over the others. Some designers design for only one of those glances. Tom says he wants to design for all three.

Super Pinata Pro counts up candy in the background; Kozilek jumps up and down to Luftrausers. That's it. That's the final piece.

Tom hugs me goodbye. We promise to see each other more often for drinks.

The party is finishing up. Alice, George, Ricky and Pat are cleaning up, I am swept away by the plans for the afterparty, where my body collapses, ill and exhausted, into orange juice. In the morning, when I get up, George isn't around. Alice takes me for brunch, but, as fate would have it, we end up in a Nandos. It is Alice's first one. She says she was pleased with how The Wild Rumpus went. Nothing went wrong, although they didn't show International Karate +, and The Beast was out of commission. George and her did good. The whole team did good. It was one of the biggest and best. She asks me if I'm excited to be leaving, and I say I'm afraid. But I will miss her. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. I had to kill London. But I did it. I feel like London is now just a blip on a world map. Edinburgh, my second, more beloved nemesis, waits on the scroll. STAGE CLEARED.

Drinking in bars with Karla Zimonja

Gone Home developer Karla Zimonja is yelling at me over a glass of rosé wine in a woozy backstreet diner, the kind where everyone spits their late-night accounting frustrations over foods so greasy they stain wooden tables.

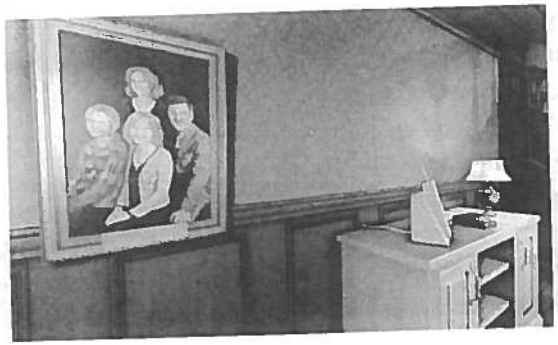
This month, I have been a passenger through Northern England and London while preparing to leave. This is a mostly meditative post; if it seems to lack the spirit of the last it is because it's not really a piece of 'embedded journalism': this will begin earnestly next month. I have been preparing to leave, giving away my room to a new tenant, giving away my clothes, applying for press visas. Karla Zimonja, co-founder of The Fullbright Company and co-creator of the multi-award-winning game Gone Home came to visit the UK to give a talk, and our time together was rushed between meetings, events, friends, storms and floods. But there was still time to talk about women's nefarious agendas.

The Little Sisters of Bioshock can either be cured and made pure, or killed and harvested.

There's a fear that lives in women, and it's the fear that we are not normal. Stories are usually written by men and women about men; because it's normal to think men are interesting,

they can be both hypocritical and heroic. Though films like Young Adult do exist where the narrative follows a woman who is fundamentally broken yet headstrong, they are few. It's thought that women cannot be versatile: we are either beautiful or disgusting. Madonna/whore. When women are uncouth or anti-establishment, we are not celebrated, we are abhorred. When we are not pretty we are useless. When we don't care we are dangerous. Stories do this to us. Stories that talk about us as if we are an image and not people.

Gone Home, a game with narrative written by Steve Gaynor and edited by Karla Zimonja, is different. It is a game that has no bodies in it. It's just an environment, one that happens to be a 3D house. There are pictures of people – though very few. We get a glimpse of how Kaitlin and Sam Greenbriar look from their family portrait. But there are no non-player characters in the Gone Home house. Our own player character's body is weightless, invisible. It is part of the reason that it initially feels so uncomfortable there: there is an absence of physical bodies within the game, and to us, that is all women are. They are physical bodies. They are 3D objects we look at; they are usually not the narrative in our heads. They are not the Hemingways or the Chaucers. Women rarely get their narratives canonised. Women are usually not in charge of their own stories, and when they are, they are ignored, because they are not canon.



Gone Home didn't have the budget for 3D rigged women, which is the argument big budget studios also give for not including women characters. But Gone Home didn't include men's bodies either. The Fullbright Company designed to make people real without having to consider the one constraint that consistently objectifies and dehumanises women: the gaze of the player and a fixation on bodies.

Instead the discourse is given wholesale to women in direct contradiction to what usually happens. The first narrative discourse Gone Home indulges is to have one young woman leave another a note, seasoned with a kick of emotion, on the front door. The second is to have Sam's calm voice speak to you via audio diary. And suddenly, in your head, these young women are not invisible any more in the storm. They become people who are just like you.

*

'Steve doesn't have an "agenda",' she says on half-sleep. 'I HAVE A FUCKING "AGENDA". I want to help even out some of the inequality.'

I can't remember if she hit the table then; if she didn't let's just say she did. But I sat there thinking I was witnessing the terrible and wonderful.

'I HAVE A FUCKING "AGENDA".'

It felt like she'd reached into my body and plucked out a giant, sticky ball of elastic bands from my body, and with it all the tension of the past few years. I have a fucking agenda, I said silently over and over to myself. I have a fucking agenda. Everyone has a fucking agenda. I couldn't believe she'd said it so readily. These are the sorts of things we whisper in our sleep but never consciously, where people can hear.

*

I think about how many people I know who try to brush off the fact that their 'agenda' might be something that exists.

That it might be to tell a story that isn't just the same as everyone else's. The very idea of being accused of an agenda in itself: what a horrifying prospect. The idea that people might want to be heard! It was as if Karla, right there, had screamed at the top of her voice over almost everyone in the games industry. I have an agenda. I have a fucking agenda. I imagine her standing in front of an audience made up of everyone in attendance at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, and pointing at people: 'YOU have an agenda. And YOU have an agenda. And YOU have one too. I HAVE A FUCKING AGENDA.'

But Karla is quiet now, and is eating some chips. We make delirious ideas come to fruition: we should write a story about two women: one a fat, sexually vociferous woman, and one woman an acerbic androgynous wit, and together they will take over the narrative. Later I realise we have merely described a video game French and Saunders.

We went to the Animex Festival in Middlesbrough, where Karla had asked me to interview her in front of an audience about her work. I'd met her briefly for the first time at GDC a year ago, and this was only our second meeting. We get on well, because I think we both have a prickly uncertainty about our lives and a will to make jokes about the absurd. We joked about tampons, toilet rolls and pillows with skeletons in front of large audiences of students, and we showed trailers of Gun Home in between our talking about how Christmas Duck initially had too many polygons, as well as some useful stuff like how to use space and narrative.

Later in the bowels of a Mexican-themed bar over margaritas and bass-heavy music, I grill her on her beginnings. Karla started work in the games industry around 2000, working in animation for Turbine. Later she would go on to work on Bioshock 2: Minerva's Den at 2K Marin, doing narrative and 2D art. When Steve asked if she wanted to move to Portland, Oregon, to start The Fullbright Company

with him, it seemed like a good time for a change, and so she moved into a house where the team all lived and worked.

'I wasn't in games originally, I was going to be in animation,' Karla says, the music vibrating over the banquette. 'I didn't know anything about games. I liked it, I still sort of like it, but it is a little more abstract.

