

Expressing Displeasure: A Casual Guide to Making Sims 4 Machinima During a Pandemic

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## Abstract

### Expressing Displeasure: A Casual Guide to Making Sims 4 Machinima During a Pandemic

Patricia Petit Liang

Machinima is a unique artform that combines the aesthetics of gaming with filmmaking. Machinima challenges existing video game narratives through the remixing of its content. This creation-as-research project is a *Sims 4* machinima video diary about negative feelings I experienced as a queer Asian femme during the COVID-19 pandemic. This project explores the topics of machinima, *The Sims*, women of color self-portraiture and amateur/DIY digital art through the lens of intersectional feminism. These subjects empower marginalized individuals to engage in creative artistic practices, self-reflection and identity formation. Concepts guiding this research include Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem," bell hooks' writings on "The Oppositional Gaze" and Donna Haraway's writings on "situated knowledges." Together, they describe ways women of color and other marginalized folk can unapologetically engage in artistic creation and knowledge production. The rest of this paper is dedicated to describing how I created my machinima project "burden: a short video diary" with *The Sims 4*, Fraps, Audacity and Adobe Premiere. This thesis is ultimately a guide for how to create personal, digital art while undergoing great personal difficulty.

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## Background and Introduction

Completing this project took longer than expected due to a lack of confidence, personal strength and coping mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic marked one of the scariest and most alienating periods of our collective lives. Libraries and research labs were closed during the pandemic lockdown and professors became increasingly overwhelmed with work as classes were forced to move online. University students and faculty searched for new ways to communicate as the Concordia email system developed technical issues after migrating to a new inbox system. Students and professors felt drained from Zoom fatigue. Some opted to use Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts instead. Countless Discord servers were made and abandoned. Facebook group chats were flooded with anxious discussions about the future. When email inboxes did work, they were filled with countless invitations for stressful virtual meetings. It quickly became difficult to stay up to date with everything happening at our university. Even though most of the members of our department lived in the same city, everyone felt so far away. Nothing felt real anymore. Those in positions of power seemed so overwhelmed I stopped asking for help. My close classmates and I decided to rely on each other for information, guidance and support. I held regular Zoom meetings with my students and peers. We tried our best to comfort each other as we struggled to navigate this new, terrifying landscape. We struggled not only because of the COVID-19 pandemic and drastic changes to university life, but because of the threats of the climate emergency, poverty, eviction, hate crimes and domestic abuse. The events of 2020 and 2021 have clearly demonstrated how unsustainable life is under Western Imperialist Capitalism.

Those who survive are left feeling exhausted, helpless and sick. I was officially diagnosed with adjustment disorder, or burnout, in November 2020.

My Master's thesis project has transformed drastically since I first enrolled in the Media Studies program in 2018. First a project about the fetishization of Asian women in video games, then an exploration into virtual pets and digital intimacy – my project is now a celebration of machinima as a way for marginalized artists to express themselves creatively. I employed creation-as-research to process negative feelings I experienced during this pandemic in the form of a *Sims 4* machinima video diary. The feelings expressed in my machinima are not feelings I still have while writing this thesis. Making this video was an important act of catharsis for me. I felt a lot of shame for not following through with my original thesis ideas. I ultimately had to choose to stop making the art I wanted to make, but instead produce the art I needed to.

Making this grim *Sims 4* machinima video helped me survive this painful period of my life. Creating this project allowed me to reflect on my identity and appreciate the progress I made throughout my studies. It also taught me how to become a better stylist, makeup artist, set designer, audio producer, director and video editor. I will likely never show my video to anyone outside of this program. Even the thought of sharing it with anyone outside of my thesis committee scares me. The version of myself I present in this video is almost unrecognizable from the regular, cheerful persona I embody for white academia. I used this video as an opportunity to break away from the Asian model minority stereotype and express my feelings of unhappiness. The “model minority” stereotype describes Asians in North America as “as a hardworking, successful, and law-abiding ethnic minority that has over-came hardship, oppression, and discrimination” (Shih et al. 414). The model minority myth conceals systems of violence and oppression towards Asian immigrants while pitting them against other ethnic groups. As an



Asian woman living in Canada, the model minority myth has deeply impacted the way I perceive and treat myself (415). I am expected to make myself small, ignore my own feelings and assimilate to placate North America's white majority. However, no matter how much I assimilate, I will never truly be accepted by Canadian society because of the shape of my eyes and color of my skin. I will always be a "forever foreigner" and a threat to white racial purity in North America (414). This project was a valuable use of my time because it helped me process my feelings, learn about filmmaking and engage in the artistic practice of research creation. The negativity I express in this project is healthy, productive and necessary to understanding the experiences of marginalized university students.

## Literature Review

My research creation project is a *Sims 4* machinima video diary about processing difficult emotions I experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis is not only an artistic outlet for me to process my feelings, but a loose guide to making art while under distress. I hope that other burnt-out, queer students of color can read this thesis, relate to the obstacles I faced and find value in the ways I tried to process my misery. To better understand my research, it is necessary to discuss machinima, *The Sims*, women of color self-portraiture and amateur/DIY digital art. These subjects empower women and queer individuals of color to engage in creative artistic practices, self-reflection and identity formation.

### **Machinima**

May and McKissack define machinima as “the practice of manipulating video game graphics and engines, as well as video editing software, to generate animated videos” in their 2017 article “Queer Stories and Selves: Gamer Poop and Subversive Narrative Emergence” (1). Machinima videos are made by editing video game footage to tell new or existing stories within the game’s world. Emergent narratives are often produced by machinima artists, “existing as stories created beyond the embedded textuality of games and are organic products of gameplay, not pre-programmed or planned” (May and McKissack 1). Machinima shares a lot in common with “DIY fanvids, remixes, and parodies” as well as “anime music videos” as they are tributes to pop culture media that remix and transform existing content into new creations (Ito 51). Machinima artists also engage in gaming documentation by capturing “aspects of the spaces,

events, and activities through the lens of a player's view of the game world" (Lowood 4). As video games continue to receive updates, machinima projects maintain a record of games at specific moments in time. As the graphics of video games improve, so do those of machinima.

"The term" machinima was first used "by Anthony Bailey and Hugh Hancock as a mashup of" the words machine, cinema and animation to describe the remediation of video game content into film (Harwood 169). The process of creating machinima is different from regular cinema, as machinima artists take on the roles of "actors, director and producers" – controlling almost every aspect of the filmmaking process (Harwood 168). With that said, machinima can be created alone or in groups, with the collaborative projects "*Red vs. Blue* by Rooster Teeth Productions," as well as the 2006 film *Leeroy Jenkins* and the 2006 episode "Make Love, Not Warcraft" of *South Park* celebrated as some of the most popular machinima projects of all time (Kirschner 21). In these projects, characters were manipulated by multiple players. In an interview with Machinima.com, *South Park's* producer, Frank Agnone, technology supervisor, J. J. Franzen, and director of animation, Eric Stough, describe working with numerous members of the Blizzard Entertainment team to coordinate the movement of dozens of characters for the critically acclaimed episode. Many have stated that the first "machinima films were Quake demo films," which were released in 1996 and were only viewable to spectators with a copy of the game (Kelland 23). Early machinima used to only be accessible to those with access to their respective game's engine until screen recording software was later developed (Lowood 7). As gaming technology grew less complicated and more accessible, more and more people could create and interact with machinima.

