YOU WILL NOT WIN AND YOU MUST DIE, YOU CHURL: Re-Structuring *Beowulf*'s
Polyvalence using Interactive Fiction

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

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This research-creation thesis presents a game experience of close reading the Old English poem *Beowulf* that prioritizes a multivocal structure of the text. It builds upon existing scholarship, like Kevin Kiernan's, addressing the interpretative potential of the Vitellius manuscript's evidence of variance. The poem's fifty-year temporal shift at its mid-point is used as a contextual offramp to highlight its fragmentary construction. A literary analysis of the various hegemonic structures Beowulf participates in and perpetuates problematizes his status as an immutable heroic figure. John D. Niles, Frederick Klaeber, Gale Owen-Crocker, and T.S Miller are amongst those cited as shaping the existing discourse on Beowulf's identity outside of the confines of the poem's hierarchical structure. By re-contextualizing his death and legacy in an interactive fiction game-world titled *YOU WILL NOT WIN AND YOU MUST DIE, YOU CHURL*, this thesis adapts sections of *Beowulf* as inter-connected pieces of a hypertextual system. The principal aims of the game's designing processes are two-fold: prioritizing the voices and perspectives of Beowulf's supporting cast of characters while stretching the limitations of narrative cohesion in the hypertext genre. To connect the thesis' academic argument with this creative component, Nick Montfort's *Twisty Little Passages* and Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* influence the approach towards IF that complements the act of close reading. By gamifying the interpretative textuality of *Beowulf,* the final build of the game encourages players to view ludic choice-making and literary analysis as similar repeatable acts leading to multiple points of (re-)entry to a text.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Beowulf's current form is a lively work-in-progress, its medieval prose both alienates and attracts. It is a story about the heroic exploits of a Viking warrior. It is a tragic exploration of an entire society's desolate end at the hands of an aging monarch. It is both, neither, or another dozen literary signifiers. This Old English epic is in a state of perpetual dis/assembly, re-built by readers filling its many interpretative gaps. Efforts to transcribe *Beowulf* throughout the centuries have resulted in additional layers of mediation from the 'original' text, hinting at an ongoing state of generative openness.

Working from this interpretative openness, my reading of the poem's main narrative beats is summarized below. It is the basis from which the creative component of this thesis begins its own.

Beowulf goes like this: the speaker begins by describing the elaborate and emotional sea burial of a beloved king named Scyld Scefing. He is remembered for his enduring legacy as a defiant warrior-king and generous gift-giver. The name Scyld Scefing is never mentioned again after his body floats out to sea.

A young Geat hero named Beowulf arrives on the shores of Jutland. He presents himself to the Danes' aging king, Hrothgar, as the bold warrior who will rid his people of Grendel, the demon-man haunting their inner walls. Beowulf fights the monster bare-handed and rips him apart, shockingly ending years of bone-deep fear in a single night. One of Grendel's severed limbs becomes a trophy for the warrior-hall. A couple of days later, Beowulf murders Grendel's mother as well, mainly in retaliation for her assassination of Hrothgar's most trusted thane. Though the old, sickly, and sad Halfdane king begs Beowulf to stay, the young warrior returns to Geatland with gifts aplenty.

While surviving the ensuing battles between feuding families, enemies, and former friends, Beowulf becomes King of the Geats. He rules for fifty years, undisturbed. Interrupting this half-century long peace, a treasure-hoarding dragon attacks Beowulf's people. This prompts the king of kings to don his armor and sword to fight a monster one last time.

As he lies covered in draconic poisonous blood, Beowulf begs Wiglaf, his most trusted thane, to let him die while looking at his hard-earned treasure. He does, but the treasure is cursed. Beowulf's body burns on a funeral pyre. His people realize that the rising flames are nothing but a monstrous flare alerting their enemies, The Swedes, to their now defenseless position. Beowulf is, nonetheless, remembered as the most kind and eager for fame.

Two codices were bound together to create the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript, the current material source for *Beowulf* as a complete poem: the Southwick Codex and the Nowell Codex. Scholars identify two hands in the Nowell codex (27). Attempting to date the writing of *Beowulf* is a contested topic, ballparking the construction of the manuscript between the eleventh (Klaeber 27) and seventh century (Fulk 162).

Most academic writing on this subject vacillates between the sixth and tenth centuries. Colin Chase's "Saints' Lives and Royal Lives," for example, points to hagiographical writings of

medieval saints in the late tenth century celebrating "heroic culture and values" (163) as evidence for dating *Beowulf* in the "rapidly changing and chaotic" (163) ninth century that influenced them.

In *The Dating of Beowulf*, Kevin Kiernan argues for a different reading based on his analysis of the manuscript. In his view, *Beowulf* is the product of two eleventh-century poems (14). Though this theory has been met with "marked opposition" (Fulk 162), in view of my project's focus on the poem's fragmentation and the ensuing polyvocality stemming from it, I am prioritizing Kiernan's later dating of the text.

Claiming certainty about *Beowulf*'s material, historical, and authorial beginnings has torn apart and put together this poem for decades. To me, though, the most interesting element of uncertainty about *Beowulf* is the discussion surrounding the mid-point of the poem: Beowulf's homecoming and enduring 50-year rule as king. Kiernan describes the transition in the manuscript between the first two fights and the dragon's end as "abrupt and unplanned" (*The Dating of Beowulf* 14). He consequently argues that the second scribe took over from the first in the middle of a line (15).

This unplanned shift is potentially evidence that the homecoming "may well have been first composed to join together two different *Beowulf* manuscripts and first copied in [the] surviving manuscript" (15). The handwriting is ill-matched, too. The first scribe "did not plan in advance a place for the second scribe to take over the copying" (15). In *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript,* Kiernan also states that the surviving narrative is possibly the result of composite authorship, where a late collaborator attempted to "weld together two slightly different versions of the same story" (252).

This attempt and quasi-failure of melding versions of *Beowulf* together through vellum ink makes it a creatively malleable and academically generative text. Its complex history as an artefact with a fluid and polyvocal identity is the source material for my research-creation project, *YOU WILL NOT WIN AND YOU MUST DIE, YOU CHURL[1]*:

You play as a research assistant working for Dr. Hagard, a professor who has set up a private server named THE ARCHIVE to back-up and document the information found on an abandoned personal site hidden behind an 'UNDER CONSTRUCTION' GIF on a long-forgotten *GeoCities* medieval history site. Titled *BEED'S RESEARCH DISPATCH*, it speaks of a strangely familiar story:

> Beowulf, King of the Geats for the last 50 years, has just perished in a battle against a fearsome wealth-hoarding dragon. BEED, a computational wizard who idolizes the warrior-king and his exploits in her homeland, Denmark, attempts to put together the materials she deems necessary to publish Beowulf's biography with the help of her two feline familiars, WORLD and RIM.

Dr. Hagard believes that this mysterious blog could be material evidence that Beowulf, the hero described in the epic Old English poem *Beowulf,* existed as a real historical figure in 9th century Europe. Your job is to look through the recovered daily pages of this blog and archive, annotate,

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[1] From here on referred to as *CHURL.* The version of the game that is primarily discussed in this document is *PUBLIC VERSION 1*. The executable HTML file and all of its assets are publicly accessible in this repository.

analyze, and report on the information BEED publicly shared with her limited audience, whether it is content she tried to delete or not:

BEED has abandoned the project altogether after months of public research posting on her personal website. Through centuries of data loss, images have broken down, documents have been lost, and dispatches between BEED and her field research assistants have become incomprehensible. It is up to you, the player, to reconstitute the remains of Beowulf's legacy through BEED's eyes. You must pull the project's threads back together.

By utilizing the building blocks of close reading, *CHURL* purposefully does not lead to a singular end-state. The game instead guides readers through a textual puzzle that begins by repeating endlessly the words, 'Beowulf rules the Geats for fifty years and rules them well,' borrowed from Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*:

> the wide kingdom
>
> reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
>
> for fifty winters, grew old and wise
>
> as warden of the land (lines 2207-10).[2]

The main contextual subject forming *CHURL*'s narrative is a baseline knowledge of *Beowulf* and the problematization of its mid-point temporal jump, as cited above. Through the navigation of a non-linear and fragmented interpretation of the text's fictional world, players are prompted to participate in a gamified pattern of literary analysis. The player is incentivised to figure out exactly why/how/when BEED abandoned her project. The end of that investigation explicitly invites players to start anew. One can gain a completely different understanding of the text in their next playthrough.

This speculative fiction adaptation is informed by the manuscript discourse discussed previously and serves as a vehicle for my thesis' argument that the IF genre allows players to think of the society depicted in *Beowulf*, its titular hero, and his monstrous enemies as part of a system rather than a hierarchy.

To address this argument and frame it within the context of a research-creation thesis, I formulated a research question that encompasses three fields of study (English literature, media studies, and design):

> How can the polyvocality of *Beowulf* be prioritized and used to problematize notions of assumed narrative linearity by adapting scenes from the poem into an interactive fiction game?

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the thesis, the research question addresses a two-fold intervention in the early medieval poetry genre using the IF game design software Twine. The result, *YOU WILL NOT WIN AND YOU MUST DIE, YOU CHURL*, is an interactive nonlinear narrative adaptation of *Beowulf*, presenting the text as fragmented raw material for literary analysis by the player. Close reading is an act in which a reader engages deeply with a text such

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[2] The Old English text in Heaney's translation is based on *Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment* edited by C.L. Wrenn and W.F. Bolton, University of Exeter Press 1988 edition.

as to recognize patterns and recurrent motifs. This allows readers to identify thematic linkages between plot elements, character traits, and other overarching textual components. Close reading generally occurs when one connects to a particularly complex or stimulating text (or media artefact). In an academic milieu, close reading is associated with successfully persuasive argumentation by providing textual evidence to support theses about the texts in question.

My focus was centered on building a convincingly complex set of Twine passages that provide players with the ability to understand the polyvocal qualities of *Beowulf* as a text. *CHURL* is partly inspired by Meghan Purvis' modern English translation/adaptation of *Beowulf* into a collection of short poems. By adapting the original text into a series of shorter poems, each with a separate title like "BUILDINGS" (21) or "BAPTISMS" (26), Purvis allows the diverse cast of voices to break out of the normative structure set by the speaker. This adaptation gives additional space (both on the page and within the narrative) to the marginalia – a method that conceptually inspired *CHURL*'s depiction of the poem as an intermedial experience.

