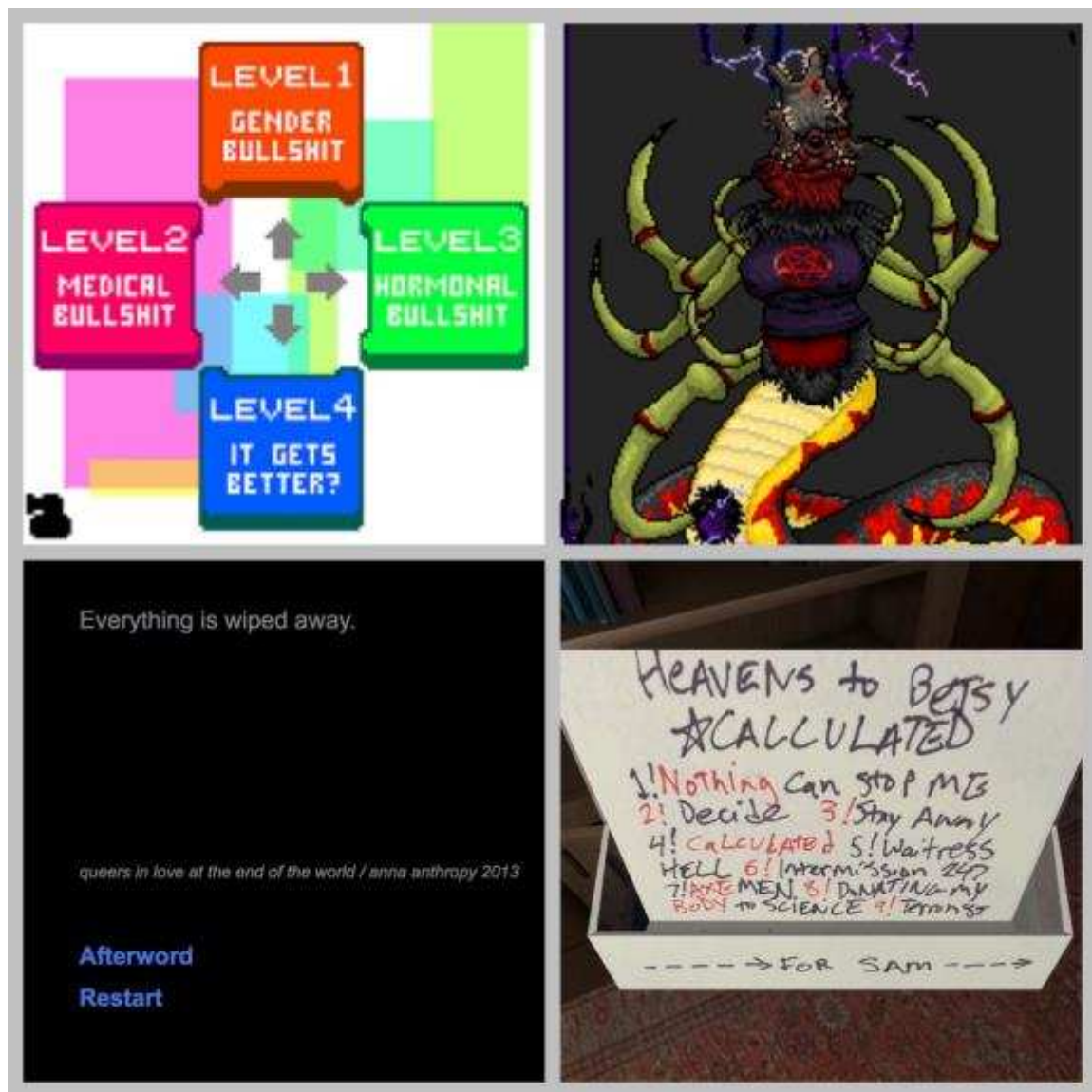


GOTHS, PUNKS, QUEERS & GAMERS

IDENTIFYING SUBCULTURAL AND QUEER CONVENTIONS IN
CONTEMPORARY INDIE GAMES AND ESTABLISHING A QUEER PUNK
INDIE GAMING COMMUNITY



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ABSTRACT

When the Sex Pistols “encouraged the young to become producers of culture rather than consumers” during the explosion of the punk music and art movement of the 1970’s, they were speaking to those who wished to find ways to resist capitalism, “the man,” and dominant cultural hegemony (Ensminger 5). In 2012, openly queer video game developer Anna Anthropy implored members of the gaming community to do the same, to “take back an art form” and become developers, designers, and producers (Anthropy). This dissertation utilizes an examination of two subcultural movements: the Gothic literary movement (and subsequent goth culture) and the queercore punk movement which splintered off of the more heteronormative punk movement. The examination will help establish connections and parallels to the contemporary indie gaming community and its queer subsect, occupied by members and creators like Anthropy. Utilizing punk subcultural theory, queer Gothic literary conventions, queer theory, and theoretical approaches to progressive cultural production, I seek to identify both an indie gaming community that leans more towards the heteronormative as well as a queer punk independent gaming movement that mimics and mirrors the queercore punk movement in its resistance to heteronormativity and capitalism. Punk ideologies and lifestyles demand resistance in myriad ways, and I’m suggesting that indie games made by individuals at little to no cost for both the producer and the consumer, featuring queer narratives and resistant game design, are the most punk of them all.

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TERMINOLOGY INDEX

AAA: A term used for many mainstream games, it is interchangeable with “mainstream” and is a somewhat slippery definition, but usually refers to games with incredibly large budgets that take in equally large revenue.

Bitpunk: A style of game design that references old school 8 and 16-bit video games, identified by pixelated edges, simple shapes, and bright, elementary colors.

DIY: A common shortening of the phrase Do-It-Yourself, which can be utilized when discussing music, art, movies, and more.

First-Person Shooter (FPS): Arguably the most popular style of contemporary games, first person shooters are shooting games that place players in the body of the main character; the camera view is meant to mimic the eyesight of the playable character. Popular games that are FPS style include the *BioShock*, *Call of Duty*, and *Half-Life* franchises.

NPC: Non-player character, or any character featured in a game that is not controlled by the player. Often referred to in-game as CPU (shorthand for computer)

Playthrough: The act of playing through a game, as shortened by game reviewers and critics.

Port: “Porting” a game is the process of taking a game that is meant to run on a certain platform (e.g., an Xbox console or a desktop computer) and converting it to run on a different platform.

IMPORTANT NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from gameplay audio are my own transcriptions, made during my personal playthroughs. Hence all punctuation in transcribed text is my attempt at choosing the most appropriate punctuation for the audio; for example, pauses are represented by ellipses and louder portions of audio are represented by exclamation points. Any quotation from a game built in Twine is directly from in-game text.

The font utilized for the section headings is called “Lunchtime Doubly So,” and is featured in in-game dialogue in a handful of Super Nintendo role-playing games including *The Illusion of Gaia*. It was created and uploaded to 1001fonts.com by the user codeman38.

The images from the cover page are all screenshots taken from in-game play, save for the top right one, which is available as part of a folder of images of “sprites” when you purchase *Sabbat: The Director’s Cvt*. The top left is from *dys4ia* by Anna Anthropy, the top right is from *Sabbat: The Director’s Cvt*, by ohnopproblems, the bottom left is from Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World* and the bottom right is from *Gone Home*.

This dissertation has been formatted utilizing the Modern Language Association’s formatting style and is written in American English.

I hereby certify that this this submission is wholly my own work, and that all quotations from primary or secondary sources have been acknowledged. I have read the section on plagiarism in the School Style Guide/my Stage and Degree Manual and understand that plagiarism and other unacknowledged debts will be penalized and may lead to failure in the whole examination or degree.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the gaming community saw a controversial movement known as #GamerGate erupt under the guise of demanding ethics in video game journalism. #GamerGate supporters believed a game called *Depression Quest* by a woman named Zoe Quinn was receiving positive reviews by game journalists in exchange for sexual favors allegedly performed by Quinn. These allegations were never proven, however, they caused an eruption of tensions between dominant members of the community and those who felt marginalized by it. Supporters of the #GamerGate movement used social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and reddit to make death and rape threats and participate in “doxing,” or the practice of publicizing and weaponizing private information. It was considered by many to be a heterosexist attack against female game developers, female members of the gaming community, their supporters, and those who existed elsewhere along the margins.¹ #GamerGate is not a standalone incident—the community has been infamously heterosexist and unwelcoming for women, queers, and people of color for much of its history.² Despite the prejudices, the community is quite diverse—a recent Entertainment Sports Association pamphlet states that, in the United Kingdom alone, 52% of gamers are female (Entertainment Software Association). However, this statistic is not reflected in the content of today’s video games, which are still predominantly created by men and for men.

It is along the margins of the gaming community, in the independent (or “indie”) gaming scene, that the focus of this paper lies.³ Indie is itself a slippery identification, one that is consistently shifting and changing, a mercuriality indicative of the “crucial ideological struggle at stake” within the

¹ For more on the scandal, see “We Are All Fishes Now: DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate” by Shira Chess & Adrienne Shaw, as well as Sian Tompkinson’s “The position of women in video game culture: Perez and Day’s Twitter Incident.”

² For a personal anecdote on the narrow-mindedness of gaming culture from a member of the gaming community who fits all three of those descriptors, see Lisa Nakamura’s “Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital”

³ Within this paper I will use the terms “indie” and “independent” interchangeably.

gaming community (Lipkin 8). Some, like video game academic Nadav Lipkin, consider indie games to be defined by negation—they are simply not mainstream (or AAA) games, which are identified by their development budget, revenue, advertising, and/or popularity.⁴ For the purpose of this paper, I will be utilizing a definition of indie game development that is the opposite of a definition of mainstream game development, which is “corporate in nature and capitalist in ethos” (Lipkin 9). I define indie games as games that are created by small, privately-owned companies or independent individuals, with small, or non-existent, budgets, the feature unique game designs, and simple, often nostalgic visuals.

During my research I discovered variations and fragmentations within the indie gaming community that I believe delineate between indie games created by entirely independent companies or individuals and indie games created by shadow companies of mainstream gaming corporations, as well as between large-scale, commercial successful indie games and small-scale indie games that are often available to play for free.⁵ Lipkin suggests games created by shadow companies is “the demonstration of co-optation” in “that it is possible to create a game that passes for indie without bearing the background markings that define the movement” (17). A similar co-option within indie itself is demonstrated in my thesis by a juxtaposition of two large scale indie games: *Amnesia* (2010) and *Gone Home* (2013) against five small-scale games created by solo artists: *Sabbat* (2013), *dys4ia* (2012), *Lim* (2012), *Mainichi* (2012), *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), and *Ultra Business Tycoon II* (2013), whereby the former ultimately reinforce heteronormativity, despite their indie roots, and the latter resists it in various ways. In this comparison I identify the subversive potential of indie games and ultimately suggest that small-scale, individually-designed games are more successfully resistant to

⁴ See the terminology index for a concise definition of “AAA.”

⁵ This will be discussed further in a later section, but many of today’s gaming monoliths (e.g., EA and Microsoft) have created independent gaming subsidiaries in order to capitalize off of the indie gaming craze.

dominant heteronormative and capitalistic hegemonies; this success results in the creation of a subculture within the indie community that acts as a creative space for marginalized members.

I will utilize two different approaches in order to support this statement: 1) I will look at two similar literary, social, and artistic subcultural movements, specifically Gothic literature (and goth culture) and the punk music and art movement, specifically queer punk and identify the similarities between these movements and contemporary indie games; 2) I will employ queer literary theory to unpack forms of queer resistance presented in these games, and suggest that certain games adhere more loyally to conventions of both queer theory and subcultural movements. I seek to approach this argument holistically, not just via literary theory but also through subcultural theory and notions of resistance in order to properly depict the subversive quality of the “texts” I discuss.

The first chapter will focus on queer Gothic literary conventions, goth subcultural ideologies, and goth’s ideological vicinity to the punk subcultural movement. I identify the conventions, ideologies, and modes of resistance to heteronormativity that are symptomatic of the aforementioned movements, and locate these within three contemporary indies games: *Amnesia: Dark Descent*, *Gone Home*, and *Sabbat: The Director’s Cut*. I also analyze the prevalence of queer Gothic conventions within these games, specifically Mikhail Bakhtin’s grotesque and carnivalesque, Julia Kristeva’s abject, and Freud’s uncanny in order to highlight the games’ narrative forms of resistance. What I seek to accomplish is an establishment of the methods of resistance utilized by the Gothic, goth, and punk movements and their presence in contemporary indie games. I also suggest that there is a clear difference between the level of resistance deployed by *Amnesia* and *Gone Home* when juxtaposed against *Sabbat*—these differences are unpacked via readings of their narratives as well as a conversation on their form and distribution. I wish to identify the inherent queerness in the goth and punk subcultural

movements and supplement my discussion of the movements with theoretical work by punk academics and queer theorists such as J. Halberstam, and Judith Butler.⁶

The second chapter focuses on the queercore punk movement, its heteronormative resistance and anti-capitalistic distribution methods, as well as its similarities to what I define as a queer punk indie gaming movement. Utilizing work on the punk and queercore punk movements by Maria Katharina Wiedlack, Jodie Taylor, and David Ensminger, I identify the similarities between the movement's creation as a form of resistance against a heterosexist punk cultural environment and the emergence of the queer punk gaming movement. I identify the queer punk indie gaming movement as a subcultural faction of openly queer game developers (in this chapter, all of the solo developers I refer to live publicly as transgender women, save for ohnproblems, who identifies on social media as a "big gay dragon babe") who work individually on games that often tell stories about their lives as queer individuals, thus mimicking queer punk's "the personal is political" ideology (ohnproblems, Wiedlack 264). I suggest that the queer punk indie movement began as a direct result of the pervasion of heterosexism within the gaming community and that its content, forms, and methods of dissemination resist heteronormativity.