Machinima can be created alone, encouraging its creators to engage in "practice-based learning through a process of digital creativity and evaluation of outcomes" (Harwood 169). By

creating machinima with video games, artists have access to creative tools like lighting and props for much cheaper than their real-world counterparts (Payne 242). Machinima also encourages its creators to interact with “new technologies [...] to experiment with modes of aesthetic expression, performance (puppetry), hacking (coding), editing (media), modifying and recombining (art) content into digital artefacts” (Harwood 170). Machinima artists can therefore take on the role of an entire film production team on their own. By engaging in coding and utilizing mods, machinima artists can also go beyond the limits of a game’s base content by expanding “what they can show on-screen,” granting them greater storytelling freedom (Kelland 25). Machinima artists can challenge existing game narratives to tell their own new stories by transforming and remixing game assets.

Video game developers have become aware of machinima as a phenomenon and now regularly include photography and video capturing tools in their games for players to use. *The Sims 2* is noted to be the first game “to be shipped with tools specifically designed to make it easy for users to create films,” with users simply needing to press “the ‘V’ key” to capture screen recordings (Kelland 26). This trend would continue with AAA adventure games as “Naughty Dog’s *Uncharted 2*” would also include “a Cinema Mode that included green screen compositing and built-in video editing” for players (Lowood 16). The Nintendo Switch, released in 2017, even has a single button completely dedicated to taking video game screenshots and recordings. Although early machinima began with “first-person shooter (FPS) games like *Doom* and *Quake*, whose fan base consisted of young men,” the machinima community has expanded astronomically and now encompasses people of all genders and backgrounds (Jones 279). *The Sims 2* created a woman-led machinima explosion with its release in 2004 and *The Sims* machinima community is still active on YouTube and TikTok today (Kelland 27). In 2018,

“gaming” was “YouTube’s fourth most popular category” with video game let’s players gaining millions of views on their videos (Caruso et al. 1704). It could be argued that almost any videos featuring edited video game footage can fall under the machinima umbrella. Video games have increased in popularity and accessibility over the years, and so has art about them - including machinima.

## **The Sims**

*The Sims* is “the most successful PC game in history [...] holding the third position in the list of global best-selling game franchises of all time” (Sihvonen 10). With *The Sims 4* released in 2014, *The Sims* has gone through dozens of reincarnations since its original publishing “in 2000 by Electronic Arts/Maxis” (Consalvo 2). At its core, *The Sims* is a “strategic life-simulation” game where players can design and control “humanoid characters, called the ‘Sims’” as well as lots in the worlds they live in (Sihvonen 9). This unique premise attracted players of all ages and genders, making it one of the most successful gaming franchises of all time, surpassing “\$5 billion in lifetime sales” in 2019 (Valentine). Sims can build relationships with each other, buy new homes as well as furniture and progress through different aspirations and goals within the game. However, *Sims* creator Will Wright has noted that the game invites several different types of play styles that push “the limits of” its “behaviour engine” and design tools (10). *The Sims’* players decide its “particular conditions for winning and losing” and take on the role of “a God,” watching their creations and guiding them towards different fates (11). The free and open-ended nature of *The Sims* lends itself perfectly to various playstyles and audiences.

*The Sims* has always had a large creative fan community, specifically catering to their needs since *The Sims 2* with the introduction of “cameraman mode” to allow players to engage in in-game photography and machinima (Kelland 26). Electronic Arts additionally encourages *The Sims* players to share their works online, providing websites and directories for users to display their creations (26). *The Sims*’ fan community is one of the largest video game modding communities, with hundreds of thousands of aesthetic and gameplay altering mods currently available for download online. According to Tanja Sihvonen, “modding refers to various ways of extending and altering officially released computer games, their graphics, sounds and characters, with custom-produced content” (12). Passionate fans regularly create new content to make *The Sims* more accessible and exciting.

Modders of color have been creating free content for *The Sims* for years, including better hairstyles and skin tones for Black and Brown Sims (Livingston). Representation and diversity have been a lingering problem in *The Sims* franchise for more than twenty years. In Mia Consalvo’s 2003 study “It’s A Queer World After All: Studying The Sims and Sexuality,” she notes how in the first *Sims* game, “there are more heads available in the light shade than in the medium and dark shades for both men and women” (14). Male light skin sims were also found to have access to 12 more outfits than their darker skin counterparts. Examples like this are what led to the creation of Black Simmer communities online to share and celebrate mods made for Black players (Harrington et al. 25). The uncompensated labor of countless modders paved the way for better diversity and inclusion in *The Sims* franchise. It was only in December 2020 that Electronic Arts released better sliders for hair and skin tones for *The Sims 4* – which was released in 2014. On top of the original game, Electronic Arts frequently releases new expansion packs, game packs and stuff packs for *The Sims 4*. The company charges players for new

aesthetic and gameplay additions to the game like better hairstyles and cultural attire for sims of color. The possibilities of what can be achieved while playing *The Sims* continues to expand with each passing day, with dedicated players expanding its horizons with their fan creations.

### **Women of color self-portraiture**

Photography has traditionally both fetishized and excluded women of color in its practices. Photographic subjects have been historically subjected to the photographer's totalizing gaze (Loewenberg 399). Photographers occupy a position of immense power, dictating their image's subject matter, exposure and composition. bell hooks describes the artist's gaze as something that is always political and representative of existing structures of domination (118). Early ethnographers captured photos of exotic subjects from foreign lands, fetishizing the Other and transforming racialized individuals into spectacles (Sheehan 3). Early photography is noted for bearing a powerful, controlling, colonial gaze, degrading the Other for the pleasure of white spectators. Tanya Sheehan describes the West's fascination with the exotic as an obsession with "everything that their world is not" (3). The bodies of racialized individuals are viewed as inferior, backwards objects trapped in the past (Sheehan 3). This colonizing gaze is still present today, with continued representations of Indigenous peoples as a vanishing community lost at the hands of time (Sheehan 7).

Photography is also inherently racist in its very technology. The photography industry was originally developed with white subjects in mind, as early cameras were designed to best capture and represent fair-skinned, white people. The process of "skin-colour balance" within photography involved "measuring and calibrating the skin tones" for a photograph, using Kodak's "Shirley cards" (Roth 112). These cards contained images of almost exclusively white

women as the “ideal standard” for technicians to process images with (Roth 112). When multiracial Shirley cards were invented in 1995, they were sold “at a rather high premium” and took years “to become available through major photo lab suppliers” (122). Even after the introduction of the digital camera, there remained “White skin colour biases within the chemistry of film processing” and an inability to capture and contrast different skin tones within the same shots (Roth 115). Lorna Roth describes this neglect towards people of color’s appearances as the embedding of “Whiteness [...] within” the very “architecture and expected ensembles of practices” of photography (117). Photography makes marginalized people both invisible and hypervisible through its technology and practice.