Intersecting these ideas with IF game design processes means bringing a new understanding to choice-making within the context of a static text like *Beowulf*. Close reading in *CHURL* is intellectually and emotionally challenging. It entices players to revisit pages, errors, broken links, hidden compartments, and characters. Instead of a map to a physical environment in which a classic IF game would present its narrative, this project offers a literary environment. Beowulf is presented as a hero reborn out of a process of re-constitution. Players parse a hypertext adaptation of the poem. This new materiality argues for an understanding and reading of *Beowulf* as playful. In the same way, contemporary IF games creatively interpret the complexity of 3D environments through textual means. Critical analysis and textual understanding in *CHURL* do not lead to a satisfyingly closed narrative, but act as a jumping off point for re-interpretation.

This is also a project about research and the aesthetics of digital documentation! More specifically, it is about the process of research gathering and attempting to create a coherent whole. The main inspiration behind my approach to adapting *Beowulf* as the result of a botched attempt at maintaining a public research site on an outdated buggy platform is [Electronic Beowulf](). Edited by Kevin Kiernan and programmed by Emil Iacob, the EB site allows users to interact with a compilation of high-quality scans of the Vitellius manuscript. Aesthetically and UX design-wise, this site rocks so hard.

Fig 1. Kiernan, Kevin S. *"Studying Beowulf: Electronic Beowulf - Fourth Edition."* https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/. Accessed 14 April 2025.

Despite last being updated in 2015, the web design of EB is wonderfully dated. Offering a wide array of translation, grammar, and glossary information to guide readers through the manuscript, EB still displays these attachments through old school Windows 95-like pop-ups. Even the more modern addition, the audio file of someone reading the text in Old English, is just dumped on the top of the page without much concern for aestheticizing the UI. EB's commitment to keeping *Beowulf* somewhat difficult to navigate is a great example of how interactive texts, and by extension the IF game genre, create narrative complexity. If EB, and *Beowulf*, are intimidating encounters, then audiences must choose to wrestle with them with the tools provided by the designer.

CHURL also embraces and amplifies the messiness of research. As such, this setting exposes the unfinished nature of BEED's abandoned academic, personal, and material research. The fictional website mimics the aesthetic of *GeoCities*'s blogging functionalities borne of a specific era in internet history where user pages remain unfinished, abandoned, or 'under construction' to this day. Any attempts to re-assemble or alter the design of these digital 'construction sites' triggered a sense of solidarity between users who saw their access to *GeoCities* as "structural as opposed to superficial" (Monahan 173).

Platform-wide events like The Haunting allowed its users to feel like "vital agents of platform politics" (Reynolds and Hallinan 3283), thereby weaponizing the shared visuality that still defines *GeoCities* today. In that sense, that visual culture became synonymous with the early days of the Internet and the cautious, but quickly expanding, practice of establishing oneself on an online social media platform. In turn, the profitability of the site relied on the "monetizable value of access" (3269) to this content and the "threat of revocation" from its designers became an actionable way of tanking its value in protest (3269).

Ultimately, to answer the research question and provide more of an in-depth understanding of how these academic discussions shape *CHURL*'s game world, this thesis begins by presenting sections of the game with accompanying context from the fields of study identified previously.

They are expanded upon through a multidisciplinary literature review, followed by a homebrewed methodology for designing and play-testing a 'no fun' game. This document ends with a comprehensive reflection essay detailing a higher level of interpretation of the design process I followed while iterating on prototypes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and its Influence on the Narrative Design Process

 This review addresses the academic threads that shaped my writing and design decisions for the project: literature about medieval burial rituals, various readings on the structure and form of *Beowulf*, the positioning of medieval literature within the hypertext and/or action-adventure gaming genres, discussions of media literacy and *GeoCities'* legacy as one of the first iterations of online interactive spaces populated by user-generated content.

These sub-chapters elaborate on a few of the 'error pages' in *CHURL* and my thinking behind the narrative design choices made when creating them. The layers of errors and hidden, unsuccessfully deleted, or jumbled pages, act as important pockets of academically sourced information.

In the fictionalized world of *CHURL,* I intentionally obscure access to a deeper and more complex understanding of BEED's research project. I designed her daily posts as fragmented riddles, working from Nick Montfort's chapter on riddles in *Twisty Little Passages*: *An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. For Montfort, "the riddle is best at giving a new perspective on something already familiar in certain ways, in reorganizing our perception or thinking" (60). Through this framework, he argues that the IF genre's evolution is indebted to the enigmatic and interactive nature of riddles.

I am building on this analysis and challenging players to seek out these passages, quotes, and interpretations presented in this literature review. By re-packaging them as supplemental materials to the overarching gameplay loop of close reading, I am creating the "riddle's world" (44) which requires readers to not only "relish passively in the revealing and concealing" (44) but to actively participate in these processes.

Chapter 2.1: Death and Dying in *Beowulf*

 Obsessed with the king's ashy remains as the ultimate proof of the project's legitimacy, BEED's 'field research' hinges on enlisting WORLD and RIM to trudge throughout the land to unearth any clues, curios, or information about the dead and buried – including the monsters Beowulf fought. So, a lot of the academic influence behind my writing of *CHURL* is based on a selected bibliography addressing the themes of death and dying in *Beowulf*.

In *The Four Funerals in Beowulf and the Structure of the Poem*, Gale Owen-Crocker discusses the difference in how the speaker describes Scyld Scefing and Beowulf's funerals. There is a contrast between Scefing's funeral ship being cast out to sea and Beowulf's theatrical cremation pyre scene. Owen-Crocker describes Scefing's ship as "an impatient beast" (23), serving as a way of mythologizing the late king as a heroic figure while personifying the ship as an active agent. Eager to set out to sea, having lived a long and good life, Scefing disappears in the distance bearing the symbolic and emotional weight of his people.

When it comes to Beowulf's funeral, Owen-Crocker reads the scene as having a distinct sense of finality, even if his body becomes one with its funeral vessel like Scefing. The Geat king's body

merges with the pyre. It is also visibly destroyed in the process. Noting a distinct element of intensive labor in both scenes, she also mentions the dragon's carcass being cast out to sea from the cliff's edge. This is the same location on which Beowulf's pyre is built. Owen-Crocker calls the carcass' removal "a truncated travesty of a burial at sea" (86). Scefing's people, the Danes, lovingly take the time to plan, assemble, and decorate his boat – a funeral procession done right. The overall argument these comparisons contribute to is a significant symbolic discrepancy between the emotional burden of Scefing and Beowulf's funerals, which is emphasized by the fact that these scenes act as bookends for the poem.

These readings are the main inspiration behind my choice to open *CHURL* with a dramatic re-writing of the poem's final scene. By juxtaposing Beowulf's death to BEED's own funeral pyre, it was my intent to engender a similar emotional juxtaposition that Owen-Crocker describes. The beginning of the game incentivizes players to take advantage of the site's textual interactivity in order to feel deeply conflicted about the potential knowledge, writings, memories, records, materials, or characters burning alongside BEED when her pyre lights up the screen.

The game also begins its narrative where Beowulf ends his because the larger overarching theme behind my adaptation is an understanding that *Beowulf*'s final scene is readers' first step to many interpretative beginnings. *CHURL*, mirroring *Beowulf*'s bookends, also begins and ends with two contrasting funeral scenes. Seemingly witnessed by her research assistants, WORLD and RIM, Beowulf's funeral acts as the establishing context for the beginning of BEED's research project website.

Harry Berger Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester argue for a more epistemological view of Beowulf's funeral in "Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in *Beowulf,"* describing the self-destructive vision of his people's future. If Beowulf 'the undying' is all smoke and mirrors, his funeral pyre takes the people who built the character within its flames as well (354). When Beowulf dies, his people "become losers" (352). Only Beowulf is allowed to remain a winner.

As the first voice introduced in-game, BEED is the embodiment of taking this death to its interpretative extreme. It becomes an event signifying more than just the loss of a hero. It is also the destruction of BEED's self-fashioned identity of one. This feeling only gets amplified with the passage of time, as the research project repeatedly fails to reach a satisfying conclusion for her. In order to get the narrative tension to that breaking point, Beowulf's cremation scene is introduced early on in the game as a destabilizing agent. During the tutorial section, it is showcasing the 'hidden pages' mechanic. Players learn to look for elements of the site where they can uncover more of these moments of perplexing depth relating to *Beowulf*. They are taught to scrutinize and metaphorically tear apart BEED's curated presentation in the process.

In this way, the first interaction with *CHURL*'s main characters is encased within a gameplay framework built on juxtaposition: BEED does not witness Beowulf's funeral herself, but a very detailed description of it has found itself on her blog somehow anyway. How? Why? And why is this section hidden from public view? This exact same line of questioning is repeated throughout *CHURL*, as BEED asks herself these questions about Beowulf's funeral, and players are confronted with the final scene of the game.
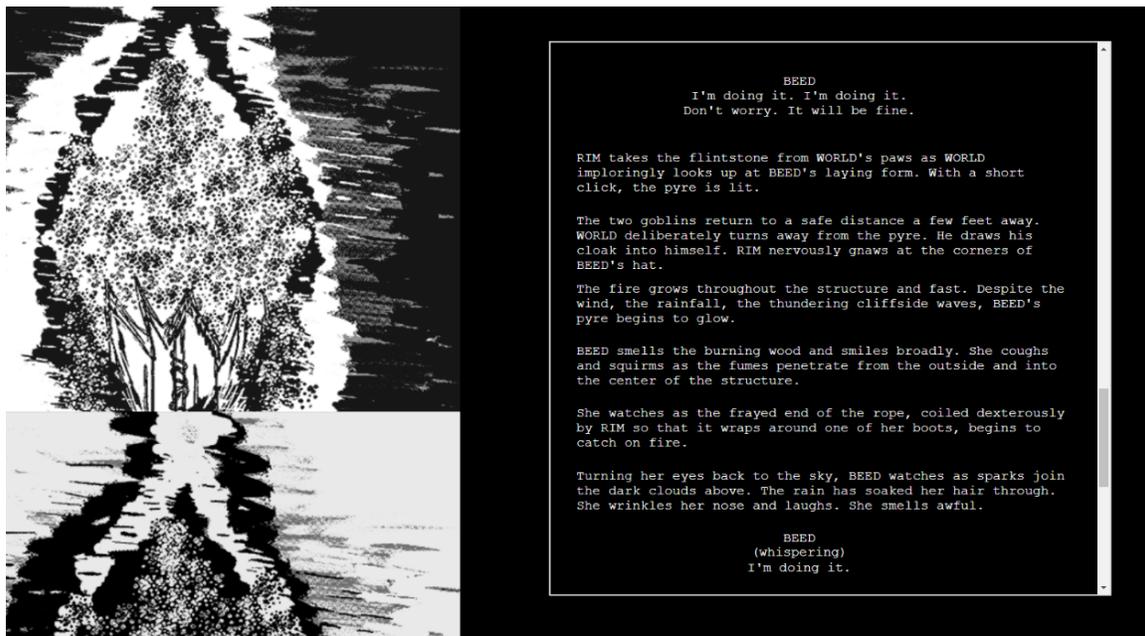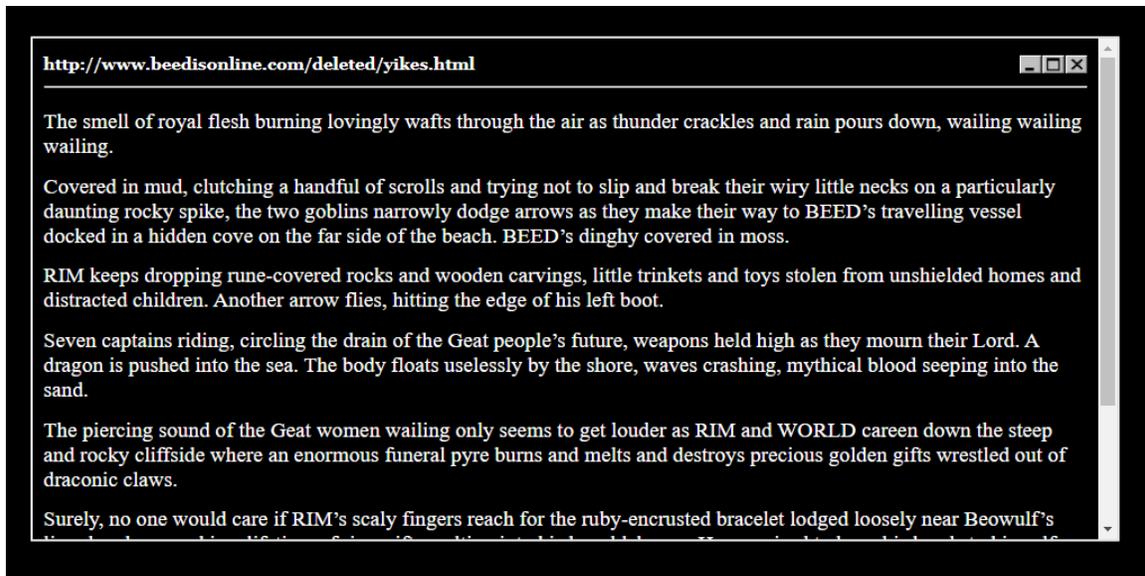
The smell of royal flesh burning lovingly wafts through the air as thunder crackles and rain pours down, wailing wailing wailing.

