but as far as I was concerned, this was a small price to pay not only to cohabitate with Krobus, but to aid them in their quest to shift across the boundary between humans and monsters. By finding a way to "life live otherwise" through my relationship with Krobus, I transformed the game not just into a place where I could have multiple significant others, but a site of "significant otherness" where "the artificial boundaries between humans, animals, machines, [and] states of life and death" were dissolved (Halberstam, 2011, p. 33; Haraway, 2003). I began to feel as though I had more in common with Krobus than I did with many of the townsfolk: Our queerness was murky, illegible, and our disorientation in this idyllic little town brought us closer together "through the very turn toward others who are also seen as outside the contours of a good life" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 105).

Discussion: Rejecting Hetero-Monogamous Inheritance in Videogames

The case studies in this chapter reinforce extant research in game studies underscoring the importance of queer modding and other queer playing strategies as forms of resistance

against normative constructions of gender and sexuality (Lauteria, 2012; Chang, 2017; Ruberg, 2017; Macklin, 2017). While my own exploration of opportunities for queer play in *Stardew* is not exhaustive of what players can do to stray from the path laid out for the game's default heterosexual and monogamous player, the data collected during my play sessions shows how players can turn straight/monogamous lines into unusual twists and turns, reconfiguring intimacy (be it sexual, romantic, familial, or communal) by failing against the game's systems. The occasional frustration, awkwardness, and even boredom I experienced while I employed these strategies speak to Chang's assertion that the binary structures of digital computing can make queergaming an arduous task (2015, 2017). Yet, this processual journey wherein I used modding, sexual illegibility, waste, and alternative kinship to play in ways that resonated with my own being and desire affirms videogames' potential to act as sites of queer becoming and resistance, spaces where imagining new kinds of futures activates an interface "where the un/well/come begins to take the form of well/come" (Ilmonen & Juvonen, 2015, para. 18).

One dimension of this queer becoming that is deserving of additional contemplation is *Stardew*'s open-ended organization of time. As I stated previously, the power to forget (or, more accurately, to make NPCs forget about having had romantic relationships or children with the farmer) generates replay value by providing players with opportunities to pursue as many bachelors and bachelorettes as they want to without having to abandon what progress they have already made developing their farms or completing other quests and self-set goals. This system also serves to keep players continually climbing up the game's relationship escalator so that they can "sample the whole buffet" and re-invest in inherited family lines with each subsequent partner. However, the decisions I made during my years-long stay in Pelican Town—to change my gender, to date everyone, to break up and only date a few, to be married, to get divorced, to date casually, to have children, or to undo my offspring's existence— contributed to the development of my orientation in and to the game world and its NPC inhabitants.

Citing Kath Weston's work on discourses of kinship, Halberstam reminds us that forgetfulness can be a valuable mechanism for people of marginalized and underrepresented identities and orientations to bring about futures neither depend upon nor point toward hetero-reproductive futures. He writes,

> queer lives exploit some potential for a *difference in form* that lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness but as a

> possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives. We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts. (2011, p. 70).

It follows that *Stardew*'s organization of time contributes to how it functions as a queer interface, and as a site of queer becoming. Choosing to live one's virtual life otherwise involves rejecting two common mononormative trends in videogame dating: that one must either only date casually (and often transactionally) or else the story ends when they "succeed" in committing themselves romantically and sexually to a single person. Instead, each farmer's life story in *Stardew* more closely resembles Chess's description of videogames as a medium which occupies a queer narrative "middle space" by denying players "the expected catharsis and release of hetero-narrative" (2016, p. 92; Roof, 1996). Chess extends this claim to videogames more generally, but *Stardew*'s organization of time and memory seems to intensify our access to this middle space. Life does not end with marriage or children, and each and every trip up the escalator confronts the player with the possibilities of a pathway that splits off in multiple directions: We can run in place by living an idyllic life with a nuclear family, plummet back down to the bottom and climb up all over again, or else do as I have done here and throw ourselves off the pathway slantwise to find out if we might land somewhere more pleasurable or interesting.