Women of color’s self-portraiture disrupts the white, colonizing gaze of photography by allowing subjects to interpret themselves and control their image’s composition (Loewenberg 400). The advent of affordable personal cameras, smartphones and social media have made it easier for marginalized people to engage in creative projects such as self-portraiture (Shelby-Caffey et al. 191). With total control of the camera, they have the artistic freedom to portray themselves however they desire. They can perfect their image’s lighting, manage their appearance and process the image on their own terms, ensuring proper color balance for their unique and underrepresented identities (Roth 115). Marginalized artists can thus develop methods to overcome the camera’s inherently racist technology. When marginalized individuals engage in self-portraiture, they assert their own gaze, resisting Western colonialism and developing their own narratives. Self-portraiture expands the Other’s modes of existence, allowing them to see themselves “with an oppositional gaze” and to extend care and love towards themselves (hooks 122). Art therapist Eileen P. McGann explains that racism and discrimination negatively impact identity formation in marginalized individuals, causing them to



experience self-rejection by internalizing the white, heteronormative gaze (198). Self-portraiture serves as art therapy, allowing subjugated artists of color to explore new ways of perceiving themselves by exacting agency over their own bodies (McGann 214).

### **Amateur/DIY digital art**

Affordable technology and digital image-editing software have also expanded the artistic horizons of marginalized creators. Haraway explains the ways women of color have always been innovative in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Racialized femmes regularly engage in “oppositional consciousness,” building “effective” unities that avoid recreating “the imperializing, totalizing revolutionary subjects” of their white counterparts (Haraway 156). Countless women of color currently share their art through “YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram” and other new platforms like TikTok, engaging in amateur storytelling through the production of “media collages” consisting of “webpages, blogs” and “digital stories” (Shelby-Caffey et al.191). Their compelling works of art help bring communities of marginalized people together on the net through the shared appreciation of women of color’s beauty and cultural aesthetics.

The introduction of image-editing software like Adobe Photoshop dramatically changed the nature of photography and self-portraiture, making it possible for individuals to produce works of magical realism, manipulating their photos to include elements that do not always belong together. Originating from “Latin-American and Caribbean culture,” magical realism combines “the historical and the imaginary” to communicate “new ways of understanding” and “reconciling” the existence of marginalized artists (Honeyford 18). By creating art with subjects that do not necessarily belong together, artists of color can challenge existing structures of white

supremacy. For example, Black trans artists like renowned Instagram artist bbychakra92 Photoshop marginalized individuals into high fantasy and cyberpunk settings that exclude queer characters of color within the mainstream media. With digital image-editing software, individuals engaging in self-portraiture are no longer constrained by the physical realm and can produce ambitious, original works of art. The Internet helps marginalized individuals create art outside the confines of neoliberal institutions and build online communities with others belonging to their diaspora (Adair and Nakamura 264). Marginalized people can connect through the web's perpetuation of "visual culture," uniting individuals from different backgrounds through their posts online (Chun 27).

Digital artists like Concordia University's Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito use the net's visual culture to their advantage, creating the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace research network and connecting diverse Indigenous artists together from around the globe to produce art about their lived experiences (Lewis and Fragnito 206). Much of Skawennati's work involves modding and creating machinima using the game *Second Life* to retell Indigenous stories (McNamara). They additionally host workshops to teach young aspiring artists how to create digital art of their own. Digital self-portraiture defies the narratives of the white supremacist patriarchy, granting agency to the disempowered Other by helping them connect with their diaspora and making the impossible visible.

Digital self-portraiture has become a lifesaving tool for marginalized artists living under white supremacy. Self-portraiture empowers marginalized artists to oppose Western, colonial narratives and to celebrate their identity while also advocating for their better treatment. The visual culture of digital technology brings the impossible to life, making it possible for individuals to consider new ways of being. Digital self-portraiture is a powerful act of resistance,

allowing individuals to refuse internalizing the discrimination they face and to love themselves despite the violence they are subjected to. It also grants marginalized individuals access to online communities of people facing the same adversity as them. However, it should be noted that much of the digital self-portraiture produced by marginalized individuals often goes unremunerated as it is disseminated online. Women of color are disproportionately exploited into engaging in unpaid labor on the net, with their works dismissed as passion projects or burdens of love (Adair and Nakamura 264). The web platforms hosting their work profit off the page views they attract by selling “advertising space” (256). Although many of these works are worthy of being displayed in galleries, neoliberal institutions continue to fail marginalized artists challenging systems of oppression. Individuals benefit greatly from seeing the works of marginalized artists and so do powerful, wealthy institutions. It should be their responsibility to find ways to compensate them.

### Theoretical Perspective

I approached my research creation project through the lens of intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism is the third wave, feminist of color response to the exclusion of Black women's voices by first and second wave white feminists in their movements (Wright and Wright 8). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw created the concept of "intersectional analysis" to describe the ways "class, disability, gender, race and sexuality based" oppressions influence and build upon each other (8). Intersectional feminism acknowledges the layered complexity of human identity and recognizes that issues like class and gender cannot be separated from race as they thoroughly shape each other. The main topics guiding me through my work are Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem," bell hooks' writings on "The Oppositional Gaze" and Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges." Written in the 1980s, these classic Black and intersectional feminist works are still cited by scholars today as much of the societal injustice they describe remains. Many of the more recent texts referenced in this paper's Literature Review discuss Rushin, hooks and Haraway's theories as they are revered as seminal Intersectional feminist canon. Their works are powerful, historic and critical to understanding today's feminist struggles. These foundational feminist ideas and works are widely referenced in Media Studies and are crucial to discussing art made by marginalized folks in the twenty first century. Together, they describe the act of creating and interpreting art within our current North American Capitalist context.

### **The Bridge Poem**

Author, poet and Black feminist Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem" famously begins the

Radical Woman of Color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (Adair and Nakamura 263). In this poem, Rushin discusses her experiences as a Black woman and how she is tired of serving as a bridge for others, being forced to look after people without any reciprocation. Rushin discusses having to be “the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people” while also having to defend herself constantly during everyday interactions (xxi). She describes having to repress parts of her identity to uplift people who regularly dehumanize her and ignore her needs. She resolves these feelings by promising herself to become “the bridge to” her “own power,” refusing to help anyone else before she helps herself (xxii). She decides to rest and take care of herself so that she may become powerful. Rushin implores those who depend on her to “stretch or drown/evolve or die,” refusing to let others take away any more of her energy (xxii). “The Bridge Poem” is Rushin’s powerful declaration that she refuses to be exploited by others any longer.

