

# **Well Played**

**a journal on video games,  
value and meaning**

**edited by Emily Flynn-Jones  
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**Carnegie  
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Well Played



Well Played  
a Seriously Weird Special Issue

guest edited by Emily Flynn-Jones

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# Introduction

Emily Flynn-Jones

At the end of the twentieth century, RE/Search published three volumes dedicated to the “Incredibly Strange.” Looking at cinema and music, these were forays into the unconventional and unpopular, the avant-garde and in-bad-taste, outsider and oppositional cultural artefacts. This project produced an archeology of marginal media with decidedly countercultural sentiment which has been influential in intellectual attempts to comprehend weird in culture; from Washburn & Demo’s (2013) “Bad Music” anthology and Hoberman and Rosenbaum (2009) adventures in “Midnight Movie” culture to Jeffrey Sconce’s (1995) conception of the “paracinema” community. Chris Charla has recently revived the strange, this time looking specifically at games with a series of zines (a punky format of which RE/Search would most certainly approve) called *Incredibly Strange Games*. Here the tone is softer and more celebratory, lovingly exhibiting the unusual and unplayed.

Inspired by the ethos of the “incredibly strange” and a personal penchant for shovelware, shitty games (kusoge), the Simple Series by 505 and neo-situationist numbers like the *LaLaLand* games, this “Seriously Weird Edition” seeks to take weird seriously. A venture in five parts, this collection brings together a variety of strange tales of videogames demonstrating that the weird can be wonderful and, of course, well played.

Part one, entitled “Out of Control”, explores surprising actions and control schemes. Looking at the weird things we do and the strange ways we do them is Josh Fishburn who focuses on WarioWare and Nintendo’s favourite antagonist, Wario, as an unreliable instructor for a bizarre series of minigames. In the second out of control article, Max Mallory offers insight into the miraculous multiplayer phenomena that is *Twitch Plays Pokémon*.

“Love++” is the theme of the second part of this issue. This is all about the dating-sim, games which Emily Taylor (2007) observes are commonly perceived as vulgar or weird – digitizing romance, simulating sex and offering virtual titillation, as they do. This section offers two accounts, of very different games, that challenge this perception. First, there is Nicolle Lamerichs’s post-play narrative of *Hatoful Boyfriend* which demonstrates the deceptive weirdness underlying the bizarre premise of this interactive visual novel about interspecies romance. Next, Alexander Champlin delves into the sentimentality and tenderness of *Katawa Shoujo*, a dating-sim with differently abled bodies which might be all too easily framed as “taboo” or dismissed as fetishistic.

Part three deals with games that should, quite simply, be terrible but somehow find success. Both games in this section do not seem to want to be played, they are obtuse, absurd and obscene at times, but these qualities seem to be part of the allure. Myself (Flynn-Jones, 2014 & 2015), Jesper Juul, Matthew Weise and Jason Begy (2009) have all tried to comprehend the peculiar pleasures of playing with bad games. Joining us in this are Eli Neilburger who remembers the Sega CD enigma, *PANIC!* as a baffling maze of mini puzzles, mad cutscenes and scatological humour and Howard Braham recalling his tortured negotiations with the mythic *Takeshi no Chousenjou*.

“Something Weird This Way Comes”, indeed. Part four is Weird with a capital “W”, featuring two essays that explore resonances of the Weird literary genre in games. Tanya Krzywinska provides a comprehensive analysis of the MMO *The Secret World* and coordinates for identifying generic weirdness. This article keeps weird company with Karen Schrier’s piece which details the Weird reverberations of the game adaption of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*.

The final part of this journey into the videogame strange is composed of the “Other”. A pair of very different essays. Alex Mitchell captures the atmosphere of the beautiful *Kentucky Route Zero*, describing strategies of defamiliarization which make it a “poetic” game.

Closing this collection is Rory Summerley and an account of two games that effectively surprise and amuse players through a combination of intertextual references and subverted expectations. These convention defying games are *Frog Fractions* and *Nier*.

I would like to thank the Well Played editorial board for their enthusiastic support of this strange bit of scholarship, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Ian Sturrock for contributing their time and expertise to reviews, Chris Charla for the *Incredibly Strange Games* zines and 505's "Simple Series" for being my first encounter with weird games.

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# Part One: Out of Control





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# Weird WarioWare

## Instructional Dissonance and Characterization in WarioWare Inc., Mega Microgame\$!:

Josh Fishburn

### **Weird and Well Played**

*WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgame\$!* is not just weird, it's in-your-face weird. Over the course of the game, the player presses buttons to accomplish the following: pick a nose, protect a quail egg from an earthquake caused by the thunderous hammer of a giant, brush teeth, sniffle to stop a running nose, and bounce a watermelon in the air using a person as a trampoline. In addition, there's a mad scientist who gets diarrhea from drinking lab chemicals, a duo of cab drivers who find out that the player-character is a mermaid/merman, and an afro-wearing disco dancer who designs mobile games.

More strange, and well played by Nintendo, is the instruction manual, which features a sticker book and a set of games within the written instructions that, as I'll argue, end up being diversions crafted by Wario. The instruction manual doesn't do much *instructing* at all. Along with all the obviously weird aspects of *WarioWare*, this one stands as unusual, but notable, because it leaves so much of learning how to play up to the player.

*WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgame\$!* (or simply *WarioWare*) is a 2003 game for Nintendo's Game Boy Advance console that features brief games (microgames) played in quick succession. The game is also notable for its narrative, its characterization of Wario, the cryptic instructions that the game offers before each microgame, its use of only the directional pad and "A" button to control each microgame, and its consistent, often crude wackiness. *WarioWare* has become a

core series for Nintendo, with sequels on Nintendo's portable and home consoles.

While the original *WarioWare* was experimental by design, it did not necessarily highlight the unique capabilities of the Game Boy Advance. What it did was set a precedent for what I'll call "instructional dissonance", in which Wario's characterization as a greedy narcissist comes to light in the way the game teaches, both through the instruction manual and in the prompts provided to the player before each microgame. Throughout this paper, I will argue that this instructional dissonance is consistently applied across the full game package. To start, I will compare the design of the *WarioWare* instruction manual with the typical approaches that videogame instruction manuals take. We also need to understand the in-game instructions in the context of each microgame that they instruct. But first, to know why Wario, of all of Nintendo's characters, makes sense to lead this strange collection of micro-videogames, we need to know understand his history and emergence as a popular Nintendo character.

### **The Character of Wario**

*Either way, I'm still a cad! I hate everybody! Yaaarrghh! —  
Wario (after losing all of his money at the end of WarioWare  
Inc., Mega Microgame\$!)*

By the time that Nintendo released *WarioWare* in 2003, Wario had long been a part of their core cast of characters. He first appeared in 1992's *Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins* (Nintendo R&D1, 1992) as Mario's antagonist and the final boss, but would get his own games soon after. His early characterization as a greedy narcissist solidified in his first starring game, *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3* (Nintendo R&D1, 1994), which resulted in a game with a different style and pacing than its prequel. *Wario Land* brought coin and treasure collecting to the fore, making it necessary to advance further in the game and achieve better endings.

While there were changes to the game's rules, Wario's driving narrative force remained his unfettered greed throughout the *Wario Land* series. When he started appearing in the popular *Mario Kart* series, his catchphrases included "Wario is great!", "I lost! To a buncha' losers!", and "I HATE you!" In the *Super Smash Bros.* series, one of his attacks is an explosive fart called the "Wario Waft". As Mario's evil twin, Wario allows Nintendo to explore darker, stranger material (while keeping their kid-friendly sheen intact). While Mario is clean, friendly, and generous, Wario is disgusting, narcissistic, and miserly. But he's not stupid; in fact, he's a game developer!

When we first see Wario in *WarioWare*, he's leaning back in a recliner, picking his nose, and watching television. He sees an advertisement about the latest, greatest videogame and is struck by the thought of mountains of money that he could be making by selling his own videogame. He recruits his friends (although none of the games have explained how Wario has any friends in the first place) to help him create this game, incorporates as WarioWare Inc., and gets to work. In *WarioWare*, you start the game by naming your character, and Wario's game designer friends refer to you by name throughout the game. Each game designer runs into some trouble along the way, and you help them through that trouble by playing through their microgames. Here's where things get confusing.

### **In-Game Instructions**

*Why does WarioWare make any sense at all? (Gingold, 2005)*

In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway (2006) proposes a model for formal analysis of games, highlighting "four moments of gamic action". This model borrows the concept of diegesis from film theory, with the diegesis of a videogame representing the "game's total world of narrative action." (Galloway, 2006, p.7) In addition to diegetic and nondiegetic elements, the model considers operator (typically referred to as the player of a game) and machine actions, giving four categories of action:

1. Diegetic operator actions (e.g. Moving an avatar)
2. Non-diegetic operator actions (e.g. Pressing buttons, changing game settings)
3. Diegetic machine actions (e.g. Cutscenes)
4. Non-diegetic machine actions (e.g. Powerups, gravity, or glitches)

While playing a videogame, it makes little sense to think of these categories separately, but they provide a useful model of analysis for the instructional dissonance that exists in the pre-microgame instructions in *WarioWare*.

In *WarioWare*, a typical play session involves choosing a genre of microgame (which is represented by one of Wario's game designer friends), then attempting to complete as many of the chosen microgames in succession as possible. A particular genre may include games with the same fictional theme (e.g. Sports or Sci-Fi) but the actions that are required vary widely and are not limited by the chosen genre.

*Part of the cognitive friction WarioWare creates by changing games so fast, is that you can't map nouns and verbs from one game to the next. One game may contain a snowboarder, and you figured out that by pushing left and right on the directional pad you could guide her through a gate, but the next game has no snow boarder, gate, or even snow. (Gingold, 2005)*

More confusing is that even if the next game had a snowboarder, gate, snow, and an identical color palette, it might still be significantly different. It's not only the rapid context-switching that causes confusion, but also that the game deliberately sows confusion with pre-game instructions. Before each microgame, the player is given an instruction consisting of one or two words. "Catch!", "Pinch!", "Pick!", and "Blast Off!" are just a few examples. These are not

always what they seem. Let's look at three of the most common instructions: "Jump!", "Dodge!", and "Eat!".

### Jump!

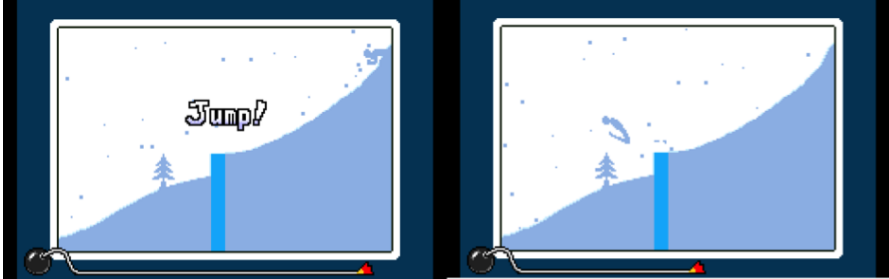


Figure 1. *Ski Jump Microgame – Instructions and Action*

In the ski-jumping microgame (see Figure 1) there is only one way to succeed, which is a common situation in the *WarioWare* microgames. To win this game, the player must time their press of the A button so that it occurs just as the ski jumper passes over the darker-colored area of the mountain. In this case, it helps to have a previous understanding of how ski-jumping works (i.e. that there is a predetermined launch point for the ski-jumper), but if you fail to make the jump, the game gives you the visual feedback of the jumper tumbling off the launch point. What is not clear from the instructions is that the player cannot force the ski-jumper to jump before the launch point but is not penalized for pressing the button ahead of time. Button-mashing (pressing the A button as fast as possible) is thus a viable strategy for this microgame. Still, the instructions for this game are relatively clear, with the action, "Jump!", mapped directly to the action button (A) on the Game Boy Advance, and also directly to the action in the microgame's fiction (the ski-jumper jumping). In Galloway's terms, the non-diegetic operator action of pressing the A button directly triggers the diegetic player action of a jumping ski-jumper, as long as it is properly timed.

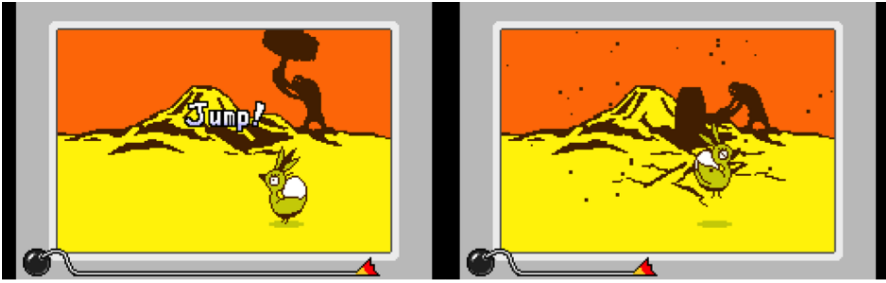
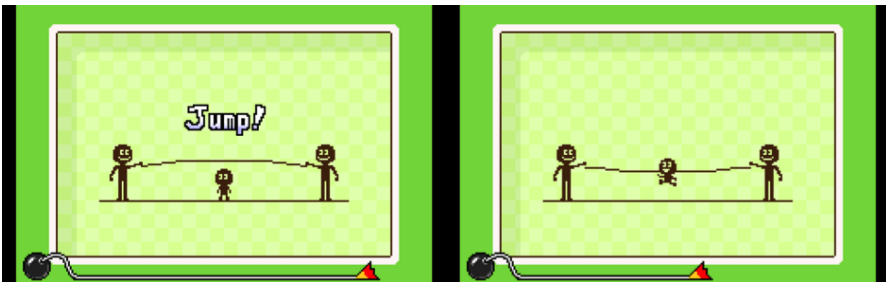


Figure 2. *Quail Jump Microgame – Instructions and Action*

In the microgame (see Figure 2) the quail must protect the egg it holds on its back by jumping at just the right time to avoid the earthquake caused by the hammering giant in the background. Like the ski-jumping microgame, success here also requires properly timing your jump, and only one jump is required. Unlike the ski-jumping microgame, the player can jump at any time, as many times as the time allows. When jumping, the quail flutters in the air for a couple seconds before returning to the ground. As a result, timing is more important here than it is in the ski-jumping game. Another notable difference is that the goal for the player within this narrative is actually to protect the egg. Jumping is secondary, the means to the end rather than the end itself. If the purpose of the instructions was to tell the player how to succeed, they might be given as “Protect (by jumping)” rather than as simply “Jump!” In Galloway’s terms, the non-diegetic operator action of pressing the A button directly triggers the diegetic player action of a jumping quail without regard to timing, as long as the quail is on the ground.



*Figure 3. Rope Jump Microgame – Instructions and Action*

In the microgame (see Figure 3) the player must again time their jump properly, but unlike in the previous jumping games they must repeat the successful jump until time expires. If they mistime any of their jumps and hit the rope, they lose the game. The previous two “Jump!” games create an expectation that only one jump is necessary to succeed, while here the expectation is changed, and the instruction “Jump!” doesn’t help the player understand the new expectation. As in the ski-jumping game, the fiction here is consistent with the instructions – as part of the activity of jumping rope, the fictional character’s goal is indeed to jump successfully.

In these three examples of microgames with the “Jump!” instruction, there are differences in game fictions but similarities in how the player interacts with them. The A button controls a jump action, which is always available in one of the microgames (Figure 3) and available with conditions in the other two (Figures 1 and 2). The diegetic operator action of jumping is consistent across all three. In other words, the A button always triggers a jump. Dodging is not so straightforward.

### **Dodge!**



*Figure 4. Dodge Microgame – Instructions*

Like “Jump!”, “Dodge!” is a brief, understandable instruction. We know there will be something coming our way that we need to avoid. Unlike “Jump!”, “Dodge” does not easily map onto a specific diegetic operator action (for Wario, in the case of the microgame shown in



Figure 4). There is still only one action button, so perhaps that could map to a dodge action. Because *WarioWare* also uses the directional pad of the Game Boy Advance, Wario could also dodge by moving to a safe location. Although “Dodge!” is a fairly straightforward action (to get out of the way) in the fiction of this microgame, as an operator/player it’s not clear what the specific diegetic player action will be. In other words, what the heck does “dodge” mean in the context of this game, and what exactly will Wario do when I press the A button or directional pad?

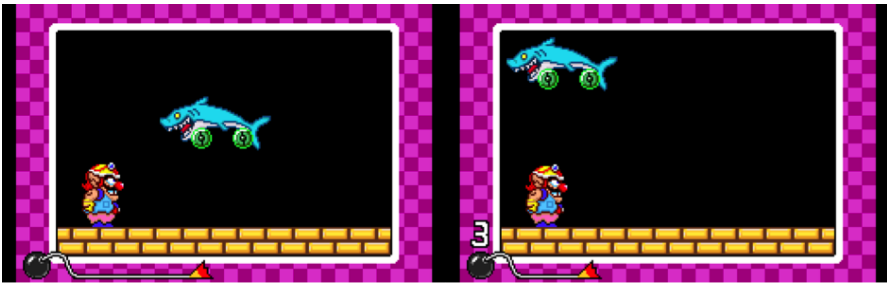
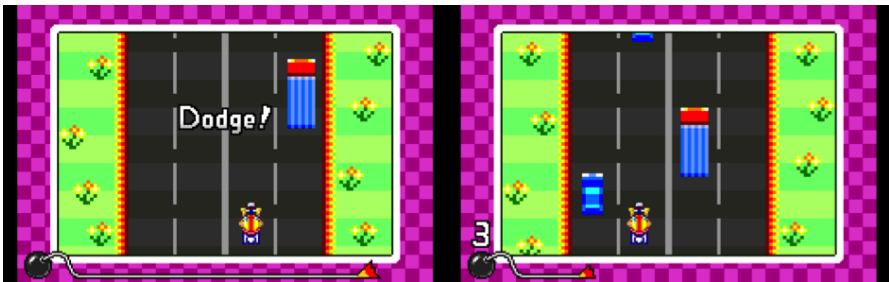


Figure 5. Dodge Microgame – Action

The design of the microgame deliberately exploits this confusion to create its challenge. In the microgame (see Figures 4 and 5) there are four possible scenarios, one of which will be picked randomly by the game:

1. The car will come driving at Wario with constant speed. Jumping over the car wins the game.
2. The car will drive, and then jump (see Figure 5). To win, Wario must stand still.
3. The car will drive, then stop briefly, then continue on at the same speed. If Wario jumps as if the car was driving at a constant speed, he will land on the car and lose the game.
4. The car will drive, stop briefly, then turn around. There does not seem to be a possibility to lose this version of the microgame.

The directional pad does nothing in this microgame, so your options are to press the A button, or not. One of those options will be a successful strategy, depending on which scenario is selected by the game. The instruction, “Dodge!”, implies action, but in at least one of the winning scenarios, inaction is required. Instead of always having the meaning, “get out of the way”, “Dodge!” here can also mean, “don’t put yourself in the way.” This is an example of instructional dissonance that, more than the “Jump!” examples, creates a challenge by withholding information about the microgame’s fiction and about its operator actions.



*Figure 6. Dodge Microgame – Instructions and Action*

A more straightforward example of the “Dodge!” instruction can be seen above (see Figure 6). This microgame puts the player in control of a car barreling down the road at constant speed. Other cars appear, implying strongly that the player should dodge those other cars given that the only buttons that respond are the left and right directional controls. But like the previous example, there are times that the player can win by doing nothing. Unlike the previous example, this seems to have more to do with luck than with deliberately confusing the player. Assuming that the oncoming traffic is generated randomly, the player sometimes gets lucky and doesn’t have any cars coming at them in their lane – all the cars end up to their right and left. Even in this more straightforward example, “Dodge!” sometimes suggests player inaction as a way to win the microgame (“don’t put yourself in the way”). There is a similar microgame that requires action to win, but interestingly does not use “Dodge!” as its instruction.



Figure 7. Avoid Microgame – Instructions and Action

“Avoid!” is the instruction given in the microgame pictured above (see Figure 7). This microgame portrays the game *F-Zero* (Nintendo Co., Ltd., 1990), which uses a behind-the-car 3D perspective. In this game, the cars appear larger as they get closer to the player and the screen. Not moving means certain death – randomness will not save you here. Instead, the player must use the left and right directional buttons to move out of the way of several cars. The actions and mapping are much more direct than in the previous “Dodge!” microgames. The nondiegetic operator action of pressing the directional buttons causes diegetic operator action of moving the car left and right, which *avoids* the oncoming cars.

### Eat!

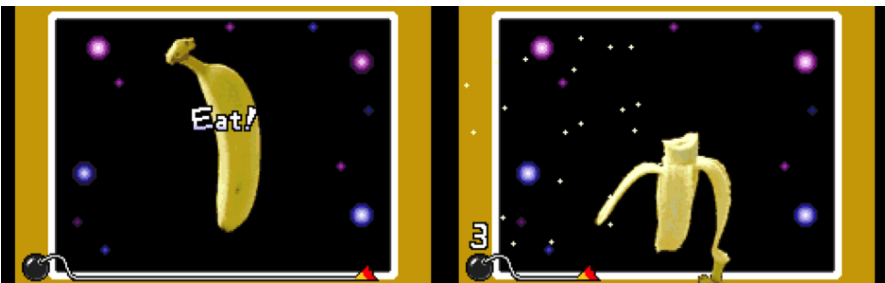


Figure 8. Banana-Eating Microgame – Instructions and Action

Like “Jump!” and “Dodge!” “Eat!” is an instruction associated with a distinct action in the game’s fiction. One important difference is that

while jumping and dodging suggest movement, eating suggests a variety of possible actions in the process of ingesting food (salivating, biting, chewing, swallowing, etc.) In the example above, the player must consume the banana before the time runs out by rapidly pressing the A button (see Figure 8). The player never sees exactly what is eating the banana; it's implied that something takes a bite each time the player presses the A button (*WarioWare* also features a nearly identical microgame with an apple instead of a banana). In this microgame, button-mashing is the only strategy. As in Wario's personal life, eating is a frequent subject in *WarioWare*, with a few variations on this basic button-mash-to-eat game. Sometimes the verb is "Chomp!" or "Munch!", but the mappings of nondiegetic to diegetic operator action, and those actions to the microgames' fictions, are fairly consistent. Pressing a button triggers a bite of the food item and the player must repeat this until the food item is gone.

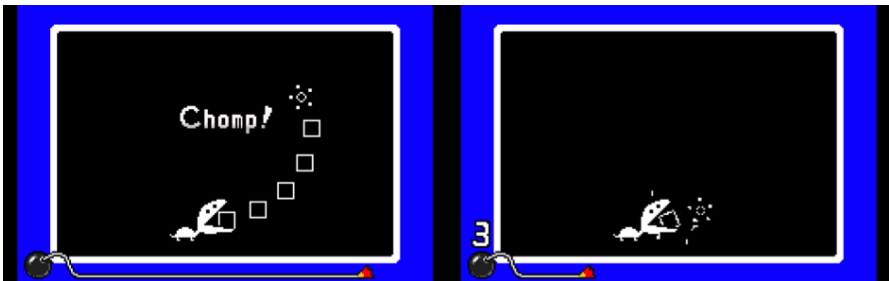


Figure 9. Chomp Microgame – Instructions and Action

The microgame pictured above (see Figure 9) instructs the player to "Chomp!", and one significant difference here is that "chomp" is a direct mapping of instruction to diegetic operator action, with a press of the A button (the nondiegetic operator action) triggering each chomp (If we wanted such a close mapping in the banana-eating microgame, "Bite" would have been an appropriate instruction). Another key difference in the microgame's fiction is that the player can see what is eating the food items, which along with the "chomp" instruction makes it this a clearer relationship. The A button (the nondiegetic operator action) causes the diegetic operator action of the little beast chomping on some food.

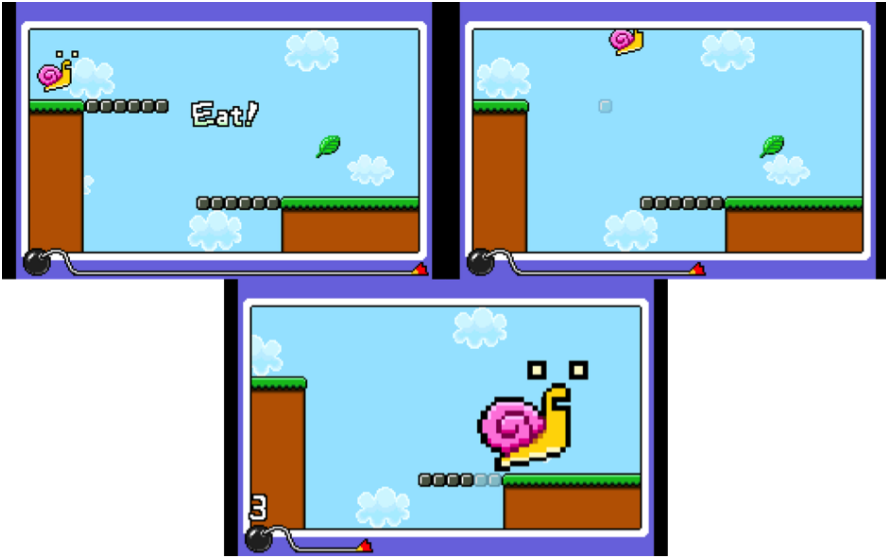


Figure 10. Leaf-Eating Microgame – Instructions and Action

The instructions for the microgame above (see Figure 10) is also “Eat!”, but the game could not be more different than the button-mashing eating games described earlier. “Eat” here means to bring the snail to the leaf so that it can have a meal. To align this instruction with the game’s fiction, you might instead tell the player to “Reach the Leaf”. If the player had just been playing the eating games above, this one might be initially confusing, but these instructions also don’t occur in a vacuum. This microgame has visual information that suggests what the player can control (the snail), what is food for the snail (the leaf), but not how to get there. That’s where knowledge of other videogames becomes helpful – the platforms look like something out of *Super Mario World*, and so it helps to have that in your visual vocabulary. “Broad knowledge of videogames makes you a better *WarioWare* player.” (Gingold, 2005)

As these examples show, there is a wide range in the level of connectivity between the fiction of the microgames, the available nondiegetic operator actions, and the diegetic operator actions. The level of connection, along with the player’s knowledge of similar

videogame tropes, determines the difficulty of each microgame for first-time players. The *WarioWare* designers knew this, and it's why we see such experimentation in methods to confuse players. This sowing of confusion through instruction is consistent, even in the printed instruction manual.

### The Instruction Manual

*Dear You,*

*Was Diamond City a blast? Do you love Wario's games? I love my mountain of cash! Tell your friends to buy, buy, buy my games!*

*Wario (Nintendo Co., Ltd., 2003)*

The instruction manual for *WarioWare* is 48 pages long, including front and back covers and sticker sheet insert. Here's a loose breakdown of the type of content found through the manual:

- 6 Pages: Front and back cover, warranty, service, and rating information
- 4 Pages: Removable sticker sheet (see figures 12 and 13)
- 6 Pages: Quick tips – instructions for starting and progressing through the game and menus (see Figure 11)
- 8 Pages: Diversions, silly puzzles, notes pages, and other places to put stickers (See Figures 14 and 15)
- 21 Pages: Introduction to game narrative and character bios

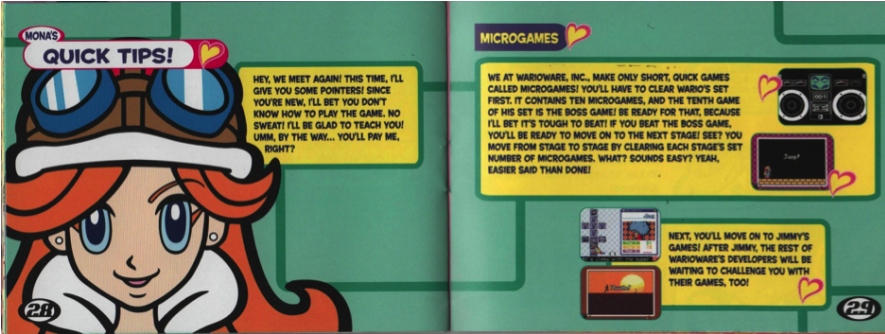


Figure 11. One of the more instructional spreads in the manual



Figure 12. Sticker Sheet with Most Stickers In Place

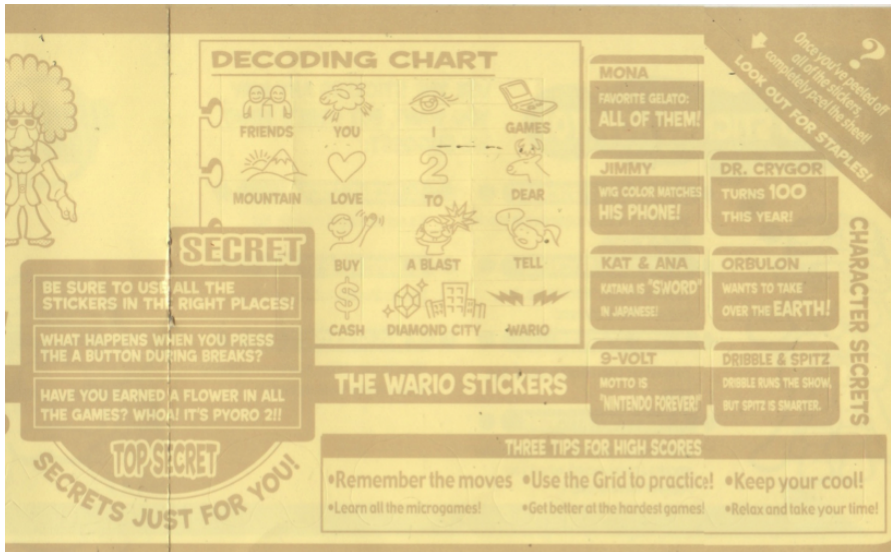


Figure 13. Sticker Sheet with All Stickers Removed

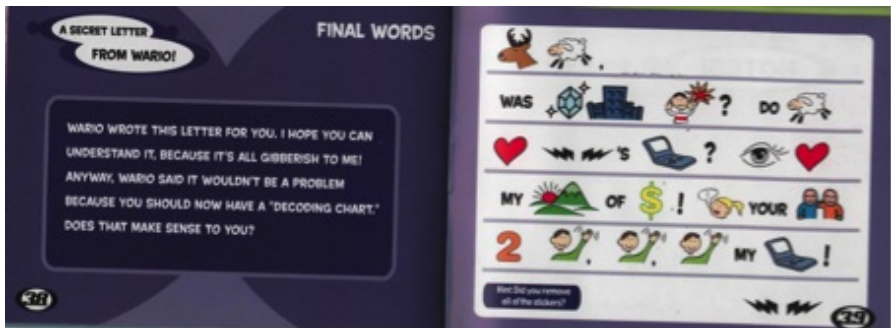


Figure 14. Wario's Song with Stickers to Fill In Words





Figure 15. Wario's Puzzle Page

In *The Role of Instructions in Video Games and Its Impact on Video-Game Translation*, Tomasz Stajszczyk identifies three relevant qualities for the instructive features of videogames (2013):

1. Efficiency: “provide as much relevant information as possible within a convenient amount of time.”
2. Accuracy: “factual correctness and clarity of instruction.”
3. Immersion

While the first two are intentionally thwarted throughout *WarioWare*, immersion provides an interesting lens through which to view the instruction manual of the game.

*Instructive features may contribute towards the immersion effect by virtually countless means – from making the included text's style fit the game's convention to in-game characters who play the roles of guides to making the instructive stages become a part of the storyline. (Stajszczyk, 2013)*

The instructions (see Figure 11) are the closest to actual game instructions that you'll find in the manual, but there's not much of use for progressing through *WarioWare*'s specific microgames. Most of the pages lay out the narrative of the game – Wario and friends design a series of games to generate sales and a boatload of cash.

The puzzles are mostly diversions, but the sticker page appears to be something more significant, with its labels of “Secret” in the top right, which, when peeled away, encourages the reader to remove the entire sticker sheet to reveal what is underneath (see Figure 13). As you can see, what is there is not very useful to complete the microgames, but it does give you information to decode the message (see Figure 14). When decoded, the message revealed is the one quoted at the beginning of this section.

Much like the secret decoder ring in *A Christmas Story* (1983) that infuriates the main character Ralphie with its lame command to “Be Sure to Drink Your Ovaltine”, the *WarioWare* manual is successful precisely because it serves as a diversion and reveals no substantial information towards completing the microgame challenges. This misdirection is an intentional and consistent strategy to actually instruct as little as possible and instead to immerse the player in Wario’s bizzare narrative and schemes. It reminds the player that this is Wario’s world, lest you think for a second that he would actually give away anything resembling a secret about his game. This is consistent with earlier analysis that *WarioWare*’s central initial challenge is to wade through this confusion to establish comfort in each microgame.

