

Rewriting the Game: Queer Trans Strategies of Survival, Resistance, and Relationality in Twine  
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

August 2019

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## Abstract

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This thesis explores how a selection of video games, created by transgender people using the free software Twine, create space for the survival and flourishing of queer and trans subjects through visions of transformative relationships. It deploys the lenses of queer theories of failure (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*), disidentification (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*), and utopianism (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*) to perform close readings of the techniques of narrative and game mechanics used as strategies for survival, resistance, and relationality in Anna Anthropy's *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entree* and *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *With Those We Love Alive*, and Ira Prince's *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*. The analysis focuses on games produced in and around the moment of the "Twine revolution" (Harvey) that aimed in the early 2010s to radically re-envision video games as spaces for minoritized subjects to thrive. Even as the transformation of video games culture as a whole remains an unrealized ideal, this paper argues for the importance of revisiting the under-examined queer strategies these games depict and enact in order to imagine possibilities for "rewrit[ing] the game" (Halberstam in Halberstam and Juul), and through this for "rewrit[ing] the map of everyday life" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25), possibilities which can allow for the flourishing of queer and trans modes of relationality within and against toxic and exclusive norms in game play and design.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Krista Lynes, for her continued support throughout this project. Without her compassionate and thoughtful engagement with and encouragement of my work this thesis would not have been possible.

Thank you also to Dr. Mia Consalvo, for her feedback and support throughout my degree, and for her role on my examination committee, and to Dr. Fenwick McKelvey, for his role on my committee.

Mircea Mandache has been an endlessly helpful in answering my myriad questions about navigating the department throughout this work and I am grateful for this assistance.

Thank you to my MA cohort for their companionship and help through this degree and life in Montreal. Sharing our highs and lows throughout the program has been invaluable.

The students and professors of Technoculture Arts and Games (TAG) at Concordia also have my gratitude for their support and feedback throughout this process.

My partner, Anders Bayly, has been with me through many difficult times, in this research and beyond, and I thank them for sharing this time with me.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) which made this project possible.

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## Transformational Possibilities in Twine: Literature and an Introduction to the Field

I first discovered Twine, a free software application released in 2009 that allows users to “create interactive, nonlinear stories” (“Twine”), along with my discovery of the queer games scene around when it first started to reach mainstream attention in 2013. I was finishing my undergraduate degree in English literature and writing a capstone thesis on queer representations of gender and sexuality in the video game series *Mass Effect*. I had recently come out as bisexual, in part spurring my interest in queerness in video games, and though I had not yet come out as trans I was privately questioning my gender identity and changed my name in that same year. I was able to attend the first Queerness and Games conference (QGCon) at the University of California, Berkeley that fall and hearing from so many people who were studying, playing, and creating games from queer perspectives was transformational. I was struck by how many other people were interested in exploring the incredible creative possibilities in the ways that video games could be played and created differently: games could be playful, serious, moving, and queer in ways I had never seen before.

In a dialogue with Jesper Juul at this conference, Jack Halberstam reformulated the thesis of his book *The Queer Art of Failure* in terms of a game metaphor: a queer person in our heteronormative society can “try to play the game as it’s been written” and conform to heterosexual standards, or “refuse the game,” which means “you rewrite the game, and in the process, you accept the label failure.” His talk of “rewriting the game” suggests possible methods through which we can create or play games queerly in part by redefining rules and celebrating what would be considered failure under those rules. The potential of investigating queer modes of failure in video games has been taken up by several writers in queer game studies such that there is a section in *Queer Game Studies* on “Queer Failure in Games” (153-224), and a chapter in Bo Ruberg’s *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* on “the Queer art of Failing in Video Games” in which Ruberg takes up Halberstam and Juul’s *Art of Failure* to argue that video games can be particularly interesting spaces to explore what it means to fail queerly, through “an approach to play that defies normative notions of desire and success” (137).

This kind of approach to video games which I was introduced to at QGCon speaks to me because games have been a coping strategy for me for decades: in some of my worst times, games have been the only thing that gets me out of bed and, in the years before I was out as queer or trans to myself or to the world, games allowed me to explore my gender identity and

sexual and romantic orientation. Despite my lifelong interest in video games, as a queer person and a person perceived as a woman at the time, game spaces often didn't feel welcoming. "Normative notions of desire and success" within game culture were working against me, and QGCon was my first introduction to a community of people who were similarly excluded by mainstream game spaces but who also continued nonetheless to see and engage with games' potential. Finding other people invested in resisting the dominant gaming culture of exclusivity and toxicity from a queer perspective opened new doors for me to more fully consider the potential of video games as a space for identity exploration, community building, and coping through difficult times. In thinking through these experiences and my personal relationship with video games, queerness, and transness, I have come to some of the questions that define my current research: what about video games, despite their often hostile cultures, has allowed them to provide me and other queer and trans players relief from real-life pain? What methods do queer and trans players use in order to continue to engage with games in toxic environments that often work against them? Which forms of community might be envisioned in the strategies these players and creators use to navigate the spaces of video game creation and play?

In order to investigate these questions, I have selected four Twine games, all produced by transgender creators, as case studies of games as spaces for developing strategies to survive and shape queer relations in cis-heteronormative society. While many types of games and game play can take up this challenge to queerly rewrite games, part of the reason I focus on Twine in particular is because the works produced using it are marginal to the definition of "real games," and the margins of a medium can often be a site where marginalized creators flourish as well. In the following section, I discuss literature that forms my analysis, beginning with an introduction to the emerging paradigm of "queer game studies," which aims to "disrupt . . . dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played" (Ruberg and Shaw x). I trace some connections between queer game studies and the "queer games avant-garde," an assortment of creators producing "scrappy, impactful, and indeed revolutionary video games that relate directly to lived LGBTQ experiences" (Ruberg, *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* 210) and then draw from literature that establishes Twine as a particularly productive tool for the expression of marginalized people based on its accessibility, while also addressing some of the limits and drawbacks to this accessibility. I then outline the queer theoretical approaches that provide the frameworks I use to investigate queer strategies used

within these Twine games, particularly Halberstam on failure, and Muñoz on disidentification and utopianism. I also elucidate some of the connections and tensions between these approaches and trans theories that I also draw from in my analysis, before ending with a few notes on my methodology.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 begins the analysis of my game case studies with anna anthropy's *Encyclopedia Fuckme* and *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, which I interpret as exploring queer strategies of reforming supposedly negative affective experiences of fear, submission, and rage in order to survive and imagine queer possibilities for reworking intimate relationships, strategies which are depicted within the games and taught to players through the experience of gameplay. In Chapter 2, I take up Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *With Those We Love Alive* and ira prince's *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy* as two games that offer forms of disidentificatory and communitarian survival strategies within their game worlds while also enacting these strategies through the collaborative contexts in which the games circulate in online queer communities.

### **Queer Game Studies**

I locate my approach to this work within the rapidly growing category of “queer game studies,” a term drawn from the title of the 2017 anthology *Queer Game Studies*, co-edited by Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. As Ruberg and Shaw outline, queer game studies is an emerging paradigm of playing, studying, and creating games using varied queer methodology, and it has had an explosion of visible activity, particularly since 2012-2013, years which included the first editions of the Queerness and Video Games Conference and the Different Games Conference (Sarkar). Since then, there have been two special issues of games studies journals specifically focused on queer game studies: *Games Studies*' 2018 “Queerness and Video Games” issue—the largest issue in the journal's history and the first collection of queer game studies work in a major peer-reviewed journal (Ruberg, “Queer Game Studies 101”)—and *First Person Scholar*'s 2019 “Queer Game Studies” special issue. In the introduction to their anthology, Ruberg and Shaw offer their framing of the field:

as a paradigm, queer game studies stands as a call to action, an argument 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. (x)



This definition is intentionally broad, as the anthology includes work using many different approaches and from game designers, scholars, and journalists. The “dominant assumptions” that queer game studies aims to disrupt range from toxic and exclusive gaming culture, to “the impulse to define video games themselves” within games scholarship (xii).

One of the interventions queer game studies aims to make is in challenging what Fron et al. have termed “the hegemony of play:” a self-selecting, self-perpetuating logic which structures game creation, development, and marketing to the preferences of a predominantly white, heterosexual, male “elite” and “hardcore” audience of game players and creators (1). This hegemonic gamer culture has deep issues with reactionary violence and toxicity that have real-world consequences for women, people of colour, and queer and trans people, as has been exemplified by GamerGate, a much discussed movement that enacted targeted harassment against women in response to a perceived “feminist conspiracy” in games journalism and academia (Kaplan; Marcotte). “GamerGaters” sent death threats to and published personal details of women involved in games, particularly game creator Zoe Quinn and feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian (Mortensen). Game studies academics and feminist games researchers were also targeted with threats, and accusations of being part of a feminist conspiracy to infiltrate and destroy games (Chess and Shaw; Mortensen). Gamergate is perhaps the most visible recent manifestation of toxic gamer culture, but beyond the event itself, this toxicity has wide-reaching implications for those who play and create games, and for society as a whole as games become an increasingly normalized part of our media landscape. GamerGate made visible the necessity of taking hostile online cultures seriously, as they can have impactful real-world effects (Mortensen). The tactics of violent threats and doxing used in GamerGate have also been connected to the rise of the white nationalist so-called “alt-right” in North America (Bezio; Lees), further highlighting the need to take these issues seriously.

It is in part this hegemonic gaming culture that queer game studies and adjacent game scholarship continues to address through investigating, exposing, and confronting it (Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture;” Nakamura, “Racism, Sexism, and Gaming’s Cruel Optimism”), and in studying strategies of resistance used by marginalized players. This latter work on strategies used by marginalized gamers to resist the dominant and toxic culture of video games is particularly of interest for my own research. I see video games as having powerful potential as spaces for identity exploration, community building, and providing coping methods

in difficult life situations, and am inspired by the way players excluded from hegemonic gaming communities continue to find creative methods to make space for themselves in these communities.

Much of the current work investigating player community-building focuses on the building of meaningful relationships specifically through online play, whether in a more general way that players engage with interpersonal interactions in online spaces (Boellstorff; Taylor), or specifically with a focus on strategies of resistance used by women, racialized and queer players in these spaces (Gray; Nakamura, “It’s a N\*\*\*\*r in Here! Kill the \*\*\*\*r!”; Pulos; Thompson). This work is vital, but I aim to take up in my own work an investigation of strategies used to explore queer relationships and collectivity without direct player-to-player interaction in-game. While single player games are perhaps a less obvious location for research on queer relational strategies, these games can present powerful visions of queer bonds. In some cases these single-player games also enact the forming of queer bonds and queer resistance strategies outside of the game space itself through their uptake in online communities, as I discuss in particular with reference to *With Those We Love Alive* and *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*. The site of single-player games for developing queer modes of relationality alongside and outside of in-game space is relatively underexplored in the literature on communities in game culture.

As well as challenging norms of gaming culture, queer game studies positions itself as intervening in norms within game studies, such as the “impulse to define video games themselves” (Ruberg and Shaw xii). This impulse can be seen in much of early games literature which has been framed as being composed of two oppositional camps: “ludology,” characterised by work like Espen Aarseth’s (*Cybertext*), which focuses on defining games based on the rules and structures of games as systems; and narratology, characterised by work like Janet Murray’s (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*), which focuses instead on defining games through their narratives, as an extension of other narrative technologies like film and literature. Of course, strictly separating the field into these two distinct categories has since been recognized to be unnecessarily limiting (Murray, “The Last Word on Ludology vs. Narratology”), however, the question of defining and categorizing games continues to be present in games scholarship (Ruberg and Shaw x). Juul argues that defining what is and is not a game can create space for creativity and innovation, as “it is easier to break the rules once you are aware of them” (*Half-Real*), however, it is also vital to acknowledge that categorizing the elements that make a game “a true game,” and thus

necessarily excluding some texts in the creation of that definition, can resonate with reactionary gamer communities who mobilize definitions of “real games” to exclude certain games and the people who play them, often those created or played by women and people of colour, from consideration as worthy of critical attention (Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 9; Shaw “Do You Identify as a Gamer?”).

Because defining games can be such a political move, and because defining what is and is not “a game” is far from the most interesting way to explore the ways that games affect and reflect culture and the ways that players and designers engage with these works, rather than argue that the Twine texts I study should be included in the category of “real games,” I work using Ruberg’s definition that a video game can be “any designed, interactive experience that operates primarily through a digital interface and *understands itself* as a video game” (*Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 8). This definition, while it may also have its limits, particularly in varying definitions of what “interactivity” can mean, creates possibilities to understand the ways that the Twine games I have selected work within and against larger narratives about what video games can be or do.

Queer game studies aims not only to challenge norms within games scholarship more generally, but also LGBTQ game scholarship specifically (Ruberg and Shaw xiv). Ruberg and Shaw argue that LGBTQ game studies is “scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQ topics—from LGBTQ players or designers to games with LGBTQ representation,” (xiv) such as Shaw’s earlier work interviewing “gaymers” (“Talking to Gaymers”), or Mia Consalvo’s study of sexuality in *The Sims (It’s a Queer World After All)*. Queer game studies seeks to build on LGBTQ games scholarship by “seek[ing] to understand video games through the conceptual frameworks of queerness” (xiv), in part a project to move “beyond representation” (Ruberg and Shaw xv; Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 14). Ruberg and Shaw outline several trends in the type of work they categorize as doing this within queer games scholarship, including: “explor[ing] the ways that queerness can inform video game mechanics” (xv), as in Colleen Macklin’s argument that video game mechanics have inherent queer potential through allowing players to fail, explore identities, and “explore unfamiliar pleasures and desires” (Macklin 256); and “locating queerness in games that do not, at first glance, appear to include explicitly LGBTQ content” (Ruberg and Shaw xv), as in Amanda Phillips’ interpretation of the hyper-femme character Bayonetta as challenging heterosexual masculinity. In a later text,

Ruberg adds also the category of “analyzing video games using queer theory” (“Queerness and Video Games”), exemplified by Jordan Youngblood’s reading of failure as a queer strategy to counter hegemonic masculinity in *Metal Gear Solid* (“I Wouldn’t Even Know the Real Me Myself”). My own work takes up this strategy, as I see queer theory as a useful tool to allow the formation of a deeper understanding of what the relational strategies depicted and enacted within specific games have to offer for queer and trans people, communities, and politics, beyond representation. I elaborate on the reasons that queer theory is particularly productive for this project and the specific theories I use in the section “Queer failure, utopianism, and disidentification as survival strategies.”

