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CARES, LABORS, AND DANGERS: A QUEER GAME INFORMED BY RESEARCH

by

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Abstract

Queerness as a quality has a permanent fluidity. Videogames as a medium are continually evolving and advancing. Thus, queer games have a vast potential as an art form and research subject. While there is already a wealth of knowledge surrounding queer games my contribution takes the form of both research paper and creative endeavor. I created a game by interpreting the queer elements present in games research. My game reflects the trends and qualities present in contemporary queer games, such as critiques on empathy and alternative game-making programs. This paper details what research inspired elements of my game as well as how those elements compare to other queer games.

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Introduction

I created *Cares, Labors, and Dangers* to argue that a game informed by queer games research can have a similar presence of queer nonconformity compared to contemporary queer games in terms of "narrative, mechanics, and modes" (Salter et al., 2018, p. 1). Most queer games derive from queer experiences as opposed to research. The research informing my game discusses various forms of normativity affecting queer people as well as their effects on games. In addition, the game adheres to the trend in recent queer games that shift away from portraying queer people as persons solely to empathize with; alternatively, these 'non-empathy' games offer flawed and radical queer people and queer situations. The program I used to create my game is Twine, which has a history as a tool for alternative, queer game-making. Due to personal circumstances involved in the production of my game I also provide a brief discussion of my design process detailed through the lens of Stone's reparative game design. The queer elements of my game are influenced by research, while the elements that are not explicitly queer have influence from my personal experiences. These personal experiences, however, have some inherent queerness to them as I am a queer person.

Background

The term *queer* has shifted meanings over its history of use. This paper discusses how queer people create media, and how a non-person (i.e. a game) can be queer, so defining the term is necessary. The contemporary definition of queer are individuals who are non-cisgender or have non-heterosexual sexualities. This definition includes individuals who are transgender, individuals who experience same-sex attraction, individuals who experience no sexual attraction, and other minority identities. Queer has historically been a derogatory term, but some members of the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more) community reclaimed this term to have a positive meaning near the turn of the 21st Century (Zosky and Alberts, 2016, p. 601). The academic definition of queer can include the contemporary definition, but also includes broader meanings. The definition of *queer* in this paper borrows from Halberstam's definition as "an assemblage of resistant technologies that include collectivity, imagination, and a kind of situationist commitment to surprise and shock" (2011, p. 29). While Halberstam applies this definition to the realm of animation I apply it to the realm of videogames similar to Harvey's approach (Harvey, 2014, p. 97). Near the end of an interview together, some of the queer game scholars I mention in this paper say they are fearful that queer as a term in media industries will supersede queer as a term to describe transgender and non-heterosexual identities (Brey & Vist, 2019). These authors want queer games to stay messy forever.

While this section is labeled 'Defining Queer Games,' a singular definition would be antithetical to the queerness of these games, because queer game-makers and scholars appreciate the fluidity of this type of game similar to how queer people value the fluidity in how they describe their identities. Instead, I offer two possible definitions. One near universal occurrence of queer games is a prominent author of the game, is a queer person who has queer experiences, and uses those to inform their game. What a queer game is not is a game created by the same modes of production as a mainstream

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game (Salter et al., 2018, p.1). These definitions are not mutually exclusive, but instead describe the intersection between the identities of creators, and the modes of production they oppose. Additionally, this definition does leave out my game, since it is informed by research. Part of this paper is showing that the definition of queer games can be expanded because of the term's fluidity to include queer experiences of others, even through the lens of academia.

Normativity

Normativity describes the institutional forces responsible for what is deemed normal in a group or society. It is the tendency for societal pressure to push and pull those who do not fit its ideals of the dominant majority. This push and pull is ubiquitous to the point that it seems normal to those that do not experience it. Queer game research has a focus on studying normativity, possibly due to the personal nature of videogames as well as game's affinity for fantasy. The following section discusses three types of normativity: chrononormativity, heteronormativity, and homonormativity. These concepts illustrate the substantial role that normativity has in resistance to queer elements in mainstream game development.

Chrononormativity

Chrononormativity is a succinct word to describe the expectations a person growing up and then living in the current day has based on assumptions which maintain the ostensible belief that these expectations are instinctual. Freeman defines chrononormativity as "a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (2010, p. 3). Knutson, a games researcher, defines chrononormativity as "the major milestones of a normative life as well as normative temporal cycles" (2018). Knutson gives the example "Go to grade school, go to high school, go to college, get married, buy a house, have kids, get promoted, save for retirement, see the kids get happily married, retire after

40 years with a single company, live out one's golden years and die." Clearly, not every person

experiences these landmarks of livelihood, but failure to do so is seen as a stain on a person's character.

Those who purposefully ignore these expectations are seen as failures. The naturalization of these

modes of production caused them to become institutionalized. Knutson describes the life imposed on

queer and non-queer people alike: graduating college, having a singular career, sharing life with a

singular romantic partner, saving for retirement, then dying. Queer people are frequently among those

who discover this mode of living undesirable or unattainable. Chrononormativity describes the expected

way to live. Institutional forces control and limit the valid paths for success or survival. The prevalence of

reinforcement for these ideas causes some people to regard them as fact. The options for members of

both queer and non-queer communities become conform or reject. To live and act queerly is to reject.