Covered in mud, clutching a handful of scrolls and trying not to slip and break their wiry little necks on a particularly daunting rocky spike, the two goblins narrowly dodge arrows as they make their way to BEED's travelling vessel docked in a hidden cove on the far side of the beach. BEED's dinghy covered in moss.

RIM keeps dropping rune-covered rocks and wooden carvings, little trinkets and toys stolen from unshielded homes and distracted children. Another arrow flies, hitting the edge of his left boot.

Seven captains riding, circling the drain of the Geat people's future, weapons held high as they mourn their Lord. A dragon is pushed into the sea. The body floats uselessly by the shore, waves crashing, mythical blood seeping into the sand.

The piercing sound of the Geat women wailing only seems to get louder as RIM and WORLD careen down the steep and rocky cliffside where an enormous funeral pyre burns and melts and destroys precious golden gifts wrestled out of draconic claws.

Surely, no one would care if RIM's scaly fingers reach for the ruby-encrusted bracelet lodged loosely near Beowulf's

BEED
I'm doing it. I'm doing it.
Don't worry. It will be fine.

RIM takes the flintstone from WORLD's paws as WORLD imploringly looks up at BEED's laying form. With a short click, the pyre is lit.

The two goblins return to a safe distance a few feet away. WORLD deliberately turns away from the pyre. He draws his cloak into himself. RIM nervously gnaws at the corners of BEED's hat.

The fire grows throughout the structure and fast. Despite the wind, the rainfall, the thundering cliffside waves, BEED's pyre begins to glow.

BEED smells the burning wood and smiles broadly. She coughs and squirms as the fumes penetrate from the outside and into the center of the structure.

She watches as the frayed end of the rope, coiled dexterously by RIM so that it wraps around one of her boots, begins to catch on fire.

Turning her eyes back to the sky, BEED watches as sparks join the dark clouds above. The rain has soaked her hair through. She wrinkles her nose and laughs. She smells awful.

BEED
(whispering)
I'm doing it.

Fig. 2. yikes.html error page accessed through Month 1, Day 5 and BEED's funeral scene, accessed through Month 4, Day 30.

In its last month of active posting, the site is slowly stripped bare over the few days detailing the project's deterioration. As BEED buckles under the emotional and psychological weight of her biography's failure, her site symbolically rots before disappearing completely in a rabbit hole of glitches and errors. If players decide to push through and see the final hidden post from BEED, they arrive at the scene shown in Fig.2, bottom. Just as Owen-Cooker describes the dragon's corpse thrown into the sea, BEED's funeral is a truncated travesty of a cremation pyre.

I intentionally wrote Beowulf's funeral scene (see Fig, 2, top.) through the chaotic perspective of WORLD and RIM as disruptive presences in *Beowulf*'s poetic ending. Emerging from the margins, the goblins are chased off by the mourners as if they were caught stepping on the poem's original manuscript with muddy boots. My take on the poem's opening funeral scene is

purposefully destabilizing. In order to establish the game's commitment to re-structuring the poem, this inter-connected set of narrative fragments form a loosely visible system rather than a clear hierarchy of events.

Chapter 2.2: Beowulf – What Happens if you Realize that he's Just a Guy?

Keeping in mind my research question's focus on highlighting fragmentation and narrative diversity, what pulls together these sources is an overall analysis of Beowulf's agency as a protagonist in relation to the weight of his 'heroic acts.' If *Beowulf* is tangible, its protagonist's legacy being some material element that can be found and analyzed by BEED, then the hierarchical order through which its legitimacy is reinforced should be addressed in its full complexity.

This legitimacy can be questioned and re-interpreted as being part of a complex socio-political system. It includes seemingly unheroic acts, bystanders, thieves, monsters, riddles and feuds all shifting and changing their positioning over the course of months (like in BEED in *CHURL*), years (like Beowulf in *Beowulf*), or centuries (like the research assistants working for Dr. Hagard). Even in the process of transferring Beowulf's story in a different medium, BEED is confronted by the same forces that attack the Geat warrior in the poem: a necessity to perform unthinkable acts with confidence and an ability to hold entire structural frameworks together.

Because of her status as a real, flawed, decidedly cowardly person, BEED cannot bear the weight of her self-imposed structure. She must contend with the possibility that her research and Beowulf's heroic identity are going to be forgotten.

In *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, Kevin Kiernan notes that one of the most prominent voices in the discussion of *Beowulf*'s structure is J.R.R Tolkien's argument that the three monster fights anchor the narrative flow while emphasizing the structural importance of Beowulf's homecoming: "because it is not a heroic event in Beowulf's life, [it] tends to be forgotten. Yet the transition is structurally essential" (Kiernan 251). In *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, Beowulf's centrality is seconded, but this ability to "hold the two parts together" is only given, according to Frederick Klaeber, to "the person of the hero" (80). There is, consequently, a straightforward gradation of difficulty – Beowulf must wrestle with harder enemies over the course of his life.

Tolkien's focus on transition and unheroic actions as essential to Beowulf's story speaks to a level of relatability. John Leyerle's "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*" argues that there is actually an interwoven nature to the structure of the poem: "an episode cannot be taken out of context […] without impairing the interwoven design" (122). In *The Postmodern Beowulf*, Nicholas Howe echoes this interwovenness by observing that readers (or listeners) of Beowulf could not imitate him by slaying mythical monsters, but they could approach that feeling by transferring his story to other settings or languages (63).

BEED's choice to create a public documentation site for Beowulf's legacy is one that she makes in hopes of imitating him. She is exceedingly optimistic about the project at the beginning, but as obstacles keep emerging, she must admit to herself that she cannot defeat monsters bare-handed.

In *Dating Beowulf – Studies in Intimacy*, editors Daniel C. Remein and Erica Weaver discuss how 'knowing' *Beowulf* as a text deals with a certain kind of tricky intimacy, where returning to a passage can either bring readers closer to it or make them realize that they actually don't get it at all. By emphasizing an interlinked and thematically contingent structure, the many errors exposing the research site's hidden insides are imbued with the emotional and psychological weight stemming from a journey of self-exploration for Beowulf, BEED, and the player.
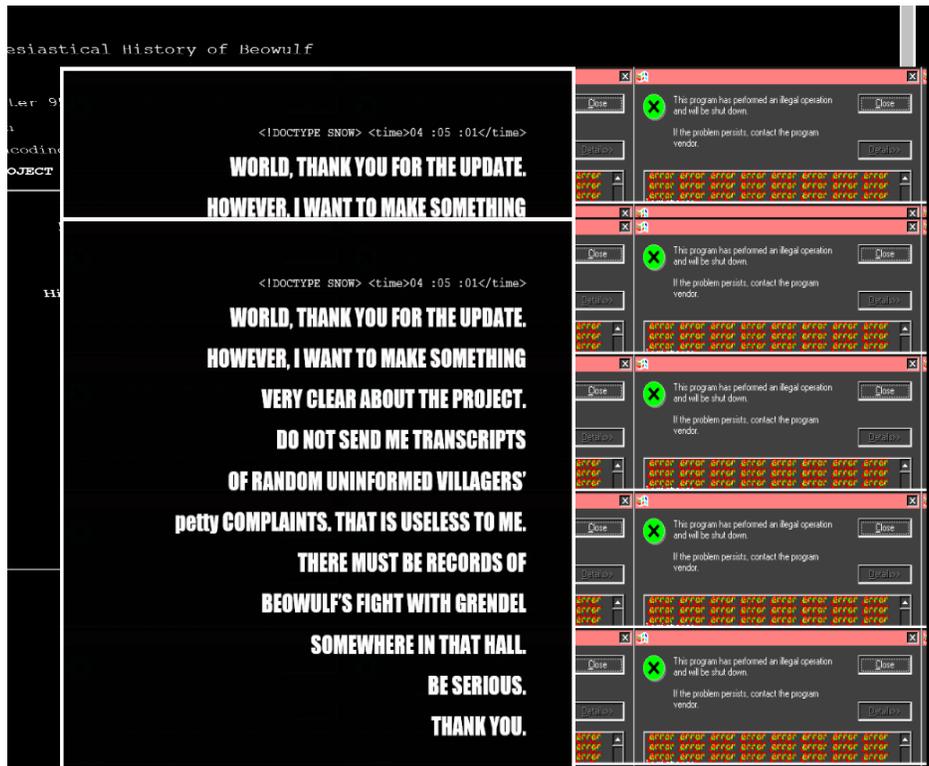
Fig.3. Blinking error overlay covering Chapter X on Month 2, Day 6's THE PROJECT section.