In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* Ruberg takes up the strategy of locating queerness in supposedly “straight” games through readings of how specific games can either be played or interpreted in ways that reveal their potential to challenge norms of desire, such as their reading of *Octodad*—a game about playing as an Octopus trying to avoid detection while pretending to be an average suburban human dad—as analogous to the queer experience of “passing” as a normative straight subject. This work importantly forwards an understanding of even games that do not obviously contain queer representation as spaces for queer methods of play, however I instead focus on games that *do* understand themselves as explicitly queer, not only as examples of representation but also to explore the intentional interventions these queer game designers make in games as a medium. While the focus of Ruberg’s analysis is on queer play in supposedly straight games, they also address explicitly queer games in their conclusion to *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, focused on the “queer games avant-garde,” which I take up in the following section.

### **Twine and the Queer Games Avant-Garde**

I began this paper by calling up my memory of the first Queerness and Games conference in order to return to a moment when a radical reclamation and reformation of game spaces as sites of queer and trans flourishing seemed possible and perhaps even imminent. While the particular San Francisco Bay-Area queer games community that was particularly associated in the early 2010s with the first few years of this conference and the “queer games movement” has since largely dispersed (k 7; Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 213) and the mainstream games community has moved on to investment in other, newer innovations (k 8),

there is still much to be said in revisiting the utopian visions created by these games. Ruberg points out that the work associated with the so-called queer games movement is ongoing, and suggests instead the term “queer games avant-garde” to acknowledge this ongoing work beyond a particular moment in time and beyond a particular “movement” arising from “one specific, clearly defined community” (*Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 212). For these reasons, I take up Ruberg’s term, defined as a “network of queer game-makers working individually or in small teams to make scrappy, impactful, and indeed revolutionary video games that relate directly to lived LGBTQ experiences” (210).

Twine is far from the only tool used by this avant-garde of queer game creators, but I focus on it in part because it has been taken up by creators within and adjacent to this network with particular enthusiasm. Harvey offers some possible reasons this might be the case when she suggests that what she terms the “Twine revolution” “queers the norms of game design, from who does it to what they make to what success looks like” (96). There are several reasons that Twine has been taken up for these game projects so readily by queer game developers: it is free to use, requires little knowledge of programming, and has a visual interface that allows for intuitive mapping of game projects. Harvey also highlights the fact that it can be used on multiple operating systems and that the size of files it outputs are small enough to be easily distributed (97). Playing Twine games is also relatively accessible, as they are often released for free and the ability to play a Twine game requires only the kinds of skills needed to navigate a website: the ability to read and click links, and sometimes to type, while many more mainstream games require players to have the ability to learn complex control systems and interfaces (k 9).

I believe that Twine’s frequent use for the making of queer games is also in part due to the fact that Twine and the works produced using it are marginal to the definition of “real games,” and the margins of a medium can be the spaces where marginalized creators flourish as well. The format of work made in Twine has been compared to zines (anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*; Fuller; Hudson), to printed “choose your own adventure” novels (Allan; anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*; Bernardi; Zukerman), and to “interactive fiction,” a term used for one of the earliest forms of commercial digital game that was widely popular in the 70s and 80s when game consoles were not capable of rendering high quality graphics (“Frequently Asked Questions”). anna anthropy also categorizes the work produced in Twine as “hypertext fiction,” a subcategory of the more general interactive fiction, characterized by the

links being embedded within the text rather than in separate lists at the end of text-paragraphs (“Games Literacy,” slide 338).

Hypertext fiction produced in Twine is on the margins of traditional game definitions, and some would argue that these pieces are not games at all, as can be seen in Jesper Juul’s game categorization. In *Half Real* Juul presupposes in setting up a “test” of his definition of games that “traffic, war, *hypertext fiction*, freeform play, and ring-a-ring o’ roses are not games,” and that his definition will only be effective if it excludes these “not games” (emphasis added). Hypertext fiction is not a game for him because it fails the conditions of having “variable outcomes” and “player attachment to outcome.” The definition of what is and is not a game can easily become political, as I explained in the previous section, and it is in part the aggressive arguments that Zoe Quinn’s Twine game *Depression Quest* was not a game that spawned the violent harassment she faced during GamerGate (Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* 9).

While their marginality within games culture can have dangerous effects for creators, it also allows for innovation outside of established conventions of game design: as anthropy argues, Twine is one of the tools that has allowed increased access to people who never thought they could create games to realize “that there are ways of interacting with games other than just playing them: roles beyond consumer” (*Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* 90), and that expanding the means of expression in video games will allow for “a much more diverse, experimental, and ultimately rich body of work” (21). The relative accessibility of Twine as a tool for developers is what has drawn creators who are often excluded from the white masculinist heteronormative spaces of mainstream game development, and even indie game development which often replicates similar norms on a smaller scale (Harvey 96). The accessibility of playing the games also allows this content to be disseminated to consumers who are marginalized from game-playing communities.

In the introduction to *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation*, merrit k’s anthologized collection of commentated playthroughs of dozens of Twine games, she describes a personal experience with how the increased accessibility of game design with Twine, and through it the challenging of game norms, affected her as a player. She describes her first encounter with a Twine game—anthropy’s *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entree*—as an awakening to the possibilities of what games could do differently: “It was everything I had been led to believe videogames weren’t, couldn’t be: funny, hot, relevant to my

life” (6), similar to my experience upon discovering the queer games scene during my undergraduate research.

Of course, Twine is not a perfect tool, and Harvey also highlights some of the issues she sees with Twine. She points out that there is the potential for the depoliticization of the platform as it achieves increasing recognition in dominant gaming communities, providing an example of a statement made by Kellee Santiago, a prominent woman in mainstream game development, who referred to Porpentine Heartscape’s statement that “queer women and women of colour are making games every day” as the paraphrased “different and innovative games are made every day,” softening the language to fit in with “industry buzzwords” (102). Harvey also points out that while the culture of free production and distribution of Twine games can “resist commodification” (101), increasing access in some ways, it also limits access in other ways as it relies on unpaid or underpaid labour which not everybody, particularly those in marginalized communities, has the time or ability to provide (105).

Another major issue of access to play and creation in Twine is its dependence on creators’ masterful use of language, and in particular English, as this is the language used by the software itself and the majority of the community surrounding it. Avery Alder briefly points this out in her playthrough chapter in *Videogames for Humans* (177). While the more-visually based systems of mainstream games that focus on graphics and mechanical skills may create barriers to access for many people, the relative separability of gaming ability from language facility does mean that communities such as non-native English speakers might find even toxic mainstream game communities easier to access than the heavily language-dependent community of Twine. On a panel about accessibility in Twine, Austin Walker highlighted the racialized nature of this access to language:

There are people of color making Twine games, said Walker, but stories in that space usually “come from, are informed by, a historically white sense of what good writing looks like.” Notably, Walker continued, white people generally have better access than minorities do to educational systems in which they learn how to express themselves in writing. (Sarkar)

This could offer part of the explanation for the disproportionate whiteness of Twine communities, pointed out by other authors as well (k 18; Kareem).

For the purposes of my work I aim to remain aware of these issues, and there is certainly ample space here for future work on what we can learn from the limitations of Twine as a software and a community. While a vision of Twine as completely revolutionizing access to game production and play remains unrealized and it is vital to acknowledge the barriers to accessing this tool, it is also vital to explore some of the things it allows and does well. In the rush to find the new exciting revolutionary potential in games, I don't want to discard the potential that many trans creators saw in Twine as a tool during the "Twine revolution" and I believe there is still value in paying more close critical attention to some of the radical works produced during this time of utopian possibility in queer games.

Despite its characterization as a particularly useful tool for marginalized creators, scholarly work that closely examines Twine games themselves is relatively rare, and I believe that these games merit closer scrutiny in order to realize some of the tool's potential to challenge narratives within game play and design regarding power, game mechanics, and gender and sexuality. Harvey's analysis of the "Twine revolution" highlights many of the reasons that marginalized creators use the tool but does not discuss the specifics of any of the games themselves. Twine has also been studied as a teaching tool (Thevenin) as a tool for research and communication (Wilson et al.), and as a game design tool among many other tools (anthropy *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*; Freedman). k's anthology *Videogames for Humans* does important work towards a close consideration of specific Twine games, but the anthology's focus is in part on collecting the text of the Twine stories themselves and so the analysis is often quite short, limited to sentences and short paragraphs in between game text. Bragança et al. have studied LGBTQ representation in case studies of Twine games, with an analysis focused on how these games represent the identities of the characters portrayed within them. However, as I have described, I aim to undertake an analysis that moves beyond representation, highlighting instead the underexamined queer strategies used within these games for resistance to hegemonic culture within and outside of games.

### **Queer failure, utopianism, and disidentification as survival strategies**

I use queer theory as a lens in this analysis, as queer theoretical approaches offer frameworks for investigating queerness beyond representation of identities and instead as a mode of living and developing bonds and relationships in a society that tells us that our desires and



identities are wrong. In the introduction to the GLQ issue “Queer Bonds” Weiner and Young suggest that “what makes . . . bonds queer is a simultaneous adhesion and dehiscence, a centripetal pull toward the social and a radical centrifugal drive away from it” (236). I aim to explore how the games I have selected take up these questions within queer theory about how queer subjects navigate the social sphere in varying ways as strategies to survive and thrive in a cis-heteronormative social sphere. Games themselves can be used as coping strategies for trans people in particular (Janiuk), as is reflected in my own experience with playing games throughout my life, and I aim to use queer theoretical concerns to investigate further the ways the games I have selected can be used for queer and trans subjects to facilitate the work of surviving oppression and reimagining relationships in ways that enable queer flourishing.

In order to understand the queer strategies used within these games, I first describe Halberstam’s idea of queer failure, a strategy for taking up the power to be found in the position queerness is made to figure in the social order as a failure to be a good heterosexual subject and through doing so to refigure our relationships with norms of success. I relate these strategies to Muñoz’s argument for the necessity of imagining differently and better for queer subjects in his work on queer utopianism and queer of colour disidentificatory survival strategies, and I introduce how these strategies can be effectively employed within games in order to refigure the cultural power and possibilities of games for queer liberatory projects. I then end by outlining some of the connections and tensions between these queer theoretical concerns and trans theory. Throughout this paper, I use this combination of theories to understand different strategies for survival, resistance, and relationality for queer and trans subjects within cisheteronormative dominant social norms within and outside of games.

#### *Accepting and reimagining failure*

“Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world,” (3) argues Halberstam, and it is this potential in underappreciated and seemingly negative forms of existing in the world that he forwards as a powerful queer strategy for navigating a heteronormative social sphere. Halberstam’s interest in queer reconceptualization of negativity has been associated with the “anti-Social thesis in queer theory” (Caserio et al.), among whose most prominent scholars is Lee Edelman. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman calls for a radical queer negativity to stand in

opposition to the heterosexual “logic of reproductive futurism” (2) that structures politics in service of an imaginary child and against which queer people are figured as signaling the end of the social order. Edelman argues that “the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization” (17). Thus for both Edelman and Halberstam it is vital that when queer people’s exclusion from social structures is recognized as oppressive, queer people fight against these structures rather than fighting to assimilate into them, and these anti-assimilationist tendencies can be drawn out in the Twine games I discuss throughout the paper.

While Edelman and Halberstam may at first seem like natural allies for their shared interest in negativity, Halberstam’s focus is not actually on the complete rejection of sociality as Edelman’s is: “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact *offer more* creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (*Halberstam* 3, emphasis added). This interest in finding alternative meanings in failure is what causes Edelman to accuse Halberstam of “strik[ing] the pose of negativity while evacuating its force” (Edelman in Caserio et al. 822). I see Halberstam’s focus on the productivity to be found in failure as more useful for my work here, as it both acknowledges the force of negativity and imagines how it might be turned towards queer liberatory politics, a strategy employed in the Twine works I study. Halberstam’s investment in alternatives produced through failure also leads to productive connection with the theory of queer utopianism as advanced by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*.

#### *Imagining utopian worlds and modes of relation*

“Shouting down utopia is an easy move” (Muñoz in Caserio et al. 825), while imagining utopian possibilities for queer subjects within the violent systems of the homophobic public sphere can be a productive difficulty. Muñoz forwards a queer of colour critique which argues that negativity as used by Edelman “first and foremost distances queerness from what some critics seem to think of as contamination by race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference” (Muñoz in Caserio et al. 825). He is, however, not opposed to negativity but instead interested in what he calls “radical negativity” which “becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism” (13). This radical negativity investigates utopian imaginings as strategies that queerness necessitates, and enables, in order to negotiate a homophobic public sphere. This productive potential in negativity

resonates with Halberstam's interest in the productive possibility to be found in redefining failure. Muñoz connects his concept of utopia to failure himself: "utopia's rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And . . . utopianism represents a failure to be normal" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 169). Queer utopianism for Muñoz is "to live inside straight time and to ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place" (26), imagining new and better ways of being in the world similar to Halberstam's reframing of success and failure.

In an earlier work, *Disidentification: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz describes the disidentification as "the survival strategies the minoritarian subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). In this analysis, the failure to conform to normative citizenship necessitates the emergence of survival strategies for queers in general, and queers of colour in particular, and in my analysis it has particular relevance for trans subjects who experience their gender identities as elided and punished by normative citizenship. Disidentificatory strategies, in response to this positioning of minoritarian people as failed subjects, are the practices which "*do more* than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality" (196, emphasis added). While Muñoz focuses on performances, disidentification is also a particularly useful way to understand the games I analyse, as they often take up tropes and assumptions within mainstream games (such as power fantasies and a focus on player control and agency) and reimagine their use for queer liberatory purposes. Disidentification thus is an important strategy for a queer utopianism which allows for queer subjects to "imagine another time and place" (*Cruising Utopia* 26).

The interplay between failure and utopianism comes up in research on queer games. Games themselves, according to Colleen Macklin are queer in part because "they encourage and let us revel in (the queer art of) failure" and also because they "give us the space to explore unfamiliar pleasures and desires" (256). In this description, games are simultaneously utopian and full of failure. I thus use theoretical perspectives on queer failure, utopia, and disidentification to analyse how different games by and for marginalized people engage with gender, sexuality, and failure in their own unique and queer ways as survival strategies in cis-heteronormative society.

### **Transgender theory and trans strategies**

Throughout this work I use the term “transgender,” and trans as its shortening, in the sense described in Susan Stryker’s introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader*, “as the term of choice . . . for a wide range of phenomena that call attention to the fact that ‘gender,’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity” (3). I use queer theory in this work because it provides useful language and concepts for analysing alternative identities and practices of gender and sexuality, but my focus is specifically on narratives by, about, and for transgender people specifically rather than queer people more generally.