Knutson also informs the definition of chrononormativity as it relates to games. Knutson claims

that the professional play of Esports is gaming's most apparent form of Freeman's chrononormativity,

while asserting that the game *Life is Strange* (2015) stands in opposition to normative play by

exemplifying queer temporality. Through the lens of this analysis, Esports, particularly competitive

MOBAs and first-person shooters, exemplify chrononormativity through their rigid adherence to

regulated time. "At the intersection of gaming, critical timing/timekeeping and money, one finds

esports." they say. Esports concerns rewarding vast sums of money to those who adhere to precarious

and risk-averse labor practices to maximize productivity for either exposure or competition. The author

argues that Esports and related occupations extract "more labor out of those on the network by keeping

them constantly tethered to their work."

Knutson posits *Life is Strange* as the other end of the spectrum of chrononormativity in gaming.

The game is a choice-based narrative adventure created in the Unreal engine. The protagonist, Max,

uses her power to reverse time to complete her goals, which frequently coincide with her best friend,

and potential romantic interest, Chloe. Independent of the players' choices, however, the end of the *Life is Strange*'s narrative has a negative element. This narrative reflects the reality many queer people face; there is no guaranteed happy ending. *Life is Strange* encourages careful deliberation and forced failure, as opposed to the quick thinking of esports. This game could be a queer game, but its origin in a game development corporation holds back a definitive labeling.

Heteronormativity and Homonormativity

Heteronormativity refers to the expectation that non-heterosexual identities either do not exist or are negligible enough to be ignored. Ahmed illustrates the meaning of heteronormativity as the continually reinforced impressions of heterosexual acts in a space to the point that those who engage in such acts presume that those who abstain from those acts are abnormal. Ahmed explains that heteronormativity "refers to more than simply the presumption that it is normal to be heterosexual," but instead that there is an ideal form of heterosexuality (2014, p. 149). The desires of those who stray from this paradigm are seen as illegitimate by those who adhere to the norm. Heteronormativity extends to new spaces allow for queer experimentation. As Brett says, despite technological affordances being so advanced, and so readily available, interactive spaces are still dominated by heteronormativity because persons who make those systems are a part of the already present and dominant hegemonic structures (2019). The result is a perpetuation of heteronormativity in new spaces, which happens regardless of the potential for a new space to alter the conformity of existing power structures. Gaming culture is no exception to the perpetuation of heteronormativity, which Brett notes by using *VRChat* (Gaylor & Joudrey, 2014) as an example. When Noel Brett's avatar in the game VR chat fails to adhere to heteronormative standards, other players of the game direct transphobic slurs to them. In 2013, Oulette

said that queer characters in videogames "remain flat, and even futuristic and alien ones are saddled with contemporary earthbound modalities [concerning sexuality]" (p. 65).

Homonormativity describes the tendency for institutions to tolerate homosexual individuals who adhere the closest to a heteronormative ideal. For example, a gay person without any marginalized identities gets treated differently by institutions than a queer individual with marginalized identities. The disparities mentioned in this example serve as the basis for the field of intersectionality (Bearfield, 2009, p.384). With homonormativity, there is also a prevalent assumption among non-queer policymakers and administrators that homosexual people desire the same goals and materials as those with heteronormative ideals with the one exception being participation in a gay relationship. While gay people who do adhere to heteronormative ideals exist, Daum declares the belief that all gay people exist this way as a myth. On the disparity within the gay community to marry Daum says "one's geographic location, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and religion all intersect to determine one's ability to marry a same-sex partner" (2020, p. 128). For queer persons who find themselves incompatible with homonormativity, however, they can be led to believe that despite identifying as queer, living queerly is incorrect. This disparity is notably absent in *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator*, a visual novel developed by Game Grumps (2017) where players pursue romantic relationships with fathers while roleplaying one themselves. In Schaufert's close reading of *Dream Daddy,* they discuss homonormativity as it relates to games (2018). Schaufert argues that the appeal of *Dream Daddy* to players derives from the conflation of the masculine queer figure and a suburban father. The inherent queerness of two men participating in romantic dates cements the former's inclusion, while the latter constitutes the characters of the game: a cast of suburban fathers. Schaufert does say that there is no stable definition of a daddy; it originated as a subversion of fatherhood in a queer and kinky setting. The author argues that *Dream Daddy* sanitizes the daddy figure to fit

homonormative expectations. This appropriation of the daddy figure is an issue because it contributes to a homonormative narrative which "disengage[s] from the realities of social problems and avoid negativity." The ability to conform to heteronormative expectations is a privilege only some queer people possess. Adherence to apolitical stances happens in other queer spaces, which denies nonconforming queer voices from reaching the mainstream. Dating dads in this game shows none of the elements of a queer romance. The game's text implies sexual relations, but never states they exist outright. Schaufert states "the focus on family unity, raising children, and suburban communities make *Dream Daddy* a problematically 'comfortable' game." Why would a comfortable game cause problems? It erases struggle. The author states that "the history of the daddy figure is bound up with "'feeling otherly"' and daddy kink incorporates feeling bad into the play of sex." *Dream Daddy* presents a fantasy world that, while some clearly enjoy, others critique its presentation of a world devoid of queer interpretation in favor of homonormative elements.