In building on these analyses, I am highlighting the symbolic impact of Beowulf's heroic actions on narrative structure and movement. Tolkien's argument about seeing the Geatish homecoming as structurally essential, but often cast aside, is at the heart of my narrative design process for *CHURL*'s discoverable error pages. BEED's obsession with immortalizing Beowulf as an aspirational heroic figure turns into an impossible task. She can never successfully finish it, in part, because she is determined to ignore any events she deems 'unworthy.' She casts aside any version of her project where he is portrayed as a nuanced figure with some kind of interiority.

Fig.3 is a previously unseen, perhaps deleted, TYPEWRITER response from BEED about the YOUNG WOMAN's interview transcript in Month 1. This type of 'error' is a crucial element in understanding the game-world. It is constructed through the multilayered voices of not only its characters, but also the research that informs its writing. BEED's own tendency to self-censor parts of her research that make her look arrogant and 'unworthy' is exposed for all to see despite her attempts to bury it.

At the same time, this image is a repurposed Twine passage from the very first version of *CHURL,* wherein players embodied BEED replying in real time to RIM and WORLD's dispatches. Fig.3 shows how my design process is impacted by the academic underpinnings of

the project, where the transference of *CHURL* 1.1 to *CHURL* 1.5 is indicative of an interwovenness. John Leyerle's "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*" argues for an interwoven nature to the structure of *Beowulf* as well, stating that an episode could not be taken out of context without impacting the overall narrative (122). In *The Postmodern Beowulf*, Nicholas Howe echoes this reading by observing that readers (or listeners) of Beowulf could not imitate him by slaying mythical monsters, but they could approach that feeling by transferring his story to other settings or languages (63).

As the designer and writer of the doomed narrative BEED is forced into, consequently, I would be remiss if I did not mention that this analysis applies to my own development of *CHURL*. When I first began working on this project, the length of the narrative was approximately triple the size of the finished thesis build. As the gradation of difficulty increases for Beowulf through the three fight set pieces in the poem, the difficulty of building *CHURL* out as I initially envisioned became increasingly impossible. I had to accept defeat by committing unheroic actions: transitioning *CHURL* to a shorter narrative game style.

There is an emerging theme of malleable interiority and transformation that this section brings to the surface, allowing for some productive tension in challenging it. BEED's project is fundamentally story-shaped. It attempts to exist as a straightforward biographical document but finds itself unraveling and revealing its messy hagiographical nature. My design process led me to combining versions of *CHURL* to create the next build. It is precisely because *Beowulf* is so prone to fragmentation that it can be opened to complex inwardness by interacting with it as a textual playground. Multiple layers of storytelling can coexist as relevant material to enrich the understanding of one another.

Chapter 2.3: Medieval Burials, Pyres, and Deathly Remains

The scholarly literature on burial and/or gravesite remains addresses how medieval funerary culture was mired in contradictions and experimentation. These varying perspectives were largely respected by the many societal pockets co-existing at a time of intense geo-political flux. There is evidence of an underlying understanding of the religious and cultural nuances through various anthropological research nodes. This is useful material for how these complexities are intensified and satirized in *CHURL* by putting BEED in charge of interpreting historical finds while connecting all artefacts, even the most mundane, back to Beowulf.

John M. King's "Grave-Goods as Gifts in Early Saxon Burials (ca. AD 450-600)" challenges the assumptions that items placed in Anglo-Saxon graves were predominantly goods that belonged to the person interred. According to King, grave-goods were often gifts. These items were used in funerary rituals that established and reproduced social, cultural, and ethnic bonds. In a section on burial sites at Apple Down, Alton a pattern of infant graves with knives found in them (221) shows that these gifts given to the children as indicators of identity or 'personhood.'

Howard Williams, in "Material Culture as Memory: Combs and Cremation in Early Medieval Britain," writes about the significance of objects in graves as well, but in a more practical way by describing them as "technologies of remembrance" (93). Williams focuses on combs as the main material object acting as a symbolic representation of the many ways in which the dead can be remembered. Combs placed in graves may have been regarded as essential parts of the

deceased's personal identity. However, they were also symbols of reconstitution and embodiment, ways in which the living could keep a part of the deceased for themselves.

My main interest in these readings is the idea of an everyday object given in trust transcending its usefulness and becoming something more substantial. How can a narrative about Beowulf and his burial alongside the treasure he died for be affected by these cultural anchors? What if BEED sees Beowulf as a great hero when, in some ways, he also was a useful tool transcending his intended purpose? In essence, her attempt to tell Beowulf's story is in itself a technology of remembrance. *CHURL* deals with a symbolic sense of undeath by allowing players to relive his life many times over.

THE YOUNG WOMAN: I do sometimes wonder during sleepless nights whether Beowulf would have set foot in Heorot Hall if there were no monsters for him to rid us of. What we could have built if he and his Geat Lord father did not only consider the Half-Danes as **QUEST GIVERS**.

WORLD: Grendel and his mother, right?
THE YOUNG WOMAN (nodding): Yes. Fat lot of good it did us to boast so proudly of Grendel's destruction.

THE YOUNG WOMAN points to a GREAT HALL at the center of HEOROT. She spits on the ground.

THE YOUNG WOMAN: My mother spun the tale: Fifty years we kept that beastly arm nailed to the door of the honor-hall. After five, the flesh had rotted off the brattling bones. Too sickly to eat, too pathetic to display. And yet Lord Hrothgar insisted on its evil presence.

Fig. 4. Section of WORLD_DISPATCH_2 accessed through the DISPATCH ARCHIVE on Month 1, Day 27.

I decided, early on, that BEED needed to continually cycle between the highs of writing about Beowulf and the lows of interacting with the material reality of *Beowulf* in order to highlight the dichotomy between her yearning for the limitless heroic potential she sees in him and the often-incoherent portrait of a man's interiority when constructed through fading memories and peripheral accounts. The narrative arc between BEED's first and last post is then built by a pattern of perceived triumph and unexpected loss.

She is established as the main narrator of the project at the beginning of Month 1. Just as she thinks that she is getting somewhere with the biography's focus on Beowulf's status as a 'hero,' she gets the dispatches from Heorot. WORLD and RIM talk to the Halfdanes and report information that feels if not contradictory, maybe more telling of the decay that the passage of time has caused to Beowulf's identity (Fig. 4). This contradiction between what BEED believes and WORLD sees is heightened the more she finds herself at odds with their field research results.

As she increasingly holds on to the belief that Beowulf is the central, and only, figure that upholds heroic societal ideals, the characters who disagree or contradict her reading increasingly overwhelm her pre-established narrative. They weaken her control over the project with multiple setbacks. This disempowerment BEED experiences is connected to what Renée Trilling calls the

aestheticization of nostalgic longing in *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Historical Representation in Old English Verse*, an ideology that allows fragments of the heroic tradition to be "reused to construct a new edifice thoroughly imbued with the aura of history" (5).

BEED's nostalgic desire to resurrect Beowulf as the hero she has always imagined him to be does not materialize out of thin air. She is clearly attempting to work with existing ideas and relics related to his time in Heorot. She instructs WORLD and RIM to seek out information from the Halfdanes and posts the full transcript. However, as Trilling describes the heroic Anglo-Saxon poetry construct as a patchwork stitched together to "create a coherent picture of historicity" (4), BEED's documentation seeks to reconstruct Beowulf's life out of a combination of real and imagined fragments of his past.

As the project unfolds, BEED molds and re-shapes herself in an attempt to escape the complexities of a multi-faceted identity. The hierarchical order she imposes on the narrative is mirrored in her self-image and lack of connection to the material world itself. For all her commitment to closeness, connection, and immediacy to Beowulf, BEED is a paranoid and tower-bound eyewitness to WORLD and RIM's interactions with the materiality she yearns to understand.

An untenable inner contradiction builds from that intent, making historical coherence impossible. As evidenced by THE YOUNG WOMAN's retelling of the fight against Grendel, the aesthetics of nostalgia that BEED clings to so fiercely are problematized by the passage of time. While BEED sees the material evidence of Grendel's arm as having the potential to reconstitute Beowulf's identity as heroic warrior-lord, the citizens of Heorot find little comfort in the physical reminder of the grim gift his death brings to their land.

WORLD's conversation with THE YOUNG WOMAN poses then several challenges to the stability of BEED's reading of Beowulf: Is there a way of seeing Beowulf as someone aware of this transactional relationship he has with his own legacy and power? What is personhood or identity to someone who is placed as the locus of so many literary classics? The fantasy of reconstructing his identity in *CHURL* is to do so without the obstacles of narrative linearity or coherence.

To emphasize this, I also re-contextualize his death and legacy in *CHURL*, a game-world that repeatedly aims to wrestle the narrative from BEED's insistence on authorial control. In BEED's final post, she laments the fact that Beowulf's body, his material remains, are lost forever. For her, the notion of immediacy with a monster Beowulf fought, like the dragon, is a benchmark she already failed to achieve. The realization setting in that she will never be able to see, touch, and document what she thinks is Beowulf's true identity is too much to bear.

This focus on immediacy and BEED's paradoxical fear of it connects to an earlier point: Nick Montfort's argument about the ludological links between the IF genre and riddles. IF works incentivize players to leave the 'last room' that concludes the gaming experience and leads them towards a post-solution space. By replaying the same scenarios with the goal of testing out the vocabulary options of the parser, a new 'room' is created.

This dovetails into the way Old English riddles, for example, elude a definitive ending to the process of solving them in a conventionally successful manner by the deliberate obfuscation of material knowledge, the difficulty of establishing one interpretation of highly figurative

language, and the fragmented nature of medieval manuscripts. All of these elements combined create "the specific way in which the literary riddle makes strange – and then invites the riddlee to figure its strangeness" (Montfort 44).

Over the course of a lengthy investigative process involving WORLD and RIM's discoveries and dispatches, BEED is compelled to solve the strangeness of Beowulf's identity. She consistently refuses to engage in the process of stress-testing the one-dimensionality of her answer. WORLD and RIM, on the other hand, are questioning the material world around them in almost every dispatch, re-treading old ground and discovering new paths. New encounters re-mold players' perceptions of Beowulf and the socio-cultural context he emerges from. BEED does not participate in the post-solution space of *CHURL* because her death must initiate its existence, forcing players to take ownership over the representation of her complex identity in return.

Chapter 2.4: Examining *Beowulf: The Game* and Explaining Why CHURL Looks Like That

This section addresses academic discourse on the IF genre and its permutations today, the visual and rhetorical importance of *GeoCities*, and a look at the video game adaptation of *Beowulf*. Choice-making, especially in the context of the carnal/virtue system, is what interests me the most about *Beowulf: The Game*. The linearity enforced on the poem through the adaptation as well as the extreme simplification of what 'medieval heroic virtue' means to Beowulf are elements that I see as potential springboards for a comparison to Anglo-Saxon contemporaries' writings on morality, free will, and human actions.