Of course there is significant overlap between the fields of queer and trans studies, but there is also tension between cisgender and transgender queer activists and theorists. Stryker’s introduction to the first *Transgender Studies Reader* outlines some of the tensions between transgender subjects and cisgender gay and lesbian theorists, some of whom viewed transsexuality as “perverse” and “sick” (1). While queer theory in part aims to expand the earlier gay and lesbian studies to include analysis of gender variance, trans theorists have critiqued queer theory as well for being largely written by cisgender people and for using transgender people as examples in ways that benefit cisgender academics rather than transgender people themselves (Namaste, “Undoing Theory”). Namaste outlines the binary that early queer theorists drew between cisgender academics and their trans objects of inquiry: “transvestites are those figures “we” look at; they are not those people with whom “we” speak. And “they” are certainly not “us”” (190).

It is vital to point out and critique the failings of the cisgender queer gaze on transgender subjects, and there is certainly more work to be done in this area. However, I also see value in recuperating the theories of gender advanced by queer theory to reflect on transgender perspectives and experiences. Stryker suggests that, alongside cisgender queer theories which privilege “sexual object choice” as the only “mode of queer difference,” transness can be framed as another “mode of queer difference,” and one that reveals failings of heteronormativity that can be hidden and even reinforced in cisgender queer understandings (7). Seeing transness as a possible “mode of queer difference” is in part what allows for the application of queer theories to my work here. The concept of queerness I use is one that is in relationship with transness. By

choosing texts produced by and for trans people and looking at them through a trans perspective my intention is for my work in part to address, or at the minimum avoid perpetuating, the gap in understanding the forms when cisgender queer theory is used to discuss gender without sufficient consideration for trans subjects and experiences. I use queer theory also because, while there are many trans people who see their lives and identities as entirely separate from queerness (Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*), the texts I have selected explicitly engage with queerness as well as transness, as is evident in part through the use of the word “queer” in several of the game’s titles.

Each of the queer strategies outlined in the preceding section can be used by trans subjects for ends that specifically work to enable trans survival and resistance to not only heteronormativity but cisnormativity as well. In Chapter 1 I use Susan Stryker’s piece “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” in dialogue with Halberstam’s celebration of failure to investigate the ways that rejecting a social order that subjugates queer and trans subjects is a powerful mode of resistance to this subjugation within anthropology’s *Queers in Love*. In my analysis of *With Those We Love Alive* in Chapter 2, I outline some resonances between transgender practices of self-naming and relationships to the body and disidentificatory strategies as described in Muñoz’s work. Throughout the paper, I use the combination of theories outlined throughout this section to explore the complex ways the games I analyse are invested in pleasure and pain, destruction and rebuilding, thinking differently, and reimagining a future in the capitalist, masculinist, heteronormative world of video games and the world at large.

### **Final notes on methodology**

As Ruberg and Shaw call for as a queer game studies approach, I am interested in a methodological approach that investigates aspects of both game mechanics and narrative, recognizing the distinction between the two as itself unnecessarily limiting for an understanding of the complex ways games engage with media conventions (xvi). My approach comes from a background in the humanities and textual analysis, while also aiming to keep in mind perspectives such as Hayles’ media specific analysis which call for approaches that are aware of not only the content but also the form of the texts they study (“Print is Flat”). Keogh applies this thinking to video games when he argues for an approach of “thick description” of both game

mechanics and narrative elements to account for the form of games as “messy hybrids of a variety of previous media forms” (“Across Worlds and Boundaries”). In my descriptions of the games I study I aim to note particularly the way that the mechanics and structure of the game systems are entwined and inseparable from the narratives and the larger social contexts in which the works circulate.

Non-linear texts can cause complications when conducting textual analysis, which comes from film and literary traditions based on the assumption of linear texts (Hayles), as most games, including all the games I discuss here, can be played in more than one way. Even those games that have only one final outcome often have different paths to get there, or optional details that might be skipped, intentionally or not, by some players. As Consalvo and Dutton note, textual analyses of games often do not describe how the researcher played the games in question, relying on the “assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author.” While the particular elements Consalvo and Dutton suggest should be catalogued in a game analysis are often not applicable to Twine games (“Object Inventories,” for example, do not exist in any of the games I analyse), I note here how I approached playing these games in order to elucidate my analytic process: in order to approach these non-linear texts, my research included playing each game several times according to my personal interest and desires while noting my experiences (a strategy to foreground my own situational knowledge, as described in the coming paragraph), followed by playing each game repeatedly until I had methodically explored and mapped in a text document each possible option, to ensure that I understood the way that player behavior affected (or did not affect) the text displayed on screen. In discussing the content of the games I analyse, I aim to note which player behavior will lead to the text I discuss so that it is clear to the reader how each game, and readings of it, might change based on player behavior.

Finally, I opened this paper with some personal anecdotal details in order to work towards situating myself as a researcher in this project and through this to make visible to readers some of the biases in the perspective from which I write. Haraway’s prioritising of situated knowledges (“Situated Knowledges”) is one that I am inspired by in this method, as I believe that acknowledging and stating my personal stake in this project is not a drawback to my supposed “objectivity” as a researcher but a critical method of holding myself accountable to my own biases. It is unavoidable that my interpretations of any games I encounter are filtered

through my experience as a queer trans masculine person, and I believe that bringing this perspective to game studies is important, and also important to acknowledge.

I aim to not only acknowledge my subject position as a member of marginalized communities but also of my privileges, whiteness in particular. Recent trans theory has engaged with the problem of appropriation of the suffering of primarily working class trans women of colour to become a universal “trans theory” that privileges the voices and experiences of white middle-class trans people (Gan; Koyama; Namaste, “Undoing Theory”). In putting forward my situated position as a white queer transgender scholar I hope to be able to present my own interpretations while not representing my work as part of an essentialist “transgender theory” that assumes all trans people have the same experiences, and to acknowledge that there are very likely elements of my analysis that will be enhanced and some that will be lacking because of my situated outlook.

Chapter 1. Accepting the End: Submission and Destruction as Strategies for Reimagining  
 Relationality in *Encyclopedia Fuckme* and *Queers in Love*

In this section I discuss two Twine pieces by anna anthropy: *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entree (EFM)* and *Queers in Love at the End of the World (QiL)*. anthropy is relatively well-known as part of the queer games avant-garde and her (non-Twine) piece *dys4ia*, a 2012 Adobe Flash game about her early experiences with medical transition, is perhaps her best-known work. *dys4ia* has received a fair amount of critical attention within game studies circles, though anthropy herself is less than enthusiastic about this critical reception. She has expressed frustration about responses from straight, cisgender players who claim that they “learned empathy for trans women” through the game (@adult\_witch, “if you are a cis person”) and it has now been removed from her website. She has also expressed frustration at the attention that *dys4ia* has received disproportionately to her other work (@adult\_witch, “i made a new twine game”), and I believe this disproportionate attention reflects a cisgender preoccupation with a trans narrative that focuses primarily and almost exclusively on medical transition and trans bodies undergoing it, while there are actually many more stories we have to tell about our lives. For these reasons, I aim to critically engage with the concepts she explores in *EFM* and *QiL* as some of her less critically discussed pieces, to see what else anthropy’s work has to say about queer and trans strategies of survival through her use of Twine mechanics, and by doing so to move beyond a cisgender fascination with medicalised trans bodies.

I group these two games together not only because they are by the same creator but also because they explore similar themes. *EFM* is an exploration of masochist submission as a site for resistance and power—a queer strategy in a heteronormative world that privileges dominance—as well as a lesson for the player on the value of this subjugated form of sexual and interpersonal behaviour. *EFM*’s hidden ending in which the player character is able to alter the power dynamics in her relationship also reveals the transformational possibilities opened up by submission as a strategy. *QiL*, a later piece by anthropy, further explores how an embrace of certain forms of powerlessness, this time because of impending apocalypse, and resistance in the face of oppressive structures allows for the building of queer connection and love. Both games thus show queer resistance strategies and how they can be employed through game narrative and mechanics to reimagine social relations.



### 1.1: Challenging Power in *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entree*

*Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entree (EFM)* explores the potential that queer masochism offers for reveling in the joy of practices that are traditionally undervalued—giving up control, for example—through placing the player in the role of a masochist submissive in a BDSM partnership. The text is explicitly and unapologetically pornographic and anthropy uses this provocative writing style and the mechanics of Twine to draw the player into an experience of submission that reveals the pleasure and power that can be found in this role. *EFM* accomplishes this disruption of normative assumptions about sex and relationships in part through disrupting player expectations of game mechanics, using the form of the Twine game and the use of player choice in particular to directly involve the player in the narrative message of celebrating submission. In order to “win” (achieve an ending that doesn’t result in the player character’s death), the player must learn to allow for the possibility of taking sexual pleasure in the threat of being murdered and eaten. I argue that *EFM* challenges player expectations of choice and agency in games, and through this also challenges norms of sexual relationships to reveal the queer potential of refusal of social norms through submission, an argument which I support using Halberstam’s analysis of masochism as a subversive political strategy. The ending of the game then reveals that it is vital to *EFM*’s exploration of masochism that the “pulsive force . . . of negativity” (Edelman 4), rather than being focused only on reveling in the undoing of a system as in Edelman, allows for the possibility to transform relationships, as in Muñoz’s understanding of a “radical negativity [which] becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism” (13).

anthropy’s original post about *EFM* on her website calls the game a “lesbian dating sim,” categorizing it within a familiar game model and setting some player expectations. Critical reception at the time of release echoes this categorization as a “dating sim,” but also makes it clear that this game is far from a typical example of the genre (Alexander; Salgado). Salgado’s review of the game opens by expressing his sense that, unlike his usual experience with games in general and dating sims in particular, this game “isn’t for [him], that is to say, a male over the age of 18.” Dating sims more typically allow players to develop (usually heterosexual) relationships with, and have romantic and sexual encounters with, their choice of attractive partners, while *EFM* places the player in the role of the titular lesbian submissive, Encyclopedia Fuckme, as she is invited to a sexy dinner with her dominant partner, Anni. Rather than allowing

the player to choose between different romance options, *EFM* is an exploration of the power dynamics in one pre-existing relationship over which the player has little choice.

*EFM* frames the player's expectations with this opening warning: "Heads up: this game is super pornographic. It contains FUCKING, THREATS OF VIOLENCE, THREATS OF FUCKING, VIOLENCE and VIOLENT FUCKING. There's some filthy, nasty, dirty stuff here." This warning at the beginning of *Encyclopedia Fuckme* operates as a functional mechanic that allows the player to decide whether they are willing to be hailed into the violent sexual systems of the game, preparing them for what to expect from the content as well as the tone of the game. The enthusiastic text, often peppered with all-caps exclamations to indicate intensity of sensation and emotion, continues throughout the game, and the warning is also followed by the first clickable option offered to the player: a single choice of enthusiastic assent stating "Oh fuck yeah, I am hella into that LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD!" The language of the warning and the single choice prepares the player for the expectation that this content is meant to be entertaining and enjoyable, and not something to be experienced reluctantly. If the player is not "hella into that," the game does not invite their participation and instead the player's option is to leave.

The nature of the relationship between the player character, Encyclopedia Fuckme, and her partner, "Anni," is clear from the first page of the game, in which Encyclopedia reads a letter from Anni inviting her to a dinner with "No questions, no reschedules." Until this point, it seems that Encyclopedia and Anni have had several sexual encounters in their dominant and submissive roles and Encyclopedia goes along excitedly as Anni ties her up. Both Encyclopedia and the player are shocked at the turn of events when Anni pulls out a knife. One of the player's response options highlights how this moment is a shift in the relationship dynamic: "Oh God Anni this is fucking SCARY and HOT but that is a giant fucking knife and we have never really had a conversation about playing with knives yet." When Anni responds to this statement by revealing that this is no longer role-play and that she is actually planning to carve and eat Encyclopedia, the situation goes beyond BDSM play and becomes life-or-death for Encyclopedia. While Encyclopedia is stuck in this situation, the player continues to be able to opt out at any time by leaving the game. This option to leave, however, is one of few choices that the player actually has.

The player is called to identify with Encyclopedia in her submissive role regardless of the player's own identity, in part through the use of the second-person "you" pronoun throughout the game text, except in clickable choices, which use the pronoun "I." The use of the "you" pronoun is rare in traditional literature, but so common as to be conventional in interactive fiction and Twine games ("First or Second Person?," Frampt). Using the "you" pronoun in literature "explicitly writes the narratee into the text" (Walker 9) and is an "irresistible invitation" (Kacandes, qtd. in Walker 11), reminiscent of the "Hey you!" of the police officer which hails the subject into the social order in Althusser's writing. This call for the player to embody Encyclopedia's role is in part enabled by the fact that the text-based rather than visual nature of the Twine game allows for some ambiguity in the player character's identity markers, opening identification to players of varying experiences. Most of the player character's identity is conveyed not through description of her body but through a description of the interactions she has with her lover.

The ambiguity of Encyclopedia's description in theory could extend to racial identity such that players of colour and white players could be equally interpellated into the game, however, there are a few moments that reveal the privileging of whiteness as the norm in the seemingly un-marked character. The image that accompanies the game is a pixelated, zoomed in shot of a woman biting her finger. She has pale skin and can easily, though not definitively, be read as white. Despite the way that the second-person, text-based narrative avoids descriptions that might indicate Encyclopedia's race, the image that opens the game alongside an introduction of Encyclopedia as the protagonist associates her with this light-skinned figure. Thus, while calling the player to embody a queer woman within the game space can challenge norms that privilege heterosexual masculinity, especially within video games, the call to embody a light-skinned persona can reinforce oppressive social norms that marginalize racialized people. This is perhaps especially true because Encyclopedia's apparent whiteness, based on the image, is not indicated within the text of the game, reinforcing a call to white players as a default "unmarked" race. Players of colour can of course still respond to the call to inhabit Encyclopedia's role in the game, but it becomes a potential site of rupture in player interpellation into the game's systems, perhaps necessitating more work on the part of a player of colour than a white player in order to benefit from the norm-challenging relational possibilities created in the game space. In calling attention to this I aim to acknowledge some of the limits of the game's radical potential, while

still allowing for the possibility that there are strategies explored within it that can be used to challenge oppressive norms.