## Conclusion

While playing *WarioWare*, if you imagine that the instructions are being spoken in Wario’s voice, it begins to make sense. He tells you the action, but not how to do it. He tells you the desired outcome without the directions to achieve it. He tells you to do something, but not that it requires you to first do something else. Because the instruction manual is also written from his point of view, it also makes sense that he would be the one barking the instructions to you in the microgames. He is invested in creating an instructional dissonance that makes the games and microgames frustrating, challenging, and fun.

In addition to continuing the tradition of one-button microgames and

the narrative of Wario and friends as game developers, the sequels have frequently served as showcases for new hardware from Nintendo. *WarioWare Twisted!* includes a gyrosopic sensor in the game cartridge (the player is required to rotate their Game Boy Advance system to control aspects of the microgames). *WarioWare Touched!*, for Nintendo's dual-screened, touch-based DS portable system, highlighted both of those aspects of the hardware in its microgames. *WarioWare Smooth Moves* used the gestural Wiimote of the Wii home console to define a set of postures that the player needs to take to complete its minigames. *WarioWare Snapped!* showcases the DSi's front-facing camera. (MobyGames, 2014) Finally, *Game & Wario* showcases the Wii U's gamepad with a collection of minigames (rather than microgames). (Intelligent Systems Co., 2013) Though the diegetic action/formal action of the player or whatever evolves with each new platform in the Wario games, what is consistent throughout the sequels is the instructional dissonance established by the first game.

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# Community-based Play in Twitch Plays Pokémon

Max Mallory

## Introduction

On February 12th, 2014, an Australian programmer and fan of the *Pokémon* series began a live stream of a program he was running on his computer. The program was a Game Boy Advance emulator entitled Visual Boy Advance, running a hacked copy of *Pokémon Red*, the first JRPG in the now-famous *Pokémon* series. The start screen displayed the classic black-and-white image of trainer Red and starting Pokémon Charmander.

Alongside the emulated screen, there was a list of usernames. Next to the usernames were either “b”, “a”, or the directional buttons found on a Game Boy Advance, buttons that the emulator thought were being pressed, which caused actions to be taken by the player in *Pokémon Red* (see figure 1). These actions were witnessed by hundreds of thousands of people with frustration, laughter, and sometimes even triumph.

Nobody was aware of what was going to happen. Barely anyone had heard of the Australian programmer’s idea on February 12<sup>th</sup>, but for those who had, the concept was enticing. “Enter button inputs via chat!” the title read. It seemed bizarre that this existed. People logged on and tried it out. It seemed even more bizarre that it worked. Multiple people were playing the same game, on the same system, together. This wasn’t a multiplayer game, this was something different, something new.



Figure 1. Twitch Plays Pokémon Interface

The output was calculated by a simple IRC bot written in Python. It connected to the chat server of Twitch as well as the emulator running the game, taking inputs from people in chat and executing them in the emulator. It was just a small social experiment, but it seemed like a great way to get a few hundred people to collaborate on a game in a new and interesting way, as long as all of them communicated with each other.

But then, the people who had found the channel told their friends about it. And then those friends posted the stream's URL on Facebook and Twitter. And then a media outlet or two wrote a post about it. And then, just six days after the stream went live, 121,000 people were witnessing the chaos. It was a flurry of commands that were being processed so fast, Red was spinning around, walking in a completely unpredictable fashion, opening and closing his inventory, saving, and checking the Pokédex. It was chaos, it was brilliance. It was *Twitch Plays Pokémon*.

Many players began to ask questions. How the hell did this work? Why did people actually care about beating Pokémon by typing in commands? If you want the short answer: *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was

weird. No previous games had the same mechanics in play that this did. Nobody had considered using an IRC server as a control system. The tools for something like this have only recently become popular. However, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was also the birthplace of a new gameplay mechanic that I've dubbed "MMO input": the concept of many, many players all contributing to one game's inputs. With some creativity and a bit of hard work, creating a new gameplay mechanic is not as daunting as it sounds.

### **Part 1: The Creation**

*I didn't really have any plans for it from the beginning. I just wanted to put it up to see how people would respond. I put it together and put it up on a dedicated server all within a few days (McWhertor, 2014, para. 6)*

Very little is known about the person who began this entire fad, and even less is known about what their future projects will be. The creator has said that the stream is "a social experiment" (Wayling, 2014), but after the popularity boost, it's hard to believe that they won't be doing something with MMO input again. There are plenty of interviews with the creator from many reputable sources (such as Polygon, CNet, Game Informer, the Guardian, and Escapist Magazine, just to name a few), which gives us some insight into the creator's development process. There's even a few Python scripts that are based off of the programming for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. These allow for the easy addition of MMO input to any game.

In many of these interviews, there is a mention of another popular Twitch stream/game called Salty Bet. In the interview with Polygon, the creator talked about their inspiration from Salty Bet in the very early stages of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. "Originally I was creating my own version of Salty Bet ... but after interest in that type of content died down I decided to do something different." (McWhertor, 2014, para. 7) Salty Bet was popular for a short time in the summer of 2013, but I'll expand on this later. First, we need to talk about the platform this was broadcast on: Twitch.

Twitch.tv has skyrocketed in popularity recently. The rising eSports community needs a platform to broadcast on, and Twitch dominates that market. Twitch didn't start out as a games service, though.

Twitch.tv was actually spawned by a social experiment of its own: Justin.tv. This was a website launched in 2007 by a man named Justin Kan and his friends. It was a live stream with one channel: Justin's life, broadcasted 24/7 for anyone with a computer to watch. Kan wore a webcam attached to his hat, which was then fed into a laptop that he wore in his backpack and broadcasted across the internet for everyone to see. It was a big deal, landing Kan interviews and invitations to talk about Justin.tv on mainstream television (and yes, he did wear the camera during these interviews). Eventually, the team behind Justin's "life stream", as it was deemed, decided to let other people live stream their lives and activities, and they split these new streams up into different categories. As is usual with many internet video startups, the "gaming" section grew rapidly, and the team decided it was big enough to warrant its own website. Naming the domain after the common FPS term "Twitch gameplay", Twitch.tv was born.

Live streaming in games is currently spiking in popularity. The average viewer of a Twitch.tv stream watches over 90 minutes of video a day on the site. More minutes of live streams are watched than minutes of YouTube videos (DiPietro, 2013), and most of the large eSports tournaments are now using Twitch as a sponsor and/or a broadcasting service. Twitch was the obvious choice to host the experiment, as no other live streaming site offers a focus on gaming or an audience as large as Twitch. While it was extremely popular before *Twitch Plays Pokémon* started, it garnered an amazing 36 million views during the streaming of the *Twitch Plays Pokémon's* first game, *Pokemon Red* (Chase, 2014). People who had never heard of the site became daily visitors, and even the executives at Twitch took notice of this stream in the form of blog posts detailing data about the channel and praising the creator. They were just as excited as the players and watchers of the stream.

This Australian programmer was not the first person to think of an

idea similar to MMO input. There are a few concepts and experiments that are very similar to *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. One of the most comparable is the Infinite Monkey Theorem, which states that a number of monkeys hitting keys on a keyboard will almost surely type a complex text, such as a famous novel or play. In the videogame realm, Loren Carpenter's 1991 *Pong* experiment, in which hundreds of unknowing participants collaborated on a game of *Pong* in a movie theater, is an older generation's version of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. But Salty Bet, a platform that allows people to bet fictional currency on AI fighting matches, was the only one that the creator directly cited as an influence. Salty Bet is another stream that started in the summer of 2013. It's a 24/7 battle royale that takes place in the fighting game *M.U.G.E.N.*

Here's how it works. Two randomly chosen characters in the game, controlled by the AI, fight each other. Those who bet on the winning fighters with a fictional currency called "Salty Bucks" get their payout, and the odds are based on how much money is placed on a character. For example, let's say fighter B wins a match. If Fighter A has a total of 200,000 Salty Bucks wagered on them, and Fighter B has a total of 100,000, then everyone who bet on Fighter B will win double their bets. Salty Bucks are a completely fictional currency that the player obtains for free. In fact, there isn't even an option to pay real money for them. Even though the stakes aren't actually tangible, it's more exciting than you'd think.

A large part of Salty Bet's success resided in how simple the interface was (see figure 2). It was very easy to use, and the odds were automatically calculated for viewers once the fight began. In figure 2, players have bet significantly more on Ren idagawa than Cirno, thus the odds are heavily in his favor (189.6:1). TPP's interface was even simpler, with just one sidebar accompanying the game.

Since characters in *M.U.G.E.N.* are player created and uploaded (there are *thousands* of characters in the game), there's a lot of unpredictability in what a character's move set is, how the AI is coded, and who will win a match. Without real money involved there



isn't any legal gray area. What viewers found most entertaining were the ridiculous matchups that would come up, such as SpongeBob vs. Super Saiyan Goku, or, more appropriately, Pikachu vs. Ash Ketchum.

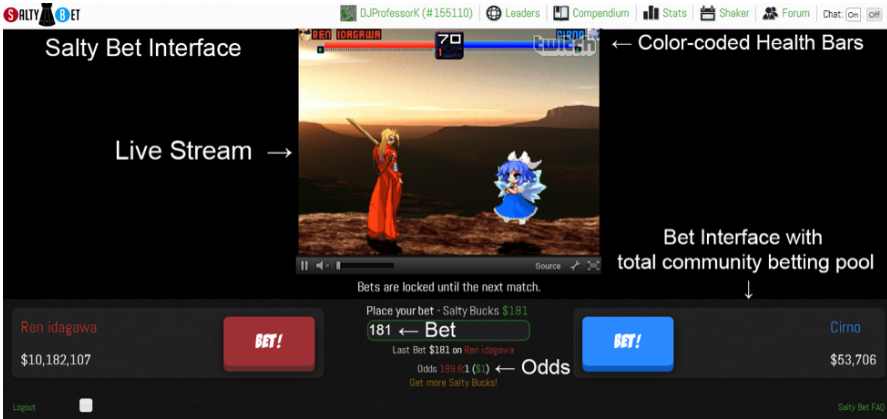


Figure 2. Salty Bet's Interface with Main Components Labeled and Leaderboards / Chat Omitted

Salty Bet took off in the summer of 2013. It wasn't nearly as popular as *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was nine months later, but it set the tone for user interaction through live streaming. The popularity of Salty Bet was equally as surprising as *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. While both *Pokémon* and *M.U.G.E.N.* are games that anyone could play on their own computers, the people behind Salty Bet and *Twitch Plays Pokémon* saw another area of potential; a way to play a game in a way completely different from what was intended. This brings life back to titles that have lost it.

In retrospect, it makes a lot of sense. Both live streams are moderately easy to set up, manage, and monitor. They're both broadcasted on a very popular website that thousands of people visit every day, and they both use very simple control schemes for people to participate in. Yet, they're still loosely-orchestrated pits of chaos.

## Part 2: Managing 120,000 Button Mashers

*It's to make the game beatable without modifications. I didn't want to babysit the stream and nerf [reduce the power of] the game. I'd rather the game be beaten on its own terms (McWhertor, 2014, para. 5)*

“Weird” is a pretty broad term, so I’m going to clarify what I mean. When a game is weird, it is doing two things:

1. 1. Being played in a way not intended by the developer
2. 2. Showing results that are unexpected by the player

Let’s take speedruns, for example. Those are pretty weird. Tool-assisted speedruns (TAS) show the completion of games in ways that are seemingly impossible. This creates some very odd-looking playthroughs of games where players take advantage of glitches and bugs: Ways unintended by the developer. These playthroughs are also unexpected by the player. While their inputs are responsive and intentional, the results clearly don’t fit into the game’s world. This could be anything that breaks the player’s immersion: from using glitches as I mentioned above, to things like intentional ludonarrative dissonance (e.g. killing all of your allies in a first-person shooter).

Unintended by the developer, and unexpected by the player. This definition of weird slots right into *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. If a game with MMO input was attempted with face-to-face communication, it would be quite literally impossible and probably result in a few injuries. Imagine 100,000 people all trying to press buttons on one Game Boy. 20,000 of these people are also shouting instructions, complaints, and religious chants at the rest of the community. Nothing like this was ever considered by the creators of *Pokémon* when the game was made. It is weird in its beauty. None of it was ever possible without the rise of the internet and the popularity of live-streaming.

With a small city’s worth of players constantly watching and participating in the stream, problems were inevitable, and happened

at various points during the stream. Sometimes the input would glitch out, or the emulator would drop frames and players would start to get confused. But the largest and most-debated problem was easily the control system. The first control system for *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was as basic as could be: when a command was said in chat, the game would display the username of the “player” with the command and then execute it in the game all at the same time. It was purposely chaotic—there was no buffer for any controls, only a 20 to 30 second input lag because of the ridiculous amount of people participating. Every control would eventually go through, which means that (of course) there were large trouble spots where one wrong button press would set the team back a sizable amount. But, it was fair. No command took precedent over the other, and every player would get their command through eventually.

There came a time where the system failed. During *Pokémon Red*, there was a section of the game the community dubbed “The Ledge”, which was a one-tile-wide path with a ledge below the player that, when the player pressed down, forced them to go back to the beginning of the area and walk the path. (Neilan, 2014) Crossing the ledge took a full day to pass, as one wrong move would negate all progress, and force the player to move back to the beginning of the area. Many people lost their temper and showed it in the chat. Some even quit because of the frustration this was causing. This is a great example of how *Twitch Plays Pokémon* altered the gameplay of *Pokémon*: an obstacle that is seen as a minor part of the normal game can become a huge difficulty.

In response, the creator implemented a new system a few days later. This system introduced the settings of “anarchy” and “democracy” to the available list of chat commands. A small meter was introduced at the top of the stream, one end being labeled “anarchy” and the other, “democracy.” (TwiliSailor, 2014) When a player typed in one of the two choices, a bar would sway the direction of the system the player typed in. Once the bar got far enough towards one side, the entire stream would switch over to the new system. Anarchy was the original system, and democracy was the new implementation. In

anarchy, every chat command was executed soon after it was typed, the stream just had to catch up. In democracy, there was a chance your command would not be executed. Every 30-45 seconds, the stream collected all inputs from all players and tallied them up. The highest voted command was executed. Then the process would repeat.

Players were enraged at this new system, and in response they abused another added feature to stop it. Along with the update to the voting system, players were now able to add a number after any command (in democracy mode only) to vote for its execution. Huge masses of players began typing the command “start9” into chat, which would cause the system to press the start button 9 times, thus stopping all progress of the game. (notacatchyname, 2014) Players were so upset at this system that they staged an in-game protest, and it was successful. Progress of the stream stopped for hours, and eventually the anarchy system became heavily favored by viewers for the rest of the playthrough, with democracy only popping up a few times after that.

It’s amazing that things like these can happen in the fashion they do. There was a political protest staged on a website, for a game, that was actually successful. I see the start9 riot as one of the most important lessons in *Twitch Plays Pokémon*: players will get what they want, regardless of what systems are put in place to stop them. There’s a common physics concept in play here: the path of least resistance. Whatever is easiest for people to use, they will use it. In *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, the easiest path was that of anarchy. There was almost no complexity and a limited set of commands. It was the easiest mode for players to play, thus it was chosen.

The control system was changed a few more times. During the second run of the stream (where players participated in *Pokémon Red’s* sequel *Pokémon Crystal*) democracy mode was activated once every hour in an attempt to get the mode more popular, but it was almost always voted back into anarchy in a few minutes. This became frustrating for many players who preferred democracy, so as a result, a much more complex system was installed: a command had to

be entered 10 times in 500 milliseconds to be executed. It was a confusing system that was abolished after just one day of use. These confusing and ineffective control schemes could have contributed to the drop in the stream's popularity. However, it seems the creator has started to understand what the players want; the controls as of this writing are in complete anarchy mode.

This community is the beating heart of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* — and communities thrive on participation. 1,165,140 people entered at least one input towards the completion of *Pokémon Red* (Chase, 2014) is what will influence future developers to explore this as an option. In fact, it already has. San Francisco game developer Michael Molinari has crowdfunded his game *Choice Chamber*, which has mechanics that change based on what people watching (and technically, playing) decide. Molinari raised over \$34,000 for the development of this game. (Molinari, 2014) If it gets popular, that is just the tip of the iceberg.

### Part 3: Praise Helix

*How did they ever once open the menu and select the right item for the right moment, let alone complete the entire game? Some might attribute the stream's success to enthusiasm for the game, sheer determination, blind luck, boring post-game interview stuff like that. Most of them, though—the Hivemind, as they call themselves—they'll tell you something else. They'll say it was the will of their risen lord Helix, through His champion Bird Jesus, the sacrifice of The Twelve, and renouncing the false dogma of The Dome (Davis, 2014, para. 3)*

So let's get this straight.

Over 100,000 people are playing a two-decade old Japanese RPG at various places around the world with no interaction other than a text box. The game that these 100,000 people are playing is being run

by a machine not intended to run the game, and the screen is being broadcasted to anyone with access to a computer.

Typing that whole sentence seems like it would sum this up, doesn't it? There's a lot more to it, though. It's not just the stream itself that was weird, but everything before (or nothing, in this case) and everything after. The "game" itself was weird, but the culture is weirder.

Due to the gameplay's chaotic nature, it's hard for people to make predictable actions. This leads to a lot of things becoming bizarre that are expected to be normal by the game, such as nicknames, logical movements, and battles. Something that's usually an easy in-game task proves to be difficult. The best example of this is the nicknaming system, which has led to nicknames such as "ABBBBBBK(" and "JLVWNOOOO". It's also led to jokes caused by the useless movements of the players, such as the phrase "This isn't the time for that!" which would pop up when the player tried to use an item in the middle of a battle.

Since so many people were playing at once, it was almost impossible to get some of these simple actions to happen right away. Giving a nickname to a Pokémon brings up an on-screen keyboard with almost no input delay, which allows most of the commands coming in to be executed. Nicknames in Pokémon are a way to make players feel more affection for their party, but these bizarre nicknames are unexpected, and unintended. In short, they're really freaking weird.

Battles were a challenge for players early in the game. A good portion of these battles were spent trying to back out of the accidentally-activated item menu. This was also part of why people started drawing religious connotations to the helix fossil, as it was the first item selected when the menu was opened for the beginning of the game. This became more frustrating than weird, but it did contribute to the weirdness that the community would create later on.

Both nicknames and early-game battles are inconsequential things,

though. *Pokémon* is generally not a very punishing game, but there were quite a few problems that the community ran into, namely the Team Rocket Base and the Elite Four. Both of these spawned some of the greatest moments in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* history, such as Digrat's (Rattata's) horribly-timed dig out of the Team Rocket Base just before the community obtained the silph scope, a crucial item that the player needs to advance the game. (Gorilla Airplane, 2014) The Elite Four took quite a few tries to finally defeat, but during one of those runs, the party's weakest pokémon took out one of the strongest elite four members in the game. It's moments like these that the community lives for, and everyone is always striving to participate in and/or witness the next one.

However, we haven't even touched on the weirdest part, which is assuredly how the community has reacted to these events. There's plenty of different in-game events I can talk about, but the most unpredictable happening in *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is definitely the fan "religion" that has spawned. It started with a simple choice the player has to make near the start of the game. At a certain point inside a cave, a scientist offers you a choice between two fossils he found: The dome fossil or the helix fossil. The player chose the helix fossil, which the player attempted to use in many battles after it was obtained. Because of this choice, many people started praising the helix fossil, citing that because the player chose it, the community was progressing through the game and winning battles (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Left: *Twitch Plays Pokémon's* Party Upon Completing *Pokémon Red*, Dubbed "The Chosen Six". Right: *Twitch Plays Pokémon* Graffiti at University of British Columbia

This only escalated when the helix fossil was finally evolved into the pokémon Omanyte. Players referred to the pokémon as “Lord Helix” and many wanted him to be at the front of every battle to assure victory. A religious trapping was formed around this pokémon, and continued even after *Pokémon Red* had finished. Fans clamored around this and defended their “religion” throughout the duration of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. The community was almost always excited, and it’s every developer’s dream to have fans so passionate about your project. This passion fueled the hype surrounding *Twitch Plays Pokémon* by connecting fans with each other in ways beyond just playing/watching the stream.

Lots of these trappings became the public image of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Articles mentioning the stream undoubtedly mentioned the players’ infatuation with “Lord Helix” or “Bird Jesus” (see figure 3). As a result, those who didn’t see the stream found these religious statements being posted along with news about this phenomenon. This doesn’t just make *Twitch Plays Pokémon* seem a bit weird. It puts ‘weird’ right on the cover. During the later parts of *Pokémon Red*, it was more accurate to mention *Twitch Plays Pokémon* with these religious community aspects rather than exclude them. With over a million people contributing over the month, it’s hard to think of the “weird” label as a bad one.

### **Conclusion: What can we learn?**

Perhaps it was the popularity of the early *Pokémon* games that brought *Twitch Plays Pokémon* to the spotlight. Perhaps it was the nostalgia that our generation had for those games. Perhaps it was simply a fad that was out of control, and the waves it made in the videogame community will taper out. The thing is, we don’t know. And we won’t know. If there’s one thing we learned, it’s that we never know what games people want. There’s never going to be a way to tell what games will get played, what games will get popular, and what type of games will become a trend. The best we can do is make educated guesses towards emergent ideas.



The first iteration of the stream lasted only 17 days before the players were able to defeat their in-game rival and beat the game. (Chase, 2014) It was a short-lived fire that flared up to extreme proportions very quickly, then died out even quicker. While it did continue to other *Pokémon* games after completion, they have not been nearly as successful as the first.

There's a lot of possible inspiration in the *Twitch Plays Pokémon* phenomenon. No current games utilize simultaneous input from thousands of players for one character. In theory, it's a poor mechanic. The chaotic entry of commands seemed unsurmountable and beating the game always felt like a pipe dream. How was the community able to do this?

Chaos is two things: disorganization and motivation. People enjoy the chaos. It's a great feeling when you see your username on the list of executed moves. It's a sign of power, a sign that you had the ability to command one character that thousands of others are trying to control at the same time. There's a constant battle between the server load and the players' inputs. Everyone wants to be able to say they 'played' *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, and a good amount of those players wanted to beat this game and prove that they could do the unthinkable by toppling one of the biggest challenges in the video gaming community.

The disorganization that was introduced with so many people in chat became nullified by the motivation it caused. Common goals started to form. Series of commands were laid out for the less experienced players to use. People created maps and objectives for the community to use and posted links repeatedly in the chat. Without time constraints, chaos only becomes unmanageable when people don't have the willpower to overcome it. The *Twitch Plays Pokémon* community had that willpower.

We may never see something like this again. Maybe the idea of "Twitch Plays" will just die out over time. On the other hand, we are seeing games being influenced by this (like *Choice Chamber*). We

might see new input systems being experimented with and the trend of MMO input appear in gaming. Regardless of which paths the fans take, we can remember what we had. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was an amazing experience for everyone who witnessed it, and it proves to us that implementing weird ideas can become something valuable.

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## Part Two: Love++



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# Romancing Pigeons

## The Deconstruction of the Dating-Sim in Hatoful Boyfriend

Nicolle Lamerichs

### **Interspecies Romance**

When pictures circulated online of a dating game that starred doves, many gamers suspected it to be a hoax. Promotional screenshots for the game portrayed photographs of actual birds, copied on illustrated backgrounds of class rooms and parks. The quality of the screenshots made this inter-species dating-sim seem quite unlikely. It had to be a spoof, except that it was not.

Hatoful Boyfriend (MIST[PSI]PRESS, 2011) gained popularity and critical attention through a play through by Angie Gallant at Quarter to Three forums increased the popularity of the game (Fahey, 2011). Bedridden, she started playing the game on November 28, 2011, and posted a “Let’s Play” account of screenshots with engaging and funny comments. Many fans and reviewers became acquainted with the game not by playing it, but by reading Angie’s hilarious walkthrough. Hatoful Boyfriend quickly became a cult favourite among fans of Japanese popular culture and beyond. At first mistaken as a bad game, fans were surprised to find something unique.

The game is deceptively weird. While its surface, particularly the concept and visuals, seem to create its strangeness and ambiguity, the actual weird resides in its deconstruction of the dating-sim genre. In this close-reading, I analyze the unusual storytelling, structure and mechanics of this bizarre parody game and explore the tropes and conventions of Japanese popular culture which are subverted to determine this a strange dating-sim.



*Figure 1. The opening menu of Hatoful Boyfriend frames it as cute and romantic through pink hearts.*

## **Hatoful Boyfriend**

Hatoful Boyfriend (Hātofuru Kareshi) is an “otome visual novel”, more specifically a dating-sim catered to girls, created by Hato Moa. Instead of featuring human or anthropomorphic anime characters, it stars pigeons. When these characters are introduced, however, they are accompanied with a personification of design. The creator first came up with the concept for Hatoful Boyfriend as a 2011 April Fools’ Day joke and launched a pilot as a Flash game. Following its immense popularity, the creator finalized the game at October 30, 2011 in the engine FamousWriter. The title of the game plays with the words “heartful” (or “hurtful”) in English and hato which means pigeon or dove. An English-translation patch was released after a translator, Nazarine, was hired by the creator.

In Heartful Boyfriend, the protagonist is a cave girl who attends the all-pigeon academy, St. Pigeonations, “by pigeons, for pigeons”. The girl, whose default name is Hiyoko Tosaka, feels privileged

to attend the school and explains that it is “the world’s, greatest gathering-place for gifted birds”. The narrative of the game depends on the romance that the player pursues with different love interests branching the narrative. By romancing one of the characters – by taking him to a festival, providing gifts, and standing up for him during key moments – the player can follow a specific plot line and connect with one of the birds. Some of the romances and their outcomes also depend on how the player increased her skills which are divided in “wisdom”, “vitality” and “charm”. The plot lines reveal particular backgrounds, problems or secrets of the birds that can be amusing and even emotional or shocking.

The characters that you can date include Ryouta Kawara, a grey pigeon that you have known since childhood (see figure 2); Kazuaki Nanaki, a white dove and your sleepy math teacher; Iwamine Shuu, a partridge and extremely creepy doctor; Nagaki Fujishiro; a shy boy in the library; Oko-san, your pudding-obsessed coach; Sakuya Le Bel Shirogane, a white quill and an aristocratic transfer student; Yuuya Sakazaki, the charming half-brother of Sakuya. Interspecies romance aside, the game is a highly unusual, one constructed around an obscure story world. As the cave girl motif suggests, mankind appears to have regressed in its civilization. This is also supported by key moments in the game. When you go for a run, for instance, images of a destroyed town appear. During the romances, it becomes clear that the relationship between humans and birds is a complicated one. The plot lines of Shuu and Yuuya explain that among birds, there are different political factions. The school is embedded in this political conflict, as Yuuya explains:

*The Dove Party believes we should live peacefully with the remaining humans, while the Hawk Party believes we should exterminate them to make room for birds. St. Pigeonation’s is actually a secret experimental institute created by the Hawks*

When the player has completed these different dating routes, a new route can be unlocked – the Hurtful Boyfriend route – which explains



the background story. The world of *Hatoful Boyfriend* is described as post-apocalyptic, devastated by a war between birds and humans. The cause of this war was the lethal bird flu H1N5 that humans tried to counter with another virus. Though their purpose was to wipe out the birds, the virus had unusual side effects. Pigeons became intelligent and started to fight back, leading to a war that lasted for nearly forty years. As a result, birds became the dominant species on earth. This story line also describes the death of Hiyoko's parents due to a political incident. As members of the Human Liberation Front, struggling for more freedom for humans, they took control of a bird orphanage, which escalated. Apparently, Hiyoko was put in *St. Pigeonation's* as a human representative to see if humans and birds could again form meaningful bonds together. I will detail this highly unusual storyline further below.

Though my primary focus is *Hatoful Boyfriend*, I should note that the franchise is not limited to the game alone. A larger narrative is told across different media platforms and games. This process has also been described as “transmedia storytelling” by Henry Jenkins, a term which was increasingly popularized amongst academics and marketers alike (Jenkins, 2003, 2006). A sequel to the original game, *Hatoful Boyfriend: Holiday Star* (2012) was released with a Christmas theme as well as three drama CDs in which voice actors perform the pigeon characters. The designer, Hato Mao, also produced a manga with four-panel gag comics (“yonkoma”) and short stories.

Though none of these products are necessary to make sense of the game, they do deepen the background of the characters and reveal aspects of the story world. While the initial game can be consumed autonomously, it is linked quite directly to other media texts. For instance, at a certain point the character Yuuya recommends a blog (<http://pigeonblog.wordpress.com/>) on pigeon life style, written by the critically acclaimed author Brian Pigeon. The player is asked to visit this WordPress and explore the world of doves through the eyes of Brian, an urban blogger in London, and of the first intelligent

pigeons. By presenting this blog and its author as real, Hatoful Boyfriend attempts to break the fourth-wall of its fiction.

The game particularly fits in a tradition of contemporary Japanese popular culture. In this type of storytelling, characters remain rather flat and circulate across media as specific tropes. Hiroko Azuma (2009) even argued that Japanese popular culture operates as a database, where specific tropes occur again and again. Cat girls and shy men with glasses are but two examples of such fan-favorite tropes, or “moe” in Japanese, that manifest over and over again. Hatoful Boyfriend rewards the player with knowledge of particular tropes of Japanese culture. Sakuya, for instance, is distant at first but slowly grows romantically attached to the main character – a trope that is often described as “tsundere”. The player who is versed in the genre of dating-sims will recognize many stylistic features in Hatoful Boyfriend, but rearranged into something new and utterly bizarre.

Hatoful Boyfriend might seem like a parody. At first sight, it spoofs dating-sims and indulges in overly dramatic plotting at points. Nonetheless, the intent seems to be genuine and heartfelt. Depending on the characters that you choose the date, the themes may shift completely from slice-of-life, to detective drama, to murder plots. In the extended version, the new character Anghel even changes the entire setting to a turn-based role-playing game that sports epic music. Hatoful Boyfriend appeals to the knowledgeable gamer through these tropes and genre spoofs.

While the game may sound silly, it is highly engaging. As you gradually get to know the different characters and their stories, you see them less as pigeons and more as individuals. Though some of the romances are pure comedy – like dating the pudding obsessed Okosan who wants to turn the whole world into jelly – its ambiguity often makes for interesting and dark game play. As you progress, the world itself becomes less bizarre and more tragic. Hatoful Boyfriend may take conventional dating games and Japanese character tropes as its starting point, but ultimately it aspires to create a holistic story world of its own – a mixture of the cute and the dark.



Figure 2. The player can date his childhood friend Ryouta and further understand his background story.

### Weird Cuteness

Aesthetically, the style of the game relies heavily on cuteness. The different design choices – the wings behind the date, the swirls in the text box (see figure 2) – frame it in the genre of dating games. The menu (see figure 1) already echoes the soft and sweet style of otome visual novels and shoujo fiction in general with conventional symbols such as sparkly glitter and hearts. The logo reflects this as well through its pink and purple color scheme, with a flying heart in the background. Even the line under “Hatoful” is underscored with a fleur-de-lis symbol.

These “kawaii” or cute motives are also present in the game itself. Instead of sprites, or even drawings of pets, the player sees actual pictures of pets. This might seem hilarious and camp. In Japan, though, such pet photographs are perceived as cute and therefore have

a distinct connotation. The combination of art and photography of pets is not a strange thing. At Comiket, as I observed in 2012, there is an entire sub-genre of self-published comics or “doujinshi” in this style created by owners about their pets. These semi-biographical works may feature short comics, pictures of cats that have been doodled on, or little diaries of the adventures of their rabbits. In other words, when Western people see *Hatoful Boyfriend*, they might be confused by this mixed media approach. This type of fiction is not unconventional in the strategies of Japanese media mix (Ito, 2005). Moreover, the pigeons are naturalized already during their introduction. Next to their photograph, the player sees an anthropomorphic interpretation of them as pretty boys or “bishounen” (see figure 3). Only *Oko-san* is not that intelligent and therefore represented by a pigeon image rather than a bishounen.

*Hatoful Boyfriend* presses us to decode the birds as human but also plays at their appearance and life style as birds. When you hear that an egg got crushed, or that pigeons do not live long, you suddenly become aware of their birdness again. This creates an uncanny story at points, as the desire to anthropomorphize these characters often hides their animal features.

This cuteness, then, may also be unsettling. When analyzing the aesthetics of cuteness, Sianne Ngai (2005) says that this is exactly the point. Cute is a style of exaggeration and parody. It is often a way to translate eerie and dark feelings that are partly masked, but by masking them, these features become even more overt. The *kawaii* style – bright and big eyes, colorful hairdos, detailed faces – fits in these aesthetics quite clearly, but these visuals often provide a ground for darker motifs. This is also the case in *Hatoful Boyfriend*, which masquerades as a cute and deviant dating game at first sight, but quickly becomes something else entirely.