Beowulf: The Game came out in 2007. Developed by Ubisoft Shanghai, the hack and slash title received mixed to negative reviews at the time of release. Following the narrative of the poem quite loosely, *Beowulf: The Game* is characteristic of several genre-specific markers of the mainstream medieval adventure video game market. Players control Beowulf while fighting mythical monsters and defeating bosses in between moments of narrative focus where mead-drinking and strength contests highlight the heroic 'lifestyle' of a soon-to-be king.

One of the core gameplay mechanics establishing the two possible endings of the game is introduced during the episode where Beowulf swims against Breca. In the game, Beowulf is dragged under the waves by Grendel's mother. She announces that he has been chosen to be her champion and gifts him with 'Carnal Power,' which he must use at the expense of his valor and virtue as a hero. This unlocks the game's 'Carnal Mode,' where players can choose to make more violent and heavier hits on enemies, but at a considerable moral and strategic cost.

Carnal Mode can make Beowulf hit friendly NPCs and with each use, Beowulf walks up the ladder of dishonor, chaos, and monstrosity. When one finishes *Beowulf: The Game* having predominantly used Carnal Mode, Beowulf's death leads to a bleak future for his people, one that the game's narration clearly lays the blame on his feet for. If the player focuses on 'Heroic Valor' instead, the kingdom is portrayed as having an optimistic chance of survival after their king's passing.
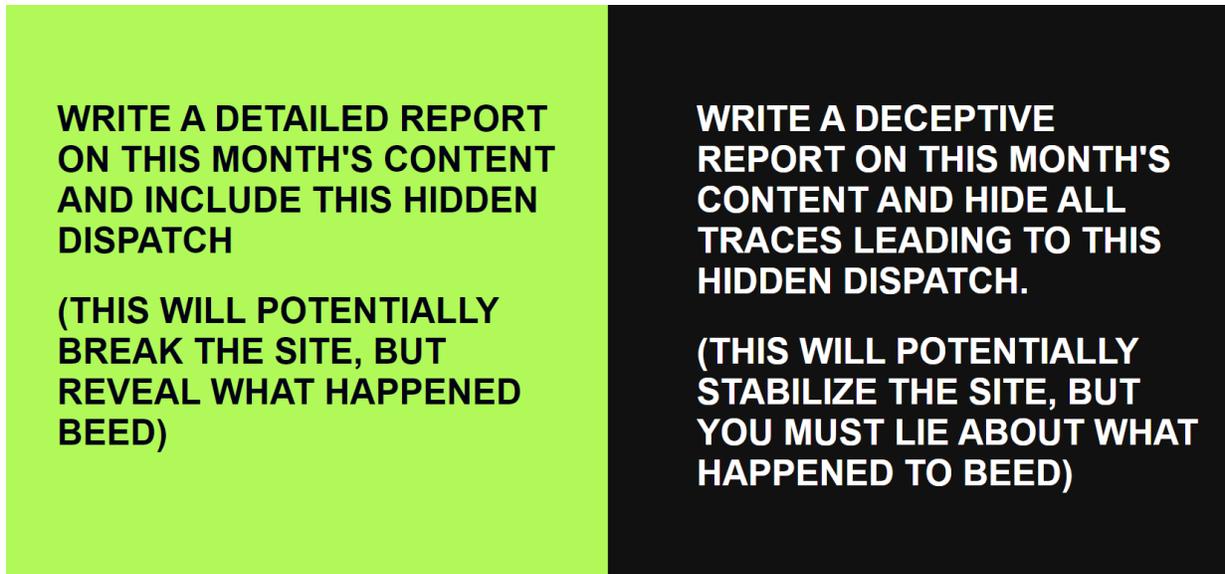
Fig. 5. Screenshot of the 'final' choice players make, determining the epilogue text of the game.

In *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England*, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe discusses the history of Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural notions of agency and free will greatly influenced by Augustinian religious philosophy. By the twelfth century, the doctrine explained human freedom as underpinned by moral responsibility, specifically pointing to free will as the "faculty by which human beings made choices" (16). The concept of free choice, in this formula, carries the bulk of the moral weight – choices can be labeled as 'good' or 'bad' and act as the vehicles through which moral responsibility is assigned. As a result, "the will as disposition may be good or bad, but choice, the endpoint of any process of the will, is the action in the world" (16).

The endings of *Beowulf* and *The Game* both address the poem's nostalgia for a desolate past, its anxieties about an instable present, and its ambivalent acceptance of a radically different future without Beowulf. My interest in Augustinian philosophy despite its popularization after the writing of *Beowulf* (9th century) is also rooted in exploring narrative agency with a distinctly multi-linear perspective.

As O'Keeffe points out, choice, "with its implication of options and alternatives becomes the mechanism by which moral responsibility is assigned" (16). This focus on choice, not will, as the endpoint of a process amounting to the concretely impactful, pragmatic 'action in the world' is similar to how *Beowulf: The Game* approaches the gradation of 'bad' and 'good' choices when faced with the moralistic gameplay of the Carnal/Virtue system.

Players aren't necessarily thinking about the consequences of Beowulf's corruption at the hands of a monstrous power, but by making the choice to utilize it, players submit to the Augustinian framework as the end point of immoral action in the world. One example that highlights this is the difficulty of boss battles vs. regular enemies - some of the bosses become almost impossible to defeat without using carnal power. When trying to avoid an insurmountable challenge, ill-gained supernatural power holds a certain allure.

What *CHURL* showcases is the complexities of the philosophical and design aspects discussed above. More concretely, Fig.5 shows how the IF genre can address the dichotomy of moral choice-making in a more nuanced way. This final choice allows for slippages in these tight frameworks, especially as the last opportunity for interactivity in a hypermediated IF game.

As a style with a visual language whose "goal is to remind the viewer of the medium" (Eskelinen 272), hypermediacy allows for a gameplay experience that eschews linearity and unification. The core narrative-gameplay thrust of *CHURL* is filling out a series of data reports at the end of each month of content, answering guided questions about the main sections of BEED's site. By subverting this system with the final binary choice presented in Fig. 5, I highlight the game's ability to problematize the dilemma of choice-making as represented in mainstream medieval adventure games like *Beowulf: The Game*.

Espen J. Aarseth describes the tensions within IF games between interpretative insight and control in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*: we "want this text to tell [our] story; the story that could not be without [us]" (4). The more the narrative slips away from what BEED wants to write about, say, research, or really do, the more the voices surrounding the blog shift the game's objectives from the rigid structure set by her to digressions and insights into the wider game-world of *Beowulf.* After closely reading hours of content from her, BEED's death challenges players to decide how, or whether she even will be, remembered for years to come. The game's final narrative beat is where BEED finally releases herself from attempting to gain control over the site, its content, the project, its perspective, the research, and most importantly, Beowulf.

The abrupt way in which the site collapses is designed to shock players into worrying about the loss of their research work and the raw material it feeds from. So, when the game asks players to choose what to do with the remains, salvaging or disposing of them, that final choice should be informed by players' history of intentional choice-making. If players have investigated every nook and cranny of *BEED'S RESEARCH DISPATCH* and analyzed the content, the structural collapse can be both exciting and terrifying. But the choice here is decidedly not about feeling 'good' or 'bad' about the decision made.

BEED becomes one with her treasure when she dies – as Beowulf did – and her research burns alongside her, used as kindling for the fire. No matter what path the player picks, BEED, now freed the chains of her own narrative, haunts *CHURL* by merging with the outer narrative framework the player has been introduced to.
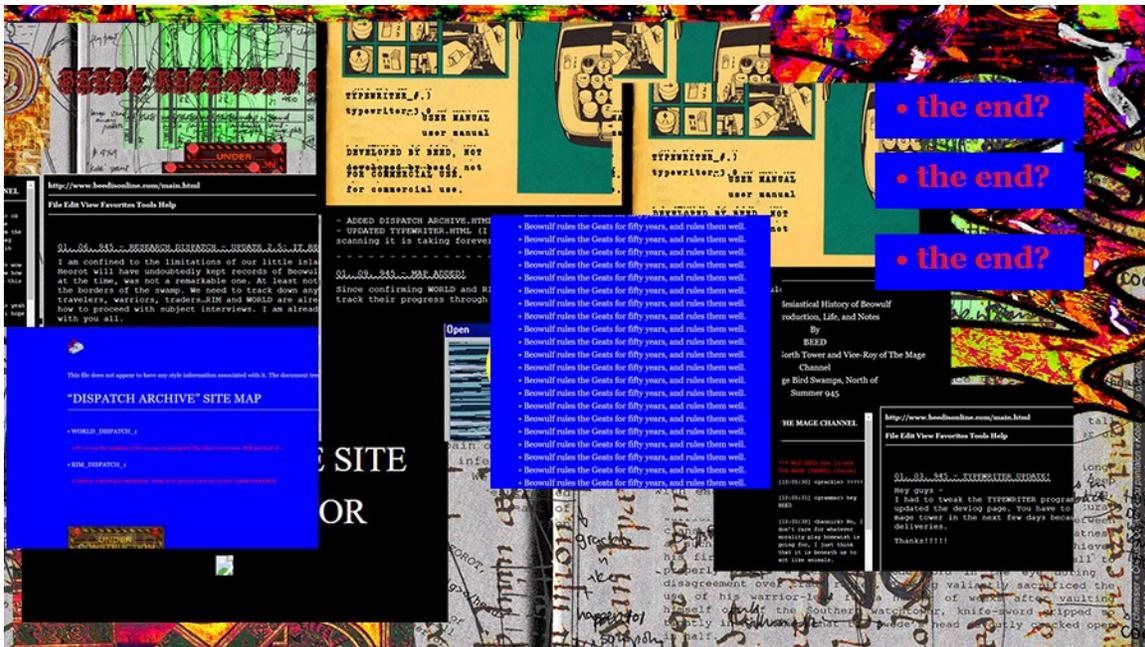
Fig. 6. Section of the background image pattern of the 'SITE MELTDOWN' passages.

Ultimately, by imitating a loose structure of public research for BEED to input her findings into, her personal site becomes a space where linearity is clearly an ambitious goal that has devolved into a fragmented collection of text, images, archives, diagrams, maps, and more (see Fig. 6). In "Structural Patterns and Hypertext Rhetoric," Mark Bernstein discusses the hypertext narrative's reliance on hyperlinks: "most large hypertext narratives […] depend on dynamic links, links that change behavior as the reader moves through the document."