The player's response to the game's call to interpellate themselves into Encyclopedia's role in her relationship with Anni may be complicated by the players' own identity, but if the player responds to this call, their interpellation into Encyclopedia's submissive role is emphasized as the player's choices become limited based on the game system. Embodying the role of a player character might more typically be understood to allow for player agency in the game world—Murray, for example, considers agency one of the “characteristic delight[s] of electronic environments” which distinguish digital narratives from other forms of narrative (123)—but being interpellated into a game's system necessarily also means submitting to its rules. Walker suggests that this process of “submitting to the code” in games is actually part of the pleasure that we take from them (22), and it is this possibility that *EFM* explores through its use of player choice.

*EFM* reinforces the player's experience of helplessness through subversion of expectations about game mechanics of player choice. Most pages in the story have two choices, and early in the game they are somewhat different from each other. For example, when first arriving to the dinner date, the player is offered a succession of choices about whether to have dinner or sex first. Either choice leads to Encyclopedia being tied up, but in the one where she demands dinner, Anni feeds her a breadstick. A minor difference, but a difference. While the choices are limited, this ability to make choices matches what the player likely expects from a “choose your own adventure”-style game, which *EFM* appears at first to be, based on its text-based interface and blocks of narrative text followed by clickable options. Salgado's article about *EFM* opens with this quotation from a classic Choose Your Own Adventure story, for an example of what the genre generally offers: “You're the star of the story! Choose from 38 possible endings.” Player choice is not only expected, but often the defining feature of this kind of story. The use of the you pronoun in this quotation is again notable for the way it puts the player in the position of the character who has the choices. In *Encyclopedia Fuckme*, however, player choice is quickly revealed to be very limited. One set of response choices to a command from Anni is: “Shit. Yes, ma'am.” or “Yes, ma'am. Shit.” After Anni has revealed her true intentions to kill and eat Encyclopedia, the choices offered to the player continue to be restricted based on the limited options Encyclopedia has: immediately after the reveal, Anni gags

Encyclopedia and the response choices are “MMMMMPHH!! MRRRRPHH!!! MMPH MMRRRRPHH!!” and “MMPH? MMPPH MMMPH! MMMRRRRPH?” One could imagine that these possible responses could have different tones based on the slight differences in punctuation, but the meaning is clear: Encyclopedia and, through her, the player have been silenced and nothing she/they say(s) will have an effect on what comes next.

At first the options the player is offered seem to reflect the level of freedom that Encyclopedia has at any given moment—when she is bound and gagged, the player can only choose to make unintelligible noises, but once Anni temporarily leaves the room and Encyclopedia has a chance to attempt escape, the player is offered a choice between trying to reach for a knife or trying to untie the rope, and later the choice between hiding under the couch or in the closet. However, no matter which options the player selects, Anni eventually catches Encyclopedia, hog ties her, and puts her in a bath. The convergence of all choices up until this point into this single narrative branch is a structure that subverts the expected format of a Choose Your Own Adventure game, which promises branching narratives and multiple endings. anthropy thus uses player expectations of the format and subverts them to reimagine what choice means in a game system. This strategy can be seen as disidentificatory with the structure of games as a whole, through “recycling or re-forming an object,” the expectation of choice in games, in this case, “that has already been invested with powerful energy” (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 39).

Mattie Brice describes *EFM* as an exploration of the death of player agency, because the game forces players to confront the fact that the control they have over games in general is an illusion (“Death of the Player”), echoing Walker’s proposition that part of the structure of games involves the enjoyment of submitting to a game’s rules. While games often strive to make the player feel in control, *Encyclopedia* reminds the player that this player control is always ultimately an illusion created by the game designer, who has control over which options are available in the first place. “The game was set in its ways, knew what it wanted, and I felt incidental. I could play along, or leave,” says Brice of her experience playing *Encyclopedia Fuckme* (“Death of the Player”). Anni “dictates times and places and positions and states of desire” (*Encyclopedia Fuckme*) to Encyclopedia just as anthropy dictates the same to the player through the structure of her game. In revealing the player’s necessary submission to the game designer’s will, *Encyclopedia Fuckme* actually celebrates this submission rather than exposing it

as something to be hidden or changed. *EFM* thus develops queer methods of relationality not only because it centers on sex between women, but also because it disidentifies with game norms and celebrates powerlessness at the centre of player experience, challenging norms that privilege dominance in relations, sexual or otherwise.

*Encyclopedia Fuckme*'s celebration of her own powerlessness is evident, from the enthusiastic response to the content warning that opens the game, to Encyclopedia's eager participation in her submissive role, and it extends to a celebration of her own possible death. Encyclopedia continues to be clearly turned on by the power Anni holds over her even when it is revealed that Anni is interested in Encyclopedia in a "MURDER way" as well as in a "SEXY way" (in Encyclopedia's words). The narration makes comparisons between the way that Anni treats Encyclopedia in this encounter to how she has treated Encyclopedia in their previous, non-murderous, encounters: when Encyclopedia has been inevitably caught and Anni is bathing her, "she starts at your dirty feet, using the same gentle touch that she might have used when she wanted you as a woman and not as a steak on a plate." As well as reminding Encyclopedia of the way that Anni has treated her in their past sexual encounters, she is also turned on by the real threat of being eaten: "in her cannibal eyes, you're a rich cut of meat. That red hot thought and her hungry groping hands gets you really terror horny." This highlights the pleasure that Encyclopedia takes in her submissive role; it's so intense and all-consuming that she continues to be attracted to the idea of submission when it comes with a real rather than fantasised threat. Encyclopedia's role in this story thus can be interpreted as a kind of "performance of radical passivity" as a method of challenging dominant notions of self and power "in a liberal realm . . . where certain [gendered] formulations of self (as active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive) dominate the political sphere" and in which becoming an active, propulsive self within these dominant norms means incorporating oneself into those same power structures (Halberstam 140). Encyclopedia's celebration of her own powerlessness is a refusal to see power only in this "active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive" understanding of the self.

The player is also encouraged to experience and celebrate the underappreciated value in this queer mode of refusal, as their participation in the game is contingent on at least partly accepting a blurring of the boundaries between player and Encyclopedia-as-player-character. Whether the player shares Encyclopedia's excitement about the situation she is in is of course a matter of preference, however, in order to find an end to the story that doesn't result in

Encyclopedia's death, the player has to learn to submit to the game's logic, as Brice describes it. Attempting to play the game with the assumption that it will follow conventions of gameplay that focus on player agency and power will result in repeated deaths: whether the player has Encyclopedia run, hide, or attack Anni, she is always caught. However, in each failed escape attempt there is a hint that another ending is possible. Each time the player attempts and fails to guide Encyclopedia to escape Anni, this message follows "THE END:" "Gosh Encyclopedia, things didn't turn out well for you. Maybe you can click on that link on the left to RESTART THE STORY and find a happier ending!" If the player realizes, possibly after repeated failures, that they need to submit to the game's logic they will discover the path to the "happier ending:" acknowledging Encyclopedia's desire, despite/because of her danger, and begging Anni to fuck her. By allowing Encyclopedia to submit to her desire to get off on her own imminent death, the player is rewarded with a surprise ending in which it is revealed that Encyclopedia has a previously undisclosed "condition" of vagina dentata, which she uses to "CHOMP CHOMP" Anni's arm off, leaving Anni "incapacitated by blood loss" and allowing Encyclopedia to escape.

The player must learn to accept the game's lesson of submission and through it learn the power in that role. In this ending, Encyclopedia's "hungry pussy" is revealed to be literally hungry for flesh. Devouring the penetrating body with her insatiable desire allows Encyclopedia to claim power in her relationship through her role as receptive and submissive sexual partner. While Anni continues to occupy the seemingly dominant role as penetrator, the power that Encyclopedia finds in her sexual submission in this ending is foreshadowed before the reveal of her vagina dentata in the change in language used once the player pursues sex instead of escape. Until this point, Anni has been characterized as the one who is "hungry" for Encyclopedia, but now Encyclopedia "moan[s] with hunger at the sight of [Anni's fist]." In the lead up to this scene, Encyclopedia is also frequently called a pig both by Anni and by the narration, but in this scene of consummation it is Anni who has a "grinny grin grin." The coming reversal of power is thus subtly signalled by this use of language even as Encyclopedia is begging to be fucked. The new power relation established between Encyclopedia and Anni in the wake of the prior relationship's destruction is vital to the transformational power of Encyclopedia's submission.

There are some ways that this ending does seem to back away from some of the radical potential of the narrative, as the power relationship is simply reversed: submission becomes

powerful, domination becomes weak, and Encyclopedia's willingness to experience her own death as pleasurable turns out not to have been the sole motivation behind her actions but instead a method to escape. This ending in which Encyclopedia kills Anni also fails in some ways to follow through on the game's potential to challenge expectations of gameplay: it allows the player to get a sense of satisfaction from having "beaten" the game—the method for winning may be an unexpected one, but there is still a way to win in the end; to defeat the murderous Anni and to escape from Encyclopedia's predicament. However, the potential for submission to create new relations can also be viewed as part of the power of negativity and it is here that Muñoz's arguments become particularly relevant.

Muñoz argues for the vital importance of the transformational and productive power of queer relations. Muñoz's attention to "moments of queer relational bliss . . . as having the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life" (*Cruising Utopia* 25) emphasizes the productivity in Muñoz's theory, and offers a possibility for reading *Encyclopedia Fuckme* as being about a "rewriting" of the relationship between Encyclopedia and Anni. In the case of the vagina dentata ending, the actual result of a simple flip in power between Encyclopedia and Anni's relationship may be in some ways unsatisfying, but it is a demonstration of the space and possibility for change opened up through their interactions. The power disruption created in "radical negativity . . . becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 13). Acknowledging the potential for change is vital in order to avoid replicating the same norms that have been challenged and the transformative queer potential of *Encyclopedia Fuckme* is thus not found in the realization of Encyclopedia's successful defeat of Anni, but in the potential for the rewriting of their relationship.

*Encyclopedia Fuckme* embraces submission as an underappreciated mode of queer survival and "a revolutionary statement of pure opposition that does not rely upon the liberal gesture of defiance but accesses another lexicon of power and speaks another language of refusal" (Halberstam 139). It is this submission to her own approaching death that reveals the potential for changing the deadly power structure Encyclopedia is caught up in, and the player is invited to inhabit the role of pleasurable submission with Encyclopedia, if only they are willing to relinquish their own expectations of mastery and agency within the structure of the game world. Through the limitation of player choices, subverting expectations of game design, *EFM* offers the player a lesson in the power and pleasure that can come from accepting and even



eroticizing submission as a survival strategy when power is constraining you. Encyclopedia's willingness to destroy herself can be seen as a radical statement in the context of a social order that prioritizes masculinized ideals of dominating power, and the ending which flips this power dynamic reveals alternate possibilities that can flourish in the disruption caused by this strategy. As Encyclopedia allows herself to enjoy the possibility of her own annihilation, there is a possibility for productivity in the changing of her relationship with Anni that leads the way to conceptualizations of queer failure that allow for new modes of relationality, modes which are further explored in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*.

## 1.2: Utopian Apocalypse in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*

*Queers in Love at the End of the World (QiL)*, a 2013 Twine game created by Anna Anthropy and available for free on her website, explores queer love in the face of an unspecified apocalypse. The game opens with these lines: "In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together. You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do," and a 10 second timer begins to count down. The player, addressed only as "you," is then able to choose how to interact with their lover, "her," in those ten seconds before "everything is wiped away." The branching paths of the 10 second game focus on intimate interactions between lovers in the final seconds before apocalypse, and the structure as well as the content of the interactive narrative explore negativity, loss, death, and failure. Expanding on the themes explored in *Encyclopedia Fuckme*, in which player choice is constrained in an erotic submissive relationship, player choice here is constrained by cyclical repetition of societal destruction. Like *EFM*, *QiL* explores the power of refusing oppressive social structures, and *QiL* explores further the potential for radical queer utopian relationality even in, and perhaps because of, this apocalyptic collapse.

*QiL* is a queer story not only because of the positioning of the titular lovers as queer through the game's title, but also because of its apocalyptic setting that is focused particularly on the destruction of social systems and norms. Video games often represent the apocalypse (*The Last of Us*, *Far Cry New Dawn*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *DayZ*, among many others), which, as in literature or film, can be a method for exploring cultural anxieties, as in McClancy's analysis of the *Fallout* game series which she understands as exploring and challenging Cold-war revival technological anxieties. However, game apocalypse settings can also be "an excuse to create a world filled with nothing but repetitive violence against monsters, without any annoying

interruption by law enforcement or other social constraints,” as Poole argues particularly about *DayZ* as an example of the popular zombie-survival genre of video games. Rather than creating an environment for “nothing but repetitive violence against monsters,” the end of social institutions in *QiL* allows for freedom from social oppression, reflecting Halberstam’s call for “refusing the game” that subjects queers to oppression.

Susan Stryker discusses the desire to destroy oppressive social institutions from an explicitly trans perspective in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix:” she compares transsexual people to Frankenstein’s monster, not only because of how we are viewed as monstrous and rejected by much of society, but also in the affect that she feels in response to this, which she calls transgender rage (241). This rage is “direct[ed] against the conditions in which I [Stryker] must struggle to exist” (238). *QiL* reflects a similar rejection of and desire to destroy cis-normative hegemonic society in several of the narrative paths:

Let the houses burn, the cities, and all the countries, and all the governments. They never sheltered you. The only shelter you found was in these arms, in this touch. Let the end of the world come. You're home.

This desire to let the world burn reflects what Stryker relates to in Frankenstein’s monster’s mission to destroy everything Frankenstein loves: “Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. . . . It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival” (243). Stryker and the protagonist of *QiL* find their queerness and transness to be rejected by social structures and thus celebrate the rejection and destruction of these structures in order to survive as trans subjects.

The rage in *QiL* is directed at “at cops, at warmakers, at politicians, at colonialists, at parents, at everyone who ever hurt you, who made you less free.” In the narrative branch in which this quotation is found, the player character and her lover are laughing at these people who represent oppressive social institutions. This laughter is a celebration of the joy found in the freedom at the end of these systems. Another branch again suggests that the end of these systems is funny, as the player character and her lover laugh together: “I mean, it’s pretty fucking funny,” offers the narrator, and the next passage is a set of choices that are all set-ups to jokes. No matter which joke the player chooses the answer will be: “Who gives a shit? There's no more capital, no more cops, and no more roads. That's the punchline.” The player character’s celebration of the end of the world echoes Stryker’s statement that instead of mourning the loss of company of

people who reject her womanhood as a trans woman, she instead “roar[s] gleefully away from it like a Harley-straddling, dildo-packing leatherdyke from Hell” (239).

