Post-Mortem: Beyond the Binary
Project Title: Beyond the Binary
Developer: Noah Porter
Platform: Unreal Engine (2.5D Platformer)
Development Timeframe: Spring 2025

Overview

Beyond the Binary is a 2.5D platformer designed to explore the evolving and deeply personal nature of human sexuality. The game seeks to challenge traditional binary portrayals by introducing mechanics and environments that reflect fluidity, ambiguity, and emotional resonance. Throughout development, I aimed to build an experience that was not only mechanically engaging but also personally meaningful—both for players and myself as a designer.

The game features symbolic levels such as the **Binary Playground**, the **Mirror Garden**, and **Echo Cavern**, each of which serves as a metaphor for stages of identity, reflection, and interpersonal connection. Mechanics such as environmental morphing, shifting gravity, and magnetized attractions were designed to embody emotional states rather than literal objectives.

What Went Well

- **Concept Clarity:** From the beginning, the core idea of exploring sexuality as a fluid, evolving experience resonated both personally and thematically. This clarity made design decisions more focused and purposeful.
- **Visual & Metaphorical Cohesion:** The symbolism in the game—from the Shame Box in the Binary Playground to the Echo NPCs in the cavern—created a sense of emotional depth that complemented the gameplay. The environments told a story without relying heavily on exposition.
- **Mentorship & Iteration:** Working under the guidance of Professor Greg Bayles provided invaluable structure and feedback. Our regular discussions helped push the game toward deeper thematic integrity.
- **Playtesting Insights:** The early summer playtest offered meaningful insights into how players interpreted the game's metaphors. Some players shared personal emotional responses, which affirmed the game's intention to invite reflection and not dictate meaning.

What Was Challenging

- **Balancing Mechanics with Narrative Ambiguity:** One of the toughest aspects was making the game feel emotionally coherent while avoiding overly prescriptive storytelling. Some players wanted clearer "objectives," while others appreciated the openness. Striking that balance is still an ongoing process.

- **Scope Management:** I had ambitious plans for the number of levels and mechanics, but time constraints made it necessary to prioritize a smaller selection of levels. This taught me a lot about meaningful reduction.
- **Learning New Skills:** I have never tried to design a game solo before. I knew I would have a lot to learn, but I didn't realize how much I would really by googling to learn. I think learning how to implement mechanics in Unreal Engine was the biggest difficulty for me. I am an artist, and can build wonderful things, but when it came to Blueprint, I was a novice

---

Personal Takeaways

This project helped me understand how to design not just for interaction, but for **emotional impact**. I learned how to convey internal experiences—like shame, reflection, and connection—through space, pacing, and subtle feedback rather than direct dialogue. It also pushed me to reflect on my own journey with sexuality and how games can be used as tools for empathy, exploration, and self-discovery.

Developing *Beyond the Binary* was both a technical and emotional challenge, but one that I found immensely rewarding. I now feel more prepared to design games that don't just entertain, but provoke thought and cultivate meaning. This game is a beginning—not just of a project, but of the kind of work I want to do.

Next Steps:
- Continue refining mechanics for clarity and responsiveness and finish final assets for levels.
- Explore opportunities to present or showcase the project (GDC, itch.io, student showcases).
- Begin concept development for new levels exploring themes like desire, intimacy, and relational identity.
- Prepare for official playtest before the summer for UROP.

Submitted by:
Noah Porter
University of Utah
Spring 2025