Empathy and Fun

By depicting people and places outside our own experiences, videogames, like other forms of media, have the capacity to generate empathy, while also causing great harm. Also like most media the tangible implications of videogames are more complex than creating positive or negative feelings. The subject of popular queer games prior to 2014 dealt with portraying the queer experiences of queer people. This led to a majority interpretation that the games were allowing non-queer people to empathize with queer people (Ruberg, 2020, p. 58). The documentation of these queer experiences was for the sake of their queer authors, not necessarily with the intention of informing non-queer persons of queer experiences. For instance, some videogames, such as *dys4ia* (2012) by Anna Anthropy provide insight to players who misunderstand the exact depths and challenges of a transgender person's life. While this videogame does provide an opportunity to learn about the lives of marginalized persons, it is not a

complete way to understand what someone with a transgender identity goes through in their day to day lives. If anything, *dys4ia* is a first step to a proper dialogue between the privileged and the marginalized. Games possess the ability to help players understand others, but it is currently impossible for players to understand other's plights to the degree of that those affected by institutional harm experience them. Recent trends in the queer game design community have created a genre of games that are made by queer people for queer people. These games do not focus on presenting relatable queer experiences to non-queer audiences, but presenting any queer experiences to queer audiences. This seemingly small difference marks a huge shift in who matters to queer game-makers; nonqueer audiences, who enjoy media catered to them, are not considered (Pozo, 2018). The change in 2014 shifted to queer experiences expressed in a flawed and radical way, so that the interpretation of such would be as relating to fellow queer persons instead of appealing to non-queer ones. The shift is from a documenting queer experiences from a place of assumed audience ignorance to a reveling in queer experiences to those who live them, and who desire to have more. The epitome of this shift comes from the work of queer game designer and writer Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia*, which Pozo classifies as an empathy game. Anthropy's own installation *Empathy Game* (2015), which criticizes the eponymous type of queer games. Empathy is a point in history rather than an everlasting genre, or quality of queer games Pozo argues that "must be understood in a continuum" by drawing a parallel to the work of feminist theory present in games. The existence of queer games critiquing empathy, such as Anthropy's *Empathy Game* installation, is a signifier that queer games have exceeded the limitations of videogames designed to evoke empathy. Emotional responses continue to have a role in queer videogames, but the purpose of the majority of queer videogames no longer is to have audiences understand the lives of queer people. This shift corresponds to more games being made by queer people for queer people, instead of uneducated normative audiences.

Notably, some queer games intentionally have a focus other than empathy with the expectation of reciprocation. *transgalactica* (2018), by Marcotte and Squinkifer opens with a radio transmission from the T.R.A.N.S. (Trans Radio Artist Network in Space). The broadcast channel features heavily in the game. It is apparent from the opening dialogue: "If you are one of us, this transmission is for you," that this game is for transgender people. I mention this example because it is blatant; the game tells players who it expects them to be within the first seconds of play. *SABBAT* (2013), by ohnoproblems is a Twine game that features animal sacrifice and demon worshipping. The protagonist undergoes a transformation into a demon. They then have the options of 'making out' with a woman with a witch aesthetic or murdering a member of Christian forums. This game deliberately disregards the goal of empathy games to humanize queer people in favor of demonizing them in a literal sense. It is uncaring of non-queer perceptions. A queer game does not need feature grotesque violence to the degree *SABBAT* does, but when designing it requires the same attitude toward hypothetical perceptions of a non-queer audience. *Curtain*, by dreamfell from is a game that focuses on an abusive relationship. It is also a queer relationship. The game portrays neither Ally, the protagonist, nor especially Kaci, the other main character as well as Ally's romantic partner, as total representations of the queer community. Kaci is not a normative videogame antagonist, but acts as a negative influence to Ally. Per the game's itch.io description, Kaci "watches and comments on [Ally's] every thought and action." Kaci is not a character expected to be empathized with. *Curtain* shows that queer relationships can have the same flaws as non-queer ones, but does not expect players to fix that relationship through play. *Curtain* is a queer game, because it does not rely on mainstream design methods, and it is a post-empathy game, because it does not care for non-queer perceptions. Emotional responses continue to have a role in queer videogames, but the purpose of the majority of queer videogames no longer is to have audiences understand the lives of queer people. This shift corresponds to more games being made by queer

people for queer people, instead of uneducated normative audiences. The purposes of queer games are radical and varied like their authors.

Games that promote empathy and games that feature violence can coexist; either purpose suits the medium well. A problem occurs, however, when either purpose has a majority stake in current availability. Mainstream games have always been dominated by violence. Queer games were dominated by empathy in the early 2010's. Striking a balance between violence and emotion is necessary. The queer game creators seem to be on their way of doing that, while the mainstream corporate videogame industry continues to lag behind (Fung, 2017). Games also possess the ability to spread this harm. The idea that fun is the sole purpose of games promotes a reactionary demographic by playing to that audience's biases (Ruberg, 2015, p. 155). They argue that the pursuing of fun has lead to "reactionary gamer culture, where 'serious' concerns like discrimination and sexism have been deliberately silenced." If the purpose of videogames is only to be entertaining, then any element that does not contribute to that goal can be dismissed as incorrect. They reference the harassment campaign of GamerGate to support their argument. Games that employed no-fun principles were mocked, and their creators threatened. Ruberg, however, does not argue to discontinue these efforts. Instead, the author encourages the creation of no-fun games to diminish the overwhelming majority opinion that videogames for pure entertainment has over the industry (Ruberg, 2015).