In Halberstam's terms, if "false narrative continuity" perpetuated by normative constructions of time and intimacy privilege "permanent (even if estranged) connections over random (even if intense) associations" so that family ties are valued above all else, the way that *Stardew* invites players to waste, play with, and exist outside of time is crucial to how players form other kinds of intimate connections (2011, p. 72). Forgetfulness became a powerful tool for "creating new futures not tied to old traditions" so that I became my queer Farmer Allyn not through the character creation interface, but through the disorientation and re-orientation brought on by each subsequent encounter with objects and others in this game world (p. 83).

Still, I am hesitant to provide an overly celebratory account of what queer playing strategies can offer us through their potential to transform the normative matrices of "straight" texts. As Ahmed reminds us, the politics and practices that condense around experiences of disorientation can counter its queer potential "depending on the 'aims' of their gestures" and

"how they seek to (re)ground themselves" (2006, p. 158). What does it mean to reground ourselves, to face disorientation, by accepting that videogames can always be made queer *enough* because queer players can be counted upon to do the labour of making it so? What is lost when we assume the position that misusing, reappropriating, or remaking the game are attainable or desirable objectives? To start, taking the creation of games into our own hands at the level of altering the code presents its own challenges. Although Lipkin (2019) describes the accelerated visibility and availability of the tools and knowledge geared toward game production as a "democratization" of the resources that are required to make games, access to such tools, knowledge, time, space, mentorship, and financial capital is distributed unevenly across lines of gender, race, ability, and socioeconomic class, (Sims, 2014; DiSalvo et al., 2008). Further, while Krobová et al. (2015) observed a variety of queer strategies being used by the players in their study, they also found that players most often role-played as queer characters under two conditions: when they are already aware that such options existed in a game, and when pursuing that option made sense for the player-character's role in the fiction. My section on modding and non-monogamy shows that there is demand for game options that allow the player to live life on the farm otherwise, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that this means that queer identities and orientations are automatically made significant and consequential within *Stardew*'s hetero- and mono-normative world and story. In fact, the authors found that many queer players have accepted that they would not find queerness in a medium so overdetermined by normative designs and discourses, and so understand themselves as players (not necessarily queer players) who have "learnt not to look" for queer content (p. 47).

My attempts to fail queerly at monogamy in *Stardew* confirm that there is cruel optimism at work in simply lauding players for having to do the labour of bringing their own experiences and desires into the text (Nakamura, 2017). Accepting this logic means accepting that players who want to do intimacy differently (whether they already understand themselves as queer or just happened to stumble or stray from a game's straight pathways and progressions) must earn their position in games and gaming cultures through "self reliance, unfettered competition in unregulated space, in short, a neoliberal fantasy of the entrepreneurial self's power in precarious times" (2017, p. 247). Romance in *Stardew* offers something that feels like queer social justice because it "ignites a sense of possibility" but "makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). Put

differently, the game's playersexual dynamics exploit marginalized and underrepresented players because they do so little to aid us in "breaking the game by seeking to change its rules, customs, or social contract" (p. 247). Compulsory monogamy and its imbrication within heteronormative and patriarchal discourses and social institutions still reign supreme. In a sense, Nakamura's assessment of the cruel optimism complements Halberstam's refusal to fully embrace the anti-social thesis of queer theory by insisting that "games are far too valuable, and pleasurable, to let go" (p. 249), and so we need strategies for recreation and transformation rather than integration into hegemonic game forms and cultures (Chang, 2015, 2017).

