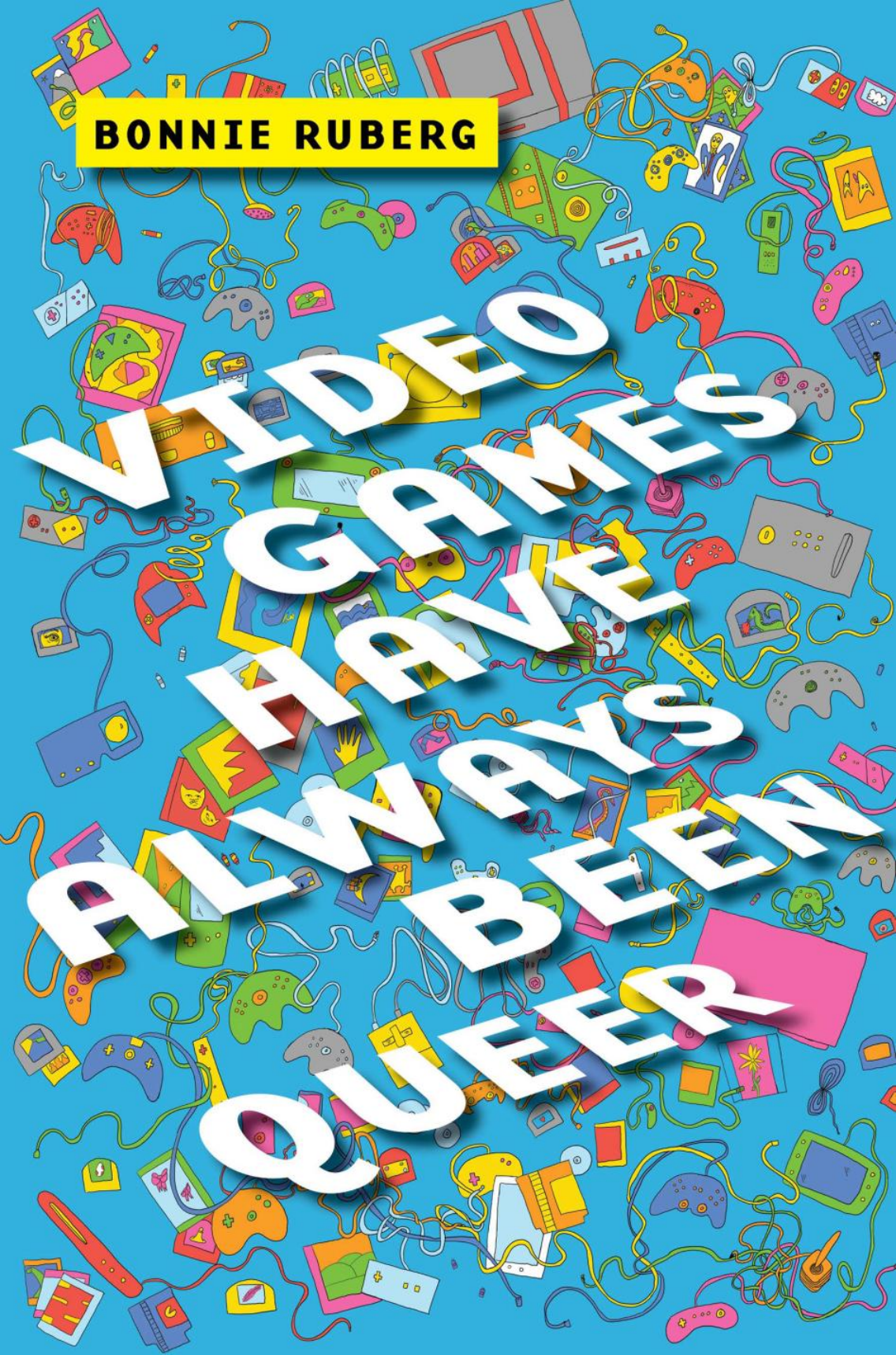
BONNIE RUBERG
VIDEO GAMES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN QUEER

VIDEO GAMES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN QUEER

POSTMILLENNIAL POP

General Editors: Karen Tongson and Henry Jenkins

Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire
Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns

Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture
Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green

Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries
Derek Johnson

Your Ad Here: The Cool Sell of Guerrilla Marketing
Michael Serazio

Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities
Mark Anthony Neal

From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry
Aswin Punathambekar

A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America
Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson

Surveillance Cinema
Catherine Zimmer

Modernity's Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music
Roshanak Kheshti

The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics
Ramzi Fawaz

Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation
Elizabeth Ellcessor

The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening
Jennifer Lynn Stoever

Diversión: Play and Popular Culture in Cuban America
Albert Sergio Laguna

Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy
Greg Goldberg

Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television
Aymar Jean Christian

More Than Meets the Eye: Special Effects and the Fantastic Transmedia Franchise
Bob Rehak

Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection
Nancy K. Baym

Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility
Alexis Lothian

Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age
Edited by Melissa A. Click

Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley
Stuart Cunningham and David Craig

Video Games Have Always Been Queer
Bonnie Ruberg

Video Games Have Always Been Queer

Bonnie Ruberg

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York
www.nyupress.org

References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Ruberg, Bonnie, 1985– author.
Title: Video games have always been queer / Bonnie Ruberg.
Description: New York : New York University Press, [2019] | Series: Postmillennial pop | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018037663| ISBN 9781479831036 (cl : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781479843749 (pb : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Video games—Social aspects. | Gays. | Gender identity. | Queer theory.
Classification: LCC GV1469.17.S63 R83 2019 | DDC 794.8—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018037663

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

CONTENTS

Introduction

Video games have always been queer. Even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly, and all games can be interpreted through queer lenses. This is because queerness in video games means more than the representation of LGBTQ characters or same-sex romance. Queerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play. From the origins of the medium, to the present day, and reaching into the future, video-game worlds have offered players the opportunity to explore queer experience, queer embodiment, queer affect, and queer desire—even when the non-heteronormative and counterhegemonic implications of these games have been far from obvious. Through new critical perspectives, queerness can be discovered in video games, but it can also be brought to games through queer play and queer players, whose choices to engage with games on their own terms and for their own pleasures can profoundly transform the meaning of games and unleash their queer potential. In this way, playing queer, like queer interpretation and queer game design, can be seen as a transformative practice that reframes and remakes games from the inside out. Amidst a dominant games culture that has proven itself to be openly hostile to diversity, the politics of queer play echo outward across games communities, games history, the games industry, and into wide-reaching contemporary concerns around identity, marginalization, and agency in digital media.

Arguing for the importance of queerness in video games beyond representation—or, more accurately, arguing for redefining queer representation in games—is also a way to rewrite the LGBTQ history of video games. This history is commonly told as one of absence and linear progress. From the 1970s to the 2000s, LGBTQ characters are commonly said to have been all but non-existent in commercial games, with a slow but steady rise in LGBTQ representation from the early 2010s to the

present.[1] As a kind of "it gets better" narrative, in the language of columnist Dan Savage's well-known video campaign, this history seems hopeful, yet it also raises notable concerns.[2] It is indeed valuable to celebrate the increasing visibility of gay, lesbian, transgender, genderqueer, and other non-straight, non-cisgender identities in video games. However, as theorists of queer history have warned, linear progress narratives run the risk of erasing the complexities and obstacles of LGBTQ subjects' lived experiences.[3] These experiences are often far messier, more winding, and ultimately richer than tales of straight movement from oppression to acceptance would suggest. The history of queerness and games as it is being told today often reinforces the problematic and indeed misinformed assumption that LGBTQ players, game-makers, themes, and meaning are relatively new to video games. To the contrary, queerness and queer people are now and have always been central to games.

As I argue throughout this book, placing video games in dialogue with queer theory reveals the deep-seated resonances between queerness and games: from their emphasis on world-building, to their denaturalization of the normative body, to their invitation to rethink the mechanisms of desire. Throughout this analysis, queer theory serves as a guiding framework, pointing toward a future for the study of video games that foregrounds gender and sexual expression in its many forms. The medium of video games has immense queer potential. At the same time, the exploration of queerness in games must remain grounded in the lived realities of the LGBTQ players, game-makers, and scholars who call games their own. Queer people have always belonged in video games, no matter how often we have been made to feel like outsiders, because video games have always been queer.

Video Games and . . . Queerness?

These are the claims that guide this book, and though they may appear straightforward, they are in fact highly controversial. For those who are new to the study of video games, and even for many who know the medium well, talking about games in relation to LGBTQ issues may seem counterintuitive. To understand why, it is important to understand more about (one version of) games history, as well as the current cultural landscape of video games.

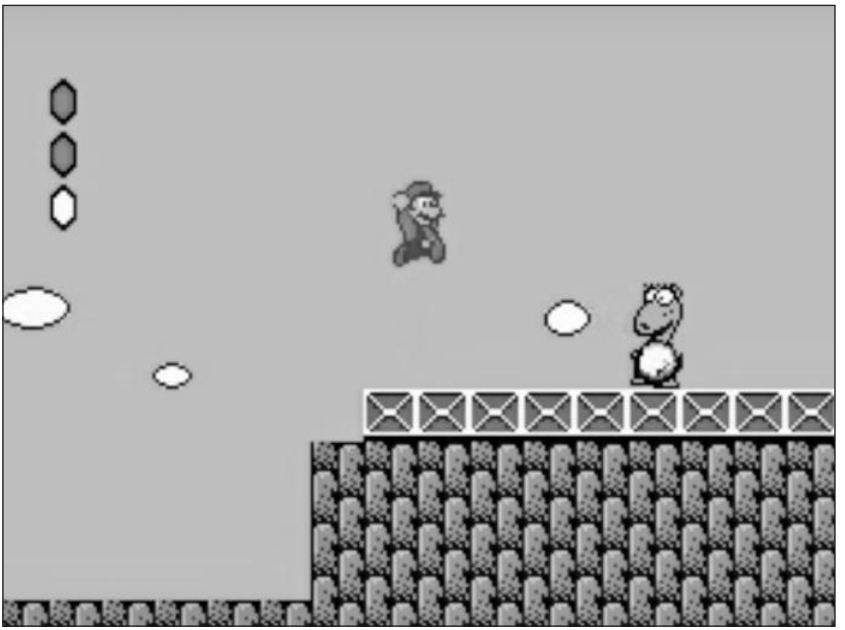

Figure I.1. Birdo in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, 1988). Screenshot by author.

For decades—from the production of the first arcade machines to the rise of the thriving, multibillion-dollar commercial games industry of today—video games have notoriously underrepresented or harmfully misrepresented LGBTQ people. The few well-known LGBTQ characters from before the turn of the twenty-first century, such as the transgender, egg-spitting dinosaur Birdo from *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo, 1988), have primarily been oddities, caricatures, or villains (figure I.1). The issue of LGBTQ representation is an intersectional one, part of a larger "diversity problem" in games, the games industry, and player cultures that constitutes, as Mary Flanagan among others has stated, "a social justice issue."[4] In part, the poor representation of LGBTQ people in the history of games speaks to the profound impact of corporate concerns on video games as a medium. Fearful that diversifying their content will alienate their established player bases, large-scale, "AAA" development studios have long catered primarily to imagined white, straight, cisgender male audiences. This perpetuates what Janine Fron et al. have called "the hegemony of play": a set of rarely questioned, continually reinforced

assumptions about what video games should be like, who should be represented in games, and what types of players count as "gamers."[5] In many ways, the cards seemed stacked against queerness in video games. Heteronormative content remains standard in most game genres, homophobic language is commonplace in online gaming, and LGBTQ players often report feeling uncomfortable in game-related spaces, both online and off.[6] Recently, long-standing tensions between progressive and reactionary sectors of games culture have reached a boiling point, drawing national attention to the vitriolic online harassment campaign #GamerGate, which has targeted feminists and other so-called social justice warriors.[7] From one perspective, this would appear to be a particularly discouraging and inopportune moment to argue for the place of queerness in video games.

However, despite all of the obstacles that stand in the way of "diversity" (a convenient shorthand for identity issues, but one that itself merits scrutiny), video games are now, and have been since their origins, important sites of queer expression and self-discovery.[8] There have been LGBTQ video-game players as long as there have been video games. To claim otherwise would contribute to what T. L. Taylor, writing about the often-repeated misconception that women rarely play video games, has described as the "devastating cycle of invisibility."[9] Indeed, for some queer players, video games have long offered invaluable opportunities to explore gender, sexuality, and identity in ways that may not have been possible outside of games.[10] The present moment itself represents an important and indeed exciting time of growth for the area of queerness and video games, with game-makers, scholars, and players bringing new queer perspectives to the medium—perspectives that challenge standard ways of imagining the relationship between LGBTQ issues and games.

To date, the focus of many popular discussions about queerness and video games has been LGBTQ representation, and, in particular, the representation of a subset of highly visible LGBTQ characters from mainstream games. Historically, LGBTQ characters have rarely featured prominently in AAA games, but today examples are becoming more common.[11] For example, later games in the long-standing *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000–2017) allow for same-sex pairings. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) are much loved by fans for giving players the opportunity to pursue queer romances

Figure I.2. *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016) comic panel in which character Tracer is kissed by her girlfriend.

with non-player characters (NPCs). *Overwatch* (2016) garnered considerable attention when its creators, Blizzard, confirmed that Tracer, arguably the game's most prominent character, was a lesbian (figure I.2).[12] In 2017, Riot Games followed suit by announcing that Varus, a character from their game *League of Legends*, was also gay.[13] While these characters are often incorrectly described as some of the "first" LGBTQ characters in video games, current archival work, such as Adrienne Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Alayna Cole's Queerly Represent Me project, is demonstrating that queer characters and other LGBTQ content have been making appearances in video games since the 1980s.[14] With its 300+ entries, the LGBTQ Video Game Archive is a compelling case for flipping the script on the dominant narrative that says that LGBTQ subjects are only now finding a place in the medium. Even if they have largely been cast in supporting roles, these earlier, lesser-known LGBTQ characters still matter.[15] By shining a light on the margins of video games, counter-histories of this sort turn attention to those who have been overlooked by well-intentioned yet limiting narratives about diversity in games.

Yet the shift toward queerness and video games that is happening today encompasses far more than the introduction of additional LGBTQ characters into mainstream games. In the cultural landscape of North

Figure I.3. *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012). Screenshot by the author.

America and beyond that surrounds contemporary video games, this shift is taking many forms. The increased availability of accessible game-making tools like Twine, as well as the rise of online game publishing platforms like Steam and itch.io, has ushered in a new wave of small-scale, "indie" games, predicted by Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, many of which are being made by queer creators and directly address LGBTQ issues.[16] An example of these games is Anthropy's own celebrated 2012 work *Dys4ia* (figure I.3). I term this wave of queer indie game-making the "queer games avant-garde," and it is the subject of the last chapter of this book. Simultaneously, a number of annual events, such as the games convention GaymerX, are creating vibrant communities around queerness and games. Change is also coming to the academic study of games. Long dominated by formalist voices that advocated for separating social issues from discussions of play (though by no means have these been the only voices in this area), the scholarly field of game studies is increasingly turning toward cul-

tural concerns—LGBTQ issues prominent among them.[17] In this way, game studies is finding its political voice. At the forefront of this shift is an ever-growing network of scholars who are exploring the intersection of queerness and video games through critical lenses. This nascent yet thriving academic area calls itself "queer game studies."

This is, in short, a pivotal moment for video games and the way that meaning is made from games. Queerness is at the center of this shift. However, even as we look toward video games' queer future, this moment also stands as an invitation to reconsider video games as we have already known them. Inspired by the queerness of the present, we can reimagine the medium on a broader scale, discovering the queer meanings even of those video games that may seem "straight" and looking to play itself as a site of queer potential.

What is "queerness"? Like many of the key terms that appear throughout this book, queerness is difficult to define—yet, in laying the groundwork for connections between video games and queer theory, it is crucial to establish a common vocabulary. "Queer" has meant different things at different times and to different people. This speaks to the word's changing nature and multivalent meaning. Originally used as a pejorative, "queer" has since been largely reclaimed as a term of pride in popular as well as academic contexts.[18] Today, "queer" is used in two distinct yet interrelated senses. At its most basic, queer serves as an umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality. By this definition, queer encompasses all of the identities described by the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and many more, including genderqueer, asexual, and intersex—though not everyone in these categories self-identifies as queer. The second meaning of queerness is more conceptual. Over the last 30 years, queer theorists like Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, Lee Edelman, and Kathryn Bond Stockton have argued for thinking about queerness as a way of being, doing, and desiring *differently* as much as a specific marker of identity.[19] To be queer, by this definition, is to resist the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject. Queerness challenges dominant beliefs about pleasure and power. It names a longing to "live life otherwise."[20] In this sense, queerness is simultaneously a term for the lived experiences of LGBTQ subjects and a term for a way of reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world.

Perhaps surprisingly, the definition of "video games" is just as complex and slippery as the definition of queerness. "Video game" too has multiple meanings, and these meanings have long been contested, within both game studies and the cultures that surround them. In this way, the term video game describes something seemingly concrete in the world (e.g., the game object itself), but it also describes an often-unspoken set of beliefs about what does and does not count as "real" when it comes to the study, design, and discussion of play.[21] How we define a "game" matters because it sets the terms for what types of experiences, perspectives, and subjects are valued—or even visible—in the way we talk about this widely influential medium. Defining video games may seem like a semantic task, but in fact it is inextricable from larger questions about who does and does not get to "count" in games.

For the purposes of the present study, video games are defined as any designed, interactive experience that operates primarily through a digital interface and *understands itself* as a video game. By my definition, video games encompass a wide range of genres, production paradigms, platforms, and styles of gameplay. Arcade games are video games, as are home console games, computer games, portable games for systems like the Nintendo Game Boy, social games played on Facebook and other networking sites, and mobile games played on smart phones. In the mainstream news media, video games are often equated with first-person shooters, but in truth these games represent only a sliver of the work contained within the medium. Role-playing games, strategy games, puzzle games, adventure games, sports games, and racing games are among the many other popular video-game genres. Different games also emerge from different production paradigms. Typically, a division is made between large-scale AAA and indie games, developed with smaller teams and more modest budgets, but many game studios operate in a middle ground. Video games can also vary greatly in those who play them and the communities that form around them. Some video games garner substantial followings; others are produced, played, and disappear into relative obscurity. Games are not always developed for the people whom we imagine. As Shira Chess explains in her book *Ready Player Two*, a considerable number of contemporary games are being designed for and marketed to women and girls, though society at large continues to imagine gamers as men.[22] This book attempts to speak

to as many of these video-game types as possible, while recognizing that this field is far vaster and more varied than any one book can account for. Though my own focus is on digital games, which I often shorten to simply "games," non-digital games and analogue play are also important touchstones in discussions of queerness and video games.

My definition of video games is inclusive by design, but it is also far from self-evident. Definitions of video games are as numerous and nuanced as the individuals who critique them. Game studies, the academic study of games and play, has a long tradition of defining and re-defining games. Much of the early- and mid-twentieth-century works from which game studies scholars drew initial inspiration were anthropological treatises on the characteristics of play and games.[23] The field was founded in the late 1990s by scholars like Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth, who are often described as representing the positions of "narratology" and "ludology" respectively; narratology and ludology have long been pitted as rivals in game studies precisely because they represent different modes of understanding games: the latter as play and the former as narrative.[24] In the intervening decades, many major works in game studies scholarship have continued to consider issues relating to the question of what defines a video game. One such thread of thinking, for instance, explores the permeable nature of games' boundaries, challenging the divide between "game" and "not game" (T. L. Taylor) that is often described as the "magic circle" (Mia Consalvo) and instead repositioning games as "half real" (Jesper Juul), blurring the line between in-game fiction and embodied experience.[25] Such work demonstrates that "video game" is, by nature, neither a single nor a stable ontological category.

Even (or perhaps especially) outside of the academic context, debates about what does or does not count as a video game continue to rage. A regular complaint expressed online by what I characterize as "reactionary" gamers—those who bemoan the push to bring diversity to the medium—is that video games that do not closely resemble established genres should not be considered games at all.[26] Often, it is games made by or about women, queer people, people of color, and non-neurotypical people that are dismissed or outright condemned for being "not real games." For this reason, though the question of how to define a game may sound rhetorical, it in fact serves as an active example of how social biases are shaping what work is or is not permitted to enter the conversation

around video games. This is why defining video games as digital media objects that "understand themselves" as games is a political statement. It asserts the right of games and game-makers to set the terms of their own identities.

Whatever definition we use for video games, it is crucial to recognize that these works are meaningful products of culture. As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum have compellingly argued, games communicate social values and serve as windows onto the beliefs of the communities and society from which they emerge, whether or not the game developers who create them intended them to do so.[27] Long misunderstood as mere entertainment for children or machines of violence, video games are in fact an impactful media form with an immense capacity to affect and also reflect on the world outside the game in ways that are simultaneously political and deeply personal. All video games, no matter how "fun," send messages: about how to act and what to value, about when to conform and when to resist, about what is possible and who is allowed to explore those possibilities.

At the Intersection of Queerness and Video Games

The intersection of queerness and video games is a site of rich potential. This is reflected in the wealth and variety of work, both academic and creative, currently taking place at this intersection. As areas of research interest, gender and sexuality in video games are not new. Work on these issues can be traced back to foundational texts like Sherry Turkle's 1995 *Life on the Screen* and Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins's 1998 collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. In the decades since, discussions about gender identity in video games have focused largely on experiences and representations of cisgender women (though more recent writing, such as Yasmin B. Kafai et al.'s 2016 collection *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* and Carly Kocurek's research on masculinity and arcades have productively broadened and complicated discussions of gender in games).[28] However, until recently, queerness and LGBTQ experiences were rarely the subjects of game studies research. In the 1990s and 2000s, texts that did address sexual orientation frequently did so through questions about straight male identification with sexualized, on-screen women—problematically perpetuating the presumption that

video-game players are predominantly heterosexual, cisgender men.[29] This is not to say that earlier game studies scholarship did not engage, in less direct ways, with notions of non-normative desire in video games. Canonical works like Aarseth's *Cybertext*, Alexander Galloway's *Gaming*, and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, among others, all include reflections on how play makes space for alternative pleasures.[30] The present work takes these ideas further by insisting on non-normative desires as core to video games and explicitly linking those desires to queerness.

This book emerges as part of the current rise of queer game studies. I began writing about LGBTQ perspectives in and on video games in 2005, more than a decade ago, during my first days as a games and technology journalist. In the intervening time, I have seen queerness in video games go from what was perceived as a highly niche interest to an area of widespread attention and major growth for both the study and the creation of games. In the academic context, this rising interest in queerness and video games is coming together to form what Shaw and I have termed elsewhere an interdisciplinary "paradigm."[31] Because queer game studies is still nascent, scholars come to this work from a variety of backgrounds; some are humanists, some social scientists, some coders or critical makers. Across these many perspectives, queer game studies is built on the belief that queer studies and game studies, considered together, shed new light on one another and suggest valuable areas of inquiry. At the same time, "queer game studies" does not describe one, unified community of scholars, but rather a network of collaborators and affiliates from across North America, and indeed the globe. This paradigm has galvanized around the annual Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), a hybrid event that brings together representatives from academia, industry, and activism, of which I am honored to have served as lead organizer from 2013 to 2017. One of the things that makes QGCon, and queer game studies more generally, unique among established modes of scholarship is that it is founded on a commitment to building bridges between theoretical analysis and the LGBTQ people who make, play, and study games.

New scholarship in the paradigm of queer game studies is emerging regularly, so any overview of this area would be by nature incomplete. However, there are a number of key threads that can be traced across

Figure I.4. Still from *Bayonetta 2* (Platinum Games, 2014) trailer. Screenshot by author.

this work. One of these threads is an interest in the implicit queerness of characters who are not overtly coded as LGBTQ. Amanda Phillips's writing on hyperfemininity in *Bayonetta 2* exemplifies this scholarly approach (figure I.4).[32] Another thread is the critique of existing LGBTQ representation in mainstream video games, which often promotes limited or re-normativizing perspectives on queerness. An example of this is Edmond Chang's writing on same-sex coupling options in the popular social media game *FrontierVille*.[33] Issues of player culture also appear in this work. Lisa Nakamura's essay on the challenges faced by queer women of color who game illustrates this type of queer game studies scholarship.[34] Also common in queer game studies is work that reflects on connections between queerness and game design—or the queer potential of alternative design approaches. Naomi Clark and merritt kopas's "Queering Human-Game Relations," for example, looks at game mechanics (the rules that govern interactivity) as potential sites of queer expression and resistance.[35] Evan Lauteria has written about how "modding" enacts queerness by reshaping the game's very code through nonnormative player agencies.[36] As queer game studies becomes an area of broader interest, we are beginning to see a widening pool of play theorists dip their toes into queerness, as demonstrated by Miguel Sicart's article "Queering the Controller." New texts, such as the recent collection

Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games, continue to emerge.[37] Together, these works suggest just some of the many ways that video games can be reimagined through the frameworks of queerness.

Moving forward, there are many more issues at the intersection of queerness and video games for queer game studies to explore. Bisexuality, asexuality, kink, genderqueer identities, and polyamory and non-heteronormative relationship structures are all subjects that merit further consideration in relation to video games, as are broader theoretical discussions around subjects like affect and politics. Queer game studies must also continue to push toward an intersectional understanding of queerness by increasing its engagement with race, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, socioeconomics, religion, and nationality. Industry studies and the experience of LGBTQ people within the commercial structures of game-making represent another potentially fruitful avenue for queer game studies scholars. Similarly, fan studies offers an opportunity to turn toward video-game fandoms and the ways that fans are remaking games as queer.[38] The present moment is a promising one for the study of queerness and video games, but the real work of making sense of video games through queer perspectives is only just beginning.

At times, this moment of unprecedented potential for queer voices within the study and creation of video games can also feel like a moment of unprecedented danger. With the increased visibility of diversity as a core issue in video games has also come a sharp rise in harmful negative responses from the reactionary sectors of games culture. Though misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination have long been part of video games' cultural makeup, in recent years a torrent of online harassment has been unleashed on those who make or speak publicly about diverse video games. I myself have been harassed many times, and I know all too well the risk involved in calling for social justice in video games. Yet #GamerGate has gotten at least one thing right. It is no coincidence that this backlash comes at the same time that queerness is becoming a more central concern in games and the dialogues that surround them. As Katherine Cross has written, proponents of #GamerGate are driven by a fear that video games are changing, that they will no longer belong only to white, straight, cisgender men and boys.[39] And that is true.

Beyond Representation

Among the many possible approaches to exploring the intersection of LGBTQ perspectives and video games, my purpose here is to demonstrate the value of understanding queerness in video games in ways that go beyond representation. As many have argued, video games communicate meaning not only through the people, situations, and stories they represent on-screen but also through their procedural and computational systems. Such systems, writes Ian Bogost, make arguments and communicate ideologies, thereby "invok[ing] political, social, and cultural values."[40]

When I say that we must look for the queerness in video games "beyond representation," I do not mean to understate or devalue the importance of diverse representation in video games—for LGBTQ people, people of color, and many more. Organizations like #ineeddiversegames and Dames Making Games, who are pushing for increased racial and gender diversity in games and games production, are doing important work that directly furthers the cause of social justice. Dmitri Williams et al. have argued that the systemic underrepresentation of women and people of color (and, I would add, queer people) in video games has the real potential to negatively impact how society views these groups, as well as how players from these groups view themselves.[41] As Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm write in their introduction to *Gaming Representation*, it is crucial not to overlook representation and issues of identity more broadly in an attempt to push game studies toward "hardcore" concerns, like questions of platforms and code.[42] Yet, increasing diverse representation in video games is not the only path toward making space for those who are "different" in games—and representation itself, as it is traditionally imagined, has its own limitations. It is not enough to simply count the number of LGBTQ characters who appear on-screen. We must also think about how experiences of difference can be given voice (or once again be silenced) by video games' seemingly non-representational elements, such as their interactive systems, their controls, and their underlying computational logics. Indeed, Malkowski and Russworm themselves explain that representation should not and cannot be separated from the designed and technical aspects of video games.[43]

Once we move beyond the traditional limits of representation, the queer possibilities of video games become significantly more wide-reaching and, I contend, significantly more subversive. In its conceptual modes, as a name for being or desiring differently, queerness can also be a way of designing a game, interpreting it, or playing it. As the examples discussed throughout this book demonstrate, a game's queerness may lay in its mechanics, or in its imagery, or in its control schema, or in how it creates a platform for emergent and transgressive forms of play. As yet, the possibility for emergence and transgression through video-game play has been most directly explored in relation to virtual worlds, such as in Celia Pearce's writing on emergent cultures in *Uru* or Jenny Sundén's ethnographic study of sexual expression among *World of Warcraft* players.[44] Yet all video games can become platforms for playing at the boundaries of heteronormativity—or for disrupting and dismantling heteronormativity itself. The queerness in a video game may lie in the opportunity to resist structures of power, or partake in alternative forms of pleasure, or inhabit embodied and affective experiences of difference. Queerness can be found in how video games construct or disrupt notions of desire, temporality, success, meaning, life, and death. The idea that queerness could be embodied by a game mechanic, and in this sense could move "beyond representation," was first described by tabletop role-playing game designers Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick in a 2013 talk at the Queerness and Games Conference.[45] Alder's game *Monsterhearts* (2012) illustrates this move beyond representation by translating sexual attraction into a mechanic; players must roll a die to determine who "turns their character on." This is just one example of how LGBTQ experiences can manifest through gameplay rather than traditional representational elements.

In order to identify queerness in video games beyond representation, I look not to games with explicit LGBTQ content but to those that are commonly assumed to be "straight"—i.e., "normal" or not queer. With a few notable exceptions, the games I address here contain no LGBTQ characters or romance options. Nonetheless, I believe they should be understood as deeply queer, especially when they are placed in the hands of queer players. If these video games seem initially unrelated to queerness, perhaps because there is good reason to doubt that their creators and/or primary audiences see them as queer, this is actually the point; these

are the games that most need reclaiming. There are many wonderful games available today, many of them emerging from the queer games avant-garde, that do directly engage with LGBTQ issues. Such games deserve extensive scholarly and popular attention. Yet (with the exceptions of the games discussed in chapters 4 and 8) these games are not my subject here. An octopus attempting to walk on land, a ball bounced back and forth at a frenzied pace between paddles, a race car crashed into a semi-truck in a spectacular blaze: As a queer player myself, *these* are the moments that I find myself most drawn to in games—not when I see characters who share my gender and sexuality identities, but when I see my own queer approach to the world echoed in what it feels like to play. In this way, this project builds on Adrienne Shaw's insight in her book *Gaming at the Edge* that, for many LGBTQ players, identifying with a video game is rarely as simple as relating to a queer character on-screen.[46]

Finding the queerness in video games "beyond representation" requires methodologies—like close reading and critical analysis rooted in theory—that are well-established in other fields, such as media studies, yet remain surprisingly contentious in the study of games. Queer theory has its roots in the analysis of language and imagery, and many of the most formative works in the field (such as D. A. Miller's practices of "too-close reading," discussed in chapter 2) focus on how queer meaning can be read between the lines.[47] In the early 1990s, Alexander Doty was already arguing for the right of scholars to critique cinema and television that others deemed "straight" through a queer lens. Indeed, Doty's laments about the skepticism and judgment he faced for interpreting film queerly sound much like the present-day frustrations of queer game studies scholars and feminist game commentators. "It often seems as if people think that since you have chosen to read something queerly," Doty has written, considering this issue more than once, "you need to be pressured or patronized into feeling" that your efforts represent "pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there."[48] This quote could easily describe the backlash from contemporary games culture against "reading too much into" video games. The practice of drawing comparisons between film and video games has been, in other contexts, rightly criticized.[49] Games differ from film in key ways. In this case though, the history of film scholarship does serve as a useful benchmark. Twenty

years from now, with any luck, it will likely seem surprising to all of those who study video games that there once was a time when we had to fight for the legitimacy of interpreting games queerly.