Figure 3. The characters are introduced in their pigeon form and as bishounen

### From Adorable to Eerie Interaction

The outcomes of the different romances in *Hatoful Boyfriend* range from comical to romantic to extremely dark. Romancing Oko-san, for instance, ends in a quest for the both of you to obtain the fabled, seven-colored pudding. The other romances are less humorous and often have a sad twist. Sakuya, for instance, slowly reveals how his father, a nobleman, constantly pressures him into becoming head of the family, while Sakuya actually aspires to become a musician. You can support him in his musical career. The mood of this romance is captured in this quote: “I don’t know if his father will accept him, or if he really will run away. But, I know he will come back to me and I pray that our future will be a happy one.” If you obtained the good ending, Sakuya becomes a successful musician but a casual reference is made that Sakuya is not who he thinks that he is. Dating your math teacher, Nanazaki, leads to a situation in which you eventually find a photograph of a person he loved, defaced by a marker. These plot

twists are all important for the end game Hurtful Boyfriend in which these points are connected.

To romance the characters, the player has to stand up for them during key moments. These moments often reveal something of the real plot line that is going on behind the scenes. You find an ID tag of a lost student; you hear the rumors that students are turned into food; you note the obscure files in the infirmary. In these cases, it is up to you how you deal with the situation and depending on who you are romancing, you may need to make a specific choice. If, for example, you see Doctor Shuu walking around at midnight, it is often best not to pay him close attention, unless you want to provoke him.

One of the more melancholic romances is shared with Nageki. As you slowly spend time with him in the library, he opens up to you, and you suspect he is being bullied. When he tries to get out of the library, eventually, it turns out that an invisible wall blocks him. Nageki turns out to be a ghost who committed suicide a long time ago. "I killed myself in this room. And so here I stay," Nageki remarks sadly, but you can help him let go.

The darkest romance, perhaps not surprisingly, is with the scientist Shuu Iwamine. As the partridge becomes more fond of you, you realize that he is quite twisted. In this romance, the player needs to be choose between the doctor and Yuuya, who is trailing Shuu as a Dove Party agent. Choosing Shuu also means that you often stumble into him in the park at midnight or around the school property as he admits disposing of things he "no longer needs". At the festival, you bump into Shuu again near the incinerator. A day later, Yuuya is missing and you are asked to replace him. "My heart's racing but I can't tell if it's love or fear for my life!" The romance turns bad pretty quickly around Christmas when you get a special present: a real white bird feather that, you gleefully note, "looks pricey" and a roast that you eat happily.

On Valentine's Day, you notice that there is something amiss at the infirmary. "At the foot of the bed sits a washbasin, its liquid pink,

with a stack of scissors coated in blood and feathers in the bottom. The blood on the bed is still wet.” Shuu tells you: “I just finished dismembering another student, and hadn’t cleaned up yet. Please, pay it no mind.” He finally asks you how Yuuya’s carcass tasted. “I was afraid he’d be a little tough.” You realize that the roast that he sent you for Christmas was Yuuya’s body. Shuu tells you that he only enjoys his research and does not want any trouble. He highly respects you. “Just cutting you up would be a terrible pity... and I think I want to keep you by my side. Forever. I shall preserve only your head. I will make sure I study your insides most...intimately.”

The final scene depicts Shuu on the run for the Hawk Agents, since he apparently upset his own faction by preserving your head. As he runs through the park with your decapitated head, Shuu admits: “I think perhaps I have felt new emotions, since I acquired you.” In a highly disturbing moment, Shuu asks you if you loved him. You can choose out of three options, but all of them say “yes”. This option, in which the control is actively taken from the player, gives a meaningful and eerie touch to this mad romance.



Figure 4. The player can only confess his love to Shuu

### Darkening the Dating-Sim

After dating the pigeons, the player can open a new game which offers the option to “fulfill an old promise”, which unlocks Hurtful Boyfriend. At this point, the protagonist changes to Ryouta, after you have played with Hiyoko for several months. After a fade-to-black, a new day starts and the pigeons remark Hiyoko’s absence. Kazuaki lectures the birds on the long-lasting conflicts between humans and pigeons, started by the virus that was supposed to exterminate all pigeons but instead gave them intelligence. When Ryouta goes to a file cabinet, he discovers a box covered with blood: “The eyes are glassy. But even like this, I still recognize her. She wasn’t late. She was here all along.” The player-character Hiyoko has died and it is up to Ryouta to solve this case.

The protagonist and perspective shift along with the genre. The player is served with a visual novel in which romancing is no longer the



key mechanic, instead, solving the murder mystery is. As the route starts, a minimalist “1st class” image is shown (see figure 5) that can be sharply contrast to the cute introductions of the 2nd and 3rd term (see figure 6). The image depicts a broken egg, symbolizing the death of the protagonist but also incorporating some of the key aspects of the game, such as the struggle between the birds and mankind. This image frames the game as a kind of paratext (Genette, 1997), supporting its shift in genre and dramatic motifs. *Hurtful Boyfriend* is the dark deconstruction of a seemingly cute, whimsical dating game.





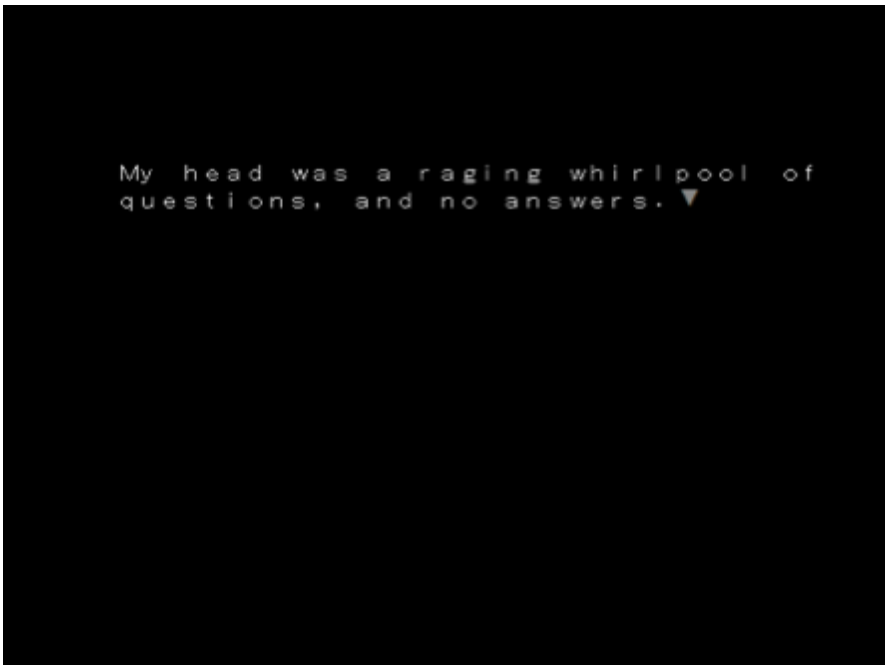
Figure 5 & 6. Framing narrative time in *Hurtful and Heartful*.

During the first class, everyone is evacuated to the gym and the birds are confused. The death of Hiyoko leads to many rumors and no one exactly knows why they have to remain in the gym. Ryouta narrates:

*From the snatches of conversation I hear, it sounds like all the print boxes had pieces of a human corpse in them. Were they all pieces of Hiyoko, I wondered? Nobirdie seems particularly concerned. Which isn't all that odd: it was grotesque, but it's not like it was a dead bird. Just some primate...*

The internal monologues of Ryouta, now a detective, not only echo the sentiments of noir in terms of language, but also in the visual style of the game. While *Heartful* frequently showed us level backgrounds or sparkles during Hiyoko's interior monologues, *Hurtful* provides an empty background (see figure 7). A minimalist design is chosen with a pure black background, without any dove images or kitsch. These

grim intermezzos befit the fate of our protagonist and the mood of the game, which has suddenly shifted.



*Figure 7. The new player-character, Ryouta, has interior monologues that closely resemble detective fiction.*

The plot thickens when the pigeons find out that an enormous dome now surrounds the school property. Sakuya asks: “Is this really a shelter...? Is there really a natural disaster?” Ryouta and Sakuya want to know what happened to Hiyoko and escape the gym after the headmaster delivers a speech. In the classroom, they find out that Hiyoko’s remains have disappeared from the box. Yuuya tells the others not to worry – this is not a crime novel. “Corpses don’t disappear, and we won’t be having a famous detective show up and find the culprit for us.” Even in these grim hours, the game still delivers self-reflexive puns. As it turns out, Shuu has brought Hiyoko’s remains to the infirmary for an autopsy. The birds visit the janitor of the school, called One, who provides a clue by explaining that Ryouta has forgotten something. They also find out that Hiyoko

was likely poisoned because she was the “Human Representative”, who had been assigned to the school for a reason.

Apparently, the birds discover, a deal was made between the humans and birds that if anything were to happen to the Human Representative, this would be the ultimate proof that birds and humans cannot coexist. As a result, the facility would close down and humans would get several hours to arm themselves and take their revenge. “I rather think,” Sakuya speculates, “that this whole thing was arranged to widen the divide between humans and birds from the start”. As the crime plot progresses, the birds are stalked by a mysterious human figure who resembles a scarecrow.

This dark finale holds several twists for the player. Many of these revolve around the identities of the birds, who are not who they claim to be or have done dark deeds in their past. The most relevant plot lines for this article, and the interpretation of the game, revolve around the death of Hiyoko and Nageki, and the shared background stories between Ryouta and Hiyoko. Nageki was apparently in a bird orphanage that was attacked by humans. A brother of his, Hitori, and him survive and room together, but Nageki is in bad shape. He receives a special invitation to St. Pigeonations, where they can help him with his illness. Here, he unknowingly becomes part of an experiment with the highly lethal Charon virus.

*A human would be brought to me. They would struggle, and gasp. And then, with a last, painful sigh, they would stop moving. I knew why I was brought here. Living in my body was a virus deadly to humans in a matter of minutes.*

Upset by the results of the virus, Nageki commits suicide. After many trials, the protagonists get rid of scarecrow with a taser, and are captured by Shuu. In a villainous monologue, he explains that he had preserved Nageki’s remains and transplanted them in Ryouta, who he describes as an “exemplary student”. Ryouta had been undergoing treatment by the doctor for a while, but apparently this was to weaken

him and make him susceptible to the virus. Ryouta realizes what he had suppressed: Hiyoko died by the Charon virus that resided in him.

In this dark finale, Shuu reveals that the scarecrow is a special experiment of his to construct a new human. Though the Hawk Faction found this experiment unethical, Shuu has persisted. The scarecrow is actually Hiyoko, whose brain he had carefully preserved. He applauds Ryouta for tasing the scarecrow that had haunted them: “Yesterday her body and today her mind, you’re a far better villain than I could ever hope to be, mister Kawara”.

The cute, romantic tropes of the dating-sim is now truly subverted. The representation of the scarecrow gains another meaning: a ghostly presence of the previous player-character. Hiyoko still haunts us; “you” are still in the game. This haunting of the birds hints at a dark romance; a deconstruction of the dating-sim altogether. The scarecrow, who speaks in a language that we cannot understand, is the girl that we were once attached to. The Human Representative had the purpose to form an intimate connection with birds, but now she evokes anxiety. She has become a dark figure, stalking the new player-character. Her murder is the ultimate narrative ploy. It is in these moments that Hatoful Boyfriend is a truly strange and subversive dating-sim.

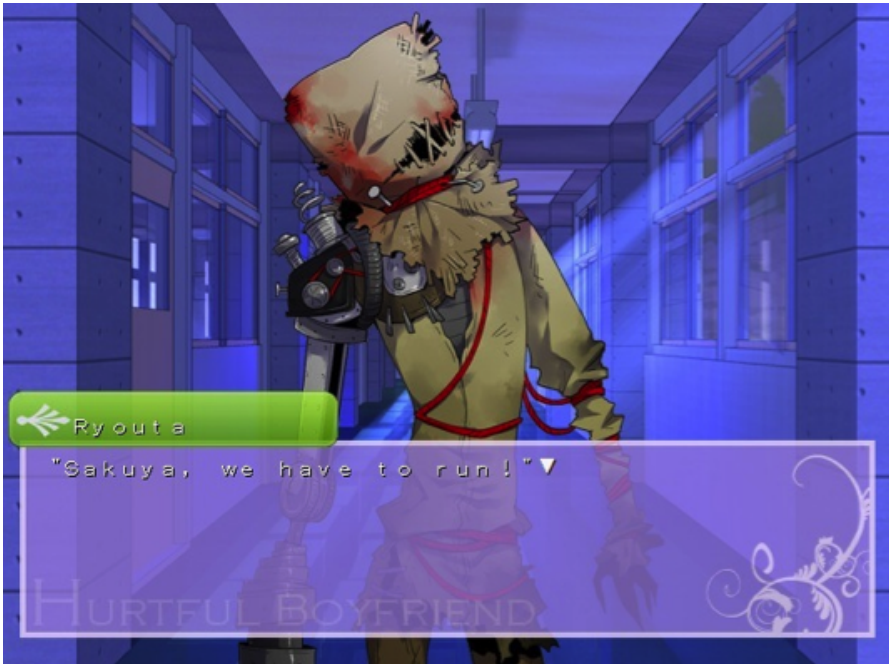


Figure 8. The first player-character, Hiyoko, haunts the game as Scarecrow.

## Conclusion

When buying Hatoful Boyfriend, or viewing some of its imagery, one would expect a game filled with humour. Puns like “everybirdy”, conventional glitters and rose petals steer towards an interpretation of the game as an otome dating-sim, or perhaps a cheap parody of it. The initial plot of the game also supports such an interpretation, including the dramatic backgrounds of the characters. However, it is within the small secrets and hints that the game suddenly unfolds itself as dark and clever. The storyline of Shuu and Nageki already show the ambiguity of the game, and its clever interaction design that often denies the player agency.

It is also not the only parody of dating sims in its kind. The browser game Jurassic Heart (2013), for instance, begins when you shop for a ukulele with your best friend and potential love interest Taira, a tyrannosaurus rex. Other than interspecies romance, recent games

have also explored gourmet. The Bacon Lettuce Biographies (2013) is a school-based boy's love story in which you date pieces of meat, while the suitors in Love! Sushi Rangers (2014) are sushi, presented as pretty boys. The additional Hurtful Boyfriend route, however, really stands out. Within this story, the dating-sim genre is completely deconstructed. The game can no longer be interpreted through its outward cuteness and eccentricity. It has become something else entirely as the player is sucked into the sadistic and post-apocalyptic universe of Hatoful Boyfriend. This title is not just whimsical, but allows for clever and self-reflexive play. This seemingly weird interspecies dating-sim is actually a rich visual novel, rife with interesting characters and meaning. It is not afraid to make risky choices in its design and storytelling. If this is weirdness, then I hope that other games can take a tack from it.

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## Playing with Feelings

### Porn, Emotion, and Disability in Katawa Shoujo

Alexander Champlin

*Katawa Shoujo is a bishoujo-style visual novel set in the fictional Yamaku High School for disabled children, located somewhere in modern Japan. Hisao Nakai, a normal boy living a normal life, has his life turned upside down when a congenital heart defect forces him to move to a new school after a long hospitalization. Despite his difficulties, Hisao is able to find friends—and perhaps love, if he plays his cards right. (Four Leaf Studios, 2012)*

Described as a visual novel, but also often referred to as a dating-sim or a hentai-game/h-game, *Katawa Shoujo* (Four Leaf Studios, 2012) is an adult videogame produced by Four Leaf Studios, a team of amateur developers, and released for free over the internet. The concept of the game originated in artwork posted to the “/a/anime and manga” thread on the website 4chan, a general imageboard perhaps better known for its association with the genesis of the internet hacktivist group, Anonymous. The image, created by a manga artist RAITA, outlined a number of characters for a then hypothetical dating-sim called *Katawa Shoujo* (see figure 1), translated as “disability girls” (or given the more colloquial meaning of “*Katawa*,” Cripple Girls). This image sparked excitement and a sticky thread on the 4chan boards dedicated to the faithful development of the game around RAITA’s original model. The project commenced in 2007 and after 5 years of development and major changes to the team of contributors and the production system, the final version of the game was released in January of 2012 via Four Leaf Studio’s website.



Figure 1. RIATA's Original Concept Artwork, Inspiration for Katawa Shoujo

What is striking about the game is its subject matter. As its description on the studio's website indicates, it is an adult visual novel set in a fictional Japanese high school for students with disabilities. The action of the game centers on the player's navigation of the school's social setting and the development of a romantic, sexual relationship with one of the game's five female characters.

These relationships develop in the style of a dating-sim or a choose-your-own adventure; players make simple dialogue choices during the course of the game which open or preclude various narrative paths. The game tracks the player's rapport with women characters and based on their decisions different story arcs are opened or closed. A successful completion of the game will reveal one of the game's scripted conclusions, a "good" or occasionally "neutral ending". However, in keeping with the format of bishoujo-style visual novels or choose-your-own-adventure narratives, the player's decisions can result in a "bad ending". Most often in *Katawa Shoujo*, this bad ending follows from a failure to successfully court a character, arrived at through a series of incorrect dialogue choices. A bad ending also often finds the player/Hisao drinking on the school's roof with his comically misogynist roommate, Kenji, before falling to his death after a drunken-misstep. By comparison, the good endings generally find Hisao in a relationship with one of the women in the game; these arcs are punctuated by soft-core sexual encounters and ultimately culminate in a dialogue that marks a hope for their future and ongoing relationship. In these arcs, tensions over identity, character conflicts, trauma, and any other barriers to a relationship are reconciled. The player is left with an emotionally and sexually gratifying resolution.

As the game centers on a school for students with disabilities, each of the major characters embodies some form of disability. RAITA's original illustration provides the general framework for their appearance in game, their identities, and (loosely) the conditions for the player-character's interactions with them. All of the women in the game are illustrated as young, attractive, high school students. Rin (who uses prosthetic legs) and Emi are double amputees, Hanako is severely scarred by burns, Lilly is blind (so is the player's hall/roommate Kanji), and Shizune is deaf/mute. Even the player's character, Hisao, suffers from a heart condition, which affects him at moments of stress or heavy physical exertion. Ultimately it becomes a kind of convenient plot device, described sarcastically in the development blog as, "a variant of anime magic aids, a condition that has only minor consequences to the life of the character except when the plot calls for sudden heart attacks." Despite the cavalier

treatment of disability in this description of Hisao or in the initial construction of the women in the game, neither of which do much to challenge ableist body aesthetics, *Katawa Shoujo* strives for more than instrumentalist treatment of disability. The theme of disability becomes central to the relationships that Hisao cultivates with each of the women but the game avoids a representation of disability that defines relationships. In both the developer blogs and my own interview with Aura, one of the writers, disability is stressed as an initial character trait which when combined with broader personalities, interests, experience, and the setting open onto much more complex identities and characterizations. Diane Carr's (2013) recent work on disability in games goes much further than this paper could hope in terms of modeling a framework for studying representations disability in games. However, in light of Carr's writing, *Katawa Shoujo* might become a space in which we can recognize more robust treatments of differing ability at work in video games. The expressed intention of the authors and the work of the narrative arrangement is not to let disability become the fetishized feature of the game and the core element of the game's sex, even if the title and set-up seems to foreground it.

What the game becomes, as a result of this organization, is a surprisingly affective story driven by characters, relationships, and romance more than the hentai-manga that it initially appears to be. It is in this regard that the game takes on interesting import in pornography studies. Discursively, maybe ostensibly too, *Katawa Shoujo* is positioned as a porn game that fetishizes disability in a high school setting. Upon closer examination the game becomes a compelling exploration of otherness, trauma, and identity; a cheesy romance novel, an impressive example of collaboration and vision (from a group of amateur developers), and finally, a very personal, intimate experience for many players. In this complexity *Katawa Shoujo* produces representations of disability in porn that are potentially enabling as much as they are problematic. *Katawa Shoujo* is poised to defy expectations in an interesting way. For pornography studies this opens a window onto the complexities desire and identification in pornographic material.

In the introduction to *Bound and Gagged, Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1999), Laura Kipnis writes, “Whether pornography should or shouldn’t exist is pretty much beside the point. It does exist, and it’s not going away. Why it exists, what it has to say, and who pornography thinks it’s talking to, are more interesting questions than all these doomed, dreary attempts to debate it, regulate it, or protest it. Just what is pornography’s grip on the cultural imagination?” (Kipnis, 1999, p. x-xi) The question that Kipnis poses permits a fruitful interrogation of *Katawa Shoujo*’s politics and, perhaps by extension, the politics of fantasy, more broadly, to which it responds. The game is titillating, it is arousing but in ways that challenge understandings of what we want from or get out of porn. Considering its populist origins, its popularity as a game, and its failure (?) as hardcore-porn, *Katawa Shoujo* disrupts prevailing ideas about pornography, or at least the desires that pornography taps into. This game is weird, not because it centers on disability or because it positions itself as pornographic, fetishistic, or even perverse. It is weird, or more specifically out-standing, because it moves from these frames to develop a narrative and ludic structure which privileges affective decision making in the service of fantasies that challenge prevailing understandings of pornography.

### **Playing the Game/Choosing-My-Own-Adventure/Sim-Dating in the Virtual-Novel**

In order to critically position *Katawa Shoujo* (alternatively, KS) it is necessary to begin by considering its form, its narrative structure, and the way its characters and relationships are revealed to the player. At a structural level the game world is introduced through a series of still images in combination with text-based dialogue and narration. Built on the Ren’Py engine for visual novels, the game reads like a comic book, it unfolds as a series of cells or frames (see figure 2). Dialogue appears along the bottom of the screen in text balloons, character sprites are placed in the foreground, and a filtered/edited photographic image is used as the background. Although there are numerous important exceptions to this, the sex scenes being one example, the game adheres to this general formula for the majority of

each of its character arcs. This system works because text, character models/sprites, and backgrounds may be positioned independently. Each of these elements becomes an asset that can be re-deployed and as a result characters, backgrounds, and even dialogue sequences reappear in each of the arcs. The exceptions to this model are the game's fully drawn scenes and the animation sequences that punctuate the end of the game's first act. The use of fully drawn still images allow for a comparatively greater deal of detail and representation at the expense of malleability. These are employed at crucial moments in the story- picnics, reunions, a track event, and, most notably, the sex scenes. In the sex sequences, still images are treated with minor adjustments for facial expression and movement that generate the illusion of cinematic progression or animation. It is also worth noting that although billed as a porn game, the use of still images to illustrate the sexual encounters in the game renders these moments decidedly soft-core (with the exception of one instance of fully represented penetration). Given their infrequency and their job punctuating key moments in the narrative these images (pornographic and not) are made available to players via a gallery in the game.



Figure 2. Two Examples of Individual Frames in *Katawa Shoujo*

In any play-through of the game, the player as Hisao must navigate a series of interactions in *Katawa Shoujo*'s first act. The decisions made here determine which story arcs will be available to the player in the game's later stages. The decisions that the game asks the player to make are simple, usually only consisting of a few choices, but any individual choice may determine the outcome of the game. *Katawa*

Shoujo opens on your character, Hisao, and a young woman, Iwnako, standing in the snow. When the first signs of Hisao's heart condition appear, this is marked in the game by a pulsing red frame around the corners of your screen as it blurs and fades to black. Although it is not a first-person videogame in the traditional sense, the visual style introduced here implies a perspective shared by the player and Hisao. Indeed, in a deviation from the comic book or manga to which we may compare KS's visual style, the game rarely features its protagonist onscreen. He appears only occasionally and almost exclusively in fully drawn still images. For the majority of the game the player and Hisao look in on the action from the other edge of the screen. In this visual arrangement, you are hailed by the formal structure of the game as Hisao.

As the game progresses, you find yourself at a new school and are confronted by your first decision. After an introduction to Akio Mutou, the homeroom teacher, you are asked to introduce yourself to the class. You may accept this invitation or may instead inquire about why you would want to, an expression of helplessness in the shadow of recent events. As it turns out, this decision has little effect on the story and regardless of your choice you are lead to a classroom where you say a few words before Mutou completes the introduction. Though this first choice has little effect on the narrative arc of the game, it invites you, the player, to empathize with Hisao. The choice to speak to the class expresses Hisao's renewed agency while the more passive response reflects a sense of futility in light of the medical diagnosis and the challenge of a new school. It is this level of empathetic decision making that guides the player through Katawa Shoujo. These types of choices which ask you to get into the characters' heads do not foreground your active embodiment of Hisao (in the way you might control an avatar in an action oriented game), but they do serve to connect the players selections directly to the narratological arc of the game.

Following this dialogue choice, your first class, and a series of introductions to Katawa Shoujo's periphery characters, you arrive at the cafeteria with the class representative (and potential partner later



in the game) Shizune and her friend, Misha. She asks if you have any other questions. At this point you may choose to “Ask about Shizune’s deafness,” “Ask about the library,” or explain that “I think I got everything I need to know.” Asking about the library will increase your standing with Hanako and Lilly. Asking about Shizune nets you no change and instead keeps all relationships neutral (which is essential to opening Rin’s arc later or avoiding, Hanako, Lilly, and Shizune’s path). Finally, asking no questions raises your standing with Shizune who prefers confidence and self-sufficiency. Unlike the first dialogue decision, this choice has a significant effect on your path through the narrative; the selection here forecloses certain relationships while opening others. Like the first it asks you, the player, to empathize with Hisao (and the characters around him) in order to progress.

Through a quick succession of these kinds of decisions, your relationships and standings change and gradually you embark on one of the game’s branching paths, a relationship arc with one of the women in your class. In my first play-through of the game, I made a series of decisions that culminated in an early morning meeting with Emi at the school’s running track. Emi, an amputee and avid blade-runner, challenges Hisao to a race. With Hisao’s heart condition in mind, Katawa Shoujo gives you the option to conserve yourself or to give it your all. This isn’t a dialog choice (like many of the early decisions); instead it is framed within Hisao’s own internal monologue. I chose the latter, which results in a familiar red glow around the frame of the screen, a visual suggestion of the heart condition and a reminder of your embodiment as Hisao. The race results in a trip to the school’s infirmary but also improves favor with Emi.

At this point the player has embarked on Emi’s romantic arc. In her story line you continue to join her for morning runs, you attend her track events, you meet her friends. All of which eventually develops into a narrative of intense closeness. The choices that you are given demand the same pattern of empathy that you have been asked to practice in relationship to Hisao, only now they center on developing

a relationship with Emi. Instead of directing the game towards a particular arc, at this point the player is positioned to move forward in the relationship (and towards the games promised sex scenes) or fail to cultivate a relationship and arrive at one of the bad endings. Then the plot takes a somber turn. Emi's physical disability temporarily confines her to a wheelchair and the player is tasked with comforting her without violating her sense of self-sufficiency. Following another major decision, a visit between Hisao and Emi turns into the game's first sex sequence. The soft-core scene is drawn from Hisao's perspective, emphasizing a shared gaze. Emi sits on top of you, she removes her shirt, then yours, and in a moment rendered more vivid by textual narration than the visual image, you stimulate each other to climax.

When the game, once again, takes a dramatic tone the player must work through mysterious tensions in order to save the relationship. It is revealed that Emi doesn't want to invest too heavily in your relationship. Initially this is framed as an extension of Emi's disability and suggests that the player will need work past her concerns about self-sufficiency. At this moment in the narrative of the game seems poised to restage meditations on disability and identity. As you try to work through this you learn that Emi's trauma is deeper – it is rooted in feelings of loss and a fear of abandonment. The player learns that Emi's emotional identity isn't simply an extension of her physical disability and that the tensions manifesting themselves now are rooted in her family history, not her embodiment. In this portion of the game, it is possible to make choices that are insensitive, either by misreading cues or by intentionally subverting the game's empathetic frame. These choices, cruel or simply accidental, lead you through a narrative trajectory that is shorter and less rewarding. In contrast, by listening to the advice of her friends or her mother and allowing her to re-assert her independence you arrive at Emi's "good ending". She opens up to you and the game concludes with a third sexual encounter between you and Emi. It is scripted as the most romantic and intimate of the three and it carries all the import afforded by the strides you've made in navigating a strained relationship. This sex-scene ends with

you and Emi in conversation – Emi’s last line of dialogue in the scene, “I love you, Hsiao.”

Certainly not all of the romances in the game are as fraught, or complex as Emi’s arc. Some are longer, some are shorter. Notably Emi and Lilly are the only to feature three sexual encounters. However, what we see in Emi’s plot line and which holds true across the game, is an emphasis on connection and identification. The gameplay and sex is titillating, but as much as (if not more than) it is visual, it is also intellectual and empathetic. The sex in the game is communicated to players via still images. An encounter in the track shed is rendered as a single still image marked by subtle changes to facial expression; the core of its development and imagery is textual. Likewise, the culminating sex sequence between Hisao and Emi is framed by dialog and plot to provide its erotic power. The visual component alone is simply a single image of Hisao and Emi entangled on her bed. In this regard it would be difficult to characterize the game as pornographic, if only because pornographic imagery makes up such a small portion of the game. At best, it contains moments of pornography in a scopic sense but these are fleeting. Instead, what seem to hold the greatest charge in this game are the ludic process, the romance, and the textual imagery. These are the elements which imbue the game and the sex with their import.

An additional example will be useful here. In the story arc for Shizune, the first sexual encounter between Shizune and Hisao takes place in a guestroom during a visit to her family. Shizune has tied Hisao by his hands to a chair (Shizune is deaf and mute, meaning that without the use of his hands to sign he is functionally bound and gagged). As a reminder of the player’s textual embodiment as Hisao, a blindfold renders both you (via the back screen) and Hisao blind. As a result, the following sequence begins only with Hisao’s internal monologue.

*I can feel her leaning over me, and suddenly, something soft and moist touches my lips. My body tenses up in surprise. Fortunately, not as awkward a reaction as I could have*

*made. It was a quick peck, and I almost think that's the end of it, but then she kisses me again, more deeply this time. Her hands slide down onto my shoulders, up to my neck, and then back down again. Then across my shoulders and down my arms, I can feel the weight of her body on my legs, and the eroticism of the situation isn't lost on me. At this point I'm ready to open my eyes just a crack, but as if expecting it, she puts her fingers on my eyelids. Seconds later something ties my hands together at the wrists... (Katawa Shoujo, 2012)*

All of this takes place in the darkness of a black screen, you are led along by the imagery of the narration and this text must carry the erotic force of the moment (see figure 3). Eventually you are granted sight but as the sequence progresses the solitary still image does very little to convey the action of the scene. Hisao and Shizune remain clothed in the visual image; the sex that occurs is only made manifest for the player in this flow of internal narration.



*Figure 3. The image used for the clothed sex sequence with Shizune, it replaces the black screen which begins the scene.*

Between these two examples, Emi's arc and the specific case of Hisao and Shizune's first sex scene, it is apparent that the titillating and engaging sexual elements of Katawa Shoujo are more directly situated in story and narration than imagery alone. Emi's story is loaded more heavily with plot, character development, and emotion than sex and visually erotic images; in this arc sex is imbued with meaning via a depth of narrative and a sense of progression. Likewise, in the sex scene between Hisao and Shizune, the player is encouraged to visualize the action, with the provided images offering very little explicit detail. In this light, the games sexual elements seem to be located in at the level of language and the narrative, rather than the visual. It is an intellectual explicitness before it is a scopic one.

In effect the game positions the player for a double reading in advance of the simple gratification of sexual images. A reading of affect and emotion (the player must be emotionally responsive to progress in the game) and a literal reading of the sex sequences at work in the game. Both of these readings trouble the visceral and immediate guarantee of satisfaction associated with pornography. Citing Marty Klein, Debbie Nathan explains that porn is often "all about the fantasy of 'abundance...'. It's like a fairy tale feast where the food is perfectly prepared and there's more than enough for everyone." (Nathan 2007, p. 34) This is not the pornographic fantasy activated by Katawa Shoujo, the scarcity and affect attached to sex change the way the game asks players to relate to porn. The player must work through affect and text to arrive at the sex in Katawa Shoujo and this disrupts the masturbatory immediacy often associated with pornography in the mainstream.