Twine

Indie games are games developed independent of a major triple AAA game development studio. Unlike triple AAA games that possess the financial backing of at least one major corporation, indie games have less development resources overall. These circumstances position indie game development as an alternate approach to corporate game-making, yet indie games share many of the same production processes that mainstream games do. They both rely on employed groups of developers all working in a

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hierarchical structure with the purpose of finding success with profit and fame (Harvey, 102). The engines indie game development primarily uses, Unity and Unreal, prioritize the creation of accessibility measures for popular genres in mainstream game development over explain these affordances as serving first and third person action shooter (Salter et al., p. 2), while Freedman focuses on the difference of intuitive code between Twine and Unity; the former lauded for its comparably more accessible and intuitive coding platform. The knowledge of code separates the game development communities of Unity and Twine. Harvey argues that indie and mainstream games are not ideologically opposed to one another, because of their many similarities in the production process. Queer games, then are the type of game that ideologically opposes mainstream and indie game development; Harvey considers the anti-capitalist stance of many queer game-making processes. Those games "that serve to challenge not only big industry but also the hegemonic context that shapes it" (Harvey, 2014, p. 96).

The focus of this section is on the Twine community of queer game-makers. This section spends most of that attention on the 'Twine Revolution,' an event in 2013 mostly credited to game designer Anna Anthropy. A community grew around the program, which Harvey argues should be a subject of research. Twine is a free, open-source tool used to create interactive stories in an HTML format. Sharing these games requires only connection to the Internet, because of the small size of Twine publications. Its visual map editing layout does not require its users to learn any coding language. In 2009, Chris Kilmas created Twine for Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) stories, so there is an absence of what components are assumed to be necessary for a game-making program. Harvey, and others, acknowledge the popularity of Twine to create games came with the works of queer game designer and writer Anna Anthropy. This event is known as the 'Twine revolution,' and is the subject of Harvey's article. The accessibility of Twine is one of the main reasons it is my program of choice to create a queer game. The appeal of Twine to people whose identities mismatch with the dominant voices in the game

development industry is apparent, and so I consider myself included with queer game-makers. Although,

I do acknowledge my privilege attending a game design undergraduate program when comparing myself

to other queer artists, Twine's appeal to queer game-makers is attributed to its accessibility compared

to other gamemaking programs. Freedman compares game engines with corporate support, such as

Unreal and Unity, to alternative game-making tools, such as Twine and GameMaker (2018). Earlier in

their article, Freedman categorized these programs together, but later grants these programs

differences based on the accessibility of these programs. The main quality the author uses to

differentiate these tools is their reliance on code. They stress that these categories are not binaries, but

qualities that some engines possess. They state that Twine communities and Unity communities rarely

intersect, and this divide, despite both programs acting as independent development tools, is the

presence of C#. Freedman posits this presence as a barrier of entry for queer game-makers, because

without the knowledge of code, they cannot create games. These engines focus on action. While *Curtain*

is made in Unity, it is a walking simulator, a popular genre for queer games (Salter et al., 2018), and the

graphics are not focused on realism but on a style that matches the game's tone. Making a queer game

in Unity requires more sunk cost than one in Twine, and not just because of the higher skill ceiling, but

because the affordances Unity has encourages usage of the realistic engine, such as the physics engine,

to make games. *Curtain* does not use the accurate physics system of Unity to any considerable degree as

if the game were made in an engine without one. Unity tutorials, which are built into the system, teach

users about how to use the physics system to its fullest potential. Queer games can have realistic

physics, but *Curtain* and games made in Twine show they have no need for physics.

Alternative Game Design

Butterfly Soup (2017), by Brianna Lei, and made in Ren'Py, a platform for creating visual narrative styles

of games and experiences, is an example of what I have denoted as a queer game for queer gamers.

Other examples include: *SABBAT*, *transgalactica*, and *Curtain*. All of them have either explicit or heavily

implied queer protagonists. *dys4ia* also has a queer protagonist, but it is an empathy game; it educates

about transgender experiences rather than creating new ones. All of the games mentioned above are

undoubtedly inspired by their author's queer experiences, but they are not meant for non-queer people

to empathize with the game's characters. Leveraging my knowledge of queer game research, my game

contributes to the discussion of queer games by providing a unique mix of research and personal

experience that increases the visibility of queer voices as well as demonstrating research topics in an

engaging fashion. Transgressive play involves playing a game in an unintended way, which the authors

compare to fanfiction, because both significantly alter the content and experience of games media

according to individual players (Salter et al., 2018, p. 1). Transgressive design, thus, describes design

thought that mirror play in mainstream games performed contrary to those games' design. The authors

suggests to view queer games through the lens of transgressive design, because they both rebel against

mainstream gaming culture. The authors argue that transgressive design cannot exist in "traditional

spaces of the games industry," because it is a design method oriented against mainstream game design

(Salter et al., 2018, p. 2). Freedman describes three elements of queer design being: "Constructing non-

normative space, creating narrative incongruity, and evoking liminality" (2018). They argue that game

engines used by independent developers, which also have support of game corporations, such as Unity

and Unreal, cannot accommodate these elements. Freedman illustrates the corporate game

development industry pursuit of photorealism by using Capcom's Fox engine as an example.