Arguing for queerness beyond representation constitutes far more than an academic exercise. In the face of discrimination in games culture, it becomes a rallying cry for queer subjects to reclaim the medium. In identifying how video games, even those that appear most simplistic or heteronormative, can resonate powerfully with queer experiences, queerness emerges as a form of potential that lies within all games. In this way, discovering the queerness in video games calls for an expansion of the very definition of representation. It allows us to make new space for queer identities, desires, and ways of being within the medium across its past, present, and future. Queerness beyond representation also disrupts the neoliberal instrumentalization of LGBTQ content in video games. In the corporate context and the popular media, the call to increase diversity in games is often conflated with financial incentives for studios to bring in additional queer consumers.[50] Looking to queerness beyond representation is not about buying, or selling, or making things "better" in any traditional sense. It is about rethinking the stories we tell about the place of LGBTQ subjects in video games. It is about being bold and unapologetic in refusing to lay claim to anything less than the entire medium of games.

From this vision of queerness in video games beyond representation comes the notion of what I term "playing queer." Writing about how mainstream game series that include LGBTQ representation, such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004–2016) and *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009–2014), offer limited options for exploring sexual difference, Stephen Greer has used the phrase "playing queer" in reference to what he sees as the ultimately limited possibilities for queer identification in video games.[51] My use of the concept here is quite different; I see "playing queer" as a mode of nearly infinite possibility, brought to games largely through their players rather than systems structured by (mainstream) developers.

In the hands of those who bring queer perspectives to the medium, video games can be interpreted queerly, whether through their content or their structures, but they can also be played in queer ways. Queer play can take a variety of forms—from playing to lose, to playing to hurt, to

playing too fast or too slow. It can be simultaneously defiant, deviant, ecstatic, languid, silly, or absurd. Sometimes queer play is built into a video game by its designers, but in many other instances players bring this queerness with them when they choose to play in ways that a game did not intend. In such moments, queer play resists and repurposes games for alternative desires; it upends the normative logics that structure the game and transform it into a space for testing the boundaries of pleasure, identity, and agency. This is a form of what T. L. Taylor has called the "transformative work" enacted by video-game players, or what Anne-Marie Schleiner terms "ludic mutation."[52] It is also related to Alexander Galloway's notion of countergaming, i.e., gaming that resists the established logics of video games.[53] Along with cheating, as Mia Consalvo has described it, queer play shares the belief that there is more than one "correct" way to play a game.[54] To put this even more boldly, queer play embraces the powerful act of playing the "wrong" way. Just as any video game can be interpreted queerly, any video game can be played queerly, and thereby reimagined. This is what it means to "play queer."

At the same time, it is worth interrogating and even problematizing the notion of playing queer. To whom does queer play belong and who has the right to describe themselves as playing queerly? Can straight, cisgender LGBTQ allies also take part in queer play or do they risk appropriating the terms of queer experience? Playing queer signifies the act of queer play, but it also suggests playing queerness itself—whether that means playing *at* queerness or somehow playing with queerness as an object (the way one plays a game). To call this form of expression "playing queer" also invokes the image of a queer subject who plays. Like Johan Huizinga's "homo ludens," the playing man, the playing queer might be a name for a kind of universal queer subject who is characterized by the fact that they are, in some basic sense, at play. However, while it represents a site of expanding intersectional potential, inviting non-LGBTQ people to play at being queer should bring us pause. For example, as I discuss in chapter 6, a number of queer games today are being mislabeled as "empathy games," encouraging straight, cisgender players to engage in a kind of queerness tourism—to echo Lisa Nakamura's concept of "identity tourism"—by supposedly stepping into the shoes of their queer designers.[55] I also recognize that the vision of queer play that I am offering here

runs the risk of becoming diffuse and all-encompassing, as if all types of engagements with video games that are non-normative, in one way or another, now have grounds to call themselves queer.

In response to this, let me articulate a distinction—and also let me re-assert the importance of the direct, material connection between queer readings of video games and LGBTQ lives. Playing queer is a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players—but which belongs, first and foremost, to those who live the joys and the pains of their queer lives each day in the world beyond games as well as within them. Queer theory, as a framework, can inspire many sorts of re-readings of video games: not just queer readings, but also others that challenge the standard notions of what games mean, who belongs in them, and how they make players feel. All players are entitled to explore and experience alternative desires through video games, and all scholars are entitled to approach games and the communities that surround them with an eye toward their transgressive implications. Yet, in using the word "queer" itself, straight, cisgender subjects must remain aware that their experiences are never one and the same with those of LGBTQ people (who themselves each bring their own individual perspectives to this work) and that their use of queerness as a lens must come with an acknowledgment of and respect for real, queer lives.

Even bearing these complications in mind, there is immense potential in playing queerly. This potential lies equally in the value of play as the value of queerness. Play, for instance, differentiates the study of queerness in video games from the study of queerness in other media forms. Beyond the representation of LGBTQ subjects on the screen is the interactive experience of queerness. Interactive experience matters because it is individual as well as cultural, and because it is felt in the body. Ultimately, it is in the body that queerness meets video games. Both discovering the queerness in games and bringing the queerness to games are experiments in bringing the queer body—its desires, its loss, its expression of self—to press up against a game, to see where the two attract and where they repel, to form an intimate, erotic, and often subversive connection between the experiences of queerness, the beauties and dangers of LGBTQ lives, and the medium of video games.

Methodologies, Themes, and Chapters

This book approaches the relationship between video games and queerness from an interdisciplinary perspective, bridging digital media studies, cultural studies, and social activism. Yet, in another sense, the methodologies of the project are relatively straightforward. Each of the chapters is structured around creating a dialogue between video games and queerness by juxtaposing a close reading of a game or games with a specific text or set of ideas from queer theory. By allowing these works to speak to one another, a rich network of insights reveals itself, shining new light on video games as well as on conceptualizations of queerness. In order to demonstrate the wide-reaching relevance of queerness to video games, I have selected games from across a variety of moments in the history of video games, game genres, and paradigms of game production. The queer theory texts I am working with are likewise diverse. Because it is important to me to establish that queer theory has shared an ethos with video games from its earliest days to the present, I have brought in both foundational and contemporary works of queer theory. Often, in describing points of commonality between queer theory and video games, I use the word "resonance." What does it mean for video games, conceptualizations of queerness, and the experiences of queer subjects to resonate with one another? These resonances are points of relationality, moments when the structures and messages of video games echo and are echoed by the structures of queer thinking. To resonate does not simply mean to replicate; resonances still allow for difference and even contradiction. At the places where video games and queerness meet one another, they reverberate, calling to one another and calling to us to make new meaning by reading them in tandem.

Queerness is at the heart of the methodologies of this book, as well as its subject matter. My own training is as a literary scholar, as well as a scholar of new media, but I also worked for many years as a professional video games and technology journalist. Today, in addition, a notable amount of my time is spent as an LGBTQ community organizer. This has given me a perspective that is hybrid by nature: part theoretical, part cultural, with a wide-reaching knowledge of video games and the games industry but also a passion for diving into details. Many of the analyses included in this book are structured around close reading,

which theorist Elizabeth Freeman describes as a distinctly queer process of slowly unfolding.[56] These methodologies are political as well as queer. As I discuss in chapter 2, close reading—or, to use D. A. Miller's words, too-close reading—stands in direct opposition to the insistence from reactionary sectors of games culture that video games should not be overread, and that they should remain "just for fun." Instead of allowing the meanings of video games to remain distant, I delve deeply, embracing the queer intimacy that forms between scholar and game.

Though queerness, sexuality, and gender are my explicit focuses here, a number of related themes emerge across this work that suggest additional underlying connections between the games and texts that I critique. Intimacy and forms of closeness—whether between characters in a video game, game players, or a player and a game—is one of these themes. Movement is another: movements through game space and time, movements of the body, movements across a game board as vectors of desire, movements backward and movements forward as we rethink the history and the future of LGBTQ issues in video games. Affect and embodiment also appear frequently. In addition, there are also a number of ontological questions that underlie these chapters, questions that game studies scholars and players may have heard before, but which are approached from important new angles. What types of interactive experiences count as "real" games? What is the place of winning and losing in a video game, and how can we challenge traditional notions of success? Understanding video games through queer perspectives also generates tensions and points of friction—such as between the way that a game is received by mainstream games culture versus the way that it is interpreted analytically, or the way that a game is designed by its creators versus the way that it is played. My approach to each of these issues is structured around challenging dominant logics and seeking alternative ways of being, doing, and understanding in and through video games.

This book is broken into two sections: "Discovering Queerness in Video Games" and "Bringing Queerness to Video Games." These sections, broadly grouped, represent the two key approaches to exploring the relationship between queer issues and video games that I am proposing here. The first section focuses on using queer theory to identify the queerness that already exists within video games, yet often remains just below the surface. As throughout the book, the games analyzed in this

first section are likely not those that come immediately to mind when one imagines a "queer video game." Yet together they demonstrate that queer desires, bodies, affects, and acts of hegemonic resistance can be found already operating in a wide range of games, even those that seem unengaged with or perhaps antithetical to the concerns of queerness. Methodologically, the examples of queer game analysis given in this section demonstrate the work of doing game studies queerly. This is the work of interpretation, of approaching the medium from new angles; it is the work of allowing the multifaceted nature of queerness to disrupt, enrich, and complicate the standard set of lenses through which scholars and players make sense of video games. These chapters are also founded on an even larger claim: that all video games can be seen as queer, because all video games—like all forms of cultural production—can be interpreted through experiences of non-heteronormative identity and desire.

"Discovering Queerness in Video Games" begins with a juxtaposition that places games directly into dialogue with queer theory. Chapter 1, "Between Paddles: *Pong*, *Between Men*, and Queer Intimacy in Video Games," offers a comparative reading of the video game *Pong* (Atari, 1972) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1985 book *Between Men*. These two works are foundational in the fields of video games and queer theory respectively. They have more in common than their canonical status, however. Both *Pong* and *Between Men* can be understood as reflections on queer intimacy. In a text that many consider the very origin point for queer theory, Sedgwick describes how male homoerotic desire in Western literature has often been triangulated through female characters. Similarly, the ball in *Pong* is hit back and forth in an ongoing dance between identical paddles, which can be seen as a metaphor for a mediated, sexually charged connection between like subjects. Yet reading *Pong* and *Between Men* side by side accomplishes more than a reframing of the classic video game through queerness. It also illustrates that resonances between queerness and games can be found not just in the present moment, with the increased push for diverse content in games, but across the medium's history, all the way back to the very origins of video games and queer theory.

Chapter 2, "Getting Too Close: *Portal*, 'Anal *Rope*,' and the Perils of Queer Interpretation," illustrates how the cultural logics that surround

video games, as well as games themselves, can be re-read through queer theory. Much as chapter 1 established ties between games and queer studies scholarship on literature, this chapter looks to a text that has been formative for queer studies in film: D. A. Miller's essay on the homoerotic implications of camera work and editing in *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948). By performing a parallel analysis of the homoerotic elements in the popular video game *Portal* (Valve, 2007), this chapter addresses and reclaims the notion of getting "too close"—a complaint often directed at those who seek to unpack the social dimensions of video games. It establishes the relevance of video games to scholarship on film and media and argues for the right of all players to look closely in order to see themselves in games.

Chapter 3, "'Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus': Queer Embodiment and Passing in *Octodad*," looks for the queerness in video games through a consideration of their control schema. In the cult hit *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), players assume the role of an octopus trying to pass as a normal, suburban dad. Accomplishing this feat is harder than it sounds, however. Each of Octodad's tentacles are controlled individually, resulting in endless displays of flailing contortion. Intentionally designed to foreground the awkward absurdity of the non-normative body, the game does more than represent difference; it allows players to inhabit difference. Read through a queer lens, *Octodad* reveals itself to be a game about "passing." The image of the fish out of water becomes a multivalent metaphor for the real-world experiences of queer subjects, people of color, and those with disabilities. In this sense, *Octodad* also demonstrates how intersectionality underlies the study of queerness in video games.

Chapter 4, "Kissing for Absolutely No Reason: *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, *Consentacle*, and Queer Game Design," closes the first section of the book by addressing how a game's very interactive systems can resist heteronormativity. In the small-scale, independent game *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Loren Schmidt and Jimmy Andrews, 2015), players lick and prod one another with impossibly long, floppy tongues. The game has no goal and continues indefinitely, upending the assumption that video games—like sex—must by nature have a win state or a point of completion. Here, "discovering" the queerness in games means attending to the ways in which design can act as social critique. In the face of

"gamification," a prominent tool in the neoliberal instrumentalization of play, Schmidt and Andrews's design stands as a compelling illustration of what I call "de-gamification," the stripping away of the ludic structures than enact oppression in everyday life. This chapter also looks to a second game, Naomi Clark's tabletop role-playing game *Consentacle* (2014), to explore the idea of "re-gamification," through which designers can make visible the unspoken rules that shape cultural expectations for gender and sexuality. Together these games demonstrate how discovering the queerness in games calls for a careful consideration of a game's design and its interactive systems, as well as its representational content.

There are many other ways, and many other places, to discover the queerness in video games than those addressed here. Thousands of video games await queer interpretation. My hope is that the chapters in this first section lay a groundwork for future scholarship. They illustrate the concept of queerness "beyond representation," and evidence the legitimacy and rich potential of reimagining video games through queer perspectives. Queerness opens the doors to new ways of seeing. With this work, video games step through that door and move toward multiplicity of meaning.

Whereas the first section of this book focuses on looking beneath the surface to find queerness as it already exists in games—a scholarly mode of intervention—the second section, "Bringing Queerness to Video Games," explores practices through which players and LGBTQ game designers are actively making games queer. In these examples, those who play games, and a new artistic generation of those who create them, are resisting the often toxic heteronormativity of mainstream video games and games culture. They are picking up existing games and playing them "the wrong way," rejecting and thereby queering the stated goals of the game. Alternatively, they are intentionally taking non-normative pleasure in gameplay or questioning the politics of affect in relation to games, disrupting widespread beliefs about how video games are supposed to make players feel. Bringing queerness to games is at once political and personal. The designers in the loosely termed "queer games avant-garde," with which this section closes, are introducing queerness to the broader field of game development by drawing on their own experiences as LGBTQ subjects to tell stories that have rarely appeared in commercially released video games.

Chapter 5, "Playing to Lose: *Burnout* and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games," begins this section by arguing for failure as a mode of queer resistance. As mentioned in chapter 4 in my discussion of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, the assumption that video games are meant to be winnable, and that players play them because they want to win, is still nearly pervasive across game design and game studies. This chapter rejects that assumption, drawing attention to the non-normative pleasures of play, and arguing that players play queerly when they embrace, to use Jack Halberstam's term, "the art of failure." To do this, the chapter looks at the racing game *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion Games, 2005), which turns notions of success on their head by instructing players to crash their cars and accrue points for self-destruction.

Chapter 6, "No Fun: Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," moves from queer failure to queer feeling. It draws from writing on affect from theorists like Sara Ahmed to argue that players can and do experience a range of difficult emotions in video games. This destabilizes the widely held and fundamentally heteronormative belief that video games are first and foremost "fun." Empathy is also a central concern of this chapter. Increasingly, both queer games and games designed for virtual reality devices, which seem poised to become more widely integrated into basic consumer technologies, are being lauded for allowing players to feel what others feel—such as experiences of LGBTQ marginalization. Yet queer affect problematizes empathy, exposing the worrisome implications that underlie the belief that a brief gameplay experience could (or even should) effectively communicate to a straight, cisgender player what it feels like to be queer.

Chapter 7, "Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking: Queer Movements through Space and Time," looks at the temporal and spatial dimensions of queer play. It draws from writing by queer theorists Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Love on "chrononormativity" to identify how players can disrupt established norms of temporality and spatiality in video games. Whether by "speedrunning" (racing through video games by memorizing levels or exploiting glitches) or by insistently lingering during gameplay, players have the opportunity to purposefully reject the chrononormativity of video games as a medium. Recently, the discourse around movement and speed in video games has

explicitly shifted to issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. The so-called walking simulator, a genre that includes games that often represent or are created by women and queer people, is at the center of heated debates within games culture about what does or does not count as a video game. This chapter looks at both the meta-gaming practice of speedrunning and the gameplay of walking simulators, which themselves have ties to the historically queer figure of the *flâneur*, as queer modes of play. Though speedrunning and walking simulators may seem diametrically opposed, they both offer alternative visions of what it means to move through time and space in video games.

The conclusion, "Video Games' Queer Future: The Queer Games Avant-Garde," finishes the book with a profile of some of the independent LGBTQ game-makers who are bringing queerness to the medium of video games through their work. While a number of themes resonate across their games, each of these designers approaches the relationship between queerness and video games from their own unique perspective, demonstrating the nearly infinite opportunities for self-expression that the medium affords and offering a vision of the future of video games that is undeniably queer.

Together the chapters in this second section suggest a vision of some of the many ways in which queerness can be brought to video games. In addition to queer interpretation and queer design, modes of identifying queerness in games, these chapters propose queer agency, queer affect, queer experience, and queer play as forces through which video games can be made queer. Much as the first section of this book argued that any video game could be understood through the lens of queerness, this second section argues that any game can be queer if it is played queerly.

Why Play Queer?

The value of identifying the queerness in video games "beyond representation" extends far beyond games themselves. Queer studies, for instance, has much to gain from being placed in dialogue with games. To date, the work of queer game studies has been presented primarily in game-related spaces, such as conferences and publications focused on digital media. Yet, as the juxtapositions I offer here demonstrate, video games bring new perspectives that productively complicate and

enrich queer theory. In much the same way that queer studies scholars like Kara Keeling, Jacob Gaboury, and micha cárdenas have identified resonances between queer and transgender experiences and technology more broadly, placing queerness in dialogue with video games offers the opportunity to reconsider the desires that structure digital protocols and algorithmic systems.[57] Dominant social norms of gender and sexuality shape every aspect of the video game as technology—from the rumble of a vibrating controller to the sexist remarks left behind by developers in a game's very code.[58] Among the many ways to define video games is as systems, rule sets that describe and regulate the operations of the worlds they create. For this reason, thinking through video games represents a valuable critical tool for rendering visible and reinventing systems of power, privilege, and interpersonal connection.

To talk about queerness and video games is also to talk about technology and diversity on a wider social scale. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, online digital tools have emerged as primary platforms for the popular discourse that surrounds problems like racial discrimination in America. The hashtag #blacklivesmatter is one particularly impactful and moving example of this. Simultaneously, as big data is coming increasingly to serve as the benchmark of knowledge in the digital world, feminist technology scholars are raising much-needed questions about whom data accounts for and whom it renders invisible.[59] In short, inclusion and identity are quickly becoming the most prominent and pressing points in widespread discussions about digital entertainment, digital communication, and digital subjecthood today. Video games, played by hundreds of millions in the United States and billions worldwide, are a critical part of this nexus of technology and culture.[60] Bringing queerness to video games represents an important step toward raising visibility around LGBTQ experiences, as well as the experiences of many other marginalized and underrepresented people, in the context of contemporary technology.

This book has been written with immense gratitude to my fellow queer game scholars, players, and makers, who fight this fight with their words, their hearts, and their bodies every day. With that in mind, I offer this text to all those who are passionate—or simply curious—about the place of LGBTQ issues in video games, as well as sexuality and gender in digital media more broadly. When possible, I have written this text with

a wide range of readers in mind, including scholars, developers, fans, and students. While its close reading methodologies and use of critical theory may make it academic in tone, the book's larger messages have real, immediate implications for the LGBTQ subjects who play games, who develop them, and who care about them. Queer game studies is playful work: interdisciplinary, inter-industry, and creative by nature. Though it is far from comprehensive, my intention is that this work will serve as a springboard for ongoing thinking around queerness and video games from the fields of games studies, queer studies, media studies, cultural studies, and beyond. Only through a diversity of perspectives can the complexity of the intersection between LGBTQ lives and games be uncovered. The way we think about video games must continue to change as games themselves are changing. This is a pivotal moment for the medium, a moment when both games' queer future and its past are coming into focus, when video games are being reclaimed as never before in the name of loving, living, being, and playing otherwise.

PART I

Discovering Queerness in Video Games

1

Between Paddles

Pong, Between Men, *and Queer Intimacy in Video Games*

First released in 1972, *Pong* (Atari) is widely celebrated as one of the first and most formative video games in the history of the medium. Published a little more than a decade later, in 1985, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, is equally well-known within queer studies as a foundational work that helped shape the field. Apart from their revered places within their respective canons, *Pong* and *Between Men* may appear to have little—if anything—in common. *Pong* is a classic arcade game, later brought to a number of home game platforms, inspired by the sport of ping-pong. The original *Pong* is a rudimentary game; only the paddles, the ball, the net, and the score appear on-screen. It has no narrative, no characters, and certainly no explicitly LGBTQ content. By contrast, *Between Men* is all about characters, narrative, and what would likely today be called queerness. In her book, Sedgwick uses examples from British novels to articulate a system through which she sees male same-sex bonds forming via a triangulation of desire through women. Video games are not mentioned in Sedgwick's book, and the abstracted forms represented in *Pong* make for an unexpected match with the detailed stories and dialogue analyzed in *Between Men*. Despite their many differences, however, these two classics can be seen to speak to one another in powerful ways. The dynamic structures that appear in both works in fact closely mirror one another: the erotic triangle described by Sedgwick and the geometric movement of the ball bounced back and forth between paddles in *Pong*. Both can be understood as interactive systems through which desire is communicated, connection is built, and queer intimacy takes form.

By juxtaposing *Pong* and *Between Men*, this chapter explores some of the new perspectives, parallels, and points of complication that arise

when video games and queer studies are put in dialogue. This juxtaposition models one of the key scholarly methods for "discovering" the queerness in video games, the title of this first section of the book, especially when it comes to games that do not initially appear to relate to gender, sexuality, or LGBTQ issues. Directly pairing a highly influential work of queer theory with one of the best-known (yet rarely theorized) video games demonstrates how considering queerness and games together can cast new light on even those works that seem to be well-trodden territory. What is more, because both *Pong* and *Between Men* have been so foundational in their fields—both through their direct influence and through the later generations of work that they helped inspire—identifying the overlaps between them represents an important piece of the larger argument that queerness and video games are indeed profoundly linked. As this comparative reading shows, that link can be found already operating at the respective origins of video games and queer theory, long before LGBTQ characters made their first well-known appearances in mainstream games or game studies began engaging with theories of queerness. These connections reinvigorate and reverberate through both game studies and queer studies, pointing toward ongoing work that explores a wealth of alternative frameworks for making meaning from both queerness and video games.

Current queer game studies scholarship focuses primarily on bringing the interpretive lenses of queer theory to video games. Yet, as this rereading of *Pong* and *Between Men* illustrates, the study of video games, play, and ludic systems can also enrich conceptualizations of queerness. Articulating the ways that *Pong* and *Between Men* speak to one another suggests a larger paradigm for thinking about issues of culture, identity, and resistance: through interactivity and rule sets. As Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson have argued, the work of queer studies is not only to identify and celebrate antinormativity.[1] It is also to use analytical tools informed by concerns of gender and sexuality to lay bare how norms (including norms of queerness) function. Thinking about queerness through video games has the potential to do just this. Games like *Pong*, driven by mechanics rather than story, shift the focus of queer theory away from narrative and toward interactions. Increasingly, game-like experiences, such as Vi Hart and Nicky Case's *Parable of the Polygons* (2014), are modeling how video games can facilitate critical thinking

about the systemic forces that shape society. Placed in conversation with *Between Men*, *Pong* offers a similar opportunity for critical analysis. It invites players to take part in the formation of queer intimacy through critique, creating space for alternative interpretations and emergent play. In this way, this juxtaposition productively complicates the dynamics originally described by Sedgwick in *Between Men*, while simultaneously demonstrating how *Pong* can be understood as a queer game.

Pong: Gameplay, History, and a Call to Critique the "Classics"

Pong is a classic video game in more ways than one. It exemplifies the types of games produced in the "golden era" of the arcade, it enjoys a revered place in the games canon and games history, and it has been, through generations of influence, formative for many waves of games that have followed it. In the intervening years since its original release in 1972, *Pong* has been updated and re-skinned (to use the terminology of the games industry) any number of times, but its basic gameplay remains the same. I will be describing and referring to the 1972 arcade version of *Pong*, since it is in this form that the game first achieved the widespread commercial success that launched its many later iterations.

Though *Pong*'s gameplay may seem simple, each of its elements can be identified and interpreted. Designed as a translation of ping-pong to the then-nascent medium of the video game, *Pong* is a game for either one or two players (figure 1.1). Each opponent, whether human or computer (if the human player is playing alone, they play against the computer), is represented by a thin white rectangle, i.e., a paddle. At the center of the screen, dividing the play space from top to bottom, is a dotted white line: the net. Players' scores are displayed prominently in thick, white numbers on their respective sides of the screen. As in ping-pong, the goal of *Pong* is to hit a ball, represented by a small white square, back and forth between players. If a player misses the ball, a point goes to their opponent. The ball itself is served onto the table at an angle by an unseen force. In order to hit the ball, players move their paddles along a vertical axis. Gameplay is controlled by only one point of input: a smooth metal knob that, when turned, slides a player's paddle up or down. The aesthetics of the game, which is in black and white, are as minimalist as its controls. *Pong*'s 8-bit soundscape adds perhaps its most notable sensory

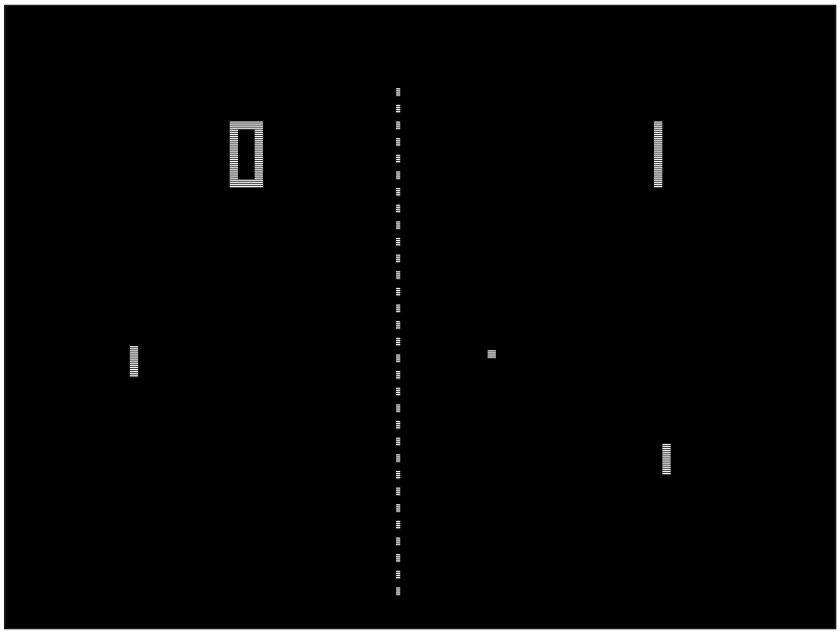

Figure 1.1. *Pong* (Atari, 1972). Creative Commons image via Wikimedia Commons.

element. When a player's paddle hits the ball, the game gives off a bright, electronically inflected chirp; when a player misses, a harsher, longer penalty noise sounds. Together, these deconstructed elements make up *Pong*'s gameplay.

The history of *Pong*, and of the game's importance within the larger narrative of video-game history, has been told many times. Typically, *Pong*'s origins are recounted as a tale of genius breakthroughs by singular men—Atari employees Allan Alcorn and Nolan Bushnell, the game's widely credited creators—whose innovative efforts and creative vision are said to have profoundly shaped video games as we know them today.[2] While it is important to note the problematic gender and labor politics of this narrative, it is true that *Pong* was formative in the emergence of commercial video games in the 1970s, and that the technologies that were developed in part as a result of *Pong*'s success did lay the groundwork for how video games have been played for the last four decades. Not uncommonly, *Pong* is erroneously cited as the first arcade game, or even the very first video game. While other games pre-

ceded it on both counts (e.g., *Spacewar!* in 1962 and *Computer Space* in 1971), *Pong* did contribute significantly to the popularization of the arcade game and, soon after, the medium of the video game more broadly. *Pong*'s popularity helped kick off the production of the scores of games that soon populated arcades. The game also played an important role in the birth of the home game console. In 1974, hoping to build from their commercial success by creating new markets, Atari released *Home Pong*, an all-in-one console, controller, and game that allowed players to play *Pong* at home on their television sets. Expanding on this model, Atari released the Atari 2600 in 1977. From the Atari 2600 can be traced a lineage of consoles that leads up to the present day.[3] In this way, *Pong* can be described as an ancestor of almost all contemporary video games.

In addition to its formative role in the commercial and technological evolution of video games, *Pong* has been highly influential from the standpoint of game design. It was the first video game to use a sports heuristic, and many of its basic elements—like its shared top-down view and centrally displayed score—have since become so standard in multiplayer games that it can be easy to forget that these too have design histories. Later games in which can be seen elements of *Pong*'s design influence, like *Mario Tennis* (Nintendo, 2000), have gone on to take their place as classics in their own right, spinning off long-standing and widely played series. *Pong* also holds a central place in the cultural imaginary as a synecdochic referent for video games themselves. Mentions of *Pong* frequently appear in other forms of media, such as film and television, as well as in popular writing on games, as in the title of Damon Brown's 2008 book on the history of sexual content in video games, *Porn and Pong*. In these instances, the game is often deployed as a shorthand for retro games, the game arcade, or simply the medium of video games itself. In short, even as we might seek to resist retelling the glorified history of *Pong* as a celebration of individual genius, *Pong*'s notable place within the emergence and evolution of video games as a part of North American popular culture merits recognition.

For all that has been written about *Pong*, however, the game has rarely been considered through a theoretical lens. Perhaps because *Pong* seems so basic in its gameplay, its controls, and its forms of on-screen representation, it has been largely overlooked by those interested in closely interpreting video games. In this sense, *Pong* stands in contrast to other

classic arcade games, like *Pac-Man*. The Ms. Pac-Man character has been a point of interest and debate for feminist game commentators and fans alike. Some of these have condemned Ms. Pac-Man as a shallow re-gendering of Pac-Man himself. Isn't she just, as Anita Sarkeesian asks, "Pac-Man with a bow?"[4] Others have sought to reclaim Ms. Pac-Man as gaming's earliest and perhaps most beloved transgender character.[5] Yet *Pong* too, though it seems to represent no characters on-screen, deserves careful critique with an eye toward issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. Contained within *Pong*'s gameplay are rich metaphors for the communication of desire, the formation of intimate relationality, and alternative expressions of agency. As the resonances between *Pong* and *Between Men* will suggest, these aspects of the game can be seen as fundamentally queer. In a sense, interpreting *Pong* through a queer lens represents a retelling of the game's already often-told history—and, through *Pong*, an important element of the larger history of video games. In this new history, *Pong* becomes a queer game that has long passed as an icon of straight gaming culture. Obfuscated, overlooked, yet deeply resonant, *Pong*'s queerness can be found just beneath its surface, where it waits to come to light.