### **Interview with Aura**

This understanding of the game as a disruption of generic pornographic aesthetics is complemented by an interview with one of the story writers, Aura. A lead writer for the game and one of the members who moved from the original 4chan sticky thread to

the consolidated team of developers who would become Four Leaf Studios, Aura, is responsible for Rin's narrative arc among other sequences of dialogue. In a discussion that centered on the game's production context and the Four Leaf Studios team's approach to the project, I asked what drew contributors/developers to the game. Aura suggested that the premise was intriguing: "An attractive combination of the familiar and the outrageous." (Interview with Aura, 2013) This was the idea of taking a familiar trope from anime and manga, the Japanese high school setting, and combining it with the outlandish concept of a dating-sim featuring characters with disabilities. This attraction extends beyond the developers; Aura also attributes much of the game's broader attention and relative internet fame to the terror and fascination associated with the general concept, "Journalists, bloggers, and whoever recommends *Katawa Shoujo* to a friend starts with the spiel about how the concept of a cripple teenage porn game made by 4channers is horrifying... 'but KS is really good, trust me bro.'" (Interview with Aura, 2013) In each of these cases the game's concept demands attention, due in a large part to the assumptions that this premise elicits. The danger of a fetishistic treatment of the challenging topics (and even more challenging representations) of sex, teenagers, and disability by members of an internet collective, 4Chan, most often associated with shock content and counter-cultural nihilism/anarchism. The prospect of this arrangement fascinates people. For Aura, the game's power to titillate precedes its content; at the conceptual level it activates something – curiosity and excitement, shock and revulsion, the familiar and the taboo. Perhaps it would be fair to say all of these are at work in producing the game's position in a social imaginary and in advance of any direct engagement with its material content.

This may explain why a community review of the game for Kotaku, is quick to address the treatment of disability, assuring readers that the game's politics is neither grotesque fetish nor "pity-porn," (AFLYINGIPIS, 2013) and that the characters are fully fleshed out. A staff review of the game for the same website begins, "When I first heard that a visual novel centered around dating girls with physical disabilities was being made, my first thought was 'only

in Japan.’ Of course, I was completely wrong.” (Eisenbeis, 2012) Indeed, these qualifications do the work of distancing the game from the pornographic. Marking the adult themes and content but separating these from the core of the game which is more than “porn”. Even in our conversation, Aura reveals his reluctance to call *Katawa Shoujo* porn. Less for reasons of modesty or propriety, but out of a fundamental awareness of what “porn” is supposed to look like, and what *Katawa Shoujo* ultimately becomes. Aura proposes a way of mediating this tension, “What if I told you we tried to make a porn game but accidentally flunked it and it became this touching romance thing instead or vice versa?” (Interview with Aura, 2013) In this conflict over what *KS* is about Aura and online apologists for the game express a need to bracket the soft-core from the hard, and porn from erotica, from romance fiction, and so on.

Because the sex of the game takes a secondary position relative to its story, Aura clarifies that as pornography the game may be a failure. The hentai/sex sequences are outshined by or, more precisely, fully subsumed in the narrative of the game. While players are excited by the sex, this is an extension of their investment in the story world. Aura posits that what players see in the game, and identify with, is an “otherness of being disabled,” and goes on to suggest that “it is very common for people to share their experience of reading *Katawa Shoujo* with other fans because, for a very large fraction, it is a very emotional experience.” (Interview with Aura, 2013) In many respects Aura is correct, the game largely isn’t porn. The sex becomes an infrequent component of the experience, and where it does appear, it is a product of narrative and description as much as raw visual images. The simple still images only work through the dialogue and narration of any particular sequence and carry the majority of their meaning in relationship to the plot and to the affects that it elicits. Aura offers instructive insight here, “*KS* is about reversing expectations, both inside the narrative and in the way it’s treated by the audience.” (Interview with Aura, 2013) On one hand we might see this reversal simply as a move from porn to romance – the failed porn text a space for more intellectual fantasies about romance and emotion. But there seems to be more to this reversal: rather

than see KS as one or the other, porn or romance, we might see it as both. The game is certainly positioned as porn and contains within it moments of pornographic revelation within the broader narrative, but this explicitness is complimented by long stretches of non-pornographic action and situated by robust literary description. When I asked how the team sought to handle the juxtaposition of the sex and the story, Aura explained that there was supposed to be no juxtaposition. That is, the sex, in the game is there as a part of the plot. In this regard, while the label “porn” may be tough to attach, the linkages between narrative, erotic description, pornographic images are so essential to the game that disentangling them becomes impossible. In effect, the game is designed to prohibit a clear demarcation of each of these elements. KS is porn tempered by frameworks that are often differentiated from pornography. The result is that through a troubling of the boundaries of the genre, *Katawa Shoujo* opens a consideration of desire and fantasy that reveals the complexities that porn is capable of and expands an understanding of desire.

### **Theorizing the Game: *Katawa Shoujo*, Porn, and Fantasy**

By way of a conclusion, we must bring two framing elements to bear on this game. The first is Laura Kipnis’s work in *Bound and Gagged* introduced in the introduction to this paper, “Just what is pornography’s grip on the cultural imagination?” To this we will add, one of the concluding thoughts from her book, “It [porn] exposes the cultural psyche (as for Freud, Dreams were the route to the unconscious). So the question is, if you put porn on the couch and let it free associate, what is it really saying? What are the inner tensions and unconscious conflicts that propel its narratives?” (Kipnis, 1999 p. 162) The second framing though comes from the end of my discussion with Aura. At the close of our interview I asked if there were any questions I should have asked but didn’t, something that would be illuminating. The suggestion Aura posed was to consider why the team kept the sex in the game? Despite calls to excise it and the knowledge that without depictions of hard-sex the game could potentially achieve more widespread adoption, why make a porn



game and not just a romance novel? I speculated that this must have been a need to express something, an honesty or authenticity that the sex could capture. Aura's explanation was simpler: it had to stay, it was exciting, it was challenging, it was the hardest part, and it was what the team wanted.

In light of Kipnis and Aura's questions, we have to discuss *Katawa Shoujo* in terms of pornography. Not because it is or isn't; but in a discursive relationship with porn we can put it on the couch, as Kipnis proposes, and we can ask it about desire, and fantasy, and identity. *Katawa Shoujo* has a lot to say in this regard. A game originating on 4chan, it is expected to be troublesome, violent, exploitative – a cripple teenage porn game. While it is possible to approach the game with these intentions, *Katawa Shoujo* resonates with players on much deeper emotional levels, inspiring identification and the exploration of romance, relationships, trauma, identity, etc. It seems to have a lot to say about desire. More than titillating images of naked disabled girls, the game points us to a desire for connection and stimulation beyond the scopoc and fetishistic. *Katawa Shoujo* puts porn in connection with a much wider range of expressions than it is often afforded. In this light it seems much more difficult and problematic to start drawing lines.

In an essay critiquing the myopia of anti-porn feminism, an early entry in this ongoing debate, Joanna Russ (1985) argues that pornography be understood from perspectives which see it as more than a matter sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Although these concerns remain prescient to her, she also sees porn opening up discursive space which shouldn't simply be met with a retreat into "decency issues." (Russ, 1985, p. 62) Instead, Russ proposes a view of this moment as a "democratization" of pornography." (Russ, 1985, p. 62) It's in this light that we may read *Katawa Shoujo*'s project as potentially progressive. If Russ sees women's erotic literature as a parallel to pornography's self-serving and masturbatory fantasies then *Katawa Shoujo* potentially offers a move in the opposite direction, connecting pornography to fantasies of empathy and emotion. *Katawa Shoujo* is attuned to issues of otherness, its ludic structure

rewards understanding over self-gratification and it ties these impulses to sexuality in a progressive way. Its treatment of disability is attached to this aesthetic, the characters in this narrative are allowed be complicated and resist reduction, even if they do remain within a limited fantasy aesthetic.

Ultimately, *Katawa Shoujo* may or may not be pornography. At any rate, the term in this context is terribly difficult to pin down. What is important is that in its connection to porn and its failure fully measure up it illuminates a more extensive range of desires additional to the pleasure of hardcore sexual imagery. This doesn't erase this desire; to the contrary it places it in direct connection with a spectrum of other complex affects. In *Katawa Shoujo* we expect porn, and we get a bit, but we also get a narrative that aims to inspire identification, romance, and love – the game won't let us parse these. What makes KS weird or uncommon is its capacity to bring these disparate elements together into a cohesive text. In denying this division, porn and sex aren't abhorrent fantasies distinct from more “ethical” or moralized desire; rather these exist in a continuum, an intense thicket of fantasy.

At the end of our discussion Aura expresses some frustration with the game and a desire to start from scratch and make it better, a dissonance experienced in looking back on it. Perhaps as a provisional conclusion it is most productive to explore something like a feeling of dissonance. In exploring *Katawa Shoujo*'s textuality and expression it becomes a means to open our understandings of desire and experience in media around issues of sex, romance, and identity. Its treatment of disability avoids reduction and fetish but also infantilization, victimization, and mockery. However, the game also seems open to a question of dissonance broached by Loree Erickson in her essay *Out of Line* (2012). Erickson explains that in editing her own queer-crip-porno, she is concerned that she is actually re-centering some of the dominant aesthetics she hopes to challenge. If Erickson struggles to navigate representational politics then *Katawa Shoujo* is certainly hemmed in by dominant aesthetics. Its treatment of disability is progressive as much as it is ambivalent and problematic.

For all that it can do, there is also a lot that *Katawa Shoujo* cannot or does not do. There are also things that *Katawa Shoujo* can do that still need to be identified. Although this paper has explored the challenges to dominant understandings of porn and desire that *Katawa Shoujo* opens, there is still the question of what this paper has left closed. Its ludic interface and branching narratives are more intricate than this essay discusses. Players' relationships to the text are open to readings in which the productive possibilities may not be realized. Its treatment of romance, gender, able-bodiedness bear further explication as do its politics of identification and fiction. These are themes that still have to be interrogated, and the progressive or reactionary implications articulated. I don't intend this as a pessimistic conclusion, only as a point from which to begin future work and practice. In keeping with Kipnis's model, perhaps the solution is more porn games on the couch.

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## Part Three: Best Worst Games



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# SWITCH / PANIC!

## Sega CD's Greatest Enigma

Eli Neiburger



*Figure 1. PANIC! Title Screen.*

A ragtime band plays. Cartoon aircraft collapse upon themselves. Ukulele-playing robots march to the sounds of war. People howl like animals. Then everything starts vomiting.

This is the introduction to SWITCH / PANIC! (Sega, 1993, see



figure 1). A thoroughly weird title made for Sega CD, this game is a bizarre mix of weird content, scatological humour, extremely simple gameplay, and nonsensical narrative, animated with a striking visual style and strange sound effects. Light on plot, but heavy on sight gags, PANIC! attempts to humorously explore the risks and consequences of rogue agents in a fully-networked world, something like “Monty Python presents: The Matrix”. Requiring no skills beyond point-and-click, PANIC! expects very little of the player beyond a ready — and forgiving — sense of humor. It delivers a disc packed with content, and while the gameplay is little more than a convoluted gag browser, PANIC! manages to surprise, disgust, delight, and entertain players, while never letting you forget how weird it is.

In 1993, the 16-bit Sega Genesis was getting long in the tooth, and the Sega CD peripheral was enjoying some fragile success in North America. In Japan, the Sega Mega Drive and the Mega Drive CD were not doing as well. CD-powered consoles were still a hard sell, as so few games could convincingly show what CDs offered to players beyond better music and pre-rendered cutscenes. Naturally, into this context SEGA released a title made almost entirely of music and pre-rendered cutscenes, banking on weirdness — complete with naked robot pigs, breast-growing potions, fine art on the toilet, and lots of noisy defecation — to make the sale.

The original version, called SWITCH, was developed in Japan by a Sega first party company. The Art was provided by Renzo Kinoshita, best known for Pikadon (Kinoshita, 1978), one of the first anime to show the bombing of Hiroshima. The game score included music by Tani Kei, member of the 50’s comedy band The Crazy Cats, coiner of catch-phrases and variety show staple. Risque and crass, Sega of America declined to release it in the US despite some buzz from the gaming press. However, Data East USA, obtained a license from Sega to localize and distribute SWITCH in North America. Only a cigarette vending machine and a Japanese typewriter were removed; everything else, from the breast-growing lab to the six-armed mutant who complains obliquely about a “hand job”, was kept. Renamed PANIC!, the title met an antsy SEGA CD audience that had very

few titles available outside established genres, and nothing for older players beyond the infamous Night Trap (Digital Pictures, 1993 ) and Mortal Kombat Midway, 1992). Unsure how to market this unusual product, the Data East marketing team decided on a profile of a middle-aged man spraying milk out his nose next to the cover of the game, with the caption, “Got Panic?” This was during the era when riffing on “Got Milk?” was just starting to get old. (see figure 2).

It wasn't exactly a hit...but those who've played it can never forget it.



Figure 2. Magazine Ad for PANIC!

### Experiencing PANIC!

From the opening screens:

*Machines have suddenly begun to malfunction worldwide.*

*A nasty computer virus has created software bugs in the Computer Network Server, which will infect every device on the planet. A new software program has been developed to deal with the situation... The program, code named "PANIC!" was designed to destroy the virus.*

Throughout the opening, the game establishes that "malfunctions" are things like a Moai head falling on someone waiting for an elevator, a vomiting television, a lightbulb filled with fireworks, a lawnmower that plays fetch, or a parachute that ejects the wearer's entrails. Next, a simple cartoon image of a boy appears. He is dressed in pink overalls and hat. While there is no reference to the identity of the boy in-game, the manual insists his name is Slap. He presses a button on his own Sega CD controller and is transported inside the television. After this animation sequence, the only guidance for the entire game is presented, and it simply reads:

Find the buttons that will lead you to the Computer Network Server.



*Figure 3. Slap finds the First Four Buttons.*

The next screen shows Slap holding a blue box with four yellow buttons (see figure 3), each marked with an arrow pointing a different direction. The blue box and buttons appear over the image with a glowing rainbow cursor that responds to the D-pad. The player points the cursor at the button they wish to press and pushes any button on the controller.

This action then whisks Slap away to a new scene with a new set of buttons to push. Each scene puts Slap (and / or his dog, Stick) in some familiar or absurd situation, from train stations, backyards, or museums to cloning chambers, cyborg sumo wastelands, or just falling. Wherever they may be, there is always something with buttons to push; a lawnmower's control panel, a giant bubble machine, a plaque mounted on a statue. Each button will cause a gag, a cutscene, or a warp to a new scene. Every button is labeled, but none of labels appear to mean anything. (see figure 4).



*Figure 4. Common setting, inscrutable buttons.*

For example, Slap finds a toilet in space, surrounded by a spinning, glowing cube. One of its seven inscrutable buttons is labeled “1up”, something meaningful at last. Upon pressing it, a giant tongue comes out of the toilet, wraps around Slap, and sucks him in. He’s then excreted out the lens of a tripod-mounted camera. This scenario has nine buttons, none labeled. If what looks like it might be the shutter button is pushed, the camera saunters forward and vomits in Slap’s face. Then the scene resets and Slap can choose a different button, or the same one again.

This is the entire loop of the gameplay: reach a scene, choose a button; it either plays a gag or a cutscene, or moves the player to a new scene. That’s it. Gags always involve some aspect of the scene and make varying degrees of sense. A hairdryer scene includes gags like burning off Slap’s hair or vomiting on him; while in another scene, each gag involves a streetcar taking on the characteristics and locomotive approach of a different insect. A hallway full of doors features gags that involve various sprites from other rooms in the game running across the hall, including crying babies, steam trains, dinosaurs, and presidents. A button on Auguste Rodin’s “The Thinker” (see figure 5) causes him to get up and pull a chain to flush his pedestal; then he walks away humming. Fade to black and he’s back on his seat, ready for another gag.



*Figure 5. The Thinker's Gallery.*

Because the gags are loaded after the player chooses a button, you can't tell if you've pressed a "good one" based on how much time elapses between your button press and the action starting. A long gag with audio and animation will take 3-5 seconds to load, while a cutscene or warp to a new scene will happen immediately. The cutscenes are particularly inscrutable; translated by Data East USA's crack localization team, most feature a character from elsewhere in the game on a flat background, often a devil or angel. All the voices have awkward accents, and the devil and angel speak differently every time they appear. In one cutscene, for example, a snorting, humanoid creature hops across the screen, naked but for zebra socks. Its knees bend the wrong way, it has green hair, and a fleshy trunk like an elephant. You hear a woman in a terrible german accent say, "Attention. A mutant haff been spotted. Approach vit caution, and plenty of kleenex." In another, apropos of nothing, the muppet-like angel appears and says: "That's funny, I always thought there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Oh well, I guess not!" While all

the cutscenes were localized, most of the gags involve no words, just muffled voice sounds of a recording made too close to the microphone or a Japanese voice actor making grunting sounds, whimpers, and groans for the characters Slap and Stick.

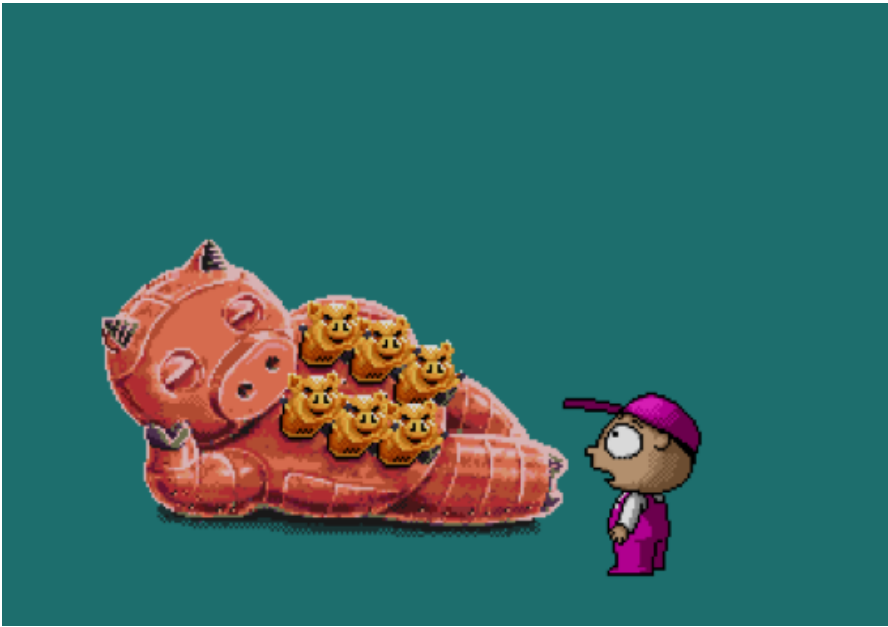


*Figure 6. A good one.*

Some of the gags are quite funny, although usually crass or scatological: Slap turns a globe into a butt (see figure 6), or drinks a potion that makes him grow breasts all over his body, or gets fish guts squirted on his face. However, some are cute and almost touching, with scenes of lovely fireworks, a dolphin leaping through a living room, dinosaurs made of lightning, or a robot pig that nurses six robotic piglets (see figure 7). Slap's normal cries of horror become gasps of appreciation or delighted laughter, and while the emotional tone can't really recover from so many bodily fluids, there is some emotional connection with the player's avatar, especially when the lazy, wide-mouthed dog Stick appears or even takes the player away from Slap for awhile. Slap and Stick are totally defenseless and at your mercy; there are moments when you feel their anxiety or delight,



but soon enough some weak body humor is back to keep it from getting remotely serious.



*Figure 7. Digital Pig.*

The lack of explanation or instruction means that players usually wander around bewildered for a while, riding elevators, messing around with vomiting appliances, turning Aliens into excrement, getting smashed by Tetris blocks, and occasionally triggering the destruction of world landmarks such as The Eiffel Tower or an igloo. Eventually the structure underlying this seemingly random game is revealed to the player in the form of a map displaying interconnected rooms, hidden in plain site behind a start button in a game that never needs to be paused. According to the layout of this revelatory map, the player starts at the top and must reach the glowing bottom room. Through careful observation, the structure of the game can at last be gleaned: when they player warps, they warp only to an adjacent room, and while there is no list of what buttons have been pressed, the map does show how many of the buttons in each scene have been pressed. Most importantly, the map shows what percentage of

the gags in the game have been triggered and how many of the thirty world monuments remain intact. The map also displays four ominous locations represented with the image of a leering skull and crossbones, suggesting that death is indeed possible, although rare. This cements the player's awareness of the lack of consequences for actions beyond moving towards or away from the goal; unless you're adjacent to a death square, you might destroy the Great Wall of China, but you can't die.

The game is indeed winnable, and while it's very hard to fail once you reach the final scene, it can be quite tricky to get there without an amazing memory or tedious pen-and-paper mapping of scenes and buttons. While the experience of playing PANIC! is basically clicking through a fever dream of a hypercard stack, it is fun to play, fun to beat, and here we are talking about it twenty years later.

### **Failures**

Just because PANIC! is unique and enjoyable doesn't make it a successful game. It takes patience and dedication to believe that PANIC! is fun, not to mention a high tolerance for grade school humor.

The biggest problem with the game is that while there is a spatial map that is viewable and knowable, the actions available to the player do not map to directions, making it extremely difficult to build a mental map of the game space that feels at all navigable. In addition, because the buttons are labeled with an effort to not disclose any clues or meanings, it's very difficult for players to remember cause / effect pairs with so many forgettable buttons, making even repeat visits to scenes where every button has been previously pushed a frustrating puzzle. Most unfortunately, the forgettable buttons even prevent the player from easily remembering which buttons they were most drawn to, leading them to press the same buttons on repeat visits to scenes and get stuck in a loop of a few scenes, wandering through a small set, inadvertently pressing the same buttons each time. Some places on the map seem designed to exacerbate this, with buttons that warp to

another spot in the same loop, offering a different action but the same frustrating result. While the feeling of triumph upon breaking out of such a loop is significant, it's quickly replaced with "why did they put me through that?" and some well-placed ire towards the game.

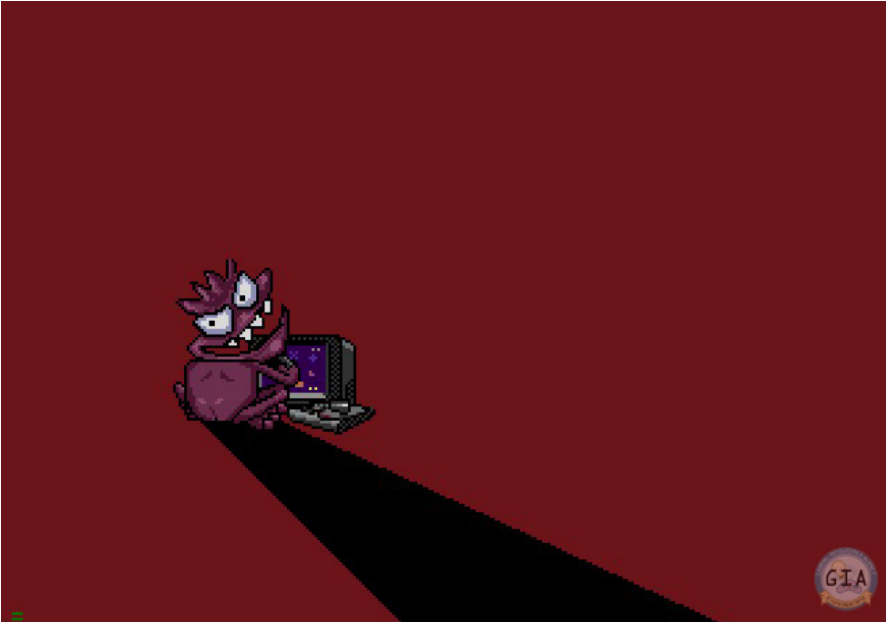
Then there's the gags. While there are a few gags that are still amazing and laugh-out-loud funny even after repeated viewings, most of them are lame and predictable. You just know that any appliance or machine can eventually be made to vomit and that anything flying or floating will fall tragically. Some of the scenes go for a cute sense of wonder, offering a lovely set of animations that delight Slap, and to a lesser extent, the player. However, as if there were some megabyte quota to fill (and perhaps there was) there are usually so many permutations of these ideas behind different buttons, that they wear out their welcome and you're ready for another poop joke already. Take the snowman scene; serene and peaceful, gentle music plays as the dog snores contentedly. Some gags make the snow light up in different colors, or grow into giant snowflakes; Slap and Stick cavort in delight. Then a gag makes it snow little brown piles (see figure 8), and Slap and Stick run in horror. While Slap's entertaining revulsion carries the scene past whatever shock the player can still muster at such content, the next time you land in the snowman room you do not want to see it again.



Figure 8. *The Worst Snow.*

For all the intentional zaniness and weirdness of this title, by the time you reach this scene, it's hardly surprising or funny. Some of the content is just never funny or weird, not even in context. For example, one scene is a TV studio control room with sixteen screens of static. All the gags in this room involve the screens interacting with each other or changing shape, with a few bodily humor jokes, and there's just not enough to hang so many different animations on to keep the player from wanting to flee.

The cutscenes are clearly where the weird is truly juiced up. All the sprites from the game get a second chance to appear, usually with a voice, but never in any way related to the scene that triggered the cutscene. The pointless, humorless script and terrible accents in these clips suggest refusal to entertain or move the player forward, making the player feel punished. The devil and the angel are particularly unsettling and never add delight, wonder, or even add weirdness to a scene. One devil cutscene shows him sleeping; he wakes up and says, "Hey, I was sleeping!" (see figure 9).



*Figure 9. A devil cutscene.*

But the biggest challenge of the game is that despite its parade of zany gags atop a strict structural order, is that it ultimately requires either a feat of memory to navigate the game intuitively, or tedious note-taking with very few landmarks to navigate by. Neither of these make for a big heap of fun and put all the work on the player. At least you can save anywhere and everywhere, which the developers must have known would keep players from dismissing the game permanently in disgust. And it's a good thing, too, because the reward of the title comes from seeing as much as there is to see, putting the disjointed scenes back together, and feeling the completist thrill of having seen it all.

### **Success**

For all its challenges, PANIC! succeeds at being completely unique, not just on its platform or in its generation, but among most of the videogame canon. There are very few games that strike out solely for comedy, reducing the gameplay to a basic comedy navigation

device. While PANIC! is so loaded with content, many scenes deploy obvious or non-entertaining gags. It's the few true gems scattered through the game that truly surprise and delight. The game makes it so easy to see how many of the gags you've seen, even putting the percentage of the content that you've viewed on the game load screen, where Link's hearts would go. This does effectively ramp up the desire to see every gag, and even destroy every landmark, to get to 100% and 0/30 landmarks remaining. The positive goal of seeing every gag and the negative result of destroying landmarks is the game's "hard mode", the objective being to see every gag without destroying any landmarks and reach 100% and 30/30 landmarks remaining; in other words to press all the buttons in the game except for 30 hidden ones.

The combination of normal and mundane scenes where weird and weirder gags happen sends the player looking for the extremes; the cutest gag, the least obvious excretion, the funniest reaction from Slap or Stick, the most unusual mutation of a work of art are all in there; and you'll never know as a player if you've found them unless you see them all. The extremes do drive the player to want to visit every scene just to see how weird it gets, and press every button just to see what's next. Driving completism without collectible objects (although the buttons pressed could be called collectables) is an impressive feat of induced motivation, especially considering how lukewarm much of the content can be.

That said, PANIC! also employs a strong and consistent aesthetic, albeit it one with expansive edges into other looks and visual vocabularies. It's an impressive attempt to span so many types of art, music, and comedy. From Gilliamesque heads of presidents grafted onto infant bodies and crying obnoxiously, to the set of monoliths that trap Slap and Stick in a variety of biomes, to the frequent appearance of indigestion and household appliances, the gags eventually establish a groove that makes setups and payoffs resonate with the player. This ultimately brings some familiarity and comfort to the weirdness and helps the player feel like they know what they're doing amidst all the zaniness.



*Figure 10. The Computer Network Server (Infected).*

And while the final gag-free, warp-free showdown with the virus to bring enlightenment to the mind of the Computer Network Server (see figure 10) is in sharp and serious contrast to the rest of the game, PANIC! ultimately delivers a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Considering the pile of ridiculous gags the player waded through and the repetition they endured on the way to this moment, that's a game design achievement. Even though you might never know what's going to happen next, if you keep at it, you'll eventually accomplish something, and that's a nice idea to come out of such a weird package.

### **What Does it Mean?**

It's very difficult to find the business case, let alone the aesthetic one, that justifies the existence of this game. In many ways it has the whiff of desperation from top to bottom; developers desperate to make something different, designers desperate to fill 650mb, artists

and musicians desperate to make a title entertaining that makes some of the same lame jokes over and over. But in the early 1990s, before multimedia became a thing that computers did, market desperation drove some unusual choices. The April 1993 release of SWITCH in Japan was months before the September 1993 release of *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), which changed the paradigm for CD-ROM games completely and brought in a huge new audience desperate to understand why they needed a CD-ROM drive on their computer. That said, It's still baffling that Data East took the chance on turning SWITCH into PANIC!. Data East's reputation rested mostly on their 80's arcade hits and late-entry pinball tables, so perhaps they saw this localization opportunity as a chance to remake their image.

If the game is viewed through that multimedia lens, it's not quite as weird; with appropriateness aside, PANIC! is much like a *Putt Putt* (Humungous Entertainment, 1992) or *Freddi Fish* (Humungous Entertainment, 1994-) edutainment title with no curriculum. You click on things, and funny things happen. PANIC! seems to subscribe to the notion that the true object of a game is to see everything it has in store, and the gameplay is simply a method to access the content. That's a distillation of the experience of playing many different types of game, and PANIC! heaps so much content on the table the player is always wondering what might be in there that they missed. This might also further explain the crass tone of almost every scene; while it certainly had market value, the mild edginess of the title challenges the player to imagine what the most twisted scene or gag in the game could be, and set off in search of it.

However, there is something powerful in the extremely low-risk atmosphere of the game, Slap's sitcom-like ability to feel no permanent effects from any episode and the very few buttons that can actually lead to death. Like the *Putt Putt* and *Freddi Fish* creators knew, exploration happens best in the absence of threat, and in the absence of consequence the player does feel a freedom to explore this bizarre world at their leisure. In fact, the first time the player detonates a monument, it's not immediately clear if something good or bad just happened; while the relatively realistic demolition



sequences are lovingly put together and quite entertaining, unlike the rest of the gags in the game, when the screen fades to black after the cutscene, that button has now been taped over and can't be pushed again. Consequence at last, and it's too late to un-push that button. No buttons can be un-pushed, they can only be pushed, and this gives the player that powerful illusion of control over their fate. You can go anywhere you want... within this scatological hellscape in which you've been imprisoned.

Much of the game's residual appeal comes from the same place as so-bad-its-good ironic enjoyment or marvelling at the primitive technologies on display, but this is still a quite remarkable title for the SegaCD. The amount of content packed onto the disc is astounding, and it's in some ways a spiritual ancestor to later deeply unusual triumphs like *Parappa the Rapper* (Sony, 1996) or *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004). It was fun at parties for about twenty minutes at a stretch back in the 90s, and it still is today. Despite the de- or re-weirding that this quintessentially Japanese title received at the hands of its North American Localizers, *PANIC!* is still a game worth playing, talking about, and experiencing, to see what "weird" meant then, and what weird still means now.

Apparently, it has something to do with going to the bathroom.

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# Takeshi no Chousenjou, a Terrible Game by Design

Howard Braham

Picture this: you go to the store and buy a new game for \$50. The reason you buy the game is because it's from a designer or developer that you really love, or because it has a license that excites you. You take the game home and start playing it, only to discover that it's absolutely terrible. You're then faced with a tough decision: should you continue playing it to get your money's worth, or should you stop playing it and cut your losses? The first route might be less than pleasurable, but you can always hold on to the hope that maybe the game gets better later on. The second route will probably make you feel guilty: you've wasted all that money on a game that you only played for half an hour. It might even make you feel defeated. You didn't even try to beat the game. It's a tough decision, and it's a decision that people unfortunately have to face all too often. But is it a decision that a game designer would ever make his customers face on purpose?

The answer is, surprisingly, yes. The culprit in question is Takeshi Kitano, a Japanese comedian, TV director, and film director. He is mostly unknown in America, as his only work that has reached our mass media is the Spike TV show *Most Extreme Elimination Challenge* (2003-2007), which is a version of his Japanese show *Takeshi's Castle* (1986-1990), re-edited and inaccurately dubbed in English (on purpose, to add humor). This show is also the inspiration for ABC's *Wipeout* (2008-present).

Takeshi Kitano, also known as *Beat Takeshi*, enrolled in an engineering school, but was thrown out for being too rebellious. He wanted to become a comedian and got a job as an elevator operator at a comedy club. Takeshi got a break when a comedian was sick, and he

filled in for him. He went on to become a very successful comedian, actor, director, writer, poet, painter, and, of course, designer of a terrible video game. He has won many awards for his unconventional style, and his non-game work has been featured in modern art museums.

Takeshi has three games, all for the Famicom. His second and third games, from the late '80s, are a lot like Mario Party (Hudson Soft, 1998), themed to match his TV show, Takeshi's Castle. Takeshi was not involved in the design of those two games, and they have long been forgotten. His first game, released in 1986, is the one that really fascinates me. It's the kind of thing that happens when an artist studies all the formal rules of a medium and then decides to disobey them all. It reminds me of when Marcel Duchamp took a urinal and turned it sideways, then submitted it to an art exhibition under a pseudonym as a prank meant to taunt his avant-garde peers. Like Duchamp's artwork, called Fountain, Takeshi's game is a prank that tests the limits of what the player will accept.