The destructive force in *QiL* is reinforced through the mechanic of the ten second timer. The 10 second time limit of *QiL* draws the player into the experience of this disruption of time, as in one playthrough it is only able to get through a fraction of the overall choices available. It is often not even possible to finish reading the text of one narrative branch before it is wiped away as the timer reaches zero, making restarting again and again necessary in order to completely read any single narrative branch—some of which eventually end in a dead-end passage with no links to follow, and some of which become loops—or to explore any different narrative branches. While *Encyclopedia Fuckme* explores the conventions of player choice by making choices limited and ineffective, the choices in *QiL* in effect become constrained by their effusiveness. The choices are overwhelming given the extremely short time limit, leaving the sense that there is no way to make meaningful choices and that there will never be enough time for all of them.

In order to experience the game, the player is forced to repeat again and again not only the act of selecting sometimes the same passages but also experiencing the end of the world as a timer in the top left relentlessly counts down, erasing onscreen text as soon as it reaches zero, replacing it with the text “everything is wiped away” and the options to select the afterword or to restart. The player will eventually discover that there is no way to alter the ending – everything is inevitably wiped away regardless of player actions. While a player used to a more standard video game narrative might expect to be able to heroically save the world, or at the very least alter its fate somehow, these expectations are completely subverted by making the player powerless to make these kinds of changes. The only control the player has is in choosing their interactions with their lover in these final ten seconds.

This ending demonstrates one of the ways that this game uses the mechanics of Twine to draw the player into the experience of the story: rather than simply stating or describing that everything is wiped away, *QiL* wipes away text that the player is likely still in the process of reading. The wiping away of the text creates a feeling of urgency and reinforces the message conveyed by the words. The inability of words alone to adequately capture queer experience is a theme throughout the narrative: in one interaction between the lovers, the narrator says that “Language is over, the only language remaining is the one that the two of you have been inventing, writing on each other's skin with touch and with teeth.” Rather than words, the

language that the lovers find power in is the romantic and sexual expression of a queer bond between them through physical touch.

This lack of adequate expression through language is also revealed through repetition, as in one passage where the player character repeats “over and over, ‘I love you,’ till the words lose meaning, and all that’s left is the feeling.” In order to see this passage, the player must select to tell the lover “I love you” twice in a row, and so the player’s actions mimic and highlight the description of repetition in the narrative. There are several branches in *QiL* that involve repetitive gestures like this, such as a branch in which the player character calls out “Yes” repeatedly in response to her lover’s touch. When the player selects one “Yes!” it is replaced by another, repeating three times before the final “Yes!” becomes unclickable, staying displayed until “everything is wiped away” and the player again has the option of repetition in restarting the entire narrative. This repetition until meaning is lost and “all that’s left is the feeling” echoes a queer desire to reach the moment where we can break free from the social order that constrains us all to certain subject positions. This moment of freedom comes for the lovers through their queer love in apocalypse.

Words and language are connected explicitly to structures of oppression in one narrative branch of *QiL*:

The last history of the world will be written on your bodies, *not on anything so crude as paper, not in anything as abstract as words*. It will not be a history of empires, of borders, of kings and killers. It will be a history of your struggle to reclaim your bodies, your lives, your desires, yourselves.

This passage aligns “words” and “paper” with “kings” and “killers” in opposition to the player character and her lover’s “lives,” “desires,” and selves. The irony is that this story about the violence of words and language is conveyed in Twine as a word-based medium. As is typical of games made in Twine, the narrative of *QiL* is conveyed almost entirely through plain text, in this case grey on a black background, with blue text representing clickable segments that will take the player to a new screen. Conveying this message through Twine as a language-based medium is potentially productive, as it reveals a simultaneous investment in and rejection of the systems of language. Working within the oppressive systems towards their own destruction reflects the work the game itself and other Twine games are doing within game culture: taking its own language and systems and turning them to different ends. As in the subversion of choice in

*Encyclopedia Fuckme*, this practice can be interpreted as reflecting a disidentification with both language and game norms, as outlined by Muñoz as a “recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy” (*Disidentifications* 39). The disidentificatory use of language is one strategy among others that the queers in love use to understand and survive their hostile world.

While any single playthrough of *QiL* can be experienced as relatively linear, the repeated experience of diverging paths that sometimes repeat and loop back on each other creates what Claudio Lo calls a “polytemporal understanding of the game” (188). Lo connects this polytemporality to Muñoz’s argument that “queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds’ mapping of space” (Muñoz qtd. in Lo 191), and I would add Muñoz’s remark that “Queerness’ time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (25). The cyclical, repetitive structure of the game can also be interpreted as an essential element in disrupting the “temporal stranglehold of straight time” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 32). The utopia in *QiL* is reached only in fleeting moments before the end of everything, and in order to experience these moments of utopia for more than a few brief seconds the player must repeat the experience again and again, never being allowed to rest on the resolution of queer utopia. As in Muñoz: “Queerness is an ideality . . . We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). This sense of never quite touching queerness is captured in the endless repetition of 10 second gameplay in order to experience more branches and depth in the narrative of *QiL*. There is always something more to discover and yet it’s never quite enough to change the ending.

This structure forces the player to repeatedly experience failure in order to explore the narrative. Given that the only possible outcome here is not only death of the player character but the presumed destruction of the world, this leaves the player looking for satisfaction in routes other than “winning” through saving the world, as might be expected in a video game narrative. In his analysis of *Mass Effect*, for example, Jordan Youngblood argues that the queerness in the game series only “counts” within the game narrative as long as it can be exploited for success through military conquest in the galaxy-saving narrative. The success to be found in *QiL* is not in employing queer and trans bodies to fight the apocalypse, but in experiencing moments of connection in the failure of systems; what Halberstam might call “revel[ing] in and cleav[ing] to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (Halberstam, 187), and what Muñoz might call

“feeling queerness’s pull” in moments of ecstasy (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 185). The utopia of queerness is always just out of reach but approaching “like a crashing wave of potentiality” (185).

Reflecting also Muñoz’s conceptualization of communality as essential to queerness, *QiL* is invested in strategies beyond allowing queer subjects to reject norms that have been imposed on them, continuing by reconstructing their subjectivities to match their own desires. The player character’s lover “loves you the way you want to be loved. Here in the end, you are able to experience your body not the ways they insist you do, but as you really are.” This seeing and experiencing of the true self is shared between the player character and her lover, as “You see her - you really see her. Free of construction, artifice or coolness, she allows you to witness her unprotected and vulnerable. It is important, at the end, that someone do, that someone acknowledge her and accept her as she truly is.” Together, the player character and her lover experience what they see as the “true” versions of themselves that they are unable to find in participation in normative social structures.

Despite the fact that “*everything* is wiped away” (emphasis added), the narrative is focused on the positive feelings and interactions that emerge between the player character and her lover even in these final moments of catastrophe. Many of the narrative branches involve affirmation of the player character’s feelings, needs, and desires: “The way you feel in your belly—fear, pleasure, need, lust—is real.” This affirmation of feelings reflects also Halberstam’s approach to failure, in which rejection of normative understandings of success and failure offer “more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2). The connection that is affirmed between the queer lovers in this apocalypse affirms a need for an understanding of queer failure that allows also for new utopian modes of sociality. In this sense, despite focusing on an apocalypse, *QiL* can be read as a queerly utopian exploration of failure, through its celebration of the destruction of social systems and even the world. The “essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (Muñoz in Caserio et al., 825) is reflected even in the destruction of *QiL*. The focus of the narrative is on interactions between lovers, particularly highlighted in the afterword: an image of white text, stylized to look like dripping paint, saying “WHEN WE HAVE EACH OTHER WE HAVE EVERYTHING.” This image reminds the player that, for these lovers, finding connection in each other is worth infinitely more than all the oppressive institutions that are destroyed along the way.

Ultimately the failure that this story celebrates is the failure of institutions, which allows for the success of queer love and the discovery of affirmation and safety. Alongside the strategy of disidentification with language and game conventions and the celebration of social destruction employed as queer strategies in *QiL*, there is also a complementary strategy of investment in alternatives to the systems that are destroyed. The bond between the titular lovers is queer in its “*simultaneous* adhesion and dehiscence, a centripetal pull toward the social and a radical centrifugal drive away from it” (Weiner and Young 236). *QiL* shows how queer subjects wrestle with negativity and utopia simultaneously as coexisting strategies for survival in a hostile world. Even as the characters in *QiL* celebrate the literal lack of future for its destruction of oppressive systems, they also find meaning within this destruction through a utopian model of love. The player is drawn into the endless cycle of hope and disappointment, and through it the always approaching horizon of queer futurity “here at the end.” In every repeated ending of *QiL* there is also a constant option to “Restart,” to try again; even though it won’t change the outcome, there is always something new to discover in the bond between the lovers.

In this chapter I have first investigated how *EFM* situates masochism as a queer resistance strategy with the potential to challenge and reform social norms, and then continued by arguing that *QiL* takes this rejection of social norms to its extreme in apocalyptic destruction of society. Both games use strategies of disidentification with game conventions to tie these queer strategies to the player’s experience of agency within the games, and, while the surprise ending is the main site of exploration for the transformative potential of these strategies in *EFM*, they are explored throughout the lovers’ interactions in repeated playthroughs of *QiL*. *QiL* is particularly invested in queer models of relationality as an alternative to the systems that are destroyed. The transformative potential of this mode of queerness and how it can be extended to players through their interactions with the games is further explored in the game case studies I discuss in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2. Imagining Differently: Disidentification and Utopian Imaginings in *With Those We Love Alive* and *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*

In this section I explore queer survival strategies in the pieces *With Those We Love Alive* (*WTWLA*) by Porpentine Charity Heartscape and *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy* (*QTMIPF*) by ira prince. Heartscape is one of Twine's better-known creators, with her work "howling dogs" in particular receiving attention in game circles (k 7-8). Many of her games explore queer and trans aesthetics and politics of negativity, failure and "trash," and she often experiments with Twine mechanics to tell these stories. I have chosen to discuss *With Those We Love Alive* because it is a powerful example of the way that Heartscape's work engages the player in the pain of living in an unjust world, while providing a path for survival and the possibility of resistance and change. It is particularly interesting for the way that it engages the player in these strategies through asking them to interact with their own body while playing, challenging the boundaries of the game space and providing instruction in resistance strategies for queer and trans subjects.

I continue from Heartscape's piece to prince's *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*, which offers a reimagining of the idea of a video game "power fantasy" to be about the power of minoritized queer subjects to take care of themselves and their communities. While *WTWLA* invites players to engage with their own bodies as individual survival strategies and imagines the possibility for communal relationality, *QTMIPF* more explicitly enacts the vision of utopian relationality represented within it through the circulation of the game itself within queer and trans communities as a tool for queer survival. *QTMIPF* has received relatively little coverage outside of its circulation within queer and trans communities and I bring attention to it last in order to show how the visions of transformative queer relationality created within these pieces affect the communities described within the games and how the games work to bring about some of the queer relationality they describe in their texts.

### **2.1: Queer Survival in *With Those We Love Alive***

In the Twine game *With Those We Love Alive* (*WTWLA*), Porpentine Charity Heartscape uses vivid language to describe a fantasy world that is both darkly beautiful and repulsive and horrifying. The player character is summoned into the service of a monstrous Empress to make magical artifacts for her, free in the time between these tasks to explore a dystopian landscape.



Eventually, the player character's childhood friend arrives at the palace, and together they escape the palace, ending with their companionship in an undetermined future together. The narrative is deeply invested in exploring violence at the heart of social institutions, not shying away from implicating the player character, and through her the player, in this violence, while also offering possibilities for methods of resistance to these structures. I begin by describing how the player character's place in the violent society described in *WTWLA* reflects the need for queer strategies of survival that are not always overt resistance. The player character employs strategies for her own survival through a quiet connection to her body, a strategy which is also extended to the player through game mechanics that invite them to engage with their own real-world body. I then argue that the game's ending represents a moment of ecstasy that leads to pursuing a queer utopian vision, allowing the player character to see alternatives to the system of violence she is trapped within.

The society depicted in *WTWLA* is a stifling, restrictive one, and the player's choices within the game are likewise quite restricted. Near the beginning of the game, after a prologue with instructions and a content warning, as well as a character creation section which I will discuss in more detail in the following paragraphs, the game hails the player: "you have been summoned." The player has no choice but to follow this summons to serve the Empress as her "artificer," living in the palace and creating increasingly intimate items for her from the remains of her enemies. The main component of the game is a series of text pages or "rooms" that the player can explore mostly at their leisure, with time and thus the story progressing when the player chooses to sleep in the player character's chambers in the palace. These rooms are composed mostly of white text on colour-gradient backgrounds that occasionally shift colours to reflect changes in mood. The text is accompanied by loops of ambient, lyric-less electronic music, composed by Brenda Neotonomie, which shifts along with the background colours. Clickable text is indicated with purple (text that will change when clicked) and pink (text that will move the narrative to another page), as is explained to the player in the opening page. The locations represented by these text pages are: in the palace: your chambers, the garden, the lake, your workshop, the throne room, and the balcony; in the city: the canal, the streets, the temple, and the "dream distillery." Outside the city, as you can see from the balcony, there is only "death jungle" and "ashen wasteland" making the boundaries of the space clear and seemingly inescapable. While the player can visit and revisit the various locations represented by these text

rooms at their leisure, and it may at first seem like a lot to explore, the restrictions on this seeming freedom become quickly apparent.

As time passes, marked by sleeping, the player realizes that the spaces they can explore don't change much, and they become familiar and repetitive. Sometimes, it will take several sleeps before anything in the game world changes at all, so the player may wander around the same spaces repeatedly looking for something new. Sometimes small details will change, encouraging an attention to spaces that the player has visited repeatedly, rather than skipping them or passing through them quickly (though that is still an option available to the player). One of these details that changes over time is that "dead people" appear in strange places. It's unclear at first whether the bodies are real, but since nobody except the player character seems to notice them, they may be metaphorical or hallucinations rather than real bodies. Narratively, they convey a sense of dread and remind the player of the death undergirding the society the player character lives in, while mechanically these short, matter-of-fact lines ("A dead person is in the trees," "A dead person is under the table," etc.) appearing in familiar places encourage the player to slow down while reading text they have already read, reinforcing the sense of monotonous dread and constrained space.