Between Men: Structures, Limitations, and the Foundations of Queer Theory

Like *Pong*, Sedgwick's *Between Men* has been foundational for its field. Sedgwick focuses her text on what she sees as a common social structure: the erotic triangle. The erotic triangle, for Sedgwick, describes a system in which intimacy is formed between men by routing desire through women. Sedgwick calls this a "graphic schema" for understanding how male-male bonds are formed within a cultural context of homophobia and the oppressive instrumentalization of women.[6] She articulates the functions of the triangle through a discussion of erotic rivalry. "In any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved," she writes. "The bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent."[7] To illustrate the mechanisms of these bonds, Sedgwick uses examples from mid-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century British novels. Through these works, Sedgwick

describes a system of male-male bonds that fall on a spectrum between the homosocial and what she calls the homosexual, but which could be more appropriately called the homoerotic. (In her 1993 preface to the second edition of *Between Men*, Sedgwick admits that the book's shortcoming is in its blanket claims about male homosexuality and its lack of engagement with perspectives from gay men.)[8] The vectors through which these bonds form, according to Sedgwick, are as much related to power as to desire. "The homosociality of this world . . . is not that of brotherhood," she asserts, "but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination."[9] In this sense, competition, conflict, and an anxious vacillation between control and powerlessness are key elements of the relationship that the erotic triangle represents.

To a scholar working with *Between Men*, the question of gender makes itself readily apparent. Segdwick focuses explicitly and intentionally on *male* homosocial desire: the way that she perceives connections forming between men, not between women or people of other genders. In this way, *Between Men* differs from Sedgwick's later work, such as *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and *Touching Feeling* (2003), which offer a more nuanced and holistic view of queerness. To what extent then can Sedgwick's vision of triangulated desire, which describes a gender-specific paradigm of bonding, be applied more broadly to a range of queer identities? The answer lies in thinking about Sedgwick's triangle as an alternative, non-heteronormative model for building intimate connection—rather than as an immutable or even accurate depiction of how bonds are actually formed between real LGBTQ subjects. In thinking about queerness through *Between Men*, I am following in, reflecting on, and extending to new media forms an established tradition within queer theory of using Sedgwick's text as a springboard for making sense of the mechanisms and cultural implications of queer desire.[10] Through these works and many others, the ideas expressed in *Between Men* continue to infuse contemporary queer theory as they trickle down through successive generations of scholarship. This suggests the wider relevance of Sedgwick's argument about erotic triangulation beyond the specific context of her source material (British literature) and the theoretical milieu of her writing (mid-1980s clashes between the diverging camps of feminist critique). Like *Pong*, *Between Men* speaks both about and beyond its historical moment through its ongoing influence.

As it has looked to literature and film in the past, queer theory today must look to video games. This is one among the many values of putting Sedgwick's text in dialogue with *Pong*: It models how even the most unassuming video games can serve as windows onto larger issues of subjecthood and society. In the years that have passed since the publication of *Between Men*, Sedgwick's methodology of illustrating social phenomena through products of culture (e.g., British novels) has become standard in queer theory texts—many of which transition seamlessly from theoretical argumentation to examples from the literary and visual arts. The widespread popularity of video games and their ever-growing cultural influence, as well as the increasing turn within queer theory away from "high art" and toward the pop culture, stand as a call for queer theorists today to expand their points of reference to include video games—including, or perhaps particularly, ones like *Pong*, which unfold their unexpected meanings through the alternative frameworks of queerness.

At the same time, the analytical methods of queer theorists such as Sedgwick bring much-needed precedent to the study of video games, which has a track record of resisting critical cultural lenses. When, in 1997, games scholar Janet Murray reasonably suggested that *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov and Vladimir Pokhilko, 1984)—another widely popular, highly influential, and nonetheless undertheorized arcade-era game—could be read as an allegory for "the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s," she became the object of ridicule from colleagues in the field for years to come.[11] Her detractors cited her reading of *Tetris* as an example of a kind of absurd overreaching performed by a scholar who valued subjective interpretations of "narrative" over the formalist elements of play.[12] Reading *Pong* through the framework of queer intimacy runs the risk of inciting similar objections. However, as illustrated by Sedgwick's "erotic triangle" itself, which takes shape through the dynamic interplays of desire, reading representationally abstract games like *Pong* for their social meaning is not a matter of imposing narrative onto playful systems. Rather, such work seeks to explore the "stories," loosely termed, that these playful systems themselves tell.

Sedgwick's methodologies in *Between Men* are also particularly relevant to the work of discovering the queerness in video games. In her text, Sedgwick too is looking beyond representation, reading between

the lines of the relationships directly represented on the page in order to identify queer elements that, while palpable and present, remain in some sense unwritten. In addition, Sedgwick is making similar claims about the widely applicable value of reading queerly—which she calls "recasting and refocusing" the study of same-sex desire. "The choices I have made of texts through which to embody [my] argument . . . are specifically *not* meant to begin to delineate a separate male-homosocial literary canon," she writes. "In fact, it will be essential to my argument to claim that the European canon as it exists is already such a canon, and most so when it is most heterosexual."[13] Parallel claims could be made for video games: that there is no such thing as a queer canon, because video games themselves are queer, potentially even those (as is so often the case with mainstream games) that appear heteronormative.

Theorizing (Queer) Intimacy and Video Games

Intimacy represents a crucial conceptual bridge between Sedgwick's text and *Pong*. It is also a key element of the connection between queer theory and video games more generally. Therefore, it is important to establish a groundwork for discussing intimacy before exploring how it appears across these works. However, the definition of "intimacy," like the definitions of "queerness" and "video games," is messy. Shaka McGlotten, writing about how closeness is formed in digital spaces, describes intimacy as "a feeling of connection or a sense of belonging."[14] He also cites embodiment, carnal sensuality, materiality, semiotic practices, and ideologies as components of intimacy. McGlotten's description demonstrates the slippery, multifaceted nature of intimacy, which can only be understood through a constellation of ideas about experience and feeling. For my purposes here, the keywords of intimacy are closeness, connection, contact, and relationality—though each of these can take many forms. Importantly, this conceptualization of intimacy holds space for queerness, because it does not dictate the terms of acceptable, interpersonal togetherness, thereby allowing for non-heteronormative modes of connection.

Talking about intimacy in video games raises the question: How is intimacy formed in relation to media, as opposed to simply between individuals? Existing work on media and intimacy comes primarily from

feminist film theory. Scholars like Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker describe the experience of watching film as an intimate and embodied exchange between viewer and screen.[15] Often such models for intimacy are articulated through the language of "touch." In her writing on multisensory media, Laura U. Marks explores the relationship between materiality and the media experience. For Marks, as the "haptic critic," objects of analysis become "tangible and beloved bodies."[16] She writes, "I try to move along the surface of the object, rather than attempting to penetrate or 'interpret' it, as criticism is usually supposed to do." Instead, she "press[es] up to the object" and develops a "sensuous closeness."[17] In using this language to describe her work as a scholar, Marks suggests an understanding of analysis as an intimate form of knowing. This intimacy is characterized by points of physical contact (the "tangible"), by warmth of feeling (the "beloved"), and by nonviolence (the "sensuous closeness" that does not "penetrate"). Yet this vision of intimacy too is erotic. "What is erotic?," Marks asks. "The ability to oscillate between near and far is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver."[18] This vision of erotics as that which is bounced back and forth between partners will be key for identifying how intimacy operates in *Pong*, and how that intimacy reveals itself as queer through the juxtaposition with *Between Men*.

In fact, though its implicit presence can be felt throughout *Between Men*, Sedgwick herself rarely uses the word "intimacy." Much more commonly, in her discussions of homosocial and homosexual connections, she deploys terms like "desire" and "bonds."[19] Yet, if we understand intimacy as an interpersonal closeness that is at once affective and erotic, the term "intimacy" can easily be applied to Sedgwick's descriptions of the bonds that form between queer subjects in the erotic triangle. Sedgwick calls desire the "glue" that "shapes an important relationship . . . even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred."[20] Whether or not this intimacy is by necessity sexual is an active question in *Between Men*. By arguing for a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual, Sedgwick indirectly presents sexual contact and/or longing as a defining factor of difference. However, I would argue that Sedgwick's formulation of the continuum actually helpfully calls into question the assumed connection between intimacy and sex itself—one that scholars and activists

striving to bring increased attention to asexuality as a queer identity have also challenged.[21] If, following from Marks, intimacy is imagined as "erotic" rather than "sexual," we allow for an intimacy characterized by its "oscillation between near and far," leaving room for individual experiences that may not be "sexual" in a traditional sense while also refusing to shy away from the importance of desire.

To what extent should the intimacy that Sedgwick's text describes—and the related intimacy that will be seen to operate in *Pong*—be understood as queer? What, for that matter, does queer intimacy mean, and how does it differ from intimacy more generally? In one sense, queer intimacy might simply describe intimacy between queer people. In another sense, the idea of queer intimacy suggests that there is a qualitative difference between the types of intimacy enacted by queer and straight subjects, or that some sort of intimacy might itself be termed queer. The concept of queer intimacy, as I am proposing it here, has the capacity to encompass all of these possibilities. Queer intimacy is intimacy done differently. It describes forms of interpersonal connection that do not conform with normative logics of relationality and closeness. That is, queer intimacy describes a connection that differs from or actively resists the heteronormative vision of intimacy as the stuff of "healthy," monogamous, committed coupledom. It is an intimacy formed through alternative structures: mediated intimacy, intimacy that travels at odd angles, intimacy that challenges what connection and closeness mean. Rather than offer one clear answer to the question, "What is queer intimacy?," I leave these provocations as invitations to interrogate spaces of queer possibility in the analysis that follows, and to find the queer connections that emerge between intimacy and video games more broadly.

Talking about intimacy in video games is more than a theoretical matter. It also brings to the fore a set of cultural beliefs about the effects of technology on interpersonal relationships. On this subject, experts and the popular opinion alike seem distinctly ambivalent. Books like Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* argue that the increasing ubiquity of smart phones and other personal computational devices are taking a serious toll on the ability of young people to form "real," intimate bonds.[22] At the same time, a second vein of writing argues that the spread of consumer technology is strengthening intimacy, allowing users to stay connected to their loved ones through more frequent contact. This

notion, that technology actually bolsters intimacy, is taken still further in texts like David Levy's *Love and Sex with Robots*, which insists that, in the not-so-distant future, our most fulfilling romantic and sexual relationships will be with machines.[23] However, each of these perspectives on closeness and/with the digital shares an interest in what Emma Leigh has called "mediated intimacy": intimacy enacted through the mediating platform of technology or other platforms.[24] In this sense, Sedgwick's *Between Men* offers an especially apt model for thinking about intimacy in relation to digital media because the intimate bonds (between men) she describes are so clearly mediated (through women). In this comparison between the erotic triangle and contemporary cultures of technology, the woman takes on the role of the digital interface through which desire is conducted between would-be lovers. Unlike Turkle or Levy, I am not interested in whether this dynamic is "good" or "bad" for society more broadly. Instead, I am interested in how this parallel of erotic models engenders opportunities for exploring technological experiences (like the play of *Pong*) through queer perspectives.

In addition to the cultural associations between intimacy and digital media, the idea of intimacy in video games is also tied to specific cultural anxieties about the effects of video games on human connection. When it comes to their ability to foster closeness, video games have something to prove—arguably more so than any other media form. In her book *How Games Move Us*, Katherine Isbister notes, "People who aren't on the inside of the game world often tell me they fear that games numb players to other people, stifling empathy and creating a generation of isolated, antisocial loners . . . The reverse is true."[25] Here, Isbister is both acknowledging and refuting the stereotype that video games weaken intimate personal connections. While her foregrounding of empathy raises issues that I address further in chapter 6, her general sentiment is shared by many people who make, play, or study video games: that, far from weakening interpersonal ties, video games have the distinct capacity to foster closeness. I agree—but I would also assert that it is important to think critically not just about whether video games create intimate connections, but also about what sorts of intimate connections they create.

Exploring intimacy in video games also raises the issue of medium specificity. Video games have key features that make their relationship to intimacy unique. For instance, video games are often played by more

than one person at a time. This togetherness in play takes multiple forms. "Local" multiplayer games are played by people who inhabit the same physical space and use a shared device (usually a computer or game console). However, many of today's most widely played games use online connectivity to facilitate multiplayer and even "massively multiplayer" experiences engaged in by players from the world over. Yasmin B. Kafai and Deborah A. Fields's work on "connected play" has looked at how tweens form friendships and other intimate bonds in virtual worlds.[26] Indeed, contrary to the belief that video games make players antisocial, bonding (and especially male bonding) is often associated with playing video games together. The intimacies of video games are not all necessarily queer, however; they can also serve heteronormative functions. As Betsy DiSalvo has demonstrated, collaborative group play is at times a practice that contributes to the performance of "gamer" masculinity.[27]

Intimacy in video games can manifest in other ways as well, such as between characters on-screen, between fans of a game who have joined together in a fan community, or between a player and a game itself. This last possibility—that intimacy can be located in the act of play—points toward the importance of interactivity for understanding intimacy in video games. Interactivity is commonly cited as the defining feature of digital games; players can directly interact with video games in ways that make games stand out among media objects. Yet interactivity is a complex dialectic, a dance of power between the player and the game. Considered in relation to the theorizing of intimacy above, this interactivity can be seen as a kind of erotic connection, like the push and pull of control described by Marks or the movement between dominance and subordination described by Sedgwick. Of course, video games are not the only interactive medium, and interactivity should be understood as only one among the defining features of video games. Yet, by accepting interactivity as core to video games, we broaden the possibility space for envisioning intimacy in games. Through interactivity, even single-player games can be seen as intimate (and intimately queer) experiences.

Pong itself, both in its design and in its history, speaks to a number of the ways that video games can engender intimacy—and how they have done so. One of the core but as-yet under-explored elements of intimacy in video games is their materiality. The original arcade cabinet design

Figure 1.2. Original *Pong* arcade cabinet. Creative Commons image via Wikimedia Commons.

of *Pong* offers a compelling example of how a game's hardware, physical presence, and tangible interface can create intimate experiences (figure 1.2). With its bright yellow face and wood-paneled sides, the cabinet aptly looks the part of a cultural product from the early 1970s. Like the game itself, the cabinet's design is simple yet sleek. Its controls—two knobs to sensuously tweak labeled "player 1" and "player 2"—stand against the backdrop of a mostly bare metal plate. The cabinet's small screen sits recessed in the overhang of its forward-slanting front panel. Fittingly, the most visually striking element of the original *Pong* arcade cabinet is its angles. The front face that the cabinet presents to the player is stylized

through a series of angular planes that give the cabinet a silhouette reminiscent of the path a bouncing ball might take between solid surfaces.

In ways that both foretell and exceed video-game arcade machines to come, the design of the *Pong* cabinet is intimate. With its small screen tucked deep into the mysterious, dark-sided recess of its yellow façade, the cabinet requires players to stand particularly close to one another and to the machine, leaning down and in as they play. By the time the next generation of hit games (like Taito's 1978 *Space Invaders*) entered arcades, screen sizes had grown and display technologies had improved. This made games easier to see, which in turn allowed players to literally step back from the intimate experiences like those they had had with the *Pong* machine. Gregory Bagnall has written about how video games can enact or resist heteronormativity through the design of their material interfaces.[28] By insisting on a physical closeness between game and player, the original *Pong* arcade cabinet enacts an alternative and arguably homoerotic understanding about what it means to stand in relation to a video game. It literalizes the intimacy of the arcade as a space of homosocial togetherness for young, straight men: the prototypical "gamers" whom Carly Kocurek describes in her research on the history of American video-game arcades.[29] Yet arcade-goers were not the only ones who would have played *Pong* in its earliest, most intimate iteration. The game cabinet was also a popular staple at bars, where it was considered an appealing ice breaker for flirtatious players, since it brought the bodies of potential romantic partners into close physical proximity.[30]

Indeed, it is possible to reframe the whole history of *Pong*—as well as its place in the larger history of games—as a history of video games and intimacy. The sale of Atari's *Home Pong*, inspired by the popularity of *Pong*, was an early example of a much bigger shift that would take place by the late 1980s in how video games were conceived of and consumed. *Home Pong* was among the first consoles to take video-game playing out of the arcade and into the living room, transforming an experience of public play into a private one. By the 1990s, a sea change was well under way that had begun in no small way with the *Home Pong*'s progeny, the Atari 2600. Playing video games had increasingly become something that individuals or groups did behind closed doors. With a home console, as well as a mobile console or a personal computer, a player or players could be alone with a game, suggesting experiences of

increased intimacy and the association of games with domestic, even erotic spaces. Indeed, Matthew Thomas Payne and Peter Alilunas have argued that the first wave of pornographic video games, epitomized by 8-bit titles like *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), were made possible through the introduction of home consoles that could be moved "from living rooms into bedrooms."[31] This movement away from public play and toward private play is only now beginning to see a second shift, with the rise of competitive gaming as a spectator sport and the popularity of "Let's Play" videos and Esports streaming on sites like Twitch, which allow non-players to watch as others play, making once-private, domestic spaces public once again.

Erotic Geometry: Parallel Structures in *Pong* and *Between Men*

Pong and *Between Men* may appear to have little in common. However, the dynamic structures that they present—whether through theorizing or through gameplay—mirror one another in revealing ways. Most strikingly, Sedgwick's erotic triangle can be seen to parallel the geometry of the ball passed back and forth between paddles in *Pong*. This suggests a reading of *Pong* that refigures game mechanics through queer desire, and a reading of *Between Men* that highlights the interactive elements of Sedgwick's system. Together, these implications push conceptualizations of queer intimacy beyond representation and into the realm of systemic interpersonal relations.

Much as desire is exchanged between male subjects through women in *Between Men*, players in *Pong* interact with one another via an exchange of the ball. This comparison is figurative, but it is also visual: the shape of the erotic triangle and the shapes that the ball traces as it moves across the board share a common geometry. *Pong* is a game of angles. To play well, one must calculate the angle at which the ball is currently moving, as well as how that angle will change when the ball hits a wall or the opponent's paddle. Bouncing against the top and bottom edges of the game board as it passes between paddles, the ball enacts a triangulation between players. Yet this triangulation is also constantly changing, forming its point at new places on the game board, multiplying out its triangles as play progresses. As it moves, the ball traces an invisible

path that marks the board with the specters of all the trajectories it has already traveled, suggesting an increasingly complex and tangled set of geometric shapes connecting the players.

In this sense, the geometry of desire in *Pong* is a queer geometry. It is structured around ricochets, crossed paths, and movement that almost never adds up "straight." Only two players who position their paddles directly across from one another and do not move can hit the ball in a straight line. As soon as either player moves, the ball flies off sideways. Indeed, *Pong* can only be played through this queer triangulation. Each direction in which the ball is hit can be seen as a vector of desire. Its speed embodies the heat of the exchange—in which the opposing players (or "rivals," to use Sedgwick's term) act upon one another using the ball as proxy. In a sense, the gameplay of the physical sport ping-pong could be described in similar terms. Yet, the ways in which *Pong* abstracts the original sport, to borrow the game design language of Colleen Macklin and John Sharp, heighten its queer aspects.[32] By removing the bodies of players, leaving visible only rudimentary paddles, the video game transforms the motion of the ball and the frenetic, non-straight relationality it suggests into particularly charged points of visual and affective interest. With no players in sight, only the triangulated vectors of desire remain.

Touch is also a key element of intimacy in both *Between Men* and *Pong*. Similar to the men whom Sedgwick describes as connecting through the medium of women, the paddles are in constant contact through the ball. Technically, the paddles cannot touch, or even approach each other; the game only allows players to move up and down, never closer to their opponent. Instead, the ball serves as a go-between—the material object that they both touch in place of touching each other. This exchange of contact through the ball is an erotically charged act: a point of tension and excitement in the game (will a player get to the ball in time, or will they miss?). Embodied in the movement of the ball back and forth across the playing field, the relationship between paddles is characterized by the "oscillation between near and far," as Marks describes the erotic. In *Between Men*, straight relationships act like a conduit through which the spark of homosociality and homoeroticism travels, facilitating the creation of queer intimacy at a distance. Similarly, in *Pong*, the

ball is the object through which connection is transferred: the mediating surface, like a skin that both players touch.

Sedgwick's triangle also foregrounds the formation of intimacy through competition. This is especially relevant for theorizing intimacy in video games. In *Pong*, players, represented by their paddles, work against each other while simultaneously building their intimate connections. The erotic triangle itself is a competitive game: Two compete for the love of one, forming what Sedgwick calls an "intense and potent" bond between rivals. Yet *Pong* adds an additional layer of complexity to the equation. If they are playing to win, players do not actually want their opponents to hit the ball back; they prefer to sever the connection and win the point. This suggests that there may be differences in the nature of the intimacy that builds between players and between paddles. Even if players think of themselves as rivals without meaningful connection, the paddles can be seen as lovers: seductively dancing up and down on the screen in order to find geometric points of connection.

If we doubt that the erotic geometries described in *Pong* and *Between Men* can be read in parallel, we need look no further than Sedgwick's own language, which clearly recalls video-game mechanics. Sedgwick's description of the woman as the point in the erotic triangle between men could easily be applied to a wide range of objects in games. "Women are meant to be in a subordinate, complementary, and instrumental relation to bonds with other men," writes Sedgwick.[33] At the most basic level, it would certainly seem true that the ball (like other video-game objects and non-player characters) is subordinated to the paddles and instrumentalized in the construction of a gameplay experience for the players, though I will return to the issue of the ball's agency below. In critiquing the dynamics of male-male bonding, Sedgwick condemns the ways in which she sees women exchanged like money. In this system, says Sedgwick, a woman's "value" lies in being passed "from (male) hand to hand, like the used currency she is . . . as currency that has no inherent value, but takes on value in circulation."[34] Given this, Sedgwick writes, "a stable relationship to a woman is impossible in the context of male transactive circulation."[35] The ball too is passed "from hand to hand," i.e., from paddle to paddle. Like a form of currency, it also only generates value, i.e., game points, when it is in motion. However, in *Pong*, the dynamics that Sedgwick is describing take on a different valence.

Though the game could be read as a parable of oppression, it can also be reclaimed and celebrated as an opportunity to play in that very space of unstable relationality. In *Pong*, transactive circulation is indeed the name of the game—but accomplishing that circulation is tricky business that requires constant vigilance and inevitably entails failure, recasting the dominant paradigms of heteronormative desire embodied in the standards of gameplay as precarious and always subject to impending "loss."

New Perspectives on *Pong*, New Perspectives on *Between Men*

Through its resonances with queer theory, *Pong* can be interpreted in ways that notably differ from how the game has been traditionally understood. Compellingly, *Between Men* opens the door to thinking about *Pong* as a system of symbols, metaphors, and parables: a seemingly simple play experience that nonetheless embodies some of the key structures through which desire, agency, power, and queer intimacy are formed. Though the subjects of Sedgwick's analysis are primarily narrative texts, the resonances between the systems she describes and those that appear in *Pong* illustrate that queer theory that emerges from an interest in literature can speak in equally meaningful ways to interactive works such as video games.

One of the important new perspectives that *Between Men* brings to *Pong* is an emphasis on the body. Bodies seem entirely absent from the game. This is true both in terms of representation (no bodies appear on-screen) and in terms of gameplay. Sliding smoothly up and down along vertical axes, the paddles do not move as if they are being swung by human arms. This is a sport as played by a machine, with a machine's precision but also a machine's oversimplification of embodied human expression. Yet the overlaps between the dynamics of the game and Sedgwick's work suggest that bodily desire can be found operating in *Pong*. In this way, *Between Men* stands as a challenge to reconsider the place of the body in this game and video games with minimal representational content more broadly.

Indeed, a closer look suggests that, far from being absent, bodies are actually present in *Pong* in many forms. These bodies exist in negative spaces. Imagine *Pong* played as a game played with the lights off; the paddles, the net, and the ball all happen to glow in the dark, but the bodies of

the players are obscured. What stands in the unknown spaces on either end of the board if not the implication of unseen human forms moving the paddles? Whereas the ball bounces off the top and bottom of the screen, it goes out of bounds when it passes to the right or left: the spots where these unseen players stand. Therefore, this place of the invisible body, absent yet present, is also of great importance for gameplay. Alternatively, the paddles themselves could be seen as stand-ins for the players' bodies. Drawing attention to the implied presence of the body in *Pong* entails a "recasting and refocusing" of the content of the game similar to the one that Sedgwick enacts in her interpretations of literary texts.

Reading *Between Men* in conjunction with *Pong* also highlights the importance of gender in the game. Gender (specifically a presumed cisgender binary) is an explicit focus of Sedgwick's text. This raises the question of how gender might map to the intimate dynamics of *Pong*—or how these gendered implications, suggested by *Between Men*, might be productively brought into question through the game. As mentioned above, if we overlay the gender dynamics of Sedgwick's erotic triangle onto the interactive structures of *Pong*, the paddles become the "men" forming bonds and the ball becomes a "woman" heatedly exchanged between them. This mapping implies that *Pong* offers a concerning model of gendered agency, with "male" paddles as subjects and a "female" ball as an object. Whereas the paddles are free to move and exert their own power, the ball must go where it is sent, obeying both the whims of the players and the basic rules of physics as programmed into the game. Though potentially reductive, this interpretation of gender roles in *Pong* does resonate with ongoing discussions in game studies and news media commentary about the ways that video games, often designed for straight male consumers, might be interpreted as machines for facilitating the exertion of male heterosexual "power fantasies" over female characters and game worlds more broadly.[36]

However, there are also other ways to interpret the gendered implications of *Pong* as read in conjunction with *Between Men*. Rather than reaffirming structures of male power over women, the symbolism of *Pong* can challenge assumptions about power, agency, and gender-based oppression as they manifest in video games. The ball is batted back and forth between paddles, yet to say that its movements lie entirely in the

hands of the players is to overlook the drive and desires of the ball itself. Within the world of the game, the ball is a force to be reckoned with. It is not served onto the table by one of the players, as in a traditional game of ping-pong. Instead, it enters the play space from off-screen, flying onto the table at an angle that the players have had no part in determining. Far from being a mere tool for the transmission of connection between paddles, the ball is a willful, dangerous, and at times chaotic entity that the players struggle to contain. This too is a metaphor for the dynamics between men and women, in Sedgwick's terms—or, more broadly, between those whose power is overt and institutional, and those who are driven along their own trajectories to create resistance and disorder within a system. We see only one ball at a time on-screen, but what if there is not one, but an infinite number of balls? It can be imagined that each ball hit off-screen is replaced by a new ball; this repeats every time a point is lost, multiplied out by each time the game of *Pong* is played. In this sense, the balls, amassing at the unseen margins of the screen, far outnumber the paddles. To play *Pong* is to enter one small corner of a larger world, barely bigger than one ping-pong table, that is primarily populated not by paddles and those who wield them, but by a multiplying array of balls: playful boundary breakers who fly off in all directions and form an implied community of white dots that circle the table just outside the limited view of the screen.

Reading *Pong* in this way stands as a larger challenge to reconsider what agency might mean in a video game. The subject of player agency is one that comes up frequently in discussions of video games, largely because of the interactive nature of the medium.[37] Interactivity prompts questions about the extent to which video games allow players to make their own meaningful choices, as many have claimed, or whether they offer only the illusion of choice. When agency is placed into dialogue with gender, however, the conversation within game studies has largely focused on the portrayal of female characters, often with an eye toward the divide between playability and non-playability. Frequently debated playable characters like Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series have inspired concerns about what it means for a presumed male player to control the body of a sexualized woman.[38] More recent mainstream feminist critique of female characters in video games has pointed to a presumed hierarchy of player-characters versus non-player characters—arguing

that, even when women characters do appear in video games, they lack meaningful agency because they cannot be controlled by the player but instead remain "background decoration."[39]

A queer reading of *Pong* offers an alternative vision of in-game agency as it relates to gender, however. This alternative vision is made possible precisely by the fact that the game does *not* allow players to directly control its female-coded "character." If player-characters are those through which players directly interact with the game world, then in the case of *Pong*, the paddles are the player-characters. Non-player characters are those that inhabit the game world but through which players cannot interact; in *Pong*, the ball can be understood as a non-player character. In the most basic sense, we might be tempted to say that player characters (the male-coded paddles) should be considered empowered because they have the agency to move freely, though admittedly within a limited range of spatial possibility. By contrast, the non-playable ball could be considered disempowered: shuttled between players, as in Sedgwick's description of women as currency. Yet reading *Pong* alongside *Between Men* actually suggests that non-player characters may have more agency than they are commonly given credit for. Because these characters are not controlled by the player, they have more independence. The paddles must do as they are told, but the ball follows its own path. Except in the case of an indefinite stalemate, the ball will always ultimately reach the destination of its own desire: the edge of the board. In this way, placing *Pong* in dialogue with Sedgwick reanimates the ball as subject in its own right. Through queer theory, we can begin to consider the politics of objects in video games—the uses and the inner lives of the things that populate game worlds—suggesting that queer meaning can be found in not just whom but also what is represented in video games.

Much as *Between Men* brings new perspectives to *Pong*, *Pong* brings new perspectives to Sedgwick's text. Importantly, it calls attention to elements of the erotic triangle that Sedgwick herself overlooks, both building from and complicating the vision of queer intimacy that *Between Men* presents. This reconsideration of *Between Men* through *Pong* demonstrates that, in addition to the important frameworks that queer studies brings to video games, game studies also has much to offer the field of queer theory.

One of the key elements of *Between Men* onto which this juxtaposition with *Pong* sheds new light is the importance of movement. In describing the way that bonds are formed between men through women, Sedgwick repeatedly uses language that is closely tied to motion. Sedgwick calls this mode of male-male bonding "the heterosexual detour of male homosocial desire."[40] Women "circulate" between men.[41] "Passed" from hand to hand, she says, they serve as "conduits" for men's homosocial desire toward other men.[42] These terms come from Sedgwick's discussion of how women are treated like objects with fungible value. However, reading *Pong* alongside *Between Men* underscores motion as a second, equally important theme in this rhetoric. In the system Sedgwick articulates, the figure through whom queer intimacy is triangulated is not static; she is on the move. Like the ball that bounces between paddles, she has the potential to travel with great speed and momentum as she "circulates" along the "detour" that describes the path through which intimacy is established. As the one through whom desire is transferred, this third figure in Sedgwick's schema not only moves; she also controls the possibilities for movement. If she is the "conduit," the motions of desire must transfer through her. In *Pong*, as seen, the ball walks a fine line between object and unruly subject, figure of oppression and figure of agency. The parallel between the ball in motion and the woman in Sedgwick's erotic triangle suggests a similarly complicated picture. This language of movement also points to direct ties between Sedgwick's text and the logics of computational media. In addition to the word "conduit," Sedgwick describes the triangular schema as a "circuit," bringing to mind the flow of electricity and information that moves through the very types of digital systems on which video games are built.[43]

Reading *Between Men* in conjunction with *Pong* also helps us locate a broader queerness—as opposed to a more reductive vision of homoerotics—in Sedgwick's text. For Sedgwick, the locus of what we might today call queerness lies in the intimate relationship between men. However, a queer reading of *Pong* suggests that the ball (i.e., the female-coded figure) can also be conceptualized as queer. The ball could be read, for instance, as a representation of José Esteban Muñoz's vision of queer futurity.[44] Because it is always on the move, always changing angles and trajectories, players of *Pong* cannot think about where the

ball currently is, but rather where the ball will be. To keep up with it indefinitely is, for a human player, an impossible task. Yet to play in a way that complies with the stated goals of the game is to keep working toward that impossible future. The comparison with *Pong* also recasts the formation of queer intimacy described in *Between Men* in a more positive light. If the ball hit back and forth between paddles is seen as a kind of embodied dialogue, the exchange of meaning through touch-by-proxy, the erotic triangle becomes a model for queer communication. Each friendly beep that the game intones when a player hits the ball functions like a word in code. A connection is built through the receiving and returning of these coded utterances. The paddles are also in conversation with the game board itself. When the ball hits the upper or lower walls of the screen and bounces, the game responds with a higher, quicker chirp. These sounds function like sonar: the sonic blips through which the paddles know the edges of their darkened surrounds. They mark points of contact—between ball and paddle, between ball and wall—and form a soundscape for the game formed entirely of moments of (queer) touch.