The second chapter will also analyze DIY development and distribution methods in indie games, specifically the game development software Twine and its potential to subvert and redeploy capitalistic co-options of indie gaming and queer consumer identifications. While analyzing the production and distribution methods, I reference Benjaminian notions of successful progressive cultural politics and their existence in DIY punk culture, as well as Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman's notions of queer positionings in heteronormative society. Afterwards, I unpack two games

⁶ J. Halberstam, now known professionally as Jack Halberstam, is a transgendered man whose work has been published under the names Jack and Judith Halberstam. For the purpose of this paper I will refer to his work by the name J. Halberstam and Halberstam.

made on Twine by openly queer developers and how those games depict queer resistance to success, capitalism, and heteronormativity, again via Halberstam and Freeman.

There will be a noticeable difference in approach between the two chapters, mainly because the first deals with queer Gothic conventions in rather lengthy video games, so my readings of the games are more in-depth and detailed, especially in the first section. The second chapter is a combination of ethnographic research and queer theoretical frameworks. I utilize much shorter games, therefore my unpacking of those games will be more condensed, and I will reference several games as opposed to just the few I utilize in the first chapter.

There has been little academic work on the parallels between the queercore punk scene and the independent gaming scene, and similarly disparate work on the methods of queer resistance depicted in contemporary indie games. This dissertation seeks to mine the aforementioned literary and cultural movements for conventions and forms that are present in contemporary indie games and identify the queer resistant potential of their presence. The contemporary independent gaming movement, much like the punk movement of the 1970's, promises cultural resistance yet often delivers heteronormativity. Conversely, the queer punk indie gaming movement I identify here delivers consistently resistant, queer, and punk games that challenge heteronormative notions of play and of life. It is in these games that I find the most successful deployments of queer punk resistance in contemporary independent gaming.

CHAPTER I

GAMING ON THE FRINGE

QUEER GOTHIC CONVENTIONS AND GOTH AND PUNK SUBCULTURAL MOVEMENTS IN THREE INDIE GAMES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to accomplish three things: 1) establish the presence of queer Gothic conventions in three contemporary independent video games; 2) suggest the subversive potential of queer Gothic conventions in video games and posit which games maximize this potential; 3) connect Gothic conventions, the subsequent goth subculture, and punk ideologies to suggest their similarly subversive traits and resistant potential in video games. I will be utilizing literary criticism on queer Gothic conventions, Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque, Julia Kristeva's abject, and contemporary queer theory. In order to connect this to the overarching goal of this thesis, and suggest connections between the punk subcultural movement and the Gothic literary genre and subcultural movement, I will be employing Bakhtin again to discuss his carnivalesque individuals as well as utilizing David A. Ensminger's work on horror influences in punk music, culture, and art.

By connecting the queer Gothic with punk, I seek to identify the subversive, disruptive, and anarchic potential of the indie games utilized in this chapter, and identify which game(s) maximize this potential. The first section of this chapter focuses on two identically-priced and similarly-designed indie games, *Amnesia* (2010) and *Gone Home* (2012), which weave together queer Gothic narrative conventions and gameplay techniques, resulting in a fusion of traditional Gothic conventions with contemporary horror video game conventions. The existence of queer Gothic conventions throughout both games opens up conduits through which to discuss the subversive potential of indie games that utilize themes from genres that have been previously associated with queer studies and queerness.

Sabbat (2013), featured in the second section of this chapter, features unique gameplay techniques (the game is text-based as opposed to most games which focus on graphics and visuals) and the creation of an anarchic, monstrous, hybrid monster. It is here where I find a maximization of queer, subversive potential, as well as a clever amalgamation of queer Gothic and punk themes.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to identify the aforementioned subversive potential and extend a bridge from queer Gothic conventions to queer punk ideologies and practices in order to establish subcultural, queer resistance demonstrated by both movements and paralleled by contemporary indie games.

“WELL-NIGH INVISIBLE [MONSTERS]”⁷
Queer Gothic Conventions in Independent Horror Games and Their Queer Potential

In this section I will draw connections between Gothic literary conventions and two independent horror video games. I provide a reading of Frictional Games’ *Amnesia: Dark Descent* and the Fullbright Company’s *Gone Home* to demonstrate how contemporary indie games evoke queer Gothic conventions through gaming styles, themes, and narratives, and posit how effectively both games resist normativity through their employment of said themes. Both *Amnesia* and *Gone Home* take place in eerie interior spaces and require players to piece together found documents (e.g., journal entries and other physical scraps of information) to discover what is haunting the house and the protagonist.⁸ *Amnesia* draws more explicitly on traditional Gothic conventions by featuring a haunted castle, a campy villain and two men vacillating between desire and abjection, *Gone Home* teases the player with the existence of a monstrous villain only to reveal the heteronormative horror of the queer uncanny and lesbian spectrality. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque, and contemporary work on queer Gothic conventions, I establish Gothic’s influence on independent horror games, arguing that the gothicization of independent games “inform[s] a systematic stylistic deviance from perceived norms in...artistic preference” (Hughes and Smith 3). This deviation provides developers and players with ways of subverting dominant forms, styles, and themes prevalent in mainstream gaming and opens up channels through which this deviation can be analyzed and perpetuated. Conversely, I also discuss the tendency to revert to heteronormativity in Gothic literature, an aspect of the genre that

⁷ This title is a play on a quotation on lesbian spectrality by Paulina Palmer in *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (2012).

⁸ For more on Gothic literary traditions and their connection to queerness, see Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980).

problematizes its queer content, and one that I unpack in order to suggest the varying levels of queer resistance depicted in the games discussed here.

Amnesia: Dark Descent begins with the protagonist, Daniel, waking in a vast, empty castle with no memory of his life or the events that have placed him there. This harrowing framing technique presents a gaming experience in which the player-as-Daniel must piece together the narrative by navigating the castle to discover pages from Daniel's diary. This Gothic convention, established by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick and others as a way of imbuing a text with uncertainty and withholding information from the reader in order to promote fear, is commonly used in horror video games.⁹ As the game progresses and more pages of the diary are discovered, queer Gothic conventions bleed further into the narrative. As you read more diary pages, you discover that prior to the game's inception, Daniel travelled to the castle to seek counsel regarding a supernatural orb from a man known as the Baron Alexander. Despite initially offering his help, it is revealed that Alexander experiments on people he keeps imprisoned in his castle and that he purposefully unleashed the supernatural power locked within the orb, causing Daniel to lose consciousness. As the game progresses, the orb's power increases, and it covers the castle in fleshy, pink growths and populates it with horrifying monsters that greatly resemble nude male figures. Daniel has tasked himself with killing the Baron Alexander and preventing the orb from unleashing its terror upon the world.

Amnesia's design allows queer Gothic conventions to bleed into the game's mechanics, blurring the boundary between narrative and gameplay. You, as Daniel, must navigate the darkness, avoiding the horrifyingly human-like monsters and the encroaching shadows of the castle, all while wielding a lantern with finite oil stores. The horror of the figures lies in their physicality—they have

⁹ Game designers frequently use darkness as an economical means of visually establishing eeriness; rendering dark, undetailed visuals do not require advanced game design technology, and can be a cheap alternative to detailed visuals. For more on these conventions see the first chapter in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (2009), edited by Bernard Perron.

the form of a human male, but hulk and lurch while moving and emit gurgling noises and growls. They can inflict physical harm upon Daniel, but *Amnesia*'s mechanics do not allow players to combat them, making gameplay more stealth and fleeing rather than fighting. This is a clear departure from mainstream video games which often feature combat-heavy gameplay in the face of frequent antagonism by NPCs.¹⁰ *Amnesia* also utilizes disorienting in-game camera and gameplay techniques (e.g., shaky camera work and the temporary loss of control of Daniel's movement) as well as auditory signifiers (e.g., panting, gasping) to invoke queer Gothic themes. Whenever Daniel encounters a humanoid figure, his breathing becomes increasingly more labored and more similar to coital gasps and groans; whenever he is plunged into darkness or in the presence of the monsters for too long, he faints. The gameplay, in-game audio, and visual signifiers highlight Daniel's vacillation between desire for and disgust towards the male monsters and Alexander, a relationship that will be further unpacked later through theories put forth by Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin. *Amnesia* provides the unique mobilization of queer Gothic conventions in both narrative and gameplay, where the horror of Daniel's condition is exacerbated by limited player mobility and the lack of an opportunity for players to fight back.

Daniel's vacillation between desire for and abjection of both the male figures and the villainous Baron Alexander can be further unpacked via a reading of Bakhtinian and Kristevan theoretical frameworks. Daniel's repeated fainting in the presence of the male figures implies an inability to admit his queer desires, while the auditory sexual signifiers imply his initial erotic reaction to them. This ambivalence can be connected to and expanded upon by Kristevan and Bakhtinian notions of the abject and the grotesque. For Kristeva, the abject is invoked by a "loathing" towards "a piece of filth, waste [...] the wound with blood and pus"; this loathing manifests in Daniel's

¹⁰ NPC stands for Non-Playable Character and is a term frequently used in the gaming community. See the terminology index for more video game jargon.

visible and audible reactions to the creatures and growths (138). For Bakhtin, the grotesque is something that should be “relished rather than feared,” and as referenced in a found page from his journal, Daniel initially identifies with and desires the orb “despite [its] unearthly quality [he feels] a strange familiarity towards [it], which haunts [him]” throughout the game (Hurley 139, *Amnesia*). The other horror Daniel faces is his relationship to the aforementioned Baron Alexander. The forging of a homosocial bond between Daniel and the Baron prior to the game’s beginning can be read as an initial acceptance of homosexual desire and relations. But as his relationship with Alexander wavers between abjection and desire, Daniel presents *Amnesia*’s take on a conversation between both the grotesque and the abject as well as homosexuality and homophobia.

The male monsters’ uncanniness, sexual presentation (see Fig 1.1), and ability to inflict bodily harm upon a seemingly helpless man is indicative of *Amnesia*’s pervasive homoeroticism and its referencing of the homophobic conventions of traditional Gothic novels.



Fig 1.1 - Monster from *Amnesia*. Frictional Games, 2010. Author’s screenshot.

The monsters invoke Freudian notions of the *heimlich*, or familiar, which “develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite *unheimlich*,” or uncanny, as the horror of the monsters is directly linked to their similarities to and deviations from the male body (345). However,

despite the presence of these uncanny, queerly enticing figures, Daniel's primary concern is the Baron Alexander, who is hidden in the Inner Sanctum of Brennenburg; Daniel must then penetrate the castle. The only direction his pre-amnesic self provides is via a note imploring him to kill the Baron, invoking a queer Gothic theme posited by Sedgwick when she describes *Frankenstein*, and subsequently, many other Gothic novels, as "a tableau of two men chasing each other across the landscape (ix)." For *Amnesia* is, at its core, a tableau of one man chasing another through a labyrinthine, grotesque castle filled with uncanny, pursuant nude men acting as analogies for the desire for and rejection of homosocial/homosexual relations. And Daniel is, as Halberstam writes of other Gothic protagonists, "the paranoid hero [...] locked into a homosocial relation to his feared and desired double," the campy villain Baron Alexander, who trumps the horror of the uncanny monsters with his villainous queerness (*Skin Shows* 107). Daniel's preoccupation with defeating Alexander implies the existence of a strong homosexual attraction that frustrates him to the point where he must murder his desire's object. This narrative furthers *Amnesia*'s mimicry and deployment of traditional Gothic conventions.

Amnesia's horror can be read as Daniel's repressed homosexuality, and the ultimate "straightening" that takes place at the end of the game can be read as a reassertion of heteronormativity, a resolution of many traditional Gothic novels.¹¹ Despite the duality of his feelings towards the Baron Alexander, the fleshy growths that envelop the castle, and the predatory nude men, *Amnesia* ultimately sides with Kristevan notions of the abject, as the ending finds players attempting to kill Alexander in order to "expel those unwanted objects which remind [Daniel] of [his] origins and [his] fate" (Hurley 144). What is implied is that the Baron Alexander is aggressively homosexual and seeks to keep Daniel as yet another male prisoner in his castle, and that Daniel

¹¹ Gothic novels that reinstate normality often do so with heterosexual marriage or the destruction of the homoerotic monster, as referenced in "Queer Gothic" in the *Routledge Companion to Gothic*.

initially desires both Alexander and the male monsters. The horror of the Baron Alexander, which seems superficially to be a horror rooted in his murderous ways, is actually Daniel's horror towards the male homosocial bond and its implications. *Amnesia's* queerness is established early on, however it conforms to traditional Gothic conventions by allowing heterosexuality to regain its hold on the narrative and on the protagonist, robbing the game of its subversive potential.

Fullbright Studio's *Gone Home* can be read as a utilization of traditional Gothic themes (e.g., the uncanny specter, a haunted house) as a means of invoking more subversive modes of living and of playing. *Gone Home* teases the existence of supernatural monsters just to present the heteronormative horror towards queer disruptions of normality. The game takes place in the vacant Greenbriar household, where players control Caitlin, the newly-returned older daughter of the family who has spent the past year travelling Europe.