'My dad used to make board games when I was a kid. Toy board games for me to mess with. And card games.' Karla says her dad recently made a political board game and sent it to the Fullbright house to test. 'We grew up playing Euro board games,' she says. 'There was a German game called World Trip which was about visiting a certain number of cities around the world map, and you had to stick push pins in the map where you'd been – it was actually kind of adorable. There was a game about ... I can't quite remember – it was a square board but the playing area was circular, and you would place cardboard trees in spots around. They had little clips for them so that they would stand up. And there was a wolf, and you had to stay out of his sight by staying behind the trees, and you had to try to get to a thing and pick up objects and stuff, and it was really cute. Maybe it was called "Pass auf, der Wolf!"? Which I remember being charming.'

I ask her if they have influenced the way she thinks about design: the mechanical parts of games, how play is mediated.

'Probably,' she says. 'It is really hard to know. I totally just took this stuff for granted. It never would have occurred to me to be "let's think about why we're playing board games in this family and how they work". It took me until much later to learn some design ideas, and learn to think about things productively.'

'How much animation do you still do?' I ask.

'I kind of burned out on it,' she says. 'This is extremely trivial, but when the book opens at the end of Gone Home, I did that – the pages sort of squoosh up. My background's in

character animation. It's all balancing sides and secondary motions and stuff. All that kind of shit. I don't really do that much any more. I like to pay attention to it. I think, something isn't quite right about this, and I will ignore a medium until something interesting happens. That happens to me sometimes. I feel like finally people are getting the hang of stuff in Flash, even though it's been around forever. Maybe they're rediscovering it or something.

'I decided to do animation when I was in college. You get one year that's just foundation, all the basic shit that everybody has to go through,' Karla explains, before saying that was when she became interested in animation and chose it as her major. 'Because I went to art school I got zero basic education after that; it was all art-based. The foundation stuff was all figure drawing, sculpture, colour theory. I had to apply and send a portfolio. Going into my school, going into illustration, was sort of the default. Everyone went into that bin. [Animation] seemed to make sense at the time because it was just combining things ... I think I remember feeling like there is potential to have a job in animation rather than like sculpture or textiles, that stuff is pretty hard.

'I made all kinds of goofy stuff,' she goes on. 'At the beginning we did projects that were quite regimented, like rotoscoping, a cutout animation – say you have a little person and the torso's a piece and the upper legs are a piece and the bottom legs are a piece and the foot's a piece and you slowly move that across, and you slowly give it motion without having to redraw it. We did stop motion. I have little projects of these and they're all mouldering in 16mm in my parents' garage. My junior project in film was this really goofy thing where I got these two guys who worked with [me] at my work study job, and they were older than the students so I was totally proud of myself. I dressed them up in four different outfits and had this narrative which was that they were all after one thing, which was – like, which

of course – because I was a derivative thinker and I still am, was a suitcase. However the one funny thing I did was that at the end when you open the suitcase, inside it was all the clothes they were wearing, so it was at least a little bit less dumb than it had to be. That film is called Octoglomerate.'

Karla tells me her influences at this time were Philip K Dick and Geof Darrow, hypermasculine hyperdetailed things. 'A lot of respecting only craft,' she says, sounding disappointed in herself. 'This was before Tarantino got really shitty. It's before I stopped liking him. I liked classic violent things. I was way better at dealing with that ... Nowadays I care more about interesting characters than I do about intricate plots and clever things. I loved the Coens when I was in college more than anything – *The Hudsucker Proxy* was my favourite because it's nothing but craft. It's solid. Everything is planned out perfectly and really cutely arranged. I thought that was like the best. I am pleased to say that I no longer think that way.'

I say her later growth of interest in character-led narrative must have been reflected in her work on Minerva's Den.

Art Karla made for Minerva's Den.

'Games are weird because they're sort of a world that you can work within – other things are sort of like that but ... how can I say it? Games are also more open-ended, and you have to worry about the world more by default in games. How things are put together. It's more about constructing a space in which things can happen. I understand editing

and some amount of filmmaking, and it's really weird how people compare them all the time.'

I say I think games are much more about theatre than they are about film; the possibility space is much more explicit in both, they work live, they have an audience participating, there's a performative aspect. Steve Gaynor in particular gave a talk at GDC 2013's Level Design track about theatrical techniques used to direct player attention in Bioshock, for instance, things such as lighting, sound and movement as an indication of where the player should look and navigate. I think theatre in the round has much more to do with games than we've previously given credit for. Wrestling games, for example, seem like such a natural proposition. The player also often performs a role, as do NPCs.

'You really need to go to Sleep No More,' Karla says, with finality. 'When you are in the US. If I'm there, I will take you there.' As far as I can see, Sleep No More is a live theatre event that takes place in New York City, but I don't want to spoil it for myself too much. I am planning on travelling there in July. (I never do get to Sleep No More.)

Just before we got on the train back south from Animex, we got coffee, Karla bought Bakewell tarts (a British delicacy), and I told her I thought she was the closest likeness to a Daniel Clowes character I have ever met. She frowned, and then completely opened up. 'When I was a kid, when I was a teenager, I didn't realise that it was possible for me to identify with media. It was just like a foreign concept ... There wasn't a lot of stuff – stuff that influenced me – that I could actually identify with, and I just didn't like ... the concept didn't make any sense to me until I read *Ghost World* when I was in high school, and I was like, "Oh holy shit. This is actually for real, legit relatable." It was really strange.'

Our hotel room had some strange guests.

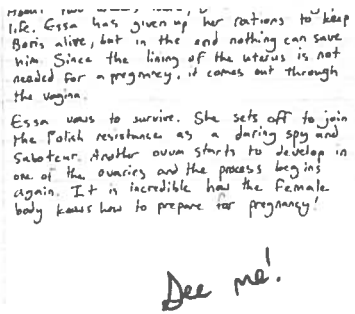
'Isn't it weird though,' I say, 'that a guy [Daniel Clowes] would be the person to write it?'

'Yes,' Karla says, sipping coffee, 'and another thing – *Heavenly Creatures*, which I saw in college, also about women, also written by a man – relatable. And that's the only thing I can think of offhand. And this was before I actually got to read good women writers – Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood and stuff. Because you know, I would read Philip K Dick and he couldn't write a female character to save his life – except *Man in the High Castle* which has the only good female character he's ever written. And so ... there was just like, nothing there. The idea of a role model was just kind of non-existent in the media that I tried to consume. I'm trying to think of what my conception of what I wanted to be was, and I think it was just kind of weird, androgynous invisible person, because I just wanted to not have the shitty lady trappings, and obviously it's not possible [for me] to just be a guy.'

I tell her I think a lot of my friends related to *Ghost World*. It's like the idea that girls could be sweary and be interesting and cool ...

'It's not quite that,' Karla says. 'It's more just like, we're shitty and we hate everything, this is somewhere I can actually see myself in the world, just kind of hate everything in the world, because that's how we used to operate back

then. It was just kind of like, everything is basically dumb, but like, oh wait, that's me. It had never happened to me before. I was like, seventeen before that happened. Which is crazy.'


life. Essa has given up her rations to keep Boris alive, but in the end nothing can save him. Since the lining of the uterus is not needed for a pregnancy, it comes out through the vagina.

Essa vows to survive. She sets off to join the Polish resistance as a daring spy and saboteur. Another ovum starts to develop in one of the ovaries and the process begins again. It is incredible how the female body knows how to prepare for pregnancy!

Dee me!