Above all, the resonances between *Pong* and *Between Men* point toward the importance of thinking about the formation of queer intimacy as an interactive system. By nature, games are structured around rules. Drawing comparisons between *Pong* and *Between Men* suggests that the system that Sedgwick describes—indeed, social systems of sexuality and gender more generally—is similarly governed by unspoken rules. Learning to function within that system (or learning to resist it) is equivalent to identifying and internalizing the rules and mechanisms through which that system operates. Yet, crucially, any interactive system leaves room for emergent behavior—or, more precisely, emergent play, to return to Celia Pearce's term described in the introduction of this book.[45] *Pong*, as a point of comparison for *Between Men*, stands as a testament to the fact that systems are not always played perfectly. When a player misses a ball, the triangulation of queer intimacy does not succeed, so to speak. Alternatively, when a player chooses not to play or to "play to lose" (the subject of chapter 5), they reject the invitation to participate in the structure Sedgwick describes. Once a system is understood to be interactive, its edges begin to reveal themselves. The presence of the "out" area behind the paddles suggests that it is possible to stand outside the

system, to inhabit the apparent no-man's-land where hegemonic structures break, bend, and fail.

Here then is another site of queerness that *Between Men* and *Pong* suggest in one another: the space not just "beyond representation" but beyond the game itself, beyond heteronormative expectations for the formation of intimacy, in that encircling and unknown place where the ping-pong balls of past and present gather around the edges of the table and watch a system of rules play out that is, in that moment, not their own. Through association with play, this system become playful—not a set of rigid social prescriptions that dictate the shape of each individual's intimacies, but a game at which a subject may win or lose, play or not play, revel in or resist.

With Sedgwick's text as a model for queerly re-reading *Pong*, we can productively reconsider a game that has been previously overlooked in the study of sexual identity in video games. Indeed, the new perspectives that *Between Men* brings to *Pong* suggest the many more pairings that could be made precisely between queer theory and those video games whose queer implications go far beyond explicit LGBTQ representation. Held in juxtaposition, these two classic works revitalize each other, suggesting novel interpretations of long-established canons and helping build an interdisciplinary foundation for the study of queerness and video games.

2

Getting Too Close

Portal, *"Anal* Rope,*" and the Perils of Queer Interpretation*

"On one hand, connotation enjoys, or suffers from, an abiding deniability. To refuse the evidence for a merely connoted meaning is as simple—and as frequent—as uttering the words 'But isn't it just . . . ?' before retorting the denotation. On the other, this maneuver is so far betrayed by the spirit of irritation, willfulness, and triumphalism . . . that it ends up attesting not just to the excesses of connotation, but also to the impossibility of ever really eliminating them."[1]

This is a passage from D. A. Miller's 1990 essay "Anal *Rope*," in which Miller performs a queer reading of Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 classic film. Here, Miller is talking about the difference between denotation (meaning that is clearly stated) and connotation (meaning that is implied). He bemoans the self-congratulatory responses of those who would dismiss out of hand any interpretation that looks beyond the immediately obvious and seeks to read between the lines. Miller is voicing this frustration in the context of queer film scholarship, a nascent area of study at the time of the publication of "Anal *Rope*." In his piece, he offers an analysis of *Rope* as a film whose formalist elements, and in particular Hitchcock's use of the cut, can be seen as closely if implicitly tied to themes of homosexuality. Yet, taken on its own, this quote from Miller could just as easily describe what it is like to close read video games.

Though the field of game studies has existed for more than two decades, close reading video games—that is, looking for their connotations as well as their denotations—is still controversial work, both in academia and in the broader reaches of video-game culture. While game studies scholars like Jim Bizzocchi and Josh Tanenbaum, as well as earlier scholars of electronic text like James A. Inman, have argued for the value of close reading digital media objects, the ever-looming accusation of "over-reading" continues to deter many would-be close readers from

exploring games as textual objects (loosely termed) with significant attention to detail.[2] This is especially true when it comes to interpreting games through socially engaged lenses, like an interest in LGBTQ issues and experiences. Players, scholars, and commentators who perform critiques of video games that look beneath the surface are often met with this same brand of irritated, willful skepticism that Miller describes, which aims to shut down interpretation by insisting on the validity of only the most simplistic evidence. Yet, as Miller suggests, these heated, reactionary responses also point toward the power of close reading to "irritate" the norm. Despite protests from players who insist "Isn't it just . . . ," connotative meanings destabilize dominant understandings of video games even as those connotations are being "willfully denied."

In this chapter, I bring Miller's "Anal *Rope*," as well as his concept of "too-close reading," into dialogue with video games in order to demonstrate the counterhegemonic potential of getting "too close" to games. This approach is particularly valuable for interpreting video games queerly. As noted throughout this book, the majority of existing video games do not include explicit representations of queerness; yet, through connotation, queerness can still be identified in many of these games. Interpreting seemingly "straight" games queerly comes with its perils, however. Publishing or speaking publicly about queer interpretations of well-known video games can make one the object of the sort of vitriolic harassment faced by so-called social justice warriors.[3] Attempts to analyze video games with even the same basic level of attention to detail afforded to literature and film are still comparatively uncommon, and are often met with accusations of "reading too much into" games.[4] Miller's writing on *Rope* offers a valuable opportunity to embrace rather than to defend against this idea of reading too much and looking too closely. Like *Between Men*, which I discussed in chapter 1, "Anal *Rope*" has been foundational for the contemporary field of queer studies, especially as it intersects with film studies. Read in this new context, however, Miller's essay takes on additional implications. It demonstrates how the critical frameworks of queer theory, including those derived from film as well as those derived from literature, can productively bring into question the meanings of video games and the cultural logics that surround them.

To explore this juxtaposition through a fittingly deep dive, I have chosen to read "Anal *Rope*" alongside one specific game: Valve's 2007

hit *Portal*. Combining shooting, platforming, puzzles, and a wry sense of humor, *Portal* is beloved by the very same sectors of gamer culture that have lashed out in response to diversity initiatives in games. Yet, in ways that meaningfully mirror Miller's interpretation of *Rope*, *Portal* is a game whose queerness operates both in the connotations of its narrative and in its formalist elements. Considered alongside "Anal *Rope*," *Portal* opens itself to a too-close reading (or rather, borrowing the concept of "close playing" from Edmond Chang, a too-close playing).[5] Through this reading, the game is recast as a world of women and female robots, in which same-sex relationships are explored and critiqued through some of the same queer mechanisms that Miller identifies: the fantasy of the continuous shot and the embodied metaphor of the cut. At the same time, *Portal*'s representation of gender sets it apart from *Rope* and complicates Miller's original essay. By demonstrating the insights that can be gained through a too-close reading of *Portal*, this comparison reframes the accusation that humanistic game studies scholars over-analyze games. Like Johan Huizinga's "spoil-sport" or Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy," the too-close player rejects the hegemonic rules that dictate the boundaries around how "acceptable" meaning is supposed to be made from video games.[6] Instead, the too-close player insists on the right of queer subjects and others who are commonly underrepresented in video games to see themselves in games through connotation.

The Perils and Power of Queering "Straight" Video Games

There are real and immediate political and personal stakes to approaching the study of video games through the methods of close reading. Video-game culture is often misrepresented in mainstream media, such as in popular films and television, as the domain of boys in basements: a network of undersocialized, overly enthusiastic young men who bond by fighting in digital environments.[7] In reality, video-game culture is far bigger, far more rich and complex, and at times far more dangerous—though not in the ways that many non-gamers imagine violent video games to be dangerous. Today, as a number of studies have shown, nearly as many women play video games as do men; the average age of a game player in 2015 was 35 years old.[8] Games culture, however, continues to be dominated largely by the voices of straight, white, male

consumers. Particularly loud among those voices are those that express hostility toward the presence of "non-gamers" or supposedly "fake gamers" (e.g., women, queer people, and people of color) in game content and game communities. While many offline factors contribute to the state of games, the hub of contemporary video-game culture is the Internet. Most of the discourse between gamers that could be said to form games culture takes place on social media platforms, in forums, and on video-game websites. These same spaces are notorious as sites of online harassment. For anyone seen as "different," the threat of harassment looms large in games culture. As a panel at the 2015 Game Developers Conference titled "Game Developer Harassment: How to Get Through" illustrates, these attacks take many forms and can affect a variety of people: from racist comments made to a player of color in a competitive online game, to threatening emails sent to a game critic, to the release of highly personal information of a female game-maker.[9] Though this type of harassment is not new in games culture, the rise in 2014 of the large-scale harassment campaign #GamerGate brought the intensity of these attacks to new heights. As Zoë Quinn has written in her book *Crash Override*, #GamerGate was a "new front in the full-blown culture war over the heart and soul of the internet itself."[10]

Along with women, queer folks, people of color, etc., who make and play video games, those who analyze games have also found themselves the targets of harassment. As Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw describe in their essay, "A Conspiracy of Fishes," those same reactionary sectors of games culture that have issued attacks against game designers have increasingly accused game studies scholars, and especially scholars whose work focuses on diversity issues, of conspiring to denigrate the medium of video games.[11] For #GamerGaters, this harassment is enacted in the name of an ethical imperative to make the study of video games supposedly more "objective." In addition to professional academics, public commentators who perform analyses of games in an academic mode have also incited the ire of harassers. Perhaps hardest hit of these commentators are those who explicitly approach video games through feminism. Most notably, Anita Sarkeesian, creator and host of the online video series "Feminist Frequency," has been the object of online abuse on an overwhelming scale. What has most incensed her harassers is her "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" videos, in which Sarkeesian unpacks

video games in detail in order to illustrate the misogynist tropes that frequently appear in mainstream games. The gamers who reject and revile Sarkeesian's work frequently insist that her practice of close critical analysis negates her legitimate gaming subjecthood—that is, that because she deconstructs video games (with an eye toward social justice), Sarkeesian must not be a "real gamer" and therefore deserves to be the object of ongoing abuse.

Because this harassment is so abhorrent, often vicious, and deeply personal, it can be tempting to try to put it out of our minds. However, it is worth pausing to deconstruct the rhetorics that structure this backlash against video-game analysis—not to find their merits but rather to expose and critique their logics. Interestingly, harassers (and other, less aggressive but nonetheless resistant gamers, such as many university students) who direct their complaints at game scholars often focus on the notion of "over-reading" video games. Sexism, racism, and homophobia are clearly among the forces that drive these responses, which seek to invalidate and thereby silence analyses of all but the most apolitical leanings. Yet the indignant uproar that often meets the critique of video games through lenses such as feminism seems to latch onto the idea that scholars and commentators are "reading too much into" games: making up meaning that is not there. Implicit in these objections is the unquestioned assumption that video games are "just for fun," a surprisingly widely held popular belief that I challenge at greater length in chapter 6. By this anti-intellectual logic, "just for fun" means immune from analysis: an escape from reality that should not and indeed cannot be seen as any kind of meaningful reflection on society. If games' white, cisgender, straight players see video games as "safe spaces" outside the concerns of identity politics, socially engaged analysis represents a violation of that safe space. As Katherine Cross has argued, much of the hatred expressed in these reactionary sectors of games culture can be seen as a misplaced manifestation of the fear that gamers feel that outsiders will take video games away from them.[12] Gamers of this sort worry that a medium that has been central to their own identities will be rendered unrecognizable by a territorial encroachment on the part of those who wish to include more diverse and socially responsible representation in video games.[13]

When it comes to analysis, such anxiety morphs into a set of concerns over ownership. This becomes apparent when we consider that not all

forms of detailed analysis are condemned as over-reading. Writing meticulous FAQs (step-by-step directions for playing individual games) has long been a celebrated part of games culture. What makes this work different from social critique is that it is descriptive rather than interpretive; it takes a game entirely on its own terms and does not attempt to look beneath its surface. Consider this in contrast to the response I received to an article I wrote for *The Village Voice*, during my days as a technology and games journalist. The first trailer for the much-anticipated survival horror game *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2007) had just been released. Set in Africa, where a white protagonist was tasked with gunning down hordes of black zombies, the game's racist implications seemed clear. I wrote a short piece on the topic, one that frankly was far tamer than the subject merited.[14] After its publication, in addition to the standard spiteful emails I had come to expect as a games journalist speaking from a feminist perspective, a number of complaints were mailed directly to the editor-in-chief of the *Voice*—among them a hand-written death threat describing plans to shoot me in the head in the same way that a *Resident Evil* player shoots zombies.

Often, when I talk to those who have not spent considerable time in games culture, this response to a simple article seems unfathomable. Certainly, it was deeply upsetting. Over time, though, I have come to see it as a case study in the fear and fragility of the belief system underlying the notion that socially engaged analysis constitutes over-analysis. Clearly, by making race an explicit part of the discussion, I had hit a nerve. Yet, when I was accused of "reading too much into" the game, what I was really being accused of was reading the game the wrong way, or perhaps of encroaching on territory in which I supposedly did not belong. To dismiss an interpretation as "seeing meaning that isn't there" is a way of saying, "You are seeing what you want to see in the game, not what I want to see." In this sense, the fight for the right to analyze video games closely, even in the face of the many perils of this work, is the fight to make our own meaning from games—to lay claim to the equal citizenship of those who are "different" in games cultures by understanding games on the terms and through the methods that we deem meaningful rather than those set and policed by the gamer status quo.

In addition to the challenges faced by all socially engaged critiques of video games, interpreting games queerly raises a number of additional

issues related to games culture and sexuality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, queer game studies scholars and public figures who advocate for increased LGBTQ representation in video games are among the targets of gamer harassment. This is true for people whose work focuses on LGBTQ characters in video games, but it is also (and perhaps especially) true for those who seek to bring queer perspectives to video games that are widely considered "straight." What does it mean to queer a piece of media that does not appear to have any LGBT content? This is a question that runs throughout this book, but the stakes of this question have particular relevance here. If a game does not allow a player to take part in a same-sex romantic relationship or play as an explicitly queer character, the game is generally presumed to be straight by default. The problem with figuring straightness as a default, of course, is that it casts heterosexuality as "normal" or standard, while queerness is seen as the exception or deviation.[15] This thinking follows from a double standard that structures largely unquestioned assumptions about the relationship between video games and sexuality. If LGBTQ identities are not explicitly represented on-screen, then a game is considered not "gay," i.e., it would be supposedly absurd to read queer sexuality into the game. At the same time, in the absence of overt LGBTQ content, the game is deemed "straight," i.e., it would be absurd *not* to read heterosexuality into this game.

Queering supposedly straight video games is particularly touchy work because of the prominence of homophobia in games culture, as well as in the games industry and video games themselves.[16] Much as critical analysis seems to represent, for reactionary gamers, a territorial encroachment on the safe space of games, interpreting games queerly has the potential to spark a kind of gay panic—the fear that straight games will be made gay and through them that game players themselves will be deemed "queer." In this logic, queer thinking is a contagion that can infect a previously straight video game through the agent of analysis. Once queered, this game might infect the player as well, a worry that incites backlash against the implication, however many steps removed from the original assertions of the scholar, that game players must themselves be gay.

In talking about queering straight games, I use "queer" as a verb. To queer is to disrupt, to shift, to change the orientation (so to speak) of

a video game or other product of culture so that it turns toward non-heteronormative identity and desire. In the context of the present work, using the verb "to queer" is perhaps misleading, or at least an oversimplification. My project here is not simply to *do* queerness to games (though some of these chapters do indeed focus on how players can bring queer experiences to gameplay), but instead to argue that queer experiences can already be found operating within games—and specifically that they can be found through analytical practices like close reading. A reactionary gamer would likely call this work "over-reading." Yet, contained within that telling accusation is a system of discriminatory beliefs about who does and does not get to say what elements of a video game should be looked at in detail and what elements "aren't really there."

Let me briefly illustrate my point about the discriminatory logics that structure the rejection of over-reading with a second example from my own history with games culture and harassment, one that relates directly to the game that is the focus of this chapter. A trigger warning: The comment I quote below includes anti-gay hate speech. Shortly after the release of *Portal*, also in 2007, I wrote a blog post about the game's homoerotic overtones and the implicitly "lesbian" dynamics between the game's protagonist and antagonist.[17] Like my piece on *Resident Evil 5*, my post was short and far from incendiary. In the comment thread, a reader left this response, one of many like it:

> There is nothing gay about this game, you just made that up. No one ever says lesbian. You're just a dyke bitch who doesn't know what you're saying. If you want to think like that in your own home go ahead but don't force it down our throats.

For better or for worse, this comment handily encapsulates a number of key tenants that characterize the gay panic one often encounters when interpreting "straight" games queerly. First, any game not clearly marked as gay must be straight ("There's nothing gay about this game . . . No one ever says lesbian"). Second, any interpretation of a game not spelled out explicitly by the game itself must be personal, invented, and therefore invalid ("You just made that up"). Third, anyone who talks about queerness must be queer themselves, and is therefore dismissible as an invalid subject ("You're just a dyke bitch"). Fourth, reading games queerly, like

queerness itself, belongs in the closet ("Think like that in your own home"). Fifth, making queerness visible constitutes an act of violence against the hetero status quo ("Don't force it down our throats"). Sixth, this imagined violence is itself charged with unacknowledged homoerotics (the same image of "forcing it down our throats"). Seventh, there is a "we" and there is a "you." Women and queer people fall in the "you," and stand outside an imagined, invisible community of "we": straight, male players. Needless to say, the game itself is claimed without question for the "we"—up until the imagined moment when the word "lesbian," had it been included in the game, would have satisfactorily solidified the doubtful "queer" into the comprehensible, categorical "gay" and made the game's queerness provable, crossing the line from connotation to denotation.

I want to linger here on the anxiety that reading a video game closely in order to unearth its queer implications itself constitutes a queer act. Though the homophobia that accompanies this notion as it is articulated in comments like the one above is condemnable, there is a kernel of truth to this idea. Gamers who reject scholarly analysis and feminist commentary on the grounds that it constitutes little more than "making things up" are seeking to defend the sanctity of the "magic circle," in which games are safe from cultural and political meaning. The concept of the magic circle has a long history in game studies. It is most commonly used to describe, from a formalist perspective, how game rules create a separate space that divides gameplay from "everyday life."[18] However, feminist game studies scholars, such as Mia Consalvo and Stephanie Boluk, have also importantly pushed back on the idea of the magic circle as a separate space, arguing that conceptualizing games as distinct from everyday life problematically obfuscates the very real impact that concerns of culture, power, and privilege have on the experience of play.[19] Analyzing games through socially engaged lenses requires breaking apart the protective circle and exposing these intersectional concerns. Yet truly close reading also does something more than this, something different, something queerer. It embraces the notion of overreading by pressing up against a game, by becoming intimate with a game in ways that undermine standard notions of gameplay itself and make space for alternative desires.

"Anal *Rope*" and Too-Close Reading

Miller's essay "Anal *Rope*" helpfully models this kind of queerly intimate reading and offers a valuable point of juxtaposition for exploring the issues of gender and sexuality that lie just beneath the surface of a game like *Portal*. In his piece, Miller uses a formalist approach to address the unspoken yet pervasive presence of homosexuality and implied queer themes in Hitchcock's *Rope*. Perhaps best known as a film structured as one continuous shot (more on that in a moment), *Rope* takes place in the Manhattan apartment of Brandon and Philip, two young men of privileged upbringing who have just murdered their friend David and placed his body inside a prominently displayed wooden chest. Brandon and Philip, who the film suggests are romantic partners, have strangled David as an act of artistic expression—and, to crown the achievement, Brandon is holding a dinner party at which his guests, including David's own parents, will be eating from a buffet served on the very chest that contains David's body. The guest of honor is Brandon and Philip's admired former teacher, Rupert, in whose name the two have committed the crime. In the film's culminating sequence, the murder is revealed and Rupert holds Brandon and Philip at gunpoint while waiting for the arrival of the police.

Writing in 1990, Miller opens "Anal *Rope*" by bemoaning the fact that so much of the existing scholarship on Hitchcock's film has focused exclusively on "technicist concerns," specifically the fact that the film is constructed from a series of approximately eight segments (limited in length by the camera technologies of the time) that together give the rough impression of a story told in one continuous shot. Rather than interrogating these technical elements, says Miller, previous observers have stopped short of a careful analysis and instead simply perpetuated the "dream of a continuous film," a fantasy of a film without cuts.[20] From the opening moments of Miller's essay, then, echoes can already be heard between "Anal *Rope*" and contemporary writing on the importance of addressing identity and inclusivity in video games. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, in the introduction to their volume *Gaming Representation*, similarly critique the idealization within game studies of "hardcore" technical elements of the field, such as the study of code

and platforms, which they say has turned attention away from issues of cultural meaning.[21]

For Miller, in contrast to those who have written about *Rope* before him, it is precisely these cuts that imbue the film with queer meaning. Miller is interested in the place of homosexuality in *Rope*, but rather than eschewing "technicist aspects" in favor of a singular focus on narrative content, he argues for understanding Hitchcock's formalism as a direct expression of what the film largely leaves unsaid: that its main characters are involved in a homosexual relationship. Since the nature of Brandon and Philip's partnership remains implicit, as do the homoerotic overtones of David's murder and the young men's connection to their mentor Rupert, Miller identifies a "heavyweight silence surrounding homosexuality in the film."[22] Rather than being a subject of direct discussion, he argues, homosexuality in *Rope* has in fact been "crossed" with the film's formalist techniques—and in particular Hitchcock's camera work at the moments of cut. In this way, Miller's essay demonstrates how formalist readings can go hand in hand with so-called textual analyses, as form is often an important key to making sense of what is or is not seen on-screen—an insight that holds equally true for video games.

Of Hitchcock's many formal techniques, the cut is the center of Miller's queer reading of *Rope*. Four of the cuts that Miller identifies in Hitchcock's film occur when the camera zooms in on the dark backside of one of the male characters' suits. For Miller, these cuts, which aim to make the seams of the film "vanish" into "a man's eroticized backside," represent the place where the film body merges with the homosexual male body.[23] As the darkness of the suit fills the frame, the camera seems to move "through the cleft of the buttocks all the way to the perforation of the anus itself . . . the popularly privileged site of gay male sex." In these moments, declares Miller, "the anus is a cut, and vice versa . . . a penetrable hole in the celluloid film."[24] In attempting to hide the cut, says Miller, the film also attempts to hide this symbol of homosexuality and the castration anxiety it conjures for a homophobic, heterosexual viewer. At the same time, because the cut is not effectively invisible, the technique simultaneously engenders this same anxiety.

Though Miller's analysis is explicitly centered on Hitchcock's *Rope*, his essay also lays the groundwork for queer interpretation more

broadly. In addition to demonstrating how the film's formal aspects speak to its depiction of homosexuality, he sets the terms for what was then still the nascent work of reading media queerly. As mentioned above, Miller articulates the difference between denotation and connotation and articulates the frustrations of making a case for connotative meaning in the face of irritated, willful skeptics who quickly retort, "But isn't it just . . ."[25] While connotative meaning is relevant to many interpretative perspectives, Miller makes the important point that connotation is particularly key to what we would today call queerness and queer studies. This is because homosexuality, to use Miller's language, is so often forced to remain between the lines.[26] Deliberately kept out of sight, whether to comply with either film codes of the time (as in the case with *Rope*) or simply mainstream social mores, queerness is often forcibly closeted. Close reading is one tool for opening the door to that closet. Those who would dismiss queer readings often demand that queerness be "provable," says Miller, whereas connotation can only ever be "probable."[27] When it comes to interpreting video games queerly, I would take this one step further and argue that neither provability nor probability fundamentally matter, since both imply that the scholar is building evidence to support a case for what is *true*. From a queer perspective, it is far more productive to put aside the question of truth and instead accumulate interpretive and phenomenological possibilities.

Methodologically, "Anal *Rope*" clearly enacts what would be termed a close reading, using careful attention to detail to unearth new meaning from Hitchcock's film. However, it is not until his 2013 essay on Hitchcock's "understyle" that Miller, revisiting *Rope* more than 20 years after the publication of his original article, pushes this methodology still further and gives it a name: "too-close reading," or, in the specific context of film, "too-close viewing."[28] What are the differences between close reading and "too-close reading," and what is the specific value of getting too close? Too-close reading eschews concerns of distance and perspective, Miller writes, in order to delve into signs that are "too small, or too fleeting, or too peripheral" for the "comfort of aesthetic appreciation."[29]

In this second reading of *Rope*, Miller focuses even more meticulously on details that, he readily admits, likely seem negligible or even

invisible to most viewers. He gives a precise play-by-play of the slight slant of one of the candles that decorates the dinner buffet in Hitchcock's film, for example, and speculates about the narrative implications of a nearly imperceptible stain on a sofa cushion. For Miller, these little "touches" speak to a second style that exists beneath Hitchcock's more commonly recognized style, evidencing how the director's "stealthy perfectionism generates secret imperfections."[30] Rather than seeking to defend himself against the accusation of "over-reading," Miller embraces the role of too-close viewer. Looking too closely, says Miller, allows him to uncover interpretive possibilities "undreamt of by normal spectators." In this way, the too-close viewer serves as a confidant for the film, the one "to whom alone it whispers its closest secrets": a distinctly intimate image.[31] Yet, at the same time, too-close viewing comes at a price. Once the viewer starts looking in this way, says Miller, they can never stop. The result is a kind of scholarly vertigo that overwhelms with an endless proliferation of details and their imagined meanings.

Bringing the methodologies of too-close reading to video games has the potential to unearth new interpretations, but also to spark new anxieties. It is notable that Miller uses the imagery of contagion in describing the experience of too-close reading. "After everything I've gone through, nothing in the film will look quite right again," he admits.[32] "Like a disease or a catchy tune," viewing too closely is "contagious."[33] This assertion in fact confirms the worry of reactionary gamers that analyzing video games will fundamentally change what it feels like to play them. After thinking about games analytically, whether closely or too closely, they can never be "just for fun." When it comes to video games, one need not look nearly as closely as Miller in order to be accused of over-reading. Nonetheless, the embodied experience of analysis that Miller describes has notable parallels in the work of queerly interpreting games. Miller associates looking too closely with the "touch." This touch, for him, is the tiny mark of the author on the film. However, it can also be viewed as the place where the scholar and the media object touch: the sensation of getting so close as to meet the object of analysis on the level of the body. Like the game scholar who pries open the magic circle, the too-close reader transgresses by pulling apart the space between details and climbing inside, getting queerly intimate with a game.

Portal: Gameplay, Gender Themes, and Reception

As was the case with *Pong* and *Between Men*, *Portal* may at first appear an unusual choice as a game to read in conjunction with "Anal *Rope*." In fact, however, many of the images and themes that Miller highlights in Hitchcock's film have clear parallels in this game. Drawing out these points of comparison illustrates the value of bringing close reading to games as a technique for queer interpretation. It also serves to productively complicate Miller's original essay by providing a counterpoint to the specific examples of queer formalism that he describes. Though there have been two sequels to the original *Portal* game, I have chosen to limit my analysis here to the original game and its controls for the PC, the platform for which it was first released.

Portal is a first-person shooter and a platformer—a genre in which a significant amount of gameplay focuses on correctly moving across platforms and other elements of the game terrain—with a number of twists. True to the standard format of the first-person shooter, *Portal* takes place in a 3D environment that the player navigates through a combination of mouse movement and keyboard controls. Unlike in most first-person shooters, however, the gun that the player-character holds is not actually a gun. Instead, it is a tool for shooting portals: ovular openings in the walls that connect to one another via M. C. Escher-esque logic, allowing players to transport themselves across rooms and past obstacles via rifts in architectural space. The opportunities afforded by the portal gun also change the traditional mechanics of platformers. Instead of focusing on precisely timed jumps between platforms, *Portal* requires players to think more than three-dimensionally. They must imagine how the surfaces around them, including the floor below them and the ceiling above them, can be turned into disorienting, gravity-defying passageways. For this reason, though *Portal* looks like a first-person shooter, its primary genre is puzzle game. To complete each challenge, players must figure out the puzzle of using portals to traverse a treacherous, seemingly impassable space.

Over the course of the game, *Portal*'s narrative unfolds in bits and pieces, driving gameplay forward with the implicit promise that the player-character's unexplained predicament will eventually be illuminated. The game opens on the scene of a transparent-walled cell. A

distinctly feminine robotic voice welcomes the player to the Aperture Science research center, an underground warren of gray-walled testing areas with little sign of human life. This is the voice of GlaDOS, the computer who controls the testing center. Her voiceover is the player's constant companion, and though she is a machine, she has quite a personality. Her dialogue is sarcastic, deadpan, and taunting—making the game funny and playful even in its trickiest moments. Over the course of the next one to two hours (depending on individual play-through time), GlaDOS directs the player to complete a series of treacherous levels and then nefariously attempts to incinerate the player-character once these tests are finished. In the game's final section, the player must defy GlaDOS's orders, ignore her threats, make their way through the rusting, murky underbelly of the Aperture Science facility, and defeat GlaDOS in a final boss fight, after which the player-character is transported upward toward the surface and the shining light of day.

One of the most important and yet also subtler ways that *Portal* differs from other first-person shooters is that its player-character is female. She is an unnamed, dark-haired white woman in an orange jumpsuit. Because the game uses a first-person perspective, however, the only way that the player can see their character is through the portals themselves. If the player places a set of portals at the correct angles, they can catch a glimpse of the player-character entering the first portal as they exit the second (figure 2.1). In most cases, these are only ever passing, sidelong glances—a flash of a figure in orange who moves almost too quickly to be identified. In fact, *Portal* is entirely inhabited by women, or at least female-coded characters. Besides the player-character, there are no other human beings in the game, but all of the robots (including GlaDOS, whose name is a play on Gladys, and a number of smaller talking machines) have women's voices.

The world of the game is also populated with other feminine markers. Unlikely as it may sound, a key theme that appears throughout the game is cake. GlaDOS regularly attempts to entice the player to complete the battery of life-threatening tests by promising that cake will be served at a party to celebrate her eventual success. Scrawled on the wall in one area is the warning, presumably left by a previous test subject, "The cake is a lie." In the very last moments of the game, right before the credits roll, the camera moves from the sunny, aboveground scene back

Figure 2.1. Catching a glimpse of the player-character in *Portal* (Valve, 2007). Screenshot by author.

down into the depth of the facility where GlaDOS is coming back to life. There, amidst shelves of awakening robots, we see the cake (figure 2.2). Flecked with chocolate and topped with cherries, it seems real enough, and it is a perfect specimen of baking: the sort of cake associated with attentive housewives and caring mothers. Indeed, GlaDOS often sounds like a disapproving mother, chiding the player for underperforming or disobeying. As if additional proof were needed that *Portal* is a world of women, another piece of graffiti includes quotes from an Emily Dickinson poem.