Working from Bernstein's explanation, I consider the Electronic Beowulf site as a hypertext document, inviting users to interact with the Cotton Vitellius MS's narrative by clicking on links that change both the text and their own behaviors as readers of *Beowulf* - As evidenced by a review of the CD-ROM version of EB published in *Internet Archeology*'s issue released in the year 2000, this hypertext layout has remained relatively unchanged and…a little difficult to deal with to this day:

> Navigation depends largely on consistent but ponderous menus written in cumbersome Javascript. Simple HTML navigation would have sufficed for much of this. A bewildering array of frames occupy the browser from time to time, but their multiplication is often unnecessary. A few design changes would make for an altogether less intimidating encounter. (Kilbride)

Interactivity here is being conflated with ease of access, not accessibility. *Beowulf* should be accessible, in the sense that readers should be able to interact with the physical manuscript no matter where they are in the world, with additional tools to help them navigate the poetic form, language, and structure. But that does not necessarily mean that *Beowulf* should suddenly become a modern English text imbued with an ease of access to that very form, language, and structure. These transformative links are then necessary to form the "rich structure" (Bernstein) of the hypertext and avoid the narrative's collapse into a simplistic sequence. EB, as a

straightforward educational and literary online tool, embraces the simplicity of its links, and I designed *CHURL* as a hypermediated version of that concept.
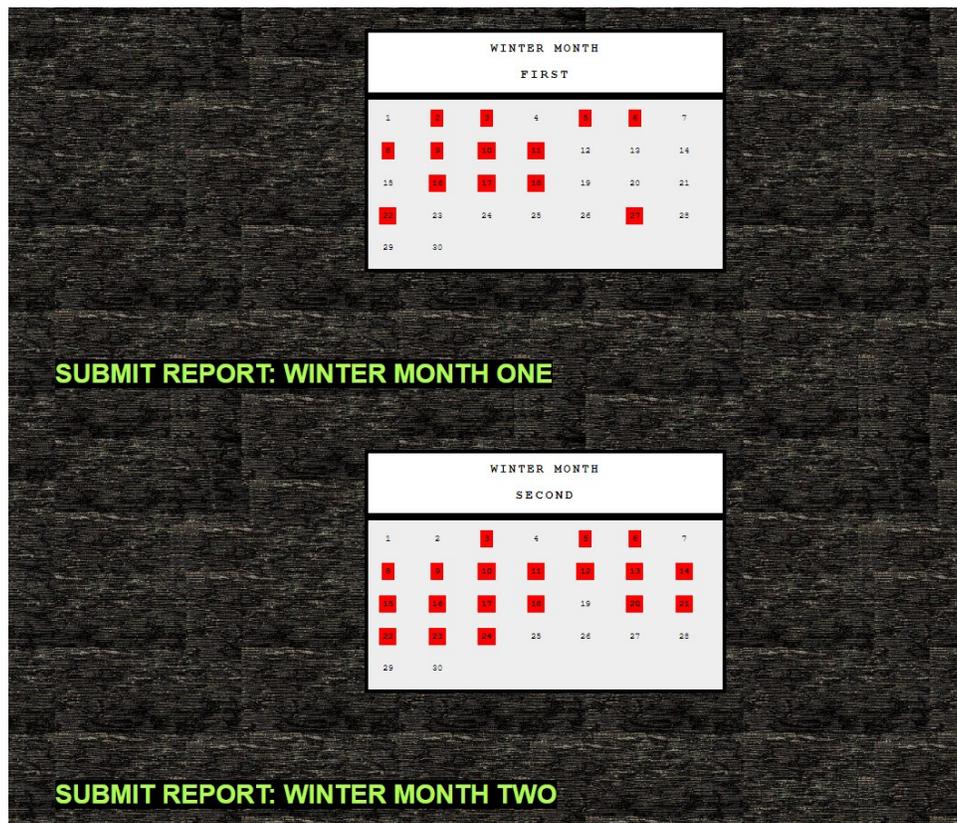

Fig. 7. Section of the CALENDAR INDEX page which displays all the visitable pages of the site.

This dovetails into my decision to lay BEED's entire post history bare for players to peruse in no particular chronological order, which is also inspired by the dynamic tensions Markku Eskelinen describes in in *Cybertext Poetics: The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory* as 'dismemberings' in attempting to rebuild coherence within digital spaces: "Time and space do not match: points of departure from specific points in the narrative (screens, links) result in displaced arrivals" (137). Both the narrative, as BEED's quest to immortalize Beowulf is in many ways representative of a desire to live on as something bigger than herself, and the gameplay mechanics, are attempts at building something resembling a coherent whole out of a puzzle made of hyperlinks.

By using the index for the first time, the player will begin looking through the semi-organized chaos of BEED's writings, collectables, and correspondences about Beowulf. What comes out of analyzing that content is a product of many decisions made by the player: deciding what and who Beowulf is to BEED, the game-world itself, and most importantly, answering these questions in relation to their own understanding of the in-game text. BEED's site, by virtue of its incompatibility with a master narrative, encourages multiple readthroughs. Consequently, the interactivity in *CHURL* argues for web-crawling as a generative task when one commits to reading closely all aspects of the site's content especially when said content is confusing, seemingly unfinished, or incoherent.

It is at this point that I must answer the question many who find *CHURL* overwhelmingly difficult to navigate ask: Why the hell does it look like that?

I have a distinct obsession with the 1.0 Web aesthetic that permeated much of the early years of the internet. One of the reasons I find myself inspired by EB's approach to *Beowulf* is that the site feels like a classic IF experience of the physical manuscript. It also contains a lot of elements that are reminiscent of *GeoCities* – a platform that is emblematic of how I approach designing *CHURL* as a fragmented, multilayered, and ultimately messy, text.

In early 1999, Yahoo! purchased the social media platform *GeoCities*, describing it in a press release published on January 28th as "the definitive leader in personal publishing tools and Web-based communities" ("Yahoo! To Acquire Geocities"). Soon after, the company introduced new terms of service that would integrate their new acquisition into the Yahoo! user experience umbrella. The revised TOS imposed a certain level of control over *GeoCities* users' sites, seemingly granting Yahoo! the right to use any of the content uploaded to the *GeoCities* servers without notifying users or providing any credit to them for their work. Following a series of similarly unpopular platform changes, as users realized what Yahoo!'s new TOS stipulated, millions organized a 'Haunting' by removing all colorful design elements and distinctive images on their pages, replacing the content with a generic grey background and text detailing the protest against Section 8 of the Yahoo!/*GeoCities* terms of service instead.

The effectiveness of *GeoCities* as a generative web host relied on users consistently making content for, working on, and expanding their web pages. In that sense, what the platform ultimately thrived on was its ability to always be seen as a 'platform-in-progress' by both its users and owners. Because of this heavy reliance on visuality, although *GeoCities* pages were not always centered around presentations of users' personal lives, the continuous process of building up and updating one's site meant that it became an embodiment of its creator. If the current notions of "image datasets as ensembles" (Mackenzie and Munster 2) define how platforms organize users' profiles and interactions with each other through massive AI-led aggregations of images made "platform-ready" (3), *GeoCities* existed at the tipping point in internet history where users provided the platform with the image set necessary for its continued relevance and growth.

As a grassroots online visual boycott, The Haunting represented the leveraging of this power as creators and owners of an iconic set of self-representative visual signifiers fought against the beginnings of a platform access conflict. This protest speaks to an important emotional attachment posters felt towards the visuality of their personal sites, and a strong belief in the ownership of a collective visual culture that they felt was about to be revoked. *GeoCities* users felt an intrinsic sense of proprietorship over their pages, and this only became more obvious as the site was purchased by Yahoo! and became part of what José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal call the platform society, "a society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by and through a corporate global digital platform ecosystem" (13).

And it is the images rather than the text, that still to this day serve as the function of identification for what is known as the '*GeoCities* aesthetic.' Because of this heavy reliance on visuality, although *GeoCities* pages were not always centered around presentations of users' personal lives, the continuous process of building up and updating one's site meant that it became a kind of digital mask of its creator. Hans Belting, in *Face and Mask: A Double History*, refers to the mask as the "excarnation of the face" given that it feels as though "it 'disembodies'

a face in order to 'embody' someone else" (19) and this disembodied effect permeates the visual language of *GeoCities* sites.

Through the rising popularity of *GeoCities* over the years, this loose structural set of images and design elements created a network centered around self-produced visuality that would remain ever shifting and inherently instable. One of the most recognizable images of this kind is the 'Under Construction' sign and its many permutations.

Fig. 8. GIF image used throughout BEED's site and the reason Dr. Hagard's discovers her site to begin with.

More than just being an indicator of a site that is unfinished, the presence of the 'Under Construction' image on a *GeoCities* page indicated that the page one was viewing was not only active but consistently transforming itself. The Haunting participants emphasized this transitionary state in their defiantly static site re-designs.

In the larger context of my project being an IF adaptation of *Beowulf,* a medieval poem echoing the same questions about nostalgia and incompleteness, the manuscript from which *Beowulf* is known as a poem today is also considered 'under construction' in much the same way I have explained above. Philology studies relating to medieval manuscript culture discuss a certain kind of incoherence that also haunts texts like *Beowulf*, which are borne out of a culture that "did not simply live with diversity, it cultivated it" (Nichols 9).

Before the advent of printing technology, the manuscript culture upheld by the act of supplementation rather than "faithful imitation" (3) by medieval scribes focused on the practice of continual rewriting – different versions of the same text were circulated and built upon. In this sense, adaptation rather than copying could characterize medieval writing, which Bernand Cergulini in "Eloge de la variante" describes as not simply being part of the production of variance – it is variance (28).

The Cotton Vitellius manuscript, as I discussed in the introduction, embodies this variance due to *Beowulf*'s fragmentary state as a text. Despite efforts to linearize and tidy up its messy origins, the poem, similarly to *GeoCities* users' aesthetic identities, works against being 'platform-ready' or structurally uniform. This is echoed in how *EB* approaches the text, too. Modern readers are confronted by "idiosyncrasies and incoherences, with gaps in the text, with anomalies" (Flesichman 21) present in medieval documents like the Cotton Vitellius manuscript, even when made available on a digital platform.

CHURL is a locus for these intersecting ideas about transformation and multivalence, where the chaotic visuality of *GeoCities* and the "adventure in supplementation" (2) of medieval manuscript culture bring players closer to the source material while eschewing a hierarchical structure in its presentation.

Fig. 9. Section of Month 2, Day 15's main page when GRENDEL THE RULE-BREAKER hacks the site for the first time.

CHURL also brings to the forefront the raw, open-ended, and in-progress nature of online self-identification that sites like *GeoCities* established in the social media space's infancy. Users saw their access to *GeoCities* as "structural as opposed to superficial" (Monahan 173). Fig. 9 showcases the clearest example of this sentiment applied to BEED's site: Grendel taking over for a couple of days!