Lest the power of forgetting be wielded by dominant cultures and social institutions "to push the past aside in order to maintain the fantasy and fiction of a just and tolerant present" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 82-83), we must demand more from game creators than just leaving behind mononormative tropes, systems, and scripts that render non-monogamies as inherently lesser, difficult, or problematic (although, this is certainly a start). We must also demand that games consciously generate opportunities to experience and explore non-monogamies in games that go beyond a reliance in players to activate its mere existence. There is nothing radical about non-monogamies as "checkboxes, decision trees, and customization" (Chang, 2015, p. 28) that diversify a game's player base in a move often justified as a way of adding to a game's value by tapping into new market demographics (Krobová et al., 2015; Greer, 2013) or levelling intimacy through the sameness of playersexual NPCs and dating mechanics. There will always be opportunities for queer play, to fail against the game, but most of us are dependent upon game writers, designers, and developers to consciously and critically engage with how binary computing systems can limit the simulation player-NPC relationships, as well as the game forms and generic conventions that these "cultural ratchets" may have inherited from the text that preceded them (Murray, 2006).

What non-monogamies in *Stardew* lack are exactly what I identified in my introduction as the very things that would act in solidarity with queer identities and orientations through the political rejection of monogamy: honesty, consent, negotiation, refusing the supremacy of the nuclear family, and supporting people of marginalized and underrepresented genders in sustaining multiple intimate partnerships (Sheff, 2020). Correcting this course requires neither appealing to non-monogamy's naturalness (Willey, 1016) nor smoothing out the friction and

complexity it carries so that it can be incorporated into games on mononormative terms (Cross, 2015).

This is, I propose, where a framework based in Shotwell's concept of relational significant otherness comes into play. For Shotwell, relational significant otherness provides us with a way of thinking about non-monogamous intimacies that resists reproducing the same hierarchies and power dynamics that compulsory monogamy sustains. This involves focusing not on the mere existence of multiple significant others, but on recognizing each of our inherited histories —the orientation work that each of us has done to arrive here and now— and accepting the messiness of "the futures we might cobble together with them" (2017, p. 284). Combining Sue Campbell's (2014) theories of relational co-constitution (or "partial connections, in which the players involved are relationally constituted but do not entirely constitute one another" (p. 283)) with Donna Haraway's proposition for an ethics and politics that values difference in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Shotwell makes the case that we must move beyond the idea bounded and self-sovereign individual in favour of cultivating "open-ended being-in-response" or "response-ability" toward the instabilities and tensions of all our relationships (Shotwell, 2017, p. 284).

If intimate relationships in games are made contingent on "relations of responsibility" in process, then maybe we can avoid turning non-monogamies into another type of box to be checked in the push for more diverse games (Shotwell, 2017, p. 284-285). Games designed with relational significant otherness in mind might explore "the potential in exploring procedural and branching narrative forms in terms of the acknowledgement of *potential* for difference and its consequences, a theorizing of queer game design principles as anticipatory rather than predictive" (Greer, 2013, p. 17). As I show in my conclusion, there are some games that have already made significant steps toward bringing this contingent "response-ability" into players' interactions with NPC partners (Shotwell, 2017, p. 284).

If it is true that "greater opportunities still may rest in the willingness of designers and publishers to create games where the performance of sexuality presents consequential and meaningful outcomes beyond the choice to engage or not" (Greer, 2013, p. 17) then we must continue to fail queerly in such a way that we "start from a new place" and not only from "where the old engenders the new" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 70). Videogames have always been queer, but to do the labour of prove our existence every time we play is a Sisyphean task, swimming

upstream against powerful current that pushes us back to a starting line I find discouraging. It is, perhaps, the same kind of starting line that perpetuates the hegemony of play by teaching us that games are not a place where we should look for explicitly queer content. As Ruberg writes in *The Queer Games Avant Garde* (2020):

> It is not enough to simply count the number of LGBTQ characters who appear on-screen. We must also think about how experiences of difference can be given voice (or once again silenced) by video games' seemingly non-representational elements, such as their interactive systems, their controls, and their underlying computational logics. (p. 14)

The arrival of games that actively incorporate non-monogamies using a framework of relational significant otherness would not "solve" the problem of the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of queerness in games. Equally so, this is not a feat that individual games can do correctly, but a situation where we need many games doing different kinds of queerness and non-monogamy differently. Nevertheless, as I illustrate in my conclusion, each game that makes its own unique attempt to explore what it means to be response-able to our intimate partners acts as a surface on which we can ground ourselves, take a deep breath, and push off again to explore new pathways through wonderfully troubled waters.