The game's engagement with gender, though discussed far less often in the mainstream discourse of games culture that surrounded the game than its innovative mechanics, is clearly deliberate and self-aware. To say that it empowers women by using an all-female cast would miss the point. At one point, GlaDOS issues a reminder about Aperture's upcoming "bring your daughter to work day," which she perkily describes as the "perfect opportunity" to hand daughters over as test subjects. Later in the game, GlaDOS encourages employees (not that there are any

Figure 2.2. The cake in the closing sequence of *Portal*. Screenshot by author.

anymore; it turns out that GlaDOS has murdered them all) to contribute to the "Aperture Science self-esteem fund for girls." These are brief but biting jabs at the rhetoric that surrounds many contemporary efforts to bring more women into game development and STEM fields—efforts that are often well-intentioned but overlook the underlying toxicity that pervades such environments. Yet another thing that makes *Portal*'s relationship to gender unique is that it was designed by a woman: Kim Swift. Swift and her team began work on the game while they were still undergraduates, and as a young woman at the game development school DigiPen, Swift would have experienced both these problematic encouragements of women in games and the realities that female developers face in the field.[34] At the end of the long, hard struggle in *Portal*, there is the promise of cake—a girly prize made by women's labor to reward women's labor—but that cake is the very epitome of deception.

This nuanced if satirical reflection on gender is certainly not what has earned *Portal* its fame, however. Both commercially and culturally, *Portal* proved to be a huge success almost immediately following its release. Among many other accolades, it won Game of the Year at the 2008 Game Developers Choice Awards, as well as the Innovation and Best Game Design awards. The game was being updated and released for new platforms as late as 2014, indicating its ongoing popularity. Compared to *Pong*, which can be seen as canonical within the history of evolving

game technologies, *Portal* owes its canonical status to its beloved place in games culture. While the game directly inspired other works, such as Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), its primary influence has been on the fan communities that embraced it. Yet, it should be noted, these are not communities of alternative players, so to speak; many of those for whom *Portal* represents a cherished classic are the very same gamers who would reject the importance of critiquing video games through frameworks like feminism and queerness. In short, despite the gendered implications of its content, *Portal* seems to have "passed" for a straight, mainstream game, at least judging by its popular reception. However, this actually makes the game a particularly strong match for reading alongside Miller's interpretation of *Rope*, a film that has also been embraced as a classic in the mainstream film canon, yet one that reveals itself, under the light of too-close reading, to be rich with possibilities for queer interpretation.

Too-Close Reading for Queer Elements in *Portal*

"Anal *Rope*" combines an interest in same-sex relationships with attention to the implied meanings suggested by formal elements. In considering the queerness of *Portal* too, I begin from the question of interpersonal relationships and how they relate to the game's interactive mechanisms. If Brandon and Philip are gay men whose romantic involvement with one another remains connoted rather than denoted, are there similar queer romances operating in *Portal*? Yes, in fact, there are many. As stated, the game world of *Portal* is populated entirely by female-coded characters—but, even beyond this, intimate relationships between women are a central theme in the game. The most omnipresent of these is the relationship between the player-character and GlaDOS. Their dynamic can be described as mother-daughter, but also as abusive partner to abused partner, or (depending on how we interpret the player-character's level of consent) as a domme to a sub. GlaDOS is the last boss in the game, but also the only boss, in that she controls all the game's obstacles. Rather than attempting to choose one precise label for the relationship between GlaDOS and the player-character, it suffices to say that it is intriguing, increasingly tense, and at times overtly erotic.

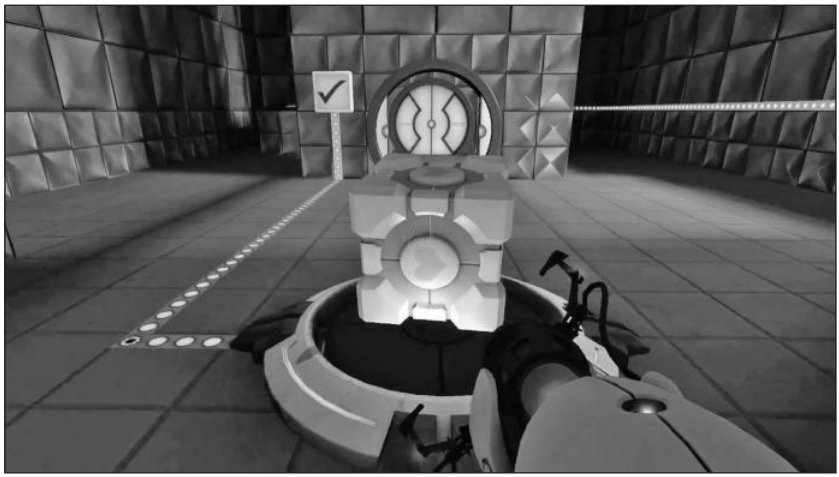

Figure 2.3. Solving puzzles using the Companion Cube in *Portal*. Screenshot by author.

In the final section of the game, when the player is attempting to escape from the underground facility, GlaDOS intones both threateningly and lasciviously, "I know you're here somewhere. I can *feel* you." Playing *Portal* means playing as a woman who is being played with by another woman. Though intimate relationships between women play a central role here, the game's vision of intimacy is ambivalent at best, and often outright violent.

A second, even more explicit relationship is constructed between the player-character and the "Companion Cube," a block that must be carried from room to room to complete a series of puzzles (figure 2.3). The cube has hearts on its sides, and GlaDOS intentionally describes it using the language of affection. "This weighted Companion Cube will accompany you through the test chamber," she coos. "Please take care of it." Moments later, in a cruel twist that underscores the game's twin themes of companionship and absence, GlaDOS instructs the player-character to throw the Companion Cube in an incinerator, then taunts the player-character for "euthanizing" her "faithful companion." If the relationship between the player-character and the Companion Cube seems platonic, the romantic and even sexual implications of this relationship are later made explicit. After the player destroys the cube, they encounter a wall of graffiti that includes, among other images and writing, a series of pho-

tos of human figures whose heads have been lovingly and even obsessively replaced by drawings of the Companion Cube. In one of these photos, seemingly a picture pulled from a lingerie catalogue, a nearly nude female model in a red bra and matching underwear poses suggestively on a bed. Her head too has been replaced by a picture of the cube, making her a human-object hybrid pinup and quite literally an "object" of desire. It is interesting to note that, even outside the game, the Companion Cube has come to epitomize affection in games culture. A considerable amount of *Portal* fan art features the cube, and soft plush versions can be bought online.

Drawing meaning from connotation rather than denotation, it becomes easy to interpret these as queer relationships. I am far from the first observer to read *Portal* in light of its themes of gender and sexuality, and a number of players before me have noted that the dynamics between the player-character, GlaDOS, and the Companion Cube could be understood queerly.[35] In this sense, *Portal* differs from many of the other games discussed in this book; though it does not contain explicitly LGBTQ content, its queer implications are sufficiently marked to have drawn attention from a subset of players. What makes the present discussion of queerness in *Portal* unique is that it pushes from close reading to too-close reading—moving beyond the basic facts of these same-sex relationships and into their interplays with the formal elements of the game. Much as, in Miller's interpretation, homosexuality in *Rope* is tied up with its camera work and editing, queerness in *Portal* is inextricably linked to its mechanics, gameplay, and other seemingly non-representational elements. Indeed, many of the key aspects of Miller's analysis of Hitchcock's film can also be found operating in *Portal*, in ways that reflect and complement, but also usefully contradict, the arguments articulated in "Anal *Rope*."

Perhaps the most immediately apparent point of resonance between "Anal *Rope*" and *Portal* is the imagery of the hole. For Miller, the hole is the film cut that attempts to hide itself in a male character's backside: the anus into which the camera appears to travel at the moment that the film reel is switched. Making that hole visible is key to Miller's identification of *Rope*'s formalist homoerotics. Holes are also a crucial element of *Portal*—or perhaps *the* crucial element. They represent the very core of the gameplay. The player's only ability, aside from walking,

Figure 2.4. The Aperture Science logo from *Portal*. Creative Commons image via Wikimedia Commons.

jumping, and carrying objects, is to create these holes. Entering them is a basic requirement for proceeding through levels; without them, the game's environments become unnavigable. What is more, players cannot hesitate or enter these holes timidly. Many of the game's puzzles involve running into portals at full speed in order to maintain enough momentum to reach a platform on the other side. The game's tagline, "Now you're thinking with portals," encourages the player to internalize the logic of the hole. Like Hitchcock's cut into the "celluloid body," the hard surfaces that surround the player in *Portal* are repeatedly cut open, closed, and cut again. In an aesthetic move seemingly made to fit Miller's critique, these holes ripple with flames around their edges. The Aperture Science logo itself, a grooved and dilated circle, recalls a puckered anus (figure 2.4).

Yet there are also telling differences between the holes that Miller describes in "Anal *Rope*" and those seen in *Portal*. Whereas Miller emphasizes how Hitchcock's cut attempts to hide itself, the holes in *Portal* are anything but hidden. If the portal, like the cut, is also the anus and by extension one possible site of queer erotics, then that anus is presented front and center. It appears in the game's very name and the name of the science facility ("aperture"). These holes, unlike those found in the darkness of the backside, are bright and inviting. If each portal is an anus hidden in plain sight, however, what does it mean to get "too close" to these portals when closeness is not necessary to see them? In this case, the value of too-close reading is not necessarily to find the tiny detail that unlocks the bigger picture, but to gain new perspective on the bigger picture itself—to think with portals differently.

Another element of *Portal* with a clear parallel in Miller's reading of *Rope* is the continuous shot. Like the structure of Hitchcock's film, which

links together a series of long shots to give the impression of a film produced all in one take, the gameplay of *Portal* functions as a continuous progression through the game space held together by its "cuts"—that is, by travel between portals. By their nature, these portals transform what would be impossible passages (i.e., into one wall and out another) into opportunities for unbroken movement; they create paths that cut through solid objects and bend the logics of space in order to allow players to move forward without stopping. This corollary to the continuous shot is also core to *Portal*'s puzzle mechanics. The game challenges players to find their way through spaces that appear to be cut—that is, divided by walls and forces of gravity—and tasks them with searching for alternative continuities. To solve these puzzles, they must put back together the pathways hidden in each level, which themselves defy normative logics of movements through space and time (the subject of chapter 7).

This is one way in which *Portal* speaks back to "Anal *Rope*." Miller rejects the continuous shot, calling it a fantasy and instead focusing on the obfuscated cut as a site of queerness. Yet *Portal* offers a different model for thinking about cuts and continuity in relation to queer formalism. Perhaps, rather than being the anus into which the camera loses itself, the cut in the film body that Miller describes functions as an entryway through which the camera travels. By traveling through the anus, the camera is able to prolong its spectatorship and gain access to each next segment of the film. Might the overwhelming darkness of the eroticized backside be an opening (an orifice or aperture, like the aperture of the camera lens itself) on the other side of which the camera finds access to ongoing continuity? Rather than a "grave," as Leo Bersani has famously termed the anus, perhaps the anus-cut that Miller identifies in *Rope* is better understood as a portal.[36]

In addition to the imagery of the hole and the continuous cut, there are a number of other parallels that connect *Portal* to Miller's interpretation of *Rope*. However, digging deeply into these parallels reveals the ways that the game and the film, as Miller describes it, also differ in their engagement with queerness. Through their contrast, these differences further illuminate the specific qualities of the queer desires, queer bodies, and queer subjectivities found both within the game and in Miller's essay. In particular, *Portal* and "Anal *Rope*" differ in their approach to issues of gender and women's experiences. For this reason, the game acts

as a counterpoint to the depiction of male homosexuality that Miller describes in *Rope*. These differences serve as the "little touches," to use Miller's term, that evidence alternative ways of discovering queerness between the lines.

One example of the differences between *Portal* and "Anal *Rope*" relates to the conflation of sex and violence. In the absence of overt representations of gay sex in *Rope*, says Miller, other types of embodied transgressions between men take the place of the sexual act. Most striking among these are the scenes in which male characters quarrel and fight, "where the choreography of their bodies relies prominently on Hollywood conventions of romantic embrace."[37] If symbolic stand-ins for queer sex can be found in *Portal*, it is in similar moments when subjects enact passionate embraces through passionate conflict. Throughout most of the game, GlaDOS's body is absent (or, to use a film metaphor, off-camera); she manifests to the player and player-character alike as a commanding voice. Yet her interactions with the player-character are undeniably physical. She controls the levels and obstacles that the player must navigate, staging and participating in the "choreography of . . . bodies." When the player-character does eventually reach GlaDOS in her physical form, their actual point of "touch" is a battle. In *Portal*, the object of desire is one and the same with the object of conflict. The Companion Cube exemplifies this. Though inanimate, it is figured as a loving companion *and* a victim whom the player literally incinerates. Like a jealous lover threatened by a new rival, GlaDOS mocks the player for feeling connected to the cube and then celebrates once it has been thrown in the fire. Yet, in contrast to *Rope*, *Portal* does not equate queer sex with violence in order to obscure the same-sex embrace. Much like the cut that *Rope* hides and *Portal* highlights, the passionate entanglement of women is a visible rather a subtly encoded element of the game.

Embodiment is also a key factor in the differences between *Portal* and "Anal *Rope*." Following from the idea of the portal as an orifice, the game space can be reimagined through metaphors of the body. The underground facility—with its twists and turns and its churning, shifting levels—becomes a hulking organic frame inside which gameplay takes place. The portals that the player shoots into the facility walls can be read as sphincters or ulcers, pathways pierced through membranes.

Following the narrative moment when the player breaks out of the test area, the level design and aesthetics of *Portal* shift. Exiting the largely pristine testing levels, the player enters rusty, dirty, claustrophobic passageways that could easily be described as the "bowels" of the facility. Giant, phallic pistons pump in and out of the walls, moving the obstacles that the player previously faced in the test area. On the one hand, these mechanisms and their abject environs are supposed to remain unseen. On the other hand, this "supposed to" exists within the diegesis of the game; there is, in fact, no way for a player to progress through the latter portions of *Portal* without breaking into these areas. The trip through the body of the facility, transgressive though it may seem, follows a predetermined course. Like a person waking up in the belly of a beast, the player-character must move through the process of digestion in order ultimately to be expelled from the final and largest symbolic orifice: the hole that opens after GlaDOS is defeated and through which the player-character rises to the surface.

In describing the game through metaphors of the body, I refer to portals themselves as orifices rather than anuses to mark a divergence from Miller's interpretation of *Rope*. Whereas Miller focuses on the male homosexual body and symbols of gay sex between men, *Portal* is a game world populated entirely by female-coded characters. As such, when looking for the place of the body in *Portal*, is it crucial to think about women's bodies (at least as they are commonly imagined, since, of course, in reality not all women possess normatively "female" bodies). For this reason, the holes that appear throughout the game can be thought of as vaginas as well as anuses. This represents a break with the exclusive emphasis on male-male desire in Miller's essay and expands our queer reading of *Portal*—and, indeed, too-close readings of video games in general—to account for other modes of queerness. While the facility that the player navigates can be understood as a body, that body is specifically GlaDOS's. GlaDOS remains a disembodied voice for most of the game, yet her physicality is the game space. The moving mechanisms of the test levels, which she controls, function like her limbs. By this same thinking, the level design that I read a moment ago as a trip through the bowels of the facility can also be read as a trip through the vagina. In order to reach the boss fight with GlaDOS, the player must

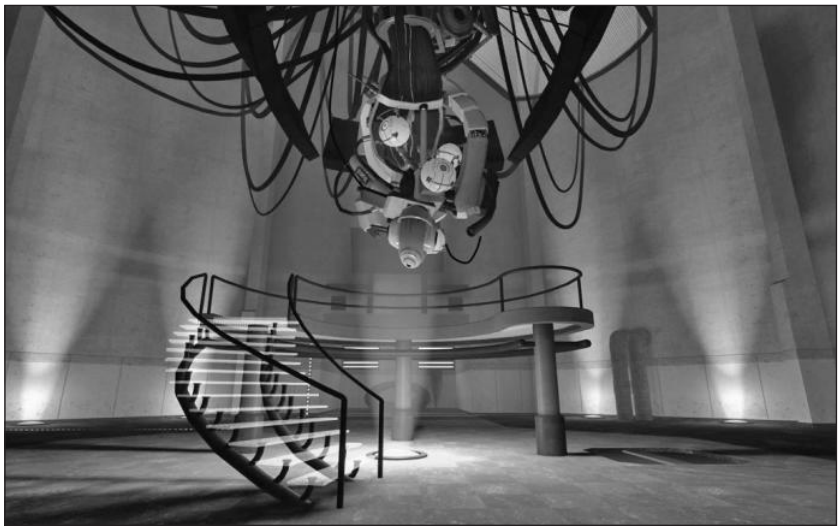

Figure 2.5. GlaDOS hangs above the player like a mother spider in *Portal*. Screenshot by author.

safely fall through a circular airshaft with spinning blades. Here, the light is red, as if saturated with menstrual blood, and the blades take on the quality of vagina dentata.

In a sense that cannot be separated from sexuality, *Portal* is a game about a woman moving inside another woman—and about what happens when one partner in a same-sex relationship (be it romantic or otherwise intimate) does not want to let go of the other. When the player does finally encounter GlaDOS in her physical form, she is revealed to be a kind of nerve center or nest of wires, screens, and moving electronic parts (figure 2.5). Her character design calls to mind Louise Bourgeois's large-scale spider sculptures, created to represent the artist's mother. Like a mother spider, perched and prepared to lay its eggs, GlaDOS pops out from the bottom of her sack-like body a series of round, purple- and orange-eyed hardware orbs that the player must incinerate. Though winning this boss battle theoretically means killing GlaDOS, the final moment of the game functions like a birth. The body of the facility, and by extension GlaDOS's body, pushes the player-character out into the light of day. The catchy song sung by GlaDOS that plays over the credits (pointing back to Miller's comment about the contagious "catchy tune")

assures players that the robotic mother-lover is very much "still alive." GlaDOS, the mother-lover, lives on—and, along with her, the anxieties around what it means for women to manage their intimate connections with other women.

This points toward what may be the biggest difference between the queer interpretation of *Portal* that I am offering here and *Rope*, as Miller describes it. Miller argues the film's style speaks to its presumed homophobic, heterosexual male viewer, a viewer who is simultaneously intrigued and horrified by the connoted presence of gay sex.[38] By contrast, despite its beloved place in mainstream games culture, *Portal* does not cater to straight male players. Though its themes of gender and sexuality may be subtle, the game operates from the perspective of women, and specifically the perspective of queer women. The game's critical self-reflection on intimacy between women comes from an insider's perspective. For Miller, *Rope* simultaneously condemns Brandon and Philip's relationship and turns it into a spectacle. *Portal* communicates a different message about queerness. It represents complexities of affection and power in same-sex bonds through the lens of parody, but it does not attempt to disavow these bonds. This speaks to the value of getting "too-close" to a game like *Portal*. When looking so closely at the game, the game's own queer positionality reveals itself.

In Praise of Getting "Too Close"

"Connotation," writes Miller in describing the challenge of attempting to "prove" the queer implications of Hitchcock's film, "excites the desire for proof, a desire that, so long as it develops within the connotative register, tends to draft every signifier into what nonetheless remains a hopeless task."[39] Though Miller calls the work of arguing for the queer interpretation of seemingly straight media "hopeless," there remains in this quote much to support the call to embrace too-close reading in video games.

Despite the reactionary backlash that meets games scholars and commentators who dare to analyze video games through socially engaged lenses, there is great value to unearthing the connoted meaning of games. Paradoxically, the desire for "proof" that will substantiate these queer connotations is both the insistent rebuke proclaimed by those who balk at the over-reading of games and the longing at the heart of

queer interpretation itself. To "excite the desire for proof" is to spark, with the initial kernel of queer implication, the drive to dig deeper, play closer, and abandon oneself to the all-encompassing embrace of queer reading until every signifier has been indeed drafted in the service of queerness. This does not represent a labor of hopelessness or absurdity. Or, rather, the hopelessness of queer interpretation is synonymous with giving up hope for the definitive legitimacy of proof. The too-close reader who seeks to uncover queerness is looking precisely for that which has been deemed illegitimate, closeted, or hidden, or which (in the case of the subterranean testing facility in *Portal*) has quite literally gone underground.

Is there such a thing as over-analyzing video games? No, but also yes. On the one hand, like any product of art and culture, all games merit close and careful attention and can be productively interpreted from a wide variety of perspectives. On the other hand, I do not want to abandon the "over" in over-analyzing. This "over" signals an excess that transgresses the boundaries by which the status quo determines what does and does not constitute an acceptable way of relating to a work (such as a video game or a film). It seeks to police the types of meaning that can be drawn from these works and which types of "proof" can appropriately be used to justify these meanings. In this way, especially when it comes to video games, too-close reading is a political act. In the face of the vitriol and violence of online harassment, too-close reading insists on the right of players and commentators to engage in their own queer embrace. Through interpretation, the game and the analyzing subject touch in ways that are deemed not "right" or not "normal." Because too-close reading is itself a queer methodology, one specifically suited to identifying undertones of non-heteronormative desire that so often must remain hidden, too-close playing games is another way of discovering and enacting the queerness of games. It is an important piece of the methodological toolkit of queer game studies and the larger push to bring social justice to video games.

As this queer interpretation of *Portal* has demonstrated, even those video games that are most beloved by mainstream gamers have the potential to contain within themselves complex systems of queer expression that permeate both their narrative and formal elements. Juxtapositions between games and works of queer theory, through their similarities

but also their differences, create windows onto these systems and offer frameworks for identifying queerness between the lines. Yet the reasons for embracing too-close reading are more rebellious and proudly indulgent than this. The too-close player rejects the supposed sanctity of fun and refuses to relinquish games to the role of "safe spaces" for privileged, male, heterosexual players. At the same time, too-close reading creates its own fun—or, more aptly, its own pleasure—by digging into an abundance of detail, reveling in the endless remaking of meaning, and insisting upon and then pressing too-close up against the desirous, embodied qualities of the game. It is imperative for queer game studies, like queer theory more broadly, to challenge the hegemony of what is deemed reasonable and comfortable by getting too close for comfort.

3

"Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus"

Queer Embodiment and Passing in Octodad

Octodad: Dadliest Catch, the 2014 cult hit from indie video-game development studio Young Horses, opens on the scene of an octopus's wedding. While his human wife-to-be waits at the altar, the octopus rushes to get dressed and find his way to the chapel. This octopus is not like other octopuses, however. He stands upright and wears a suit, inside which his body contorts itself into an approximation of a human form. Four of his eight tentacles serve as his legs, two slipped into each side of his pants. Another two tentacles act as his arms, and the remaining two form his mustache. As he enters the chapel, the octopus moves unsteadily, swaying, stretching, and flailing up the aisle toward his bride (figure 3.1). Along the way, he cannot help but topple pedestals and send arrangements of flowers flying, causing a murmur from the wedding guests. Soon, though, the groom reaches his bride and leans in for the kiss that seals their union. The screen fades to white, and now the game begins in earnest with a jump ten years into the future. Waking up in his suburban home, the octopus stumbles out of bed to prepare breakfast for his family; in addition to his human wife, he now has two seemingly human children. This is Octodad, the game's protagonist and player-character, and no one knows that he is actually a sea creature.

Like many of the video games considered throughout this book, *Octodad* does not at first glance appear to be a queer game. Part adventure game, part physics game, and part stealth game, *Octodad* combines a hybrid approach to genre with a hefty dose of slapstick humor, or what Ian Bryce Jones has described as "agonistic shtick."[1] Mirroring Octodad's own disorienting experience maneuvering his floppy body on land, the game's control schema is intentionally designed to make playing *Octodad* feel awkward and unwieldy. The result is a game that is notably difficult to play, yet one that has won over many mainstream gamers

Figure 3.1. Approaching the altar in *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014). Screenshot by author.

specifically with its wit and challenging gameplay. Seen through the lens of queer studies, however, *Octodad* quickly reveals itself to be far more than a silly game about an octopus in a business suit. Queerness can be found in both its narrative content and its controls. Players quite literally play at heteronormativity, attempting to convincingly perform the role of the straight, cisgender, masculine father. The game parodies the ideal suburban, nuclear family and denaturalizes normative expectations around gender, sexuality, reproductivity, and the motions of the human body. Reading Octodad's quest to be seen as a "loving father and caring husband," to quote the game's tagline, in conjunction with the way the game is played unlocks the queer potential of *Octodad*. Through its embodied controls, the game does not just represent difference. It allows players to inhabit that difference.

In particular, this chapter is interested in how *Octodad* can be understood as a video game about "passing." Like LGBTQ subjects who may or may not pass as straight or cisgender, the game's protagonist finds himself constantly under the surveilling gaze of the humans around him. To succeed, he must pass for human—reading to strangers, friends, and even his family not as a "secret octopus" but as a "normal" man. Navigating Octodad's unruly body through spaces designed for tidier,

human forms is one important component of the game's mechanics. The other is the mechanics of seeing and being seen. If Octodad collides with too many objects while in the sight lines of human characters, his cover will be blown. In the game's conclusion, Octodad's worst nightmare is realized: He is "outed" to his family. His wife and children quickly accept him and his identity though, and here the story seems to shift from one of heteronormativity to homonormativity. Yet the hegemonic vision of happy coupledom and parenthood has been queered beyond renormalization. In place of the straight, white, cisgender couple stands the interspecies pairing of human and octopus. Likewise, the movements of Octodad's body, and the controls through which players enact them, never become more "natural" or less ecstatic.

In one sense, *Octodad* is not exceptional as a queer game. As I argue throughout this book, all video games, even those that do not appear to engage with LGBTQ issues, can be understood through the perspective of queer experiences. In other another sense, however, *Octodad* does offer an exceptional illustration of how a game's controls, interpreted alongside its content, can resonate powerfully with queerness. By inviting players to replicate the awkwardness of Octodad's body with the uncomfortable motions of their own, the game demonstrates how queer play can encompass game interfaces. It also points toward the importance of the player's own body in the act of playing queer. In rendering straight, cisgender masculinity absurd, the game models how even—or perhaps especially—seemingly silly or "campy" games (to call back to another academic tradition that celebrates the relationship between the humorously absurd and the queer) can facilitate counterhegemonic resistance. Octadad's fears and longings are ones that many LGBTQ folks have also shared: the fear that he will lose the people he loves if they find out his "secret," the longing to have his body and its movements through the world both seen and accepted on his own terms. Interpreting *Octodad* as a game about passing also opens the game to readings through critical race theory and disability studies. The image of the fish out of water becomes a multivalent metaphor for the real-world experiences of those who must contort themselves, conform, and hide elements of their identities in order to be seen as legitimate subjects. In this way, *Octodad* speaks to the opportunities for intersectional thinking made possible by discovering the queerness in

video games. It also serves as a valuable demonstration of how queer game studies scholarship can engage with and explore games that might themselves otherwise "pass."

Octodad: A Queer Game?

Octodad straddles a line between the mainstream and the alternative. This is true in terms of both its queer content and the conditions of its production. As compared to some of the other video games discussed in this book, many of which are "AAA" blockbusters or small-scale games conceived of and built by single creators, *Octodad* falls squarely in the intermediary category of "indie" games. When the concept of indie games and the indie game scene first gained popularity in the early 2000s, "indie" simply meant games developed and released outside of the corporate structure of game publishers. Today, indie is more an ethos and a culture than a firm category.[2] Indie is still typically associated with small teams; for example, as of July 2016, Young Horses listed only seven employees on its website. Because indie games are produced on tighter budgets than AAA games—or many mobile or social games—common wisdom dictates that they also have the liberty to be more experimental.[3] Yet, in truth, indie has developed its own hegemony. The best-known indie designers are still white, cisgender men, and the most popular and widely celebrated indie games rarely challenge the status quo of limited diverse representation (with a few notable exceptions, like Toby Fox's 2015 *Undertale*).[4] Many so-called hardcore gamers are also supporters of the most commercially successful indie games, and some "small" indie teams can include nearly 50 team members. In this sense, indie is a category of contradiction, a field from which moving, challenging, and artistically meaningful work has emerged, but which often remains surprisingly socially conservative. As a contemporary indie game, *Octodad* adds an important data point in the ongoing work of comparing and contrasting video games from across historical moments and paradigms of production. It also raises meaningful questions about what it means to claim as "queer" a game that emerges from primarily straight artistic, cultural, and commercial contexts.

The contradictions that characterize the indie game scene can also be found operating in the culture and rhetoric that surrounds *Octodad* itself.

Since its initial release in 2014, the game has continued to garner attention and new players. Despite its comparatively small scope (a skilled *Octodad* player can complete the game in about two and a half hours, whereas a single-player AAA action-adventure or RPG game can take anywhere from around 20 to 80 hours to complete), the game has earned nearly $5 million in revenue and acquired a notable cult following.[5] However, its fan base, like mainstream gamer culture more broadly, is still notably straight, white, male, and cisgender. On the one hand, these *Octodad* fans celebrate the game for its originality: how it hybridizes genres and integrates humor. On the other hand, and perhaps unsurprisingly, this fan base does not seem interested in looking at the game on the level of metaphor. Browsing through the 266 forum threads started for *Octodad* in the Steam community discussion section makes it clear that interpreting the game queerly, for instance, is not a popular pastime. Of these threads, only one mentions a connection between *Octodad* and LGBTQ issues.[6] In it, a poster suggests that the game's narrative could be read as a coming out story. Other commenters quickly dismiss this interpretation as "paranoid"—recalling Alexander Doty's remarks in *Making Things Perfectly Queer* about those who rebuked his work as "pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there."[7]

Yet the intentionally ambiguous way that *Octodad*'s creators have talked about the game suggests that their authorial intent leaves more room for queer interpretation than fans may think. In interviews, Young Horse president Phil Tibitoski and other members of the *Octodad* team have not mentioned any direct connections between the game and LGBTQ experiences, even in instances when the team members have been prompted to talk about the game's "deeper metaphors." At the same time, it would be difficult to deny the queer implications of the ways in which the team *has* described the game. In 2013, before the official release of *Dadliest Catch*, Tibitoski described how *Octodad* had evolved from a light-hearted project into a game that explored a personal struggle with (according to Tibitoski) universal relatability. "Through [the game's] creation came this idea of what it would be like to be 'other,'" said Tibitoski. "What would it be like to have a secret that was so wholly part of you, and yet you can't share it with anyone for fear of rejection? The truth is that many of us hold these sorts of feelings inside of ourselves, and I think that's why the game is so relatable to so many people."[8] What

is this "secret that is so wholly part of you," a secret that we hold "inside of ourselves" yet fear to share it? Queer identities and desires immediately come to mind. Tibitoski's comment attempts to reframe *Octodad*'s feelings of "otherness" as one that all people, at some point, experience—and perhaps that is true. However, this feeling, the feeling of having to perform normalcy each and every day lest you be exposed and lose everything, is one that some experience more than others.

Of course, there is no definitive answer to the question of whether *Octodad* is "really" a queer game. The authorial intent of the development team and the interpretation of the game's fan community are both valuable for orienting the game within its context. When it comes to a game like *Octodad*, though, the goal of reading (and playing) queerly is to expand the possibility space of the game—to argue for more ways of seeing, rather than the right way of seeing. While "queer" and "straight" often seem like binarily opposed markers, *Octodad* serves as a helpful reminder that even the media that seems queerest exists within a constellation of internal and external factors that complicate the line between straight and queer, heteronormative and counterhegemonic. With that said, the queerness of *Octodad* lies almost immediately beneath its surface. Perhaps more than any of the other games without explicitly LGBTQ content considered here, it reveals itself with little prodding, when placed under the lens of queerness, to be rich with queer experience. In this way, among the many divides that *Octodad* straddles is the divide between queer and not-queer game, posing yet another challenge to the acknowledged forms of LGBTQ representation in video games. Where is the queerness waiting to be discovered in *Octodad*? To know this, we need to know more about the game itself.