Cyborg Games

Cyborg games are games that disorient the mainstream audiences of games (Vist, 2015, p. 1). They place

these players in 'the shoes' of 'gamers', but have no expectation for them to appreciate it as a 'real

game.' Because the creators have little desire for financial gain from their games, they do not adhere to

the principles of normative game design. "Cyborg games carve out those spaces by making it hard to enjoy them" (p. 56). Playing a *cyborg* game presents two options to players: continue or quit. They can either tolerate the disorientation of having their expectations of what the game they are participating in is unexpected, or they can refuse. Refusal comes at the cost of understanding the game.

Vist reaffirms that "a cyborg is more than a half-man-half robot, and queerness is more than one's sexual orientation" (p. 57). Words obviously have different meanings for different contexts. The context of *cyborg*, however, is one outside the realm of pop culture. The meaning of *cyborg* in this article describes "humans intertwined within communications systems," which Vist compares to game players' relationships to their games (p. 57). *Queer*, is, as it always seems these days, wildly amorphous and perfectly absurd. When a tool, such as a game, fails to do what an audience member or player expects, then the viewer's instinct is to blame the object, instead of themselves. This design creates the disorientation emblematic of cyborg games.

Mainstream Design

Since the early days of the videogames industry, designers have denied inclusion of other identities on the ostensible basis that the technology available at the time was the reason for this denial. An internal label fueled by misogyny for a character in *Dead Island* provides some evidence that there exists contempt for other identities (Oulette, 2013, p. 63-64). This contempt creates an environment where any non-normative identity is not permitted. Oulette argues that, despite the freedom video games offer, the medium continues to confine players to a stringent understanding of gender. To create an accurate representation of a gender, game designers rely on their own interpretations of gender to create them in games. Brett provides a succinct way to understand why creating new interpretations of identity are difficult to introduce due to hegemonic influences invading any newly created spaces (2019).

One character or even one game cannot serve as a mark of progress for the entire gaming industry. A broader look is necessary to determine a broader view. The portrayal of queer characters in videogames is limited and disappointing, especially among mainstream titles. Queer games provide a more honest depiction of the queer experience through their character and settings. Creating a game as a queer person already provides a rebuke of heteronormativity, but does little to shift the expectations of what constitutes valid options within the industry if the content of the game matches whatever available options already exist. Queer games must have content that seems invalid to the broader industry, but are nonetheless creations worth exploring.

Developers acknowledge that the use of engines can limit programmers and artists abilities to implement new and unique additions to games or game series. Capcom's Lead Programmer of the Technology Section, Tomofumi Ishida, says that "creating an interesting game should not be hindered by development engine constraints. If an artist expresses a desire to do something, the engine must evolve to make it happen" (Freedman, 2018). Capcom's drive to craft environments to be as realistic as possible, however, contradicts this desire for creative freedom. Freedman inquires about the difficulty of creating queer game mechanics using game engines built for non-queer games. Queer games excel in non-normative storytelling using so-called amateur tools such as Twine. In a practical sense, creating queer game mechanics using game engines such as Unreal and Unity; those being engines foremost for industry use, but adapted for amateur use; becomes incongruent with the engines' purposes to facilitate normative success in the games industry. Their design is based on the same standard as the RE engine's pursuit of realism, which limits a queer game creator to adapt the engine to their desires. Queer games have two paths ahead of them. Understanding the underlying systems layer of code, thus creating game engines for queer use. Alternatively, focus on the accessibility of software such as Twine and GameMaker, which facilitate queer game-making without the investment for the knowledge of coding.

Despite the pushes to enable greater diversity in AAA games, it is currently impossible to create a queer

game within the mainstream (Salter et al., p. 1). Games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* technically feature

queer romance; this type of relationship is homonormative, however (Fung, 2017). Straight and queer

relationships are equated; they are void of context unique to queer relationships. Additionally, players

can avoid any queer content in these games; the protagonist's sexuality is decided by players' actions

rather than the scriptwriter or game developer. Transgressive design logically cannot exist within

normative design processes, because it is an act of rebellion against those processes. Representations of

queerness fit to these processes ultimately become normative, despite their queer elements. Queer

designers face the challenge of creating game mechanics that exist outside of normative design. Unity

and Unreal are the "most accessible models of design," but support mechanics that adhere to the

hegemony of combat-oriented gameplay; the result is a resistance to implementation of queer

mechanics (Salter et al., 2018, p. 2). Use of programs that can support queer design, however, are

criticized by the "traditional' development community" (Salter et al., 2018, p. 3). Queer game-makers

rely on noncompetitive spaces; they form a community instead of an industry .Transgressive design,

thus, is impossible within the current mainstream because of code and culture (Salter et al., 2018).

Cares, Labors, and Dangers

When I reference my close family member, I am referring to a close family member of mine who passed away unexpectedly while I was at the midpoint of this thesis project. I directly attribute the incorporation of multiple elements in my game to my grief for this person. For instance, the title of my game, *Cares, Labors, and Dangers* comes from the last words of the George Washington character's speech in the "One Last Time" song from the musical *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda (2015). My close family member and I were both fans of this musical. The song itself is one that I associate my grief for my close family member with. Although, the words themselves derive from George Washington's Farewell Address, neither the man nor the historical context of his speech have any intended significance in my game. The words cares, labors, and dangers felt appropriate given the possible actions of the game's protagonist: caring for the denizens of the game's setting, laboring through trials to fulfill their quest, and facing dangers while doing so. A fairground is a significant inspiration for the setting of the game, specifically the South Florida Fair, which my close family member and I, as well as the rest of our family, frequented when it annually opened (sunfunguide, 2010). The name of the game's setting is Fairgray, which is a basic portmanteau of the words fairground and gray. The name feels appropriate given the content of the setting: a drab, rundown, abandoned, fairground surrounded by perpetual fog and under an eternal day.