Conclusion: Finding Significant Otherness in Videogames

Over the course of this research project, I have examined why the linked system of non/monogamy is relevant to the field of queer game studies and how *Stardew*'s game elements reproduce hetero- and mono-normative understandings of what it means to succeed in doing intimate relationships. As well, I have considered some of the strategies that players can use to fail at compulsory monogamy in order to find pleasure and alternative ways of doing relationships in unexpected places. Although these forays into failure took me in directions I might never otherwise have gone in a game that I continue to treasure, I maintain that *Stardew* exhibits the continuation of a trend in videogames in which intimate relationships exist in a binary of good/responsible and bad/irresponsible with few opportunities for players to enact concomitant response-ability (Shotwell, 2017).

When limited to what articulations of non-monogamy are explicitly acknowledged within the text, the player is limited by uneven relationship dynamics in which their position is "privileged and exclusivist" when compared to their NPC partners (Haritaworn et al., 2006). Additionally, the playersexuality of the bachelors and bachelorettes signifies queerness (specifically, the existence of same-gender romances) on the surface without ever having to account for how those relationship dynamics might play out differently compared to straight ones. For non-monogamies specifically, this can be summarized as an attitude toward relationships wherein NPC sexuality "only exists as it impacts [the player]" (Shaw, 2013, para. 10); Players must face the consequences of doing non-monogamy without the consent of their partners (despite the game never offering them any recourse) and/or do non-monogamy in secret, avoiding any acknowledgement that multi-partner relationships exist and precluding the possibility of their NPC partners interacting with one another in any way other than expressing their jealousy. It would seem that *Stardew* stands as yet another example of how monogamy persists as a default setting for videogame dating, and especially the tendency of romances role-playing games to "erase the reality of non-monogamous lived experiences, but moreover and for all foreshorten the role of personal agency in structuring relationships" (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018, para. 27). Still, this is not representative of games and games cultures as a whole and so I found myself asking: What might games that move away from playersexuality and toward relational significant otherness look like? How might we design videogame intimacies so that players' interactions with their NPC partners allows otherness to thrive?

Within the last decade, we have seen the arrival of numerous games developed both within the context of a movement Ruberg has termed the "queer games avant-garde" (2019, p. 210) —an influx of "scrappy, impactful, and indeed revolutionary games that relate directly to lived LGBTQ experiences" by rejecting normative understandings of desire, pleasure, and progress (p. 210)— as well as within smaller studio settings. Within the former group, Adams and Rambukkana (2018) have already drawn attention to Anna Anthropy and Leon Arnott's *Triad* (2013), a game that requires players to position three lovers (and their cat) on a single bed so that everyone's sleep habits are accommodated and the group gets a good night's rest. This experimental game about "the most difficult puzzle of all: human relationships" brings the negotiation of needs and boundaries into play by making the player responsible for the wellbeing of this co-constituted sleeping arrangement ("Triad," 2018). The game opens with a short scene wherein one partner suggests that the bed be shared that night and gets their partners' consent to do so. These partners have a direct and positive relationship with one another, and each time the player fails (e.g., someone is woken up by snoring, a leg is swung in the wrong direction, or the cat arrives) the player is addressed by each person whose needs were not met and is given the opportunity to try again. The harmony of the triad is shown as an ongoing process that requires regular discussion instead of repeated transactions that build up to a win-state.