I recall Sam's homework from Gone Home – the one about reproduction, where she winds a particularly earnest and somewhat imaginative narrative around the boring information about ovaries that she has to regurgitate. It ended in me laughing hard over how absurd she'd made the task. Karla's teenage 'I hate everything in the world' is deftly reflected in this one piece of homework. It's a masterpiece of satire, something that really tells you about Sam as a person, makes her much more relatable.

Karla asks me how I feel about characters I identified with. I tell her I probably didn't read *Ghost World* until two years ago when I moved in with comics artist Julia Scheele, and I feel similarly about it.

'Maybe this is more common than I think,' she says. She asks me about what I identified with growing up.

I say I always found solace in *Absolutely Fabulous*. For Eddy and Patsy, performing the role of 'femininity' wasn't so important as just being selfish; it was how male rock stars were supposed to behave, and Eddy and Patsy were doing it in their old age. Their outrageous sense of entitlement was something I so admired, because when you're a young woman you're persuaded you should sit down, shut up and

look nice, but Eddy and Patsy took what they wanted loudly, and frankly didn't much give a shit whether their make-up looked shite after falling over themselves drunk to get it. They behaved more like the Rolling Stones than any of the so-called women role models I'd been presented with. And they were funnier than any women I'd ever seen on TV before. And they were a cast of all women.

'I've often found that British television is way better at depicting people who look like actual people,' Karla says. 'Like, often you can't be in media unless you're an attractive lady.'

Much of this conversation about *Absolutely Fabulous* has taken hold, because we buy a gratuitous bottle of Cava and two Creme Eggs to consume on the train back south.

As if to carry on the theme of women at a war council, we plan to meet Rhianna Pratchett, writer on Mirror's Edge, Tomb Raider and other impressive things, in the British Museum for afternoon tea that week.

Rhianna also introduced me to bubble tea, which is weird and cool and rad.

Rhianna, over our dainty sandwiches and cute macarons, brings out the big guns. She has written some of the new Red Sonja comics, and the artist Naniiebim/ Louise Ho is illustrating. She tells me about Gerd, her warrior-turned-blacksmith.

Courtesy of Naniiebim/Louise Ho

Now this, I think, THIS is having a fucking agenda. We've got this. We've got this.

Embed with ... Tim Rogers

An adventure in Oakland, California, living with game designer and prolific internet voice Tim Rogers.

Alleycat Blues

It's late and dark and Oakland, California. Tim Rogers' apartment glows with pastel light from the wall-size TV which shows his game Videoball in large font. Outside, the air is dry and breezy and lazy with the smell of freesias.

'Let's get In 'n' Out at the airport,' Starbaby hums, Jack Nicholson-like, his black mop looming in the pools cast from the blue lights that decorate Tim's apartment. Starbaby has a lot of teeth in his mouth; a personality like a Jack-in-the-box where the Jack is just knives. Jazzpunk's Luis Hernandez stands nearby, his long dark hair and camera in his hand, agreeing because we're hungry and they've been playing Videoball all day with the sort of people everyone at the Game Developers' Conference last week would recognise. Tim's apartment is now quiet and a mess of pizza boxes, beer and energy drinks. I've been asleep all day, am drowsy. Vlambeer's Rami Ismail's bellowing laughter echoes through chambers of my skull.

Embed with ... Brendon Chung

I escaped to LA to stay with Brendon Chung, who is the centre of a small group of developers who work together in a space called Glitch City LA. Brendon makes, under the guise of 'Blendo Games', some of the most interesting PC games in our PCscape. Fellow Glitcher and Hyper Light Drifter guy Teddy Diefenbach was my stringer.

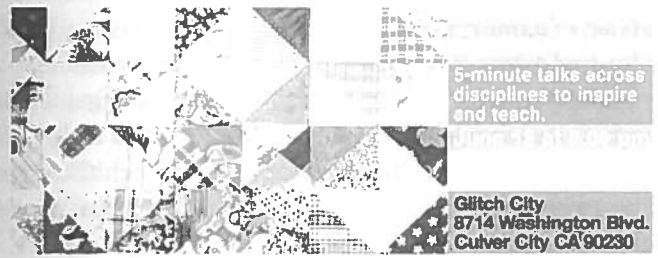
I got out of E3 like Dufresne out of shit and went straight to Glitch City Los Angeles to bathe in something that hasn't got the stink of commercialism all over it, and it was there in all its post-E3 glory: Glitch City Demo Night II.

A night of diverse people talking about their inspirations and giving advice, held in their little venue off West Washington Boulevard in Culver City. The lights are dim, the people are mild and friendly, IGF Chairman Brandon Boyer slinks in the back with a glint in his eye and a melting half-smile like something good is going to happen. Talks that are five minutes long, are positive, and don't sell anything. Fuck selling anything for now. There's beer, and later the Indiecade afterparty.

The speakers are heartfelt, charismatic even, the last three in particular illustrating something I see so little of through the lens of the games press. Game creators have talents that aren't just making games, and producing them can be the least important aspect of who they are. They are bringing what they learn from the arts in other areas to make their work spectacular.

It is easier to see people as people here, in this space. It's easier to look at people within a broader context, as people who live in a broader culture. They aren't just this

one obsession. Your life does not need to be in an eternal wrassle with the concept or purity of the word 'game' in order to produce something good. Here games seem less the obsessive-compulsive burden of one person, but the shared process of people supporting each other.



Glitch City banner for the Demo Night

The third-to-last speaker Lisa Brown, for example, radiates a kind of energy that if you tried to ignore it would just sneak up and noogie you. A designer at Insomniac Games, she also spends time on smaller projects at Glitch City. Glitch City isn't just a place for people who consider themselves 'indie', but a place for people who share similar values of artistic cross-pollination.

Not only is Lisa an excellent presenter, she's also capable of adorable, emotive illustrations, and sometimes those illustrations include the level design dragon that lives in her brain.

Nina Freeman, visiting from New York, presented a talk on vignette games. For her, vignette games are an extension of poetry, her first love, and she reads out her favourite poem. Games that can paint mood or feeling are important to her.

Though he's known primarily for his work programming Hyper Light Drifter, Teddy Diefenbach is a trained singer and studied music. To finish the night, he wrote a song about his anguish reading internet comments on his solo game project, Kyoto Wild, and then sung it to the Glitch

City crowd. Though I've known Teddy for years, since we met as Conference Associates at our first Game Developers Conference, I never knew he could sing quite like this.

The shared cooperative studio space at Glitch City isn't a unique idea, but it does play host to game creators who go out of their way to be welcoming and support a community – not just of game developers, but any kind of creator. After it was formed a year ago, it was an accident that the community was populated with people who primarily make games, but the space welcomes any kind of artist. 'Glitch Knitty', for example, is an event that happened in the Glitch City space on the twentieth of April. People were invited to come to knit, crochet and cross-stitch together.

There's a healthy diet of not-videogames going on. This will become the most pleasant realisation, one that happens over and over, for the next two weeks.

Brendon Chung, better known on the internet as Blendo Games, is the talented, unmurdery Godfather of Glitch City LA. I know this because Teddy tells me when I arrive, 'If you know Brendon, you get in. All you need to do is know Brendon.'

I got in because of Teddy, so that's the first thing you need to know. That Teddy isn't always right.