Embodied Control Schema and Queer Motion

The basic premise of *Octodad*, first released in 2010 as a short student game and then in longer form in 2014 on the online distribution platform Steam, is contained concisely in its tagline: "Loving father, caring husband, secret octopus." Octodad is an octopus who, by a twist of fate that remains unknown until the game's final scenes, has come to be living as a human man. He has a wife, Scarlet, and two small children, a son and a daughter, both of whom are apparently human; the seeming

Figure 3.2. Octodad looks lovingly at a photo of his family in the teaser trailer for *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*. Screenshot by author.

impossibility of their parentage is a tongue-in-cheek mystery that hangs over Octodad's story (figure 3.2). For a "secret" octopus, Octodad's appearance is anything but subtle. He has bright yellow skin and floppy limbs, and he speaks only in bubbling, watery noises. Yet, as in the claim that repeats in the game's theme song, "no one suspects a thing." Rather than saving the world or embarking on an epic quest, the kinds of narrative goals that are much more common in adventure games, the tasks that Octodad must complete are notably mundane and "dadly." In the game's opening scenes, Octodad has to successfully mow the lawn, flip burgers, and go grocery shopping. His wife (who is, ironically, an investigative journalist) dotes on him. His children look up to him. Their home literally has a white picket fence. By all heteronormative measures, Octodad seems to be living a wonderful life—or he would be, if he were not constantly plagued by the worry that he will be found out.

The second half of the game takes place in a local aquarium, and here the action of *Octodad* ramps up. Octodad's wife Scarlet has insisted on this family outing, though Octodad (as a secret fish himself) is vehemently opposed to aquariums on principle. "I know that you think aquariums are festering prisons of inequity," says Scarlet, "but . . . can't you make an exception this time?" Once at the aquarium, Octodad must sneak past marine biologists who, as posters plastered around the entry

hall announce, "know a fish when they see one." Inside, the aquarium reveals itself to be a gauntlet of seemingly small yet increasingly difficult feats for Octodad to accomplish, most relating to the educational games set up in various exhibit areas. Once again Octodad must prove that he is a "loving father" and "caring husband." In an arcade themed around fish of the Amazon, players wrestle with finicky and fussy controls to win prizes for Scarlet so that Octodad can play the role of the thoughtful sweetheart. In the kelp forest sports area, Octodad has to shoot hoops to impress his son. When his daughter gets scared in a spooky deep-sea exhibit, he must prove himself to be a brave, protective dad and guide her out. The game's climax comes with the arrival of a belligerent chef, the one character who can see that Octodad is an octopus. The chef wants to expose Octodad, but he also wants to kill, cook, and serve him. In the end, the family unit must work together to defeat the chef. Octodad's "secret" is revealed in the process, but his family quickly moves past their surprise, and together Octodad, his wife, and their children all watch the game credits roll.

If this narrative and its resolution ultimately sound tidy, the gameplay most decidedly is not. Most video games seek to make their controls intuitive and therefore "invisible." Typically, games model their control schema on existing standards for the genres in which they operate. Experienced players are likely to pick up these games having already developed the embodied literacy, so to speak, that allows them to quickly understand, internalize, and perform how the game is played. Design principles commonly dictate that the best designed interfaces are those that feel most natural to the user and make their own presence least obtrusive.[9] The design of *Octodad*'s controls operates under an entirely different logic. Players move each of Octodad's arms and legs separately, making his body difficult to direct with precision and impossible to fully master. Many of the objectives in the game involve reaching an area and picking up a specific object. However, the player cannot simply run forward or press A to grab, as is common in video games. Even a supposedly simple act like walking (more on challenging the notion of walking as "simple" in chapter 7) has to be cobbled together from individual halting and disjointed movements. *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* was first released for PC, with later releases for PlayStation, Microsoft, and Nintendo home consoles and mobile devices. In the original PC controls, players move

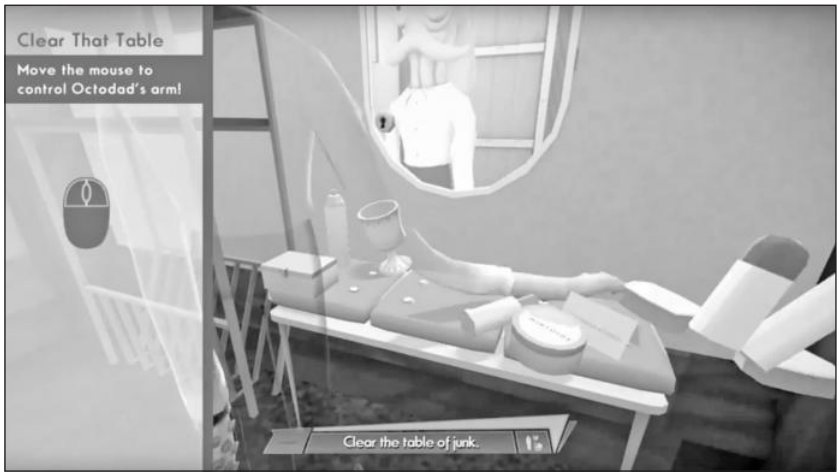

Figure 3.3. Players learn to control Octodad's arms and legs in the opening tutorial. Screenshot by author.

the mouse to move Octodad's arm side to side, right click or scroll to move his arm up and down, and left click to pick up or drop objects (since Octodad's tentacles are sticky, he can suction-cup to things at will) (figure 3.3). To control Octodad's legs, players toggle out of arm mode by hitting the space bar. Clicking and holding the right and left mouse buttons, one at a time, will raise and lower Octodad's legs, sending them stretching out at wild angles and dragging Octodad's body jerkingly behind them.

These controls are anything but intuitive. While familiarity with a mouse and keyboard are part of the embodied literacy of video-game play, little else about this schema would seem "natural" to a player new to the game. Rather than making the player's interactions with the interface invisible, *Octodad* makes them hypervisible, playing out and playing up the awkwardness of the player's experience by mirroring it through the body on-screen. Octodad's arm twirls, lifts, and jiggles, swaying uncertainly as it tries to pinpoint its object. Octodad's legs stretch up, out, and around, making it hard for even a skilled *Octodad* player to find a functional rhythm for walking. The resulting motions look more like a slapstick routine or a form of modern dance than any standard run animation found in video games. Moving in a straight line is not just

difficult; it is fundamentally antithetical to the functions of Octodad's body, which pivots and torques, moving forward over time through missteps and angular jaunts—recalling what Kathryn Bond Stockton has called the "sideways growth" of the queer child, as well as the triangulated movement of queer desire in Sedgwick's *Between Men*.[10] There are many less stilted ways that the designers of the game could have mapped Octodad's movements to the game's physical controls. Messiness and bodily disorientation are not the result of bad design. Instead, they are the point of the gameplay. It is in this disorientation that *Octodad* situates its frustrations and its pleasures. The game revels in setting up rooms strewn with carefully placed objects that Octodad will inevitably send toppling. At the supermarket, for example, the produce section is littered with banana peels for him to slip on. More so than any of the narrative objectives or environments that Octodad must navigate, the site of play is Octodad's own body.

As mentioned in my discussion of the *Pong* arcade console in chapter 1, analyzing the specifics of a game's control schema represents an important but often overlooked element of scholarly video-game criticism. Whereas user-experience design often aims to draw conscious consumer attention away from interface, a queer interest in game controls must draw attention back to these interfaces—interrogating their logics, their metaphors, and their relationship to the body—as Gregory Bagnall, Jess Marcotte, and Miguel Sicart have all pointed out.[11] Over the last two decades, a number of game artists and experimental game-makers have created work that challenges standard expectations for game controllers and the material experience of play. For example, Mary Flanagan's *[giantJoystick]* (2006) reimagined the classic Atari controller as a ten-foot-tall replica sculpture onto which players must climb to play games projected on a gallery wall. Eddo Stern's 2001 *Tekken Torture Tournament* pitted players against one another at a fighting game; the losing player received painful electric shocks. Reflecting on the Japanese-developed game *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2009), Amanda Phillips has written about how the controller inputs through which players trigger the main character's attacks recall the motions of female masturbation.[12] Others have explicitly critiqued the heteronormativity and even sexism of standard game interfaces, such as the nearly ubiquitous phallic joystick and the placement of buttons on controllers designed for "men's" hands.[13]

Figure 3.4. Octodad contorts his body to fit through the supermarket freezer case. Screenshot by author.

When looking for queerness in video games beyond representation, it is important to look at how a game is controlled because it draws attention to the player's body, but also because these controls communicate meaning and "value," to use Flanagan's term, as much as a game's narrative content does.[14]

One of the answers to the question, "Where is the queerness in *Octodad*?," can be found right here in its control scheme, which takes the motions of the normative human body and renders them foreign, unattainable, and strange. The game celebrates a kind of queer, distinctly non-normative movement—seen on-screen in the form of the "secret octopus" yet simultaneously enacted in the physical inputs of the player. *Octodad* revels in what Jack Halberstam calls the "fantastic failure" of the queer body to conform to hegemonic notions of success.[15] This is a game about messing things up, about taking the neat order of the white, suburban, middle-class day-to-day and letting limbs flail and fly until all that remains is a meaningless collection of consumer goods rolling around the floor. However, whether this foregrounding of the queered, de-naturalized body is empowering to queer players or dehumanizing is itself open to debate. When are Octodad's feats of contortion—like twisting his tentacles through the crevices of a freezer case to retrieve

a microwavable pizza—meaningful moments of alternative representation, and when are they slapstick throwaways, or even spectacles of otherness (figure 3.4)? Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the controls of the game communicate a powerful message. While so many games invite players to feel superhuman, super fast and super powerful, *Octodad* brings these goals into question and challenges its players with the equally difficult task of seeming simply "human."

Playing at Heteronormativity, Impossible Reproductivity, and Narratives of Queer Acceptance

Even though *Octodad* does not contain any explicitly LGBTQ content, its narrative and objectives place it clearly in dialogue with issues of gender and sexuality. By tasking its players with convincingly playing the role of "loving father and caring husband," the game makes performances of straight masculinity, as well as fatherhood and reproductivity, some of its central concerns. *Octodad* is set in a version of white, middle-class suburbia reminiscent of 1950s America as seen on television sitcoms. Yet the cultural visions of coupledom and parenthood it parodies are broader and more present than this setting might suggest. It would be more accurate to say that, when one plays *Octodad*, one plays at heteronormativity itself. Many of Octodad's tasks involve successfully enacting expectations for heterosexual romance. For instance, in addition to winning prizes for Scarlet at the fish-themed arcade, Octodad must woo her when they first meet. In a prequel scene released as a bonus to the main game, players play as Octodad on his first date with Scarlet. The two are having a candle-lit dinner at an upscale Italian restaurant. Scarlet seems eager to get to know her new love interest. For Octodad, however, each small step in the basic rituals of dating (bribing the host for a good table, lifting a glass of wine for a toast, eating in a way that looks sophisticated yet casual) is a new challenge. As Octodad, directed by the confused motions of the player, waves his butter knife wildly in the air, the very notion of a romantic date becomes ridiculous.

In *Octodad*, successfully "going through the motions"—to use an aptly embodied metaphor—of heteronormative romance is what makes one "human." It is no coincidence that the game opens with a traditional church wedding, or that the player's first challenge is to make it to the

altar. The scene in which players get coiffed and dressed for their appearance walking (or, in this case, flopping) down the aisle serves as the game's tutorial: the moments when the player is directly taught, via textual commands, how to use the controls to move Octodad's body. The instant that Octodad slips the ring onto his bride's finger marks the completion of the tutorial. Quite literally, players learn to play *Octodad* by getting married. In this way, heteronormative pairing is the launching point for the game's narrative, its first and most basic model for success, *and* the founding example that structures its gameplay. The wedding tux that Octodad puts on for this opening sequence becomes, in a way, his regular attire. Until the game's final moments, when his secret is revealed, Octodad wears a full suit. This suit acts as the thin veneer of his humanness and his heterosexuality, both of which are only skin (or really suit) deep. For Octodad, the clothing truly does make the man. Beneath it, there is only octopus.

To prove himself convincingly human, Octodad must also succeed at heteronormative fatherhood. Octodad's performances of heterosexuality are enacted through his relationship with Scarlet, but his performances of cisgender masculinity are tied to his relationship with his children. In instances in which the player interacts with Octodad's kids, the objectives they are tasked with are clearly gendered. When his son raves at the kelp exhibit about how much he admires a celebrity athlete named "Sports Johnson," Octodad steps up his own butch athleticism game. His daughter, lost in the deep-sea exhibit, begs, "Daddy, is that you? Don't run off without me, ok Dad?" Holding a flashlight and wriggling through the semi-dark, the player navigates her to safety, playing the part of the paternal, protective hero. This masculinity is farcical and fragile, however. Like the two stubby tentacles that make up his pseudo-manly mustache, Octodad's gender is clearly a construct cobbled together from tropes. In this way, the game uses silliness as a mode of social critique, destabilizing a basic belief in the "naturalness" of cisgender masculinity. In contrast to the vast majority of video games, which replicate hegemonic gender expectations, *Octodad* plays with these expectations by inviting players to play at them.

Within the contemporary cultural landscape of video games, often characterized by toxic masculinity, these gender politics are made all the more notable by the fact that women in *Octodad* are not the tar-

gets of the same sorts of parody. Scarlet is smart and hardworking, with a serious job; as the game progresses, it becomes clear that, far from being comically oblivious to the fact that her husband is an octopus, she definitely does "suspect a thing." Octodad's daughter is also far less helpless than she initially seems. When a marine biologist appears in the darkened deep-sea exhibit, she quickly takes a light to distract him while her father slips past undetected. And when Octodad's "secret" is finally revealed, his daughter admits that she has known that her father was an octopus all along. She too has been performing. By playing the role of the scared young daughter, she created opportunities for her father to play at the butch human dad. In *Octodad*, all sorts of heteronormative identities, not just Octodad's, are constructs. Conforming to them, far from being "natural," requires active work. In this way, *Octodad* manages to be a game about both striving for normativity and exposing the conceits of normalcy. It uses humor to enact a physical disruption of the status quo. Octodad's flailing limbs quite literally make a mess out of idealized scenes of romance and parenting, transforming the heteronormative everyday into chaos.

Octodad's disruptive approach to heteronormativity, as well as the ways in which the game resonates with queer theory, can be observed perhaps most clearly in its representation of reproductivity. At key moments throughout the game, players see happy portraits of Octodad's family. Father (i.e., secret octopus), mother, son, and daughter stand close to one another and smile warmly for the camera. Family is of the utmost importance to Octodad, and the nuclear family unit is precisely what he stands to lose by having his secret exposed. Yet this culturally idealized image of the heteronormative family intentionally opens itself to some notable nagging questions. Are these really Octodad's children? How can they be, when they appear to be human, and he is so clearly an octopus? This renders strange "normal" human reproduction. It also, through implication, casts a queer shadow over the sex that transpires between married, heterosexual partners. Even if Scarlet initially had been fooled by Octodad's suit, did she really not notice that her lover was an octopus when the two were in bed together? In this way, the game moves beyond parodies of straight masculinity, queering heterosexual reproductivity, sex, intimacy, and the very idea that exposing oneself physically means exposing one's "true" identity. At the same

time, this image of Octodad with his "impossible" family recalls images of same-sex couples with their children and the incredulous questions that inevitably follow from straight observers. Whose kids are these? How are they biologically possible? In a similar vein, the game can also be related to concepts of queer futurity. It suggests a rejection of futurity (the children who cannot exist) of the sort that recalls Lee Edelman's *No Future*. At the same time, in the same vein as José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, the game offers a vision of the future that, though impossible, continues to persist, rich with queer potential.[16]

As a game, *Octodad* is very much self-aware when it comes to playing with reproductivity. It allows the question, "Whose children are these?," to linger until the very final moments of the game. After Octodad and his family defeat the murderous chef, just before the credits roll, Octodad's son has a revelation. "Wait a minute," he says. "If dad is an octopus, then where did me and [my sister] come from?" Acting as stand-ins for the curious player, the children look up at their parents expectantly while the question hangs silently in the air. Then the whole family bursts out laughing and the screen goes black. The game offers no answer, only the acknowledgment of just how enticing the question itself is.

This confusing reproductivity has also left a deep impression on the game's fans. "Is Octodad really the father?" is one of the most common questions asked in forum threads related to the game.[17] This question also suggests that Scarlet may be having an affair—perhaps a less queer vision of the disruption of the idealized straight marriage, but a disruption of its nonetheless. What this demonstrates is the extent to which the destabilization of heteronormativity is central to the experience of playing *Octodad*, even for those players who would otherwise actively reject a reading of this as a queer game. Ultimately, however, players must simply accept this queer reproductivity, which cannot and will not be explained or explained away by the game itself.

Even the name "Octodad" reflects a queering of gender and sexual reproductivity. Octodad is a twist on "Octomom," the name that the news media coined for Nadya Suleman, who received national attention after giving birth to octuplets in January 2009. At its simplest, the move from Octomom to Octodad is a pun played for laughs. One can imagine the brainstorming session in which the game's designers, tickled by the idea of an "Octodad," were inspired to create a story about a "loving father"

who is also an octopus. Yet the translation from Octomom to Octodad also suggests a slippage from female to male, one that challenges beliefs in a rigid division between genders, especially when it comes to parenthood and reproduction. Through ties to the Octomom, the name Octodad also carries associations with hyper-reproductivity, excesses of the motherly body, and "non-human" methods of reproduction. Suleman was widely criticized for having conceived her octuplets, as well as her previous children, through in vitro fertilization.[18] In addition to the fascination with Suleman as a kind of medical oddity, the media-consuming public seemed to feel that, since she was a single mother, Suleman's reproductive choices were irresponsible and a drain on government resources. As Octodad, the game's protagonist faces the threat of the same kind of public judgment and shame—in part because he is simply an octopus, but more specifically because what being an octopus makes most unacceptable is his status as a husband and father.

For all the ways in which *Octodad* disrupts the status quo, the game's narrative ultimately resolves into one of acceptance. Despite its parody of marriage and parenthood, at its core sits Octodad's own sincere feelings of love for his family. He truly wants to be a "loving father and caring husband," whether or not he is a human being. This element of the game is not absurdist. In fact, it has the potential to resonate powerfully with the experiences of LGBTQ folks who may long to maintain their existing interpersonal connections while fearing that their loved ones will shun them if their identities are revealed. Against the odds, Octodad's story has a happy ending. The player can only beat the game's final boss, in its concluding climactic scene, with help from Octodad's wife and children. After learning that her husband is an octopus, Scarlet tells him, "This news will take some getting used to . . . but next time tell me ten years earlier." She wraps her arms warmly around his lanky, yellow form, no longer tucked inside the business suit. Octodad has not lost his family. To the extent that his secret can be read as a code for queer identity or queer desires, his family quickly accepts his queerness and reaffirms the family unit. As a coming-out narrative, *Octodad* may seem to transition from heteronormativity to homonormativity—in a kind of neoliberal sanitizing of both Octodad and the player's embodied expressions of queerness. However, the matter of Octodad's curious reproductivity is still not resolved, and his unruly body never becomes

more human. It must simply be accepted that the game will not explain or "fix" these factors. Players continue to play as Octodad as the credits roll: waving arms, spinning and stretching legs, and tossing about objects—in short, celebrating the moment of queer acceptance through an ecstatic expression of the queer body.

Passing for Human

All video games combine content with interactivity and interface. What alternate ways of understanding *Octodad* emerge when we place the two elements we have discussed thus far—the game's controls and its narrative—in dialogue? The answer relates directly to how the game pairs the movements of Octodad's body with the movements of the player's. In particular, *Octodad* offers the compelling opportunity to step inside a series of experiences that resonate with LGBTQ lives in a way that is at once representational, interpretive, and deeply physical.

Approaching the game's story from a queer perspective, it seems at first that Octodad's struggle to hide his identity may be a metaphor for queer subjects' experiences on the "down low." The concept of the "down low" was originally (and not unproblematically) codified by research into cultures of clandestine sex between African American men.[19] In today's more common parlance, to act on the down low means doing something without making it public knowledge, but by nature the term—born queer—continues to carry associations with those queer actions, thoughts, and desires that must remain unseen. To be on the down low, in its original context, is often to lead a double life: to maintain a heterosexual partnership with a wife or a girlfriend while meeting with same-sex partners in secret. Octodad too is leading a double life. The very goal of gameplay is to protect his secret. Throughout the game, Scarlet drops hints that suggest she knows that there are important things about her husband's life that he is not telling her. When she learns the truth, she says with a tone of relief, "I was imagining something MUCH worse." What would be "much worse" than being an octopus? Presumably infidelity—and, given the game's emphasis on the precarious foundations of straight coupling, likely infidelity of a queer nature.

However, adding the game's control schema into the equation suggests that *Octodad*'s story can also be read as a metaphor for a different sort of queer experience: passing. Like the down low, the notion of passing arises from discussions around identity and race. Passing was first widely used to describe the experiences of black subjects who, depending on the color of their skin, could or could not pass for white. In more recent decades, "passing" has come to be used equally in discussions of gender and sexuality: to pass as straight, to pass as cisgender, etc. Passing is related to identity, but first and foremost it is about what others perceive. To pass for straight is not the same thing as to be straight. Rather, to pass is to succeed at being seen in a certain way, to be glimpsed for an instant and deemed "authentic." Octodad wants to pass as a convincingly heteronormative husband and father, but this effort is made first and foremost in the service of a larger goal: passing for human. In *Octodad*, humanness is fundamentally tied to gender and sexuality. Here, what is required to be deemed authentically human is to convincingly perform straightness and cisgender masculinity. As Lisa Nakamura has written about passing in the context of digital media, "Passing is a cultural phenomenon that has the ability to call stable identities into question . . . [though] the fact remains that passing is often driven by harsh structural cultural inequities, a sense that it really *would* be safer, more powerful, and better to be of a different race or gender."[20]

While Octodad's struggle to pass could be read as a metaphor for queer passing in general, it speaks particularly to the experiences of transgender people. The threats of violence that Octodad faces echoes the very real dangers that threaten transgender subjects—particularly trans women of color and/or trans people who do not pass—who can find themselves all too easily under physical attack from those who respond with hate and outrage to their "secret." Interpreting Octodad's story in this way also brings up the important matter of "realness" (a concept explored at greater length in chapter 4). What is Octodad, really? To say that Octodad is actually an octopus pretending to be a human man has troubling implications if we think of his story as a transgender narrative. No matter how hard the player tries, Octodad's character design and the motions of his body ensure that he will never truly pass, at least not to an onlooker of the game. However, there is

sufficient evidence to infer that Octodad really does think of himself as human—or, at the least, that he is sincere in his love for humanity. On their first date, Scarlet attempts to make small talk by asking, "If you could be any animal, what would it be?" Octodad responds in typical style with a blubbing noise, and Scarlet translates: "A human? How weird." Though Octodad is not biologically human, he seems to identify as human. Whatever his "real" identity, he does not need to pass for a loving father and caring husband. He already is one.

Octodad's attempts to pass can also be seen as a multivalent metaphor that points to the intersectional nature of discovering the queerness in video games. Much as Octodad can be read as a queer subject struggling to pass as cisgender or straight, his struggle could be read in racial terms. If Octodad is the "other," as the game's creators describe, he might also stand in for a racialized other—a person of color who must pass as an acceptable subject within a social system that believes that being normal and successful means being (or at least acting) white. Reframed in this way, the "festering prison of inequity," as Octodad calls the aquarium, can be seen as a nod toward the historical enslavement and oppression of non-white subjects, or toward the racial discrimination made manifest in the demographics of actual prison populations in contemporary America. Disability studies also brings an important perspective to *Octodad*. Octodad must quite literally contort his body to fit the design of the world around him. To move in ways that normatively abled bodies do requires great effort for him. At the same time that Octodad's bodily difference is highly visible to the player, he seeks to hide this difference from the characters around him, calling to mind the experience of those with "invisible" disabilities who may feel they need to guard their secrets. For this reason, *Octodad* invites continued readings and re-readings—for example, through work like Robert McRuer's writings at the intersection of queer theory and disability studies.[21]

It is important to keep in mind that passing is key not only to *Octodad*'s narrative, but also to the game's mechanics and its controls. The two basic interactive elements that structure the gameplay are attempting to manage one's body and remaining functionally unseen. In *Octodad*, the movement implied in the concept of passing—passing by, moving past—becomes the movement of Octodad's twisting, twirling,

stretching walk. The desire to be perceived as authentic and the worry of being "seen through" are literalized in the sight lines that follow Octodad wherever he goes, a manifestation of the sense that one is always being watched and judged. Passing mechanics can also be found in a small but notable handful of other video games. *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) incorporates a racial passing mechanic, as Soraya Murray has discussed.[22] The player-character, a biracial woman living in eighteenth-century New Orleans, can change her outfits in order to read to those around her either as a (white) "lady" or a (black) slave. Depending on which outfit and by extension which identity presentation the player selects, they are able to access different parts of the city. In merritt kopas's *Lim* (2012), players navigate a series of pathways as a square that must decide when and whether to change its color to match the squares around it. *Octodad*, by contrast, is set apart by the fact that it pairs passing mechanics with passing controls. These controls, in their awkwardness and disorientation, themselves intentionally mirror the embodied challenges of queer passing.

In this sense, *Octodad*'s controls offer an example of how queerness can operate through video games beyond traditional notions of representation. These controls denaturalize the so-called literacy of game norms. They invite players to step inside the queer experience of playing as Octodad: of finding oneself out of place amidst a society dominated by heteronormativity, and of attempting to pass in one's gender, one's sexuality, and even one's humanity. *Octodad* speaks compellingly to the capacity of video games not just to represent difference, but to allow players to inhabit the embodied experience of living that difference. *Octodad* may initially seem like little more than a silly game, one with a mainstream fan base that resists queer readings. However, this is only because the game itself can (in its own flailing, ecstatic way) pass for "straight." Just beneath its surface is a narrative and an opportunity for interaction that echoes the experiences of many LGBTQ folks, as well as those of other marginalized subjects. What it feels like to play as Octodad—like a sea creature trying to move on land—is often what it feels like to be queer: a misfit subject with an unruly body navigating a world that is not designed for you. This is its own form of queer representation, one that does not need to depict LGBTQ characters or romance in order to resonate powerfully with queer players.

Re-Appropriating Procedural Rhetoric

I conclude my discussion of *Octodad* by considering the game's relationship to genre. Though genre plays a notable role in the way that games culture understands video games, it has been surprisingly absent from game studies scholarship. Whereas scholars of literature or film commonly use genre to talk about tropes and patterns shared across works, games studies frequently focuses either on video games taken as a whole or individual games. Yet each game genre has its own history, its own landscape of production, and its own context of player reception. Attending to game genres represents a valuable opportunity to consider what norms and expectations govern specific subsets of the video-game medium. It also opens up possibilities for understanding how games replicate or resist conventions within their genre, as well as how queerness might operate differently across these different genres.

In the case of *Octodad*, talking about genre offers a framework through which to talk about hybridity. *Octodad* stands at the intersection of three genres: adventure games, physics games, and stealth games. In terms of genre, the game is a hybrid. This hybridity is reflected in other elements of the game—such as Octodad's own status as part octopus (in biology) and part human (in performance and identity). Octodad's children are also potentially animal-human hybrids, and his marriage to Scarlet is an interspecies marriage. In this way, the game calls to mind Donna Haraway's notion of the "cyborg," a disruptive, feminist figure who is part human and part machine.[23] It also suggests ties between queer video games and queer of color theorists like Mel Chen, whose work explores the line between the animate and inanimate through the relationship between the animal and the human.[24]

Of the three genres that *Octodad* combines, physics games and stealth games are of particular interest for issues of queerness and the body. Both physics games and stealth games are deeply embodied genres. In these genres, bodies or their proxies are the primary sites of play. Important elements of *Octodad*'s queerness can be traced to the game's engagement with the standard mechanisms of stealth and physics games. In particular, this queerness functions through a re-appropriation of the procedural rhetoric of these genres. Procedural rhetoric, a widely used game studies term coined by Ian Bogost, describes the semantic units

of gameplay and the ways that they communicate meaning.[25] *Octodad* identifies and repurposes the procedural rhetoric that commonly characterizes the genres of physics and stealth games, contorting interactive tropes to queer ends much as Octodad contorts his own queer body. By reframing and remaking these tropes, *Octodad* leverages player expectations in order to perform parody and critique. In the sense that "to queer," as a verb, can mean to destabilize, reimagine, and make new meaning through counterhegemonic desires, the game queers the physics and stealth genres—and along with them the very logics through which game genres have been conceived and codified.

It is through physics games that *Octodad* most directly ties itself to the queerness of the body in motion. Physics games are a genre rich with potential for analysis, yet to date they have received comparatively little scholarly attention.[26] The genre is diverse, and some physics games look very different than others. *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009), which at one point was arguably the most popular video game on the planet with more than two billion downloads, is a physics game. What all physics games share is that their gameplay is structured around forces of physicality, such as gravity, bounce, and stretch. For example, a physics game may challenge players to throw an object in just the right way, as in *Angry Birds*, or to manipulate a wobbling substance to build stable structures, as in *World of Goo* (2D Boy, 2008). Each of these games establishes rules for their material world and challenges players to master that materiality in motion.

Octodad belongs to a subgenre of physics games that I call "body physics games." These games explicitly focus on the physicality and movement of the human body. The best-known body physics game is *QWOP* (Foddy.net, 2008), a browser-based game in which players attempt to manipulate an athlete's body so that he will run down a track. Each of his thighs and calves are controlled by individual keystrokes. Like *Octodad*, *QWOP*'s control schema is intentionally difficult to master—and, like in *Octodad*, the motions of the body in *QWOP* quickly become absurd, transforming the human into an uncooperative collection of moving parts. Also notable is that the athlete featured in *QWOP*, created by a white designer, is African American. As Dmitri Williams et al. have demonstrated, black characters are overwhelmingly underrepresented in video games, with the exception of sports games.[27] *QWOP*

is hardly a sports game, but its premise and setting are sports-related, and so it ports this sports game trope into the physics game genre. As a result, a black male body has become the iconic symbol of the frustrations and humor of body physics games. In this way, *QWOP* illustrates how a game can resist certain hegemonic beliefs and traditions, such as the presumption that the "normal" movements of the human body are easy to master, while re-inscribing others, such as the history of making racialized bodies in peril the object of spectacle.

Octodad, by contrast, takes the tropes of the body physics genre and intentionally undermines the notion of mastery. In place of the human body, the game makes the site of play the floppy, stretchy, twisting octopus. This body, even when the game is played with skill, can never be fully controlled—at least not to the extent that it appears to move, as Octodad hopes, in ways that look "human." Indeed, whereas games like *QWOP* offer players the opportunity to play with the human form, *Octodad* invites them to participate in the queering of the human form. The game also makes the physics inherent in the physics genre a personal, embodied physics. Other body physics games present the body in question as a kind of third-person object: a doll that players manipulate. By contrast, in *Octodad*, the player's own in-game body (i.e., Octodad himself) is the object of manipulation. The unruly mechanisms of the body are no longer a visual spectacle of otherness but the inhabited experience of self. In this sense, physics games tropes are one of the key tools that *Octodad* uses to create the interactive experience of queerness.

At the same time that it plays with the tropes of physics games, *Octodad* also draws from the stealth game genre. Stealth games are designed around the mechanics of not being seen. The gameplay of these games commonly involves sneaking through dangerous or crowded areas by using shadows, disguises, or stealthy movement to avoid the gaze of enemy non-player characters. Players must remain undetected long enough to complete a series of goals—usually covert operations with military overtones. Most stealth games, like the *Metal Gear* series (Konami, 1987–2016) and the *Splinter Cell* series (Ubisoft, 2002–2013), are quite serious in tone. Their protagonists are assassins, spies, or soldiers. These games offer dark and sincere fantasies of control: over what is visible, what is seen, and thereby what is known.