There is also Triple Topping's *Spitkiss* (2018), a platformer about amoeba-like beings that communicate their affections for one another through emojis and body fluids. These beings live inside a person navigating the complexity of being attracted to two people at once. *Spitkiss* deals with messiness, figuratively and literally, and has unambiguous themes of polyamory and non-binary/genderfluid identities ("Spitkiss Factsheet," n.d.). Wet, squishy bodies are also the focal point of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Schmidt & Andrews, 2015), a game that positions the player in a "polyamorous" relationship with two avatars who they guide from getting consent to kissing through a continuous game of sloppy tongue tag (Ruberg, 2017, p. 113-114).

In the realm of games made by teams working in mid-sized studios, the upcoming role-playing dungeon-crawler *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games, 2021) lets players fight monsters with sentient weapons who they can also date. Kitfox Games founder and developer Tanya X. Short shared in an interview that the game is welcoming to polyamorous and queer players (Valens, 2020). Of particular note in this category is also *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020). In *Hades,* the generic conventions of the roguelike sub-genre —specifically, a virtually endless

crawl through procedurally generated rooms wherein each death is permanent— function as the setting for a scenario in which an immortal Greek god must attempt to fight his way out of the land of the dead, eventually accepting and changing the conditions of his confinement. While role-playing as the protagonist, Zagreus, players can pursue three romanceable NPCs (Dusa, Megaera, and Thanatos) in a way that is consented to by all parties. If players romance both Megaera and Thanatos, each acknowledges the other and expresses positive feelings about both their shared affections for Zagreus and their own friendship. Dusa, however, gently rejects Zagreus, not because someone got jealous or the player did something incorrectly, but because she does not share his feelings for her. He accepts this with great care and reassurance that she need not apologize or feel badly and the two stay friends. While the fact that players are still rewarded for bonding with Dusa could be interpreted as transactional, the relationship not being labeled a failure for not resulting in a long-term or monogamous romantic commitment is a commendable step toward something resembling relational significant otherness through a celebration of difference.

Each of these titles challenge compulsory heteromonogamy and together they provide just a few examples of how games might support players in taking pleasure in the muddled mess of non-monogamy done queerly in the future. If dominant media narratives about intimate relationships provide stories that people use to orientate themselves in relation to others (Plummer, 1995; Ritchie, 2010), then the existence (and, in the case of the award-winning *Hades*, demonstrable popularity with over a million copies sold) of these kinds of games have a gradual impact on how our identities and orientations are formed "around relationships and conscious choices over the life one wishes to live" (Plummer, 1995, p. 160, as cited in Barker, 2005, p. 84). It is likely that our understanding of non/monogamy as well as what kinds of representations of intimacy we encounter in games will continue to shift and takes on new characteristics as we make sense of new "sexual stories" (Plummer, 1995). If games iterate upon the forms and conventions that preceded them and Ahmed is correct that "the more a path is travelled, the more a path is travelled" (feministkilljoys, 2018), then I am truly excited by what kinds of non-monogamous intimacies game makers have in store for us. Adams and Rambukkana stress that it is important for future research on non-monogamies in/and games to consider games in which "queer play with non-monogamy is the rule rather than the exception" (2018, para. 27), as well as how actual players receive games that are intentionally designed with

open non-monogamy in mind. These are areas I intend to investigate as I continue my own research on non-monogamies using a play- and player-oriented approach.

These authors also suggest that we should consider how non-monogamies unfold in multi-player contexts. While I wholeheartedly agree that this is an important direction for scholarship on digital intimacies to move in, I will conclude this thesis by reaffirming the value of studying player-NPC relationships in single-player games. On its face, studying non-monogamies through games where other humans are absent seems counterintuitive, but I argue that it is crucial. Sherry Turkle discussed experimenting with identity and orientation through constructed online personae in the 1990s, and recent research into non-monogamies extends this point to show that single-player game worlds afford opportunities to stray from the well-trodden path and try out "this" or "that" without requiring that players "come out" with a new label for themselves in public (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018). Along these lines, what this project contributes to existing work on identity and orientation in digital games specifically is a re-thinking of the figure of "the closet."