The second thing you need to know is that I wanted to write about Brendon. This isn't because I thought Teddy is uninteresting (he's making two games at once, can programme like a motherfucker, is trying to make a game that approximates Bushido Blade and he might do it, he can sing R&B better than almost any man I have ever met). It isn't because I didn't think anyone else at Glitch wasn't worthy of attention. It's because I had never met Brendon, and didn't know anything about Brendon apart from that he made Thirty Flights Of Loving, one of my favourite games. You have to indulge your own curiosity sometimes.

Brendon is currently making a game called Quadrilateral

Cowboy out of Glitch City, and, along with other founding members of Glitch City such as Ben Esposito (Unfinished Swan), Alex Preston (Hyper Light Drifter), and Seiji Tanaka (TURBOCATS), is primarily responsible for bringing people together here. It's on a very wide quiet street in Culver City. The ceiling is pinned with large squares of yellow and grey fabric that give the workspace a tent-like feel. It is cool and quiet inside, and (this is important to a Scottish writer) has tea and coffee-making facilities.

It also has a bathroom that has been painted with blackboard paint and is provided with large stubs of pastel-colour chalk.

Cara's foot 2k14

(I am left to wonder for a while how it is possible that it is not populated with various fancy drawings of phalluses, but Brendon tells me later that this is because they instituted an early ban. 'Pretty quickly we had to enact the no-penis rule, because it was getting out of control,' he explains. 'It was blossoming out of penises ... Okay, guys, very funny, it's on a motorcycle, it's eating cereal, it's doing all these things, very funny.')

A week later, all I have done is sit quietly in Glitch City silently cursing my broken baby, a MacBook with a malfunctioning hard disk drive cable. It is strange to have your only lifeline to the world be unresponsive, sitting there in silver shame, attempting to avoid my recriminating stares, and me cheating on it with a Chromebook. Brendon has been quietly modelling new objects for Quadrilateral Cowboy, which is his new project. I think I'd fallen in love with it before I ever played it. He tells me later one of his favourite filmmakers is Robert Rodriguez, and it all makes sense. Their DIY aesthetic is in tune.

It is a game Brendon calls twentieth-century cyberpunk. There are a number of 'jobs' you can undertake: something to steal, something to find, and you have a suitcase deck to hack switches, or a little remote robot on legs to do your bidding.

But instead of the worn neon *Bladerunner* cyberpunk universe, it is a square, classically Blendo Games-style universe in the vein of Thirty Flights Of Loving and Gravity Bone, his previous games. Things are often in sepia tones, cassette tapes lie around; there's a refined, almost screwball comedy feeling to the game – though the main characters are all women and they do not talk. There is a strong feeling of the working class around Quadrilateral Cowboy, an emphasis on what hands do, make and use. Objects feel solid; when you connect wires to hack something, twentieth-century style, they do so with a satisfying reel and click, the keys of your

suitcase deck sound like they respond to your instructions with the whole of their thickness. It's like you are in a quirky heist movie directed by Hitchcock, but Dr Emmett Brown from *Back to the Future* has given you your tools.

It is relaxing; at its heart it is a puzzle game that never punishes you for experimenting or making mistakes. It is about the joy of putting a set of instructions in and getting something spectacular out. It can make anyone feel like a hacker.

In fact, Quadrilateral Cowboy is a game so flexible in terms of what you can do with it that other people can get carried away with their experiments. One afternoon in Glitch City Teddy was procrastinating work on Hyper Light Drifter, and attempted to get the computer in Quadrilateral Cowboy to produce a series of beeps approximating a pop song.

It turned out not bad.

Brendon does live development streams every so often: he is very open about letting people see the inside of his code.

Part of me wonders if Brendon is very open about how he overcomes development problems because he, like me, grew up a PC gamer, in internet communities where knowledge of how to make things was not proprietary. Where conversations were often hostile but never uninteresting, where the extraction of what and why were important. Where Quake II ruled the world. (We play Quake II one afternoon at Glitch City; it has never lost its thrill.)

One night we go to dinner in a nice place in Culver City annoyingly named 'Lyfe Kitchen'. 'How did Glitch City start?' I ask Brendon, wondering if I can vandalise the 'y' out of 'Lyfe' on the front of the restaurant. In fact, perhaps the whole name.

'So I started with [a work group called] Strawberry Jam,' he explains. 'Every Sunday, a group of us would meet at a coffee shop and we would bring our laptops, and just start

working. And we liked it. Because it meant we were out of our houses. It meant we had to wear clothes. It meant we had to smell okay.'

I laugh in the way that only freelance writers can laugh at this statement.

'We were thinking, why don't we do Strawberry Jam more often instead of trying to bum a table every time?' he continues. 'So then some of the guys started actively searching. It was two groups of people, and Ben Esposito was the common bond [between] the two groups and brought the two groups together. That's when I met Casey Hunt and Alex Preston. And we were looking for a place, we found one in Downtown, which was scary and was in a bad part of town, then we found Glitch City.'

'And it happened to be across the street from the best burger place in LA,' I say.

Brendon's voice goes all low and surreptitious. 'It was, uh, a very good location. And Pinches' tacos ... We have a lot of tacos. I don't know if you've noticed.'

I have been eating tacos for lunch every day since I got here.

It's Teddy's birthday halfway through my stay here; I buy him the last copy of Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut from the Gamestop near Brendon's house. We buy beer and I laugh at almost every reaction Brendon and Teddy have at the game – it is extraordinary, as if David Lynch made a game – and with the leftover beer the next night, I sit with Brendon on the couch and interrogate him about his thoughts on making things.

Brendon Chung is easy in manner, mostly a quiet, unassuming and amiable person. Something both frustrating and wonderful about him is that you know that a good library of films and books sits in his head and he is keeping all of their secrets until he needs them for his work, and then it goes into whatever game he is making. He rarely starts

conversations, but he seems to like having them. It is natural for Brendon to think that games sit in a cultural spectrum like every other medium. He grew up in Los Angeles, where everyone, whether they want to or not, is exposed to movies, and his whole family is creative.

'My mom played a lot of music when she was younger,' Brendon explains to me. 'My dad liked drawing stuff when he was younger. My brother was film inclined. My sister works in graphic design.'

Brendon made his first game in elementary school in QBasic, and he's always been interested in games, but his need to make games never seemed like the only strand running through everything. He went to film school in San Diego; he's made films he's proud of.

He says when he began work at the late AAA game studio Pandemic here in LA, before they closed and he went solo, he found that everyone else was cross-disciplinary too. One of his teammates was an ex-TV cameraman, for example. Here in Glitch City, Teddy Diefenbach also has a film background; the same for Casey Hunt, who also works on Hyper Light Drifter.

For Brendon, making things seems like something necessary for him, but it doesn't really matter what medium they are in as long as he can keep making connections with people.

'There is something about having people play your stuff, enjoy your stuff,' he says to me. 'Knowing that you're making some sort of connection out there. For me, I love when someone makes something just for me. There are some movies out there that I think, you made this just for me. You made this movie to appeal straight to my senses. I like to try to make stuff for people who don't have stuff made for them.

'Gravity Bone was my attempt at "Can I make a story game?" It still had a lot of janky platforming and missions and objectives. But for Thirty Flights Of Loving I would try to

make Gravity Bone but without traditional gameplay things. Can I just make this thing that is purely about "feel a certain thing", make a certain mood in the world? Is that enough to make this something that someone will enjoy? Because not everyone likes shooting things ... The idea is: what if it was nothing but mood? Cut out exposition, cut out objectives, cut out everything that games do.'

'There's no dialogue in your games,' I say.