Fig. 1.2 - *Gone Home* main screen. Fullbright Company, 2013. Author's screenshot.

During her time abroad, the family moves into an old mansion that was passed down to the patriarch of the Greenbriar clan by his estranged and reclusive uncle. The “Psycho House,” as it comes to be known, is blanketed in darkness that players must frequently navigate, and the ever-present thunderstorm outside the house you are forbidden to leave is the only initial soundtrack

available.¹² The house is a loyal presentation of the Gothic haunted castle, complete with hidden passageways, subterranean secrets and sublime Victorian architecture and furnishings (see Fig. 1.2). The setting is distinctly ominous and the narrative seems to promise a Gothic monster: no one is home and the only clue is a note left on the front door from Caitlin's sister Samantha, imploring her (and you, the player) not to investigate her whereabouts. You as Caitlin are left to engage in the traditional Gothic process of "[finding] manuscripts" (in this case, pages of Samantha's diary) to discover what has happened to her family, whose "site of domesticity" and "ordinary life" has seemingly been interrupted by "the most extraordinary and inexplicable of events," a horror invoked in many Gothic novels that establishes the danger of the unknown (Sedgwick 9, Punter and Byron 261). I will utilize criticism on Gothic themes and their queerness in order to further unpack the subversive potential of *Gone Home*.

As with *Amnesia*, Gothic conventions are woven into *Gone Home*'s gameplay mechanics, furthering its eeriness and implications that something is horribly wrong in this game world. Players face endlessly flickering lights, thunderclaps and the anxiety of waiting for a jump scare, or when a scary element "jumps" out at players at unsuspecting moments; this gameplay device constantly teases the presence of a supernatural horror. Clever staging of the game's map also implies the existence of a sinister being—there are multiple bibles found throughout the mansion, invoking notions of demonic possession. You can scan shelves to discover that the family's movie collection is a slew of recorded VHS tapes of notorious science fiction horror films and television shows.¹³ The mansion is predictably, overwhelmingly large, with labyrinthine hallways and hidden passages, where it seems anything could hide. Players can uncover a hidden room under a flight of steps, in which lies a pentagram, a book detailing possession and a photograph and nametag of the late uncle,

¹² As referenced later on in this paper, players can discover and play cassette tapes of riot grrrl bands.

¹³ Titles written on the VHS tapes include: myriad episodes of *The X-Files*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Andromeda Strain*, and *The Time Machine*.

implying an attempt to convene with a spirit entombed in the mansion that perhaps incited its rage. A venture into Samantha's bathroom may cause a temporary jump scare as the tub seems to be splattered with blood, but upon closer investigation it is determined to be simply blood-red hair dye; this perpetuates the suspense of waiting to discover the teased horror inside the home. The staging of the domestic space within *Gone Home* cleverly hints at Gothic conventions without deploying them outright, imbuing the game with suspense.

However, what becomes most worrying is not the potential supernaturalism of the house, but Samantha's mental health and her difficulty adjusting to her new home, new school, and burgeoning sexuality, all set against the backdrop of 1990's America and its homophobic sentiments.¹⁴ It is revealed that Sam and Lonnie are engaging in a lesbian relationship that brings negative attention at school and at home, as referenced by journal entries where Sam's parents are referred to as "not exactly super open-minded" and where Sam implores Caitlin to "stick with the group" (*Gone Home*). These entries are highly indicative of the homophobic societal condition of 90's America and furthers the paratextual references that incite fear in the player, who wonders what horrors face a lesbian living in that time. Sam's alienation from her family and society, as well as Lonnie's looming departure for the Army's basic training program, suggests that the horror lies not in the supernatural but in the possibility that locked in the attic is Sam's dead body. This is implied by one of the last journal entries players discover:

The sunset light in this house is the saddest thing I've ever seen. I just want to sleep. When I'm in the attic, it almost feels like Lonnie could still be here... She's just downstairs... I'm just waiting to hear her pull down the hatch and come running up. Maybe I'll go up to the attic... and wait... (*Gone Home*, author's transcription from in-game audio)

¹⁴ The late 80's was rife with homophobic sentiments, centered around the misunderstood AIDS crisis. The 90's saw the creation of direct action advocacy groups for members of the community dealing with HIV and AIDS, but prejudice against the community still existed.

But the attic is devoid of anything remotely horrific, and is simply a photography dark room containing a final note telling of Samantha and Lonnie's journey to discover a place of their own, one assumingly far from the narrowmindedness of their school and home. This discovery and confirmation of a lack of supernatural horror allows the unease and Gothic conventions present throughout the entire game to make a strong political statement: queerness subverts normativity and destabilizes the domestic space, something that can be horrifying to those who benefit from the heteronormative.

Sam can be read as a manifestation of Diana Fuss' "phantom other," a spectral queer "suppressed and erased" by heteronormative society, and a character who embodies other queer theorists' notions on the tangential aspect of the homosexual, including Butler's "unimaginable" lesbian (Fuss 3, Butler *Bodies That Matter* 20). Crucial to *Gone Home*'s deployment of the spectral lesbian is that Sam is never physically present in the game—the only representations are a disembodied voice sporadically reading pages from her journal and the occasional picture of her. She haunts the game for its entirety, with the implication that her body lies somewhere in the house and her letters are her voice from beyond the grave. This drives home the game's commentary on the cultural erasure of the lesbian, a sexuality that is "not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not yet made its way into the grid of the thinkable, the imaginable" and one that is "well-nigh invisible" (Butler "Imitation and Gender Subordination" 318, Palmer 17). *Gone Home* can also be read as a deployment of Sara Ahmed's remarks on the queer individual's resistance to "being kept in line, often by force" by heteronormative structures of power by ending with Samantha and Lonnie's departure to create a "place of [their] own" (Ahmed 83, *Gone Home*).¹⁵ The most "horrifying" aspects of the game do not involve perceived spectral hauntings or any type of monster or bloodshed, but

¹⁵ For more on queerness and its position in hegemonic culture, see Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

are instead wholly cultural/social hauntings and horrors: the uncanniness/unwelcomeness of the queer in the heteronormative family and society of the mid-1990's. This co-option of Gothic conventions, coupled with the subversive gameplay in which there is no form of antagonism for gamers and no way to lose, allows *Gone Home* to weaponize the fear of the unknown and use it as a commentary on the erasure of the lesbian in contemporary society.

What this section seeks to accomplish is an identification of queer Gothic conventions in contemporary independent video games and the subsequent potential and stifling of said potential. In *Amnesia: Dark Descent*, Gothic conventions and atypical, combat-free gameplay provide an alternative to mainstream gaming styles and narratives. However, the presence of queer Gothic tropes like repressed homosexual desire and physical reactions to abject bodies and beings are “solved” by the game’s conclusion: the death of the protagonist’s object of desire. This situates *Amnesia* more closely amongst traditional Gothic conventions that tease the anti-normative just to reinstate normality and heteronormativity by the conclusion, ultimately limiting the queer potentiality of the game. *Gone Home* employs traditional Gothic conventions to invoke unease throughout its gameplay before concluding with the erasure of any supernatural being or entity, instead choosing to reassign the unease onto the lived experiences of the lesbian in 1990’s America. *Gone Home* successfully co-opts traditional Gothic conventions and challenges typical modes of gameplay, resulting in a game that utilizes the queer potential of both the Gothic and the anti-heteronormative. However, a maximization of the queer potentiality and subversiveness of Gothic conventions employed in contemporary games is demonstrated more efficiently in games like *Sabbat: The Director’s Cut* (sic), which I will discuss in the next section.

“BECOMING THE HORROR”¹⁶

Expanding Queer Gothic Potential, Referencing Gothic Subculture, and Punking the Gothic in *Sabbat: The Director's Cut*

Sabbat: The Director's Cut by ohnopproblems, takes traditional Gothic conventions and warps them, employing them to embrace the humor in the grotesque and tilt Gothic themes towards punk anarchist ideologies in order to subvert the heteronormative in gaming and expand their queer potential. This allows the game, the most subversive in form, narrative, and distribution of the three analyzed in this chapter, to destabilize binary oppositions and present unique ways for indie game developers to subvert and contemporize Gothic conventions.¹⁷¹⁸ *Sabbat* positions players in a grotesque and humorous Satanic ritual resulting in the creation of a transspecies, punk rock anarchist who destroys hegemonic icons of capitalism and heteronormativity. Employing theories on hybrid, grotesque bodies in Gothic conventions, Bakhtin's notions of the grotesque body situated in utopian carnival and its echoes in the punk movement, aspects of the goth subcultural movement, as well as the existence of the Gothic in punk as demonstrated by David Ensminger, I suggest that *Sabbat* presents an ideal way of utilizing queer Gothic conventions and queer gothic punk to destabilize and redefine independent gaming styles and narratives.

First, it is important to reference the subversive aspects of Gothic literary conventions and the subsequent creation of a goth subcultural group that can be connected to punk subcultural groups in order to further situate queer Gothic and queer indie videogames in a realm of resistance to heteronormativity. Gothic literature was predominantly considered to be “low brow” by writers

¹⁶ The title of this section is borrowed from a quote by Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra on their brand of horror-inspired punk. It is featured in David A. Ensminger's *Visual Vitriol: The Street Art and Subcultures of the Punk and Hardcore Generation* (2011).

¹⁷ *Sabbat* is a text-based game created on the Twine platform, making gameplay solely about dicking through text options in a choose-your-own-adventure style. *Sabbat* is also available for free, while *The Director's Cut* is available for \$5, making it the least expensive out of the three referenced in this section, as both *Amnesia* and *Gone Home* cost \$20.

¹⁸ George Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* discusses the ambivalence of Gothic literary conventions in that it “can be read as reinscribing the status quo” while “a queer reading can begin to show the ways in which gothic works beyond the limits of its structural ‘meaning’ to change the structure of meaning itself” (10).

and academics, so much so that some Gothic authors eventually abandoned Gothic literary works in favor of more “serious” approaches to literature (Geary 5). In the 19th century, Gothic novels were often produced in the form of penny dreadfuls, or cheaply made and cheaply sold sensationalist novels that were popular amongst working class individuals. Many penny dreadfuls were reprints of classic 18th century Gothic novels like *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Monk*, further perpetuating the classist notion that the contents of Gothic novels were appropriate for lower class individuals.¹⁹

Gothic literature challenges binaries and heteronormative notions of success and art, a challenge we can find in the subcultural movement that credits it as its main influencer. An adoption of its conventions and styles exist in goth fashions, which favor black fabric, veils, and clothing that is both ripped apart and pieced together, a commentary on fracturing binary notions of identification. The subculture’s origins lie in the same time period and location as the origins of punk (1970’s Britain) and represent similar dissatisfactions with mainstream fashion and music, as well as a discomfort with “the realities of the late capitalistic, postmodern Western world (Punter and Byron 61). As I will discuss later in this section, videogames like *Sabbat* are available for free play, and can thus be directly aligned with penny dreadfuls and low budget, low cost novels; in general, video games are frequently associated with “low brow” forms of media, as well, and gamers are often ostracized by mainstream society.²⁰ Gothic Studies theorists like Gavin Baddeley suggest that goth is “an aesthetic, a viewpoint, even a lifestyle, its tradition a legacy of subversion and show” and that it subsequently resists static definitions by academics and member alike, a definition that can also be utilized when discussing the punk movement (Punter and Byron 61). I am suggesting that the

¹⁹ This is interesting when unpacked through J. Halberstam’s notion of a queer adoption of “low theory,” as outlined in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). This will be discussed in a later chapter, but can be directly connected to queer subversions of heteronormative notions of success and art.

²⁰ A prime example of this is Roger Ebert’s infamous remarks at 2006 Conference on World Affairs in which he claimed that video games do not explore human problems like other art forms do, resulting in him frequently speaking on the contested status of video games as art in both interviews and in his own writing.

parallels between goth and punk subcultural movements, as well as both movements' resistance to dominant cultural hegemonies, is represented in *Sabbat*.

Sabbat differs greatly from the games discussed in the previous section, as it is a free-to-use, text-based game available on the Twine platform whose methods of resistance persist beyond its form and distribution.²¹ *Sabbat* begins by asking players to identify their genitals (or not, as you can choose “what’s it to ya” as an answer) and sacrifice animals (or not, as there is a cruelty-free option) in order to morph into a hybrid human-animal creature that takes over the world (or not, as players can choose to do nothing with their hybrid bodies). In a crucial deviation from the other games discussed in this chapter, players are clearly defined as the protagonist: the in-game text refers to players directly as “you.” “You” are described in the first paragraph as living in a dilapidated, dirty apartment which “smells like no job, no money, no prospect [...] like alienation [...] like late capitalism” (*Sabbat*). *Sabbat* forces the player into the role of the Other, of the individual living outside of the capitalistic hegemony, effectively queering the player and establishing “you” as an individual resistant to normative hegemonies. The game’s format—virtually devoid of visuals save for those provided after your ritualistic transformation—makes it even easier for players to become *Sabbat*’s “you.”²² The Satanic ritual you must partake in involves self-mutilation and the blood of animals and results in human-animal hybridity, referencing traditional Gothic notions of the border-crossing hybrid, or “an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life” (Grosz 57). Your disfigured, grotesque body defies binary categorizations and brings forth a Satanic reign of terror against the normative.