Characters

Throughout the game, three is a significant number. There are three main areas, and within each of those areas is three sub-areas, with the exception of the first area, which has six sub-areas. There are three major NPCs: Penance, the tightropewalker, and Foghog. There are three minor NPCs: Carter, Newt, and Brandon. This pattern derives from the name of the game's protagonist: ThreeDots.

The name of the game's protagonist is ThreeDots. I chose this name, because my family associates the visual representation of three black dots with my close family member. ThreeDots is nonbinary, and uses they/them pronouns. This choice was not made because I or my close family member is/was nonbinary, but it felt appropriate given the queer nature of the game. Having the most recent inhabitant of Fairgray be a nonbinary person felt fitting as the remainder of the inhabitants represent older ideas of sexuality. ThreeDots's quest is to find their way out of Fairgray. Their motivation to do so is to reunite with their Special Somebody. The intended interpretation of the phrase "Special Somebody" is to signify a romantic relationship between ThreeDots and their partner, whose name remains as queer as ThreeDots's throughout the game's text. Although, I recognize the validity of any alternative interpretation that players may have, because the relationship between ThreeDots and their Special Somebody is purposefully ambiguous in the game's text. Depending on a choice at the end of the game, ThreeDots goes to one of two paradises, or stays in Fairgray. They do not reunite with their Special Somebody.

ThreeDots has the unique ability to view how Fairgray looked in the past. While the ability is never given a name in the text, I call this ability timeshift in this paper for brevity's sake. It draws from ThreeDots's unquantifiable nostalgia; they have nostalgic deja vu witnessing these events and locations. This feeling triggers the timeshift in select locations around the setting. It is presented in the game as a window that ThreeDots can see into, but not enter the past through. They cannot interact with any of the people in the timeshifted zone, and I would hesitate to call them characters considering they are always unnamed and never influence the story. The timeshift mechanic is for puzzle-solving by viewing a different kind of world, which I explain further in the discussion portion.

The antagonist of the game is Penance. He pursues ThreeDots throughout Fairgray to convince them to adhere to his rules. Penance masquerades as a guide to ThreeDots, but his facade quickly fades into his true persona of a brazen authoritarian. He is unaffected by the toxic fog surrounding Fairgray, mostly because he is a sentient part of it. Thus, he appears in unexpected places, because he is unbound by the paths walked on by the rest of Fairgray's denizens. He represents the queer research concept of heteronormativity through his relentless pursuit to have ThreeDots conform. The negative correlations with the word, Penance, are why I chose it (Annemarie, p. 382-383). Penance is an outlier in his heternomrative ideals, because he is a man, and not a queer person.

The tightropewalker is an author insert. I chose this specific job for the character, because it is a role I once expressed felt accurate to my personal portrayal of queerness. A guide to ThreeDots, informing them of a rumor she heard of Foghog. She needs to be found in order to complete the game. She will follow ThreeDots all the way to the end if players let her. She decides to live in Fairgray for a little while longer. The tightropewalker represents my balancing act as a transgender woman. It relates to the idea of passing as a cis woman, and how that can resemble a balancing act of always being on edge hiding a part of myself. But it also is a reflection of my personal life, as a feminine transwoman, who still enjoys not particularly feminine things. It is a balance of showing that I like feminine things, to 'prove' my identity, to my friends and family, that I am a woman, while enjoying more or less the same activities and hobbies I did before socially transitioning.

Foghog is an ancient woman; she acts as the leader of Fairgray. Foghog instructs ThreeDots on how to escape from Fairgray. Her mere presence keeps back the toxic fog that threatens to envelop all of Fairgray. Her body exudes a palpable energy. She represents homonormativity. While regarded as wise woman by those who live in her town, she is somewhat naive to the state of the rest of Fairgray.

She still believes that most of the townsfolk are not gone, when only three remain. Foghog lives on if ThreeDots chooses to stay in Fairgray. But her fate otherwise is unknown. Foghog has an interesting origin as a character. It comes from an interaction I had at the funeral of my close family member. An older family friend expressed unprompted acceptance for my identity as a transwoman by proclaiming that one of her older female relatives (I cannot recall which one) was a fag hag; a term referring to a woman with mostly gay men as friends. In that moment, I became perplexed, especially considering that I had the privilege of never hearing that slur in a public space before. Thus, I swapped out the vowels of the term, then imagined what sort of character I could create with these new words. Additionally, the creation of the toxic fog that ThreeDots encounters predates the creation of the Foghog character; the former created to give the latter an important role in the world.