'Yeah. Other games do it. I don't like competing against other people. I'm not going to win against Planescape: Torment, or Bioware, whatever they do,' Brendon replies.

'Games are an underestimated means of telling a story,' I say. 'You can tell a story in a game just by making an action available.'

Brendon nods. 'The onus is on the player to be the thing that drives things forward. Something that's important for me in story is that not everyone likes story, so it's important to me that if you don't like story you can skip all of it or most of it. When I play games I skip past text bubbles because they don't generally interest me, so games like Thirty Flights or Gone Home, if you want you can totally speed run it. For me, what irks me is when games force you to read every precious word or cutscene which I don't ever want to do.'

I ask if there's a particular game that affected his outlook.

'The huge inspiration for me was Another World by Eric Chahi,' he says. 'It's really interesting. It's called Another World in Europe, Out Of This World in America. It's a side-scrolling game but it's told with zero words, and the art is very vector-based. It's made by one guy, and the gag is that he just started making this game, a scientist in a laboratory gets zapped by his own experiment and gets teleported to another universe, and that he made this first sequence as he went along. The game has this feeling of spontaneity, like he has no idea, that kind of energy. It's amazing – like, now you're in a death arena, now you're in a ... It's just amazing.'

'Thirty Flights has that feeling,' I say, 'of ... you know when Raymond Chandler says when you've run out of stuff to say, have a man come through the door with a gun? Thirty Flights is the same – it doesn't waste any time. It never occurred to me that you could literally move the player, just do a jump cut.'

'In college I was a film student,' Brendon says. 'I love movies, I like watching them and I like making them. But games, we talked about this [we'd talked in the car about how we hate that games' only cinematic takeaway is cut scenes] – they take this movie stuff and you're like, well, great. But you want them to use it in a different way, I guess. For me I wanted to use movie stuff without pausing a game, without making players watch a cut scene. What if you could integrate them seamlessly while you're playing – you can leave your hands on the controllers and you'll be okay. So that's the kind of approach I try to take with that.'

'Are you a storyteller?' I ask him.

'I worked in AAA for a while,' he begins. 'And the company I worked for [Pandemic], they made really bold choices in things, but as the company got bigger and bigger and bigger, I felt the company started specialising in the same thing over and over again. I've always been interested in storytelling, like at elementary school and making shitty Doom mods and Quake mods – so for me it's near and dear to my heart. But I don't want to be the guy that does story stuff. That's why the first thing I did was not story stuff – like Flotilla and Atom Zombie Smasher. Because I find it more interesting to do something you're terrible at, because the results are more interesting.'

'Why don't you develop for consoles?' I ask.

'There's something about console development that's super cumbersome,' he says.

'Closed?'

'Yeah, there's all this paperwork you have to do.'

'The PC seems so egalitarian, so open. You can distribute

games for free,' I say.

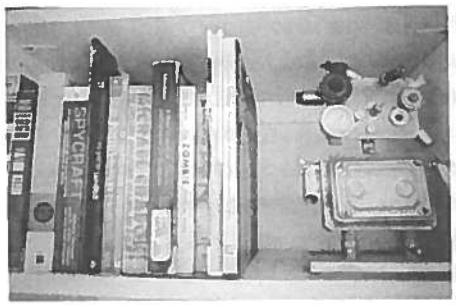
'When you say open ...' Brendon nods. 'It's also ... the files are just sitting there. You can just click on them. You can just click into the directory and see what all the files are doing. Like I was playing Farcry 3, and there are some things I didn't quite agree with, and some people out there went ahead and modified the files to remove the mini map or whatever. And that's a thing you can do here. I think that's great.'

'Quadrilateral Cowboy is very nostalgic for that era of the PC games command line.'

'I mean, that's the era I grew up in. Messing around with autoconfig. Trying to make this stupid game work on my computer.' Brendon smiles.

'There's a romanticisation in my head about the jankiness of getting computer games to work,' I say. 'I had an ATI Rage graphics card that never worked. It shaped my ability to play games because some things didn't work, and some things did. For example, Mechwarrior 2 loaded. But P.O.D. never loaded. Mechwarrior 2 wasn't an *amazing* game, but there's a tiny shard of wonder left in me for that game just because it loaded.'

'If you asked me at the time I would have said I hated it and just wanted it to work,' Brendon says, 'but looking back on it as that Dwarf Fortress feel – you've gotta *earn* your fun. You gotta fight your way through.'



Brendon's bookshelves

I guess I'm in love with Brendon's bookshelves. There's such a huge variety of stuff there. Not just science fiction and pulp, but instruction manuals, *The Grammar of Architecture*, a book on the history of Chinese and Japanese civilisations, a whole host of Prima strategy guides, Michael Chabon, C# manual next to Mark Twain.

I love personal libraries because it is like opening up someone's brain and having a look inside. These pictures are the inside of Brendon's brain. And it has a lot of stuff going on.

Love Something

'Why are games special?' I ask Brendon. '*Are* they special?'

'For me it's not about where videogames are right now,' he says, reclining further into the Glitch City couch. 'More like what we could do with videogames. We play these games right now and they do things, but it's that feeling ... We are at that stage in film where you just see the train coming towards you and people are freaking out because they think they're going to be run over by the train. Just thinking about where we're going to be in twenty years – games are going to be freaking crazy. There's something about that that is really exciting.'

Part of me wonders that if film were easier to get into would games lose Brendon completely. Actually, I know we wouldn't. His bookshelves are full of Prima guides and C# manuals – he's the Tarantino of videogames. But he tells me that if it were easier to live as a film director he might have done more of it.

'I like being able to pay for my roof,' Brendon says. 'I really want to do videogames, and I am really interested in doing film stuff. But I couldn't ever figure out how to make a living doing film and video projects. I was pretty confident about the games: you make a game and then you sell it directly to people, it's digital. But with film I felt with some practice I

could eventually make something good, but there wasn't any direct way to sell it. Like, do I sell it to a studio, do I put it on YouTube? How does this work? I had no idea.'

Perhaps there are some ways in which games are winning – that is, our young auteurs. They have a way to sell their work directly to the people who want it. They hold the sweat of their own brow.

'It is okay to make a living off what you're making,' Brendon says, assuredly. 'There are some developers out there who think it dilutes the art, making people pay money for your thing, or doing some sort of financial transaction for your art.

'And if you're an artist and I like your work, I want you to continue making your work. And you're not going to be able to do that if you don't have some attempt at asking for something. It's nothing to be ashamed of: to be able to put food in your mouth and pay for your rent. I hope that becomes more accepted.'

*

The intimation is always that I should hate Los Angeles. When I came here before, I always assumed that there was something I was missing that would show LA to be some sort of cheap drunk tarted up on the sort of nail polish that stains your nails orange, a city where the movies and the lyrics of Hole's 'Celebrity Skin' push all griminess to the surface so you can see it.

But this has not been my experience any time I have come here. I spent all my time in Culver City and Hollywood this time, and I always thought I'd hate LA, I always thought I'd come away with a thin filthy layer of it on me. Everyone outside LA gripes that it is shallow and awful, that people value terrible things here. Perhaps I don't hang out with the right people. I never hang out with the right people. Or maybe I always hang out with the right people. Maybe, out of

all of my excruciating flaws, this is my one redeeming virtue.