²¹ Twine is advertised as an “open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories” and is used by many independent game developers as it is free, easy to use, and does not require vast amounts of coding knowledge, setting it apart from almost all video game developing platforms (Twinery)

²² The visuals are only available on the *Director’s Cut* version of *Sabbat*.

This queer destabilization of embodied borders and static sexual identifications imbues your virtual body with the power of an interspecies entity unburdened by the stringent binary oppositions imposed by heteronormative structures of power, a notion reminiscent of queer theory and queer readings of Gothic literature. You are allowed to choose the body parts (e.g., head, arms, body, legs, genitals) that will be infused with the “feral” energies of “the snake, the crow, the goat, the wolf, and the centipede” (*Sabbat*). The Satanic ritual, which involves body mutilation and verbal invocations of Satanic icons, results in myriad manifestations of hybridity dependent upon those decisions (see Fig. 1.3).



Fig 1.3 - My Satanic hybrid body. *Sabbat: The Director's Cvt*, ohnopproblems, 2013. Picture available in images folder included in *The Director's Cvt* download.

This uncanny amalgamation of animal parts embodies notions put forth by Gothic theorists regarding heteronormative society’s “anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, body integrity, immortal individuality” (Bronfen 113) This allows the player to mime the reclamation of power from authoritative figures who “determine the codes of inclusion and exclusion” while acting as a marginalized member of society: the queer or the transgendered, referenced in the game by the transspecies (Palmer 152). After the transformation, you invade the homes of two individuals to

absorb their auras, destroying the boundary between the invisible queer and the heteronormative domestic space, inviting yourself “to the warm hearth of society” (Punter 111). One individual whose aura you consume is a young man with an affinity for Christian rock bands, a direct reference and antagonism of contemporary relations between queers and the religious right. Employing the border-crossing hybrid body to further dismantle and disrupt, your hybrid destroys heteronormative power structures, from the army to the air force to the capitol building of an unnamed country, allowing narrative interpretive fluidity—you as the creature could destroy any country’s structures of power, and do it in style. If you choose to do nothing with your new powers you are faced with a snide final text screen, in which you are chastised for “[amassing] enough power to crush every structural inequity and injustice perpetuated by humanity and then [doing] nothing” (*Sabbat*). This, and the ending in which you choose to wreak havoc and are heralded for “[instating] full communism” resulting in “you [getting] good end” quite clearly suggests that developer and writer ohnopproblems favors anarchy and queer punk resistance to heteronormativity and invisibility (*Sabbat*). *Sabbat* utilizes the monstrous Other, a traditional Gothic convention, to destabilize notions of sexuality and gender and resist heteronormative modes of power.

After penetrating the domestic space, no matter what gender you have chosen at the game’s inception, you engage in a sexual encounter with a witch whose aura attracts you to her high-rise apartment, an encounter that I argue further destabilizes heteronormative binaries. This would superficially seem like a lesbian encounter for players who choose to “have” a vagina or choose to remain neutral, however, *Sabbat* refuses to essentialize sexuality or gender, instead adopting a queerer stance. For example, I chose the vagina option, yet upon infusing “[my]” genitals with the power of the goat, “plated teeth [slotted] into place at the mouth of [my] vagina” and “[my] clitoris [warped] and [hollowed], becoming a (far less sensitive, unfortunately) black goat’s nose” (*Sabbat*). Here, sexual organs are distorted and completely effaced, negating the original sexed body, forcing you,

upon failing to fornicate with the witch, to “get really high and make out for a while” in order to join auras (*Sabbat*). I played the game through again a second time and chose to have a penis and to direct the power of the wolf to my genitals. Upon meeting the witch, I discovered that I had a wolf’s vagina, making my avatar both a transsexual and a transspecies individual. These representations of sexual and gender fluidity, coupled with the unbridled power you are given as a reward for hybrid embodiment, speak to Halberstam’s notion of the transgender body as “futurity itself” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 18).²³ *Sabbat*’s similarities to Gothic themes of transformation, when read through a queer theoretical lens, can be understood as the future of gaming itself in that it subverts both heteronormativity and mainstream gaming conventions.

Both the depictions of the grotesque and the jocular, snarky tone throughout *Sabbat* invoke Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque and the queer notion of transgressive sexual pleasure resulting from identity fracturing. As Palmer writes when discussing hybrid and/or transsexual characters in Gothic fiction, the grotesque shatterings of static and normative bodies “depict the fantastic and bizarre transformations [...] [undergone] in the context of carnivalesque mirth and misrule” (166). These transformations “celebrate the instances of queer jouissance they generate” and refer to an excessive, transgressive type of pleasure existing as a direct result of the fracturing of the subject who is experiencing the pleasure (Palmer 165-6). *Sabbat* demonstrates jouissance in the ecstatic reactions to the grotesque bodily changes that occur: your wings are “big” and “beautiful” and your character, despite the pain involved in the transformation, is “100% the most authentic bitch” (*Sabbat*). Bakhtinian notions of the grotesque offer innumerable opportunities to resist static binary definitions, and the bodily transformations that take place in *Sabbat* present the queer subject with a bevy of methods to destabilize the heteronormative. For Bakhtin, the grotesque discloses “the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life,” and in *Sabbat*, the

²³ In *A Queer Time and Place* will be referred to in citations as *Queer Time and Place* from this point forward.

grotesque body transformations usher in a new age of queer power fueled by transgressive pleasure and resistant embodiment (*Rabelais and His World* 48).

Bakhtin's medieval carnival and its colorful, irreverent inhabitants can be fruitfully mined for similarities with the punk subcultural movement, allowing us to connect Gothic conventions with punk ideologies and practices and establish *Sabbat's* queer and subversive potential through its invocation of forms of counterculture resistance. As referenced in Peter Jones' work on British punk's vicinity to the Bakhtinian carnival, Robert Stam suggests Bakhtin's notion of the carnival and its grotesque occupants highlights his preference for marginalized members of society:

Bakhtinian categories display an intrinsic identification with difference and alterity, a built in affinity for the oppressed and marginal, a feature making them especially appropriate for the analysis of opposition and marginal practices (21).

For Jones, Bakhtin's medieval carnival is a site of utopic pleasure whereby oppressed individuals liberate themselves from societal pressures, question binaries, don unique clothing, and revel in debauchery, a description that Jones suggests can substituted in as a depiction of the punk scene. The fluidity of the carnival is mirrored in the fluidity of the punk movement, and specifically the queercore punk movement, which will be expanded upon in the next chapter. Participation in the carnival promotes the dissolution of social hierarchies and the frequent use of obscenities, two aspects that loudly echo throughout *Sabbat*, which is rife with the destruction of hierarchal structures and peppered with frequent vulgarities. *Sabbat* treats the destruction of hegemonic norms with reverence and depicts the devastation you enact as a type of anarchic, ecstatic carnival: "you reach the capitol building [...] you peer inside at a suited sea of corpulent white fucks staring up in dumbfounded horror" shortly before gleefully unleashing supernatural horrors upon them in an unstoppable "apotheosis" (*Sabbat*). If Bakhtin's grotesque can be connected to queer Gothic conventions, as demonstrated earlier, then Bakhtin's carnival and its resistance to cultural norms can

be connected to punk subcultures. The presence of these multiple avenues of resistance provide *Sabbat*'s players with myriad paths to take in order to subvert and destabilize the heteronormative.

Sabbat is a game that puts the goth and the punk in conversation with each other, thus bringing to the forefront the resistance to heteronormative culture that they both share, and how the two movements (which permeate literature, fashion, music, and more) seek to destabilize, redefine, and reassign binary definitions. In David A. Ensminger's work on the street art and culture of the punk and hardcore music movements, he dedicates a chapter to the shared qualities of punk and Gothic/goth, and how punk art's deployment of "monstrous depictions" of bodies "actively interrogates Westernized notions of bodies as discreet and harmonious units—static, whole, and natural—thus [delving] deep into metaphors of unease" (127). Monstrous punk bodies depicted in punk band's self-made flyers "[melt] the boundaries between genders and species, the possible and the impossible, the speakable and the unspeakable" (Ensminger 133). The body you create in *Sabbat* is both an amalgamation and an abomination, an assemblage of animal parts that brings with it a Satanic utopic apocalypse, destroying in its wake hegemonic structures of power. Your monstrous body mimics the monstrous icons of punk fashion: the "skulls and death imagery" that punks wore to establish themselves as resistors to mainstream society (Ensminger 128). The body created in *Sabbat* also rejects dominant, capitalistic notions of embodiment, or as Ensminger writes, "the typical body of a consumer [...] tightly secured by authority and control" (131). This mercurial body not only refuses to be labelled and thus located and targeted within consumer culture, but also seeks to destroy such structures of power. The body you create in *Sabbat* knows no cultural or societal boundaries and symbolically destroys the bastions of authority that exercise control upon bodies (especially queer bodies) in today's environment.²⁴ The Gothic destabilization of bodies and the

²⁴ Contemporary queer political issues include US legislation that seeks to restrict the use of public restrooms by transgender individuals as well as the varying levels of illegality of transgenderism in dozens of countries.

blurring of boundaries between species and gender refuses the simplistic, heteronormative bodies of capitalism and promotes punk anarchy.

Mining *Sabbat* for queer Gothic conventions, goth subcultural ideologies, Bakhtin's queer individuals and punk's take on monstrous bodies allows us to identify the game's highly subversive nature. It is a game that resists and shatters binary definitions not only in its narrative, but also in its form, tone, and distribution. Text-based, free to play, easy to access for anyone with an internet connection, and rife with both queer Gothic bodies and queer punk anarchist themes, *Sabbat* presents a uniquely subversive take on contemporary indie gaming. If the goal of subversion is to destabilize binaries and ask probing questions of heteronormative structures of power, *Sabbat* goes above and beyond by giving players the option to destroy dichotomies, resist capitalism, and poke fun at Christianity. It is a prime example of a maximization of queer Gothic and queer punk subversive potential in contemporary indie games.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have identified the varying degrees to which three indie horror games utilize Gothic and subcultural conventions in their narratives, gameplay devices, and tone. In drawing connections between the queer Gothic literary conventions and their presence in contemporary indie horror games, I have traced the queer influences and queer resistance clearly through all three games discussed in this chapter. However, the degree to which they employ and redefine Gothic conventions differs, resulting in their varying potential for social commentary and queer resistance. It is also important to take into consideration the method of distribution for all three games, as they are all available online but with different price tags—both *Amnesia* and *Gone Home* cost between \$10-20 and *Sabbat* is free, but *Sabbat: The Director's Cut* is \$5. The distribution of independent games is nearly as important as their content, as they are often more accessible than mainstream games, which require a gaming console or PC and large amounts of disposable income, making an expensive indie game somewhat ironic.²⁵ Gothic novels were often considered cheaper in both style and price, allowing them to permeate society with queer notions and insert controversial ideas into the literary universe. Indie horror games are incredibly similar, but it is important that they contemporize Gothic conventions in order to make a more exclamatory statement against the heteronormative in the gaming industry.

If we look at games like *Sabbat*, which mines countercultural movements like Gothic literature and goth and punk culture for unique ways to narrate and design independent games, we can find an optimization of the queer potential of Gothic conventions and punk ideologies. The resistance to heteronormativity is apparent in the game's design (text-based, and simple to use), narrative (a grotesquely transformed human-animal hybrid wreaks havoc upon a city and its

²⁵ New mainstream games bought at major distributors like Walmart or GameStop cost \$60, sometimes more if they are special editions.

structures of power), as well as its distribution (free for the standard version, \$5 for the *Director's Cut*). Like goth subculture, *Sabbat* depicts marginalized citizens' discomfort with postmodern Western notions of the individual, and like punk music it refuses heteronormative definitions of bodies. The game's outright disavowal of capitalism in both content and distribution furthers its queerness and its subcultural content, and the melding of subcultural movements resists static definitions of genre and identification. It is, quite simply, a darkly humorous amalgamation of subcultural movements and genres, made manifest in the consolidated, border-crossing body you as the player are tasked to create.

This chapter functions as an identification of queer Gothic, goth, and punk conventions in contemporary independent video games. It is also a statement on the extent to which the three games referenced utilize the subversive quality of the aforementioned conventions to create games that resist heteronormativity in both gaming culture and society. Subcultural movements are often created by those who exist on the margins of society, and games created with those movements in mind should reflect that in as many aspects as possible. I will now turn to a more in-depth discussion of the queer punk subcultural movement and its manifestation in independent video games.

CHAPTER II

DOING IT YOURSELF

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE QUEERCORE PUNK MOVEMENT AND THE CONTEMPORARY QUEER PUNK INDIE GAME SCENE

INTRODUCTION

I want to turn to another genre of subcultural expression that is often tied together with queerness, queer lives, and queer resistance—punk. This chapter seeks to draw connections between the queercore offshoot of the punk music scene and contemporary indie video games designed by queer individuals (specifically transgender women) that feature queer narratives and queer game design (e.g., retro designs, frequent and/or forced failure, and a melding of process and narrative).

J. Halberstam's research focuses on queer punk rock and how it challenges heteronormativity, most specifically "the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood" (*Queer Time and Place* 161). Following this logic, video game creators and players are inherently punk and queer in the sense that they dedicate their lives and their free time to play. This dedication to a ludic lifestyle creates a community of gamers, and those who are queer-identifying create a subculture within a subculture, one that is far more welcoming to the non-white, the non-straight, and the non-male.