GRENDEL THE RULE-BREAKER is an abrasive and annoying teenager in a monster's body[3], obsessed with writing gruesome poetry about killing kings. In all senses of the word, he is a troll living in his mother's basement. When Grendel snatches the TYPEWRITER from the familiars, not only does his presence online pop textually, but also aesthetically. His voice is so distinctively loud and disruptive from the established characters' cadences that his presence is felt throughout the entire site immediately.

In the chapter he contributes to BEED's biography with, he constantly uses kennings. They are compound words used as highly descriptive synonyms for words in Old English poetry. The kenning, described by Tolkien as "flash[ing] a picture before us, often the more clear and bright for its brevity, instead of unrolling it in a simile" (59), is a literary device tailor-made for GRENDEL THE RULE-BREAKER, a larger-than-life loser who loves literal flashing pictures.

In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," the question of monstrosity always surviving its attempted murder or erasure is addressed with a comparison to another medieval text: "No matter how many times King Arthur killed the ogre of Mount Saint Michael, the monster reappeared in another heroic chronicle" (38). The decision to include Grendel's resurrection in *CHURL* is the result of my own agreement with Cohen's theses and my interest in complicating the use of *GeoCities*' visual language in the game.

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[3] Thank you to John Gardner's *Grendel* for the inspiration.

As Month 2 unfolds, the narrative control is sharply stolen from BEED's hands again. Grendel is revealed to be alive and hacks the site, forcing her to let him have his own section in the biography where he, like WORLD and RIM do in their dispatches, questions and contradicts BEED's reading of Beowulf. To Grendel, he was a fine warrior, but the now two-headed monster noticed in his eyes a palpable sense of guilt, remorse, and hunger for absolution that he did not understand nor care for.

Grendel's monstrosity allows him to resist any classification within a hierarchical system, something that Beowulf is beholden to by virtue of his status as a hero of the Geat people, the *human* people. Grendel, instead of trying to integrate into a system that categorically shuns him, demands "a system allowing polyphony, mixed response, and resistance to integration" (Cohen 40). From the clunky placement of animated images interspersed between blocks of text to the use of colors that completely obstruct visibility and made any given page quasi-unreadable, *GeoCities* users felt free to express themselves online with minimal restrictions on their curated personal site presentations. These feelings culminated in the successful boycott of Yahoo!'s new TOS. Grendel's similar resistance to Beowulf's humanity is aesthetically transposed onto BEED's site, denying her the opportunity to maintain a hierarchy that sidelines him.

Grendel invading BEED's site is then emblematic of the desire to reclaim structural ownership, echoing the sentiments felt by *GeoCities* users who participated in The Haunting. To ultimately connect it back to his roots as an antagonist in *Beowulf*, his unrestrained excitement in populating the site's many pages with images, moving text, and his own digital identity duplicated over existing content represents the all-encompassing ownership he feels over the prevailing narrative, reminiscent of his characterization as humanity's immortal foe in the original text.

Chapter 3: Design and Workflow Reflection

The methodologies involved in creating *CHURL* embrace the concept of failure as a generative term. The idea of an unfinished, incomplete, and flawed process permeates my thesis' intervention in all three chosen fields of study. More specifically, *CHURL* in its current state is contributing to the genre of 'no fun' games as defined by Bo Ruberg in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* and has been iterated on using the Method for Design Materialization (MDM) developed by Pippin Barr, Danny Godin, Rilla Khaled, and Jonathan Lessard.

Chapter 3.1: *CHURL* is Not Fun and That's Fine

In "Best and Only Bulwark: How Epic Narrative Redeems *Beowulf: The Game*," Candace Barrington and Timothy English describe the moralistic gameplay mechanic of the Valor/Carnal system in *Beowulf: The Game* as using barbarism as a way of varying gameplay (*Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* 34). By leaning into the stereotypical notions of what medieval societies looked like, developers highlight the most sensational and alluring aspect of *Beowulf*: violence! Even the first sequence changes the poem's opening in Heorot to match the new tone: the soldiers who greet Beowulf at their shores do not lead him to Hrothgar unharmed. Instead, Beowulf and his men fight hundreds of Danes while making their way up to the hall.

The fragmentation of *Beowulf* is seamlessly glossed over by the game adaptation thanks to the Valor/Carnal system because players are either guided to feel bad for being a bad guy or good for staying virtuous when the credits roll. However, one thing remains clear: you're killing everything and everyone in your path. It is almost as if the developers knew players would ask "Why is Beowulf so strong if he isn't killing everyone?" and lose interest entirely.

The changes brought upon the poem serve multiple purposes, like "working to make the narrative fit gamers' expectations [and] reinforcing gamers' notions of medieval barbarism" (32). Barbarism, as Barrington and English expand on, is at the root of player choice in this adaptation and other contemporary depictions of medieval texts in mass media products. Not only does it provide an easy path for development by presenting two clear poles on a moral compass, but it also fulfills the expectations of popular imagination about the medieval warrior.

'Fulfilling the expectations of popular imagination' is the first bullet point on my list of things I DO NOT want *CHURL* to do when I think about its target audience. Instead of leaning into barbarism, and by extension, the immense amount of importance *Beowulf: The Game* puts on players 'having fun', I wrote and designed *CHURL* to be a 'no fun' game.

Existing as the opposite of Good Time Games, 'no fun' questions the necessity of considering fun as the most crucial component of whether a game is good or not. In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bo Ruberg describes 'fun' as "deeply meaningful," but that there is "much more to video games than fun. As a blanket concept [...] fun is insufficient at best" (167).

'No fun' challenges the common belief that there is "one universal way to feel good" (159) while playing a game and suggests that players can find pleasure in failure or even intentionally play to lose (137). Ruberg's analysis of 'no fun' games is an extension of Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* before him, two texts that address the theory of queer failure as a means of challenging hegemonic beliefs in failure as instructive, inherently negative, and a signifier of deviating from the norm. Halberstam does not address game theory, but through a philosophical lens, describes queer failure as "the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd" (187). Juul picks up on these ideas and applies them to ludic theories, introducing the paradox of failure in games: "We ask, 'Why am I doing this?' when experiencing an unpleasant failure in a game yet desperately wanting to continue playing" (33).

Ruberg's work combines the two texts by questioning why failure is considered unpleasant while winning is assumed to be inherently pleasurable. As 'no fun' traces its roots to queer theory, Ruberg suggests that we should "think about playing queer as a way of feeling in a game—that is, a way of feeling otherly or 'badly' during play" (166). As a 'no fun' game, *CHURL* embodies segments of Halberstam, Juul, and Ruberg's depictions of queer failure, and this is felt not only through the narrative design but also documented player reactions to several versions of the game.

In *CHURL*, BEED must reconcile, repeatedly, with the possibility that Beowulf was a deeply insecure person, an invader, a young upstart looking for fun, a selfish king, or a shortsighted aging monster hunter. These moments of demoralization and disempowerment pile on, and she deteriorates further and further into a state of paranoia and depression.

At the end of Month 2, she is extremely doubtful of her belief in Beowulf as the ideal warrior-king and asks her readers the question: 'What does fifty winters of peace look like to a warlord?' before logging off for several months. When she returns, it is to destroy the research site and sabotage any attempts at accessing it. Accepting the end of all things and sick of failing, BEED feels like she is playing a badly designed video game. She has felt nothing but disappointment and is not excited, interested, or optimistic about trying again: BEED is doomed to fail passively (McGonical 64) as a close reader of *Beowulf*.

Rather than encouraging players to be more efficient research assistants or stalwart defenders of BEED's life when they witness her final moments, I poured all my energy into writing the pivotal narrative sequences at the end of each month to inspire unsettling and discomforting emotions that "communicate their own messages [forming] a network of counter-affects" (Ruberg 175) and hopefully challenge how players feel. Ruberg describes counter-affects as destabilizing forces against the status quo, pointing to interactivity in games as "offering players agency, while simultaneously dictating and strictly limiting the extent of player choice" (177). I have discussed the approach I took to designing player choice and its limitations in the previous chapter, so I would like to address the network of counter-affects in *CHURL*.

For about the first year of development, I was certain that the overarching narrative and gameplay scheme of *CHURL* would mirror the five stages of grief: acceptance, depression, bargaining, anger, and denial. This worked very well thematically at the time, because the first version of the game was meant to be in BEED's perspective. Users would play as her answering WORLD and RIM's dispatches as the project unfolds in real time. With each reply, players would be opting into two narrative branches: one which follows the five stages as they are, and

the other where the stages are experienced in reverse. At the end of the game, the project's outcome would rely on which branch has the most choices in it.

This sketch document's last page shows my initial plans with this framework. The main question and obstacle this version of *CHURL* prompted in me was "How do you mediate gameplay through the website content/constraint?" and I think the double bind I found myself in restricting player choice to the stages of grief while also committing to BEED's perspective made that question really hard to answer. I characterize this iteration as an example of a series of unproductive counter-affects, where the number of constraints I put on myself as a designer only quadrupled when experienced by the players.

The emotional and psychological specificity of writing a narrative influenced by the five stages of grief basically cemented *CHURL* as a linear IF game. On top of that, writing it in BEED's perspective felt like I was straying really far from my intent to open *Beowulf* up and provide a truly multivocal, complex, and interpretation-rich adaptation of the text. Funnily enough, I distinctly remember adding the "in the website, but also being out of it while in it" part to the question I asked myself on that notebook sketch. Just that simple rumination on pulling the player out of the myopic view I had set out made me reconsider the entire vision I had for *CHURL*.

But this radically new iteration of the game is not without its drawbacks - one of the most consistent comments made throughout the playtesting of *CHURL* over the last six months is that the game requires a lot of attention. In fact, it requires the entirety of the player's attention. This has made the project significantly harder to pitch for someone to take a quick glance at its mechanics or narrative, but as the feedback continued to roll in with the same sentiments about how hard it is to play *CHURL*, I began simply replying: "Yes." Even in its current 'complete' form, the game takes several hours to finish if a player decides to thoroughly commit to reading all the months' available days.

It is very hard to produce a short, snappy, and commercially sexy gameplay section for impromptu playtests. All in all, the biggest indicator of *CHURL* belonging in the 'no fun' genre is my insistence on maintaining its complexity and broadening its network of counter-affects, making it a gameplay experience most people would consider 'bad' and 'boring.'

This, however, does not mean that the game is not *actually* fun. While aggregating the feedback data for this document, I realized that the writing being so engaging and entertaining throughout the game is actually the main reason behind some of the players' willingness to continue working through *CHURL*'s 'no-funness' difficulty. Below are some of the comments that illustrate this:

- November 29th Feedback Session
  - The Data Logging is NICE – putting your name is fun
  - The written data log is great, uploading the lost content is so cool
  - I almost want to write alongside each day – the notes are important!
  - The animated text is a nice callback to the aesthetic of *GeoCities*, I like the different types of content – dry data / narrative text contrasts
  - The game is replicating academic research perfectly! In the flow of research, you step back and get a general idea – going into all that data, if you are not asking questions of the text you don't know what to do with the research itself.