I was introduced to this poem by my classmate Keven Hernandez at the beginning of my Master’s studies at Concordia University. As queer students of color, we are regularly dehumanized by the people around us and the institutions we belong to. Rushin taking a stand to protect her energy and devote time to nurturing herself brought me comfort throughout my studies. Whenever I feel exhausted and exploited, alone and forgotten – I come back to this poem and remind myself that I am a worthwhile student and that I do not need to take care of everyone else to belong. I do not need to follow the Asian model minority stereotype by making myself a palatable and comforting presence for the white people around me. Instead, I should focus on taking back my energy and caring for myself. Rushin’s poem motivated me to create an introspective research creation project about myself because my feelings are worthy of being expressed and heard. I should communicate the negative feelings I have about my own marginalization as an Asian femme. My feelings are normal and relatable. Rushin additionally

reminds me that although I am strong as an individual, I am not weak for requiring the same care and attention as my peers. I am independent and resilient but also worthy of care. This research creation project is worthy of attention and support.

### **The Oppositional Gaze**

“In the *Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*,” feminist, activist and scholar bell hooks’ describes the power dynamics of representation in the media and the racialized, gendered hierarchy of the human gaze (116). hooks finds agency in engaging in oppositional readings of media that exploit and exclude the bodies of Black women. Donna Haraway cites Chela Sandoval to describe a similar occurrence, explaining that women of color have developed a powerful “oppositional consciousness” towards normative society “born of the skills for reading webs of power by those refused stable membership in the social categories of race, sex, or class” (Haraway 17). By engaging in oppositional readings of media, the Other can challenge the hegemonic structures and institutions that regularly deny them of their humanity.

My research creation project can be considered a kind of counter-reading of *The Sims 4*. By modding *The Sims* and altering its code for my own use, I can share my idealized version of *The Sims 4* with my audience. The modded content I add to my game are things I wish *The Sims 4* already included in its base game. For this project, I use mods that add more realistic, imperfect skin features like freckles and scars to the game. I also downloaded mods that add better Asian hair, make up and skins. Machinima that deviates away from established video game storylines can be considered oppositional readings of the texts they remediate. Race and racism are not acknowledged in *The Sims* universe. The world of *The Sims* is both peaceful and idealistic but also fails to represent different cultures at times in its graphics and gameplay. Through video

editing, I can layer my voice on top of the game's graphics to inject my own commentary to the game. By creating art where I represent my Asian features and discuss my Asian feelings openly, I offer my viewers a glimpse of my marginalization. I want to be honest about the ways I am Othered, instead of embodying the model minority stereotype by lying about my experiences to make myself more palatable for those with more power and privilege than me. By making *Sims 4* machinima about my racialized experience of feeling alienated and unsupported, I am implicitly commenting on the absence of race in *The Sims* franchise. *The Sims* is a wonderful, comforting game lacking in realism. It is not an accurate life simulator. On a larger scale, it can be argued that any media that is remixed or transformed could be interpreted as oppositional to its original inspiration. By creating a modded machinima project about my Asian feelings, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, I offer viewers unique insight on *The Sims 4* and my identity.

### **Situated Knowledges**

Haraway discusses Western scientific "objectivity," offering the concept of feminist "situated knowledges" as an alternative to the white, male, imperialist gaze (581). Haraway emphasizes the importance of reflecting on "the vantage points of the subjugated" and to consider the importance of "situated and embodied knowledges" (583). Haraway ultimately encourages the inclusion of multiple viewpoints, as complete objectivity is impossible to achieve. One must always consider their unique position within the rest of the world when engaging in discourse (587). Who gets to participate in discourse relies on one's privileges and position in societal hierarchies. Knowledge is political and will never be completely pure of subjectivity.

Haraway states that “situated knowledges are about communities, not isolated individuals, and that objectivity can exist “as positioned rationality” (590). Knowledge can be ambiguous and exist within a wide “range of contexts,” filling in gaps of understanding (591). Throughout my research, I consider my own positioned rationality as a queer Asian femme living in North America. I want to empower myself to consider my situated perspective when writing about the research creation process and find confidence in my words. My research creation project can serve as a valuable resource for other students aiming to create amateur digital art or *Sims 4* machinima about themselves. The knowledge I have to offer is useful on a local scale but can be meaningful to others facing similar subjugation and offer insights to those belonging to other identity categories.



## Methodology

My project's primary methodology is research creation. Created by Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, research creation is "is an emergent category within the social sciences and humanities in Canada" (6). The concept of research creation was developed to describe and pitch unconventional social science and humanities research projects to Canadian academic funding organizations (8). Research creation projects involve research that cannot be addressed "without engaging in some form of creative practice" and push the boundaries of the university's established notions of epistemology (6). Research creation posits that artistic creation is a valid form of experimentation that yields valuable information and findings. Natalie Loveless states that research creation allows researchers "to tell new stories [...] that demand new research literacies and outputs" (51). Loveless goes on to explain that all research is a form of storytelling and that our research's presentation speaks for itself (54). Lai-Tze Fan explains that theory is heavily limited when restricted to "a classroom, a seminar, a conference, or a book" (40). The terms research creation and critical making are used almost interchangeably across Canada and the US, with Tim Ingold describing the importance of "the cultivation of knowledge and insight through doing" (Chapman and Sawchuk 50). Those who write research creation theory see the intellectual value of analyzing creative production. Research creation expands the ways scholars can engage with and present their research, generating new ways of knowing outside of academia's traditional, heavily regulated structures.

For this project, I mixed elements of creation-as-research with creative presentations of research to present my work in a way that is accessible to viewers outside of academia (Chapman

and Sawchuk 15; 18). Creation-as-research is the act of engaging in artistic practice while extracting “knowledge from the process” (19). The result of this creative work can be considered an “intervention” and a unique contribution to academic knowledge (21). Creation-as-research projects defy traditional academic research by communicating different types of knowledge in inventive ways. Creative presentations of research involve expressing and presenting knowledge through different artistic mediums as an alternative to strictly writing one’s findings (49). Unlike most qualitative and quantitative research, no single research creation project is the same and they are difficult to replicate. By creating machinima about my feelings, I wanted to learn what it means to make digital art about myself, as a queer woman of color. I also want to learn about the process of making machinima and filmmaking in general, which Tracy Harwood describes as practice-based learning (169). The act of research creation in itself is educational and will teach me and my readers something new, regardless of the outcome and success of my project.

Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito’s *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* research network is an excellent example of the innovation that comes from research creation. Their creative projects have become a vital resource for academics and young people to learn more about Indigenous history, myths and identity (Lewis and Fragnito 206). Lewis and Fragnito’s research creation projects depict Indigenous futures that challenge the mainstream media’s negative representations of Indigenous identity (207). They describe their work as “boundary objects that are much more effective as arguments than analysis and writing alone,” reaching wider audiences with their more accessible, multimedia projects (206). This unconventional process of research creation has helped me learn about myself, women of color’s self-portraiture and machinima-making while also empowering me to take control of my own representation.