The first section of this chapter examines the inception of the queercore punk movement and its symptoms in order to connect it to what I define as a queer punk indie gaming movement. Here I will identify the myriad similarities between the queercore punk movement and a section of the indie gaming community populated by queer-identifying developers who create games that represent their personal experiences and disrupt heteronormative styles of narrative and gameplay. The games discussed in this chapter also destabilize binary notions of failure and success, resist capitalistic endeavors through low-budget creation and free distribution methods, and frequently co-opt retro gaming styles in an attempt to reverse the co-option of queer identities. I will also delve into queer theoretical conceits such as Elizabeth Freeman's temporal drag and Halberstam's notion

of the queer art of failure. I will then showcase the aforementioned theories' presence in three indie games created by openly transgender women developers.

The second section focuses on DIY punk and its resistance to capitalism and heteronormativity, before mining the movement and its ideologies for parallels within the queer punk indie gaming community. I will utilize ethnographic studies on punk and queercore punk completed by Jodie Taylor, Kevin Dunn, David Ensminger, and Maria Katharina Wiedlack. I will then turn to Benjaminian notions of progressive artistic production and compare that to the DIY punk movement and the game development software Twine before turning to an unpacking of two Twine games made queer developers.

I am suggesting that the parallels between both queer movements allows us to place independent games by openly queer creators in an archive of games that further resist, fragment, and destabilize heteronormativity, more so than many AAA and indie games created by those who exist in the center of a heterosexist gaming community.

“THE DYKES MAKING ART DEPARTMENT”²⁶

Mining Retro-Style Indie Games and the Queer Indie Gaming Community for Queercore Punk Ideologies and Anti-Heteronormative Social Commentary

This section draws connections between independent video games and the queercore punk movement and suggests that specific indie games act as queer punk resistance to heteronormative gaming culture. I will connect the queercore punk movement to three indie games created by three transgender game developers: Anna Anthropy’s *dys4ia*, Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi*, and Merritt Kopas’ *Lim*. I will reference J. Halberstam’s notions of the queerness of failure, transgenderism and “passing,” Elizabeth Freeman’s “temporal drag,” and Jodie Taylor and Maria Katharina Wiedlack’s ethnographic studies of the queercore punk movement that splintered off of heteronormative, masculinist punk.²⁷ I posit that games created by openly queer developers have aided in the creation of a queer punk gaming community that deploys in-game narratives as anecdotal political commentary. Wiedlack posits that “theoretical approaches developed within the queer-feminist punk movement have a strong connection to the everyday life of its participants,” which causes a breakdown of the binary divisions between life and art, theory and practice (16). The creators referenced in this section frequently comment on the biases they face in an industry that consistently promotes mainstream, open world “gamey games” over closed world, personal games like the ones they create (Keogh 2013).²⁸ Their work resists mainstream gaming narratives and styles, blurs the boundary between autobiography and fiction, and inserts theories on the destabilizing nature of queerness into gaming practice. I trace the connections between queer indie games and the

²⁶ This section heading is a paraphrased quotation from Anna Anthropy’s *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (2012). The original quotation reads: “Why are digital games so sparse in the dykes making art department?” (5).

²⁷ For the purpose of this chapter, I will not be utilizing Wiedlack’s term “queer-feminist punk” which she employs as an umbrella term for queercore, homocore, dyke punk, riot grrrl, and more. I will be utilizing the term “queercore” (employed by Jodie Taylor) to refer to the movement.

²⁸ For more on Anthropy, Kopas and Brice’s queer identifications and how it influences their games, see Brendan Keogh’s “Just Making Things and Being Alive About It: The Queer Games Scene.”

queercore punk movement through both an ethnographical and theoretical approach in order to establish the subversive quality of queer indie games and their potential to disrupt heteronormative gaming practices and ideologies.

At the time of this writing, there is little academic work on the parallels between the queercore punk movement and the creation and proliferation of queer independent video games—I will make this connection here ethnographically before delving deeper into their formal and narrative similarities. Punk music emerged in the 1970's as a countercultural movement rife with queer ideologies and methods of existing that seemed to destabilize traditional binaries (male/female, gay/straight, musician/amateur).²⁹ However, the movement was mostly populated by straight, white men who upheld “heterosexist values,” effectively alienating women, people of color, and queers (Taylor 1). The emergence of queercore in the 1980's brought together queer-identifying and marginalized musicians, zinesters, and artists in spaces and places more welcoming than a community built on “machismo and heterosexuality rigidity,” as stated in queer punk icon Bruce LaBruce's manifesto in his zine *J.D.s* (Taylor 6). For Taylor, members of the community believed that punk, initially a lynchpin of queer resistance to heteronormativity, lost its way, “[abandoned] its cause,” and “[became] hostile towards outward expressions of queer gender and sexuality” (6). David Ensminger writes that queer punk did not just want to destabilize norms within the community, but sought to “[reclaim...] a space they [envisioned] as latently queer” (167). These notions of reclamation and resistance resulted in the creation of a queercore movement that rejected existing heteronormative structures of power and punk's surprising conformity to those structures.

Despite the problematic aspects of heterosexist punk, the movement's ideologies and practices can be connected to queer theory and queer modes of living; these ideologies and their

²⁹ For more on the queer over- and undertones in traditional punk rock, see Tavia Nyong'o's “Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s”

queerness can then be associated with the gaming community. As Halberstam suggests, queer subcultures like punk

afford us a perfect opportunity to depart from a normative model of youth cultures as stages on the way to adulthood; this allows us to make out different forms of adulthood, or the refusal of adulthood and new modes of deliberate deviance (*Queer Time and Place* 174).

Halberstam's queer notion of perpetuating childhood and refusing to grow up in the heteronormative sense can be applied to the gaming community, which is mainly comprised of those who maintain subcultural participation by engaging in video game play well into adulthood (a 2015 Entertainment Software Association pamphlet states the average age of gamers is 35).³⁰ Queers also resist via failing to successfully adopt heteronormative values, an act which “preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children [...]” (Halberstam *The Queer Art of Failure* 3).³¹ And for Halberstam and Taylor, punk “has always been the stylized and ritualized language of the rejected,” and has long been associated with “social marginality and sexual perversity,” a parallel that can be found in the stereotypical picture painted of nerds in contemporary movies and television (Halberstam *Queer Failure* 4, Taylor 4).³² This resistance to heteronormative structures of power allows punks and gamers to occupy alternative spaces and exemplify alternative lifestyles, thereby embodying aspects of queerness as put forth by queer theorists.

Contrary to their anti-heteronormative modes of living, gamers, like punks, have historically perpetuated rampant heterosexism in their subcultural community, silencing the voices of those who

³⁰ For more statistics on the gaming industry, including the identity of gamers and the highest selling games, see the 2015 ESA Essential Facts brochure.

³¹ *The Queer Art of Failure* will be referred to as *Queer Failure* from this point onwards.

³² Examples of this are seemingly endless—the bevy of nerd movies that surfaced in the 80's, the 90's television shows *Freaks and Geeks* and *Boy Meets World*, the gamer/computer nerds of the 00's, as featured in *Transformers*, *Grandma's Boy* (which is explicitly about game developers), *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, and the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a nostalgic throw-back to 80's nerd movies. All the characters in the aforementioned movies are depicted as outcasts and society's weirdos.

exist further along the margins (e.g., queers, people of color, and women). This severity of the inequality in the gaming industry was exposed by the 2014 #GamerGate movement (mentioned in the introduction to this paper).³³ The highly contradictory nature of contemporary gaming culture has resulted in the creation of a splinter subculture that rejects mainstream and heterosexist indie gaming and embraces women, queers, and people of color.³⁴ Game creator and author Anna Anthropy attributes the narrow scope of gaming culture to the “small, insular group of people” who are the nearly sole contributors to the community (5). She seeks to create new spaces for those who feel marginalized by both mainstream and indie gaming culture. She is not alone in this recognition, as other non-white, non-male gamers and developers have identified and resisted the community’s heterosexism and racism (see the aforementioned footnote). If a subcultural movement’s potential is the creation of alternatives to capitalistic commodification and provide “stomping grounds for grassroots social justice movements,” then the gaming community’s failure to adequately include marginalized members of the community further aligns it with heterosexist punk (Fisher and Harvey 26). Thus, a queer subset of the indie gaming community combats heteronormativity and exclusivity, mirroring the queercore punk movement in its attempts to create alternative spaces and alternative artistic contributions.

A return to retro-style gaming by queer independent developers opens up conduits through which heteronormativity can be destabilized and the past can be re-mapped and re-formed in the present. Before the advent of advanced computer processing and game development systems that allow contemporary games to boast graphics similar to big-budget Hollywood blockbusters, video

³³ For more information on the ostracizing of queers, people of color, and women in the punk community, see Wiedlack’s *Queer-Feminist Punk*, specifically the chapter “To Sir with Hate”: A Liminal History of Queer-Feminist Punk Rock.” For more information on the same phenomena in the gaming community, see “We Are All Fishes Now DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate” by Shira Chess & Adrienne Sha as well as Lisa Nakamura’s “Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital.”

³⁴ More on heterosexism in the indie gaming community can be found in Stephanie Fisher and Alison Harvey’s “Intervention for Inclusivity: Gender Politics and Indie Game Development.”

game graphics were only available in 8-bit or 16-bit format.³⁵ With the increased accessibility of programs that allow amateurs to code their own, simplistic video games, the indie community has seen a return to retro-style, Flash-based games that are often entirely free to play. The nostalgic quality of retro games can be read as the community depicting a dissatisfaction with the present climate and a desire to mine gaming's past for tools to influence its future. This can be further unpacked and queered by utilizing Freeman's "temporal drag," or a "stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceed one's own historical moment" (62). This stubborn identification with the old-school style of 8-bit video games coupled with the games' queer narratives allow developers like Anthropy, Kopas, and Brice to reverse the co-option of queer identities by co-opting a moment in gaming history most often associated with straight, white men: the vintage gaming era. This adoption of the past is a direct refusal of the established history of videogames by those who have been erased, denied, or abused by mainstream gaming, a refusal which weaponizes "the interesting threat that the genuine *past*-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present" as referenced in Freeman's work (63). By utilizing visual, auditory, and gameplay design techniques that harken back to an age of gaming where women were utilized only as tired in-game character tropes and not considered members of the community, queer developers dip into history in order to subvert it and establish themselves as voices in the contemporary indie gaming community.³⁶

Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* is an autobiographical, Flash-based game available for free play that chronicles Anthropy's gender transition from male to female via hormone replacement therapy (hence the title—a play on the phrase "gender dysphoria," or a psychological condition in which an individual feels they are not the gender they were assigned at birth and/or by society). The visuals of

³⁵ 8-bit and 16-bit refers to the amount of data that can be stored and accessed by the processor, thereby affecting the quality of the game's audio and visuals

³⁶ For more on video game tropes and women, see Anita Sarkeesian's vlog "Tropes vs. Women" on her website *Feminist Frequency*.

dys4ia are clearly reminiscent of retro games with bright, simple colors, elementary shapes, and basic font. The music is similar to contemporary indie-electronica with simplistic synth notes and a steady hum of feedback, further rooting the game amongst the retro gaming scene of the 70's and 80's, where in-game audio was incredibly basic due to the simplicity of available technology. But perhaps what is most interesting about *dys4ia* is the melding of narrative and gameplay and the discomfort and frustration it causes during play. In the very first task players must attempt to fit an oddly shaped object through an unreasonably-shaped space (see Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1 - *Dys4ia* first task, *dys4ia*, Anna Anthropy, 2012. Author's screenshot.

It is an impossible task, and despite the game's quick transition into another assignment, it immediately highlights the discomfort and repeated failures of a queer transgendered individual in the eyes of heteronormative society. *dys4ia* also asks players to attempt to use the women's restroom while navigating obstacles in the form of other women, fail to be considered a woman in feminist social and academic circles, repeatedly shave stubborn body hair, cease taking blood pressure medication, and ultimately fail to have their hormone replacements renewed due to high blood pressure. *dys4ia* presents incredibly frustrating gameplay peppered with failure; the failures and

frustration can be unpacked by utilizing queer theorists' notions of the subversive qualities of failing.³⁷

J. Halberstam explores heteronormative notions of success and how queer individuals resist heteronormativity by committing to failure and acting as society's letdowns. *dys4ia* ends positively, but the uncomfortable path and persistent failures present alternative, queer ways of living and gaming. Halberstam repeatedly references "failed" political actions that provide "potent avenues of failure" that can be "[built] upon in order to counter the logics of success" that have pervaded heteronormative lifestyles and values (*Queer Failure* 19). *dys4ia* presents the alternative paths that can be traversed when one fails not only to conform to societal standards of gendered embodiment but also fails during the queer process of gender transitioning. It refuses the notion that there is one way to embody femininity and one way to transition genders. Despite the worrying fact that the game's avatar is still suffering from high blood pressure by the game's end, the final screen depicts a butterfly floating towards the sun and these words:

It's a small thing

But I feel like

I've taken

The first steps

Towards something

TREMENDOUS

(*dys4ia*)

³⁷ It is also important to note the autobiographical moorings of failure in Anthropy's experience in the gaming community. She discusses in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* that she failed to successfully join the video game workforce by dropping out of the Guildhall, a gaming university that promised instant admission into the competitive game development field if students accepted the perpetual "crunch time" of the community, which required 40+ hour workweeks and no overtime (see pages 96-99).