Minor Characters

Carter and Newt are two gay men in a relationship with one another; they are both American veterans. All of the side characters represent homonormativity, because out of the two normative concepts I discuss in the paper, only this one can have someone who identifies as queer do so as well. While queer people can adhere to chrononormative expectations, that also means they conform to heteronormative ones as well, and since these are actions a queer person undertakes, they are being homonormative. The validity of these lifestyles I feel is shown through the text, though it also shows the flaws in assuming all queer people live in this way by presenting alternatives. The characters of Carter and Newt are based on fan interpretations of a romantic relationship between the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes (Myers, 2016). Carter is based on Steve Rogers. His name is not inspired by his canonical partner, but by ranking the popularity of the when the name was most popular, based on the social security index for the most popular names, then taking that ranking and finding out what

name shares that ranking in the year the character their based on was released. I did the same with

Bucky Barnes though with several liberties taken. I could not find Bucky on the list of most popular

names. I found it was a nickname derived from Buchanan, no doubt from the presidential predecessor

to Abraham Lincoln. His real first name is James, but he never goes by that. So I used the same method

but applied to surnames from 1990-2010 based on the U.S. Census Bureau. Buchanan was most popular

in the 1990 survey, and what matches its ranking in 2010 is Newton, which I shortened to Newt, to go

along with the nickname aspect of the character.

Brandon believes they currently serve as an undercover agent to an unnamed secret

government agency. He wears typically feminine clothing, which is not a part of any disguise, but

because he genuinely prefers this type of clothing. Brandon is inspired by the secret agent character

known as Noah Nixon from *Generator Rex,* specifically the episode where he crossdresses as part of a

disguise (Sonneborn & Ono, 2012). I am particularly drawn to incidental crossdressing characters,

especially characters who show a disdain for it, because of my trans identity. I do enjoy transforming

problematic writing by turning it into a positive queer one in my hobbyist work, so that is why Brandon

is designed the way he is.

Story

ThreeDots arrives in Fairgray without any knowledge of how they got there or how they can leave. They

come across a fairground causeway with broken attractions and no visitors. In order of appearance,

those attractions are: a pirate ship ride, a merry-go-round, a funhouse of mirrors, a ferris wheel, a

tunnel of love ride, and a rollercoaster. ThreeDots discovers their ability to view the past through

interacting with these rides, which occurs because the rides provoke a response of nostalgia, thus

activating ThreeDots's ability. ThreeDots uses this ability to explore the causeway. They must also avoid

the character of Penance. He attempts to convince ThreeDots to step into the fog that surrounds the

causeway; he assures them that is where they belong. Following his instructions results in a game-over. After avoiding Penance, and trekking across the causeway, ThreeDots arrives at a fork in the path.

On one path, the concrete causeway path veers askew. In the distance, ThreeDots can see a large, white building at the end of the path. On the other path, at first it is only a dirt path. Looking ahead, ThreeDots can see a wooden bridge, which leads to a collection of buildings. Players must explore both areas to finish the game, but depending on which they choose first will change the content of the other path slightly as well as change the causeway.

Taking the concrete path, ThreeDots arrives at an impossibly large, white building. A window occupies most of the space of a forward-sloped outer wall of the building, which itself extends for an indiscernible length into the hazy sky. The rest of the building is very rectangular and cubic. The entrance to the building is a series of glass double doors. Despite the large window at the front of the building, the interior of the building is pitch dark with only the entrance illuminated.

The inside of the building is a 4x4 grid that wraps around into itself. This environment decision creates a familiar yet endless section that lends itself well to the game's overall surreal setting. Two of the grid spots act as exits from the main section, but only if players move in a specific direction while on a specific grid spot. Three of the grid spots in the building have obstacles players can interact with; these are: the sofas, the hot tubs, and the kitchen. The sofas and the hot tubs provide challenge by impeding players' progress. The kitchen has a flashlight, which illuminates the interior of the building, so ThreeDots no longer has to wander around in the dark. Picking up this item removes the grid movement from the building; players explore the building by clicking on links signifying landmarks as normal going forward. With or without the flashlight, players can enter one of the two other rooms in the building: the band room or the circus room.

Taking the dirt path, ThreeDots travels across a wooden bridge that passes over a river. That river begins and ends past the fog. Below the bridge are clusters of lily pads. While crossing the bridge, ThreeDots hears the croaking of frogs and the chirps of crickets, but cannot spot any nearby. The collection of buildings ThreeDots spotted is actually a collection of convincing cardboard cutouts. The fake buildings flank a grassy, overgrown field. In this field is a single occupant: Brandon, the gender non-conforming secret agent. Within the town, players converse with Brandon about his role in the town along with how to leave Fairgray. Brandon instructs ThreeDots to go to Foghog's house, which is nearby. It is in the next area. Upon viewing the house, it has two floors, and an oddly flat roof. Upon entering the house, ThreeDots meets Newt and Carter, who, when asked where Foghog is, respond that she is on the second floor of the building. Foghog instructs players to seek out another person in Fairgray, which she says will allow them to escape Fairgray. Speaking to Brandon corroborates this request's validity.

After meeting with the tightropewalker, the third floor of Foghog's house opens up. ThreeDots can bring the tightropewalker with them, but is not required to. If players visited the abandoned village before the abandoned building then the tightropewalker knows a shortcut to Foghog's house through empty animal pens. Once ThreeDots speak with Foghog after completing her house, she offers them a choice: go to the roof, then live in an eternal paradise; go to the basement, then live in an eternal carnival, or stay in Fairgray. ThreeDots can protest by explaining they want to reunite with their Special Somebody, but through so many words Foghog explains they can no longer be together.