Octodad too is a game about avoiding detection and remaining unseen. The threat of sight and surveillance is a constant presence throughout the game. However, in many other ways, *Octodad* looks little like traditional stealth games. The game's aesthetic is colorful, cheerful, and cartoonish; its tone is tongue-in-cheek and lighthearted. Except for the sequence in which Octodad guides his daughter out of the deep-sea exhibit, the game is brightly lit and free of shadows. There is nowhere to hide, except in plain sight. Rather than sneaking around in order to kill, Octodad is sneaking around simply to exist: to pass for human and thereby to be allowed to continue the everyday objectives of living. The enemy gaze he must avoid is the gaze of the very society that surrounds him, a kind of cultural, systemic, and ever-active vigilance against the perceived dangers of difference that can be readily identified outside of the game in slogans for community policing like "If you see something, say something."

In one sense, *Octodad* is a parody of the stealth genre. To the player, Octodad's secret is anything but secret. It is hard to imagine, if we think of the game world as mimetic to our own, that no one would "suspect a thing." This itself can be read as a critique of stealth games. By making sneaking around unseen seem ridiculous, *Octodad* casts doubt on the very notion of sneaking around in video games. After all, how could a game not see the player? It has been made for the player. To think otherwise is solipsistic. *Octodad* also undermines the presumed value of "realism" in stealth games—as well as in physics games, for that matter. Both genres function around the performance of presenting the world to players as it would "really" happen: how high a ball would really bounce, how far a flashlight would really cast light. Though *Octodad* is both a physics game and a stealth game, it has no interest in being realistic, at least not in any direct and obvious way. In abandoning the performance of realism, the game exposes how other games in its genres attempt to pass off artifice for reality, much like heteronormativity attempts to conflate gender expectations with gender realness.

The game does more than bring into question the established tropes of the stealth genre, however. It re-appropriates these tropes to tell a story about queer experience. Even as the list of video games with LGBTQ content continues to grow, both through the addition of LGBTQ characters

to contemporary games and through archival work documenting lesser-known instances of queer characters in games, physics games and stealth games rarely appear on this list. To the extent that one can meaningfully distinguish between "straight" and "queer" game genres, at least in terms of their representational content, these genres have long been overwhelmingly straight. Yet, through *Octodad*, the core procedural rhetoric of the stealth genre becomes the stuff of metaphor for the mechanisms of queer passing. The player who might, in another stealth game, be sneaking past security guards with guns is instead here trying to pass undetected under the critical eye of heteronormativity. Octodad is outed in the same moment that he is made visible. Without his business suit on, his family can see the fullness of his yellow-skinned, slippery, invertebrate form; through this seeing, they come to know his secret. In such moments, *Octodad* is using the tools of existing game genres to simultaneously deconstruct and rebuild the possibility spaces of video games. The unquestioned gaze that drives gameplay in the stealth genre takes on significance beyond the game as the surveillance and policing of queer bodies.

Like the embodied queer experiences that emerge from *Octodad*'s control schema, the game's intervention in the politics of genre demonstrates how queerness can operate in seemingly "straight" video games in ways that relate to but also move beyond representational content. *Octodad* offers a particularly rich and illuminating example of how a game can be read through intersectional queer lenses. It points in important ways to the place of the body, both on-screen and off, as well as the potential for meaning contained within a game's control schemes and material interfaces. Ultimately then, an analysis of the game adds to the work of queer game studies by gesturing toward the diversity of video games elements in which queerness can be discovered. Whether that queerness is located in the story a game tells, the design of its characters, the way it is played, or the way that the game itself plays with existing expectations, queer experience can be meaningfully reflected in all the moving pieces of a game. The multifaceted nature of queerness opens up these possibilities, expanding and complicating the angles through which we approach games, whether individually, at the level of genre, or as a medium. The embodied and surprisingly powerful experience of playing as Octodad is one to which queer players have the right

to lay claim. As a proxy for the feeling of moving through the heteronormative world in a queer body, the flopping, flailing movements of the not-so-secret octopus are strange and beautiful. Though they may not fit traditional notions of LGBTQ representation, they have the power to speak to queer subjects in ways that truly matter.

4

Kissing for Absolutely No Reason

Realistic Kissing Simulator, Consentacle, *and Queer Game Design*

In Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt's 2014 browser-based game *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, two players interact by licking one another with long, floppy, wriggling tongues. A small-scale game, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* has basic, physics-based gameplay and a cheerful, absurdist style. Its aesthetic is thoughtfully crafted but also intentionally simplistic, even crude. Represented by faces in side profile, one purple and one green (figure 4.1), the players share a keyboard in order to move their tongues up and down and to extend them toward the face of their kissing partner. The controls are tricky to master and the game states no objectives, so gameplay tends to take the form of a kind of silly, grotesque dance of impossibly stretchy tongues. Players can use their tongues to poke each other (or themselves) in the eye, prod at each other's nostrils, or attempt to slip between each other's rubbery, bumper-like lips.

In their materials promoting the game, Schmidt and Andrews describe *Realistic Kissing Simulator* as a "robust . . . co-operative, goal-less kissing simulation."[1] Cooperation takes two primary forms in the game. First, unlike most multiplayer games, which use multiple controllers, the players share one interface; to play, they must stand close together with their hands on the same keyboard. Second, players have to actively consent to playing. The game begins when both players hold down keys to reach out and touch hands. Before a kissing session can commence, one player must ask, "Would you like to kiss me?" and receive a positive response (figure 4.2). As soon as one player retracts their tongue fully, signaling that they would like to stop kissing, the game comes to an end. For this reason, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* can be played for just a moment or it can be played indefinitely.

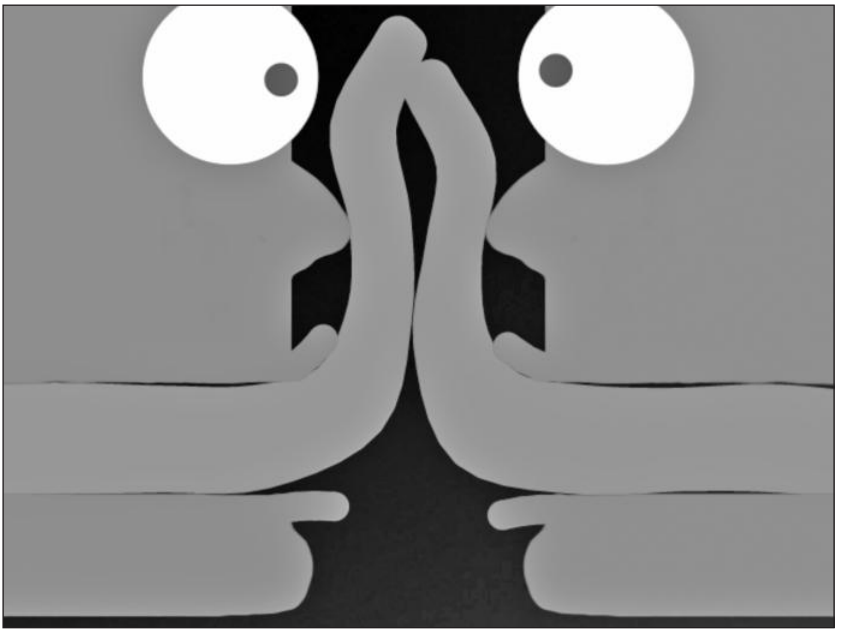

Figure 4.1. *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt, 2014). Screenshot by author.

Realistic Kissing Simulator models, succinctly and yet with surprising nuance, one mode of discovering the queerness in video games: through what I call "queer game design." Queer game design is the practice of deliberately using game mechanics and other design elements to challenge normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and the established logics of digital gameplay. While *Realistic Kissing Simulator* exemplifies queer game design, it also occupies a liminal space between queer and "straight" games. Unlike many of the other games discussed in this book, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is not widely known in mainstream gaming circles, though it has gained some notoriety in the "indie scene." More closely allied with the work of the queer games avant-garde described in the conclusion of this book than with the AAA industry, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is an example of a truly independent game. Designed and developed by a team of only two people, it is available to play for free online.

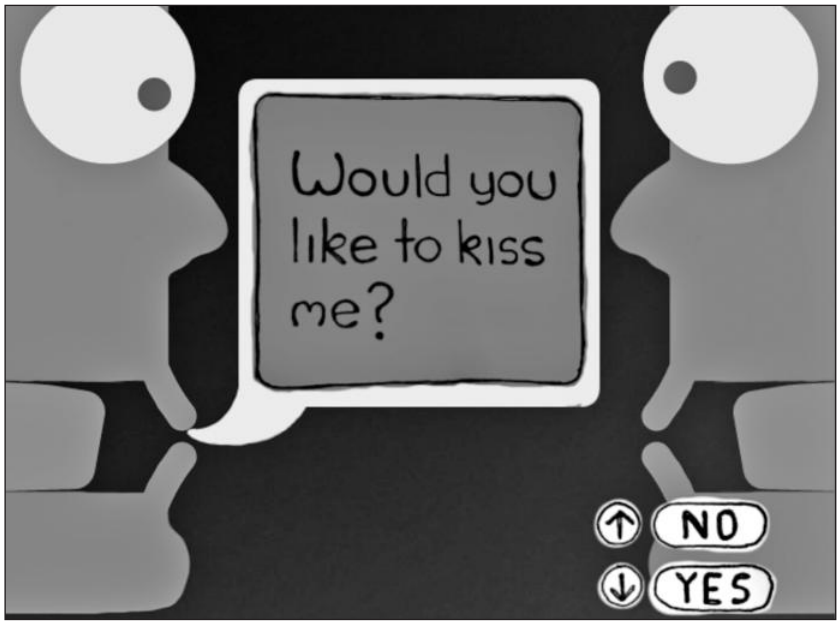

Figure 4.2. Players ask for consent in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*. Screenshot by author.

Notably though, the game's reception has largely downplayed its queer themes. Coverage of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* published on game news websites around the time of its release primarily characterized the game as goofy and fun: a brief but enjoyable distraction.[2] It was featured at the independent games festival IndieCade in 2014 and at the Wild Rumpus Party in 2015, an indie-focused event that takes place during the Game Developers Conference—both of which are "alternative" yet still predominantly straight gaming spaces. While the game was part of the arcade at the 2014 Queerness and Games Conference, and while queer game-makers like Naomi Clark and Robert Yang have explicitly called it out as a model for queer game-making, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* has largely passed as quirky rather than queer.[3]

Despite the fact that the game's queer elements have often been overlooked, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* offers a particularly helpful illustration of queer game design and how queerness can be discovered in video games through their mechanics. This is because, though the game may appear simple, its engagement with queerness operates on many levels.

Some of the ways in which queerness has been incorporated into the game are representational. Perhaps the obvious example can be seen in the game's character design. *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s characters are depicted as gender-ambiguous. The game gives none of the socially accepted visual cues for determining their genders, such as makeup or differences in facial structure. In every aspect besides their colors, which are themselves far from "realistic," the two kissing partners look the same. Compared to the problematic gender stereotyping so often seen in the design of video-game characters, this ambiguity alone suggests that the game is resisting the problematic, heteronormative standards of game design.

In addition, this gender ambiguity makes space for additional types of queerness. By refusing to signify gender, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* allows the players to imagine a variety of gendered pairings, or to accept the absence of gender as a precondition for play. (Similarly, the difference in the characters' skin tones can be read either as a marker of racial difference or as a refusal to signify race.) Another representational element that is key to the ways that *Realistic Kissing Simulator* queers standard depictions of gender and sexuality in games is its emphasis on visibility. Lindsay Grace has identified a genre of what he terms "affection" games: web-based or mobile video games in which players must avoid the gaze of disapproving onlookers and sneak kisses from their characters' heterosexual love interests.[4] By contrast, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* makes the motions of kissing hypervisible. By cropping the game's visual field tightly on the kissers' faces, and by designing the characters with wide, unblinking eyes and mouths cut open to reveal the motions of their tongues inside their bodies, Schmidt and Andrews have created a game that intentionally plays with expectations for the representation of in-game kissing as surreptitious rather than overt.

At the same time, the game's queer implications go beyond its representational aspects and into the heart of its design. In their talk at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference, tabletop game designers Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick argued that game mechanics themselves—the very rules and systems that structure a game—can be tools of queer resistance.[5] Whereas commonly used game mechanics are often founded on the unquestioned logics of heteronormativity (such as the presumption that a player must have a "monogamous" relationship to their avatar,

as opposed to a "polyamorous" relationship to multiple avatars), Alder and St. Patrick propose that mechanics can be re-designed to resist hegemonies of gender and sexuality. Along with its parody of realism, which challenges the role of "realness" in both video-game development and the policing of LGBTQ identities, *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s "goal-less-ness" and its foregrounding of the mechanics of consent are crucial elements of the game's queer design. The messages sent by these design choices also resonate far beyond this individual game. *Realistic Kissing Simulator* destabilizes the assumption that video games—and by extension sex or other intimate contact—should have a win state or even a pre-prescribed ending. In this way, the game enacts what I term "de-gamification," which I explore in greater depth below.[6] As opposed to gamification, the practice of applying game design elements to real-life situations in an attempt to increase productivity and contentedness (or, we might say, more cynically, exploitation and complacency), de-gamification identifies those life experiences that mainstream society has already problematically gamified and seeks to liberate them from their culturally imposed, game-like structures.

At the same time, however, I want to complicate the idea that the goal of queer game design is simply to present alternatives to the status quo. Game design is itself a critical practice and a mode of cultural analysis, as scholars like Mary Flanagan and Gonzalo Frasca have compellingly argued.[7] By distilling elements of social and personal experience into interactive systems, game design has the potential to lay bare and invite reflection on the workings of larger structures of power. Among the games most often described as representing critical game design are those like Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013), which model the relationship between systems and discrimination. Yet, in order for queer video games to engage meaningfully with the larger stakes of their cultural contexts, critical game design must also be a central element of designing games queerly. In a sense, this entails not a de-gamification but a re-gamification. Re-gamification recognizes, literalizes, and thereby makes visible the socially constructed mechanics that structure and restrict personal agency and identity. To demonstrate this mode of queer game design, I close this chapter by adding to my analysis of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* a consideration of Naomi Clark's tabletop game *Consentacle*

(2014), in which can be seen both the power and potential pitfalls of re-gamifying experiences of gender, sexuality, and queerness.

The Queer Design of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*

Although, similar to *Pong* (discussed in chapter 1), *Realistic Kissing Simulator* may seem like a simple game, Andrews and Schmidt's design in fact works in many ways to defy heteronormative expectations and standard game structures. Among the design choices represented by *Realistic Kissing Simulator* that could be described as queer is the decision to map the game's control schema onto a single keyboard. What makes this design choice notable is the way that it changes the qualitative experience of playing the game. In order to have both of their hands on the keyboard, the two players must stand with their bodies relatively close together. This is one of a number of important ways that *Realistic Kissing Simulator* differs from many other multiplayer video games. In a typical local multiplayer game, each player is assigned their own controller, which is either wireless or attached to the game PC or console with enough cord to allow the players to stand a marked distance apart. (In online multiplayer games, of course, players' bodies can be thousands of miles away from one another.) By insisting on proximity between the players, however, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* creates a kind of intimacy that can feel exciting but also uncomfortable. I use *Realistic Kissing Simulator* often in the classroom and at talks when I am discussing queer game design, such as during a "Well Played" presentation I delivered at IndieCade in 2015, so I have had the opportunity to observe many new players' encounters with the game. Often, these players seem nervous to be standing so near each other. I suspect that this is because they are not used to playing multiplayer games in which their own bodies, and not just the bodies of their characters, might touch. This unfamiliar sense of closeness is heightened by the way that the players' bodies implicitly mirror the bodies on-screen. As their in-game tongues lick, poke, and entangle, the players' own embodied relationship takes on an erotic element. Like their tongues, the players squirm.

The intimate implications of the game's interface can be seen as queer because they restructure standard models of player-to-player relationality

in video games. Given the prevalence of homophobia in games culture, Andrews and Schimdt's design also represents a bold move toward bringing gamer bodies together in ways that embrace rather than obfuscate the potentially (homo)erotic tension that builds during multiplayer gameplay. With the exception of some of the works from the queer games avant-garde discussed in the conclusion, the video games considered in this book do not represent actual sexual contact, let alone sex, between LGBTQ partners. In a way, the graphic intermingling of tongues in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, and the intimate connection that the game builds between players, is the closest we come to this representation in these works.

The design of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, paired with its (aptly) tongue-in-cheek title, can also be interpreted as a reflection on realism and realness. Concepts of realism carry weight in the realms of both video games and LGBTQ issues; through their overlapping rhetoric and related stakes, they illustrate how debates around games and around queerness can directly intersect. At first glance, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* seems to mock the idea of realism. Despite calling itself "realistic," the kissing represented in the game looks very little like what we would normally call "real" kissing. The bodies of the game's characters, with their impossibly long tongues, seem to bear little resemblance to actual human bodies. In this sense, the word "realistic" in the game's title marks it as a parody of realism. Video games, and especially those that bill themselves as simulations, have long been judged by a benchmark of realistic-ness. In game reviews oriented toward mainstream players, realism (for example, realistic graphics or realistic physics) is often considered an important measure of a good video game. As Nathan Grayson has noted, the name *Realistic Kissing Simulator* recalls other irreverent "simulator" games from 2013 and 2014, such as *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Games) and *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios).[8] However, realistic simulation is still taken seriously in many sectors of games culture and the games industry. This is especially true with the rise of commercially available virtual reality peripherals sold on the promise that they make players feel they are "really there." *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, by contrast, is insistently uninterested in realism. The game's character design and movements are enticing precisely because they are alienating and not realistic. Rather than attempting to replicate a real experience, *Re-*

alistic Kissing Simulator enacts an implicit critique of the very notion that a game could allow players to be "really there" by making "there" an unreal place.

Realistic Kissing Simulator's critique of realism has important implications for its relationship to queerness as well. Realism has long played a role in the policing of gender and sexual identities, as in the case of Facebook's highly problematic "real name" policy. This policy, which allows the social media company to ban users whose names do not appear sufficiently "real," has disproportionately enabled discrimination against queer users (along with users from other marginalized groups, such as Native Americans) and reflects an oppressive set of cultural beliefs about whose identities do and do not get to count as "real."[9] By poking fun at the perceived divide between what is and is not realistic, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* makes realness as a measure of gender or sexual expression laughable. It also suggests that, when it comes to intimate contact between partners, there are multiple ways to be real. The kissing that players engage in through the game may not look "normal"—but, by heteronormative standards, the same could be said of embraces between same-sex or non-cisgender partners. By hegemonic measures, this kiss does not "count" as a kiss, much like sex that does not involve vaginal penetration by a penis is still widely considered not to "count" as sex. By making the act of kissing absurd and labeling it realistic, the game also calls into question the very idea of realness. As in the rhetoric of certain North American drag traditions, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* points toward an understanding of realness as a mode of (queer) performance rather than a marker of naturalistic authenticity.[10]

At the same time, there is a sense in which *Realistic Kissing Simulator* actually *is* realistic. In part, what makes the game's engagement with realism compelling is that it echoes (and enjoyably exaggerates) something that players may recognize as "real" in the experience of kissing. Following one presentation I gave on the game, during the Q&A period, an audience member raised her hand and objected to my reading of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* as a game that is ironically unrealistic. "But this is exactly what kissing is like, isn't it?" she insisted. "At least, that's what it's like for me." Indeed, though dominant heteronormative social narratives tell us that kissing is romantic, passionate, and even graceful, the reality of entangling tongues with a new partner can be

fumbling and awkward. In this sense, the representational elements of Schmidt and Andrews's game may not realistically depict what it *looks* like when people kiss; however, it may well realistically depict what it *feels like* when people kiss. This feeling, which the game translates into game mechanics, can itself be characterized as queer—precisely because it describes an embodied experience at the intersection of desire and disorientation, wherein the tongue must literally re-orient itself using licking, the primary mode of interaction through which the game is played. *Realistic Kissing Simulator* could also be called a cultural "reality check." In its framing, the game parallels and thereby parodies the idealized scenes of (almost invariably heterosexual) romance that frequently appear in movies and on television. The two game characters peer at each other with their bulging, exposed eyeballs in a send-up of a scene in which two lovers lose themselves in each other's gazes. The locking of lips becomes the mashing of tongues—destabilizing the image of the romantic kiss and insisting that real kissing is itself, in a sense, already queer: awkward, confusing, and messy.

Tellingly, this association of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* with real-life kissing is one that appears frequently in the coverage that the game received on mainstream game news sites. On the surface, such write-ups seem to be approaching Schmidt and Andrews's game as silly and fun, but ultimately of little personal or cultural consequence. However, surprisingly often, these writings make sense of the game through anecdotes about the trials and tribulations of actual kissing, suggesting that the game brings to the surface through the hyperbole of its un-realism a set of real, lived anxieties.[11] The extent to which this seemingly unrealistic game is conflated with real life can also be seen in the nearly ubiquitous references to education found in these articles. Almost all of these authors reiterate the expectation, which they admit the game quickly shatters, that the *Realistic Kissing Simulator* will teach the player how to kiss. Something in the game's title seems to bring these writers back to an adolescent moment when one longs to learn the secret mechanisms of being a "good kisser." These write-ups proceed from the assumption that their readers will also be expecting *Realistic Kissing Simulator* to teach them something useful that they can bring back to their real-life kissing partners—and promptly warns them against approaching the game in this way. "Don't let *Realistic Kissing Simulator* teach you how

to kiss," reads one headline.[12] Another post warns, "It'll teach you absolutely nothing."[13]

In this way, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is posited as the anti-educational game: the opposite of today's proliferating initiatives to use video games to teach practical skills to everyone from schoolchildren to soldiers to surgeons. If *Realistic Kissing Simulator* offers any kind of education, it is a counter-education, a deprogramming of the lessons learned from heteronormative visions of romance and intimacy. It makes players question what many of them already know: how kissing is done. For this reason, among others, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* could be said to queer the very act of kissing—that is, to denaturalize, unlearn, and decouple from hegemony what is commonly presented as a normal part of romantic pairing: the tender kiss.

Goal-less-ness and De-Gamification

Of the many elements of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s design that could be described as queer, the one with the most wide-reaching implications for the practice of queer game design is the game's goal-less-ness (to use Schmidt and Andrews's term). Unlike the overwhelming majority of video games, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* "does away with conventional notions of designer-ordained goals," as Naomi Clark writes of the game, and gives players no sense of what they are meant to accomplish by playing.[14] Schmidt and Andrews's game is not the only video game to encourage free-form play or to downplay the importance of "winning." However, even among the limited pool of games that do question traditional measures of player accomplishment, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* takes goal-less-ness to new levels. This goal-less-ness is reflected in the fact that the game has no structured win-state, but it also permeates many other aspects of the game's design. Almost all standard in-game structures by which progress could be determined have been stripped from the game. There are no achievements to unlock, no way to advance through levels, no checkpoints to reach, no opportunities to save, no culminating battles to win, no systems for accumulating goods or currency, and no reward for playing well. Every play-through of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* ends the same way: with the brief, anticlimactic flash of a "thank you" screen. In this sense, the game communicates that it

values all types of play equally: from the longest, most elaborate kiss to the briefest touching of tongues. Only players can determine when they have accomplished their goals—and what those goals might be. With this key design decision, Schmidt and Andrews have made a game that rejects one of the core tenets of video-game ontologies: that, in order for a game to even be a *game*, a player must be able to overcome a challenge and accomplish a goal—at least, as Salen and Zimmerman write in their definition of a game, "a quantifiable outcome."[15] In its goal-less-ness, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* rejects normative expectations for meaningful human experience (that it is undertaken for a constructive purpose) as represented through "good" game design.

In addition to overturning assumptions about the importance of goals in video games, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* also uses its goal-lessness to take a stand against heteronormative beliefs about the place of goals in sexual interactions. By providing players with no objectives, the game suggests that kissing itself should be goal-less: an activity engaged in for the free-form pleasures of interpersonal connection, rather than for the satisfaction of something called winning. Winning here could mean succeeding in convincing a partner to engage in sexual contact (recalling the sexist, exploitative rhetoric of *The Pickup Artist* with its "game" of seducing women) or it could mean heterosexual reproductivity: the instrumentalization of pleasure for purposes of procreation.[16] More commonly, though, it might simply mean achieving orgasm—or, rather, thinking of orgasm as the goal of sex. In making kissing goal-less, Schmidt and Andrews's game offers a much queerer model for sexual interactions, one that is not limited by the expectation that erotic contact takes place between people of opposite genders and ends following the moment of male orgasm. Because the game is collaborative rather than competitive, it also recalls Jetta Ray's work on pinball and sex as conquest.[17] Whereas dominant culture often depicts "successful" sexual partners as conquerors (contributing to the harmful ethos of rape culture), says Ray, pinball machines offer an alternative vision of "playing the game" of intimacy—since each machine has different physical elements and therefore requires intimate knowledge between player and game. Importantly, the queerness of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s goal-less gameplay differs from the queerness of game failure, as discussed

in chapter 5. Whereas the "queer art of failing at video games," as I term it, is enacted emergently by a game's players, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* has been intentionally designed to comment on the limitations of game systems structured around success and failure.

Given how *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s deliberately goal-less design functions to dismantle both hegemonic expectations for video games and game-like systems of heteronormativity, the game could be said to be doing the work of de-gamification. I use the concept of de-gamification here in direct response to gamification. Popularized by Jane McGonigal in her books *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* and *SuperBetter: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver, and More Resilient—Powered by the Science of Games*, gamification has also been widely lauded by those in fields like corporate development and education reform.[18] Gamification can be summarized as the application of game-like structures, such as levels and point systems, to non-game activities. Though McGonigal's examples extend into more personal realms, in effect gamification is most often implemented with the capitalist goals of improving worker productivity or consumer engagement with a product. Though it continues to appeal to many institutions and individuals outside the games world, gamification has been widely and rightly criticized by those inside gaming. Some of these critics see it as "snake oil": often praised yet largely ineffective.[19] Others argue against its neoliberal appropriation of games for profit and labor exploitation, which operates under the guise of making participants more "productive members of society."[20] Still others have pointed out how the techniques of gamification have been deployed by trolls and harassers in "activist" campaigns like #GamerGate in order to dehumanize the targets of their attacks.[21] Indeed, gamification appears as a kind of villain (or perhaps a straw man) throughout this book. I say "straw man" because few game studies scholars working today vocally support gamification; the topic itself has even become arguably passé. However, the belief behind gamification—that games can "make us better and change the world"—is still widely relevant to the current landscape of video games, especially in corners like so-called serious games and games for change movements. With its promise to make everyday people "happier, braver, and stronger," gamification also

calls to mind connections to critiques from queer affect studies, such as Lauren Berlant's work on the "cruel optimism" and Sara Ahmed's writing on "the promise of happiness."[22]

If "to gamify" is to impose game-like structures onto life, what does it mean to de-gamify? Like the practice of "demaking"—in which game fans resist the linearity of technological progress by remaking contemporary AAA video games in the style of older game systems, often using 8-bit or 16-bit graphics—de-gamifying allows us to see play as we already know it differently.[23] Specifically, to de-gamify is to strip away the game-like structures already imposed onto life and to remake the world without the imposition of those structures. This process takes place in three steps. First, de-gamification entails identifying instances in which society has already mapped game-like systems of goals, achievements, points, etc., onto human experience in an attempt to regulate, normativize, and exploit that experience. Second, de-gamification entails breaking down those structures and liberating the human experience that they oppress. Third, de-gamification entails creating opportunities for exploring—and thereby *playing* with—those experiences outside of the game-like structures that have been imposed upon them. This last step speaks to the complexity and even contradiction within the work of de-gamification. At the same time that de-gamification tears down game-like structures, it also facilitates play, which is itself commonly understood in game studies as being fundamentally bounded by rules. Like Roger Caillois's well-known distinction between *ludus* and *paidea*, however, the play of de-gamification is fundamentally free-form and unstructured, allowing players to build their own meaning from the act of play.[24] De-gamification, as I am defining it, is therefore both critical and a creative work—breaking down existing social systems and replacing them with open-ended opportunities for self-expression.

With regard to both video games and sexuality, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is a prime example of a game that in fact de-gamifies. Speaking at the 2015 Game Developers Conference, game designer Matt Boch offered the following poignant insight: "The opposite of gamification is recognizing that some human experiences are not meant to be won."[25] This strikes me as a deeply poetic and indeed political statement—and one that *Realistic Kissing Simulator* perfectly embodies. Through its de-

sign, the game argues that kissing, and by extension other forms of intimate, interpersonal contact, are among those experiences "not meant to be won." This argument has notably queer implications specifically because it is made from inside a dominant, neoliberal, North American culture that understands life "goals" through the established logics of heterosexual coupling, reproductivity, and cisgender subjecthood. Using queer game design, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* de-gamifies kissing and even interpersonal intimacy itself, thereby making space for these experiences to be reimagined as queer.

Re-Gamification: Complicating the Work of Queer Game Design

While I want to celebrate the queer design of games like *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, it is also important to complicate this vision of de-gamification. For instance, Schmidt and Andrews's game may not have prescribed goals, but certainly it does have game mechanics. Some of these mechanics could in fact be said to gamify (i.e., translate into game form) elements of the intimate and/or erotic experience for which kissing serves as a kind of shorthand.

The mechanics of consent, for example, are particularly prominent in the game. On the one hand, this emphasis on consent can be seen as an expression of queer game design. While so many multiplayer games prompt players to act upon one another, usually through violence, without a moment's discussion, *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is clearly asserting the importance of communication even in collaborative gameplay. In this way, the game proposes an alternative model for the establishment of interpersonal relationality that stands in marked contrast to the standard design models for digital games. On the other hand, the mechanisms through which players communicate their consent are still game-like. To begin *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, players must hold down their keys in order to reach out their hands to one another, and then they must hold down keys again to ask for consent or answer the request. These moments recall the traditional controls for entering a multiplayer game—in which each individual player typically presses a controller button to enter the round. Players who are already familiar with the standard operations of video games may follow these steps not

because they are consciously thinking about communication or consent, but because they are adhering to an internalized script about how gameplay should proceed that they see reflected in the game.