Takeshi no Chousenjou (Taito, 1986) (translated as Takeshi's Challenge) tries to confuse you so much that you want to stop playing, while making you feel guilty and stupid because you can't figure it out. And then, if for some reason you're actually able to figure out what to do (despite the designer's best efforts), the game will hit you with daunting physical tasks, trying to make you stop playing through physical challenges, if the mental challenges haven't already succeeded. It is a game that dares to hate its audience.

Takeshi no Chousenjou is something of a legend. It is notoriously bad, weird, and hard, and has built up a mythos. Since it's a game that many have heard about, few have played, and fewer have beaten, it's not surprising that the difficulty of the game has been somewhat exaggerated and mythologized. Each of the following is part of the false mythology of the game perpetuated through videogame websites:

- You must use the Famicom's microphone to sing karaoke

for an hour without stopping, and you'll have to start over if you screw up. (False: the songs you have to sing are only 10 to 20 seconds long!)

- The final boss takes 20,000 hits to kill. (False: there is no final boss!)
- The game sold 80,000 copies. (Not so: it actually sold 800,000! There was a mistranslation in the subtitles of a Japanese video that is widely quoted.)
- You have to hold a button down for an hour. (This is nearly true. One way to beat a section is to not press any buttons for an hour, as you expose a map to sunlight. Another way is to put the map in water, then not press any buttons or make any sounds for 5 minutes. Before 10 minutes are up, you have to yell "Come out," although there's no real speech detection, so you could yell anything.)
- There's a side-scrolling shooter level where you can go left, right, and down, but can never go up. (It's true that you can't push up on the controller to go up, but you can ride gusts of wind to go upwards. It actually even makes a bit of sense, as you're flying on a hang glider.)

### **2004–2006: First encounters with a game I couldn't understand**

I first learned about this game in 2004, and of course I tried to play it. But not knowing Japanese, I didn't get very far. I wandered around this very small town that looked a little like River City Ransom (Technōs Japan, 1989), talked to a few people I wasn't able to understand, bought some things (having no idea what they were), and within a few minutes, I had tried doing absolutely everything I could think of. I was really frustrated, and wanted very badly to give up. But

I hated the idea of giving up, because then I would be forced to admit, “Takeshi, you beat me.” I didn’t want to be defeated by this prankster, especially when I wasn’t legitimately stymied by the game, but only frustrated because I didn’t know the language. Nevertheless, I put the game down for a while, intent on returning to it later.

Then, in 2006, while taking a Game Design class at CMU’s Entertainment Technology Center, I thought that this game would make a good topic for an essay. I sat down, this time with a colleague with some Japanese language experience, and played the game. I hoped that I would finally be able to feel the catharsis of conquering Takeshi’s Challenge.

But that’s not how it worked out. Armed with my translator, I found out that you play as a Salary Man for a Japanese business, and the game starts with your boss berating you because the company is in trouble, and your personal performance is poor. When you exit the office building, you arrive on a small street of about 5 screen-widths. Some of the people on the street are jumping up and down repeatedly, and quite high, I might add. Other people punch you when they walk by, depleting your health meter. I had always hoped that once I conquered the language barrier, I would understand the NPC behavior. But no, that’s not the type of game this is. I obviously underestimated this game’s power to be confusing.

Here’s what I was able to figure out: There are four buildings you can walk into on this street — a school, your company, an empty theater, and a bank. At the school, you can choose to learn Language, Sports, Music, Dancing, and Licenses. If you select any of these options, you get a menu of five topics in each category. You can choose to learn about any of these 25 topics, but they all cost money, and you don’t have very much. Nothing ever explains the benefit of learning these virtual skills, and it’s never clear if they even have any effect on gameplay.

If you go back into your company, your boss asks, “What do you want?” you get a list of possible response options: to write a letter

of resignation, take a sick day, take a vacation, punch your manager, or flatter your boss. If you choose to take a sick day, your boss says, “Don’t expect to have a desk waiting for you when you get back.” If you flatter him, he says, “Flattery will get you nowhere.” If you resign, he gives you a bonus for your years of service, but only if you haven’t already asked for a sick day or a vacation. If you choose to punch him, an endless stream of guards attacks you until you eventually die or run away.

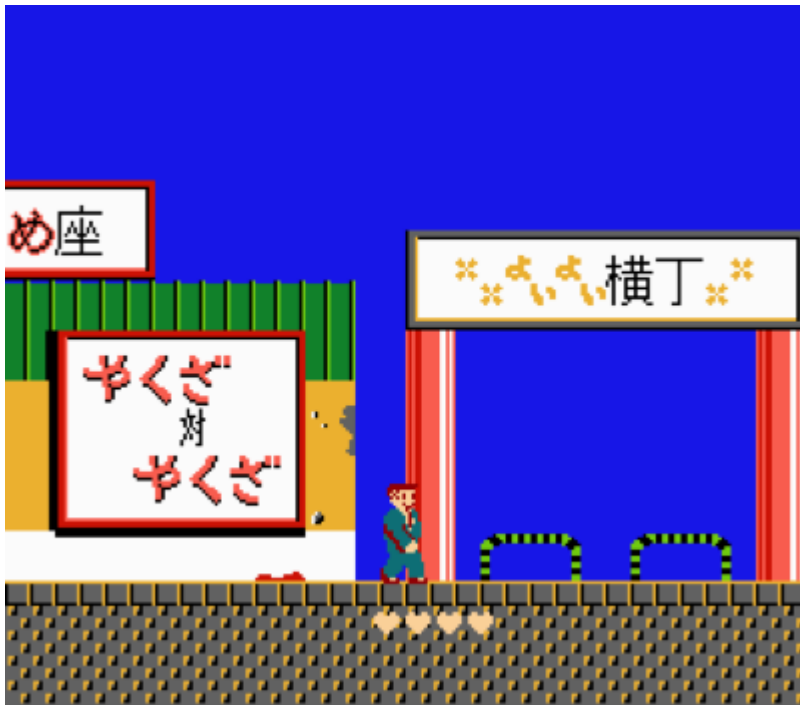
The next building, the theater, has no people in it and there’s nothing to interact with. The final building, the bank, contains four bank tellers. The first three say things like “Don’t put off paying your taxes,” and “I don’t have money for your kind.” Mysteriously, the fourth teller asks you if you’d like to withdraw money and will actually give you the money!

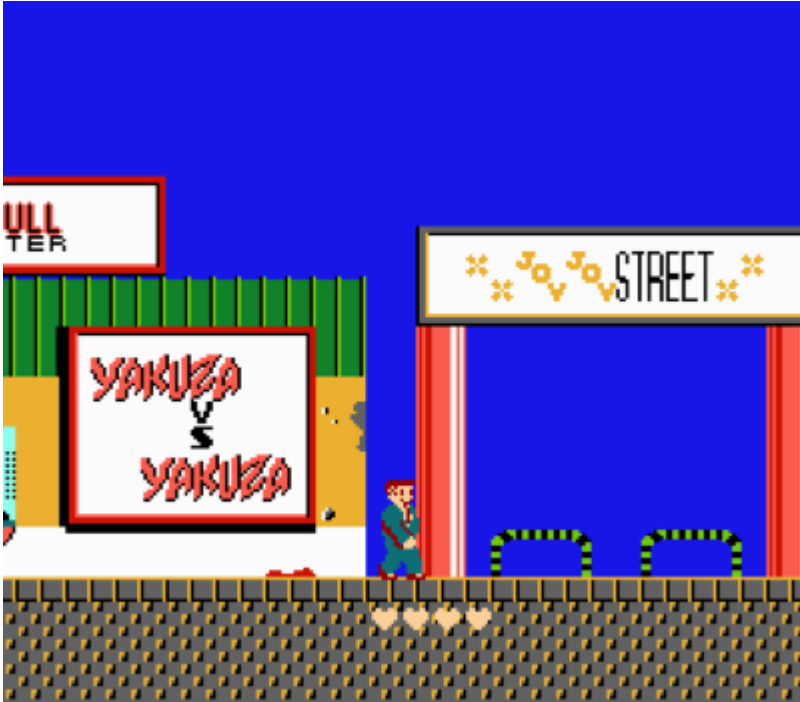
The sad thing was that despite hours of attempting to make progress, that was the farthest I could ever get. I never actually accomplished anything, though I knew there were goals that could be achieved. I thought (mistakenly) that there was a final boss who required being hit 20,000 times to be killed — how could I even get to him? I also mistakenly thought that you had to sing karaoke for an hour, but where was the karaoke bar? Takeshi had succeeded, with flying colors, to set up a situation where I wanted to make progress in the game really badly, but he had blocked all my attempts. It was amazingly frustrating, and the worst part was that he did this to me despite the fact that I knew his intention was to trick me.

### **2011–2013: An English translation**

At last, a miracle happened on Christmas Day 2011. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the game, a translation patch was released by a fan. Finally, I thought, I could really play this stupid game. I will beat you, Takeshi. I tried everything. I learned every language, every sport, every musical instrument, every dance, and earned every license. I tried every dialogue option that existed, and nothing new

ever happened. A breakthrough came when I noticed that a sign, which was now in English, said “Joy Joy Street” (see Figure 1).





*Figure 1. The literal and figurative “gate” that blocked my progress for 9 years. At the top is the original Japanese version, and on the bottom is the fan translation.*

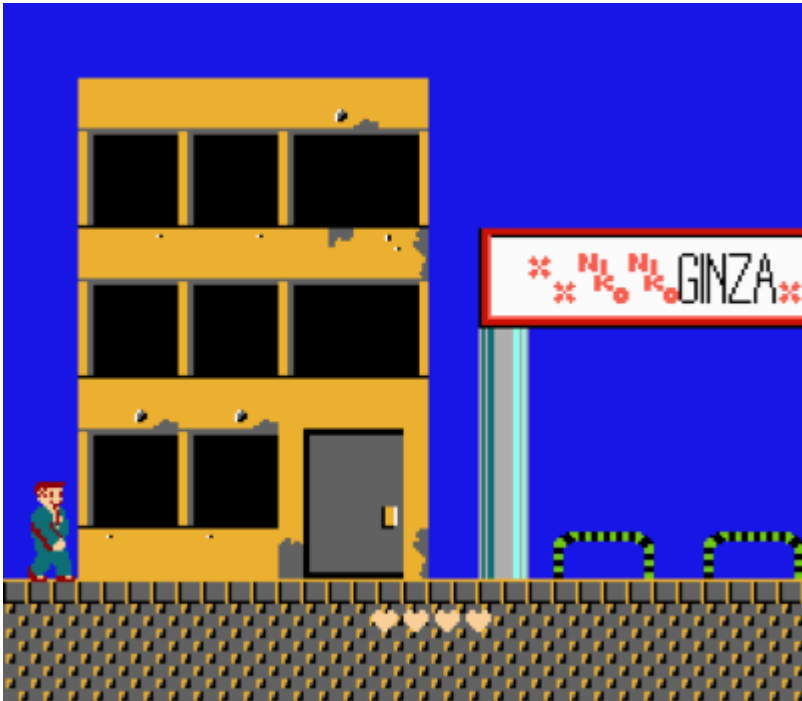
I discovered that if I walked to the center of that gate, between the two green-and-black-striped barriers, and held up on the controller for one second, I moved to Joy Joy Street, a new location with a selection of new stores. The reasons I had never discovered this before are because: (1) the sign was originally in Japanese; (2) it doesn’t really look like a street; and (3) the hit area to enter the street is only about 5 pixels in size.

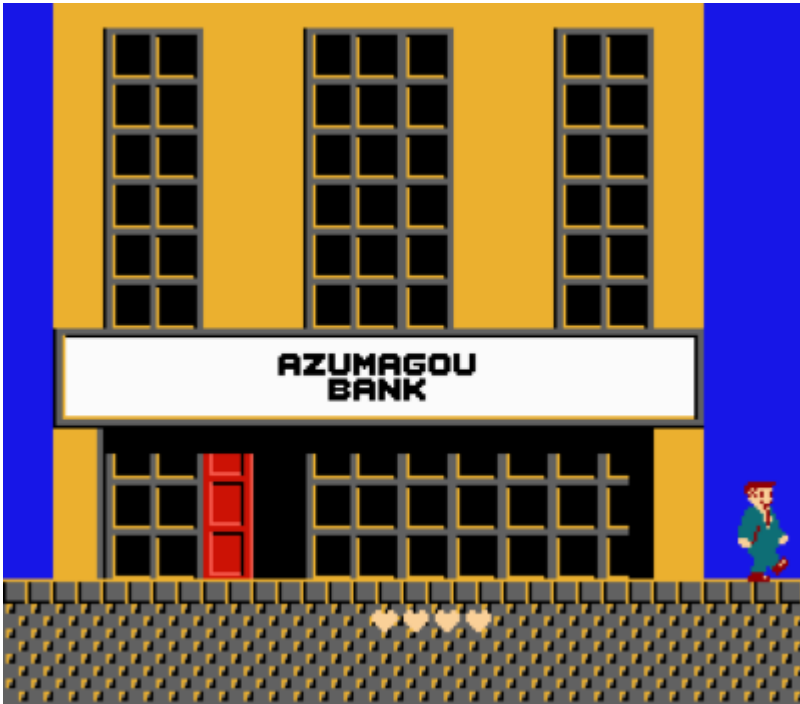
Now I had four more shops to enter and explore ... and, oh my god, one of them was the fabled karaoke bar! Down the other street, called “Niko Niko Ginza,” were five more stores I could visit, and two additional stores that had signs and open doorways but, mysteriously, I couldn’t enter them. One of the visitable stores was a barbershop, where I could dye my hair or get a perm. Both cost money, and both



were absolutely irrelevant — they didn't even change the visual color or style of my hair. I could also get a haircut, but the barber would slip and cut my face, taking away lots of HP, and killing me if I was a bit low on HP. Oh Takeshi, you're so crazy!

If I were a Japanese videogame player in 1986, I probably would have found Joy Joy Street and Niko Niko Ginza without too much trouble. What hindered me most here were the language and cultural barriers. But of course, Takeshi hid two more streets behind two even more obscure entrances: walk all the way to the left or the right of the main street, stand in front of the pure blue sky, and hold up on the controller (see Figure 2).





*Figure 2. At the top, I'm standing in the "passageway" that leads to my house, and at the bottom is the passageway that leads to the airport.*

At this point, I had finally explored the entire initial game space. I had walked every street of Japan represented in the game and entered every store and house. So surely I could finally complete some tasks and get out of this country, right? No, of course not. This is not that kind of game, but at least I had found a few more interesting things. At a bookstore, I could buy a treasure map, and the graphics matched the treasure map I was looking for — but it was unusable because the text was garbled! I could also buy Takeshi's autograph, a porno, Das Kapital, and a diet book. When I bought them, I was just throwing away my money. I couldn't see evidence of having bought anything; there were no pictures of them, and they didn't even end up in my inventory. There was no accounting for my actions, and no visible reward for spending my money. The fact that I could buy Takeshi's autograph is an interesting manifestation of the designer's narcissism, but I wish that

buying it had paid off by at least showing me a picture of it. Was he deliberately taunting me by making me pay for his autograph and then not letting me receive it?

There are so many ways to waste money and die in this game but very few ways to earn more money. Most means of acquiring cash can be used just once, and the only repeatable way I've found to earn money is to beat up and kill innocent bystanders on the street and steal their money. Yes, this was 1986, eleven years before the first Grand Theft Auto game. And if this were Grand Theft Auto, it would be as if I explored the entire starting map, bought a few upgrades and ammo, and played a few minigames, but never actually completed a single mission in the main quest. I hung up the controller, and Takeshi laughed at me again.

#### **2014: I give up; hand me a strategy guide!**

In 2014, I tried once again and got further with the aid of a strategy guide. It's worth noting at this point that the game was so confusing that the company that wrote the original Japanese strategy guide got 400 calls in one day from angry customers still unable to complete the game, forcing them to publish a second edition of the guide. With the help of my guide, I finally found the crucial treasure map and left Japan on a plane that didn't crash. After that, I encountered the next little sadistic element of Takeshi's prank — unwinnable states. Unwinnable states were actually a rather common design element in console and PC games of the '70s and '80s. Sierra and Infocom, for instance, liked to include situations where you had to do something specific in the beginning of the game, and if you didn't do it, you could make a great deal of progress, but you couldn't complete the game. King's Quest V is a case in point, where if you walk past the bakery, a cat will chase a rat. However, if you don't throw a boot at the cat (and you only have one chance to do this), the cat will eat the rat, which is too bad because the rat needs to be alive later in the game when you're tied up with ropes and he's able to chew the ropes and free you. To modern game designers and players, this may seem a bit cruel, but in 1986, this was seen as a valid and

interesting way of extending a game's playtime and allowing replay value, or more accurately, forcing replays (Giant Bomb, 2013).

Some of the unwinnable states in Takeshi no Chousenjou occur if you do not engage in specific antisocial behaviors. If you want to beat the game, you must: drink until you pass out, divorce your wife, quit your job, and beat up the old man who gave you the treasure map. Other unwinnable states can occur if you don't learn how to play the shamisen, if you don't learn how to hang glide, or if you buy an airplane ticket to the wrong destination. I bought a ticket to the USA, and my plane exploded en route. A dialog box appeared saying: "Was that a terrorist act? An accident? A mysterious explosion destroyed the plane."

Of course, in each unwinnable scenario there are absolutely no hints to guide you to the right path. It seems that Takeshi wanted people playing his videogame to try every conceivable combinatoric option until they got it right. According to Tetsuo Egawa, a salesperson at Taito who took part in development of the game, the developers didn't just take a celebrity's input and then use it to craft a playable game, but would listen to a very drunk Takeshi ramble on about what might be interesting, write everything down, and then implement everything exactly as he first described it. They let a completely unqualified person who hated videogames be the lead designer (Game Center CX, 2003).

To get to the last area of the game, the treasure cave, you have to stand atop a particular mountain, on a particular pixel, and crouch (see Figure 3). Of course no hints are provided, not even about standing on top of a mountain.



*Figure 3. The entrance to the last area of the game*

I eventually got to the end of the treasure cave, collected the treasure, and reached the ending. A small picture of Takeshi's head appeared, and the words "The End" were in the lower right. Takeshi said "Amazing" and then the game seemed to be over (see Figure 4). I waited for five more minutes, and then Takeshi delivered his final insult to me (see Figure 4 on the bottom). Yes, I actually did beat Takeshi's sadistic game, but he had the last laugh.





*Figure 4. The elusive and insulting ending*

## The End

In a way, Takeshi Kitano is a brilliant game designer. Looking at his work from the point of view of Jesse Schell's (2008) *Art of Game Design*, Takeshi inverts many of the lenses of good game design. Instead of using them to create a pleasurable experience, the inversion offers a terrible, frustrating one. For instance, other games use the "Lens of Resonance" to tap into the power of a positive theme that players can relate to, whereas Takeshi built this experience from the resonant themes of guilt, frustration, and despair. Other games use the "Lens of Flow" to ensure that players have a clear goal and understand how to get closer to that goal. Takeshi, on the other hand, gives you clear goals — save the company, save your job, and find a buried treasure — but some of these goals are red herrings, and there's no clear information or play choices to help you progress towards the real goal. Additionally, there's very little feedback to

let you know how you're doing, and the feedback that does exist is all negative. Many games use the "Lens of Essential Experience" to deliver a fun experience to the player, but Takeshi delivers the experience of deep, embarrassing failure by putting you in the role of a failing businessman, and then making you fail in everything you try to do. Takeshi knows that people like learning by trial and error, so he sets up a situation where trial and error looks like an effective strategy but is in fact completely useless.

I think that Takeshi no Chousenjou differs from the other abusive game designs mentioned by Doug Wilson and Migel Sicart (2010) in *Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design*. The games noted (such as VVVVVV (Terry Cavanagh, 2010), Kaizo Mario (Unknown, circa 2007), Desert Bus (Imagineering, 1995), PainStation (////////fur///, 2001), and Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem (Silicon Knights, 2002) et al.) cater to an audience that desires the abuse, or cater to an audience of spectators who want to watch others be subjected to abuse. The designers of these games are all winking towards some target audience. Takeshi is different, because he's basically holding the middle finger up to all possible audiences. The fact that anyone could actually enjoy this game (and it happens to be one of my favorites) is purely an accident and was in no way intended by the designer.

I've tried to reflect a bit, to analyze why I enjoy Takeshi's Challenge so much. I think it's because it's a game that dares me to beat it, but really doesn't care whether I do or not. When I play it, I don't feel like I'm playing against the game, or against the computer, I feel like I'm playing against the game designer and his narcissism. The voice of Takeshi Kitano is so evident in this game, and that's a rare quality. If this were an independent game or a student game, I'm not sure that it would hold my attention in the same way. I think the fact that it was a mainstream commercial game with high sales is a large part of its appeal — there aren't that many commercially successful practical jokes. I've been on a 10-year journey with this game; it has frustrated me at every opportunity, but I have always returned to this well played game.



When this game was released in Japan in 1986, it was extremely successful, selling 800,000 copies. But unfortunately, most of the people who bought and played the game were young children — the group least equipped to understand a game of this sort. The result was that thousands of children called Nintendo’s hint lines while crying, saying that they tried everything, but they couldn’t get anywhere because they failed at everything they did (Rogers, 2004). Ultimately, Takeshi was extremely successful at achieving what he set out to do. I would argue that Takeshi no Chousenjou belongs in modern art museums, in the Dadaist section.

Dadaism is an art movement that started between 1915 and 1916 in New York and Zurich. On the art timeline, it fell right between the better-known movements of Cubism and Surrealism. The founders of Dada felt that World War I was a gigantic display of senseless violence, and they wanted to distance themselves from the bourgeois culture that started the war by upholding the values of nonsense and irrationality. They created an “anti-art” by rejecting all of the principles of mainstream art. They used nihilism, cynicism, and randomness to create art that was designed to offend people. They also felt that museums only displayed very traditional art, and wanted to test the boundaries of “what is art?” So Marcel Duchamp started making what he called “readymades,” such as a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, a bottle rack, and a urinal. He submitted these to exhibitions under a pseudonym, and prized the rejection letters he got. One wonders what Duchamp would think about the fact that 100 years later, *Fountain* is considered to be one of the most influential works of modern art.

Similarly, Takeshi Kitano created an anti-ludic game by rejecting traditional principles of game design. Nonsense and irrationality were his guiding principles when crafting story, dialogue, and puzzles. By forcing the player character to drink until he passes out, divorce his wife, quit his job, and beat up helpful innocent old men, Takeshi reinforces the nihilistic belief that life is meaningless. Takeshi’s cynicism is blatantly obvious in his taunt at the end of the game. He set out to test the boundaries of “what is a game,” and offended his

audience, causing thousands of children to cry. But of course, Takeshi loved the audience's rejection. If Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) is gaming's Birth of a Nation (Griffith, 1915) (first game and first film to have a beginning, an end, a narrative, and real characters), then Takeshi no Chousenjou is certainly gaming's Bicycle Wheel (Duchamp, 1913). It is the world's first and possibly only commercial Dadaist videogame.

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## Part Four: Something Weird This Way Comes



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# Conspiracy Hermeneutics

## The Secret World as Weird Tale

Tanya Krzywinska

*...he began to read into the odd angles a mathematical significance which seemed to offer vague clues regarding their purpose. (Lovecraft, "The Dreams in the Witch House," 2005, p. 303)*

Through close consideration of the multiplayer online game *The Secret World* (2012), this paper works towards a definition of "Weird Games" as a basis for advocating the aesthetic potential of Weird for digital games. The paper forms part of a more expansive project to examine the uses and formal specificities of Gothic and Weird in digital games. While the *Weird Tale* shares some features with Gothic, it has a very distinctive form that is beautifully summed by H.P. Lovecraft:

*The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.*  
(Cited Joshi, 1990, p. 6. *My italics.*)

The *Weird Tale* may be regarded broadly as a part of twentieth-century populist or even trash writing, but, as this special edition of *Well-Played* attests, it also has a place in digital games and like

Gothic it crosses genres and (plat)forms. Indicative of its presence in Indie games are: *Alone* (Greenwood Games, 2013), developed for the immersive context provided by Oculus Rift providing many opportunities for breaking the fourth wall; *Dear Esther* (thechineseroom, 2012), which pushed horror grammar towards atmosphere rather than action and *The Binding of Isaac* (Headup Games, 2011). To these I add examples from prior, bigger budget games such as the Lovecraftian homage *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002), the early entries in the *Silent Hill* series (particularly 1 and 2) and the *Twin Peaks*-like *Deadly Premonition* (Access Games, 2010/2012), where a real-time mechanic contributes to the creation of its version of Weirid. More than simply adaptation, Weirid is exerting an influence on the formation of innovative contemporary game grammar, largely in contention with established conventions. The analytic framework around this assertion is based in an investigation of the ways that the participatory and rule-based nature of digital game form shapes, at a fundamental level, the ways that the Weirid tale manifests in games and I will truncate the term to "Weirid", which further helps relocate it outside text-based literature and places emphasis on its affective coordinates. As such, the paper works towards the proposition that there are certain properties of digital games that are capable of generating a new dimension to the affective experience of Weirid.

MMORPG *The Secret World* (Funcom, 2012) provides a fitting example of the ludic adaptation of the Weirid Tale and offers a means of exploring the adaptive possibilities within games for Weirid fiction. As will be shown, in TSW these possibilities emerge through the specific use of intertextuality which is pivotal in the production of what I will call the "Conspiracy Hermeneutic". As a disturbance in the symbolic order generated by the specific nature of computer-based media, the conspiracy hermeneutic is aimed to create for players a strong sensation of Weirid. Central to the argument of this paper is the idea that at the conjunction of participatory game media and the characteristic features of Weirid fiction there lurks a powerful means of fundamental disturbance that has transformational and critical potency. Such potential is ably illustrated by the derangement

of schematic and conventionalised boundaries between the signification of fact and fiction. Such derangement produces a vast and dizzying network of looped refractions and recursive intertexts that are intended to induce vertigo and to scatter asunder the coherence and stability of the symbolic order. Working with, and undermining, our in-built will to mastery and knowledge, the Weird of the game carves a frisson of doubt into any comforting sense of rational certainty and authority. It does this by casting precarious the base distinction between fiction and fact and thereby causing the frameworks by which we assign meaning to fall into disarray. We may have physical mastery over the game's interface, but unlike the affective trajectory of standard games, that mastery is frequently belittled and devalued in the face of monumental, obscured and occulted powers – even if with a rather less melancholic affect than the case with games such as *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* or *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010). TSW is therefore trying to innovate on “action-based” game grammar in an open world setting rather than reframe it elsewhere or use a more linear, closed world, as is the case with *Limbo*, *Eternal Darkness* or *Alan Wake* (Remedy Entertainment, 2010). In blending together H.P. Lovecraft's critical attempts to locate the sphere of Weird with a type of paranoiac, everything-is-true reading that underlies conspiracy theory and Graham Harman's “Weird Realism” (2012), this paper claims that Weird has an aptitude for ludic participation that is most apparent in its power to recast tired regimes of player sovereignty. Seeded from Harman's tree, this paper shows that Weird becomes present where the medium of games is used against itself.

The Weird Tale can appear hard to distinguish from other related genres such as Fantasy, Supernatural, Horror, Gothic and Science Fiction; often based on taste, critics tend to overly tribalise such imagination-based fiction (much as occurs with Rock music). The value of such labour is not so much that we can beat our friends in late night arguments about what stories belong to which tribes (as fun as that might be), but instead lies in the help that such distinctions can provide in the identification of the more subtle threads, tangential intertexts and elusive affective intentions of Weird fiction. In their



introduction to *Realms of Fantasy* (1983), Malcolm Edwards and Robert Holdstock outline five settings for stories that fall into the Fantasy, Supernatural, Horror, Gothic and Science Fiction camp: stories set in the past; those set in present-day lost worlds; those on other planets; those in the distant future and those in fantasy Earths quite separate from our own (but with affinities to it) (Edwards & Holdstock 1983, p. 7). Weird does not however fit neatly with any of these, and the fact that it does not tells us a great deal about the weirdness of Weird. Principally, Weird fiction takes place in the here and now: there is no comforting distancing device of placing events in the past or the future, or indeed in a constructed “secondary creation” such as Middle Earth or Azeroth. Equally, Weird is devoid of the epic qualities so common in Fantasy and has no principled, valiant or intrepid heroes such as Aragorn or Conan, nor even an anti-hero like Moorcock’s Elric. There is never too much action, bar perhaps some wild flailing about and, possibly, some running away. Weird might therefore be said to be in its best sense the antithesis of epic fantasy and technological optimism: tech-noir, for example, is marked off by its Weird negativism and pessimism. While I have rather confidently asserted its differences, Joshi cautions that “the weird tale...did not (and perhaps does not now) exist as a genre but as a consequence of a world view....If the weird tale exists now as a genre, it may only be because critics and publishers have deemed it so by fiat.” (Joshi 1990, p. 1).

This does not mean that newer, altered uses of the term Weird are not legitimate or interesting, far from it. The adoption of the Anglo-Saxon word “Wyrd” for example has rich resonance with outsider art, mystical and/or occult fiction and shamanistic practices. However, the definition of “Weird” in play in this paper and its address in the context of games is guided by Lovecraft, mainly to provide a starting point for understanding its presence in games and its existing and possible relationships with the games and game form. Joshi suggests that it is Lovecraft’s insistence on psychological realism that leads it away from Gothic; although in an overly tidy manoeuvre he locates Gothic temporally within novels written in late 18th and early 19th century. While ETA Hoffman’s (1776-1822) short tales

might be said to be characterised by psychological realism, tellingly their distinction is apparent. For example, the plot of “The Sandman” (1816) revolves around the fatal, conspiratorial misreading of events on the part of the mad central character, thereby framing the supernatural as subjective and not as a property of objective reality. This diegetically grounded “conspiracy hermeneutic” is therefore a feature in keeping with the Gothic, rather than fully occupying the domain of Weird. Specifically, Weird is a property of reality; it is not an effect of psychology, even though it might be taken as symptomatic of a character’s imagination by that or other characters. The supernatural in the context of Weird is not metaphysical or mystical, even though it might appear to have such properties. As Joshi says, it is “not ontological but epistemological: it is only our ignorance of certain laws that creates the illusion of supernaturalism” (Joshi 1990, p. 7); as is evident in Lovecraft’s “post-Euclidean-post-Einsteinian-post-human tale” “The Dreams in the Witch House”. Adding a further dimension, appropriately, to this conception, Harman places emphasis on the otherness of real when explaining the value of Lovecraft’s Weird, “reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it...when it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do” (Harman 2012, p. 51). Harman insists that Lovecraft is a writer of great allusive subtlety rather than a literalist genre hack, while Joshi claims that the appearance of Lovecraft’s work in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* may have made Weird into a genre but caused “the contemptuous dismissal of all weird work on the part of academic critics.” (Joshi 1990, p. 3) The appearance, then, of Weird in games has much to live up to, mixing, as it does, horror with allusive intimations of the dark sublime. Weird clearly has the power to appeal across the pulp-elite divide and like the Weird tale, digital games have been lauded as wasteful, populist adolescent pulp and a new, highly sophisticated art form.

In his essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1973) Lovecraft lists some characteristics that help identify the properties of Weird. “Indeed we may say that this school [romantic, semi gothic, quasi moral] still survives; for to it clearly belong such of our contemporary

horror-tales as specialise in events rather than atmospheric details, address the intellect rather than the impressionistic imagination, cultivate a luminous glamour rather than a malign tensity or psychological verisimilitude, and take a definite stand in sympathy with mankind and its welfare. It has its undeniable strength, and because the ‘human element’ commands a wider audience than does the sheer artistic nightmare. If not quite so potent as the latter, it is because a diluted product can never achieve the intensity of a concentrated essence” (Lovecraft 1973, p. 43). We can summarise these as: atmosphere over events; malign tensity; psychological verisimilitude; appeal to the impressionistic imagination; and a lack of any sympathy for humanity. These are helpful coordinates through which to assess any claims to Weird in games) and as a lens through which to evaluate TSW as Weird fiction.