The player character's lack of reaction to the dead people that appear throughout the familiar spaces suggests that she is familiar, if not comfortable, with the ominous setting of her world. Similarly, she doesn't offer any particular reaction to witnessing the poverty and pain in the city: "Urchins draw lines in the dust, doing their rituals of luck against starvation and luck against police brutality." Exploring the city offers several of these reminders of the violence that structures this society, and the player character's relationship to this violence is further explored through the dream distillery, which has a "gruesome pull" for her. At the dream distillery the player can choose to "take a sip" from the dream liquid distilled from "pale, shriveled humans [who] sleep forever on the floor." Every day, the liquid will have a different color and description: "A bouquet of fight or flight, a bold flavor of lust, and an aftertaste of surveillance," or "A bouquet of agoraphobia, a powerful flavor of adoration, and an aftertaste of ostracism," for example. While this provides some novelty in an otherwise repetitive world, it is a morbid entertainment, as the dreams are being harvested at the expense of the humans who sustain them. The "gruesome pull" of the dream distillery highlights the player character's implication in this system of harm, which is seemingly despite, but perhaps actually because of, the way this system

has harmed her as well. It is revealed after several sleep cycles that the player character cannot dream because when she was a child her mother fed her a potion which burned all her dreams up at once in order to avoid having them harvested for the rich. The player character knows intimately how painful this system is, but her trauma becomes a cycle as her own experience losing her dreams leads her to “pour endless things into the dark left by your [her] dreamlessness.” Through the structure of the city, the player is tempted into doing the same thing, as the dream distillery is the only location that consistently offers new content in the repetitive rhythm of sleeping and exploring. Like the player character, the player becomes implicated in harmful systems, and reminded of how their participation in society involves participation in these systems.

The workers at the distillery will occasionally offer remarks that relate this violence more clearly to real world violence: “These people are criminals. We are reclaiming their wasted potential,” one comment tells the player character. This highlights the way that people participating in this system justify their own implication in its violence and also makes a reference to the real-world oppressive criminal “justice” system. It is clear in this moment that while the society depicted in *WTWLA* might seem monstrous and alien to us in some ways, the violence it depicts has much in common with the violence of our reality.

The violence necessary to participate in society is again the focus in a section where the Empress’s offspring, “princess spores,” spawn and her subjects celebrate by killing the mewling, helpless spores. Upon encountering this event, the player character is offered a choice without explanation: “are you part of the world, one with others, a person,” or “alone and apart?” Choosing to be part of the world leads the player character to mercilessly stomp on and crush the crying spores along with the drunken revelry of the other citizens, while choosing to be “alone and apart” means that she will let them be. This choice to be “alone and apart,” and thus not to participate in the killing of the princess spores, can be seen as a queer mode of refusal that allows the player character to resist the “viability of the social” (Edelman 3); a social which demands violence. Emily Short similarly interprets *WTWLA* as a warning on the dangers of participation in sociality:

[in the game,] participating in community and joining in connection with other humans is inextricable from participating in systemic violence and oppression. It is only possible to

retain one's empathy and the ability to exercise individual conscience if one at the same time remains alone and capitulates in no shared ethos at all.

Short's interpretation of the game, or an interpretation of the game using Edelman, importantly highlights the enormity of the violence represented, but what it misses is the possibilities for survival and resistance that are also explored within the game.

The persistent and familiarized violence underpinning this society, as well as how the player character survives it, comes into sharp focus when the player character must join the Empress's entourage as she goes human hunting: the background changes from the soft gradient of blue and purple to an almost blood-like dark pinky-red and purple, and the music shifts to a beat with pounding intensity. These aural and visual changes reflect the intensity of the experience described by the text: "At the rear of the procession you listen to the always weapons and the sometimes screams," accompanied by "the smell of burnt <leaves>/<vines>/<sap>/<flesh>."<sup>1</sup> The human hunting is a violent rupture in the everyday serenity of palace life, but it is not out of place: the whole society has been built on violence, and this custom is a symptom of the same pervasive violence seen throughout the city as the player explores. The responsibility of society for this violence is highlighted as well: the human hunt is "A custom that persists because people are scared that if they question the custom they will fall victim to the intense cruelty of the custom, which persists because they <fail> to question it." The cyclical nature of power reproducing itself is clear in the repetition in the sentence, both starting and ending with "a custom that [/which] persists because." The player character is not exempt from this harmful pattern of inaction, and neither is the player, as they do not (and cannot) do anything to outwardly resist it.

The player character is also clearly harmed and traumatized by this violence as she watches others like herself be hunted for sport: she has a trauma-response of suicidal ideation, represented by a "thought loop" with cycling text of ways to die: "<letting go> / <falling into the sky> / <into the jungle> / <into the sea> / <riding into the storm> / <shredded by gravel> / <crashing> / <breaking apart> / <screaming>." The only clickable text on the screen cycles

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1. I use triangular brackets here to indicate clickable text, and forward slashes to indicate the text that replaces the previous text when clicked.

through these options again and again, drawing the player into the repetitive and constricting experience of this trauma, until eventually the option to “break the loop” comes up. After clicking to “break the loop,” the player is asked to engage with this experience through their own body by drawing “a thought loop” on their body. Likewise, the player character grounds herself in her body to break her loop of suicidal ideation: “You lean back against the engine and close your eyes and let it drown out the <screams>/noise.” The sigil drawing has the potential to bring the player back into their body in a ritual, like the calming ritual the player character enacts by leaning on the engine of the Empresses flier. I interpret this relationship to the body as resistance strategy in the face of trauma.

In describing disidentification, Muñoz points out that it is not always a viable resistance strategy, and that minoritized subjects will sometimes need to be more, or less, explicitly resistant to social structures in order to “hope to survive a hostile public sphere” (*Disidentifications* 5). For a time, the player character’s only option for survival in this society whose systems enact violence against others and against herself is through outwardly “follow[ing] a conformist path” (5), but her private, quiet relationship with her own body and internal sense of being at odds with the society she lives and works within forms the basis for future strategies that employ more outward resistance. The player character’s internal sense of out of placeness, or a failure to properly relate to the “phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 4), leads to these practices of withdrawal for survival at times, and disidentification at others when possible. In the opening of the game, for example, the player is asked to choose attributes (a birth month, “element,” and eye colour) that determine the player character’s name: “When you came of age, your parents used this information to give you a name, running their fingers along the indexes of a book, as by custom,” but “in the morning when they were gone to work, you found the other book, and you held a different name inside.” Choosing a name from “the other book” is a fairly clear indicator of the player character’s transness (as are the “precious” “estroglyphs and spiroglyphs” in a chest under her bed), and in this moment it is also clear how her transness forces her, but also allows her, to develop a sense of self separated from the customs of society. This failure to be properly incorporated into the public sphere is vital to the experience of and political possibility of queerness, and as is clear in this case, transness. The specific experience of self-naming is a resistance strategy that makes use of gendered naming conventions and disidentifies with them by reforming them to affirm

trans subjects who are misrecognized by the names given to them. As queers in general are not always properly interpellated in heterosexist mandates because of the desire for a “bad object,” and as queers of colour can desire a white beauty ideal but “with a difference” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 15), trans subjects have these moments of collision with the system that impede their proper interpellation into it and create space for resistance at varying levels of overtness.

For the player character of *WTWLA*, this moment of choosing her own name is a mode of disidentification with gendered structures that have failed to properly interpellate her through repurposing the power of naming to affirm her transgender identity. As she is called to serve the empress, her resistance to her society is often forced to become less overt in order to protect herself from violence, but she continues to enact strategies to survive through her relationship to her body, in part by modifying it with fantasy-analogue hormones. Every seven sleeps, the player will be reminded: “you need to <reapply hormones.>” The process itself is simple: the player clicks “reapply hormones,” and “You take an estroglyph and spiroglyph from the chest and press them to your thigh. They sink through the skin and glow softly under the surface, intelligent veins of blue and white.” This connection to the body (through the thighs and skin, and through presumably body-altering hormones) becomes a ritual that marks the passing of time every seven sleeps. Meditative body-based practices often seem to be the places of most comfort for the player character, such as when her friend Sedina paints her nails. The player is drawn into the ritual as they click the text representing each nail one by one. “the first nail,” “the second nail,” and so on, to ten. “The ritual is soothing.” It seems appropriate that in a piece so focused on the violence enacted on bodies, and the ways they can resist, that the player’s body is also drawn into this system, here through the meditative clicking of the nails one by one, and in other parts of the game through breathing exercises.

The player can visit a lake on the palace grounds at any time, where there is the option to meditate. Clicking on “Do your meditations” will offer the instruction “Take a deep breath.” The player then must click “I am holding my breath,” which will erase the text and pause for several seconds before the text “Exhale” appears. The player can continue the breathing ritual for as many or as few repetitions as they like. The pauses in the text and the use of the pronoun “I” invite the player to respond to the prompts and participate in the ritual as the player character does and this participation in a slow meditative process allows the player time to reflect on their

experiences. While the player character uses these strategies to quietly survive her society, they involve the player in a strategy that explicitly disidentifies with normative game mechanics. Ian Bryce Jones discusses this aspect of *WTWLA* as a radical challenge to the typical structure of digital games, which usually operate based on the assumption that the computer will monitor the player's behaviour and choices extensively and base outcomes on the behaviours it "perceives." He describes how *With Those We Love Alive* instead incorporates mechanics that rely on trust between the player and the game narrative, by asking them to complete tasks that cannot be monitored, such as these meditative breathing exercises and the drawing of sigils on the player's body. For Jones, this challenges the acceptance and even celebration of increasing surveillance in digital games (as exemplified by games such as WiiFit, which monitor the player's weight and movements, or Pokemon Go, which uses a phone's GPS to track the player's location). *WTWLA* instead disidentifies with these normative gaming practices, reforming expectations of surveillance to create a possible space for a player to engage with their own body knowing that nothing obligates them to do so. This practice creates a trusting and consensual relationship between the player and the game and gives the player a map for understanding their own relationship to their real-world body in a violent society.

Just as the player character's solace in a repressive world comes through these moments of reflection, they also offer the player more freedom of choice, not through the more typically expected game choices of which in-game text/images/buttons to click, but through how the player chooses to engage with their own body while playing. Along with the breathing exercise, at moments of significance in the story, the player is asked to draw "sigils" on their own skin. There is no direction as to what these sigils should look like or where on their body the player should draw them, leaving the sigils very open to interpretation. After the choice to kill or spare the princess spores, for example, the player is directed to draw the sigil of "what you feel," reminding them to check in about how this game experience has affected them and to inscribe their participation or avoidance on their own body. Later, after delivering a letter in which the player character desperately tries to talk her friend Sedina out of attempting to assassinate the Empress, the player is asked to draw a sigil "of influencing this outcome." As the player might suspect, given that their choices of what to write in the letter are very limited, these choices don't actually seem to be able to "influence this outcome" in any way, beyond, crucially, how the player feels about it and how they express those feelings on their own body. The breathing

meditations and the direction to draw sigils on their own body invite the player to practice the same strategies practiced by the player character for surviving in a hostile world, reminding them to take care to build resilience in restrictive systems, possibly leading to the ability to more overtly resist them in the future. The player character's participation in her violent society can thus be understood not simply as a failure to be properly subversive: in this case, it is necessary for her survival until she is able to find more overt methods of resistance: "power is wounded by anything that refuses to be destroyed by it," according to the game text after Sedina's assassination attempt, marking as resistance not only Sedina's violent rebellion but also the survival of the player character in a system that aims to do her harm.

While the player character is usually alone within the game world as she practices a relationship with her body for her survival, these same practices have become nurturing and communal in the game's circulation. The "with those we love alive" tags on Tumblr and Twitter include dozens of posts from people sharing photos of the sigils they drew on their bodies while playing, showcasing the way that the game's call for player engagement has been taken up within the communities in which it circulates. The sharing of these photos reveals methods through which single-player games can not only depict but also enact modes of queer relationality, as *WTWLA* affects player bodies and forms spaces for game experience to circulate outside the game itself.

It is important here to note that most of the photos posted by players appear to be from white players, highlighting the possible issue that, similar to how I noted the unmarked race of the player character in Anna Anthropy's *EFM*, the lack of specific racial analysis or markers in *WTWLA* may invite participation particularly from white players as the unquestioned default. The resistance strategies used within it can certainly be used by racialized players, and in fact reflect strategies that in Muñoz's analysis are drawn specifically from queers of colour, but an attention to which players are particularly called to participate in the game's system is important to avoid replicating some systems of violent exclusion while fighting against others.

Within the game, the body rituals practiced by the player character allow her to survive for a time, but they are not enough to allow her to flourish. The ending of the game explores a different and more overt mode of queer resistance that I read as showcasing the vital importance of imagining queer utopian futures, as explored by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*. Finally, after repeated cycles of sleeping, exploring, and making items for the Empress while building quiet



survival strategies, this cycle is interrupted when the player character's childhood friend Sedina arrives at the palace. The player character is reminded of the importance of this connection: "You remember how good it felt to hate the world together." This represents a moment of disruption that allows the player character to imagine different possibilities for resistance to the structures that sustain the violence in the story, and highlights how connection can be formed among marginalized people through their resistance to the system that oppresses them and how these connections can also enable that resistance.

This rupture in the player character's relationship to her position in society crystallizes in an experience when she and Sedina do fantasy drugs (ectoplasm) together. When the ectoplasm hits the player character's skin, the background changes color to a vibrant green and blue gradient that has not yet appeared in the game, a shift in perspective, and the music takes on an ethereal glow. "You feel radiant," and in this radiance, the player character runs into the garden and experiences a moment of rapture: "You feel the grass growing over your face. Feel yourself sinking into the earth. Soft, warm, like the roots are veins, red brown dark, fertile, rich, fecund, churning with life." She has "stepp[ed] out of the linearity of straight time" to experience a "greater openness to the world" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25). This openness to the world is central to Muñoz's understanding of queerness as potentiality and in *WTWLA* the player character experiences this openness through her connections to her friend, and to the non-human plant beings with whom she shares her life. Relationality between humans and between humans and non-human beings is vital to the queer utopian vision presented here. The roots become veins, connecting the player character's body to the earth. It is not a pure, uncomplicated moment but a painful one as well: the player character "suffer[s] with the earth," as "You think about your long life of fear. About waking up as a husk tomorrow. You clutch at the grass. It twists and tears in your hands and the dew feels like blood." In this moment of rupture from her daily life, the player character finally allows herself to feel the pain in the life she has been trapped in, and with that comes the possibility of escaping it: "Like being dragged out of a deep pit where you've lived so long in isolation you no longer had any reference point, but now that you've seen the light and tasted clean air, you'd fight like a rabid animal to stay free."