## Discussion: Research Creation Process

### Research and planning

One of the earliest incarnations of this project was the concept for an *RPG Maker MV* video game where the protagonist is trapped in their bedroom - terrorized by intrusive thoughts and nightmares. As the pandemic hit and life became more uncertain, I began to reimagine my project to better reflect my growing feelings of helplessness and loneliness. I thought of ways to make my amateur video game inaccessible and nearly unplayable, until finally deciding to make a machinima video out of *The Sims 4* instead. *The Sims 4* comforted me greatly throughout the quarantine as it was completely untouched by the COVID-19 pandemic. There, I was able to socialize as much as I pleased with fictional people and imagine a life for myself far away from Capitalism and white supremacy. If anything felt missing from the base game, there was a great chance that thousands of talented artists had already made their own version of it and I could download their mods for free. It is unclear if these artists receive ad revenue from the websites hosting and profiting off their meticulously made mods. I lived vicariously through my sim and felt free to express myself however I wanted. I was in complete control of almost everything that happened to my avatar in *The Sims 4* and if anything unfortunate happened during my playthroughs, I could easily load back up my most recent save game to undo any damage done. Many people turned to video games as a source of comfort during the pandemic, with the new *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* game for the Nintendo Switch making record breaking sales during the first week of its release (Gilbert). *The Sims 4* soothed me the same way and helped me stay social in the absence of others. It was a joyous game for me to play and deciding to create

machinima out of it presented an exciting new challenge for me in this safe, familiar and empowering world.

My first step to brainstorming my machinima project was developing a script for my short film. I knew I wanted to make art about feeling trapped and alone with only virtual creatures to keep me company, but I had no idea how to write a story. I was uncertain about how much I wanted to share about myself or what I really wanted to say. I was scared of being vulnerable, but I also desperately needed to express myself and process my feelings. I started off by writing several scripts for my video. Some of the scripts were old drafts I had written for my abandoned video game. I tried to write poetry and immediately felt embarrassed. It was terrifying to be honest about my feelings and to express them outwardly. I was afraid of horrifying my seniors and peers. I tried to remind myself that my project did not matter at all in the grand scheme of things. Thousands of people were dying every day and this project would not help them. The pointlessness of it all weighed on me heavily and I became deeply cynical. I ignored my project for months and was afraid to dream of a happy future for myself. I beat myself up for not working hard enough on school and for not taking good care of myself.

Being trapped in my bedroom during quarantine forced me to reflect on all the trauma I experienced throughout the course of my life and filled me with overwhelming dread. Concordia University's graduate student's Empower Me Mental Health hotline was discontinued for graduate students at the end of August 2020 (Empower Me). There was a waiting period of about six months for free mental health services in our province. I had no one to talk to about my suffering. My family, friends, peers and students could count on me to listen to them and provide them with emotional support, but I knew I could not ask them to do the same emotional work for me. They were more overwhelmed than I was. Most people perceive me as the stereotype of the

strong, inspiring, woman of color who can rely on herself, but I desperately needed love and support from my community. I had to regularly demonstrate my humanity to my friends and family, begging them to consider comforting me occasionally. Advocating for myself made it easier to write. I wrote a short confessional about my feelings, edited out deeply personal details and reread it several times for a few weeks. Every time I looked at my project, I asked myself “Am I being too dramatic?,” “Is it OK for me to express this?” and “Will my thesis make everybody hate me?” I eventually let go of my fears and settled on a script, reminding myself that very few people would watch my video and that it was acceptable for my project to be flawed. I reminded myself that I did not need to conform to the model minority stereotype by presenting a project that was more polished than those of my award-winning peers who graduated on time. I had to accept my own messiness and remind myself that I was a worthwhile person with valuable things to say.

My next step in planning my machinima video diary was developing its storyboard. The script for my video was so abstract that any visual could pair well with it. I brainstormed words, ideas, places and feelings I wanted to present on a sheet of paper. I then broke down my video’s visuals into three worlds: a high fantasy world filled with virtual pets, a nightmare hellscape and a filthy bedroom for my main character to inhabit. I watched other machinima videos on YouTube for inspiration and reflected on what I wanted to see in my own work. Some of the videos I had watched included *The Sims 4*’s user interface. I wanted to hide it as much as possible in my own project. I thought of recent films I had watched and tried to think of what would look aesthetically pleasing in a video. I felt too drained to research any literature or how-to guides about filmmaking and simply tried to trust myself throughout this process. So much machinima is made by average people with no official art school training. Part of the charm of

this type of media is the amateur, DIY nature of it. Anyone can make machinima if they have access to a video game. Compelling, experimental art can be made by inexperienced creators. Practice-based learning is a valuable way to train in filmmaking, and *The Sims 4* is a rich world filled with actors and sets to capture.

Most of my storyboard notes include closeups of elements I wanted to emphasize in my story. I wanted to leave more up to my audience's imagination by only letting them get small glimpses on my virtual world. I knew it would be difficult to portray a sim speaking perfectly in sync with dialogue in my video, so I thought of the script as an inner monologue playing over a series of actions. I also had to consider the limitations of recording in *The Sims 4* and the range of animations my sims could perform. I did not want scenes to look repetitive or unnatural. I wanted to make something that looked like conventional cinema despite being shot in a video game. I did not want the concept of remediation to be too obvious in my work. I imagined what *The Sims 4* looked like and drew shots I believed I could achieve. My notes are disorganized scribbles, but they were a crucial source of guidance throughout the making of this project.

## **Sound design**

Before recording video content for my project, I recorded my short monologue using my Blue Snowball iCE USB microphone into the free digital audio workstation Audacity. As a college radio host, I learned to turn my bedroom into a makeshift recording studio for pandemic broadcasting. I applied Equalization to my voice to boost its bass as well as a Compressor, Limiter and Normalization to balance the overall volume of my recording. I also applied several High and Low-Pass Filters to my voice to make the recording sound less clear and crisp. I wanted my voice to sound like it was coming out of an old radio or some other kind of low-fi

speaker. I wanted my monologue to sound cinematic, while hiding the sounds of my home and traffic outside. I used the royalty free audio resource [freesound.org](https://www.freesound.org) to find the sound of vinyl crackling to play underneath my voice. The specific file I used is called “CRACKLE (7).wav” and was uploaded by the user Cafftal in 2020. I then took the song “Deirdre” by The Beach Boys, slowed it down 600%, duplicated it several times in Audacity and staggered it over several layers to create a haunting, warped echo to play during my monologue. I used these background elements to add a sense of discomfort and urgency to my confession. I wanted the slowed down Beach Boys song to feel like a dark fog consuming the viewer.