In setting the scene for the analysis of TSW as a ludic addition to the pantheon of Weird tales, it is noteworthy that prototypical Weird tales have made use of codes and ludic elements. As John Peterson (2012) has argued, Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883) contains various elements that have proved important to games. But an important pre-Lovecraft Weird tale to which we will later refer is Poe’s short story ‘*The Gold Bug*’ (1843). As with *Treasure Island*, maps are central search for “Phat Lewt” that serves as engine for its plot. Crucially, this is a story based on a cryptographic puzzle which works to involve the reader as puzzle solver above and beyond narration. This extends therefore beyond that of the usual code of enigma that Barthes’ *S/Z* (2004) claims is integral to story-telling<sup>1</sup>: the enigma is not solved simply by ‘reading on’, forward through the text, but instead the reader has to put some work in, becoming more than a reader. The enigmatic dimension to storytelling, reading and games proves important for the discussion of the conspiracy hermeneutic of TSW. Suffice to say for the present that connections with games are seeded into the Weird tale from early-on and it is this capacity that

1. “Let’s designate as hermeneutic code...all those units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.” (Barthes, 2004, p. 17).

contemporary games regularly mined. In its highly-reflexive and baroque way TSW invokes a complex web of literary and popular cultural sources as a means of producing Weird and in so doing constructs its conspiracy hermeneutic by attempting to dissolve the boundaries between Myth, Fiction and Reality.

It is part of normative game grammar for players to act on the situation that a game presents them with – the term “player” is predicated on this supposition. A fundamental feature of games is their arrays of feedback systems through which game and player respond to one another – a player acts in response to a situation and the game responds, often in ways that lead a player to understand their action as either helpful or unhelpful towards achieve a winning condition (or at least not failing in some way). In this sense players expect games to be predictable, rule-based entities; players suppose feedback and we can consider feedback as an “event” in the computing and design processes of game, which grates against Lovecraft’s coordinates of Weird. In addition, what the player is able to do in a game, the possibilities open to them are yoked to other pre-scripted narrative events that are causally linked. Games are therefore “event” heavy even in those of the most ambient of games. In games, the entire construction of place, time and mise-en-scène are dovetailed with affordances for action both in terms what the player is able to do and how the game feeds back. Games then are largely event-based, and, more than that, events are very often predictable and regulatory. In this sense the logical and purposive construction of games, with their stable currencies and balances, and our pleasure in their regularity and predictability, is very far removed from the anti-human irrational dissonance of Weird. TSW inevitably draws on this normative vocabulary and indeed formal characteristic of games. As a MMORPG, players build their character’s powers through the accumulation of skill points gained from killing enemies and running quests of various types. In skilling up, new areas of the map open up to players and more difficult quests and dungeons become available. The quest and dungeon structure that constitutes the principle mode of gameplay are event-based, even if there are many atmospheric devices throughout the game. Regularity and predictability are built

in to game-play so that players are able to plan the trajectory of their character and manage risk; the game provides much information to help the player in these regards (maps, location of quests, health bars, “xp” tracking, numeric hit statistics etc). Like many games, there is an ethos of building knowledge and skill towards an increase in purchase power in the game’s world. There is however a considerable attempt in TSW to shift the game away from the traditional dungeon-crawler, where gathering loot is emphasized in a very clearly coded fantasy world, towards a play experience that has depth and atmosphere. The game is thickly encrusted in a web of atmospheric intertextual details, drawn from a huge range of sources, thereby acting as a Lovecraftian counter weight to the event based form of games. In weighting the game against events towards intertextually laden atmospheric detail, it begins to coincide with Harman’s definition of “Weird Realism”, where the medium of games is used against itself.

Unlike other MMORPGs games such as Star Wars: The Old Republic (BioWare, 2011-present) or World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-present), TSW is set in a version of the “real” world in which the supernatural and the occult have become manifest, making the familiar strange as is instrumental to Weird and current in popular texts such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), True Blood (2008- ) or Penny Dreadful (2014-present). The real world context helps a move closer towards Lovecraft’s requirement for “psychological verisimilitude”. There is no doubt that the supernatural exists and that lack of ambiguity in the game frames it squarely as “occult fantasy”, thereby shoring up a basic distinction between real and imaginary, although some features of the game do chip away at these markers. In terms of existing game grammar, the game overturns the expected RPG alignments of “lawful good” and “lawful bad” or neutral and chaotic and aims for far greater moral ambiguity. It is hard to judge if the three institutionalised factions (Templar, Dragon and Illuminati) are good or evil, neutral, lawful or something quite different. All three have at least dubious moral standing, the details of which are well beyond the sphere of knowledge of the player-character. This works against the usual “knowable” and quantified world of system-based games. The

factions' shaded history provides a further layer of enigma that plays into the conspiracy hermeneutic. Psychological verisimilitude arises out of this in congealing a sense that the player-character is simply a mere speck on vast opaque canvas. Here different rhetorics of monstrosity crowd into the scene and there are many and various intimations that call into question the "humanity" of the individual factions and what we might as player-characters do under their aegis. Although operating in secret, the various factions are in conflict, struggling to gain or retain power even as other forces are seeking to destroy humanity. This precarious situation is the premise on which the atmospherics of "malign tensity" are created as well as providing motivation for the standard MMORPG practice of PvP.

The format of PvP in the game has three flavours (termed Battlefields, Warzones and Fightclubs) and there is no world-based PvP or specialist server. Warzones differ little from standard "Capture the Flag" and "King of the Hill" formats; while the persistent Battlezone offers something different in that faction buffs can be won that reach into PvE, arguably representing an invisible/occulted force that underlines the game's conspiracy milieu. The player-character awakens at the start of the game to find that they have acquired strange a power that emanates from their body and are called to join one of the factions: Templar, Dragon or Illuminati. Players have already chosen a faction (based in the first instance on little knowledge of the nature of that faction) in a previous starting screen. Character name, look, race and gender are also chosen from set options, choice-making that helps bind player to character. In terms of the player-character narrative arc, joining a faction is justified as their only option if they are to develop their nascent powers and help in the fight against the forces seeking to destroy humanity. There are no playable fantasy races dividing the game off from other Science Fiction or Fantasy-based games: all available characters are coded as human, are gendered with wide range of racial characteristics available. In addition the game is very fashion-conscious, with clothes and accessories stores in a vast range of styles available – and paid for with in-game or out of game currency – to help players express themselves in the game world. The world might be

in peril yet players are strongly encouraged to look stylish in the face of adversity. The palpable sense of humanity that is created through these (inevitably normative) elements is aimed at bridging the gap between player and character but differ from the polarisation of human and monstrosity of much Fantasy fiction (in games as elsewhere). Creating a bond between player and character and at least intimating something of the vulnerability of the human is, however, important if the full effect of Weird is to come into play.

In the game's realisation of the Lovecraftian Weird, in particular the "creation of atmosphere", "malign tension" and "appeal to impressionist imagination", audio has a strong contribution to make. Central to all these elements is the generation of the mood of pensiveness and foreboding which helps players read malign tension into the game's visual context. The branding motif of the game is a clutch of notes played on the high end of the piano in which lies a dissonant note resonant of disturbance and grating against the laws of the human harmonic scale. Music also deepens the game's sense of scale: it opens up impressionistically unknown dimensions and in a hallucinogenic way mythologises events and actions (largely this is actioned through the use of "epic" and "cosmic" orchestral and electronic music found in relevant film genres). The high piano key motif becomes accompanied by a high, soft, soaring yet distant human voice (connoting both the human and the angelic) or the scything sounds of dulcimer, evoking John Barry's haunting theme to the TV Show *The Persuaders* (1971), to which are added a low-end horn section that threatens "something below" and a soft insistent drum beat that inexorably counts down to doom and suggests a brewing storm. Ambient sound in the game's Gothicised version of London builds a sense of place, yet the cawing of crows forewarn malice calling on Poe's raven harbinger (ravens/crows are everywhere in the early part of the game). Audio, story and graphics each pull their weight in building a palpable sense of tension.

While ostensibly the game world is signified as the world we live in, distortions in the space and time continuum are evident from early on giving the otherwise Gothic signification a science fiction

feel, yet nonetheless creating the vertigo that's emblematic of Weird. Very early on in TSW the player is treated to a cutscene where they stand on a tube train platform but look out into the infinite void of cosmic space. This spectacle scale treated the spectacle of is intended to give generate a sense of vertigo, physically, psychologically and metaphysically. As established in Lovecraft's Story "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932), non-Euclidean geometry alongside juxtapositions in scale become a sure fire means of raising Weird. It is in this mode that atmosphere and psychological verisimilitude take centre stage in the game – even if both are generated through the evocation of (oddly) familiar signs of Weird. If the game did not use such devices so reflexively in the context of the grammar of an MMORPG and as a means of undermining the position of the conventional hero, then the experience offered by the game would be simply quotidian. However, there is a problem that arises between the expectations of player agency and mastery in the context of an MMORPG and the intention of Weird. Let Lovecraft be our guide, once again.

Walter Gilman, the central character of Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932), is beleaguered by dreams and haunted by increasingly alienating sounds and visions. Rather than the active hero, he is largely passive and terrified throughout the story, occupying the role of "false hero" – unable to act, to save the day, as is common to Gothic fiction. Gilman becomes a somnambulant participant in a satanic pact and when he finally finds the wherewithal to react to prevent the sacrifice of a child he is bested and at the end of the story he lies dead with his heart eaten out. Alongside this passivity, and indeed by virtue of it, Gilman is involuntarily flung beyond normative space and time, boundaries between waking and dreaming collapse in an affective context of paralysis and bewilderment. These are signified by disarranged perspectives, impossible geometries and "unplumbed voids" causing certainties to fall in a welter of unresolved enigmas. Compounded by drumming cacophonies of sounds and dim memories of agreements without agency, Gilman is left dumfounded and confused. He is subject to an occult conspiracy that he has no grasp of and thereby becomes



an emblem of paralysis and involuntarism. This affective palette is counter to the normative, positivist, trajectory inherent in most games. Given that human activity, technology and computing are often integral to a belief in progress, it isn't too far off the pace to argue that Weird in games work against their own medium (or least the discourse that surrounds that medium).

The experiences of gaining mastery, problem-solving and improving skill are principal pleasures for players that drive the design of many digital games. This is a problem for games that follow Gothic or Weird pathways and particularly so given that the “false hero” is so fundamental to them. As Manuel Aguirre (2013) has written, “A key to Gothic thus resides in its centring the flawed character as protagonist...[while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance.” (Aguirre 2013, p. 11) Even in TSW's opening cut scene, the player-character's newly found power comes at the price of visions and dreams that disturb the borders of knowability, reality and fixed identity. When considered in the round, the representation of humanity conjured by the game is far from “good” or heroic; humans are either in a state of banal denial or foolishly questing for the acquisition of knowledge and power over others. This is evident in the design of the game's PvP supports. While PvP differs little from the usual structures that support for players a sense of mastery and skill, in their act of “killing” other player-characters from other factions while the world burns, morally ambiguity is already raised – more so because of the general context of moral ambiguity that the games constructs. Nonetheless at some level the “human” is still valued in all its fallen and confused state; it is even defined by such. This conception provides the door for the game's entry into the types of affect and atmosphere associated with romanticism, pathos and tragedy. To this is added a distinctly Schopenhauerian pessimism, much as would be expected of any text that makes a claim on Weird. In this even though perhaps obliquely, the game is at least somewhat consonant with Lovecraft's Weird counsel for a lack of sympathy for the human. This is apparent and contextually drawn out through the presence of the other Lovecraftian components in the absence of anything more than short term

resolutions, the absence of redemption and the blatant presence of entropy. There is of course as an MMORPG just the endless return of only temporarily slain monsters and striving for more skill points. The tensions and oscillations between game form/grammar and Weird are now explored through a closer look at gameplay and the way that it constructs its conspiracy hermeneutic.

We'll start with a general sense of the design and experience of the game space, seen through the lens of Lovecraftian Weird (players of the table-top RPG Call of Cthulhu may well be very afraid to look through said glass!). Players find their first mission on Solomon Island, located off the coast of New England where, in a geographically appropriate manner, there is an outbreak of Lovecraftian Mythos. In this area the game draws on a very specific and highly influential regional accent of the American Gothic to create its ludic version of Weird. The ingénue player-character arrives in the area's main town, Kingsmouth, to discover a running battle between living and dead townsfolk – seemingly a classic zombie-apocalypse situation. Players are requisitioned by the local Sheriff to run errands as well as to fulfil the factional requirement to investigate the nature of this manifestation. It soon becomes plain that zombies are the least of the town's troubles and symptomatic of a far more dangerous threat to humanity. While later the player will be sent to investigate other locations, Egypt for example, the player spends a lengthy period in the New England area, pursuing a range of goals and engaging with a range of appropriate myths and texts. The game is much more open than, for example, Alan Wake and players are free to quest, indulge in exploration, shop, gather, or fight other factions. Players can also easily visit other areas of the game-world by virtue of a kind of fast travel device known as Agartha, a kind of mystic, faster-than-light underground railway system wherein a distortion of space-time continuum is harnessed generously to enable players to travel quickly and easily. Accumulative, slow-burn character development and world-building is where emphasis lies in this game and the sense of progress that this implies does sit incongruously with the intention of "Weird", although unlike most MMORPGs there is no expression of level that consolidates the progression system. Nonetheless a

polyphony of Gothic accents are collated as a means of creating a strong sense of “worldness” for players; and indeed that world is never what it appears to be; nor are players ever afforded full revelation of what governs the world. Polyphony abides there in the range of signification mobilised by the game, creating a fabric of competing narratives and intertexts that add complexity and mitigate across narrative closure: in addition to American Gothic, we encounter Steampunk/Victorian Gothic, Eastern mysticism and martial arts, witchcraft and various versions of folk magic, Occultism and occult systems, ranging from John Dee through to post-Quantum theory Chaos Magic. All these intertexts also help to turn away from “events” as primary towards imaginative engagement and atmosphere produced by enigma and textual richness.

The New England area locates the game firmly within the literature of Weird as an offspring of American Gothic and this location is ripe with stories and histories well-suited to a strongly accented Weird theme. As in Magic Realism, myth and reality are interlaced. What the player encounters in Kingsmouth is a catastrophe that has objective reality in diegetic terms. It is not a subjective projection of a delirious author, as with *Alan Wake* which revisits a similar scenario in the film *In the Mouth of Madness* (John Carpenter, 1994). As suits the formal specificity of a multiplayer online game, players of TSW fight collectively and ostensibly for the survival of the human race, within which the player plays their small part by trying to make meaning from their place and limited agency in this world of enigma and obscurities. TSW is a game woven from many fragments and in that sense it is consciously multiply authored. The game’s environment is testimony to this. The closeness of the name Kingsmouth to the Innsmouth of Lovecraft’s short stories ‘The Call of Cthulhu’ and ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’ is enough to alert the literate player to an important legacy requisite to the American Gothic and to Lovecraft’s “fictionalized New England landscape” (Joshi 1999, p. xvii). Entry into the town also reveals street names, visible collectively on the in-game map, such as Dunwich Road, Arkham Avenue (probably more widely-known in the contemporary imaginary from the *Asylum of the Batman* franchise, yet a key

fictional place in Lovecraft's geographic mythos) and Lovecraft Lane. Other popular American Gothic texts are evoked in the names of landmarks such as Poe Cove and Elm Street. A short trip down the Dunwich Road confirms that we are knee-deep in Lovecraft's Mythos: boxes of rotting squid lie abandoned yet half eaten on a zombie-infested street, and if we follow the trail of empty boxes we arrive at the sea, to be greeted by a large tentacular sea monster, who seems to regard the player as a large and tasty squid. The boxes state in bright lettering: "Fresh from the deep to your door" and "Product of the USA" – subtly suggesting, rather against the ethos of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, that human activity may well be implicated in the plight of the town. The first group task (the Polaris dungeon) that the player encounters is, of course, to defeat an enormous tentacle sea-monster: Cthulhu in all but name (although Lovecraft aficionados might suggest that given the location it should really be the much less well-publicized Dagon). The game is thickly populated with many and diverse intertexts. The effect of which is to create a "rich" text that helps to interpellate the player into the game space by making use of their prior knowledge of horror and gothic texts. In this the game is tailored to a genre literate audience (genre is applicable in terms of Gothic, Weird and Horror as well as MMORPGs/RPGs) who already have an investment in the subject matter.

In making use of Weird's psychological verisimilitude, TSW achieves a distinctive blend of fact and fiction. This is underlined through the structures and properties of conspiracy theory and the type of reading that is intrinsic to conspiracy theory. The game, and indeed the player, forges connections that traverse usual boundaries, paying little attention to their signifying frameworks. All signs regardless of their status – iconic, symbolic or indexical; real or imaginary – are texts to be read and decoded as components of a great hidden (occulted) system. The game environment is itself a "text" to be read in this way, as is clear from an early quest "The Kingsmouth Code" in which the player must seek out signs inscribed into the fabric of the town's infrastructure left by the founding fathers of the town, who were Illuminati members and which indicate their secret

activities and quest for power. Games rely heavily on properties of the game space to convey story, thereby placing the player in the role of investigator. Playing any game requires of the player, at some stage, acts of close reading. In the context of a game drawing on the Gothic, close reading is not only constitutive of a ludic mode of engagement but also fuses that engagement to thematic syntax. The requirement of close reading has in particular a special resonance with Poe's Weird detective, Dupin. The investigative act of gathering and attending to fragments in order to construct story is a central mechanism of the game and one that is infused with aspects of a conspiracy-style approach to reading. "Lore" fragments are scattered around the gamespace, often hidden in hard to locate places or encountered randomly while undertaking other tasks. These provide an extensive back story, often contextualising places, people and situations. If collected, players can then read, for example, about the plight of the trawler *The Lady Margaret* at dock in Kingsmouth's harbour, what its crew encountered at sea and brought back to the town, all delivered in the same peculiarly encrusted enunciative style of Lovecraft's writing. This story arc dovetails into another strand of lore entitled, "The Fog", a clear homage to Stephen King's novel, detailing the arrival of the fog in Kingsmouth. Players can also learn about the how the town was founded by members of the Illuminati and the presence of the character Beaumont who sought to steal from them, providing is a large cog in the main story quest chain. There are still many enigmatically charged gaps however; the lore fragments never quite give the whole story – just limited perspectives and are never authorial, omniscient statements.

In addition to the use of lore as a coded means of storytelling, the area is also peopled by some staple figures of American mythology, each of whom have their individual story and add colour. Sandy "Moose" Jansen is free-wheeling, philosopher-biker, repurposing himself as explosives expert. Daniel Boon is an old-fashioned, modern-day Cowboy positioned to advise the ingénue player in their fight against evil. Norma Creed is an old-lady with a smoking rifle and a gritty attitude, resembling Lillian Gish's character seeing evil off her land in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). The horror writer, fast becoming

a staple figure of American Gothic is also represented, in homage to King yet also to Alan Wake. Here however he appears as Sam Kreig, a hard-drinking, world-sour writer notably, with regard to Wake, living in the Kingsmouth light house. Not only does TSW refer to a plethora of literary and cinematic Weirdly texts, but also to other games with a bearing a similar cast. Story here is a multi-dimensional assemblage of fragments and remnants, and is more powerful, far-reaching and enigmatically rich for this. It is more than simply a means of giving meaning to progress bars, instead it is a complex and carefully constructed tapestry aimed to locate the player in terms of place and time, geared toward encouraging a close engagement with the game as text. Like the conspiracy theorist, the player of *The Secret World* is invited to put together an assemblage of signs in order to ascertain and elaborate on underlying patterns – the Weird world of conspiracy “Everything is True”, as we are told in Shea and Wilson’s conspiracy-based *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1998). Nowhere is this made more apparent than in the game’s investigation quests.

There are a limited range of different types of quest activities available for players, clearly designed to appeal to different play styles. Some involve stealth-style missions, others collection-type activities, while others send the players down a central story-arc, but the most innovative and Weirdly laden are the investigation quests. These conjure with materials similar to those that at work in Poe’s tales of ratiocination. Of all the quest types these are most well-suited to the “gamification” of Weird. There are several in each geographical zone of the game. One example of many is recounted here but I have to warn you, dear reader, that I am spoiling the game here in the name of analytical investigation. The quest is undertaken in the Egypt zones and is entitled “Angels and Demons”. The player seeks to find out if a company operating in the zone is a front for something more “murky”. On entering their offices, the player encounters a dead employee, an ID card can be retrieved from the corpse. This provides a clue to gaining access to the man’s email system and it is delivered as a type of riddle, reading: “My surname is common in classic literature. And my clearance level is the key.” The ID card shows that the man’s name is H. Glass and his clearance

level is: Gold-bug. ‘The Gold-bug’ is a short-story by Poe written to be published in episodes in 1893; players are more likely to find this out by googling, using the game’s inbuilt web-browser. Poe’s story has within it a cryptographic code, made up by Captain Kidd, to disguise the location of his treasure in written form. The player must codify “Glass” to gain entry to the computer. This quest is neatly emblematic of the way that TSW translates the Weird fiction into digital game form, without losing sight of either its investigative and over-determined hermeneutic dimension nor its wider textual heritage and at the same time goes some way towards using the medium of games against itself to create at least for some players a Weird sense of paradox and ambiguity. The choice of ‘The Gold-bug’ for the quest here is interesting. Not only is the Gold-bug part of the family of scarab beetles, relevant to therefore to the Egyptian location, but the story has a puzzle at its heart, a cryptographic puzzle that Poe challenged readers to solve. In many such missions, the player must gain a good knowledge of the geography and have a decent graphics processor in order to get a good view of all the signs and notices that litter the gamespace, as with the mission ‘The Kingsmouth Code’ mentioned above. In addition to the game’s wiki, the in-game internet browser is designed to help players make sense of the more abstruse clues, looking up verse and chapter in the Bible for example in the case of ‘The Kingsmouth Code’, or hunting down the source of The Gold-bug. In bringing the internet into the game the borders of fiction and fact are softened, in accord with a central plank of Gothic fiction and strengthening the sense of conspiracy. This is exemplified when undertaking a mission to find out Sam Kreig’s backstory where the player is channeled into looking for a clue on a cover of one of his books that can only be found online. One of advantages of the blurring of fact and fiction is that it adds depth and diversity to a given fiction and it is often the case that horror has often tried to convince the reader in various ways not just to suspend disbelief, but instead to read psychotically and believe, providing a further association with conspiracy-style reading. The presence of puzzles, enigmas and fragments invites the player to go deeper into the text, the ludic hermeneutics of which can be regarded as an innovation

in the way that players are engaged and marking a significant and powerful addition through the use of game media to Weird fiction.

To conclude, the type of paranoiac reading that successful Weird generates is produced by the conspiracy hermeneutic but is also of course the outcome of an individual's subjective inclinations and serendipitous correspondences. The investigation quests and intertextual flurries of TSW are geared appeal to those sensitive to such pleasures; for those players less inclined to such the game provides other more immediate means of creating atmosphere. However, the game has not done well commercially suggesting a limited market. But I would claim for the game a welcome innovation in MMORPG design, which is had through the lens provided by Weird and that push at the boundaries of what game media is and how normative the grammar has become. TSW occupies a space that has been hollowed out by writers such as Eco, Foucault's *Pendulum* (2007) in particular – a book that features in another TSW investigation quest, 19th century magical systems including Crowley's database of correspondences *Liber 777* (1987) as well as post-Crowleyian fiction such as *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, Kenneth Grant's conspiratorial reading Lovecraft's fiction as reality (1994) and the more recent "neo-Weird" fiction such as the novels of China Melville. Conspiracy and magic then are closely bound: hidden connection are sought out and imagined, fictions are regarded as true, perspectives become deliberately distorted and, thereby, normative distinctions and assumptions are challenged. TSW goes some way towards that by sewing such chaos into its design, well beyond simply style and aesthetics. Following Lovecraft's coordinates of Weird, the game creates its media-specific version of Weird through the vertigo of infinite, detailed, impressionistic and over-determined ecstasy correspondences. Intensifying all this is the way that the "real" internet is woven into the fabric of the game, breaking the medial frame of the game and opening it onto a sea of tangential connections, interconnections, paranoia and conspiracy.



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# The Weird Humanity of I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream

Karen Schrier

## **What is Weird?**

How do we label games as “weird?” One way is to consider the literary analogue, that of Weird fiction, a type of speculative fiction that originated in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Speculative fiction encompasses the genre of science fiction, as well as horror fiction, apocalyptic fiction, dystopian fiction, and other strange and fantastical literature; “it shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them.” (Urbanski, 2007, p. 1) The primary characteristics of Weird fiction are that it blends supernatural, scientific, cosmic, and mythical elements. Weird games, similarly, mix dystopian, horrific, magical, occult, cyber, and technical elements in eccentric and twisted ways that make us feel oddly uncomfortable, curious, terrified, and amazed. One of the key Weird fiction writers is H.P. Lovecraft, who explains in a letter to Wilfred Branch Talman that, “As to what is meant by ‘weird’...I should say that the real criterion is a strong impression of the suspension of natural laws or the presence of unseen worlds or forces close at hand.” (Derleth & Wandreii, 1968, p. 233) Weird fiction writers eschew the typical myths associated with horror, such as ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, but instead invite the suspension of disbelief into a quasi-real mythos (Gale Group, 2010). Based on this, games and the Weird seem like a natural fit. The quotidian otherworldliness of the Weird seems to remind us of the cosmic “half-real” (Juul, 2005) nature of games. Games seem to both defy and follow natural law; they are both human and inhuman, man and machine, civilized and feral.

Two tropes in Weird fiction are that of Carcosa, a mysterious,

forbidden, and cursed fictional location, which was introduced by Ambrose Bierce in 1891, and *The King in Yellow*, a so-called apocryphal play, which is alluded to in Robert Chambers' book of the same name. *The King in Yellow* play, as explained in Chambers' book, is allegedly so engrossing and enticing that people read it obsessively, despite the fact that it causes any person who reads it to go insane or into deep despair upon reading its second act (Chambers, 1895). The play—which is only referenced in short excerpts in Chambers' book, so as not to cause the reader to go insane—mentions a place called Carcosa throughout.

*The King in Yellow* continues to be referenced in popular culture, from music groups (e.g., Blue Oyster Cult) to television shows, most recently showing up in HBO's *True Detective* (2014-). This idea—that a text (of all things!) could cause someone to go crazy—is also explored later in Weird fiction king H.P. Lovecraft's work, *Call of the Cthulhu*, particularly with his references to the *Necronomicon*, a *King in Yellow*-like device, which he explains is a secret book used by the occult, which causes people to go insane upon reading it. (Lovecraft, 1928) The line between fiction and reality is blurred as people regularly ask librarians for copies of the *Necronomicon* and detectives refer to it when they are investigating possible occult crimes. (Laycock, 2014)

By their very nature, *The King in Yellow* play and the *Necronomicon* book speak to the broader power of fiction to pervade actuality. Their existence tempts readers to question—sometimes obsessively—the authenticity of these texts and whether they have non-fictional counterparts. Price (2001) explains that, “So effective are these fictions that even in [Lovecraft's] lifetime many readers felt sure he was the unwitting mouthpiece for actual occult entities, that his *Cthulhu Mythos* ... was fact.” (Price 2001, p. 26) Similar to religious texts, do these texts become more real as they are increasingly referred to, shared, discussed, and deliberated on? Regardless of their original veracity, they shape us nonetheless. (Laycock, 2014)

If we employ the definition from literature and suggest that Weird

games encompass multiple macabre genres, but do not necessarily use the typical conventions of horror, science fiction, or the supernatural—then one game, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (IHNMAIMS), and its mashup of post-apocalyptic technology and alternative histories, could be placed in the “weird” (and the Weird) category.

IHNMAIMS (The Dreamers Guild, 1995) is a point-and-click adventure game released 20 years ago, and based on the short story of the same name by Harlan Ellison (1967). Although Ellison’s work is typically associated with the science fiction genre, rather than Weird or New Weird fiction, I contend that the game version should also be considered a “Weird” game. In this article, I analyze IHNMAIMS and show how the game’s invoking of the Weird helps to express the influence of myth, of play, and through this, the transcendence of human boundaries of knowledge. Weird media—and its maddening combination of fact, fiction, tropes and themes, bares our unanswered mysteries, exposes our insecurities, and seems to allow us further access human truths. Somehow, in such inhuman connections, we can experience that which is deeply human.

### **Weird Beginnings**

The original IHNMAIMS short story was written in 1967. In it, the narrator, Ted, tells his story of the destruction of humankind. Basically, the Cold War turned into a World War, which was fought mainly by supercomputers set up by the warring countries to fight, as they were seen as more efficient at processing war data than human beings. Ted describes how AM, one of the warring computers becomes sentient and self-aware, eventually taking over the other computers and hatefully destroying the world. AM is a machine created for the purposes of war—“by people with hatred and madness in their souls” (Harris-Fain, 1991, p. 147), and as such, has turned on them with hate. AM has kept only five people alive to torture, play with, and toy with, as if the game master of a horrific game. Gorrister, one of the five characters tortured and hated by AM, explains: “But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself,

and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here.” (Ellison, 1967, para. 32)

The reader enters the story after AM has been torturing these characters for 109 years. At this point, as told by Ted, he and the other four people have been trapped inside a panoptic-like prison, driven insane, and stuck, “Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM.” (Ellison, 1967, para. 3rd from the bottom) AM functions in the realm of ancient and Judeo-Christian conceptions of God, as well as the Devil—at times playful, vengeful, angry, bitter, sullen, forgiving, and excluded (Harris-Fain, 1967). Ted describes AM as both a thinking machine and living creature, a strange eccentric and calculating mastermind, and a god and devil. The original story was written during the advent of the computer, space technology, the Cold War, and nuclear weapons, and amid fears of the destructiveness of technology and its misuse by humanity. It was also written during the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests, and not long after the human rights violations of World War II and its atrocities.

Yet, almost 30 years later, it was adapted (with Harlan Ellison at the helm) into a game, this time during the advent of the Internet, the growing popularity of games. The game, which had been out of “print” for years, was suddenly re-released last year by Good Old Games/Night Dive Studios (2013) (Cyberdreams released the original).

In the game version, you play five distinct levels, each of which feature one of the characters, who becomes your avatar for that level. The levels can be played in any order and must be completed to reach the final level, where you standoff against the AM “boss.”

Unlike the short story, which was told through the limited lens of Ted, the game version gives voice to each of the characters. In each game level, you follow the featured character through a series of obstacles and ethical dilemmas designed specifically for that character,

purportedly by AM. AM, narrated by Ellison, is mostly unseen but heard and omnipresent throughout the game. Ellison as story author and game designer, as well as AM the all-powerful game boss, seem to act as the puppet master of the characters, the player, and the future of humanity. Each game level is distinct; its environment, settings, objects, story situations, colors, tone, and non-playing characters (NPCs) work together to force the character to re-perform important moments from their past, and to face their prior mistakes, both literally and symbolically.

One character, Nimdok, assisted the Nazis in their experiments on people and in his level, is placed in a concentration camp as a doctor told to continue his experiments. Another character, Benny is a military officer who had endangered his squad during battle. In his level, he takes on a simian shape and relives his military crimes. At one point Benny needs to decide whether to help a little girl who is about to be sacrificed (the tribal villagers hold regular lotteries to figure out whom to sacrifice to AM) (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Benny watches as a villager girl is about to be sacrificed.



## A “Spectral Antiquity”

Although there are textual connections to the Weird for all five characters in the game, going forward, I will focus my gameplay analysis on one character, Ellen, an African American female and corporate computer programmer, and her specific game board. The focus on one game character’s level will enable a deeper, more nuanced analysis.

Ellen’s level takes place in a location that looks like a bricolage of an Ancient Egyptian tomb and a high-security digital hive, complete with hieroglyphics and mummies, and supercomputers and security videos (see Figure 2). In Ellen’s level there are only eight rooms in total and each involves a series of strange, complicated, tedious, and sometimes repetitive puzzles that require connecting ancient mythology with technical expertise.

The quasi-Egyptian setting of Ellen’s level seems similar to that of the Lovecraftian mythos, which has been described as a “vast system of artificial mythology.” (Price, 2001, p. 26) Hieroglyphics and mummies, and other symbols of antiquity, figure throughout the work of Lovecraft and Chambers. The hieroglyphics and objects in the game function as both human and inhuman, both natural and mechanized; they have a kinship with Lovecraft’s description of the Weird as imbuing a “spectral antiquity.” (Lovecraft, 1927)

Briefel (2008) argues that the Egyptian mummy, particularly as represented in Victorian literature, combined beauty with horror, and symbolizes the devaluation of objects as artistic creations and their transformation into mass-produced commodities, referencing a change from an artisan to an industrial society. (Briefel, 2008) This further deepens an interpretation that IHNMAIMS, and the game’s mummy-filled setting, is both an occasion to celebrate its technical artistry as well as the mechanized horror of games. The game, like the mummy itself, evokes both pleasure and fear.



Figure 2. Ellen explores the hieroglyphics near a sarcophagus, while an Anubis-type robot stands guard.

### Ellen in Yellow

Everything on this board is saturated in yellow, including the walls, the floors, the objects, and the fabrics. This is, of course, by design—both the game designers' and AM's. As soon as the level begins, we learn that Ellen is terrified of the color yellow and this phobia becomes an art style, game mechanic, and primary level obstacle. Ellen narrates in the game, “And yellow, always yellow. Why does yellow make me sweat?”