For Ahmed (2006), closets are spaces that can be generative rather than something that only confines, limits, and diminishes queerness. With an acknowledgement of the harm that has come from how the social and systemic discrimination of queer people has forced us to tuck ourselves away into closets, and despite conflicting social pressures to be "out and proud," Ahmed tells us that closets are also places where interesting work can be done by making room in private for what might not be possible in public. She writes: "If the closeted queer appears straight, then we might have to get into the closet, or go under the table, to reach the points of deviation" (p. 175). The shape and visibility of non-monogamies vary depending on its intersection with other identity markers, and we must similarly consider such factors when we question who has access to meaningful representation in games and the materials required to play. Still, virtually and in meat space, the closet is itself an orientation device that doesn't necessitate players following normative lines "because of commitments they have already made, or because the experience of disorientation is simply too shattering to endure" (p. 176). For those who fear what straying from the well-trodden path of heteromonogamy, single-player games can be a refuge full of opportunities to make contact with objects and others that are, otherwise, out of reach.

Not everyone who fails against the game will necessarily understand either the game or themselves as something queer, however, research suggests that if the queer potential of videogames is in how they allow us to fail, experiment with identities, and "explore unfamiliar pleasures and desires" (Macklin, 2017, 256; Turkle, 1999), then queer play can do significant work in processes of "coming out" (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). Read through Ahmed's phenomenology, single-player games are orientation devices that provide opportunities to stray from well-trodden paths, try out "this" or "that" through encounters "overt and covert" queer worlds (Halberstam, 2011, p. 21). As players fail to align with or reproduce what preconceptions of what gender, sexuality, and intimacy they have inherited, they shift into new dimensions "between social and sexual registers" without flattening them or reducing them to a singular or final possibility (Ahmed, 2006, p. 161). These other possibilities are significant to people who study, make, and play games and so are deserving of our attention.

If, as Ahmed suggests, pursuing queer lines creates additional queer lines to follow, then what I want is for games to be queer not just to check a box on a diversity checklist, but so that those who desire differently, stumble off straight paths, can find "other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (p. 169). For this reason, the distinction between those who were always queer players and those who become queer players as they interact with the game is not always necessary. In either case, this a matter of "habit change" (de Lauretis, 1994, p. 300, cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 100). Particularly in a world traumatized by pandemic and social isolation that has restricted certain kinds of access to queer spaces and impacted how communities can come together in-person, we should understand games as unique sites that, by processually generating meaning that is "mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us" (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 3, as cited in Ilmonen & Juvonen, 2015, para. 20), act as significant resources for the becoming and survival of queer subjects (Loubert, 2019).

Halberstam writes that queer failure is about "[losing] one's way, and indeed to be prepared to lose more than one's way" (p. 6). Even when the unexpected isn't intentionally designed or accounted for at the level of game production, playing queerly can bring about the unexpected in game worlds. As I continue to do research exploring non-monogamies and other aspects of digital intimacies, I hope others will join me in thinking about how games might also spur the unexpected to emerge within ourselves.

Endnotes

[1] Non/monogamy is a framing of monogamy and non-monogamy as a mutually co-constitutive system and discursive sphere that was originally established by Willey (2006).

[2] To actively work against the harmful impact of gatekeeping queer identities, I use the term bisexual to describe my attraction to two or more genders or, alternatively, to those who are like myself and not like myself. I also emphasize that identities change over time and that being bisexual now does not diminish my relationship to lesbian and Sapphic culture.

[3] I am using Rambukkana's (2015a) definition of "open" non-monogamies as intimate arrangements in which every participant is aware of (and, I add, consent to) the arrangement in question. This stands in contrast to "closed" or "secret" non-monogamies such as cheating and adultery.

[4] In keeping with queer game studies assertion that there is no singular method or position from which we can approach games, I am hesitant to suggest that there was any originary moment or seminal text that officially established this field of scholarship despite the "explosion of visible activity" during this decade (Loubert, 2019, p. 8).