This comes after repeated struggles by both the player and the avatar, which destabilizes the dichotomy of success and failure, thereby queering the gaming experience by presenting “happy and productive” failures, a notion put forth by Halberstam (*Queer Failure* 23). *dys4ia* presents new ways of failing in regards to both heteronormative and queer values by querying the nature of the transition process for the transgendered individual. The sunny, colorful ending after repeated disappointment effectively blurs the boundary between failure and success.

Merritt Kopas’ *Lim* is a bitpunk foray into the perils of not “passing,” or the notion that a transgendered individual must pass as the gender of which they have chosen to identify; the game presents similar social commentaries as *dys4ia*.³⁸ *Lim*’s visuals are quite similar to *dys4ia*’s, as well, and feature a simplistic color palette and elementary shapes (see Fig 2.2).

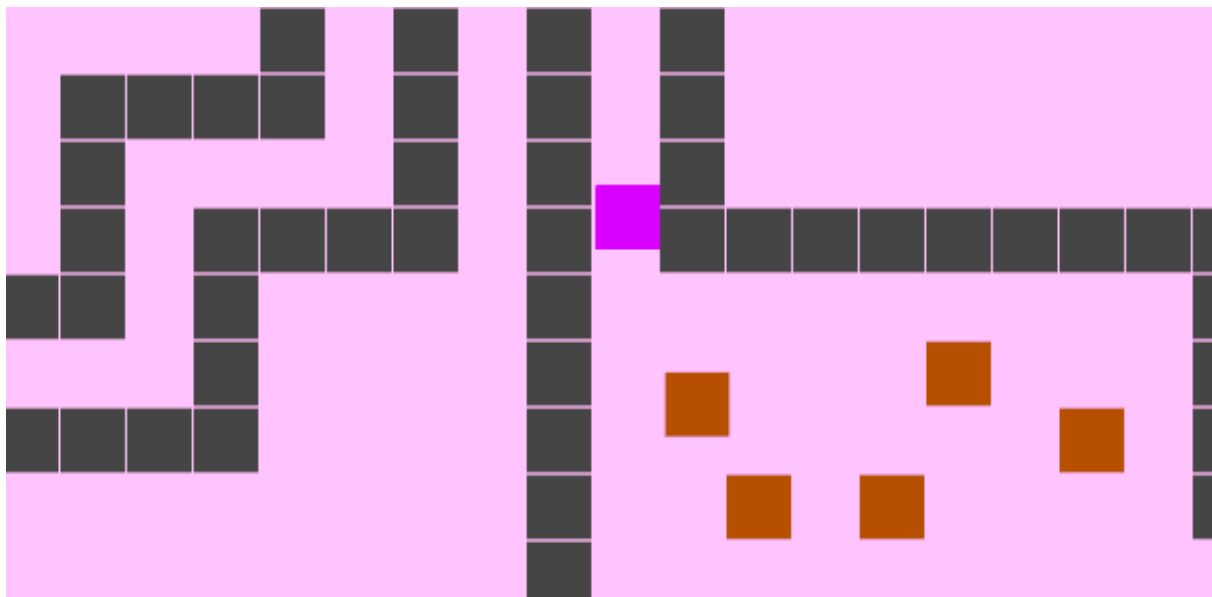


Fig. 2.2 - *Lim* gameplay. Merritt Kopas, 2012. Author’s screenshot.

Lim begins quite innocuously, as players must navigate an orange square through a crude maze. When you encounter other-colored squares, your square starts rapidly changing colors and you must press the Z key in order to stabilize your color. However, pressing the Z key violently

³⁸ See the terminology index for a concise definition of “bitpunk.”

destabilizes the camera, causing it to sporadically zoom in and out—a commentary on the violence necessary to pass and the “[excessive] labor” required of individuals attempting to do so (Chess 91). While the disorienting camera oscillates between distances, the other colored squares become more and more aggressive towards your square and start bouncing off of you, making it nearly impossible to move. The aggressive squares highlight the perils and anxiety of the transgendered individual attempting to exist publicly in heteronormative society. *Lim*’s high level of difficulty means players will frequently fail to navigate the maze—in my attempts, my square frequently became boxed in, forcing me to quit and start over. The gameplay process and the game’s narrative are interwoven, a nuanced approach to gaming that subverts traditional styles which often use cut scenes to further the narrative, keeping the gameplay entirely separate from the story (Chess 91).³⁹ Unlike *dys4ia*, *Lim* does not provide a positive ending—completing the game ejects your square into empty space. This unsatisfactory ending results in the same effect as Anthropy’s game—the violent destabilization and queering of binary notions of success and failure.

Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi* (Japanese for “everyday”) features visuals and gameplay styles that harken back to late 90’s Japanese handheld games—this familiarity, when juxtaposed against the game’s queer narrative and gameplay, allows Brice to co-opt gaming history in order to queer it. Brice takes classic gaming visuals and signifiers and reappropriates them to create a game rife with queer social commentary and queer narrative forms (see Fig. 2.3). *Mainichi* follows a day in the life of a transgendered woman and offers players numerous chances to conform to heteronormative notions of gender performance: after waking up, you can either “pretty up” your avatar by adding make-up and performing other self-care tasks, or your avatar can leave home with little to no primping.⁴⁰ If your avatar quickly leaves their house, they are misgendered and accosted by

³⁹ Many AAA games like the *Gears of War*, *Call of Duty*, and *Halo* franchises pack the plot into lengthy, cinematic cutscenes, leaving gameplay to focus on simple game mechanics like shooting a lot of NPCs in the face.

⁴⁰ For more on gender performance, see Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990)



Fig 2.3 – Mainichi gameplay. Mattie Brice, 2013. Author's screenshot.

passerby—one NPC notices the avatar and yells “that’s someone’s son!” (*Mainichi*). Conversely, if your avatar has chosen to perform feminizing rituals, they will be approached by sexually aggressive male NPCs who attempt to coerce them. The struggles persist in a café, where your avatar flirts with a barista, tells her friend she thinks he is going to ask her out, and is met with “I mean... does he know?” implying the perpetual struggle between visibility and invisibility that transgender individuals face (*Mainichi*). This is the closing line before the game resets again to the beginning, forcing you, if you wish to continue playing, to repeatedly cycle through the game, choosing different options in regards to your avatar’s appearance. However, choosing different options will not change the final, transphobic line, nor does it prevent the game from cycling back to the beginning, which can be read as a depiction of the unbreakable loop of misgendering and violence faced by transgender individuals attempting to be out (in both senses of the term) in heteronormative society.

Brice’s blog post on gaming website Gamasutra (as well as interviews and writings by both Kopas and Anthropy, referenced earlier) highlights the similarities I seek to identify between a queer punk indie gaming movement and queercore punk’s creation and political activism. Brice states

Mainichi “was an experiment in translating a personal experience into game mechanics, and also a push to prove to [herself] that [she] can make a game, even if the video game industry wouldn’t accept [her]” (Brice). This is reminiscent of the feminist and riot grrrl phrase “the personal is political,” a phrase explicitly used by Brice in her post, and one that can also be applied to the other two games mentioned in this chapter. Brice references both *Lim* and *dys4ia* as games that accomplish similar queer political activist feats in the face of a community that frequently refuses to acknowledge minority experiences, or finds making games about minority issues “nearly impossible” (Brice). Her post, like Anthropy’s book and Kopas’ interviews, ensures other marginalized members of the gaming community that “[they] can [make games] too,” invoking queercore punk ideologies of community-making and art production in the face of heterosexism and heteronormativity (Brice). The production of independent video games by amateurs and non-professionals and its subversive potential will be expanded upon in the second section of this chapter.

Identifying the heterosexist and heteronormative similarities between the punk subcultural movement and the contemporary gaming community allows us to establish a dialogue between the queer groups that splintered off of them. The 1970’s punk movement, defined as a countercultural resistance movement against cultural norms and a subversion of dominant hegemonies, was plagued with heterosexism and exclusivity. This directly resulted in the emergence of the queercore punk movement in the late 80’s and early 90’s, which opened up conduits for marginalized members of an already-marginal community to create their own spaces and their own art that were more queer friendly. The contemporary gaming community, often portrayed as a subcultural resistance to growing up, is marked by rampant heterosexism, homophobia, and the proliferation of a straight, white, boys’ club that churns out and consumes AAA games. I am positing that the creation of independent games by queer developers that resist dominant forms of play and heteronormative notions of living and embodiment is also the creation of a queer punk indie gaming movement that

clearly parallels the queercore punk movement. Mining both movements, one can find palpable similarities in their forms, narratives, sociopolitical commentary, and methods of queer resistance. The queer punk indie gaming scene of today is a sister movement to the queercore punk movement of the past.

“IF IT AIN’T CHEAP, IT AIN’T QUEER PUNK INDIE”⁴¹
Punk DIY Game Development in Indie Games as a Form of
Resistance to Heteronormativity and Capitalism

This section will explore queer punk indie gaming’s resistance against capitalistic AAA games and game culture as well as a contemporary method of indie game development that places the power of production and distribution in the hands of the individual, the consumer, and the amateur. First, I will return to *Gone Home* and sift through the queer punk overtones in order to demonstrate how the game, despite its indie classification and subversive potential, undermines that potential by co-opting queer and punk identifications for monetary gain.⁴² I will then explore two games created by indie developers that are more readily available and economically priced (*Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy and *Ultra Business Tycoon III* by Porpentine), as well as the Twine development software in order to connect the games, their narratives, and their creation and distribution to the DIY punk scene. I will demonstrate how queer punk independent video games open up channels of resistance to heteronormativity, capitalism, and the dominant hegemony of the gaming community. Just like queer punks carved a space for themselves in the “heterosexist” DIY punk scene, queer punk game developers and amateurs carve spaces out of a community that mirrors punk’s heterosexism. They do this by way of their own DIY developing tools that allow them to stake a claim in a subculture that is increasingly becoming hijacked by the mainstream.⁴³ I argue that indie gaming at its queerest and most subversive is most like DIY punk—featuring games created by marginalized individuals on easy-to-use platforms (e.g., Twine) that, to paraphrase Michael Azerrad describing indie band Fugazi, “stakes out the [...] scene as the moral high ground

⁴¹ This is a title that I reworked and borrowed from Kevin Dunn’s essay “If It Ain’t Cheap It Ain’t Punk: Walter Benjamin’s Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Labels.”

⁴² As mentioned earlier in this thesis, *Gone Home* costs \$20, an astronomical price for such a condensed game that touts itself as indie. I will not deny the need for independent game developers to make revenue in order to continue making games, however *Gone Home*’s frequent nods to the riot grrrl punk movement is an odd juxtaposition against its price tag.

⁴³ For more on the mainstream gaming community’s co-option of indie gaming forms, see Nadav Lipkin’s “Examining Indie’s Independence: The Meaning of ‘Indie’ Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Co-Optation.”

of the [games] industry... [not] just do-it-yourself, [but] Do the Right Thing” (377). This chapter utilizes Walter Benjamin’s theories on progressive cultural production, Halberstam’s notion of queer failure, Freeman’s chronobiopolitics, Anna Anthropy’s how-to book on game creation, and ethnographic studies on the DIY punk movement. I establish a clear connection between the queercore punk music movement and queer punk indie gaming and argue that certain games discussed here are better suited for perpetuating modes of resistance put in place by queer punks of the 80’s and 90’s music scene.

The Fullbright Company’s *Gone Home* presents myriad references to riot grrrl punk music, movements, and methods of production, which seep into the game’s narrative, audio, and visuals. The soundtrack is a mixture of music from riot grrrl staples Heavens to Betsy and Bratmobile and music from the contemporary female-fronted garage band The Youngins, employed by Fullbright to “play” a fictional band known as Girlscouts. The found narrative Gothic trope (referenced in my previous chapter) lets players find and play cassette tapes featuring the aforementioned bands, allowing punk to bleed into the Gothic, thereby blurring the boundaries of the two subcultural movements and imbuing *Gone Home*’s audio with cacophonous guitars and female shrieks.⁴⁴ I argue that the option for players to listen to female-fronted punk music is an attempt to root *Gone Home* firmly in the archive of punk, specifically queer punk, as the game centers around a lesbian relationship between two young women active in their local punk scene. *Gone Home* also includes zines in the game’s staging; players can discover a box of zines that Samantha and her girlfriend Lonnie created and attempted to distribute around their school. Wiedlack, in her work on queercore punk movements, suggests zines are a method of “producing meaning and active, political intervention into hegemonic power structures” for marginalized members of the community (22). For queercore punks of the late 80’s and late 90’s, the time frame in which *Gone Home* is set, zines

⁴⁴ Players can also discover a bevy of riot grrrl band pins scattered about the house.

were a countercultural way of spreading ideas that undermined capitalistic endeavors by avoiding typical printing and distribution methods, facilitating the dissemination of countercultural and anti-heteronormative ideologies. The existence of the zine in *Gone Home*, coupled with a chastising note to Lonnie and Sam from their school principal, helps remind players of the environment in which the game is set, and the punk ideological desire to resist cultural hegemonies in order to create art and spaces for the marginalized.