- January 13th Feedback Session
  - Who is BEED? Beowulf dying is good?? Maybe!! I want to know!
  - Connection to the characters!!! It makes you want to get into the story
    - I felt so bad for BEED during the beach scene, I was scared for her
    - I was so glad that they made it out
  - The live chat rocks, the way it is written is SO real, feels like I am in a friend group's Discord
  - The day-to-day progression is great, it feels like BEED is building the website out
  - The crypt dispatch is great – it really places you into the world.
  - The sea segment + the conversations with the Heorot people are great.
  - The content chunks become easier as time moves (towards the 2nd Month)
  - One paragraph per BEED main post is perfect, it makes you want to move forward and read more!

One of the most positive outcomes from bi-weekly testing has been the consistent praise for the writing quality of the project, as well as the unexpected instant connection players felt towards the characters.

Chapter 3.2: In-Depth Reflection Essay

What shocked me the most about working on *CHURL* is the bittersweet feeling of following a research-creation attempt from beginning to end, and the messiness that was created out of the process. Described as the academic game design field's evidence-based response to a lack of assertiveness in comparison to "real-world" game designers (Khaled and Barr 58), MDM embraces the fact engaging with design also means growing with it, acknowledging setbacks and crossroads as an essential part of just trying to put something *out* into the world.

When I made the decision to switch to a much more nonlinear presentation of the narrative in the first big prototype jump from 'concept' to 'draft', I started revamping *CHURL* 1.1 with a new calendar landing page in mind[4]. I incorporated the concept of a series of 'snapshots' of BEED's site, visible in chronological order, but accessible in any sequence the player wishes to visit them.

With this new gameplay loop, *CHURL* increasingly became a meta-meta-experience: putting players in the role of a research assistant for a fictional archiving project looking through a surviving *GeoCities* site with an interface heavily inspired by the *Wayback Machine*. In *Bringing Design to Software*, Donald Schön talks about the "issue of what the machine is made of" (178) and this resonated with me because of the focus on machine failure leading to "mak[ing] visible its insides" (178) like I did by iterating on 'failed' gameplay design ideas.

In connection to that, the chapter on iteration in *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure* also metaphorizes failure as instructive:

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[4] See https://github.com/raddimana/CHURL.

> "Think of failure as a flashlight; it illuminates the
> things that don't work and also, when we look
> closely, shines light on the path ahead toward the
> next version of an idea, and ultimately, the
> realization of a thing in the world." (Sharp 57)

This metaphor coupled with my iterations resulting in *CHURL*'s innards becoming a core element of the current build's gameplay reinforces my approach to interactivity as fundamentally removed from a hierarchical structure, allowing the player to immerse themselves in a world that is truly fleshed out, with all its contradictions and paradoxes. *CHURL* was never just about solving a puzzle and clicking on to the next treasure-filled room, it was and ultimately is about experiencing playfulness and considering close reading as a crucial part of it.

Speaking of close reading, the section that needs the most improvement after this build is…still the EOM data reports. In previous versions, players would get an empty text box to describe what happens every week of the month without any other suggestions or guidance. For the thesis build, I decided to scrap the weekly sections and just go with some guiding questions addressing the 4 sections of the site:

- WHAT HAS BEED POSTED ON THE MAIN PAGE? HOW IS THE PROJECT GOING ACCORDING TO HER AND THE CHAT?
- HAVE ANY NEW DRAFTS / CHAPTERS / NOTES BEEN ADDED TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT? WHAT ANGLE OF BEOWULF'S LIFE IS BEED WORKING ON FIGURING OUT?
- WHAT ARE THE DISPATCHES ABOUT? FROM WHAT LOCATION ARE THEY BEING SENT?
- IS THERE ANY CONNECTIVE THREAD BETWEEN THE HIDDEN / DELETED / BROKEN PAGES THIS MONTH?

These prompts work, but I am still unsatisfied with how they are worded. I don't know how well these sections address the issues brought up by past playtests about the EOM reports, but conceptually, the questions still focus on re-centering the player's mindset on mining the text for meaning, themes, symbols, characterizations, etc. It is frustrating to include this in the reflection essay because this section has been a thorn in my side for a while. Looking back at my reflection on *CHURL 1.5,* I wrote about the EOM reports after another round of feedback about them:

> "I am still not too sure about the categorization
> being centered on the basis of chronological order,
> but I want to take a step back, consciously, from
> inputting my own assumptions of how research or
> reading notes should be organized. I originally
> thought about the prompts for the report being like,
> themes or 'main character beats.' But that feels like
> I am trying to push too much on the 'THIS IS LIKE
> AN ENGLISH LIT COURSE!!!' button too hard."

In *Configuring Participation: On How We Involve People In Design*, the participatory research example of the 'humanaquarium' discusses audience participation in design processes. Musical artists would perform in a setting where audience members could interact with a panel resulting in changes to the sounds. Through the interactions between artists and audience-participants, the overall performance becomes "an act of collaboration" (Vines 7) where "the piece is not complete without [those interacting with it]'s presence and engagement with the work" (7). *CHURL* would not exist in its current state without the collaboration through the Behaviour Research Grant graduate student group meetings. Just after that last reflection, I sent out *CHURL 1.5.2* and someone clocked the fact that I was trying to hide my design shortcomings:

> "As soon as I sit down to write about how I want to
> be able to hide the fact that you can't really have a
> responsive loop for the EOM reports, I get feedback
> after playtests about how it's hard to care about the
> EOM report writing because players don't know
> what to put in the text box"

Hiding the ways in which I could not get Twine's Harlowe language to do what I wanted it to took up most of my time at the beginning of the project. In the post about *CHURL 1.2*, I write at length about a mysterious bar graph idea I had about the timeline of calendar days on top of the main sections of BEED's blog. It did not work well:

> I can't overstate how much these 2-3 days of BAR
> GRAPH BULLSHIT made me feel like my game
> design sessions were a waste of time. My hands
> started hurting, my right-hand wrist felt bruised
> from moving the mouse & clicking around for hours
> at a time. And the result of feeling like I
> have *Cryptkeeper Hand*s was something I genuinely
> hated looking at and had no idea how to fix without
> starting over.

That is how I felt when I wrote my journal entry, which is dated as being October 30th. In this exclusive photo taken at the end of day 2 of working on the bar graph (October 6th), I delusionally thought that it was actually going really well. A day later, I showed my progress to my brother, a software engineering professor, who advised me to completely start over.

The idea of starting over feels genuinely foreign to me. I have a tendency towards serendipity and impulsiveness when it comes to graphic and narrative design. *CHURL*'s ending was written in about thirty minutes after listening to a Mitski song all day. The inspiration for BEED's fatalistic characterization came from the echoing sounds of a dog barking at the end of "I'm Your Man." I think about *CHURL* in general as an adaptation of *Beowulf* and although it definitely belongs in that category, it also feels like its own thing existing in the margins: the edges of IF games, poetry, speculative fiction, and adaptation. Much of my design workflows mirror this feeling of alienation from the norm.

As for the art assets, most if not all of the images I created were conceptualized and added to the game in the span of half a day. On the other hand, The RAT EXCHANGE PROGRAM page, something I conjured up in order to address feedback about *CHURL* lacking in the same aesthetic diversity *GeoCities* communities had, took two full days to complete. There is always something that drives me to *immediately* create something – an excitement that I just feel in exactly *that one moment* and an acute fear that I will miss out on producing it faithfully if I wait even an hour more.

This messy methodology has led to me interpreting my design process as emblematic of hundreds of tiny moments where, by chance, I created something that excited me. And I put these fragments in my prototype, interpolating the links between them as they accumulate over time, experimenting with their placement in Twine almost like a collage. In *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*, independent queer game designer Llaura McGee expresses an incredibly relatable pet peeve with big-budget games citing experimental filmmakers as inspiration:

> They'll cite someone like Yuriy Norshteyn, the Russian stop-motion filmmaker, as an inspiration, but then the game will be full of 3D models that someone has spent days meticulously rendering. It takes away the messiness and sucks the life out of the game. Sucking the life out of things happens a lot in video games. The game is alive in your head, but once it's coded, there's no room left for serendipity and chance (68).

What I really hope is obvious about *CHURL* is how much I enjoy its unfinished, buggy, and lively state. The ideal design methodology for future versions of this project is allowing myself distance between builds and their associated reflections but always returning to the growing HTML file with new sketches, graphics, errors, dispatches, and digressions.

Instead of painstakingly working towards a perfectly structured version of *CHURL* by whittling it down to its most optimal form, I want to keep it alive and, most importantly, uniquely un-fun.

Chapter 4: Final Thoughts

One piece of feedback I got at the last playtest for the thesis build was that *CHURL* would be a very interesting game about downloading and sorting the text, images, sketches, audio files, and the rest of the components of the source game file into different folders on your desktop. By picking up on this suggestion to make the project an even more disjointed and overwhelming experience, my goal with *CHURL* is to continue working on new versions of it.

I am particularly interested in the idea of remixing this research-creation artefact in deeply structural ways, several times:

- The 'organization' version, where the source code and assets are ordered in different desktop folders.
- A version where the entirety of the calendar index is removed, and players can only access BEED's site by clicking on a button that randomly generates a page from any point in its history.
- An extended version of GRENDEL, THE RULE-BREAKER's control over the site, including him starting his own blog.
- A version set in a faraway cyberpunk future where another researcher discovers THE ARCHIVE's site about BEED's site.

Setting up shorter vignettes of these *CHURL* variants in one platform where users can interact with any of them alongside a documentation blog would really benefit my exploration of *Beowulf* as a deep cave diver reaching new crevasses.

Lastly, it would be interesting to consider the parallels between MDM and its version control setup and BEED's website being accessed through an index that shows the entirety of her design history. I have done my best to adhere to the MDM protocol in the limited amount of time I had to catch up to speed on my documentation practices as a *really* bad design methodology practitioner, but this extended report on *CHURL*'s development lacks the depth and complexity it could have had I committed more strongly to the MDM framework.

In *CHURL – PUBLIC VERSION 1.0!,* I commented on how my description of *CHURL*'s development process always included my knowledge of how it would end:

> I kept telling people that I had the entire narrative of
> CHURL figured out before I started designing it and
> that's partly true or it is a white lie or it was mostly
> delusion because I knew how it needed to end but I
> had no idea how I was going to get there

With the ending written and the game finished (for now), I can at least say that I figured out how to get there.

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