The fantasy sequence that takes place earlier in my video includes the song “Tender Lover Poupi” by the chiptune artist Komiku. Komiku’s album *Poupi’s incredible adventures !* is available for download on the Free Music Archive and is public domain. Chiptune is a genre of electronic music that emulates the sounds of old arcade machines and video games. Chiptune music is a nostalgic homage to classic video game soundtracks which have their distinct sound due to the technological limitations of early gaming hardware. Even though technology has now made it possible to accompany video games with any kind of audio, many continue to associate the electronic sounds of chiptunes with gaming. I chose this track because I wanted my viewers to understand that they were looking at a video game character during the first portion of my video. I took “Tender Lover Poupi,” cut the song into many pieces, slowed down and altered the pitch of each piece to emulate the sound of software glitching. I also imported the raw data of a Photoshop file directly into Audacity to create harsh, digital sounds for the glitch sequence. I added the public domain sounds of cassette players from [freesound.org](https://www.freesound.org) users [paradigmsomehow](#) and [whalesofjupiter](#) underneath the glitchier elements of the video to further emphasize the feeling of digital decay. The transition between “Tender Lover Poupi” and my monologue

signals the transition between my video's protagonist playing video games, remembering past trauma and feeling trapped inside her bedroom in the so-called "real world" of *The Sims 4*.

I finally exported the entire track as a single .WAV file to fuse all the audio together before re-importing it back into Audacity to use the Compressor, Limiter and Normalization effects once again to balance the volume levels of the final mix.

### **Character and set design**

The scenes depicted in my video were recorded at *The Sims 4*'s high fantasy Sylvan Glade, vampire-filled Forgotten Hollow and at the Culpepper House apartment lot of the metropolitan city of San Myshuno. I had access to these unique locations via *The Sims 4: City Living* and *Vampires* expansion packs. The colorful Sylvan Glade is part of the original Sims 4's base game and is a secret lot that can only be reached by interacting with a mystical tree. Forgotten Hollow is a world from the *Vampires* expansion pack that is dark, moody and surrounded by creepy forest landscapes. San Myshuno is part of the *City Living* expansion and is a beautiful cosmopolitan city reminiscent of Montreal, with ambient streetlights, bridges and bodies of water surrounding it. I used Dr. June's Weather Control Device from *The Sims 4: Seasons* expansion pack to alter the weather and season in-game for my video. I set the season to autumn and used the weather control device to generate rain during my recording sessions. I wanted the weather in San Myshuno to be sad, grey and moody to contrast the beautiful, vibrant colors of Sylvan Glade.

Designing my protagonist's bedroom took more time than expected. I bought her the 18 Culpepper House apartment lot and transformed her bedroom into a messy, dilapidated hideout. I wanted to emulate the visual design of the Silent Hill series. In *Silent Hill 4: The Room*, the



protagonist Henry Townshend is trapped inside a gory, dilapidated version of his apartment. The walls are filled with holes and he is attacked by “hauntings” inside his home that he must purify using holy candles and other religious objects (Silent Hill Memories). These hauntings seem to emerge from Silent Hill’s Otherworld – a bloody, gritty, industrial looking nightmare dimension that manifests itself in every game in the franchise. I wanted my protagonist’s room to reflect her distressed psychological state. I downloaded free, fan-made custom content of blood spatters and layered them under her bedroom door. I used the “bb.moveobjects on” cheat to enable the clipping and layering of objects in *The Sims 4*’s build mode. I covered her walls and floors with dirt, holes, mold, and vines to represent how filthy and neglected she feels. I placed candles all over her apartment to demonstrate that she was mourning something or someone – I wanted to keep the details vague and up to audience interpretation. I also made sure to fill her room with unfinished art projects as well as piles of laundry and mail to show how she is no longer able to keep up with the rest of the world. I enabled the “testingcheats true” cheat code to let me to right click her toilet and shower to make them dirty. I filled her bathroom with candles, vines and mold. I kept the wallpaper dark and chose vintage lamps and pipes to decorate the walls of the apartment. I turned off all her apartment’s lights except for the ones in the bathroom. I only shot footage of her room at night. I wanted to play with *The Sims 4*’s natural lighting and avoid capturing its harsh, yellow lamp hues. I wanted her room to look deeply affected by Capitalism: industrial, dystopian and polluted. I hid plants around her room to show that she is trying to sustain life amidst the chaos of her own existence. The lone birdcage on her bookshelf is a cheesy metaphor for how she feels trapped in the life that she lives. Her room is a larger, darker and messier version of my own bedroom.

The video's nightmare sequence was shot in the bedroom at Forgotten Hollow's Widowshild Townhome lot. I wanted the nightmare sequence to depict stylized, traumatic flashbacks from my past that are up to the viewer to interpret. I painted the walls and floor black and hung vines all over the room. I covered the floor with the fan-made blood spatter carpet mods and layered them on top of each other, altering their shape and size by pressing the "[" and "]" keys using the "bb.moveobjects on" cheat. I considered using red lighting in the room, but it looked too cheesy. I chose to turn off all the lights and let the room be illuminated by a single window. I also only recorded at night during this sequence. I let the protagonist be bathed in moonlight throughout these scenes, opting to only use the most natural lighting possible to keep my project looking realistic and professional. In some unused footage, you can see the mountains, forest and moon peeking through her vine-covered window. The set design for this sequence represents how trapped, wounded and alone I felt during previous traumatic events.

I did not have to enter build mode to alter the surroundings of Sylvan Glade for my shooting. I was content with its landscape of plants, trees and lakes and positioned my protagonist and her pet on the edge of a river on the outskirts of the map. The biggest challenge for Sylvan Glade was finding the most visually pleasing spot to shoot footage in.

Designing the actors for my video in *The Sims 4*'s character creation menu was a task I began long before coming up with the concept for this project. When I play *The Sims 4*, I always play as myself. I designed my sim avatar in 2019 and have been using her ever since – changing her make up and fashion to reflect how I look in real life (see fig. 1). There are a total of four sims acting in my video: "Patricia Everyday," "Patricia Nightmare," "Patricia Fantasy" and "Space Cat." Every sim but Space Cat uses the same face and body as the original Patricia sim

avatar I created in 2019. Most of the assets used to decorate these characters are free, fan-made custom content.



**Fig. 1.** The original Patricia avatar created in 2019.

“Patricia Everyday” has messy hair, an untucked t-shirt and lounge pants. Her appearance is based off my own on my days off. (see fig. 2) She has no makeup on except for some lip gloss and blush to give her face more life. Her freckles are exposed and she has dark circles underneath her eyes to demonstrate that she is sleep-deprived. She is covered with scratches as well as scars from self-harm and acts of violence inflicted upon her by others long ago. In some scenes, she wears tears as face paint. Her sim traits are Gloomy, Erratic and Paranoid and she uses the default walk cycle.



**Fig. 2.** The “Everyday Patricia” avatar created in 2021.

“Patricia Nightmare” is an exact copy of “Patricia Everyday” except she is completely naked and covered with bruises and wounds. She has tears painted on her face as well as black eyes and bloodied lips. This sim has been through a traumatic and violent event that “Patricia Everyday” has flashbacks of in my thesis video.