Through building connections with Sedina and with the non-human plant world that surrounds her, the player character is shocked out of the helplessness and apathy of a "straight time" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25) that only allows for harmful normative systems. When the

player character falls asleep in the grass after this experience it is the first time throughout the narrative that a day passes without the player repeating the pattern of going to the chambers in the palace and clicking on “Sleep.” The interruption in the crushing monotony of the player character’s routine in the palace is thus reflected in the interruption of the player’s experience of the game’s routine. “Straight time,” a time that tells us “that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (22), is represented here through the endless repetition of daily work and sleep cycles. As Muñoz notes, this is not to say that the “here and now” can’t be a site for imagining utopian futurity—and it is actually essential to his analysis that utopian moments exist in the quotidian (22)—but that the conceptualizations of present and future available in straight time do not allow for imagination beyond the continuation of majoritarian heterosexual patterns. While *QiL* uses repetition of social destruction and a focus on the “here and now” of the lover’s arms to rupture straight time’s understanding of the here and now, *WTWLA* signals possibilities to reimagine queer relationships through a disruption of cyclical time structures that affirm repressive power.

This moment of interruption triggers a change in the player character that allows her to imagine the possibility for a different future, but it is not until Sedina attempts to assassinate the Empress that this possibility becomes more concrete. Sedina and the player character depend on each other to fight against the violent system they live within, and this challenges the classic individualistic fantasy of heroic progression in video games (a narrative which I discuss in more detail in the following section on *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*). Triggered by Sedina’s assassination attempt, the game’s repetitive cycle of sleep and work within a violent system finally comes to an end, not triggered through the player’s heroic actions alone, but through her relationship with another person. Without her relationship with Sedina and the moments of “queer relational bliss” it facilitates, the player character would not have had the paradigm shift that triggers her next actions: freeing Sedina from prison, after which they escape the palace together.

The player character is spurred to action by her care for Sedina and uses the motivation provided by this relationship to return to her workshop and create a “thing” that fights the Empress instead of serving her. Until now the workshop has been used to make items for the Empress’s use, and though the space is the same as it has always been, the player character is now able to disidentify with the creative power of the tools she has previously used in the service

of the Empress to redeploy this power for her own survival and resistance. The game ends with Sedina and the player character resting in a faraway hotel, looking towards a mysterious but certainly changed future, changed because they are together in it.

Sedina and the player character depend on each other and it is through this relationship that they are able to imagine rewriting the “map of everyday life” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 25) to find new ways of relating to each other and their society. *WTWLA* offers a map for resistance within social violence, at first through withdrawing into the body and finally through a vision of relationality which allows for a utopian imagining of other possible futures. These strategies are extended to the player as well through the invitation to engage in rituals of body connection and to build connections outside the game space through the online circulation of player sigil drawings, itself a disidentificatory strategy that reworks the structure of games as surveilling the player. An analysis using Muñoz allows us to understand the strategies that allow the player character to survive trauma and eventually break free from the systems that perpetuate it. In the next section, I investigate how similar strategies of resistance are explored and shared among communities in my final case study.

## **2.2: Utopian Futures in *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy***

*Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy (QTMIPF)*, a twine game by ira prince,<sup>2</sup> offers players a vision of queer trans mentally ill strategies to survive and thrive in the world, as it presents a scenario in which the player character wakes up to find their body replaced by a “mecha suit” that can do fantastic things. The player character can use this mecha suit to accomplish daily tasks of survival, such as feeding themselves, and to facilitate queer kinship through their relationship with their friends and their cats. I argue that *QTMIPF* can be interpreted using Muñoz, to understand the game’s disidentificatory use of a “power fantasy,” and to flesh out the game’s focus on ecstatic moments in the quotidian, its holding of space for negative affect even in utopia, and its exploration of different sites for relationships of care. This interpretation reveals the necessity of imagining differently and better for queer, trans, and

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1. According to its twitter biography, ira uses the pronouns “it,” “he,” and “she” and so I use those pronouns interchangeably to refer to her.

mentally ill people, and the way that the game's creation and distribution relies on community reinforces this message and spreads it beyond the borders of the game itself, allowing queer and trans people to use the game itself as a coping and resistance strategy in the face of real-world oppression.

Imagining a video game that is described as a "power fantasy" might evoke images of a hyper-masculine fantasy of domination and mastery over a (digital) environment and characters, and reasonably so considering that popular gaming culture is dominated by these expectations and depictions of power (Fron et al.). The structure of role-playing games in particular often lends itself to this narrative, as players start with nothing and accomplish tasks that reward them with experience points and allow them to "level up" and become more powerful. As Paul points out, this structure is common in other genres as well: using examples such as *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Uncharted*, and *Restaurant Story* he argues that games generally "enable players to grow from a relative weakling into a strong, powerful demigod" (5). The "power fantasy" in *QTMIPF* is far from this narrative of linear progression. This divergence is clear already from the game's title, as the identifiers "queer," "trans," and "mentally ill" signal categories that are often already excluded from traditional conceptions of power in social institutions as well as in the space of games. Additionally, in this fantasy, the straight, male subject is not simply replaced by a subject with other identity markers; instead, the structure of "power" itself is rethought. This queer fantasy is not one of a dominating, individualistic power but of a mutually supportive power through a communitarian futuristic vision, in line with the potential that Muñoz sees in queer utopianism. The player is offered a future-looking utopian fantasy that sees power in the mutual care of queer relations, and the possibility of overcoming systemic barriers to envision "rewrit[ing] the map of everyday life" (Muñoz 25).

*QTMIPF* is composed solely of pages of white text on a black background, with clickable text in pink, and with no images or sound. Some of the clickable text advances the story to another page of text, while some of it cycles through different text options. Most of the text is in all caps, creating a kind of frenetic energy, with a few gentler more contemplative sections in lowercase. *QTMIPF* introduces itself with a brief first-person note from the creator: "I WAS GONNA MAKE A GAME ABOUT HOW SAD AND SICK I AM ALL THE TIME BUT I CHANGED MY MIND," before switching to the second person to address the player throughout the rest of the game text. This opening from ira situates him as separate from the player but also

implicates him in the story. The story is clearly about her life in some ways and also about the player's in others, particularly players who are targeted in the title (those who are queer, trans, and/or mentally ill).

As in the other games I have discussed, the “you” that addresses the player invites them to embody the role of protagonist and narrator of the story. Pronoun use has obvious relation to transgender activist issues, as one of the primary methods that people signal the way they perceive others' gender. The use of a third person pronoun signals gendered perceptions and it is common to display an intention of trans-supportiveness in social events and community spaces by asking participants to share their pronouns (verbally, or on nametags or buttons). The use of the “you” pronoun in interactive fiction can avoid gendering language, and in *QTMIPF* this pronoun usage invites the player to embody the role of the ungendered player character and bring to this character the player's own gender identity.

While in the previous games I have discussed, the player character is explicitly written to be a trans woman, in *QTMIPF* the player character's identity is more ambiguous. This is not to say that there is a problem with the strategy of centering trans women in the narratives of *QiL*, and *WTWLA*, and it is in fact quite radical to re-envision dominantly masculine cisgender heterosexual spaces as sites specifically for the flourishing of trans women, but there is a different strategy used in *QTMIPF* that particularly uses the pronoun conventions of interactive fiction to open up the story to identification among trans people more generally. The game offers a trans affirmative narrative for trans players of various genders through this use of the non-gendered second person pronoun. and through use of the mecha-suit to “<NEVER BE MISGENDERED EVER AGAIN>.” The lack of gendered terms used for the player character situates players in the role of protagonist and narrator of the story, but the flexibility of choice—and through it control of the narrative—varies so that the player both is and is not the player character, with an invitation to empathize with the player character and the implicit understanding that they will share some (perhaps many) but not all struggles.

Through the call to the player to identify with the player character, *QTMIPF* creates spaces for utopian fantasy in two major ways: its focus on the quotidian and its focus on communality. The focus on the quotidian is evident from the opening, after the creator's note, which reads: TODAY WHEN YOU GET UP IN THE MORNING YOU FIND THAT YOUR BODY HAS BEEN REPLACED WITH <A GLITTERING IRIDESCENT MECHA SUIT

ENCRUSTED WITH EVERY NICE MESSAGE YOU'VE EVER BEEN SENT.>” This opening sets the story in a space of the quotidian mixed with the fantastical, beginning with the ordinary act of getting up in the morning but with the extraordinary discovery of a new and fantastic body. The body-replacement itself, regardless of what the new body can do in its specifics, can be understood as a trans fantasy, as becomes clear in later sections when the player can use the new body to specifically address trans concerns such as misgendering.

One of the first things the player can do with this new body though, after examining the nice messages encrusted on it which I will discuss in more detail in further sections of this analysis, is one of these options:

<MAKE BREAKFAST!!!>

<PET CATS!!!>

<GO TO CLASS!!!>

When choosing to make breakfast, the player is offered clickable pink text that cycles through several choices of breakfast foods: oatmeal with “NICE TOPPINGS,” crepes with fruit filling, bacon and eggs, and so on. While what the player chooses doesn’t have any effect on the rest of the story, the ability to have these choices at all is part of the mundane and yet utopic fantasy presented by the story, as “SOME DAYS THINGS AS SIMPLE AS MAKING FOOD AND EATING SEEM INSURMOUNTABLE AND HUGE.” One might imagine a “mecha suit,” a set of robotic wearable armour that is a trope of action-packed science fiction battles, would more ordinarily be used for violence, so the tasks listed here seem incongruously mundane. Repurposing a trope more ordinarily associated with conquest and violence to enable accomplishment of daily tasks can be interpreted as a disidentificatory strategy that highlights the effort required to survive and complete everyday tasks for minoritized subjects. Through this repurposing of expectations of power, *QTMIPF* also excavates extraordinary possibility in these daily tasks. As Muñoz reads a kind of utopian vision in O’Hara and Warhol’s exploration of the mundane Coke can—Warhol and O’Hara “are able to detect an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead commodity” (*Cruising Utopia* 7)—the cycling of breakfast possibilities in *QTMIPF* represents hopeful potentiality in the mundane. As Barthes said, and Muñoz quotes, “the mark of the utopian is the quotidian” (Muñoz 22).

While these first uses of the mecha suit are not the kind of battles one might expect, that is not to say that there are no battles in this narrative. The battles waged here are against the

social and institutional forces that operate against the queerness, transness, and mental illness of the player/protagonist. These forces against which the player character is struggling are clear from the opening authorial statement about being sad and sick all the time. While the opening statement says that the creator changed her mind about the negative focus of the game, the narrative is far from a solely positive one: sadness and sickness continue to be very present in the story, but the focus is on the player's newfound ability to change this sadness rather than on the sadness itself. A utopianism in-line with Muñoz does not obfuscate these negative affects, but imagines the positive precisely "because the present is so poisonous and insolvent" (30). Addressing the fact that making food some days is an insurmountable task for the player character both reveals how difficult their daily life is, and explains why it is so powerful that "TODAY IS NOT ONE OF THOSE DAYS," as they are able to use the mecha suit to make their choice of breakfast foods "BETTER AND FASTER THAN [they] EVER HAVE BEFORE." Similarly, going to class can be "REALLY HARD" for the player character, but it is repeated that today is not one of those days. The phrasing "TODAY IS NOT ONE OF THOSE DAYS" allows for the possibility that while *today* is not one of those days, those days will likely still exist, meaning that the fantasy presented here is not hopelessly idealistic but aware of its own possible limitations while also allowing for limitless potential. If today is not one of those days where everything is hard, maybe tomorrow won't be either, and working towards this possibility becomes not just a fixed state of utopia (breakfast is easy) but a perpetual moving towards (breakfast *can be* easy some days and *could be* easy more days) that reflects the endless possibilities of utopian vision without the naivety of ever thinking we have reached it.

Essential to the queer vision of utopia espoused by Muñoz and presented in *QTMIPF* is the recognition of and opposition to systems that cause harm: the negativity of the sadness and sickness identified in the opening that persists throughout the narrative is not simply chalked up to individual failure, but instead related to systemic barriers. The educational system and capitalism in particular are identified as oppressive structures in *QTMIPF*, with references also made to the people in the player character's life who have power over them and who have not treated them well. In addressing the educational system, the player character of *QTMIPF* states "YOU DON'T WANT TO DESCRIBE GOING TO CLASS IN A GAME THAT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A POWER FANTASY," though they do describe some of the negative feelings they have about it: "YOU FIND THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FUNDAMENTALLY

UPSETTING AND DESPAIR-INDUCING. . . . ALL THAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT YOU WENT TO CLASS, EVEN THOUGH THAT IS SOMETHING HORRIFYING AND DIFFICULT FOR YOU.” Despite this passage mentioning the desire to avoid describing this difficult experience because the game is supposed to be a power fantasy, similar to how the opening lines say that ira changed its mind about making a game about how sad and sick he is, *QTMIPF* continues to address quite a lot of negative feelings. The negative cannot, and should not, be elided even in transformative utopian vision if one is to address the underlying structures that put queers in painful positions.

Another harmful system addressed is capitalism, which the player has the opportunity to “DESTROY.” What is highlighted here is not the specifics of how capitalism has harmed the player/narrator, or the specifics of how to dismantle it, but the affect of rage that leads to cathartic destruction. As the player character yells “NOT TODAY, DEHUMANIZING SHITSYSTEM,” the player can click on links describing different weapons on their mecha suit to have the clickable words describing the weapons be replaced with sound effects (“BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM!!!! / SWWWWWWWWWWOOSH / SLASH SLASH!!!”) evoking their assault on capitalism. The energetic sound effects capture the enthusiasm and rage that power this destruction. The focus here is on a pure revelling in the undoing of a system and for Muñoz this destructive “affective excess” (23) is vital, but where the true power of queerness lies is in the “forward-dawning futurity” that follows (23). While *QTMIPF* does not specifically address what might replace capitalism as a social/economic system, it does build a powerful vision of futurity and relationality.