Discussion

I can draw a parallel from my game, however circumstantial it is, to Stone's reparative game design (2018). I designed the game as a somewhat way to address my feelings of grief around my close family member. This is where I succeed at reparative game design, using game design to address and feel bad feelings to understand them. I did transfer my grief into a creative output. I struggled with it to complete this game. At one point, I felt that I had drained my grief for inspiration. But the content of the game reflects a reality I wish I had: a celebration of both my queerness and my close family members that I never had the chance to experience. It is an honest reflection of how I feel about my close family member. This project helped me process my grief, by allowing me to write it out in prose. It is a container for my grief, edged in time, preserving my raw feelings, allowing me to explore them at my own pace. Where I fail, if one can reasonably fail at design philosophy that encourages the lack of consequences for failing to create good or complete art, is the Stone took as much time as they needed. Its pace should be fluid, and its release bound only by personal desires. Making this game helped me work through my grief, but it is not a perfect example of reparative game design.

Why Twine?

Part of this project is to show that making this type of game is a valid option. A game can be multiple strings of text wrapped together in an interconnected web. Games do not require complex graphics to be able to be analyzed at a great degree.

The Twine version called Harlowe offered the most affordable code; it was powerful in its flexibility, but it was also accessible in its presentation. I would not have needed Sugarcube's greater manipulation of HTML code. Part of the accessibility is my familiarity with it, but that can apply to other queer game makers who want to make a game with what they know, rather than what mainstream

platforms define what a game is. Using Harlowe is a stance to say that games can be made without having to learn how to make a game.

Disorientation

I created this game with the express intention that it would be a "cyborg game," according to Vist's definition of the term as a game meant to disorient. I find significant overlap between their definitions of cyborg games and what this paper defines as a queer game. The assessment that cyborg game creators "deep knowledge of the genres of (video)games and of the expectations of the people who play them" (2015, p. 56). As Salter, Blodgett, and Sullivan explain in their paper on transgressive design (2018), Vist also makes the statement that cyborg games cannot be triple AAA (i.e. mainstream) videogames, because of how opposed their two philosophies are to one another. Cyborg games being the reactive portion. Mainstream games never want to disorient players for fear of consumer outrage, mostly manifesting in lost sales. Vist mentions the end of *Mass Effect 3*, which seemed to accidentally disorient players to the point where there were vocal online complaints about the ending. Even when mainstream games create a cyborgian ending, the studios responsible for it backtrack by caving to the pressure of certain consumers (p. 62).

My game does not give players a happy ending. ThreeDots does not fulfill their essential quest to reunite with their Special Somebody. Instead, they are given a choice that has vague religious connotations like Penance: Paradise, heaven; Revelry, hell; Fairgray, limbo. This disappointment is meant to disorient players who expect that a game is supposed to have a satisfying ending, where the protagonist of the story fulfills their goals. In my game, this does not happen. It would be arguably easier to have ThreeDots fulfill their goal, but I found it much more interesting to have them fail.

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I also disorient, specifically non-queer players by making repeated note of ThreeDots's apathy for non-queer identities. This is a direct connection from Vist's quote: "these games are making people who've felt comfortable with their worlds (virtual, physical, hybrid) feel deeply uncomfortable. They are making people aware that the choice to ignore entire swathes of genders, races, sexualities is just that --a choice" (2015, p. 67). Non-queer characters are at the forefront of culture and media, while queer characters are treated as niche, background characters, or tokenized. My game reverses this idea. The only named non-queer character in the game is the literal embodiment of toxicity, because he incessantly pursues the protagonist to change their ways to suit his wants. All the other occurrences of heterosexual romance are treated with apathy, and barely an acknowledgement that they are romantic. Conversely, the gay couple of Newt and Carter is described in detail, and ThreeDots's internal thoughts indicate they think highly of the gay couple's overt romance. This effectively disorients non-queer audiences, while being a reflection of the experiences of some queer people. While a documentation of queer experiences may sound like an empathy game trope, this type of documentation is one that villainizes heteronormative concepts, which are either invisible or beneficial to heterosexual people, or treats them with complete apathy. It is not teaching non-queer people how queer people view the world, but providing an exaggerated view of one queer person's uncaring attitude whenever it comes to non-queer romance.

The causeway showcases a myriad of heteronormative scenarios to illustrate the ubiquity of these in everyday life for queer people. While I expect some non-queer players may uncritically accept their identities explicit inclusion, like some do in their own everyday lives, I believe most queer players will recognize the deliberate absence of their identities, and thus understand ThreeDots's apathy toward these scenes as a queer character themselves.

Conclusion and Future Work

Queer games have a vast potential as an art form and research subject. By combining the work of queer scholars with the expertise I have as a game-maker and a small amount of personal experience, I use my game to argue that queer experiences inform queer games regardless of their origin or complexity. This paper supports this argument by explaining the queer elements present in games, then how those manifest into research. By manifesting queer elements in my game from research, I am creating a unique piece of art, while justifying the importance for its existence, and thus the continued existence of similar media for the future.

I plan to alter the game to be closer to my vision. Currently, I consider it in the prototype stage; it is not yet a finished product. I will to add more characters to show the diversity of queerness represented in Fairgray. Future work creating queer twine games could more intentionally use the various iterations and versions of it; it would speak to the versatility of a free, amateur-friendly and open-source content generation program.

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