“Patricia Fantasy” has blue skin, long elf ears, horns, lavender eyes and purple hair. She wears high fantasy leather armor as well as purple lipstick and eyeshadow. She is a Spellcaster Occult sim from *The Sim 4: Real of Magic* expansion pack and has a slightly different plumbob from the other actors. Plumbobs are crystals that float above user-controlled sims, indicating their mood based on their color. Hers has a mystical design that floats above her in the live sim mode. Her traits are Genius, Creative and Cheerful and she uses the bouncy walk cycle. She is cheerful and lively. Her appearance is heavily influenced by the Draenei race of Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft* series. Out of all the Patricia’s, she is meant to look the most overtly like a video game avatar (see fig. 3).

“Space Cat” has purple and blue fur, elongated ears, a long fluffy tail and claws. Her appearance was inspired by Cybunny from *Neopets* and Espeon from *Pokémon*. Her cat breed is ragdoll and her traits are Affectionate, Friendly and Cheerful. She was created to serve as a sweet and loving companion to “Patricia Fantasy.”



**Fig. 3.** The “Patricia Fantasy” and “Space Cat” avatars created in 2021.

### **Video recording process**

I used the screen capture Windows software Fraps to record footage for my machinima video. Fraps was last updated on February 26<sup>th</sup> of 2013 and exports videos as large, 30fps .MP4 files (FRAPS). The trademark for Fraps expired on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (Trademark Status & Document Retrieval). I first started using Fraps in high school to capture screenshots of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and later to make my own machinima music videos featuring the characters from *Dragon Age: Origins*. There are plenty of better screen capture software options that exist today, but using Fraps to create this thesis project felt nostalgic and appropriate. My

video diary is vulnerable and earnest, so the software I use to record it should reflect that. The videos captured by Fraps have such large file sizes that I had to review each video and delete them every time I made a new recording. The recordings I used for my project comprise a total of 52.6 GB.

Before recording video content, I used the “testingcheats true” cheat to allow me to right click “Patricia Everyday” and “Patricia Nightmare” to set their emotion intensity to “Very Sad.” This cheat will make a sim sad for 20 in-game days and affect the way they interact with anything during The Sims 4’s live mode. They will walk around with their gaze lowered and their shoulders hunched over. They are likely to burst into tears if they try to do anything like use a computer or take a shower. Sims also have access to special, emotion-specific interactions like “Call Sadness Hotline” and the “Cry It Out” command with beds, which allows them to cry underneath the covers.

With my actors set up in the right locations with the right wardrobe and moods, I toggled off The Sims 4’s user interface and entered free camera mode. In free camera mode I can move my screen up and down by pressing the “Q” and “E” keys and move left and right by pressing “A” and “D.” I can also move my mouse to rotate the camera to help center my shots and spin my mouse wheel to zoom in. Once I have chosen an action for my sim to complete, I can enter free camera mode and start recording them. I tried to record the same actions several times to test out different camera angles and perspectives. Objects and sims risk vanishing while in free camera mode depending on where filming begins so I also had to strategically place my camera in spots where I could see everything. I also had to avoid placing my camera too close to my performers as it would turn segments of their bodies invisible, exposing their disembodied eyeballs and teeth (see fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** A sim's body turning invisible in free camera mode.

As my sims would repeat the same actions several times in a row, their plumbobs would change color as their needs would increase and decrease. I would have to take regular timeouts to ensure that my sim's plumbobs were the right color for the scenes. A green plumbob indicates that my sim is healthy and happy. Sometimes I would need to starve and deprive my sims of sleep to turn their plumbobs red for scenes where they need to appear sick and sad. Another issue I encountered throughout filming was my actors gaining weight. If a sim does not exercise regularly, they will start to gain weight. This was fine aesthetically but risked being a continuity error. As I would wait for night to come between 8PM and 6AM to record shots in San Myshuno, I had to send "Patricia Everyday" outside to jog to maintain her weight. Additionally, "Patricia Everyday" once electrocuted herself to death while attempting to use Dr. June's Weather Control Device to change the weather from sunny to rainy. Other film making fiascos include "Patricia Nightmare" getting bitten by a vampire and "Patricia Everyday" regularly soiling herself and passing out on the floor from exhaustion during shooting. Sims also risked

glitching slightly while performing animations, causing their eyes to roll back in their heads and their heads to jam themselves in weird positions. As my sim walked through the streets of San Myshuno for my video's final scene, I was shocked to find a rat roaming by the pier – I knew it would be perfect for my project and immediately recorded it.

On top of the base game, expansion packs and mods, I also used animations from collaborative sex mod WickedWhims during shooting. I used the “BDSM Rest” and “Nude Model” poses to record shots of my sim remaining still and lying down. WickedWhims is an ambitious mod with more than 7000 animations produced by a wide range of creators (TURBODRIVER). To use these animations, all I need to do is click on the location I would like them to happen and what action I want to see. WickedWhims additionally provides optional additions to *The Sims 4* like sweating, diseases, menstruation, attractiveness preferences, polyamory and extra NPCs. I had to make sure to disable the inclusion of the mod's Peeping Toms and voyeurs to avoid disruptions while recording my scenes (TURBODRIVER). No actual sex acts are depicted in my project, but I found WickedWhims' massive library of animations incredibly helpful for the making of it. I can modify the duration of sex acts in WickedWhims to several hours of in-game time to hold my sim still in the perfect position for a shot. Other pose mods exist for *The Sims 4* but are integrated less cohesively into the game and require all sorts of additional downloads. WickedWhims is packaged straightforwardly and is easy to use, with additional animations available for optional download from different creators.

### **Editing process**

After shooting my footage and combing through my recordings, I separated my video files into folders for each scene. The folders I filtered them into were “Main shots,” “Nightmare



sequence,” “Game sequences,” “Credits” and “Room shots” – which went unused. The “Room shots” folder was filled with establishing shots of the protagonist’s bedroom, including closeups of her possessions. In the end, these shots felt too stationary and did not contribute to the video’s atmosphere or narrative as much as I had hoped they would.

I spliced my video together using Adobe Premiere Pro 2021. I first uploaded my project’s sound into Premiere and took hours to curate and arrange my video files to match the general tone of the audio. For the spoken word, confessional portion of my project, I chose videos that corresponded with what I was saying and tried to place them in an order that felt coherent and linear. I wanted to make it look like my protagonist had been trapped in her apartment throughout the pandemic and eventually leaves her home for a late-night walk. I was not sure how I wanted to end my video initially. Taking the time to experiment with and rearrange my footage eventually led me to placing the open shot of the dark, empty ocean in the rain as my video’s final shot. The big, empty abyss felt like a metaphor for the hopelessness I felt towards myself and my own future. It felt like an appropriate ending for my video diary. I treated the rest of the editing process like collage-making, trying out different arrangements until I was pleased with the results.