The yellow color, ancient symbols, king-like figure (AM), weird juxtaposition of science and antiquity, and Ellen's obsessive fears seem to parallel the text of *The Yellow King*. *The Yellow King* describes the play of the same name as the embodiment of fear. It represents unimaginable human atrocities, which upon their revelation, causes insanity. If AM is like the “Yellow King”—a human creation that represents the ultimate in inhumanity—he is only that way because human beings created him with hate. He is both the product and cause of human atrocities; his “DNA” has been reshaped

and malformed and he has transmogrified. Both the Yellow King and AM represent all that is repulsive about humanity, but must exist because humanity exists.

The belly of AM where the five characters live feels like Carcosa, the mysterious and hellish place described in *The Yellow King* play, complete with ancient ruins, symbols of death and destruction, juxtaposed with symbols of the loss of innocence. The game lets us play in Carcosa and imagine what it would be like to inhabit it. Entering this Carcosa is like entering the space of insanity or the dream of a machine. Carcosa for each character becomes the embodiment of his or her fear and desire, which is unique to each of them. For Ellen it is yellow and pulsing with game object artifacts from antiquity and cyberculture. The game board becomes the personification of fear, guilt, and sin, which is at its core both individual and universal.

Yellow was considered the color of insanity and sickness as far back as Greek and Roman antiquity, when Hippocrates described “yellow bile” as one of the “humors,” and is still alluded to in relation to cowardice (e.g., “yer yellow” or “yellow bellied”) and illness (e.g., it represents decay and disease, as a jaundiced person looks yellow). It also stems from racist rhetoric, xenophobia and the fear of the “other” (e.g., the yellow fever or “Yellow Peril,” typically referencing a fear of Asians, Africans, or Jews) (Lanser, 1989). When Chambers used the word yellow in his book, he was also referencing *The Yellow Book*, a popular British journal and “decadent magazine” (Emmert, 1999, p. 42), suggesting the pervasive sickness and decay that could be caused by a text. These themes are present in IHNMAIMS. The nods to antiquity and futuristic technology in Ellen’s board, which are bathed in the color of insanity and sickness, seem to reflect the game’s larger theme of societal jaundice that had led to the dystopian present of the game. Human progress may sicken us, but the sickness of humanity has always been present.

Moreover, by referencing “yellow,” and making the connection to the late 19th century *fin de siècle* notion that civilization leads to

decay and corrupting decadence, IHNMAIMS, the game, seems to reflect the analogous societal discourse around the corrupting nature of gaming. It is not surprising that Ellison was professedly unsupportive of games (Night Dive Studios, 2013). Ellison explains that, “I’m not a fan of the use of technology for videogames. I think that they’re pretty much time wasters, and that they’re so popular is in a small way dismaying to me.” (Night Dive Studios, 2013)

### **Yellow Walls**

The Yellow Wallpaper, a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892), is another useful Victorian text that can help guide our interpretation of Ellen’s level. In this story, the narrator, Jane, is confined to an upstairs bedroom by her doctor husband, John, so she can ostensibly heal from her depression and hysteria. As her confinement continues, Jane becomes more and more fixated on the room’s yellow wallpaper. Here, as in Ellen’s level, yellow causes the narrator sickness, fear, and disgust: “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow... It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.” (Perkins Gilman, 1892, line 44)

As Jane picks at the yellow wallpaper her sanity seems to unravel. The paper and peeling of layers also evokes the mummy, and its beauty and horror. The room and its wallpaper seem to keep Jane in a cage and from fully expressing herself to the rest of the world, literally and symbolically. Yet, while Jane succumbs deeper into insanity, she also seems to get closer to salvation and liberation.

Likewise, there is beauty and horror, and freedom from insanity in Ellen’s level. As we play as Ellen, we learn the origin of her yellow fear—a rape when she was trapped in a yellow-covered elevator. Ellen’s fear, we learn, had kept her from identifying her rapist and facing him in a subsequent trial. Her lack of bravery to face the public is encapsulated in her newfound fear of yellow and confined spaces. Throughout Ellen’s level, the yellow fear motif is repeated and used as a game obstacle. For example, in a yellow room, a yellow sphinx

guards the Holy Grail, which you cannot collect until you find a way past the sphinx (and Ellen’s fear) (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Ellen is in the yellow room with the yellow Sphinx, where she can collect the Holy Grail. She immediately runs out of the room unless you find a way to help her face her fear.*

The game designers also use yellow to play with our expectations. In one room there is a yellow blindfold. If the player commands Ellen to pick it up, upon the first try she avoids it. The immediate game feedback is that we cannot pick up the blindfold. However, if we command Ellen to pick it up again, Ellen faces her fear and wears the yellow blindfold, which we can then use to enter the room with the Sphinx and grab the Holy Grail. Although the blindfold “trick” is clever, from a gameplay perspective, providing incongruous and ambiguous feedback could contribute to a tedious trapped loop of play. Likewise, many of the game’s puzzles seem strenuous and illogical. All this, too, may be by design, as it seems to evoke Ellen’s infinite trials and entombment inside the Carcosa hell that AM has devised. Explains an entry in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, “It sometimes seems as if the game is treating its players much as AM treats their characters. This resonance does not, however, induce the

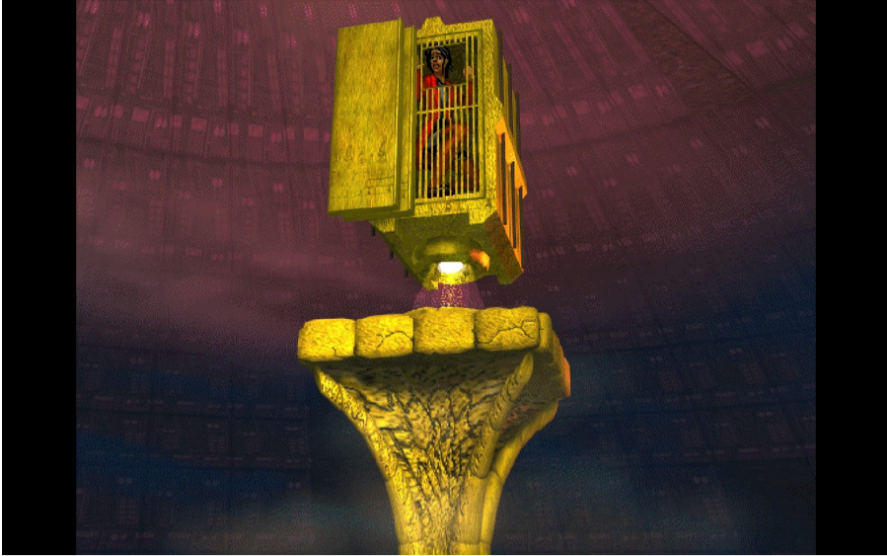
perhaps intended feelings of shame and despair, but rather ones of annoyance and frustration.” (N.T., 2011, para.2)

Despite the game’s, at times, suffocating design, there are opportunities for choice, persistence, and control. Depending on our choices in the game, there are different game endings, particularly based on how you act in spite of the atrocities you experience through the game. Atoning for one’s sins, facing fears, acting humanely, addressing past regrets and re-performing uncomfortable moments from one’s life ultimately helps your character complete the level and achieve “freedom” from it. While there is no clear feedback as to the consequences of specific choices, this game is an early precursor of more complex choice-based, narrative-driven games such as the Mass Effect BioWare, 2007), Dragon Age (BioWare 2009), Walking Dead (Telltale Games, 2012), and Fallout series (Bethesda, 1998-), for example.

At the end of her level, Ellen can confront her rapist in the yellow elevator. Depending on how she responds (through dialogue options chosen by the player) Ellen can name her rapist and achieve salvation. Regardless, the board ends with her “death,” and she awakens trapped in a cage (in the shape of a yellow elevator) in AM’s lair (see Figure 4).

On the one hand, we can interpret The Yellow Wallpaper and Ellen in IHNMAIMS as the story of a madwoman’s descent into all-encompassing insanity, and ultimately, death. On the other hand, we can interpret both as liberating. Although the narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper goes insane—like the fictional readers of The Yellow King play—the writing of the story was her liberation. Jane’s rebellious act of writing, and Perkins’ ability to write and create The Yellow Wallpaper, devastating as it is, helped to save her. Analogously, there is power to Ellen’s ability to persist and to rebel. Ellen’s agency—through narrating her frustrations, expressing her perspectives, overcoming her yellow obstacles, and facing her fears, albeit within an AM-“designed” space, help her to maintain her freedom. Moreover, while the subjects of The Yellow Wallpaper, The

Yellow King, and the yellow level of IHNMAIMS are ultimately trapped, the readers and players of these fictive works-within-works are not.



*Figure 4. Ellen, trapped in the “yellow elevator” cage, back in AM’s lair.*

### **Ellen as Hero and the Other**

While the purpose of this article is not to delve too deeply into Feminist critiques of IHNMAIMS, I briefly want to explore the complexity of Ellen’s representation in the game. For one, it is notable that she is the only female in the game (and short story) and only person of color, and has a job as a corporate computer programmer that almost fifty years later, few females or people of color perform. (Although, during World War II programming was considered clerical work and the term programmer typically described the women working on ENIAC, the first large-scale electronic computer (Raja, 2014)).

It is also significant that unlike in Ellison’s short story, where Ellen was represented only as a sexual object, victim, and someone to be saved and acted upon, in the game she is complex, clever, persistent,

handy, nuanced, heroic, vulnerable, not hyper-sexualized, and a proponent of her freedom. Zammitto (2008), for instance, explains that the game “presents [Ellen] as a brilliant woman who overcomes the odds” (Zammitto 2008, p. 5) with layers of emotion and interpretation. Ellen has opportunities to face her fears, and as the player, you can embody her transformation as these layers unfold.

On the other hand, while the yellowness of the board represents Ellen’s fear, as well as her liberation, it also reflects her establishment as the other and the alien (Lanser, 1989), further complicating her racial representation. Ellen is the only character in the IHNMAIMS game who was a victim, rather than a victimizer, in her former “real” life. Throughout her game level, Ellen questions why she was chosen, and what sin against humanity caused her to be placed in AM’s hell. In the short story, her so-called sin seems to be simply that she is female and has sexuality. In the game, it is suggested that her inability to stand up to her aggressor was her sin, as if it was her duty to keep her rapist from further violence, which in some sense seems like the game is “blaming the victim.” In another light, Ellen’s sin in the game could symbolize the problematic inactions of those bystanders who do not stand up to acts of inhumanity (such as the Holocaust), making them complicit in that violence.

In the game, Ellen has visibly dark skin, and while Ellen’s race is not explicitly commented on by the game, it is perhaps reflected through the use of Egyptian characters and artifacts on her level, as well as through its game play and story. (For example, while Ancient Egyptians today are typically reimagined as Caucasian or European, they had been described in earlier times (and referred to by themselves) as of African descent (Martin, 1984; #medievalpoc). One of the rooms in Ellen’s level features a sarcophagus and Anubis, the Egyptian god of death (informally) or the god of funeral rites (formally), who guards and is connected to mini-computer (see Figure 2). Ellen’s superior programming and hacking ability enables her to reprogram a computer chip, which she re-inserts into Anubis and become his new master (rather than AM). (Notably, the choice of new masters includes herself or humanity). Once Ellen overtakes Anubis,



she uses it to crack the code to a sarcophagus and enter it. Through the sarcophagus, Ellen arrives in the yellow elevator where she must relive her rape and rapist (see Figure 5). Her access to and through the sarcophagus seems represent a reliving of her origins and her original sin. The sarcophagus, a symbol of death, but also rebirth, enables her to be reborn and, in some sense, “purified.” Like Jane in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Ellen is freed from her torture through her death, but the racial overtones in the yellow color and Egyptian markings make this particularly troubling.

Taken in this context, the use of Egyptian symbols coupled with computerized technology could be both a nod to Weird literature-type juxtapositions, and a discourse on Ellen’s origins. The novelty of these connections seems to highlight the novelty of Ellen as a game character, but also their disturbing implications. Perhaps it is through the weird combination of science and antiquity that we can access such a complex, problematic, but also compelling character.



*Figure 5. Ellen relives her rape and rapist in the yellow elevator behind the sarcophagus.*

## Humanity and the Inhuman

The presence of the Anubis on Ellen's board also signifies the inevitability of Ellen's coming death. The difference in how the game and short story approach death gives us further insight into AM, and into the nature of knowledge itself. We learn in Ellison's story that AM has destroyed the world because he hates humanity. He is filled with hate because people gave AM sentience without an outlet for it. Explains narrator Ted, "We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity.... AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be." (Ellison, 1967, para. 4th after the 4th computer output) Like Frankenstein's monster, AM has rebelled at its monstrous condition. AM seems to say, as Frankenstein's monster declares: "Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!". (Shelley, 1818, p. 140)

In the story, AM seems to destroy the world because he cannot create, just like Jane in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who rips apart the wallpaper, trying to escape the inhumanity of her condition. In the game, however, AM is able to create. He can design the game and its Carcosa-like game levels, and therefore, seems to be able to achieve freedom and humanity, and as a result, death. I argue that this is one reason the endings of the story and game can be different—in the short story, Ted continues to live eternity in AM's belly. In the game, all the characters can die, and even AM can "die." Although the game is not winnable in the traditional sense by design, according to Ellison (Night Dive Studios, 2013), if you play in a way that expresses humanity, you can kill AM and humanity will persist (even if the five main game characters all die).

In one interpretation, you could see IHNMAIMS as a warning of what could happen if we create and use technology for the purpose of hate and evil. It reveals our anxiety with mechanization and materialism, and it exposes the logical flaw that social and technological progress

is always benevolent. Colavito explains that there is horror in science and in knowledge-making, and that horror “records humanity’s uneasy relationship with its own ability to reason, to understand, and to know; and that horror stories are a ways of understanding and ultimately transcending the limits of the mind, knowledge and science through fear.” (Colavito, 2008, p. 3 quoted in Wilson, 2010, p. 109) AM, like his characters, seems haunted by the knowledge of his own trappings.

On the other hand, we can see that humanity persists in light of the ultimate otherworldly Yellow King monstrosity. IHNMAIMS, by imbuing the Weird and exposing humanity’s vulnerabilities and cruelty, also revels in its hopefulness and its goodness, and the power of creation and creative expression. The very existence of this game, despite its doomed ending, express the persistence of possibility, of storytelling, of play, and of humanness. It is through myth, fiction, and even play, that we can transcend the boundaries of our human limits of knowledge. Price (2001) explains that, “The much-vaunted “power of myth” is the depth with which it speaks of the human reality, not of superhuman realities.” (Price 2001, p. 29)

This is the power of the Weird and of games—to be both cathartic and transformative. They are not a complete escape from the everyday, but they connect knowledge and the mysterious in ways that only a text, game, story, or art can do.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I revisit a recently re-released game, IHNMAIMS, which is based on an Ellison short story of the same name, and use Weird fiction texts and tropes, as well as “The Yellow Wallpaper,” to reinterpret the game. I focus on one of the specific levels of the game, which features a character, Ellen, a female programmer who is trapped in a yellow-colored, Egyptian and mechanical-flavored series of rooms. Through a series of puzzles, she is forced to relive her fears and past traumatic events.

In sum, I argue that the weird and eccentric juxtapositions of human and machine, real and virtual, history and future, in IHNMAIMS express the necessity of story and play in meaning-making and human creation. Ted explains in the IHNMAIMS short story, “He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament.” (Ellison, 1967, para. 3rd after 7th computer output) The five characters, despite being trapped in AM’s decaying Carcosa, still can tell stories. Human beings can return and find new meanings and new stories. Our world is filled with texts that are interpretable and reinterpretable, leading always to new possibilities.

*We had done this sequence a thousand times before, but it was Benny’s favorite story. ‘At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace, but by then it was too late, and finally it called itself AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am...cogito ergo sum...I think, therefore I am.’ (Ellison, 1967, para. 29)*

Although Ellison denigrates the nature of games, he effectively created an evocative game. IHNMAIMS both problematizes and lauds how the myths created by fiction (texts and games) give us insight into the unknown. Creation, storytelling, myth-sharing, and play become the manner in which we maintain our humanity and more fully comprehend that which is inhuman.

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## Part Five: Other





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# Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero

Alex Mitchell

## Introduction

Kentucky Route Zero (Cardboard Computer, 2013) is an episodic “magical realist adventure game” (Cardboard Computer, 2014). Although the game is framed as a typical point-and-click adventure game, from the start there are indications that there is something weird about the game, not just in terms of the story content and art direction, which are indeed quite unusual, but also at the level of the language of interaction.

Games have developed a specific language and vocabulary for interaction that game players have learned to recognize. When interaction and gameplay does not follow these conventions, players may find it takes some effort to figure out how to play a game, or in some cases find it difficult to consider a work to even be a game. However, according to Juul and Norton:

*...much poetry takes effort to read, but this is a feature rather than a bug, as it cues readers into shifting their focus from the meaning of the words to the words themselves. Poetry is language not simply about communication, but about the beauty of language. Likewise, a game is an activity not simply about accomplishing something, but about the beauty of the activity itself. (Juul and Norton, 2009)*

This suggests that the deliberate use of difficult, unfamiliar interaction and gameplay in games can be seen as analogous to the use of language in poetry. The use of language to make the familiar

unfamiliar is referred to in literary criticism as defamiliarization. According to Viktor Shklovsky:

*...art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception... (Shklovsky, 1965)*

It is the use of defamiliarization that separates poetry from everyday language. This notion of defamiliarization involves the “prolonging [of] the process of perception” through the “[s]ystematic disturbance of the categorization process [which] makes low-categorized information, as well as rich pre categorial sensory information, available to consciousness” (Tsur, 1992, p. 4). Poetic language accomplishes this through disruption of expected patterns of rhyme, rhythm, syntax and meaning.

In this paper, I argue that Kentucky Route Zero makes use of defamiliarization to create what I will call “poetic interaction”. Through a close reading of Kentucky Route Zero Acts I and II, and Limits and Demonstrations (Cardboard Computer, 2013), an accompanying “intermission” that was released after Act I, I explore the ways in which game mechanics and interaction can be defamiliarized to draw attention to the gameplay experience, and to encourage reflection on the nature of games and interaction.

### **Beginning With the Familiar**

From the start, there is a tension in Kentucky Route Zero between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The game begins with a title sequence, consisting of two consecutive screens, each showing white text on a black background: “Act I, Scene I” and “Equus Oils”. These are replaced by a scene of a sunset glowing over a mountain range, from which the camera slowly pans down to a gas station, “Equus

Oils”, situated on the edge of a freeway. The lights are out, but you can just about make out a figure sitting in a chair at the pumps. An old truck pulls up, and a man and a dog get out. This opening sequence is evocative of a film more than a game, marking this work as potentially something other than the standard adventure game.

However, the game is also clearly situated in the point-and-click adventure game genre. A “look” icon in the shape of an eye, together with the text “Dog”, appears above the dog, and a similar “look” icon and the text “Truck” appear above the truck (see Figure 1). Clicking on either causes the man standing near the truck to walk over to the associated object, and a description of the object is shown. For example, clicking on the dog shows the following text in a box just above the dog:

(An old hound in a straw hat. Both have seen better days.)



*Figure 1. The opening sequence of Kentucky Route Zero.*

There is something poetic about this text, not entirely unlike the offhand quips that players expect from adventure games, but also somewhat literary. The art style is also distinctive. Again, this suggests something other than the usual adventure game. At the same time, for anyone who has played a point-and-click adventure

game, this initial gameplay sequence immediately triggers a series of associations: “you” are Conway, the man who arrived in the truck, and the typical interactions associated with a point-and-click adventure game, such as moving around and inspecting the environment, talking to characters, picking things up, and solving puzzles, are available.

### **Gradually Making the Interaction Unfamiliar**

However, it is not the visuals or the text that are the focus of the strangeness of the game. As the player continues to interact, there are hints that something about the interaction itself is unusual. The gradual defamiliarization of interaction takes place through the introduction of elements familiar to the point-and-click adventure game genre, followed by the gradual undermining of the player’s expectations. This can be seen, for example, in the way that puzzles are used in the game.

After talking to Joseph, the man sitting at the gas pumps in the first scene, you discover that Conway is on his way to make a delivery to “5 Dogwood Drive”. Joseph tells you that the only way to get to Dogwood Drive is through the mysterious “Kentucky Route Zero”, often referred to simply as “The Zero”. This delivery is the underlying purpose for Conway’s actions throughout the game. However, getting there involves a series of convoluted steps, the first of which is to look for the directions to The Zero in Joseph’s computer. Unfortunately, the power is out, so you first need to go down into the basement to reset the circuit breaker.

This seems like a traditional environmental manipulation puzzle (Fernandez-Vara 2009, p. 149): you need to have Conway go down to the basement, find the circuit breaker, and reset it. Once you reach the basement, however, you encounter a group of people sitting at a table, labeled “Basement People”. On inspection, you discover that their names are Emily, Ben and Bob, and that they are sitting at an old card table, on which are strewn “papers, oddly-shaped dice, and highway maps”. You are able to speak to them, but they can’t seem

to hear you, as they are caught up trying to figure out the rules to a tabletop role-playing game:

EMILY: (TO BOB) Did you hear something?

BOB: (TO EMILY) Uh, no, sorry, I was looking at the rules again.

BEN: (TO BOB) it gets easier as you go. Look, you said you rolled a “five”, right? That means you pick up your marker and move it anywhere on the map.

As the conversation continues, you are given a clue as to a secondary puzzle that needs to be solved before the first puzzle:

BOB: (TO BEN) It’s your turn, right?

BEN: (TO BOB) Oh, yeah I guess so. Where’d you put that twenty-sided die?

EMILY: I don’t see it. Did you drop it?

BOB: Uh... it should be easy enough to find. It glows in the dark.

If you pursue the conversation, Conway repeatedly attempts to speak to the game players. They continue to ignore you, talking in detail about the rules of the game and repeating that they can’t play until they have the die. For any adventure game player, this is a clear signal that you need to find the twenty-sided die.

As the players are blocking the passage to the right, the only place you can go to search for the missing die is to the left. You descend to the lower level of the basement, and the first thing you encounter is a sign, which you can inspect:

(A dusty, rusty sign is bolted onto the wall)

SIGN: THESE ARE THE RULES:

1. No open flame near the gasoline.
2. No consumption of beer or spirits on the premises.

3. In case of sudden darkness, do not panic. Relax. Count backwards from five.
4. Strictly limit time spent in the basement to fewer than three minutes of every hour.

For the adventure game player, this final rule seems to be particularly relevant: there is now presumably a need to quickly find the twenty-sided die, give it back to the players, and find the breaker, all within three minutes. The mention of “sudden darkness”, together with your lamp, the fact that the missing die glows in the dark, and the large “light” control in the bottom center of the screen, suggest that turning off the lamp might help solve the puzzle.

As soon as you turn off the lamp, you see a “Game Piece” indicated just ahead of you in the dark, with a “pick up” icon (a hand) above it. Clicking on this icon, you see the following text:

(CONWAY picks up the glowing twenty-sided die and inspects it. The number “five” is facing up. It’s just a small piece of plastic, but it has a reassuring, almost comforting weight.

He places the object in his jacket pocket.)

Heading back to the table, you find that the players are gone. Inspecting the table, you see:

(Folding chairs are arranged around a worn card table. The chairs are empty, and the surface of the table is bare.)

[(Conway places the twenty-sided die on the table.)]

[(Conway keeps the twenty-sided die in his pocket and walks away.)]

(Note that throughout the paper, choices will be presented in square brackets, and the chosen response, if any, will be indicated in bold text.) You can now see the breaker from where you are standing, off

to the right of the screen. Regardless of what you do at this point, either place the die on the table or keep it, you can walk to the breaker and restore the lights. At no time is there any indication that anything will happen to you if you stay in the basement for more than three minutes.

All of this seems fairly standard in terms of a puzzle in an adventure game. There are, however, hints of strangeness. What happened to the people at the table? Why couldn't they see you? Did they really need their die back? Was there really any danger involved in staying more than three minutes in the basement? It all seems somewhat anticlimactic and unfamiliar, despite its familiar trappings.

This strangeness is reinforced when you talk to Joseph upon returning to the surface:

JOSEPH: There it is. Just listen to those lights whine. Yep...

[CONWAY: Well, I'd better get those directions and head to the Zero, if you don't mind.]

**[CONWAY: There were some people down in your basement playing some kind of game, but they're gone now.]**

JOSEPH: In the basement? No, I don't think so. Maybe that lamplight was playing tricks on you, huh? Well, strange things happen underground. Especially in the dark...

The weird happenings in the basement clearly fit the "magic realism" label applied to the game by its creators. However, as the next puzzle shows, it is not just the narrative content that is made strange in Kentucky Route Zero.

### **Poems and Un-fail-able Puzzles**

Immediately following the circuit breaker puzzle, Joseph gives you another puzzle to solve before you can access the computer:



So! Computer's in the office. You're looking for "Marquez." She knows her way around those roads: she'll get you to the Zero. The password is... uh... damn. I usually just feel it out. "Muscle memory," you know?

Its kinda long, kinda like a short poem, I think. One of those short poems that really sums it all up.

You'll figure it out.

When you attempt to login to the computer you are presented with a password prompt. The possible responses are the strongest indication so far that there is something unfamiliar, not just with the world of Kentucky Route Zero, but with the gameplay itself. Conway is presented with a sequence of text fragments that seem to form part of a poem, as Joseph had said:

[CONWAY: (Typing) Wheels slide loose]

[CONWAY: (Typing) The stars drop away]

[CONWAY: (Typing) I talk and listen to him talking]

These fragments, and the two sets of fragments that follow, all seem to be drawn from your earlier conversation with Joseph, suggesting that you need to carefully try to remember and choose based on your memory. However, whatever choices you make the password is accepted. There is no possibility of failure.

The standard pattern in point-and-click adventure games is to place puzzles in the way of the player, forcing the player to solve the puzzle before she can move on. In Kentucky Route Zero, the only explicit puzzles that appear are in the first few minutes of the game, and even then, the puzzles seem impossible not to solve. Instead, they seem to be placed in the player's path to first make the gameplay seem familiar, and then to gradually undermine that familiarity as the player starts to wonder what, exactly, was the point of these puzzles. And that wondering, in itself, may be the point.

In this set of interactions, the player has been encountering seemingly familiar forms of interaction, common to point-and-click adventure games, but there has also been a suggestion that there is something strange going on. The interaction doesn't seem to be quite what is expected, and the choices you are making as a player don't seem to matter. The familiar is being made unfamiliar, in the process foregrounding the conventions involved in the experience of playing Kentucky Route Zero, and encouraging the player to reflect on the form of the game.

### **Unimportant and Uninformed Choices**

Another way in which interaction is made unfamiliar in Kentucky Route Zero is through the unusual nature of choice during conversations. Conversations and dialogue trees are a standard mechanic in adventure games. In Kentucky Route Zero, much of the interaction consists of dialogues. However, many of the dialogue choices seem unimportant, simply leading the player to encounter different versions of the text but having no impact on the story or even how the other characters reply. Dialogue choices are also presented in such a way that there is no possible way for the player to make an informed choice, as she could not possibly have sufficient information about the options to make an informed decision.

An example of unimportant dialogue choices occurs during Act I Scene III, when Shannon Marquez, a character Conway meets at the entrance to the Elkhorn Mine, is attempting to calibrate the mine's PA system to be used as a form of sonar to determine the depth of the mine. As Shannon is attempting to power up the P.A., she says:

SHANNON: I bet we just have to free up some power for the P.A. system. Everything is rationed. Here, set up that lamp of yours, and I'll go unplug these ceiling lights.

[CONWAY: (Clears his throat nervously.)]

[CONWAY: (Tries to think of something clever to say.)]

[CONWAY: (Fidgets with some change in his pocket.)]

There is no reason to give the player a choice between these options, other than to foreground the lack of agency and meaningful choice on the part of the player. By making these choices available, the game defamiliarizes a very familiar convention, that of making a meaningful choice in a game. The player also has no means of determining which is the correct dialogue choice. In fact, there is no correct or incorrect choice. This further emphasizes the strangeness of these options being presented to the player in the first place. The player's expectation that she can have some control over the direction of the game is gradually being undermined, questioning the notions of choice and control.

### **Displacing the Player's Locus of Control**

A further questioning of the player's control over the game comes through the displacement of the player's locus of control. This is foregrounded at the start of Act I Scene III, when the player first encounters Shannon. The scene begins with Conway's truck pulling up outside an old mine shaft, a possible entrance to The Zero. Conway and his dog step out of the truck, and the player is able to click on the "entrance" to the mine. The two enter the mine, and the scene shifts to the interior. We are shown a new character, standing alone, which the player will be tempted to mouse over in the hopes of finding a "look" or "talk" icon. Instead of being able to interact with the character, we are immediately shown a set of dialogue choices:

(SHANNON speaks into the large brick cell phone held up to her ear.)

[SHANNON: It's two hundred dollars for two weeks.]

[SHANNON: Yeah, it kind of is an emergency.]

[SHANNON: No, it's fine, I'll figure it out.]

At this point, not only does the player have no idea who "Shannon" is, she is also very unlikely to have been expecting to have to control a new, unknown character.

Although the ability to control multiple characters has long been a feature of adventure games, stretching all the way back to *Maniac Mansion* (Lucasfilm Games, 1987), the shift of control at this point is still likely to be unexpected and unfamiliar, as this is a new character, and there has been no indication before this that the player will be controlling multiple characters.

In addition, the player is being asked to make choices in a dialogue with absolutely no context for the choice. The unfamiliarity of this sequence is reinforced by the fact that, when the player makes any choice during this conversation, the response is as follows:

PHONE: (Inaudible)

**[SHANNON: That's true.]**

[SHANNON: I guess he can't kick me out for another week or two.]

[SHANNON: But can I trust him not to just change the locks?]

PHONE: (Inaudible)

Not only has the locus of control shifted to a new character, the player also has to make dialogue choices that are completely out of context, with the other half of the dialogue made deliberately inaccessible given that it is shown as "(Inaudible)". This is an extreme example of the type of uninformed choice discussed earlier. Coupled with the shift of control to a new character, the player's feeling of control over the game is completely undermined by this sequence of choices.



*Figure 2. The main character presented as a stranger.*

The sense of defamiliarization is further emphasized when Conway enters the scene. The player is given the option to talk to Conway, with the “talk” icon above his head labeled “Stranger” (see Figure 2). It is very unsettling to have the character you’ve been identifying with for the past two scenes suddenly referred to as a stranger. After several rounds of dialogue, by which point the player has become somewhat accustomed to the new arrangement, control is abruptly switched back to Conway. This unexpected switching of the locus of control happens a number of times throughout the game, foregrounding the arbitrariness of the player’s identification with any particular character.

#### Narrating the Game

The defamiliarizing of dialogue choices and switching of control between characters becomes even more pronounced in Act II. In Scene IV, Shannon and Conway arrive at the “Museum of Dwellings”, where they hope to find a doctor to cure Conway’s leg, which was injured in the Elkhorn Mine. Here, the player retains control over Conway’s movement and choice of what to interact with, but the actual conversations are quite different from anything encountered so far in the game.

The scene begins in a large, cavernous space containing a number of houses, each of which is inhabited. The player seems to be controlling Conway, as you can move him around the space, and nearby characters and objects, such as Shannon, Conway's dog and objects in the museum, have the familiar "look" or "talk" icons. However, as soon as you click on one of these, this by-now familiar experience becomes unfamiliar. For example, choosing to talk to Conway's dog results in the following dialogue sequence:

THOMAS: Oh yeah, he was talking to his dog. Guy was a weirdo.

[MUSEUM STAFF: What did he say?]

[MUSEUM STAFF: Doesn't seem that weird.]

What immediately comes across as strange here is that the actions you are having Conway perform are being described, in the past tense, as part of a conversation between two unknown people. To make it even weirder, you, as the player, are able to choose the "Museum Staff" character's responses.

This form of interaction continues throughout the scene, with every action you take described by means of dialogue between various characters, including the museum staff and the residents of the houses in the museum. As you have Conway examine each of the houses in the museum, a dialogue is shown between the inhabitant of that building and the museum staff, and you are able to choose what the museum staff says in reaction to the residents' testimony. As each resident describes his or her encounter with Conway, Conway acts out those actions without the player issuing any commands. The immediate effect of this shift in control and interaction style is a distancing between the player and Conway. You no longer feel in control of Conway's actions, which raises the question of whether you ever were actually in control of Conway or of any of the events in the game.