Despite the existence of riot grrrl music, queer punk ideologies, and subversive distribution methods within the game's narrative and staging, *Gone Home*'s commercial success and hefty price tag threatens to negate these representations; I'm suggesting it reads as more of a capitalistic co-option of queer subcultural movements than a celebration and demonstration of them. For Halberstam and Freeman, queer individuals resist fitting neatly into capitalistic commodification categories, or resist making money entirely. This is demonstrated through Halberstam's notions of mainstream co-option of drag subculture and the queer art of failure as well as Freeman's stance on queer resistance to chrononormativity and heteronormative modes of living.⁴⁵ When discussing drag's emergence onto the mainstream entertainment scene, Halberstam writes that the increased visibility of queer subcultural movements highlights the uneven exchange between the mainstream and subcultures:

Mainstream culture within postmodernism should be defined as the process by which subcultures are both recognized and absorbed, mostly for the profit of large media conglomerates (*Queer Time and Place* 156).

⁴⁵ Chrononormativity is Freeman's spin on Dana Luciano's chronobiopolitics. Chrononormativity refers to the heteronormative, capitalistic phenomenon in which "naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation" (3). For more on this, see the introduction in Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010).

This recognition and absorption exists in the gaming community, where large scale companies like EA and Microsoft have recently attempted to capitalize off of the increased interest in indie games by creating splinter organizations that focus on creating smaller scale, indie-style games (Lipkin). However, the games created by these organizations are still made under the watchful eye of the medium's monoliths, problematizing their alleged independence. And in Nadav Lipkin's essay on the varying levels of independence within indie gaming, he highlights how the proliferation of digital distribution platforms directly caused indie games to shift from non-profitable endeavors to "[receiving] the kind of mainstream attention contemporary games [acquire]" (16). The effects of this are exemplified in games like *Gone Home*, which is available solely on the digital distribution monolith Steam for a whopping \$20 (1/3 of the price of a physical copy of a mainstream console game), and which made \$1 million a year after its release (Davison 2013).⁴⁶ *Gone Home* may very well be an attempt to subvert mainstream games by utilizing the tools of the mainstream. However, the game's success problematizes this effort and undermines its potential to dismantle hegemonic power structures; it panders to capitalistic notions of identifying the queer individual in order to translate that individual's queerness into commodity.

As Kevin Dunn highlights in his essay on Benjaminian ideals exemplified by DIY punk production, counter-hegemonic resistance efforts are complicated by individuals who attempt to resist the system from safely within the system. He finds examples of this in punk artists who sign to major record labels, but not in artists who maintain their independence and mainstream resistance by forging ahead with DIY methods of recording and distributing. I wish to connect independent video games, specifically games created by marginalized members of the gaming community, to Benjamin's notion of progressive cultural politics achieved via artists' "technique" (2). Benjamin

⁴⁶ Steam is a website that allows users to directly download games onto their PC or Mac desktop computers. It was created by the Valve Corporation, a large-scale game developer. It features AAA and indie games.

outlines ways in which artists can create politically progressive works of art within capitalist systems by focusing on “technique” instead of content (e.g., intervening in culture rather than proselytizing about intervening). For Dunn, DIY punk is “an attempt to realize [Benjamin’s] challenge” to artists and creators by focusing on the “technique,” or their “position in the process of production” (218). By sidestepping corporate distribution, Dunn’s DIY “anticapitalist business models” act as “sites of political engagement at the intersection of cultural production and the global political economy” (217). Dunn’s essay highlights the common practices and catalysts of DIY punk labels (as well as DIY punk zines), which includes the desire to “become more active participants in the scene” and the sense of a need to build communities around common interests (223). For Benjamin and Dunn, art may invoke themes of political activism, or utilize narrative or design to make strong comments on social issues, but if that art is disseminated to the masses via capitalistic conduits, those themes will be assimilated into the mainstream, eradicating their progressive potential. This is why I find the content of *Gone Home*, when juxtaposed against its widespread distribution and high cost, to be an example of content trumping position in the indie games scene.

It is important to clearly delineate between indie games that I believe fail to adhere to Benjaminian notions of progressive cultural production and those that I believe adhere more loyally to them. For example, *Gone Home*’s narrative and form is unique and resists typical gameplay and narrative favored by AAA games, but its budget and earned revenue is still rather large when compared to games made by solo artists like Anthropy, Kopas, and Brice. This is largely due to the fact that the aforementioned artists give away their games for free, linking them on their personal websites and offering extended versions to patrons for small fees. It is in the queer punk indie game community that we see a furthering of the punk DIY spirit—there are both small-scale development companies comprised of several people, whose structure mimics the punk labels referenced in Dunn’s work, and also solo artists creating games in their spare time, with development costs

consisting solely of “the cost of food that [goes] into [their bellies]” (Anthropy 8). These small scale, individually-created games and their development and distribution methods take indie games to nuanced and highly subversive levels, adopting a position outside of the mainstream while imbuing their narratives with politically progressive content. These games are contemporary realizations of Benjamin’s ideal artistic technique.

The creation of convenient game development software permits consumers to become producers in an artistic movement that allows for the production and distribution of games that challenge previously established notions of both games and gameplay. Like the Sex Pistols, who “encouraged the young to become producers of culture rather than consumers,” Anna Anthropy’s novel, as apparent from the title, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, makes direct references to independent punk movements, its artistic creations, and communities while imploring readers to “[take] back [the gaming] art form (Ensminger 5, Anthropy).⁴⁷ She discusses her failed attempt to enter the myopic mainstream gaming community, and how this failure resulted in the creation of her various independent games. Anthropy implores readers and gamers to “become a game author” simply by “making a game” and outlines the various tools in which to do so (117). One of the tools she references is Twine, referred to in a DiGRA conference talk by Jane Friedhoff as “the primary hotbed for games exploring personal experiences, especially those dealing with issues like marginalization, queerness, and discrimination (1).^{48,49} Twine is a text-based game development software that is free to use and which allows creators to link together branching narratives to make an interactive story.⁵⁰ Its reference materials, which help potential creators through the creative

⁴⁷ Appendix B in Anthropy’s *Zinesters* is titled “Zinester Games” and features games “created by just one or two people,” mirroring the zine culture of the punk movement (179).

⁴⁸ DiGRA is an acronym for the Digital Games Research Association.

⁴⁹ Other development software includes, but is not limited to: Game Salad, Game Maker, ZZT, and Warioware: DIY. See Appendix A “What To Use” in Anthropy’s *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* for a further elaboration on the different development tools available.

⁵⁰ *Sabbat*, the game referenced in my first chapter, is a Twine game.

process, focuses on hypertext and questions why someone would want to develop a game—eschewing traditional development software methods that often focus on the technology first and the narrative second. Anthropy’s myriad work on the importance of Twine as a tool of the marginalized and the amateur has increased its popularity greatly.⁵¹ I will unpack the importance of development software like Twine via the work of both J. Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman.

For Halberstam and Freeman, queers resist heteronormative notions of living and of succeeding, occupying spaces of resistance to both capitalism and chrononormativity; I am suggesting that these ideologies and practices can found in the milieu of indie games developed on Twine. Halberstam worries about the implications for subjects “who are manipulated precisely when they become legible,” subjects like “visible queers” who are often victims of capitalist co-option, or what I suggest happens with *Gone Home* (*Queer Failure* 10). In response to the threat of manipulation, Halberstam suggests seeking alternative, undisciplined ways of knowing, an idea I posit lies within game development programs like Twine, which allows members of the gaming community with little to no formal training to create and share games. Halberstam’s first rule of a queer subversion of knowledge is to “resist mastery”—this is precisely the goal of Twine games, to resist making games via the typical methods (e.g., expensive game development colleges, narrow-minded communities, and unforgiving work schedules) and to give amateurs the power to create (11).

Turning to Freeman’s notion of chrononormativity, or the idea that an individual’s life is defined by benchmarks that privilege the heterosexual capitalist (e.g., careers, 401ks, retirement plans), we can unlock even more queer potential in Twine and its creations. We find chrononormativity’s influence in the mainstream gaming community, where aspiring developers are pressured to enter the gaming workforce through time-consuming game development colleges, where blockbuster games generate more revenue than hit movies, and where successful game

⁵¹ Anthropy has published many blog posts on her personal site regarding the subversive power of Twine, as well.

developers are treated like celebrities.⁵² It is important to note that Anthropy dropped out of the game school the Guildhall after six months, citing its intense, “crunch-time” work environment and “horrible” culture as reasons for leaving while also lambasting it for perpetuating those ideologies as the “gatekeepers for game creation” (98). I find this interesting when juxtaposed against Freeman’s discussion of *The Physics of Love*, which depicts the capitalistic phenomena of synching up temporalities to “direct the paltry amount of body energy left over after the extraction of surplus labor toward the consumption of ever more objects” (51). The mainstream gaming community promises entrance into game development via draconian work environments and supplements this work environment by promising members that they will aid in the creation of AAA blockbuster games that generate massive profit. Conversely, games made on Twine do not require such intensive working hours, and frequently generate no revenue, allowing creators and consumers to refuse assimilation into the chrononormative and capitalistic mainstream gaming system. Instead, alternatively-created games promote a culture of sharing and cultivating, allowing producers like Anthropy and Porpentine to offer the games for free on their personal websites, asking for donations only to further their work. Twine promotes usage by amateurs and casual gamers and allows artists to create and distribute games for free, resulting in a queer subversion of the capitalistic endeavors of the mainstream industry. The two games I will now discuss are both Twine games, made by queer individuals who utilize the developing software to establish a unique gaming voice that resists heteronormativity in the gaming community.

⁵² A prime example of this is Epic Games’ Cliff Bleszinski (known by many in the gaming community as “CliffyB”), a game developer who got his start making independent games before developing the infamous Unreal Engine, a game engine that powered the *Gears of War* franchise. *Gears of War* is a third person shooter franchise, known for its gratuitous violence and hypermasculine protagonists; according to Wikipedia it has amassed over \$1 billion in revenue. Bleszinski, at the time of writing, has 587,000 followers on Twitter and a net worth of \$15 million.

Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is a 10-second long Twine game that leaves the player little margin for error or for choice.⁵³ *Queers in Love* is set at the conclusion of an unknown world ending for unknown reasons, and you play as an individual with an unspecified gender facing their girlfriend at the precipice of the apocalypse. It consists of a series of rapid-fire text prompts, forcing the player to read and decide at a lightning-fast pace. If you cannot manage to make the finite series of decisions before the ten seconds expires, the world ends, and you have failed to love/kiss/fuck/hug your girlfriend (Fig. 2.4).

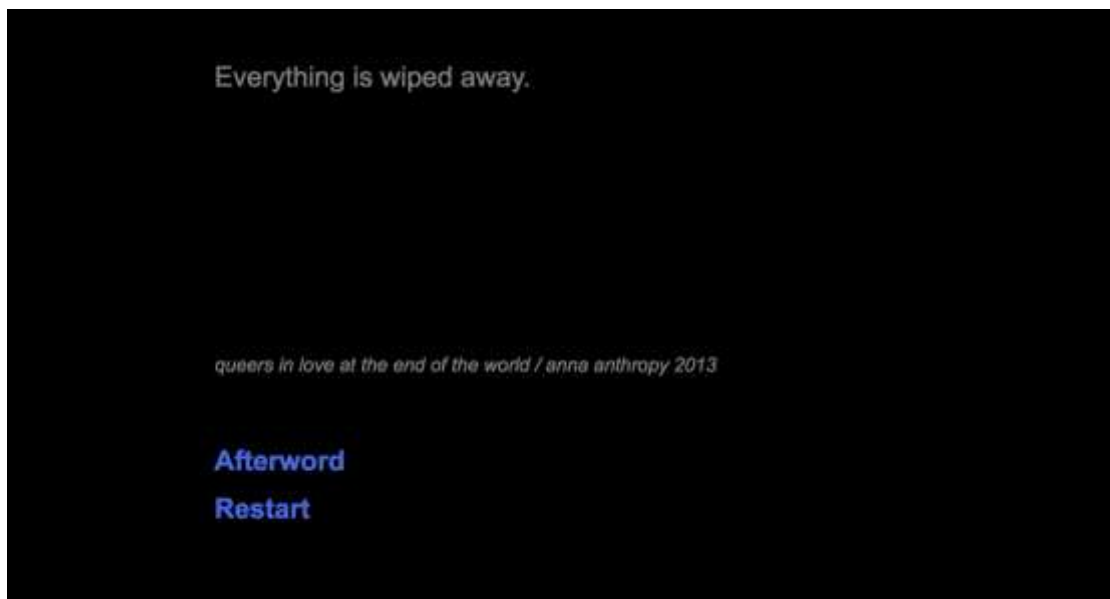


Fig 2.4 - *Queers in Love* final screen. Anna Anthropy, 2013. Author's screenshot.

It's nearly impossible to not fail unless you wildly click the embedded links without reading them, and even if you manage to read through the entire text, there's an intense feeling of dissatisfaction upon completion. You cannot prevent the world from ending, nor can you make decisions that allow your character to properly emote in the stunted time frame. However, the restricted temporality packs in myriad romantic and sexual references, including an option to "put your hand up [your girlfriend's] skirt," and pleasure her, causing the world to end "not with a whimper" but

⁵³ *Queers in Love at the End of the World* will be referred to as *Queers in Love* from this point forward.

“with a bang” (*Queers in Love*). This queer pleasure in the face of death, coupled with the game’s restrictiveness, confuses and distorts notions of success and happiness—you can successfully make your girlfriend climax, but the world will end immediately after. This invokes notions of Halberstam’s queer art of failure, whereby the game’s arrested temporality, inevitable ending, and morbid yet sexual narrative destabilizes notions of success and queers the gaming experience.