Possibly the most emotionally evocative exploration of violent systems in this game is in the way it addresses the harm done to the player/narrator. Towards the end of the play experience, *QTMIPF* offers this affirmation: “YOUR <PARENTS> DID NOT TREAT YOU THE WAY YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN TREATED.” The clickable text cycles through a series of people who have potentially mistreated the player: parents, family, friends, ‘friends,’ partner, partners, ex-partner, ex-partners, employers, coworkers, and teachers. This combination of multiple overlapping options creates space for players of various experiences to relate to the story and allows for the existence of multiple simultaneous and equally important stories of different types and degrees of harm done to potential players. Each of the options on its own might be true or not for any individual player, but the overall effect is of understanding



reassurance: there is no question that simply by existing in the world as queer, trans, and mentally ill, harm has been done to the intended player and that this harm was undeserved. Like Muñoz, this narrative “is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present” (18).

Shortly after this affirmation of harm, the player is offered the most open-ended choice available throughout the whole narrative: “HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT WHAT THEY DID TO YOU,” the player is asked, and they are given a blank input box to type whatever they want, or the option to select “I DON'T WANT TO SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT.” No matter the player’s input, the game responds with the sentence “it’s ok for you to feel like that,” the phrase appearing slowly and rhythmically three times on the screen before asking if the player wants to “talk about it a little more.” It is important to note that the choices available in this game are not so much about how to navigate the world but about how to feel emotions. Despite having little choice in terms of what to do with the mecha body (you have to pet the cats and eat breakfast in order to continue the story, for example), the player is offered a complete freedom of feeling. The empty input box allows for the player to express their feelings in words as complex or as simple as they desire, or to choose not to say anything, without judgement. The game’s lack of change in response to this input contradicts the way that choice in games is generally framed, but this has the effect of reminding that player that there is no “right” or “wrong” choice when it comes to how to feel about difficult experiences. Traditional understandings of games rely on the fact that player choices must affect the game’s outcome in order to have meaning, as is clear in Juul’s definition of games as requiring “variable outcomes,” which also leads to “player attachment to outcomes” (ch. 2). While he discounts hypertext fiction as not including these elements, it is clear here that even without variation in in-game outcome, player attachment can still very much play a role in their engagement with the game, and the lack of variable outcomes can actually create new methods of exploring player attachment.

Just as there are no right or wrong choices, there is no losing or winning in *QTMIPF*. There is only one ending, which doesn’t change based on player choices, and this ending assures the player that even though the mecha suit might not exist in real life, “YOU ARE POWERFUL BECAUSE YOU ARE HERE!!!” As Halberstam points out, usually “in order for someone to win, someone else must fail to win” (93), and as Halberstam argues is necessary (2), *QTMIPF* does not simply reverse the positions of winners and losers by valuing the losers as the “real” winners, but reframes the experience of winning and losing by eliminating win conditions

entirely. This narrative revels in a model of success that does not build itself on somebody else's loss. In doing so, it, like many Twine games that have been accused of not being "real games," *QTMIPF* troubles the categorization of games themselves, calling to mind Halberstam's queer "rewriting the game" and Muñoz's imagining of alternative futures that "rewrite a larger map of everyday life" (25).

Also of central importance to the kind of utopian vision in this narrative is relationships of care between humans and between humans and non-human beings. These relationships of care are visions of the kinds of queer relationality that are essential to Muñoz's understanding of queer utopia. In *QTMIPF* there is great importance placed on relations of mutual care: first, in the care provided for the player character, as highlighted in by the nice messages encrusted on the mecha suit body, and later in the care they provide to others. The mecha suit is "ENCRUSTED WITH EVERY NICE MESSAGE YOU'VE EVER BEEN SENT," and examining these messages by clicking on the above quoted text is the first thing the player can do with their new body. Short, affirming messages will be presented one by one, with the option to "read another one?" until the player decides to do something else. Eventually some of them might repeat, but the possible options are numerous and I was able to play through many times without feeling like I had read them all, evoking a sense that the player character is overwhelmingly loved, perhaps opening the player themselves to considering the possibility that there may be "WAY MORE [nice] THINGS THAN YOU REMEMBER PEOPLE EVER SAYING TO YOU" in their own real life history. The messages themselves are usually in lower case, as opposed to the majority of the game text in all capitals, and often use abbreviated text ("u" for "you," for example) giving them a sense of gentleness and informal affection. The acknowledgements at the end of the game mention that these nice messages were collected from people other than the creator, meaning that the game itself was partly created collaboratively in the way that the utopia within it is envisioned: ira calls these messages the "THE BEST AND MOST POWERFUL PART OF THIS GAME," asserting the importance of a collaborative relationality to of the kind of "power" represented here. ira's acknowledgements recognize how relationships of care are vital outside the game structure itself, and ties the message of the game narrative into the process of its creation.

The "power" of this power fantasy is in part the ability to take care of friends in ways that are often difficult "when you are also scared and in pain:" in "your new POWER FORM you can

take all of it.” In a body armoured with the kind words of their friends, the player character uses their power in the narrative to reciprocate this care by “COMFORT[ing] ALL OF [their] FRIENDS FOREVER.” Rather than being a fantasy of domination over others, this queer power fantasy is about the power to care for others through holding their pain, allowing them to “feel safe with you.” Just as the player is given the freedom to feel hard feelings without judgement, they are given the opportunity to extend this same care to friends who need it, allowing those friends to “CRY AS MUCH AS THEY WANT.” Through this relationality, negative feelings are again acknowledged and honoured as essential to queer fantasy.

This support and care within relational communities is not only represented within the game and through its collaborative creation, but also enacted by the game’s circulation, as it spread on social media among the people targeted by its title (the queer, trans, and mentally ill). I draw this from personal experience, and it is difficult to go back and cite the ephemeral social media posts in which friends linked each other to this game as a healing and affirming experience without compromising their privacy, however, some elements of this circulation can still be seen on ira’s Tumblr post about the game which has 10,742 notes as of July 22 2019 (iraprince), and on which commenters have replied with statements like “I needed this, thank you so much ira” (surrogatelark) and “this is my favorite game in the entire world and i’m so glad i played it today because i was very sad” (asanos2k15). Thus, the game itself serves as a coping and survival strategy within the systems it critiques through its narrative. While *WTWLA* has an element of this community support as well, visible through the spread of player sigils on social media, the central focus of *QTMIPF* is on this possibility for the game itself to build care among players.

As well as caring relationships between humans, this story highlights cross-species relations as sites for different but equally vital caring kinships. One of the first things the player character is able to do with their mecha body is to pet their cats, Moxie and Willow. The player character is in a mutually caring relationship with the cats: the cats “RADIATE LOVE AND WARMNESS” towards the player character, just as the player character reciprocally expresses love towards the cats by petting them. The importance of the relationships described in the text is not the identities of the beings involved in them, but their ability to nurture each other: they are all “critters in a queer litter” as Haraway would say (105). I turn to Haraway here because while Muñoz recognizes that “queerness in its utopian connotations promises a human that is not yet

here, thus disrupting any ossified understanding of the human” (*Cruising Utopia* 25-26) he nonetheless “talk[s] about the human as a relatively stable category” (25), while Haraway’s exploration of “making kin,” as in the title of her text *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, illustrates how the utopian “anti-antirelationality” (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 14) explored by Muñoz can extend beyond the human. In *QTMIPF*, the player can read a bit about each cat after choosing to pet them: and what is emphasized in the cats’ stories is the love they share with the player character, as well as their interspecies connection through shared suffering. The cats, like the trans player character, have both struggled with their bodies: Moxie was hit by a car and had to have her leg amputated, while Willow was born without eyelids and needs to have lubricating drops administered to her eyes twice a day. The cats’ disabilities and the player character’s experiences have in common the fact that their conditions are shaped by social structures, and that they rely on each other for mutual support in a queer bond. The player character and their cats have been drawn together as kin in systems that harm them in different ways, and they create a network of caring for each other in resistance to these systems, forming a model for one type of utopian care networks.

Of course, the mecha suit that allows for the actions described in *QTMIPF* is metaphorical, as is made clear in the final passages which say that while there isn’t really a glittery iridescent mecha body allows the player character to do all these amazing things: “you have a mecha inside you.” The mecha is a vehicle for imagining what “power” looks like in a queer world where we value mutual care and work towards the end of oppressive systems. This representation of queer fantasy reveals the vital importance of Muñoz’s understanding of a utopianism that is far from naive and instead allows space for the complex emotional effects of living and making kin in this world.

In this chapter I have argued that in *WTWLA* relationships of care, first for the self and then for and by others, allow the player character to reimagine her relationship to violent systems, while *QiL* focuses on specific sites of communality and how relationships of care create and sustain them, creating these sites outside of the game as well. Both remain aware of the violence of the social world and allow players to engage with the strategies presented within the games in order to enact these strategies to their own lives. In Chapter 1, I began this analysis with the potential I find in Anna Anthropy’s Twine games to challenge player expectations of game norms and envision possibilities for queer relationships through celebrating undervalued

forms of resistance in submission and the celebration of social destruction. In this chapter, I extended this analysis to *WTWLA* and *QTMIPF* as games that hold space for these negative affects while also more thoroughly exploring strategies for survival and change through relationships to other human and non-human beings. I end on *QTMIPF* as a particularly powerful example of what disidentifying with game norms that privilege individualism and linear progression from powerless to powerful can do to enable minoritized communities to survive and thrive within systems that work against them.

### Conclusion: Queer Strategies and the Future of Twine

Each of these games explores ways that queer and trans players and creators can form queer bonds in order to survive and thrive within dominant cis-heteronormative society. My readings elucidate also how some Twine games have been, and can continue to be, used to teach and circulate these survival methods within queer and trans communities outside and alongside of game spaces, in ways other than those usually recognized within game scholarship on player communities which focuses disproportionately on multiplayer games. Using Halberstam alongside Muñoz I have uncovered queer strategies of reimagining failure and disidentifying with dominant norms of games, language, gender, and sexuality that work with each other within these case studies to disrupt harmful norms and to use gaming as a tool for enabling care and community as strategies of resistance to harmful systems and utopian imaginings beyond the possibilities of these systems.

In my section on *Encyclopedia Fuckme*, I discussed the way that the game challenges player expectations of choice and control, drawing the player into an erotic and transformative mode of queer relationality focused on submissive sexuality. Through celebrating the giving up of power as a strategy of transformational power, this game particularly connects some of the queer strategies engaged by each of these games to expectations of player choice in gameplay, reimagining the “submission to the code” inherent to gameplay, and submission more generally, as not something to be avoided or hidden but celebrated for its resistive and transformative potential.

My reading of anthropy’s later work, *Queers in Love*, ties the exploration of player loss of control to the queer and trans desire to destroy oppressive social institutions, as well as the need to continue to negotiate relationships with each other even in this destruction. The bonds between the lovers in the face of apocalypse forms through repeated cycles of apocalyptic destruction, highlighting the need for queer modes of relationality which reject violent institutions and sustain queer life in the face of overwhelming negativity. This reading of *QiL* particularly points out the use of the timer and the overwhelming branching options as methods to use game mechanics to draw players into norm-disrupting experiences of play.

In reading *With Those We Love Alive* I mark how the game implicates players in systems of social violence, analogous to many real life oppressive systems, and offers strategies to survive and resist this violence through modelling the development of sustaining relationships

within the body and with other human and non-human beings. Through game mechanics which disrupt game norms of surveillance, space is created for players to negotiate a relationship with their own body, and by extension with other players through sharing this experience in online communities.

My last case study, *Queer Trans Mentally Ill Power Fantasy*, illustrates how some resistant and relational strategies to imagine radical possibilities for queer trans futures which are explored in the previous games are taken up also in work that has received much less mainstream attention than anthropy's and Porpentine's. *QTMIPF*'s particular investment in different sites of queer relationality, in its creation and circulation as well as its content, allows for the development of queer trans modes of survival that reimagine power fantasies of domination as instead fantasies of power to care for ourselves and our communities within and outside of games.

There also remain many possibilities for more close attention to the specific Twine games I have covered here, as they are each complex works that negotiate meaning in many ways. I particularly see possibilities in investigating the inter-species relationships highlighted as sites for relational bonds in these games, particularly *WTWLA* and *QTMIPF*. The use of theories of queer inhumanisms could allow for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of these relationships within queer stories and queer world-building.

Additionally, I have noted a few ways in which my game case studies interact (or rather don't) with race, but I believe it would be particularly productive for future scholarship to explore a deeper understanding of Twine games' investigations of racial identities, both through critiques of the white normativity in many of the games, and through attention to works in the medium that directly address racialized experiences and strategies of resistance to white supremacy.

I encourage continued critical attention particularly within queer game studies also to Twine games beyond those I have covered, as they are only a small selection among many radical and innovative pieces. itch.io hosts and catalogues thousands of Twine works in diverse genres and is a good starting point for discovering exciting and revolutionary games that often go relatively unacknowledged. Minoritized game creators and players continue to produce transformative work in this medium and continued critical attention to Twine as a site where this

production flourishes is vital for understanding and supporting the radical potential of this work to challenge games culture and social norms more generally.

The queer strategies for renegotiating power, relationships, and social norms I have investigated in these games could also be productively investigated in games produced on platforms other than Twine, particularly other types of games which are marginal to the definition of games themselves, as sites which have potential to challenge assumptions of game design and play. I see particular possibility in investigating challenges to player choice and agency, as often unquestioned norms of gameplay, in order to imagine new ways of engaging with the power and pleasure of playing video games.

In returning to games produced in and around a moment of the emergence to public attention on the queer games avant-garde, I offer a reminder to game players, scholars, and creators of the possibility for utopian visions of queer relationality within games which can continue to work towards a transformation of the medium into one that supports expression and community-building for minoritized subjects. The emergence of the queer games avant-garde to public awareness signals continued possibilities of video games to tell better, more interesting and radical stories about queer and trans people, in particular the possibilities for a greater understanding that transgender creators in particular have incredible creative and transformative stories to tell far beyond the stories of medical transition which are received most readily by cisnormative audiences. In critically engaging with work by transgender creators that explores queer and trans possibilities for utopian relationality I have highlighted some of the ways we can move beyond this medicalized narrative of trans bodies into an understanding of queer and trans survival, and the powerful, pleasurable, and painful affective experiences we negotiate within our lives.

While I see hope within these games, like the games themselves I am not interested in a linear narrative of progress, and even though the “Twine revolution” has not revolutionized gaming culture as a whole, the importance of critical attention to radical strategies of survival within this culture remains. There remains room for more work on Twine games and games developed with other tools to further examine the ways that communities of queer and trans kinship can be built and fostered within and against the dominant social order. as k says in her introduction to *Videogames for Humans*, this is not only a historical moment but “really, in so many ways, this is still a beginning” (18), and I look forward to continued possibilities of the



queerness that is endlessly on the horizon of games.

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