I went to dinner with the writer Tom Bissell, who is writing some big-budget blockbuster game as is his wont, the sort of thing I never play any more. We sat there and looked over at the sunset on the Hollywood Hills. Later he'd tell me I fall in love with the wrong people, and he's right, he's right, but you never know how you feel about something until you've had to live there. You go there and you live there and then you work out what it is later.

When I first got here I got hit on by a fedora-wearing movie director of some documentary in a rooftop bar in Downtown LA. Teddy said this was the one true Los Angeles experience that I'd had. I only thought: it seems like there's a lot of acceptance for strangeness, difference here. As if the whole of Los Angeles is just, in itself, a museum of personalities, of eccentricities. As if it is just Brendon Chung's eclectic collection of weird and wonderful books. It just opens at the movie page more often than not. And I think in the hands of someone smart, that book can make really great games.

A Brendon sketch

Embed with ... Nina Freeman

I went to Brooklyn, New York, to visit Nina Freeman, who is currently making a game called Cibele. It is an autobiographical game about Nina's experience of having sex for the first time with someone she met through an online game. The game uses real filmed sequences and sections of an MMO-like game to tell an emotionally difficult story, one of flirtation and betrayal. The art from the game, made by Rebekka Dunlap, is interspersed throughout this article. The header image of Nina was lovingly drawn by New York-based illustrator Elizabeth Simins.

We sit slumped, side by side, close to each other, in Nina Freeman's Brooklyn apartment. We are pre-game drunk. It is too hot. We can't afford to put the air conditioning on. Our skin has a glazed sheen. We wear the least amount of clothes possible.

It's smothering, like sleeping restless between tropical sheets, Williamsburg presses humid fingers on our thighs, and we are gazing at Usher.

We say nothing, we do nothing, our hands are limp on the couch. He is singing about how no one kisses like us. Nina's long-term boyfriend Emmett is due to come home tonight – high cheekbones, broad shoulders, handsome grin – and I can feel the tension try to dissipate from this fact. I am jealous of her real estate, terraces and terraces of 'this part is mine'. The last time I had sex the weather was hot but at least there was no exhausting humidity. The last time I had sex seems like a Grand Canyon away because the man in the video should stop dancing.

Usher is shirtless, purrs on the screen. The video tempts us by cutting away. He touches his body when he dances to suggest we cannot.

I think about what Nina is thinking. I think about whether Nina is thinking about Usher like I am thinking about Usher. I am thinking about whether she is thinking about how our sexuality is being manipulated by this video. Does Usher know he is binding us up like a thread around a finger? I want him to know exactly how. I want him to receive push notifications. Objectifying notifications. I want him to get mindfuck notifications that vibrate his phone off the table every time we think something filthy about this video. I want him to know that Nina Freeman and I are sitting here mindfucking him, weak from the New York heat. I know Nina is thinking this way because Emmett has been away, and in this weather we have mostly been talking about How We Like It, games and otherwise. She has lent me a book entitled *The Ethical Slut*.

I guess Nina is famous for making games about sexuality by now, or she should be, but this new game she is making – Cibele – it has been playing with me rather than me playing with it. I have come to understand very quickly that Nina and

I are very similar. Our obsessions with the personal being important. The lists of men we might make fuckplans about. Our opinions about emotional terrorism. Our experiences in teaching. Our backgrounds in poetry and literature. Our anxieties about being a woman, being ambitious, punching a hole through the grip of an industry moulded like men want it. It has become a sort of joke in my head. We feel small and alone and we make things that we want to make to feel big. Later we'd sit in a sake bar pulling our hair and poring over the war map of an industry that finds us inscrutable.

'Usher would get it,' I conclude. It seems like a feeble statement. So I say it again. 'Usher would get it.'

Nina laughs.

Screenshot from Cibele. Nina plays the main character. Samantha Corey is the filmmaker.

Nina Freeman has it together. She programs and designs all her own games, of which there are eight, and she is working on the ninth, Cibele. She owns two hentai pillows and is prone to showing me beautiful things that look like they come from a fairyland and saying, 'This is my whole aesthetic.'

She shows me this Grimes video and says, 'This is my whole aesthetic.'

Nina has recently become popular enough to receive death threats for her game How Do You Do It, a short game about her girlhood experiences attempting to figure out how sex works via Barbie dolls. You know you are a woman who said something interesting on the internet when you receive death threats. It is like graduating, but instead of smiling at your parents you cry to your pillow for several weeks when no one is around and contemplate your own worthlessness until you get angry and creative and emerge some sort of burning, fuschine dragon. Nina wrote an article on designing thoughtful games about sex and relationships just a few days later:

'It doesn't matter if you think sex doesn't belong in games, because sex is one of those basic human drives that manifests itself in our lives and in our art, whether by our own volition or in the minds of our players. Barbie dolls were not necessarily meant to be used as objects of sexual experimentation – but that didn't stop me when I was ten years old. Instead of ignoring sex in games, especially in games that are marketed to younger people, we should think about what we are saying already, and what we could be saying if we were more thoughtful.'

a person passes through history on a google search for truth
meanwhile i walk around soho
which is always like super models–
cut to me oblivious
in a sailor moon crop top

...

and one time i was playing sex with ken
until by accident i ripped ken's leg off
which kind of killed the mood

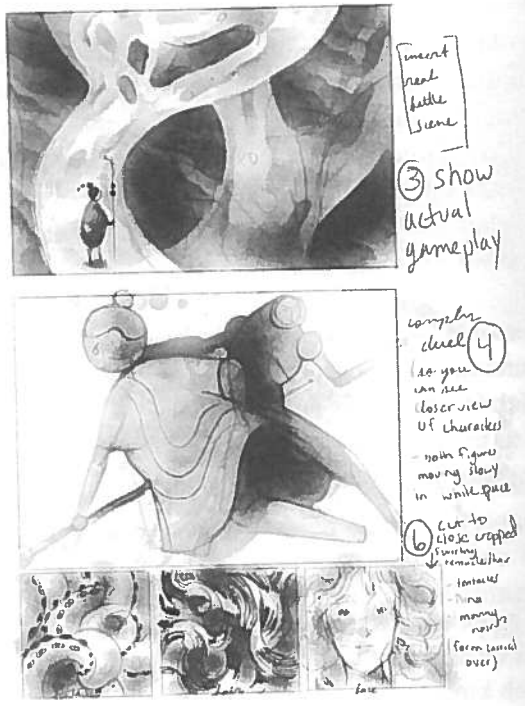
i was in aol cybersex chat rooms before i knew what sex was

now i know even less about it
my bedroom is an anime bachelor pad
and here i am drinking a cocktail called
'the corpse reviver #2'

i hereby apologize to anyone and everyone i have ever kissed

namaste

From Untitled by Nina Freeman



Nina has a degree in English Literature and a Masters of Science in Integrated Digital Media. Her first love was poetry, which has given birth to her love of 'vignette games'; games that are a snapshot of a feeling or moment, games that capture life in one small pinch of time and space. She cites my favourite, Stephen Lavelle's Slave Of God, as a good example, and she taught my vignette game Sacrilege to a packed class at Code Liberation. Nina has made a number of vignettes, including Ladylike, her most recent. Nina's last two games are interpretations of real things that happened to her.

I ask her why it is important to her to make games.