[5] Though she challenges that games can be objectively defined, Ruberg describes a videogame as a designed interactive experience with a digital interface that "understands itself" as a videogame (2019, p. 8).

[6] For additional information about the events leading up to GamerGate and the now defunct Crash Override Network including a more personal account, see Zoë Quinn's Memoir, *Crash Override: How GamerGate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate* (2017).

[7] The acronym LGBTQ2SIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, Two Spirit, intersex, and asexual and aromantic. The "+" recognizes queer identities and orientations beyond this short-form reference as well as those that could emerge in the future.

[8] The term polynormativity is derived from Warner's (1991, 1999) concept of homonormativity and is revisited in Barker (2014) and Duggan's (2002) writing on homonormativity under neoliberalism.

[9] I argue that we must be critical of calls for people who are heterosexual to be barred from accessing LGBTQ2SIA+ spaces and resources because there are cisnormative assumptions

at work in assuming that someone who is heterosexual cannot be queer. The very existence of transgender men and transgender women in opposite-gender relationships troubles the assumption that heterosexuality and queerness are mutually exclusive. Likewise, a person could easily be incorrectly labeled as heterosexual by others who make gender essentialist assumptions about them and their partner(s) based on visual cues alone.

[10] A AAA (or "triple-A") designation is often applied to games where aspects of development involve any combination of large studio settings, a generous budget, multi-platform distribution, and widespread marketing campaigns.

[11]As I will detail later in this section, my analysis focuses on theories and representations of non/monogamy made in the Euro-American games industry. For research on Eastern visual novel style dating simulators, such as Japanese *bishōjo* and *otome* games, see Galbraith (2011) and Ganzon (2019) respectively.

[12] For a detailed breakdown of gendered power dynamics, the co-opting of female empowerment language, and the dubious conceptualization of consent in *The Witcher* franchise, see Curio's video essay "The Ballad of Horny Geralt: A Look At Sexuality In The Witcher Games" (2020).

[13] For more on this topic, refer to the chapter "Queer Failure in Games" in *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, pp. 153-224).

[14] Character customization choices rarely impact a player's progression directly. The only exceptions are how gender determines which changing room the player can access at the Pelican Town Spa and how the appearance of NPC children. If players have children with their NPC spouse, a biological child's skin colour on the parent's combined appearance while an adopted child will have a random skin colour ("Talk:Children," 2019).

[15] Neutral gifts still result in a small boost in Friendship points, suggesting that at least sometimes, suggesting that it is the thought that counts.

[16] Eric Barone's developer blog only includes biographies for 5 bachelors and 5 bachelorettes because two NPCs, Shane and Emily, were added as romance options later on.

[17] Murray borrows the term "cultural ratchet from Tomasello (2000).

[18] Sutherlands's "deckchair countryside" is an adaptation of Bunce's notion of the "armchair countryside" as described in *The Countryside Ideal* (1994) that applies to computers rather than film, television, or traditional literature.

[19] Queergaming is Chang's queering of Alexander Galloway's (2006) notion of "countergaming."

[20] Games with flexible clothing design options (e.g., *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*) would allow players to label themselves as or hint at being polyamorous (e.g., using the infinity symbol), but these features are not as common in character creators and are arguably less reliably culturally legible than coding a character as queer by combining bodies, colours, clothing, and items that stylistically eschew hegemonic masculinity/femininity.

[21] Players were especially hesitant to use these strategies in multiplayer contexts, further demonstrating the potential of single-player experiences to encourage experimentation with unconventional approaches to gameplay.

[22] Prior to June 17 2020, the non-monogamy mod that preceded the Multiple Spouses Mod was bwdy's Polygamy mod.

[23] The disappearance of one's children in *Stardew* is clearly positioned as antithetical to what the hero of a rural idyll would do: After completing the ritual, players who have a phone in the farmhouse can receive random calls where voices call out "you have forsaken us." ("Secrets," 2021).

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