Porpentine’s *Ultra Business Tycoon III* is a Twine game that is both an alleged co-option of business training software (and subsequent subversion of capitalism) and a prime example of the capabilities of Twine-based games.⁵⁴ Porpentine is the openly transgendered creator of irreverent games like *Crystal Warrior Ke\$ha* that embody Halberstam’s queer notions of “privileging the naïve or nonsensical” (*Queer Failure* 12).⁵⁶ In *Tycoon III*, she presents a game that requires you to obtain 1 million dollars of an unspecified currency so that you can gain entry to the illusive Mammon Gate. Porpentine presents a fragmented version of an alleged 90’s work-based educational game, a presentation that is further disjointed by the text-based Twine format—the opening sequence runs through text prompts that mirror the loading of a typical, visual video game: you click “GENERATE BUSINESS WORLD” and a series of text prompts appear, including “GENERATING SKYSCRAPERS” and “MODULATING CAPITALISM” (*Tycoon III*). This humorous fracturing of stereotypical gameplay experiences (the opening is a take on the well-known wait for a game to fully render, or load and smooth out its graphics) sets the tone for the rest of the game, which oscillates between jocular jabs at capitalism and psychedelic scenes of violence by toxic sludge or swarms of bees. Player death is frequent (I died several times before giving up for the day) and much like the other games referenced in this chapter, present Halberstamian concepts of failure

⁵⁴ *Ultra Business Tycoon III* will be referred to as *Tycoon III* from this point forward.

⁵⁵ Porpentine daims *Ultra Business Tycoon III* is a 1990’s edutainment business simulation that she discovered, hacked, and ported into Twine. Many in the community believe this claim is to further the game’s anti-capitalist theme and is not rooted in truth.

⁵⁶ Her Tumblr page includes a 2014 text post that is simply the phrase “possessed by Satan to become a transgender.”

as a means of resisting heteronormative notions of success. *Tycoon III* takes economic failure a step further than the other games, situating capitalistic success as the end goal and peppering the path to it with redundant, violent death—presenting a commentary on the perils and ridiculousness of capitalism and those who are consumed by it (see Fig 2.5).

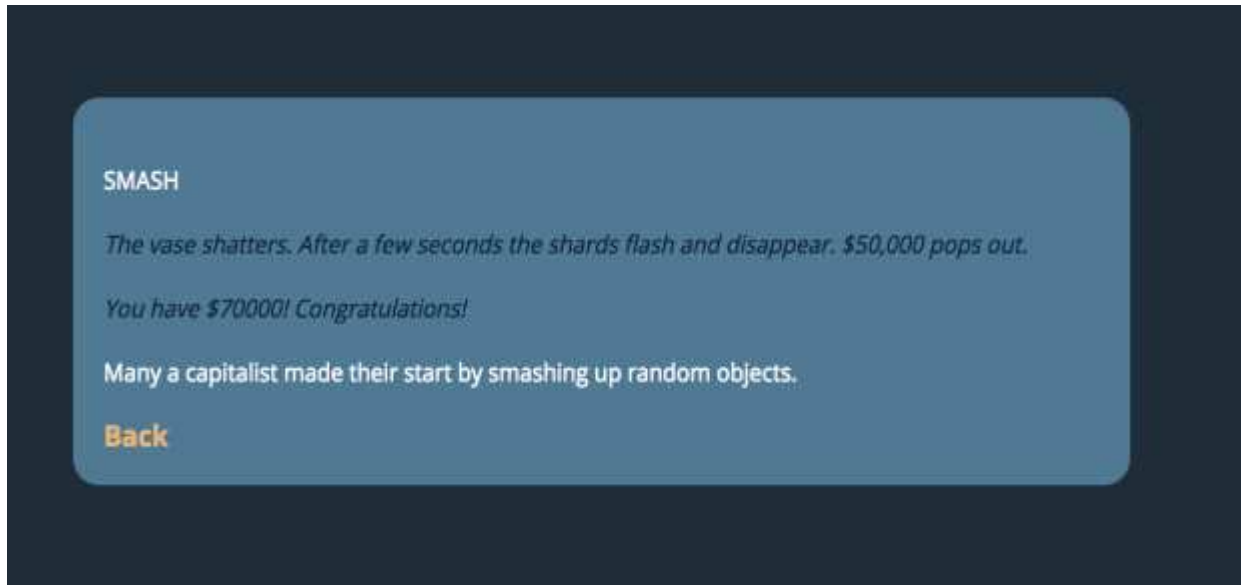


Fig. 2.5 - *Ultra III*'s jocular anti-capitalism theme. Porpentine, 2013. Author's screenshot.

Tycoon III also comments on the nature of contemporary video games, with myriad references to “ridiculous video game music” and mainstream games’ frequent deletion of characters featured on their box’s cover art from actual gameplay (*Tycoon III*). With the repetition of the world “trash” peppered throughout the game, and the your death referred to as you “[turning] into trash,” I am suggesting that Porpentine’s reworking of a popular video game style is a commentary on the current state of games—they are, for Porpentine and others not considered a part of the system, trash (*Ultra III*).⁵⁷ *Tycoon*’s narrative, format, and distribution methods (available for free play on

⁵⁷ *Ultra Business Tycoon III* references a bevy of “tycoon” or business simulation games that gained popularity in the late 90’s and early 2000’s including *Zoo Tycoon* and *Rollercoaster Tycoon*. These games mimicked business start-ups and required players to organize, design, and oversee amusement parks, zoos, and more.

Porpentine's website) allows Porpentine and her game to occupy a space of queer resistance to mainstream gaming and its capitalistic hegemony.

As referenced in Dunn's essay, true subversion and resistance comes from establishing unique methods of production and distribution, and forgoing economic gains for the sake of perpetuating art and sharing ideas. Like the DIY punk movement and its amateur recording studios, at-home zine design, and distribution amongst community members, the queer punk indie gaming movement realizes its subversive potential in unique ways of producing and distributing, propelled even further by technological advancements and the proliferation of the internet. Unlike indie games that feature queer themes but capitalize economically off of queer identifications, games made by queer developers that are given away to their community members offer up new conduits through which to resist and subvert the capitalistic dogma of the heteronormative gaming industry.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have identified the similarities between the queercore punk movement that splintered off of a heterosexist punk music and art scene and a subset of the independent gaming community that I have dubbed the queer punk indie gaming movement. I have traced the similarities between the ideologies of the queercore movement and those of the queer punk indie gaming movement, and have identified the resistance to heteronormativity and heterosexism depicted in games made by queer game developers. Utilizing ethnographic studies as well as queer theoretical frameworks, I established the inherent queerness of punk subcultures and contemporary gamers, based primarily in their perpetuation of childish lifestyles and resistance to capitalistic commodification. I then identified the perpetuation of Benjaminian progressive cultural production within the DIY punk scene and its parallels in the queer punk indie gaming community. I unpacked this further via a glance at a free-to-use development software and its implications when read through a queer theoretical lens.

The goal of this chapter was to identify the myriad parallels between the two aforementioned movements and classify their modes of resistance to heteronormativity and capitalism. Using *Gone Home* as an example of how not to resist mainstream co-option of both indie gaming and queer identifications, I juxtapose it against smaller, simpler, cheaper games created by queer-identifying developers. It is important to note that despite the problematic aspects of *Gone Home*'s distribution and cost to the gamer, I still consider the game and its contents to be a valid attempt to present a game with a unique, queer narrative and alternative gameplay. When compared to the other games discussed in this chapter, however, *Gone Home* falls short in terms of successfully deploying resistance to the mainstream gaming industry.

This chapter is an amalgamation of different critical approaches that include ethnographic studies, studies on progressive cultural production, and queer theoretical frameworks. This is an

intentional melding, one deployed in order to properly depict the symptoms of queer punk subcultural production in punk music and in queer punk indie games, and the ways in which that production resists dominant hegemony and capitalistic co-option.

CONCLUSION

What I have sought to accomplish in this work is fourfold: 1) the identification of cultural and artistic variation within the independent gaming community; 2) Gothic, goth, and punk subcultural influences within that community; 3) the identification and examination of a queer punk independent gaming subculture; and 4) establish, via queer theoretical frameworks and notions of countercultural resistance, the queer potential and realization of said potential in indie games. Subscribing to Walter Benjamin's notions of the culturally progressive artist and queer theorist's conceits of successful deployments of queer resistance to heteronormativity, we can mine contemporary indie games for successful manifestations of these ideas.

In my first chapter, I suggested that, despite the existence of queer Gothic themes and a unique gameplay style in *Amnesia: Dark Descent*, its reliance on the traditional Gothic convention of a reinstatement of heteronormativity and the subsequent destruction of homosexual desire detracts from its queer potential. I also discuss *Gone Home*, and how I believe it is a successful contemporization of queer Gothic literary conventions. However, I reference how it garnered an incredible amount of mainstream attention and revenue, a fact contrary to both indie gaming and queer theory conventions. I believe this represents *Gone Home*'s failure to conform to the queer punk ideologies it ties into its narrative. Therefore, I am suggesting that both *Amnesia* and *Gone Home* are situated closer to heteronormativity on a hypothetical scale of queer resistance in gaming.

This, coupled with work by game studies theorists like Nadav Lipkin, led me to suggest that there are signs of a splintering within the indie gaming movement that results in three distinctive groups: 1) those that create large-scale, indie games as a part of an entirely independent development organization; 2) those that create large-scale indie games as part of an "indie" gaming company whose roots lie in mainstream corporate gaming monoliths; and 3) those that create intimate, small-scale, free

games as an individual developer with no ties to a larger organization.⁵⁸ It is in this last group where I find the most loyal representations of queer punk resistance, Benjaminian culturally progressive products, and other forms of queer opposition referenced in Halberstam and Freeman's work.

This is precisely why I argued that *Sabbat* exemplifies queer, punk, and Gothic resistance with its unique form, queer content, and anti-capitalistic distribution methods. And the works and methods highlighted in my second chapter, including the development software Twine and the work of queer-identified game developers, offer up methods of indie game development, form, and narrative that are loyal to queer resistance and progressive cultural production. By comparing independent games and developers with movements like the Gothic literary genre and punk and goth subcultures, I seek to connect their dissatisfaction with the mainstream and identify it within contemporary independent gaming. The inherent queerness of the subcultures referenced in this work can be unpacked further using contemporary queer theory that focuses on the queer art of failing and resisting heteronormative life goals, a holistic approach I believe successfully highlights the subversiveness of the movements, the art, and the communities.

When indie game developers splintered off of the mainstreaming gaming community, they unknowingly created yet another heteronormative cultural movement, one that displays biases against women, queers, and other marginalized members of the community. I find this to be an almost exact replication of the emergence of the (heterosexist) punk movement from the mainstream music scene of the 1970's. The parallels continue when we look at the queercore punk movement, whose ideologies and artistic approaches I find littered amongst the contemporary indie gaming scene. This is why I have attempted to define that faction of the indie gaming community as a queer punk indie gaming movement, with roots in the queercore punk movement and artistic demonstrations of queer

⁵⁸ Examples of this second group are not referenced in detail in this paper, but for those interested in it, see Nadav Lipkin's essay "Examining Indie's Independence: The Meaning of 'Indie' Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Co-Optation."

theoretical frameworks. While there has been work on the queerness of an indie gaming scene populated by developers like Anthropy, Kopas, Brice, Porpentine, and ohnopproblems, there is no academic work that draws a direct link between the queercore punk movement and the movement led by the aforementioned developers. I believe it is important to identify these parallels in order to establish a queer punk indie gaming movement, especially in the face of a subcultural community that continually resists diversification.

The parallels between the two aforementioned movements are further expanded when one looks at their similar distribution methods and resistance to capitalistic endeavors. The DIY punk movement with its at-home recording, free CDs, and cut-and-paste band posters, is an ideal manifestation of Benjaminian notions of progressive cultural production. The DIY queer punk indie gaming movement and its preference for game development platforms like Twine, which require simply an internet connection and a functioning computer, is the gaming equivalent of the DIY punk scene, and therefore the gaming version of Benjamin's successful progressive producer. Within these anti-capitalist models of game development, creators can imbue their games with queer narratives and gameplay styles that resist dominant, AAA styles. This allows these anti-heteronormative ideas to be disseminated via equally anti-heteronormative distribution methods.

Simply put, the gaming community is a complex web of interweaving various ideologies, heterosexist and otherwise, and despite steadily increasing critical interest in them, it would be unwise to simply look at mainstream, AAA games or financially-successful indie games when discussing them academically. Queer theorists and subcultural movements provided me with crucial critical frameworks to both identify and expand upon a queer punk indie gaming community, one which I believe offers easily accessible games that can be easily disseminated. This easy dissemination, and the fact that they are created by openly queer developers and often contain queer, anti-heteronormative, and anarchist/anti-capitalism ideologies means that queer punk indie games have the potential to

radically disrupt and fragment the gaming community. Games like *Sabbat*, *dys4ia*, *Lim*, *Mainichi*, *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, and *Ultra Business Tycoon III* directly challenge heterosexism in the industry and those who support #GamerGate, proving that, despite Roger Ebert's opinion, video games are art, and in some cases, culturally progressive, queer punk art.

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GAME OVER