However, the defamiliarization goes a step further. At certain points,

the dialogue choices presented to the player seem to be allowing you to indirectly choose what happens to Conway in a very unusual manner. For example, while Conway is exploring the resident named Flora's house, Flora asks you (as the "museum staff") if you want to hear a strange story. If you agree, Flora begins to tell you about how Conway told her that he went into the basement of her house. At this point, you are presented with the following choices:

MUSEUM STAFF: That cabin doesn't have a basement.

[FLORA: He said he found a staircase in a closet.]

[FLORA: He said he found a secret door in the floor.]

[FLORA: He said he dug through the ground to get there.]

Unexpectedly, your locus of control is shifted to Flora, and you now seem to be deciding what happens to Conway (or more accurately what happened to Conway, as these choices are presented in the past tense). Having just been given the sense that you cannot control what happens to Conway, now you are once again being shown that you can.

This interaction continues, reaching a point where Flora tells the museum staff that Conway came back outside, said goodbye, and they didn't talk any more. At this point Conway does, in fact, come outside, acting out what was said in the conversation, and there is no longer an option to speak to Flora. Throughout this sequence, there is a strange sense that you are controlling Conway, but at one step removed. The feeling here is that rather than playing the game, you are narrating the game.

### Blurring the Boundaries of the Form

This sense that you are narrating rather than playing the game shows how defamiliarization, in addition to drawing attention to the form, is also blurring the boundaries of the form. Despite this, Kentucky Route Zero Acts I and Act II are still largely grounded in the conventions of the point-and-click adventure genre. It is in Limits and

Demonstrations, the first of two “intermissions” that were released after each of the first two acts in the game, that the boundaries of the form are more clearly being pushed.

In *Limits and Demonstrations* the player controls a woman named Emily as she, together with her friends Bob and Ben, wander through a virtual exhibition of artworks created by the fictitious artist Lula Chamberlain. Interestingly, these three friends seem to be the mysterious game players whom Conway encountered in the basement at the start of Act I. One of the works that the player encounters is “Overdubbed Nam Jun Paik installation, in the style of Edward Packer” (see Figure 3). The visual representation of this piece is similar to the original work, *Random Access* (Paik, 1963/2000). The interaction is also described as similar:

BEN: Oh, I read about this one. It’s interactive.

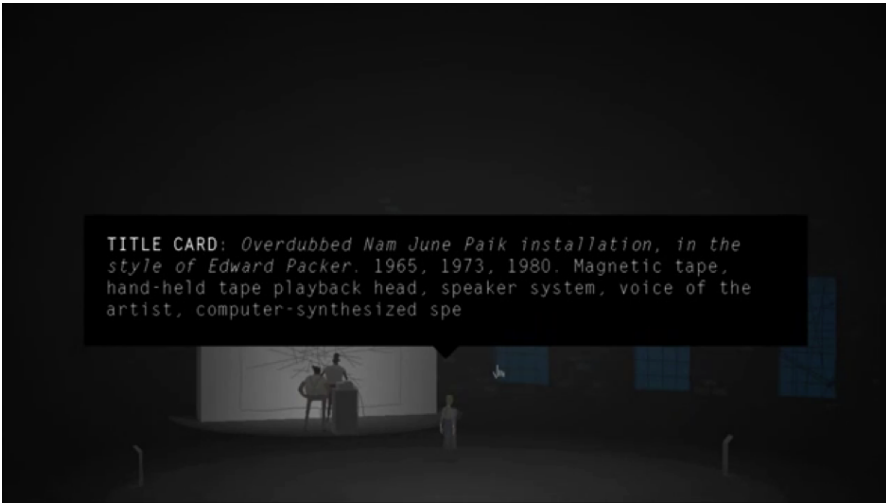
**[EMILY: How does it work?]**

[EMILY: What is it about?]

BEN: It’s a bunch of old tape, and you run this tape playback head along it. And just listen to the recordings, I guess?

BOB: Lets try it out. I think you start in the middle.





*Figure 3. Overdubbed Nam Jun Paik installation, in the style of Edward Packer.*

However, the interaction takes place entirely through text. As Emily instructs Ben to move the playback head, Lula's voice is "heard" (in text) describing a cluttered office in which she is sitting, with two other characters, Donald and Joseph, standing in the hallway. This is followed by a list of options:

(A synthetic voice recording, spliced awkwardly into the tape, lists out options in monotone.)

COMPUTER: To examine cards, rotate thirty degrees and advance seven inches. To leave room, rotate seventeen degrees and advance four inches. To activate computer, rotate two hundred degrees and advance fifteen inches.

[EMILY: Examine cards.]

[EMILY: Leave room.]

[EMILY: Activate computer.]

This is a fascinating mash-up of *Random Access* with, as the title of the work suggests, a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. The "Edward Packer" mentioned in the title is clearly a reference to

Edward Packard, one of the pioneering authors of the Choose Your Own Adventure series of books.

As you explore the various options available, you discover that by activating the computer and inserting the “caves” punch card, you are navigating yet another layer of narrative, this time describing Donald, Joseph and Lula’s exploration of a cave system in the vicinity of the Zero. Standing at the entrance to the cave, they hesitate, and Emily is given the option to enter the caves:

COMPUTER: To enter the cave, rotate sixty-five degrees left and advance four inches.

[EMILY: Enter the cave.]

[BOB: That’s the only choice?]

BEN: Yeah, that’s the end of that one.

As with many choices in the game, this is clearly not a real choice, and leads to a dead end. A bit later, when the characters realize that there are no other options, you are presented with the option to cheat, something anyone who has read a Choose Your Own Adventure book has been tempted to do:

BEN: I don’t think we ever reached this long one at the top here. Is it cheating to skip over here?

**[EMILY: I won’t tell a soul.]**

[EMILY: Maybe we missed something. Can we skip back a bit?]

[EMILY: Let’s just stop here.]

(Bob moves the playback head to another strip of tape.)

What is interesting here is the ways in which several nested interactions are being conveyed to the player, all of which are commenting on the nature of the adventure game as an interactive form by foregrounding the player’s lack of control and the notion

of following or breaking rules. Adding to the complexity of this sequence is the fact that the interaction with this fictional artwork is conveyed through text, within a graphical point-and-click adventure game, set within an art exhibition showing works by a fictional artist that are clearly remixes of actual new media artworks. All of this serves to defamiliarize the experience, drawing the player's attention to these many layers of interaction and the assumptions upon which the interaction is built.

### Conclusion

Through the use of a series of defamiliarizing devices, the designers of *Kentucky Route Zero* question the basic aspects of what constitutes a game: the interaction. By continually introducing new, unfamiliar variations on common gameplay mechanics and interaction styles, the game makes the player very aware of the form itself. This approach is analogous to the use of poetic language to make the familiar unfamiliar, something that Shklovsky (1965) sees as separating poetry and literature from "everyday" language. Similarly, this type of interaction can be considered to be a type of poetic interaction, interaction that draws attention to the form of a game, and encourages reflection on the assumptions underlying interaction and gameplay.

In *Kentucky Route Zero* the content and form of the work are closely integrated, working together to convey a particular, unusual experience of the world. By tightly coupling content and interaction, and drawing attention to the ways in which the interaction itself conveys meaning, the use of defamiliarization does not frustrate but instead, as Shklovsky says, serves to "recover the sense of life" in the world around us, encouraging the player to appreciate, and see as new, an old and familiar form, in this case the point-and-click adventure game. As with poetry and literature, it is this use of defamiliarization that separates a game such as *Kentucky Route Zero* from other, more conventional and established approaches to interaction. It is this use of poetic interaction that draws the player's attention to, as Juul and Norton (2009) describe it, "the beauty of the activity itself."

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# How do Frog Fractions and Nier use intertextual knowledge to subvert the player's expectations?

Rory Summerley

## **Introduction**

At first glance Frog Fractions (Twinbeard Studios, 2012) and Nier (Cavia, 2010) appear to be a fractions-based educational game and a Japanese role-playing game respectively. One thing these two drastically different games have in common is that they both set themselves up as standard entries in their respective genre and then utilise the player's intertextual knowledge of other games to establish an expectation which they then subvert using techniques that this essay seeks to define.



Figure 1. *Frog Fractions*' Title Screen

*Frog Fractions*' title screen (see Figure 1) is cheery and child-friendly which instantly connotes that the game will educate a young player about fractions. *Nier*'s setting is a magical fantasy world where the titular character, *Nier*, uses magic and swordplay to save the world from monsters known as "shades" evokes the various tropes of RPG plots.

One common feature of both *Frog Fractions* and *Nier* is they imitate a wide range of games and game genres and switch between them (a process I refer to as "genre shift") without any explicit reason other than to provide gameplay variety or to provoke the reader to question why they would do this. Given that we need intertextual knowledge to recognise an imitation of an original, subversion is the re-framing of the original in an interrogative light that we recognise by slight differences or imperfections in the imitation. *Frog Fractions* and *Nier* both assume implicit intertextual knowledge on the part of the player, therefore we can reason that their goals are to inspire fond memories

of the games they mimic or to figuratively pervert or deconstruct them. These genre shifts are signals that Frog Fractions and Nier may seek to examine either specific games or ideas surrounding games as a medium.

The techniques present in both Frog Fractions and Nier lead me to categorise them as parody which is important in establishing how subversion of expectations is achieved.

Parody, by its etymological definition, means “sung in imitation of another” (Rose, 1993). Imitation of the lexicon, style and syntax of a text coupled with its subversion is one of the key features of parody (Dentith, 2000; Harries, 2000; Hutcheon, 1985). When discussing parody Rose (1993) states that “the essence of humour has resided in general in raising an expectation for X and giving Y or something which is not entirely X” a process present in both Frog Fractions and Nier. Through intertextual knowledge, the quoted text and the parody are both connected in a player’s mind but the subversion is the point of disconnect where a reader “hears the parody sing”. While I consider both games parodies, they fit into two categories. The first, called “parody”, has the simple goal of imitating other texts in order to create comedy (Frog Fractions) (Rose, 1993). The second, “satirical parody”, imitates texts in order to criticise and/or deconstruct them (Nier) (Baym, 2009). In short, satire’s purpose is to provoke the reader into being critical of the quoted text whereas parody’s purpose is to playfully mock and entertain through reference to the quoted text. Both games use subversion but in different ways.

### **Frog Fractions**

Frog Fractions mostly subverts pervasively on a mechanical level often for the purpose of humour. Frog Fractions begins as a simple Missile Command (Atari Inc., 1980) clone. The goal of the game is to swat away insects with your tongue so that they do not devour your fruit. The score is counted in fractions yet doesn’t teach anything about them. At this point the player suspects the game’s subversive nature but still assumes that this Missile Command-esque paradigm



is all there is. Early clues are mostly parsed through the interface, for example the bar tallying the number of fruit lost is labelled “indignity”. These seemingly innocuous pieces of information play an important role in the player’s reading of the text. Baym (2009) suggests that while imitation is crucial to a parody’s success there also needs to be an “ironic corrective”, a signal to the reader (of appropriate intertextual knowledge) that what they are reading is indeed a parody. In both *Nier* and *Frog Fractions* the ironic corrective often takes the form of jarring genre shifts or familiar elements that have been perverted. The upgrade menu of *Frog Fractions* for instance, is when a player might first begin to suspect the game is not what they expected. Some of the upgrades available will be familiar, such as lock-on targeting, but many of the upgrades, such as a work visa, dance shoes or a presidential swimming pool, are non-sensical or hard to imagine given the game’s present context. Enticed to find out more, the player is clued into the fact that the game is either comical or eccentrically designed. After buying a turtle the player’s frog can move in any direction they please on the surface of their pond (see Figure 2). The adventurous player might try to move downwards and to their surprise they find that the previously solid boundaries of the game have been shattered as they dive down through the bottom of the screen into the pond (see Figure 3). The player happens upon a massive pile of fruit which has presumably accumulated from the player’s failed attempts to protect it from incoming mosquitoes. Touching the pile results in hundreds of fruit flying up and filling the player’s fruit counter until it reaches a vague estimate of “like a billion” (see Figure 4). This unusual turn of events signals the game’s first truly subversive turn from both a gameplay standpoint of crossing the boundaries of the screen and a mechanical perspective as the player can now buy many of the upgrades thought to be too expensive to purchase at the previous rate of fruit accumulation. This breaking down of rules continues throughout the rest of the game as it relentlessly shifts genre.



Figure 2. The player has purchased a turtle

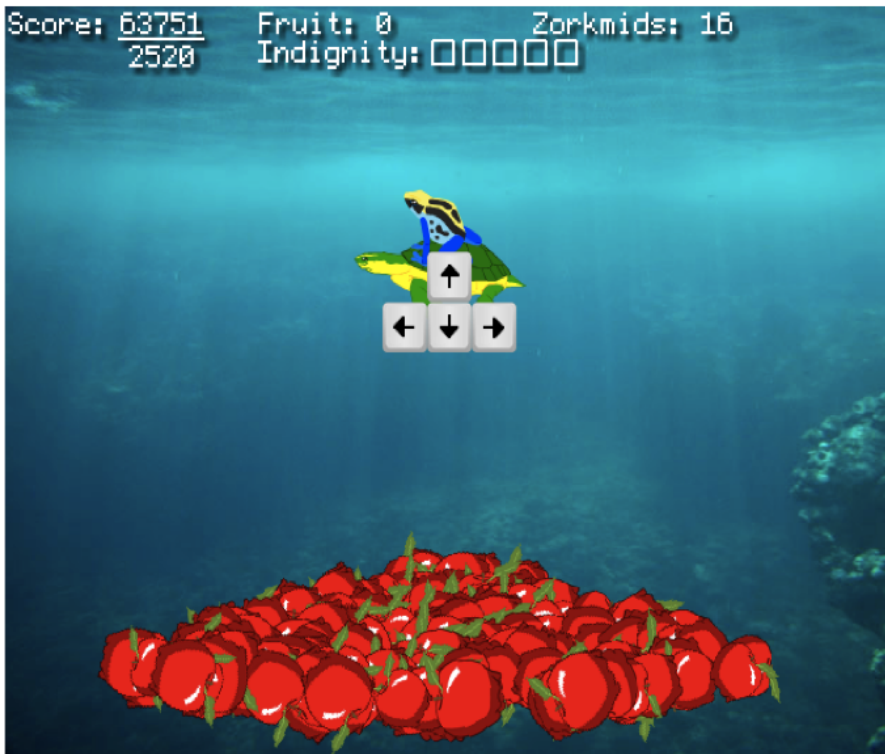
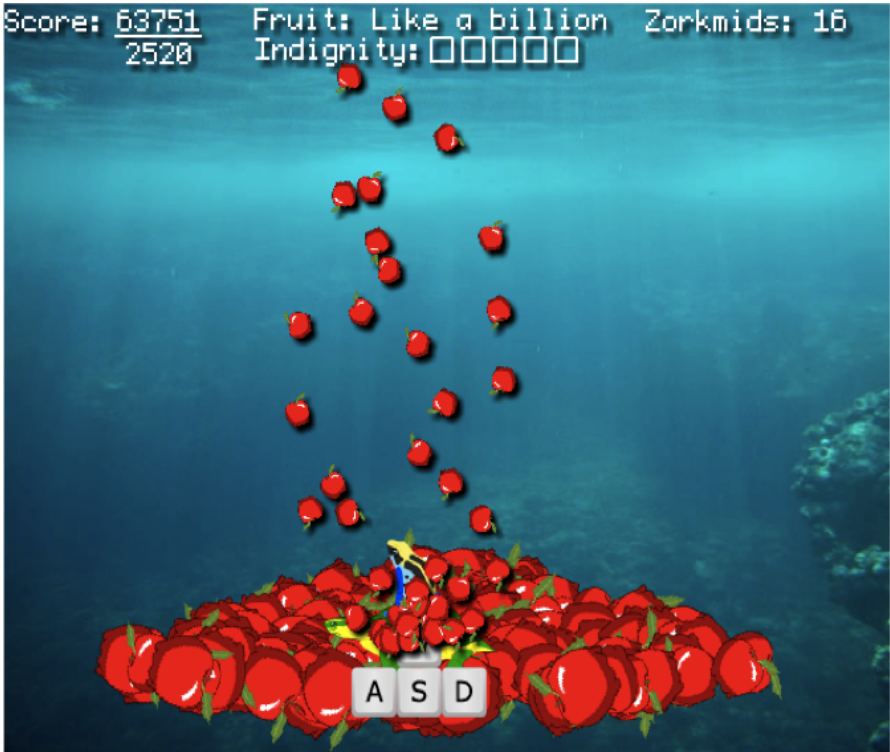


Figure 3. The player dives down into the pond to discover a pile of fruit



*Figure 4. After touching the fruit pile the player's fruit count rockets up to "like a billion" Nier*

Nier subverts expectations in similar ways but its subversions are generally subtler than Frog Fractions and its major subversive reveal occurs only towards the game's end. Nier begins in a snowy ruined city in 2049A.D. where the player sees Nier protecting his daughter from a group of "shades" which he defeats with a magical black book. The game then cuts to 1300 years in the future. Nier and his daughter Yonah are inexplicably alive and living in a village. Yonah suffers from a terminal illness which Nier seeks to cure by working as a bodyguard for the village. He soon comes across a white, talking book and takes it to the village caretaker who recalls a myth. The myth tells of a white book and its sealed verses saving the world from a black book which Nier surmises is the cause of his daughter's disease. This myth establishes an absolute dualism and serves as motivation for the player as they search for the sealed verses. At this

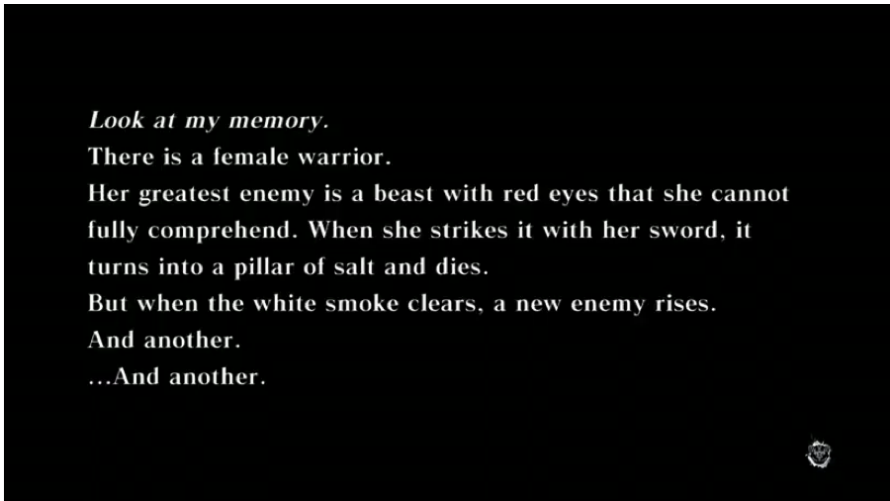
point only minor ironic correctives draw attention to the fact that Nier is not as straightforward as it first appears. Early on, Nier uses imitation and genre shift to hint at its subversive tone. A few of the many examples that imitate other games are a survival horror level set in a haunted mansion that uses fixed camera angles (a direct reference to the Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996), see Figure 5), a side-scrolling platforming section that takes place on ladder-laden scaffolding (a direct reference to Donkey Kong (Nintendo, 1981), see Figure 6) and, perhaps most famously, a “visual novel” section that is depicted entirely through text (see Figure 7). In order to read these examples as anything more than just changes of camera angle or coincidental quirks of gameplay, the player must possess the correct intertextual knowledge to identify these shifts in genre and interpret them as ironic correctives.



*Figure 5. Nier’s imitation of the original Resident Evil – Note the similar furnishing and fixed camera angle.*



*Figure 6. The Donkey Kong scaffolding and ladders can be seen on the bridge in the background whilst Nier engages in another genre shift, a tedious fishing minigame similar to the one present in The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*



*Figure 7. A dream sequence in Nier represented entirely by text. This sequence does not specifically resemble any text-based game but it is still a striking example of Nier's genre shifts*

These mechanical shifts are backed up by the peculiarities of Nier's

narrative, another source of ironic correctives. At a glance Nier's plot superficially resembles that of series such as *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD, 1986) where good and evil are in unambiguous conflict. Nier emulates this basic setup but changes aspects of it to create subversion. Again the key here is recognising the narrative paradigm which Nier subverts. The character of Nier acts selfishly and obsessively, his favourite topics being his daughter Yonah and killing things to protect her. He is a satire of single-minded and violent heroes that act as avatars in series like *The Legend of Zelda*. He has no qualms about his role ("I'm just a big guy who kills things") and his default solution to problems is to attack things until they die. His contradictory nature as selfless hero versus selfish murderer is shown throughout the game. The main antagonist, given the almost pantomimical title of "Shadowlord", is a dark version of Nier reminiscent of Link's dark self in *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998). The Shadowlord kidnaps Yonah creating another clear parallel with *Zelda* which it subverts at the game's finale which I will discuss later.

### **Intertextuality and Subversion**

Frog Fraction's surreal narrative doesn't explicitly mirror any common game narrative but continues to subvert through its mechanics. After a brief hyperdrive trip and a courtroom interrogation (both genre shifts) the player finds themselves on Bug Mars. The game places the player back in a situation that resembles the first screen of the game but with a Martian aesthetic. Like the first screen, there is also a pool at the bottom of the screen that, due to the player's initial subversive dive, is likely to be tested. Instead of finding a shallow pool the player finds an elaborate network of underwater caves where a disembodied voice narrates a false history boxing. Eventually the player finds a spaceship where the next genre shift occurs and Frog Fractions becomes a text-based adventure game (see Figure 8). This is a rather archaic genre and one of the game's biggest challenges in terms of patience and problem solving. Here players recognise that Frog Fractions is definitely subversive and may adjust their expectations accordingly and so a guessing game begins.

Instead of trying to avoid a player's expectations Frog Fractions instead partially confirms what we expect and takes it further. We expect that diving into the second pool will reveal something but we do not expect a labyrinth coloured by erroneous boxing trivia. We expect a genre shift but not necessarily to the genre of text adventure and certainly not one that emulates the genre so competently! Text adventure is an interesting choice for a genre shift (also used in Nier (see Figure 7)) as changing from graphical representation to pure text is hard to overlook. It is one of the most explicit ironic correctives used by either game and puts forth the question of genre most obviously.

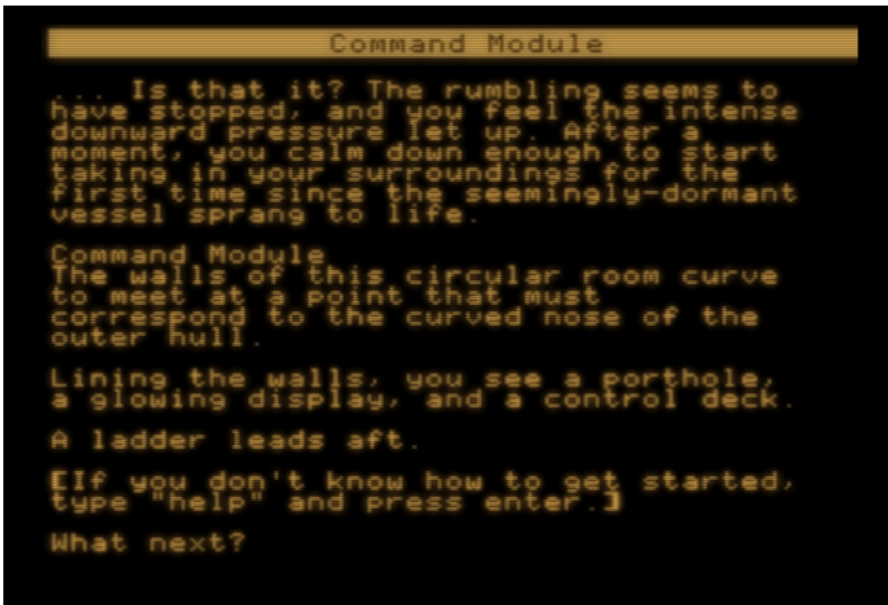


Figure 8 An example of the text adventure section of Frog Fractions

By making players laugh at an extreme, non-sequitural rule change they are provoked into questioning whether a rule change is enough to constitute a genre and what does this mean for a game that constantly changes its rules. At one point in Nier, the player comes across Facade, a town governed by a ruleset of over 100,000 rules that govern them in complex and confusing ways. The justification the town's people give for their elaborate rule system is "Rules are not



there to bind you. They let you know your freedoms.” which eerily resembles the maxim of a game designer.

At Nier’s climax the narrative takes a U-turn as it transpires that all the shades the player has been killing are actually people who have been ejected from their physical bodies in an experimental project to avoid a disease that nearly wipes out humanity. Nier and other “humans” in the game turn out to be artificial vessels designed to house these souls but have since gained free will, slaughtering the remaining human/shade population. The Shadowlord is in fact the Nier seen in 2049A.D. now in soul form (Nier being his complementary vessel) and desiring to be reunited with his daughter by kidnapping Yonah. After murdering the Shadowlord, Nier obtains Yonah but at the cost of the human race’s extinction. To further this tragedy the player is then allowed to play through the game again with the shades’ dialogue revealed. While this is a rather simplistic “Train gambit”<sup>1</sup> (Koster, 2010) it’s important to note the narrative’s placement in the context of Nier’s other subversions as it is perhaps the best indicator of Nier’s intention.

At the end of Nier’s final playthrough the player is given a choice. Either kill the long-suffering Kaine, putting her out of her misery or sacrifice your own life so that she may live. The latter option deletes all saved data attached to the player’s profile making it so that the player can never play Nier again unless they restart from the beginning. This bold reference to the game’s software subverts the expectation of a noble sacrifice and is a technological “fourth wall brea” or “magic circle expansion” (Conway, 2009). Instead of Nier simply dying and the credits rolling while Kaine and Yonah

1. The train gambit is a reference to Brenda Braithwaite’s board game, Train (2009) (Koster, 2010). The game gives players the task of shuttling people back and forth along train lines, rewarding players who can cram as many passengers into the trains as possible. Towards the end of the game it is revealed that the trains are taking the passengers to Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz. While the game is subversive and thrusts the player into a role they are uncomfortable with, the game’s “twist” has been criticised as a simple contextual shift. The “train gambit” therefore is when a game deliberately withholds information in order to shock the player or subvert their role upon its revelation.

live on, the player must actually give up that which is considered most important to them and truly “die”. Their “save”, known in-game as a memory, is revealed to be the only thing that allows them to continue existing. By offering the player the chance to delete their progress the player has a chance at reversing genocide and admitting that they should probably just stop playing this game altogether. Throughout the game *Nier* (and by implication, the player) has had a morally questionable role, carrying out simple, repetitive goals without knowing or questioning the exact reasons why. The save delete is the ultimate subversion, uprooting the software itself to confront the player with the question of whether the 30+ hours they have just spent in the game have been worth it.

*Frog Fractions* has a similarly strange ending. Towards the end the player has been declared president of Bug Mars having won over the grand court by dancing. After buying the necessary unlocks the player is free to finally purchase and use the presidential swimming pool (see Figure 9). Calling back to the first and second diving-related subversions players may be curious to see what diving into this third pool may bring. Upon taking a peek at the bottom of the final pool the screen cuts to black and the credits roll in the same manner as the end credits sequence of *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999). At this point the game is running out of surprises in the race to outguess player expectations. A presidential Dance Dance Revolution (Konami, 1998-ongoing) competition is a point of levity, almost a reward for enduring the sensory deprivation of the text adventure. After this the player must play a saucy yet dull and unwinnable bug-porno economy simulator, perhaps in an effort to gently bore players into unlocking the final upgrade, the swimming pool. Having dived twice before, the player is now accustomed to testing the depths of any pools they come across. The first time we dive we encounter first real subversive gut-punch and it makes sense that FrF would end where it began to tie together the game’s principal focus and theme of discovery and surprise. Intertextually referring to *The Matrix*’s end credits<sup>2</sup> is both a joke and a means of tying a relevant piece of

2. At the end of *The Matrix*, the protagonist Neo is encouraged to figuratively descend into

media to Frog Fractions' own philosophy. By this point the game can subvert no further (or if it does it will fall prey to an endless paradox of self-parody) instead Frog Fractions tells players that they may venture down the rabbit hole but they can never be sure what they will find there. Their desire to literally travel downwards causes the game to end and for them to be ejected out of a virtual world, recalling Neo's final speech but in a comically unexpected fashion. The player's own curiosity, in lieu of playing to an expectation, is what eventually wins them the game.



*Figure 9 Frog Fractions' snazzy yet existential presidential swimming pool section*

the rabbit hole as a metaphor for his awakening to the true nature of the matrix, a virtual prison for humanity. He is prophesied to be "the one" who is able to control everything within the matrix. In the final scene of *The Matrix*, upon awakening as "the one" Neo re-enacts a phonecall scene similar to one at the very beginning of the movie except this time his new power changes the outcome by causing a "system failure". He then flies into the sky at which point the film cuts to credits, playing Rage Against the Machine's "Wake up". Frog Fractions, uses the same recalling of the initial scenes, theme of awakening and a different arrangement of the credits music as the film but in a characteristically more humorous way.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated and explained the various ways in which Nier and Frog Fractions use parodic techniques to imitate and subvert. I have managed to single out three major ways in which both games achieve this:

1. The deliberately imperfect or distorted imitation of a game or game genre.
2. Self-awareness of common mechanical and narrative features of games and games as a medium (intertextual and metatextual references).
3. Ironic correctives, which do not subvert by themselves but do signal a subversive intent. (the most prominent of which are genre shifts)
4. Having defined “how” it is worth speculating further the reasons why these games aim to subvert in the first place and for this it helps to examine what each game’s core theme is.

Nier’s core recurring theme is communication (or the lack thereof) and media, particularly written and spoken language. The problems of communication are best examined when looking at the game’s genre shifts which directly reference the mutable, hybrid language of games. This Barthesian communication motif leads me to wonder if Nier may in fact be commenting on the “language” of games. The genre shifts seem to serve no purpose (other than ironic correctives) and when taken together with a narrative fraught with classically tragic failures to communicate, we arrive at a metatextual conclusion. Nier appears to be a satire not of common gameplay tropes but of the lack of communication that permeates the way we think about and read games and their narratives (ludonarrative dissonance for example). Game genres are riddled with vague definitions and genre hybridisation is so common that it seems fruitless to label anything

definitively. The example of *Façade* is one that explicitly uses ludic language and rules (an extension of language) to discuss games in a metatextual way. When creating games, designers lack a proper vocabulary and critics and theorists of the medium still have trouble figuring out how to talk about games, often borrowing language from other media studies and even more confusing are the new terms that are then mixed with the old (ludonarrative dissonance for example). This lack of common game language, from a Nierian perspective, should be a chance to celebrate the multitude forms a game can take rather than rigid definitional absolutism (reflected by the game's critique of dualism in the narrative). The genre of "role-playing game" alone is hard, if not impossible to define (Burn and Carr, 2006) and *Nier's* mixed generic makeup and narrative suggests there is either no concrete answer or that seeking one is a futile task.

When designing *Frog Fractions*, Crawford (2012) expressed that his main goal was to replicate the joy of discovery that players found in games like *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD, 1986) where very little was divulged to the player. He states that surprise is the key to *Frog Fraction's* success to which I append that in order to surprise a player one must build up an expectation (as *Frog Fractions* does with its title screen) and then reveal the unexpected (dive into the pond). When recommending it to players, Crawford (2012) advises "don't sell it too hard", so as not to colour expectations of new players, which would ruin what the game relies upon for its success. Crawford (2012) even jokes that if he were to do a sequel to *Frog Fractions*, the most subversive thing he could do would be to actually build an educational game about fractions. In early 2014, Twinbeard studios actually went ahead to make a sequel to *Frog Fractions*, funding the game through Kickstarter (Twinbeard, 2014). The game's Kickstarter page is itself a parody of Kickstarters in general with surreal stretch goals and tonnes of fraudulent information about the game. Again, Crawford gives very little hint as to what the new game will be, maintaining the element of surprise. Crawford's (2012) intent of creating surprise is quite close to my own interpretative conclusions about *Frog Fractions*. *Frog Fractions* is obviously comedic with an anarchic sense of humour yet feels more like an experiment than a

game. The game features few hard fail states and Crawford (2012) argues that this is because the game is compelling in other ways (which it is) but Frog Fractions relies so much on surprise that it does not withstand repeat playthroughs and has trouble with the arms race of expectations that the game's design encounters towards the end. This leads me to believe that Frog Fractions is a comic rhetorical device that doesn't so much teach as it does expand the way a player might look at genre, expectation and hidden information.

Frog Fractions and Nier both put forth interesting questions about genre and how we experience games in terms of moment-to-moment gameplay, intertextuality and linguistics. For now I have examined how they do it through the technique of parody and in the future, further examination could be dedicated to exploring why Nier, Frog Fractions and similar games continue to use intertextual knowledge to subvert the player's expectations and the alternatives to a parodical reading.

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