'I'm sort of obsessed with becoming renowned,' she tells me, as we regard each other over a flickering candle at a dim little Williamsburg izakaya. 'Both my parents, who are divorced so it was mostly my mom, would never recognise anything I did. Once in a while they did, but when it was something I was really proud of I would be like, "Mom, I did this thing, I wrote this poem and it got into some magazine at school ..." It was never a big deal to her. And I think part of that was her being bad at expressing that kind of emotion. But I didn't know that as a kid so I was obsessed with finding the one thing that would impress her. I've just grown into that. It's become my personality. I'm never really satisfied with anything I do. Nothing ever seems like it's good enough for anyone in my mind. Even if my mom does praise me it still doesn't feel complete for some reason.'

'You talked last night about the fact that creating things gave you control over things,' I say.

'Yeah,' Nina says. 'I feel like [my mom] would have been impressed if I'd pursued things she'd impressed upon me like acting. But those things weren't giving me the sense of accomplishment programming and making games do.

'When I realised "Poetry gives me a sense of control, I can express myself in this way, people are praising me for it outside of my family", that was a good adrenaline rush.

But it's a drug. It only lasts for so long. I keep having to make more and more stuff to get that short-term feeling of accomplishment.'

i opened up a microsoft word document
clippy krumped onto the screen–
'fucking hipster,' he sneered

From Untitled by Nina Freeman

'What do you like about sex the most?' I ask Nina.

'Emmett's just so good in bed I don't even think about it any more,' she says.

'Can I write that down?' I ask.

'Yeah, you can,' Nina says. 'I mean in Mangia [a text game she made] there's a whole part where I talk about having sex with him. When you get to a certain part it says, "Do you want to have sex with Emmett now?" And you can. And it just talks about how I feel after sex. His co-workers played it and were horrified.

'I've liked having sex for different reasons. Now I like it because it feels like the only time I'm not stressed about anything.'

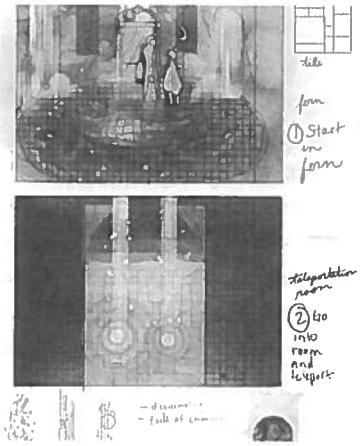
'Yes. Yes,' I say. 'Yes.'

'And you can just ignore everything.'

'And pay attention to just one person you care about,' I say. 'I'm not sure I've had a one-night stand where I didn't care about the other person. When I was in Paris, Katharine told me that the French don't really use the word for love like we would, and so the English–French translation can be awkward. It's almost like everything is on a spectrum of love for them, I think she was telling me. I started to think about how I previously considered love a binary state, but I agree that it's more like a spectrum from barely giving a shit about the other person to really giving a shit about them.'

'It shouldn't be a logic problem: "If I am in love with X,

then I can have sex with them",' Nina says. 'It's never like that. There are so many reasons people have sex. That needs to be culturally acceptable. With Emmett I can just stop being stressed. Feel normal for a while. Which is funny – "I only feel normal when I have sex" – but that's so true. Because otherwise I feel so self-conscious with people, with jobs, with objects, that I can never feel natural.'



'With poetry I hit a wall,' Nina tells me. 'And I got really sick, and I started making games, and I realised games were another way that I could express myself and feel that kind of agency again. Agency in that I knew I could make things that could attract people to me. Because I just like people. And I want them to engage with my work.

'Hopefully I can get them to engage in a meaningful way,' she says. 'Engage with the issues that I faced growing up. I still have a lot of baggage from being a kid that I just haven't gotten to explore. The most rewarding way for me to explore that is unfortunately by having other people to talk with me about it or having the awareness that other people are engaging with it. Because then I am getting this sense of not being totally alone. My parents made me feel alone by brushing off everything

that I was doing. Seeing people interact with the things I make, actually play it, feels like they are actively engaged with what I am trying to say.'

'I feel the same way about my work,' I say. 'When I write anything. The power of self-mythologising – it gives me a sense of control over my life. And I also feel less alone when people identify with something that happened to me. I feel power. I feel control when I do not feel in control of anything else in my life.'

'Yes,' Nina says. 'And also I might have said this the other night – it gives me a sense of validation. I never really got validation from my family, and you never really got it from school because it feels so artificial because you are paying to go there. But when people play your games and actually express something about it, whether that's feedback or a facial recognition that they'd finished it, you can see that they recognise that's an experience that you can express through a game. Or at least I can pretend that's what they're thinking and it makes me feel better about myself.'

'Girls are always told that they're crazy, or that their emotions aren't real,' Nina says. 'They'll be like, "Oh, you're just saying that", or whatever. People have always said that to me. I feel like maybe games are like, "No. Fuck you. I'm not crazy. *This shit is real.*"'

'I think part of the power of autobiographical games – or even when I write something very personal – is in forcing someone to identify with you,' I say to Nina, picking at tempura. 'Limiting their available options. Forcing someone into that tiny vignette space. It's very powerful. The idea that someone might feel the same way if they experience the same things is so powerful.'

'There's a lot of hope putting something out in the world that someone will come back to you,' Nina says. 'With How Do You Do It, I had a lot of people, men and women, coming back to me saying, "I did that exact same thing." It made me

feel really good about myself. And Ladylike to a lesser extent.'

New York runs Streets of Rage on a janky framework
And in tunnels
The rat AI is broken

Environment art from Cibele

Cibele is being made via a series of game jams, as Nina works full-time at Kickstarter as an intern. She is making the game as designer, programmer, producer and actor for the cut scenes. Emmett Butler, her boyfriend, is helping with additional programming. Decky Coss is the composer, sound designer and audio engineer. Rebekka Dunlap is making the art, and Samantha Corey, Nina's flatmate, is the filmmaker filming the cut scenes. Justin Briner is voice acting.

Cibele is still being made, but the MMOesque sections, built to simulate Nina's experiences playing with a guy who flirted with her via voicechat while playing, are already striking with placeholder art. The act of playing those sections of the game – killing monsters, some seeming symbolic of Nina's emotional state – while people have an awkwardly intimate conversation over the play, seems dramatic and engaging. Every time the player goes to kill a monster, the overbearing male AI player kills it first.

'I have this personality where I just let people walk all over me,' Nina says. 'Whenever I talk to people about Cibele I say, "Oh, I know, it's such a selfish thing to try and make a game about," but ultimately I'm making it for a lot of reasons,

a large one of them because it's cathartic and I still have issues with this whole scenario. It was pretty scarring for me. But also I've heard so many other people who have been through similar situations.

'It's really a stigmatised scenario where you meet someone in a game and then you have sex with them or have a relationship with them. It's a taboo to even talk about it. The only way I'll be able to get over it is talking really loudly about it, so we can't ignore it any more. No matter what the reaction is, I'll automatically feel better about it. That's why I'm super dedicated to being super honest about it. That's why I want to have the sex scene, have people be nude. It's like Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Poets: he would talk about giving people blow jobs in a graphic way. A lot of people hated him for that. But that's honesty. He did do that. So you have to be able to write about that.'

I nod in agreement. 'All my most popular work on the internet has been when I have been most honest about something that no one else wanted to be honest about. I even opened one of these with "I woke up on a chiptune artist".'