Putting together the fantasy sequence at the beginning of my video was extremely time-consuming. I did not have any particularly compelling footage of my protagonist and her pet in the Sylvan Glade. There was not much for my characters to do in this area except for fishing, walking and standing around. I needed to stretch out what little content I had for this sequence. I spliced nightmare flashback sequences with this part of my video diary to demonstrate that my protagonist is haunted by her past, no matter what activities she engages in. I layered copies of the same “Nightmare sequence” videos on top of each other and keyframed the Camera Blur and

Fast Blur effects to give these shots a glitchy feel. I color graded the nightmare flashback shots in the dark and took screenshots of each of them and placed them side by side to make sure they all looked equally cold and blueish. I chose not to color grade the rest of my project to avoid making it appear too unnatural. I also added the Mosaic effect to some of the shots to emulate a pixelated video game aesthetic. To make it look like “Everyday Patricia” was playing through the fantasy sequence as a video game, I masked out her computer screen, placed a shot from the fantasy sequence underneath her screen, applied a Mosaic effect and lowered its opacity (see fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** The edited composite sequence.

The title and credits sequence also have effects applied to them. They both use the Mosaic effect to look pixelated. I adjusted their opacity to have them fade in and out of the video softly. I decided on the title of my video at the end of my editing project. I chose the title “burden.” because I felt like a hopeless burden while I worked on this project. I was mad at myself for abandoning my previous research creation project ideas. I was mad at myself for

taking so long to complete my Master's thesis. I was mad at myself for struggling so badly throughout this entire process. I was mad at myself for being too afraid to ask for help. Even just thinking about working on this project made me feel anxious and nauseous. I took so many breaks while working on this video just to lie down in the dark and hide from everyone. I came into this project feeling ashamed of myself and finished the editing process feeling defeated and scared.

### **Peer feedback**

In the interest of saving as much time as possible, I decided to stop editing this project as soon as I completed the credits sequence. I had to accept that my Master's project was allowed to be a work in progress and that I could go back and edit it in the future if I desired to. I uploaded my project onto Google Drive and asked three of my closest peers to review my project. I requested that they inform me if there were any huge technical errors that I should fix before sharing my work with my supervisor and readers.

My peers informed me that they found the video short, apologetic and sad. They encouraged me to expand some of the sequences and consider making my video longer than 2 minutes and 57 seconds. They told me they could tell I did not want to take up any space or waste anyone's time with my project because it was so short. The rushed pace of my video made its narrative difficult to process. The video's content was sad, but the speed at which I discuss my own feelings was also upsetting because I left my viewers no time to linger on my feelings. They were shocked to learn I felt sad and alone because they were so used to me being happy, cheerful and supportive towards them at school. It felt unusual to be so vulnerable in front of my peers, but this project helped humanize me to them. Although I tried to challenge the model

minority stereotype by breaking my cheerful facade in this project, I still fell into it by trying to express my feelings as quickly and painlessly as possible. I even dismiss my own feelings at the end of the video by sharing positive affirmations that everything will be alright. I refused to take up too much space and felt uncomfortable expressing my true feelings. Guilt and embarrassment were apparent in my voice, and my peers picked up on my lack of confidence in standing up for myself.

Sharing my project with others was a bit uncomfortable, but it helped me understand how I could better present it to other viewers. I changed the opening title from “burden. a research creation project by Patricia Petit Liang.” to “burden. a short video diary by Patricia Petit Liang.” I wanted to make it clear that my research creation project was not a conventional short film with a story to tell, but instead an experimental video diary where I share a vague snippet of my feelings. I did not implement any of the other changes my peers recommended to my video because of time restraints. If I took it upon myself to create more content for this video, I felt there was a chance I would never finish this project. I believe that this imperfect machinima video is still valuable and that the elements of it that feel rushed and inaccessible still contribute to the message I am trying to communicate. I wanted to express sadness, grief and displeasure but still held back because I have been conditioned to minimize my own suffering as an Asian woman living in North America.

My video can currently be found on YouTube at this link:

<https://youtu.be/u0pKw7VWvHw>. The video is unlisted and can only be accessed via this URL. YouTube compressed it and made the parts of the video where it rains look blurry and pixelated. I might consider restricting its audience even further in the future as I continue to change and grow as a person. The feelings I expressed in my video diary are very real, but I am certain they

will not define me forever. The feelings of fear and hopelessness I expressed in my machinima are not permanent. I may have felt a powerful sense of overwhelming dread this entire pandemic, but I want to believe that I have a bright future ahead of me. I hope that someday I will be unable to relate to the feelings I expressed in this project. I want to move on from my trauma and feel good about the art that I make. With that said, I do enjoy parts of my video and believe that my thesis can be helpful to other students who feel anxious about making personal art.

## Conclusion

Concluding this project feels surreal. There were many times I believed I would never reach this stage of my research. My research creation project mutated in so many ways and as I previously stated in my introduction: I did not make the art I wanted to make, but I made the art I needed to make. Completing my thesis was an act of survival. Like many, I struggled immensely these past two years and lived every day in a constant state of fear, grief and agony. The consequences of isolation were so bad I forgot how to be a functional human being and, more importantly for the scope of this project, a student. By choosing to keep pushing forward and create this machinima, I chose to continue living. My machinima video might be sad, but working on it gave me hope for the future. Finishing it made me feel accomplished as it is the first real piece of art I have made in months. It showed me how much progress I have made throughout the pandemic and has also shown me ways I need to grow. I need to continue letting go of the Asian model minority stereotype and feel more confident voicing my feelings. I am going to continue making machinima and other kinds of digital art about myself. This video diary was a healthy way for me to express myself and learn the basics of filmmaking. Looking back on this strange thesis submission, I feel happy and relieved.

As I write this conclusion, Google estimates that approximately 5.48 million people have died from coronavirus. Capitalism, police brutality, hate crimes and the climate emergency have also taken away countless lives and the future is uncertain. What brings me courage and hope is imagining the circumstances that the scholars I cite in this paper had to live through as they were writing. Lai-Tze Fan wrote about her students struggling to produce work during the coronavirus

outbreak and noted that Stuart Hall expressed similar feelings of anguish and helplessness while writing Communications theory during the AIDs crisis (40;41). The world is a terrifying place, and it can be hard to appreciate the progress we have made over the last few decades. We need to stay hopeful and continue our efforts to save our planet and each other. So much can be accomplished at a local scale through community activism and initiatives. I want to stay hopeful and keep imagining a brighter future for myself and others.

I want to keep living and making art about my feelings. Fan explains that engaging with theory as practice during times of great adversity can serve as a “coping mechanism,” helping us stay focused while we continue working towards a brighter future (45). I would like to thank whoever has gone to the trouble of reading this and encourage you to make art about your feelings too. No matter how messy they are. Your feelings are important and deserve to be heard. Even if your art is embarrassing, it will likely be beautiful to someone else who can relate to your pain. Being open and vulnerable does not make you weak. If you are a marginalized person, I hope you take up as much space as possible and find cathartic ways to express yourself. I hope you feel joy amidst the pain and know how loved and cherished you are. I hope that my own struggles were relatable and that this paper did not waste your time. I hope that we can promise each other to keep going. Everything in the world is terrible, but I believe in you. I want to believe in myself too. We are going to do great because we are trying our best, and that is the most anyone can ask for right now given the circumstances.

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