'Same,' Nina says, and giggles. 'That's the perfect thing to make art about. It's the sort of thing that people who aren't as confident, or don't have the self-esteem to talk about it publicly, will be so thankful to see. Not only do you get to fulfil this selfish desire for validation but other people get to feed off that validation by being like, "Whoa, I'm not this person who did this terrible thing". Especially when it's sex. Women having casual sex. There's so much shame and guilt. Especially when you make games about sex.'

Screenshot from Cibele

'Why is sex with Emmett so good?'

'I think it's because we're so good at communicating. Ever since we started dating we never had an issue telling each other what we want. Or what scares us, which is even more important. When we first started having sex I'd just gotten out of a relationship with a guy who was sort of abusive and who was a mutual friend of ours. So there was this tension from the beginning that this was definitely not allowed, even though that's not true – that's a cultural expectation, that you can't sleep with someone after a certain amount of time after you've had a breakup. So our first challenge was to talk to each other and say, "Are we comfortable having sex?" And after talking we found out we were. But I feel like that set an expectation. Talking was really important, especially when it came to sex.'

'Do you talk during sex?'

'Yes. Not necessarily during, but before and after. And if I want to do something different I just ask.'

'Do you appraise afterwards?'

'Oh yeah. Literally every time we're done we're like, "That was so good" or "That was okay". Or if one of us is feeling like the other is being a little disingenuous about it ... it helps just to be asked and forced to be like, "Yeah, I'm feeling kind

of out of it". But that obviously took a long time to learn. We're good at it now. Which is why we have such good sex.'

'I've had pretty amazing sex without ever having to say a word to the other person,' I say.

'But it could be so much better!' Nina says, and she's right.

I say, 'Once this one guy was like, "I want you to get on top", and before that I didn't usually because I find it hard to have a good time on top for one reason or another – or maybe it's that I didn't find the right partner with the right body shape, or maybe I'm wired differently. I feel a lot like in bed I'm naturally submissive, I like to be thrown around a little, which is something people don't automatically think about me – y'know, dom in the streets, sub in the sheets. Anyway, I got on top and he taught me to like it. It was like I had an orgasm coach. It was pretty great to make him happy and get something out of it. And I told him, and he was like, "Uh, well, I just thought it was always easier for women on top", which I guess is an assumption he'd made. Or maybe it was an excuse he was making to excuse his selfishness in that regard.'

'I always hated on top too, but my reasons were that I was so self-conscious about my body. I'd always feel gross and fat about being on top. But Emmett likes it. And now I like it. Because I see him liking it, which makes me feel actually good about myself.'

Character art, Cibele

'When I was making How Do You Do It I wanted it to be humorous,' Nina explains. 'I feel like childhood sexuality is something that we're taught to be ashamed of. I think that's bullshit. Cibele is not humorous, but I think there's a time and a place for addressing sex in games and media. There's a time to be really serious about it too, and be like, people are affected by this.

'But especially when you're trying to convey conversations between real people. We use humour in our daily conversations always,' she continues. 'That's just something that we do. It's part of our culture. And I was writing Cibele based on conversations that I remember happening. It's interesting to see how the humour manifests itself both in regular humour but also in some of the situations where it's more like ironic humour, or you know where this is going. "Look, he's saying this flirtatious thing." It's not that it's funny, but you laugh at it because he's trying to get in her pants. I'm seeing humour come out in that way in the game. Also when people are super bigoted it's kind of hilarious. There are parts in it where the guy is just the worst. You're sort of laughing at that because it is so awful. And that's more like dark humour.'

'How about looking a person in the eyes?' I ask. 'I find it difficult to do that in bed unless I know that it isn't just something throwaway. Or sometimes that's my indication that it isn't just nothing, the ability to be able to hold a gaze.'

'Even with Emmett I don't usually look him right in the eyes,' Nina says. 'I usually do it once, but I can never do it the whole time. I feel like it's almost too intense. I'm sure there'll be a day where I want that intensity and we'll do it the whole time. But usually ... yeah, there's something about it. Because sex has that effect where you are not worrying about other things, you become super vulnerable. There's something super intense about looking at someone while you're both vulnerable, that's really ... frightening. It's easier to do with someone you love because you are vulnerable with each

other all the time. Being in love with someone is basically being vulnerable with someone all the time. But for me it's too high-risk to exchange that vulnerability with someone I am not committed to. But I feel like I can give a little bit of that away with Emmett, who I am in love with, and who I am committed to.'

'I feel a lot like I am vulnerable all the time,' I say.

'Which is why I get hurt all the time.'

*

I look down the carriage
People look away but
A small grey-haired lady looks up at me
'Do you need this seat?' she says.
'Not at all.'
'AGE BEFORE BEAUTY!' another old lady exclaims
Sitting.
'You are very beautiful,' the first old lady says, Jersey accent.
'I like your purple hair,' she says.
The train leaves
And my heart calms.
It is the city of aggressive love
People are fire humans here

'The major issue is that it makes it impossible to forget,' Nina says. 'You can forget things that happen while your eyes are closed. There's something about seeing someone ... I don't know what it is. Communication with the eyes. But there's something about that – you get a feeling and you just can't forget it. It's just there now. Filed away in your memory.'

'Maybe we need more eyes-open sex in games,' I say. 'In terms of designers being vulnerable. Taking risks. Getting hurt.'

'Yeah, that's why we have so many Mario clones. Risk averse.'

Boring sex.

Nina tells me about a set of vignettes by one author she once played. She said of all the little vignettes, there was only one that rang true as a personal narrative: it was about a painful breakup.

'This,' Nina says, pointing at the invisible creator of the breakup game, 'THIS is the game that you WANTED to make. Whoever made this game went through an awful breakup and wanted to make a game about it – but then felt like they had to pad it with all these other games just to make it more like a "game". You can see that the personal story shines.'

in any case, i think i'll
trespass the café
where everyone is beautiful and
changing the world with a single
earth shattering click
because i want to
be cool too

i wear crop tops to
professional events and
listen to rave music at Staples
hi-chew for breakfast
sega dreamcast catcher
wake up and
smell the
neighbors smoking
cloves

'this view is extraordinary'
i sigh and
stare deeply

into the horizon of my
macbook desktop,
the sun slowly uploading
into day

From Untitled by Nina Freeman

I am in New York, freshly off the plane from Los Angeles and everyone talks about the Barcades, bars where there are arcade cabinets. I meet Nina at Barcade in Brooklyn where she knows a barman, and we talk about scripting and feelings and scripting feelings. Later I get off the 6 at 86th Street alone and walk out onto the sidewalk and it begins to rain. It rains hard, and no one is on the streets but me.

When it rains hard in Manhattan it is Fuck Buttons' Brainfreeze.

The rain pelts down and the streets are BBC Micro black. The street lights cast faint white highlights, Elite style, on tall Gotham structures. The brown subway soup that my flip-flops have scooped into my toes is flushed out into the huge invisible puddles of broad Manhattan streets. I stop by the light of a shop window to be engulfed.

I remember showing my ID to the bouncer at the Barcade entrance and smile. The tarmac is being hammered; I am sure it will crack.

I spit water from my lips. People are making out hard in Manhattan speakeasies. They are making out to show other people. They are making out because there isn't enough time. They are making out for everyone. It is raining out here.

I showed my ID at the Barcade entrance. I know I am ready to be old. We are ready to be old.

Let's be old together.