Even the game's supposed goal-less-ness, which seems so core to the design of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, can be challenged. As I mentioned, I have seen this game played by students and talk attendees on a number of occasions, and I have noticed that the game rarely remains goal-less for long. In the absence of pre-stated goals, players quickly invent their own. These goals might include trying to poke each other in the eye, or for one player to wrap their tongue fully around the other's chin, or (most commonly) to penetrate all the way into the fellow kisser's mouth. Sometimes these goals are communicated verbally and agreed upon by both players. At other times, though, they are not agreed upon; instead, they take on the form of individual goals to which the other player has not consented. In this way, though Schmidt and Andrews designed the game to be collaborative, players often switch into an emergent competitive mode. Both competition and collaboration can reveal the game's more aggressive elements. After a few initial moments of figuring out the controls, players often change tactics and attempt to master the invasive art of forcefully prodding and thrusting. In short, the hegemonic expectations that *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s queer design seems to dismantle are reintroduced by players. The game becomes competitive and goalful rather than collaborative and goal-less. In turn, the heteronormative foregrounding of (presumed) male-female genital penetration that the game seems to disavow can in fact be re-identified in the players' focus on using their tongues to enter each other's mouths. Many of the cultural critiques that the game enacts through its design still hold in these moments, but these critiques are simultaneously problematized by the way the game itself is played. As many game scholars have noted, video games must be understood not just through their design but through the practices that players bring to the game.[26]

In problematizing queer game design, I do not mean to imply that these issues, such as the gamification of consent and the production of emergently competitive behavior, make *Realistic Kissing Simulator* unsuccessful as a queer work. To the contrary, Schmidt and Andrews's game does an excellent job of demonstrating how the design of inter-

active experiences can resist the heteronormative status quo. Indeed, the game stands as evidence that, among the many ways to discover the queerness in video games, one important approach is to identify the opportunities for queer play that have been constructed by a game's designers. *Realistic Kissing Simulator* also compellingly models how a small, silly, and seemingly simplistic game can communicate crucial, far-reaching messages that challenge deeply held beliefs. In this way, the game stands as a challenge to the very idea of a "serious game" or a "game for change" by showing that a game does not need to be serious or to use the rhetoric of "making the world a better place" in order to present important queer perspectives. Games founded in the principles of queer design have the potential to build alternative (not necessarily "better") worlds—worlds in which desire and intimacy are liberated from the game-like structures of heteronormativity. At the same time, such games retain their absurdity and their embodied strangeness. In part, the queerness of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* lies in its odd little pleasures, its uncomfortable laughter, and the feeling of getting too close to another while you attempt to tame the impossible, wriggling wildness of your on-screen body. The pleasure of playing Schmidt and Andrews's game, like the pleasure of kissing within it, is pleasure for its own sake. One plays as one kisses: for absolutely no reason.

Far from condemning *Realistic Kissing Simulator* or the type of queer game design it represents through such critiques, I point to these complications to demonstrate that the relationship between queerness and normative game structures is not as straightforward as my description of de-gamification might initially suggest. In part, this complexity lies in the fact that—as the second half of this book will explore in more depth—the meanings of video games are shaped not only by their designers but also by their players. For all its queer intentions, a game like *Realistic Kissing Simulator* cannot help but change when it enters the players' hands. Yet there is also a second factor that further blurs the relationship between queer game design and de-gamification. As the issue of consent in Schmidt and Andrews's game illustrates, games that are designed using counterhegemonic thinking are still games. For that reason, while they de-gamify human experiences, they also have the potential to *re-gamify* them.

What do I mean by re-gamification, and how does it differ from gamification? Re-gamification may indeed easily be mistaken for gamification, but in fact it differs in crucial ways. Whereas gamification forcefully applies game-like structures to human experiences, and de-gamification strips human experiences of game-like structures, re-gamification identifies, literalizes, and thereby critiques the game-like structures that are *already* being used to shape human experience. In this way, re-gamification is most closely allied with the practice of critical game design discussed above.

Take, for example, the way that *Realistic Kissing Simulator* translates consent into game mechanics. Rather than as an act of gamification, we could see this as an act of re-gamification. That is, we could say that Schmidt and Andrews are using standard game mechanics to suggest that there is already something game-like in the communicative exchange of giving and receiving consent. Or, to draw from the corporate context in which gamification has been enthusiastically adopted, imagine a hypothetical game in which players must work long hours for unfair wages at unfulfilling jobs in order to "succeed" by achieving meager praise from uninterested bosses, progressing through the ranks of euphemistic job titles, and eventually stumbling across the finish line of a late and weary retirement.[27] This would be a grim game, indeed, but its critique through re-gamification would be clear. It would enact an argument that some social system or institution—in this case, the undercompensated desk job—was already a game. (This example admittedly calls to mind Molleindustria's 2009 *Every Day the Same Dream*, though, as I have argued elsewhere, that game's representational politics leave much to be desired.)[28] By making that gamic social system explicit through traditional video-game tropes, re-gamification lays bare the games that we already play—and that are played on us—every day. While it is perhaps true that "some human experiences are not meant to be won," the real opposite of gamification is recognizing that in many ways the lives we live in our contemporary Western, industrialized society are already game-like. To say simply that human experience should not be a game is to overlook the fact that dominant systems of power do create "winners" and "losers." Re-gamification is a key element of queer game design because the work of queer game design is not simply to resist hegemony, but also to expose that hegemony.

The Powers and Pitfalls of Designing Queer Systems

In the remainder of this chapter, I will illustrate the idea of re-gamification as it intersects with queer game design through a second game: Naomi Clark's 2014 tabletop role-playing card game *Consentacle*. I have chosen to juxtapose *Realistic Kissing Simulator* with a non-digital game because non-digital games often make their systems and mechanics more immediately visible. Whereas many digital games leave their rules unspoken, analog games typically state them clearly. Unlike most of the games discussed throughout this book, *Consentacle* does contain explicitly sexual content—though, as is the case for kissing in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, the sex that appears in Clark's game looks little like heteronormative visions of "realistic" sex. The reason that I am considering *Consentacle* here rather than in my chapter on the queer games avant-garde is that, in addition to the game's many thematic similarities to *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, the connections between *Consentacle*'s mechanics and its queer content are productively complex. They exemplify how queer game design can be used to bring non-normative identities and desires to games in powerful ways—but also how those same design practices run the risk of problematically systematizing queerness. Considered in dialogue with *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, *Consentacle* offers a window onto the interlocking dialectics of power, appropriation, resistance, gamification, de-gamification, and re-gamification that underlie the work of queer game design.

Consentacle combines queer design with queer content to create a game that systematizes intimacy and sexual satisfaction—with compelling but also unsettling results. A collaborative, two-person card game about sex between a human and an alien, *Consentacle* tasks players (according to its rulebook) with the mission to "enjoy a mutually fulfilling romantic encounter with a sentient member of an unfamiliar species."[29] At the start of the game, players choose to play either as the human character, Kit, or the blue, tentacled alien, Dup (figure 4.3). Both Kit and Dup receive individual sets of cards associated with actions they can perform on and/or with their partner, such as "gaze," "kiss," "penetrate," "restrain," and "release." Performing these actions at the right time allows players to earn "trust tokens," which in turn can be exchanged for "satisfaction tokens." The goal of the game is for players to maximize

Figure 4.3. Character cards from *Consentacle* (Naomi Clark, 2014). Image reprinted with permission from the designer.

their combined satisfaction score while minimizing the difference in their individual scores. Thus, in *Consentacle*, the most successful romantic encounter is one that results in the most pleasure, equally distributed between partners. In this way, *Consentacle* communicates that it values mutual experience over individual gain.

With some notable exceptions, sex is still largely unrepresented in contemporary digital and analog games.[30] Clark's game, however, puts sex front and center, making it the main object of play. Like the representation of kissing in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, the vision of sex presented by *Consentacle* is "unrealistic" (in that it takes place between a human and an alien)—yet Clark's game takes a far less absurdist approach than Schmidt and Andrews's does. *Consentacle* is pleasure-positive and celebratory, emphasizing intimacy, communication, and consent. Indeed, the game's engagement with these issues goes beyond the content of its narrative and into its design, translating them into mechanics. Through its economy of tokens, for example, *Consentacle*

systemizes how trust is "earned" and "spent" between partners. The game's transformation of consent into gameplay is even more explicit. The rulebook describes two difficulty modes that players can choose between: "Practice Consent" (easy) and "Consent Challenge" (hard). In "Practice Consent," players may speak freely, coordinating regarding their upcoming moves. In "Consent Challenge" mode, players cannot speak; they can only communicate via suggestive gestures, winking, or (if they have chosen the highest setting) staring into each other's eyes. Played silently, *Consentacle* becomes a machine that generates intimacy between players, allowing the friction between the two characters to arc into the bodies of the players. At the time that I first played *Consentacle*, the game had not yet had an official commercial release, though an initial production run of the game was successfully Kickstarted in the fall of 2017 and distributed in the spring of 2018. Previous to this release, Clark exhibited the game at a number of game festivals, such as IndieCade. In these semi-public settings, the two players who sit down to play *Consentacle* often do not know each other. Staring intently into the eyes of a stranger creates a connection that can be both compelling and alarming—recalling the wide, unblinking eyes of the faces in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*.

Consentacle is not just a game about sex, however. It is a game specifically about queer sex. There are many ways in which Clark's game can be described as queer. The most immediately obvious is the game's representation of gender and sexual pairings. Neither Kit nor Dup are explicitly gendered. The rulebook refers to them only as "you" and "your partner," and the visual design of the characters is likewise gender-ambiguous. As in *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, this gender ambiguity creates a space of possibility that allows players to imagine themselves in a wide range of gendered pairings. The list of sexual actions that players can take likewise resists restrictive gender expectations. Both characters can penetrate and envelop, for instance. In one card, Kit winks as they push their fist into Dup's dripping, unidentified orifice. In another, Dup has wrapped their mouth entirely around Kit, who reaches out from between Dup's lips with an enthusiastic thumbs-up. These bodies and their pleasures are intentionally polymorphous and category-defying. The sex that players enact in *Consentacle* is queer in that it decentralizes genital penetration and reproductivity, and in that it rejects the notion

that to be "real" or "good," sex must involve acceptably normative bodies interacting in narrowly prescribed ways.

Particularly notable for our consideration of the game's queer design is how *Consentacle* re-appropriates established gameplay tropes. Structurally, *Consentacle* is modeled on the fighting mechanics from standard tabletop role-playing games, in which players (or players and non-player characters) battle for dominance using similar turn-based systems of action cards with numeric point values. In Clark's game, by contrast, players collaborate rather than compete; instead of fighting, they enact pleasure on one another. *Consentacle* also uses "combos," a staple element among digital and analog fighting games, which normally multiply the strength of a player's attack. Here, the combo is playfully reclaimed as a structure for quantifying both the harmonious and awkward interactions between sexual partners. If both players play their "gaze" cards simultaneously, for instance, they form the combo "meaningful stare" and earn additional trust tokens. If they attempt to kiss each other on the same turn, however, they form the "Fumblemouths" combo, which detracts from their score. The game also repurposes other traditional game elements, such as tokens and points. In *Consentacle*, tokens do not represent the accumulation of capital or material resources, as they do in so many other games, but the accumulation of satisfaction. In this way, *Consentacle* shifts value away from the capitalist notions of worth traditionally inscribed by game design and places it instead on embodied and interpersonal experience—in effect, re-using the systems of games to represent queer experience. Through these design choices, Clark is both resisting and reclaiming standards of game design and using the design status quo to tell different stories about alternative types of desire, pleasure, and relation.

The power of *Consentacle* lies in how it brings together game systems and queerness, but it is also that precise combination that calls for critique. While Clark's game exemplifies how queer experience can be thoughtfully depicted through game design, the implications of translating queer experience into systems can be problematic. One of the largest potential pitfalls of *Consentacle*'s design is also one of its largest strengths: that it re-uses standard game design elements. Unlike *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, *Consentacle* does give players a very clear goal and a set of achievements to accomplish. Though this goal (mutual pleasure)

is notably different from the heteronormative vision of "sex as conquest," it nonetheless replicates the hegemonic figuration of sex as winnable. At first glance, this seems like the gamification of sex—or, perhaps more accurately, the mechanization of sex. Along with this mechanization comes a codification that risks running counter to the spirit of both queer play and queer pleasure. Each time they play *Consentacle*, players follow a set path through the sexual encounter: step 1—build trust, step 2—share trust, step 3—create satisfaction, step 4—take satisfaction, step 5—do it some more. This creates a rigid and largely linear narrative (though step 5, "do it some more," does complicate this linearity) about how one progresses in a sexual encounter from first contact to satisfaction. While the goal of the game is to have good sex together, which does sidestep the issue of competition, what good sex looks like is mostly the same in each play-through; the trick is getting there. Though the game does foster connection between players, *Consentacle* also turns trust and intimacy into fungible commodities by translating them into tokens that can be literally earned and redeemed. The economies of these tokens, which represent a re-appropriation of standard in-game currency systems, are crucial elements of the game's queer design. Yet they also communicate the potentially counterproductive message that interpersonal connection can be reified, quantified, and traded. If some human experiences are not meant to be won, maybe others are not meant to be gamified.

At the same time, in making queer sex into a game, *Consentacle* is doing the work of re-gamification. The game can also function as an implicit critique of intimacy, trust, and satisfaction as they are culturally imagined, even within queer communities. By mapping standard game design elements onto the experience of a sexual encounter, Clark's game suggests that sex itself was already game-like in its societal and interpersonal constructions. As presented in *Consentacle*, sex becomes a set of mechanisms, steps, and economies that one can maximize if played correctly. In this way, the game suggests that sex—and even queer sex—is already gamified by the social standards that come to shape individual expectations.

Taken in this sense, the game's critique of queer sex is particularly biting. While queer subjects may imagine their sexual interactions to resist the hegemonic values of heteronormativity, *Consentacle* stands as an argument that queer sex too is structured by game-like mechanisms that,

far from allowing queer subjects to step outside the dominant system of values, still translate trust and pleasure into currency. In this sense, the game could be understood as using game design to make a point about homonormativity—or, perhaps more accurately, queer-normativity. Through its highly structured and game-like experience, *Consentacle* suggests that norms extend to queerness via standardized models of the ways in which intimacy "should" function between partners. Through this nexus of issues, *Consentacle* ultimately demonstrates how challenging the standards of games—along with issues of gamification and re-gamification—can be bound up together within the work of queer game design. In the cases of *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, *Consentacle*, and many other video games in which queerness can be discovered, queer game design does not just make a game queer. It also invites players to delve into a game's design elements and look closely at the implications of its queerness.

PART II

Bringing Queerness to Video Games

5

Playing to Lose

Burnout *and the Queer Art of Failing at Video Games*

In the hands of the player lies the power to bring queer experience to any video game. The first section of this book focused on how queerness can be discovered already operating beneath the surface of video games. This second section pushes the relationship between video games and queerness even farther, extending the work of understanding games queerly beyond the implicit messages and metaphors of a game's mechanics and into what players bring to a game.

Many foundational (and notably feminist) game studies scholars before me have explored how video games can operate as sites of meaning-making in ways that extend far beyond games as preconstructed, static software objects. Celia Pearce, Mia Consalvo, and Hector Postigo are among those to point toward, as examples, the communities, rhetorics, modding cultures, and play practices that surround video games as important areas of study.[1] Building on this work, I am proposing here that we can extend the project of finding alternative meaning in video games to experiences of queerness and, more specifically, what I call "queer play." Play itself can constitute a form of queerness in video games that goes beyond the representation of LGBTQ characters or romances. In this sense, queer play performs a version of what T. L. Taylor has called, in the context of video-game streaming, "transformative work," through which players change games and their meanings through play.[2] In the chapters that follow, I will explore several characteristics of queer play, linking it to contemporary theorizing around topics like queer affect and queer temporality. I begin here by arguing for the queer potential of another transformative mode of play: failure.

The concept of queer failure, articulated by theorists like Jack Halberstam, has only comparatively recently been put in dialogue with video games.[3] Yet failure has clear relevance to games, which are often explicitly

built on the foundational logics of goals and winning. Indeed, failure represents an often overlooked yet central part of many gameplay experiences—so central in fact that game studies scholar Jesper Juul has called video games "the art [form] of failure."[4] However, like the presumption that games are meant to be "fun," the subject of chapter 6, it is still commonly assumed that players play video games primarily to win. If and when players experience failure, according to this dominant thinking, that failure should be understood as little more than an unpleasant obstacle on the road to success. What feels good, it is presumed, is winning; conversely, losing feels unambiguously bad. Intentionally playing a video game to lose, to follow this logic, would be very queer indeed. This chapter rejects these assumptions and instead argues for using queer theory to reconfigure playing to lose, as well as other instances of playing "the wrong way," as modes of playing queer. When applied to video games, queer failure draws much-needed attention to the powerful role of non-normative pleasures in video games, and the ways in which these pleasures can be understood as queer.

Queerness as an ethos, the longing to "live life otherwise" (to quote Halberstam), can guide how a game is designed or interpreted, but it can also drive how a game is played.[5] Video games are a fundamentally interactive medium. They come to life not when their developers declare them complete but in the moment that players make contact with their control interfaces and step into their worlds. Between the player and the game stands a fluid space of possibility, an opening big enough for queer desires to take root and grow. To the extent that queerness can be understood as a way of being, doing, and knowing, as well as a term for LGBTQ identities, queerness can also be a way of playing—one that challenges widely accepted notions of desire, purpose, and agency in video games. In this way, queer play resists normative expectations both in and out of the game and establishes its own, emergent rules for how the game should be played.

Queer Failure Meets Failure in Video Games

In order to unpack the implications of queer failure for games, I am pairing here two works from prominent figures in game studies and queer studies respectively: Juul's *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the*

Pain of Playing Video Games (2013) and Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Despite their strikingly similar titles, these two books do not directly engage with one another or share any source material (though Juul and Halberstam did take part in a public dialogue about the resonances between their work at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference, following the publication of their books).[6] However, read together, these texts point toward a new way of conceptualizing failure in video games. Moreover, they suggest that the medium of video games, through its associations with failure, might be understood as itself fundamentally queer.

While Juul argues that failure is core to gameplay experiences, Halberstam argues for the inherent links between failure and queerness. Considered side by side, these two works point toward a "queer art of failing at video games," an approach to play that defies normative notions of desire and success. Through this framework, playing to lose becomes a mode of resistance against a game's heteronormative systems of value—a way to bring queerness to video games regardless of whether those games contain explicitly LGBTQ content. This mode of queer play calls into question and ultimately destabilizes a set of widely held beliefs about games: that players find only pleasure in success, only pain in failure, and that the two (pleasure and pain, success and failure) are somehow fundamentally opposed. To both illustrate and complicate these connections between in-game failure and queerness, the second half of this chapter performs an analysis of the racing video game *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion Games, 2005), which turns notions of success on their head by prompting players to enact spectacular scenes of self-destruction.

Here, as elsewhere, it is worth pausing to reflect on the context for queering "straight" games—this time through the framework of queer play. As discussed in chapter 2, given the current state of games culture, the act of interpreting video games queerly can incite vitriolic backlash. However, there is extensive precedent in game studies for scholarship that considers and reconsiders the meaning of play. Among the many lines of inquiry into the nature of play pursued by established game studies researchers have been: how and why game players play (e.g., De Koven, Sutton-Smith), how play communicates emotion (Isbister, Anable), how gameplay is structured and subverted (Consalvo, Bogost), and what

cultural values play enacts (Flanagan and Nissenbaum).[7] Questions of what pleasures players take in play, and how they might differ from normative expectations, have also made appearances in game studies (Taylor, Sicart), though these previous inquiries have not framed their theorizing through queerness.[8] It seems only logical to add to this list the matter of how players experience specifically non-heteronormative pleasure through play, which forms that pleasure might take, and what personal and political work queer pleasure performed through play enacts.

Pleasure, like "queerness," "video games," and "intimacy," has no one clear definition. Michel Foucault describes pleasure as that which is imagined and experienced by the "desiring man."[9] Georges Bataille differentiates between pleasure and sex. In Bataille's view, dominant culture tolerates pleasure only to the extent that it has a "use-value," i.e., that it promotes reproductivity and general good citizenship within what would today be called a neoliberal system.[10] For Bataille, when pleasure exceeds its use, it becomes "expenditure," a revolutionary force that rejects societal values and wallows in a kind of self-actualized perversity.[11] What pleasure means for those who play video games is perhaps simpler, but no less revolutionary. In my view, to take pleasure in a game is to enjoy it—not necessarily on a social, interpersonal, or intellectual level—but on the level of the body, where it tingles and reverberates, echoing back a longing that is felt as it is played.

It is also important, in discussing non-normative experiences of pleasure, not to replicate harmful cultural beliefs about what constitutes good versus bad pleasure. The term "masochism," for example, which I use here as a shorthand for the taking of pleasure in conjunction with pain, emerges from a long history of the medicalization and pathologization of sexual desire.[12] For me, as in the rhetoric of many BDSM communities, masochism operates as a reclaimed term.[13] Like failure, it carries with it negative connotations, yet it too should be understood as a powerful force for remaking the logics of the world—upending the belief that power is the same thing as control, or that agency is the same thing as aggression.

Among the many values of approaching video games through queer failure is an insistence on the importance of non-heteronormative sexuality to games. Video games with no romantic or erotic content are

often imagined to be unrelated to sexual desire (or they are considered "straight" by default): a perspective that queer failure subverts. Thinking about video games through queer failure does have its potential pitfalls, however. For example, it runs the risk of idealizing the precarity of LGBTQ lives and the dangers faced by those who live them; LGBTQ folks often encounter real-world discrimination that turns "failing" or "succeeding" into a matter of life and death. At the same time, though, queer failure makes space for these same LGBTQ subjects in video games. It also continues the work of placing queer theory (and specifically contemporary queer theory, as opposed to the "classics" discussed in chapters 1 and 2) directly in dialogue with video games, demonstrating how queer thinking can shed new light on the way that games are played. What emerges from this juxtaposition is a call to challenge the belief that all players play to win and instead to embrace the "queer art of failing at video games."

The Art(s) of Failure: Juul and Halberstam

Published less than two years apart, Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Juul's *The Art of Failure* are notably different in their points of cultural interest. Whereas Juul's book looks almost exclusively at video games, Halberstam's primary touchstones are animated films. Yet the two share a basic project: to argue for the importance of failure as a meaningful experience that has been, to date, largely undertheorized. For Juul, this failure exists within the game. Players try and fail to complete difficult levels, or they face defeat at the hands of their opponents in competitive multiplayer games. For Halberstam, failure is bigger. Represented through cinema and other windows onto society, failure stands in for all the ways in which LGBTQ subjects often fail to comply with the expectations for success dictated by straight culture—such as getting married and having children. Despite their differences, these two works intersect in surprisingly poignant ways. Unpacking this intersection in relative depth is also a way to speak to broader issues around queerness and video games. Juul's book stands as a reflection of a wider set of beliefs about the relationship between games, play, and pleasure, while Halberstam's represents a prominent thread in queer theory in which queerness is imagined to make room for spaces of resistance and possibility.

The Art of Failure, Juul's text, is a treatise on the prevalence and contradictions of failure in video games. Failure, as Juul demonstrates through an extensive overview of various game genres, is nearly ubiquitous in the medium. Though attention is much more often paid to winning a game, no game can have a "win state" without a lose state. In fact, says Juul, losing is a much more common experience than winning. If a game or a level is challenging, players are likely to lose at it many times before mastering it and succeeding. What drives Juul's treatise is a question: Why do players keep playing video games if they know that they will, at some point, lose? Juul calls this the "paradox of failure." This paradox, as Juul formulates it, is premised on the belief that, universally, players enjoy winning but do not enjoy failing—and that failing is in fact painful to players. Juul summarizes the feeling of playing video games as "pleasure spiked with pain," and dedicates his book to making sense of what he sees as the fundamental contradiction inherent in this feeling.[14]

Juul's stance on failure in video games is far from objective, however. He opens *The Art of Failure* with a passage that demonstrates how his perspective has been shaped by his own affective, embodied experiences. "I am a sore loser," he writes. "Something in me demands that I win, beat, or complete every game I try, and that part of me is outraged and tormented whenever I fail to do so. Still, I play video games though I know I will fail." Juul illustrates this by describing a scene in which he repeatedly loses a level of a Japanese rhythm game. Again and again, angry and dejected, he fails, puts the game away, then picks it up again, returning to the site of his "outrage and torment"—recalling Freud's fort/da game, in which a child repeatedly throws away and retrieves a toy that reminds him painfully of his absent father. Here Juul pauses to reflect. "On a higher level, I think I enjoy playing video games, but why does this enjoyment contain at its core something that I most certainly do not enjoy?"[15] *The Art of Failure* is not just about Juul though, and he quickly translates his experiences to assertions about video-game players in general. Everyone who plays such games, Juul insists, must participate in the same unpleasant dance between the desire to win and the pain of losing. "It is safe to say that humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent," he asserts, "but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time."[16] In this way, Juul establishes a

framework of normative desires, one in which there is a "normal" way of feeling (that success is good and failure is bad) and little room for deviations from that norm.

What is most intriguing about the way that Juul describes failing at video games, and particularly his own experiences with failure, is his visceral, sensory language. It appears that, for Juul, the pain of losing lies less in any intellectual or even fully conscious response and more in a jolt of "torment" felt deeply in the body. This suggests that, even beyond their haptic interfaces, video games have the ability to effect embodied physical feeling—that "real" sensations of pain and pleasure can leap from the mediating screen to player, transmitted via a kind of intimate touch between player and game. Juul himself quickly moves past this implication, however, into a performance of his own normativity. He "most certainly" does not enjoy the pain of losing, he assures his readers. What drives him forward, rather than the feeling of "pleasure spiked with pain," is the push to "win, beat, or complete every game."

Throughout *The Art of Failure*, Juul operates under the presumption that his own (highly gendered) compulsion toward winning is reflected in the desires of all players. How then can the paradox of failure be explained? Juul suggests a number of possibilities.[17] Perhaps video games offer a safe space for failure. Perhaps failing in video games allows players to purge their reserves of pity and fear in response to fictional tragedy. Perhaps failure motivates players to continue playing, or keeps them honest, or makes them feel flawed and deficient, yet also promises them the relieving opportunity to overcome their flaws. Across these proposed answers, the appeal of failure remains inextricably linked to eventual success. If everyone is a "sore loser," then the pleasure in failure must be in overcoming it. That failure might be its own success, its own pleasure, its own art—performed not by the game but by the player—does not enter into Juul's equation.

To be fair, Juul is not alone in making sense of failure in video games through success. Game designer Jane McGonigal also writes about the "paradox" of losing at video games in *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. In addition to being the foundational text for gamification, McGonigal's book includes a chapter on "Fun Failure and Better Odds of Success." McGonigal opens this chapter with a question: Why do players play video games

when they know that they will, according to McGonigal's research, spend approximately 80 percent of their time losing? She writes:

> No one likes to fail. So how is it that gamers [fail] and still love what they're doing? . . . Do gamers actually enjoy failing? As it turns out, yes . . . When we're playing a well-designed game, failure doesn't disappoint us. It makes us happy in a very particular way: excited, interested, and most of all optimistic. . . . [Failure is] a vivid demonstration of the players' agency in the game. The players hadn't failed passively. They had failed spectacularly, and entertainingly. . . . When we're reminded of our own agency in such a positive way, it's almost impossible not to feel optimistic. . . . The more we fail, the more eager we are to do better.[18]

McGonigal is by no means shy about repurposing the non-normative pleasures of failure for the presumed goals of success and happiness. Though McGonigal initially appears to be making the provocative claim that players do indeed find failing enjoyable, this claim is quickly sanitized and placed in the service of the status quo through visions of entertainment and optimism. Despite these problems, both McGonigal's and Juul's writing on failure does admittedly do the valuable work of pointing to the pervasiveness and the importance of failure in video games. What emerges from their writing, even as they attempt to re-normativize the pain of video games, is a vision of play as messy, difficult, and far more queer in its pleasures than these authors themselves admit.

Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* takes a very different approach to losing than Juul or McGonigal. Much as Juul's book does not mention queer desires, *The Queer Art of Failure* does not address video games. Still, questions of winning and losing sit at the core of both of these works, making them logical if unexpected material for a side-by-side reading. Because it so prominently uses the language of "losing" and "winning," Halberstam's book can easily be re-envisioned as a treatise about play. The basic imperative behind Halberstam's argument is to stop thinking about failure as an obstacle to be overcome in order to succeed, as Juul does. Instead, argues Halberstam, it would be more productive to reflect on and celebrate all of the heteronormative expectations that queer subjects subvert when they refuse or simply fail

to win—that is, to play along. In these passages from *The Queer Art of Failure* can be heard the ethos of playing to lose. Halberstam writes:

> Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. . . . [They] recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant. . . . Rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd. . . . Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures.[19]

In this formulation, queer failure means more than simply losing; it means "reveling in" that loss. It also means challenging the hegemonic "common sense" that underlies widespread beliefs, as articulated through Juul, about why people play.

Adjusted to the context of video games, Halberstam's rhetoric of advancement can be read as advancement (or rather a refusal to advance) through levels. "Capital accumulation" becomes accumulated points, ignored or wasted, and "nonreproductivity" might translate to the squandering of extra lives, the abandonment of hard-earned unsaved games. The player who approaches video games under the banner of queer failure continues to play even when they are failing—not because determination drives them to succeed or "die tryin'," as Derek Burrill describes in his writing on video games and constructs of straight masculinity—but because such players enjoy losing or recognize its counterhegemonic potential.[20] These are the players who play queer, who experience the pleasures of video game queerly, and who recognize what is "fantastic" in the pain of losing. Whereas, for Juul, video games are the "art of failure," for Halberstam failure is itself the artistry that queer subjects perform.

In the conversation that took place between Halberstam and Juul at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference, transcribed and included in the volume *Queer Game Studies* as "The Arts of Failure," Halberstam took

up the question of queer failure in video games directly. "My big claim is that someone might actually want to fail, because they're so dissatisfied with a particular social context," Halberstam explained. Turning to the rhetoric of play, he reiterated the ways in which queer people are often seen as "failures" by social standards: "There are two responses you can have to that. One is to try and play the game as it's been written, to say, 'I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I will now get married and have children, and then maybe you will accept me as a success on your terms.' Or you refuse the game. You say, 'Actually, that outcome is not what I desire.'"[21]

What is particularly notable here is the use of the word "game." Halberstam describes the system of hegemonic expectations for success as a game and poses the possibility that queer subjects can choose to assert their subjecthood by refusing to play. However, the metaphor of the game also allows for a vision in which queer subjects continue to "play," yet play queerly, against the grain of the heteronormative system. When players refuse to play, they take on the role of the "spoil-sport," the one who rejects the basic premise of the game.[22] By playing queerly, though, the player "stalls the business of the dominant" from within the game itself. Like the cheaters who exercise their unsanctioned agency through breaking the rules, these players, to use Consalvo's terms, stay in the game but "challenge the notion that there is one 'correct' way to play."[23]

The politics of the "queer art of failure," as Halberstam articulates them, bring into relief what is problematic about Juul's and McGonigal's interpretations of failure in video games. Juul describes "pleasure spiked with pain" as a paradox, yet Halberstam's vision of the queer subject who embraces their "fantastic failures," as well as Halberstam's reclamation of masochism elsewhere in *The Queer Art of Failure*, undermines the very notion that taking enjoyment in loss might be paradoxical. Through this juxtaposition, success also reveals itself to be deeply suspect. Juul insists that all players want to succeed, but Halberstam problematizes this assumption by asking, so to speak: Do "all" players really feel this way, or only those in the heteronormative majority? And whose notion of success is this anyway? Is this success as dictated by the status quo, or the success of the queer subject who wins the game of their own resistance?

The Queer Art of Failure can be read as even more damning of McGonigal's "Fun Failure and Better Odds of Success." As discussed in chapter 4, *Reality Is Broken* is the foundational text for "gamifying" (and thereby

potentially exploiting) real-life labor.[24] The optimism that McGonigal describes as being a direct result of failure echoes the instrumentalization of affect critiqued by queer theorists like Lauren Berlant.[25] McGonigal makes no secret of her goals to make society a "better," more productive place. After all, the subtitle of her book is "Why Video Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World." What Halberstam's work on queer failure makes clear is that it is important to resist this reductionist narrative about the value of losing at video games.

The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games

In truth, failure in video games is far more complex—and far more queer—than the idea that players simply hate failing. Failing at video games can take many forms and play out in many more situations than the scenes of players losing individual game levels that Juul and McGonigal describe. To question the notion that players simply hate failing, one need look no further than the multitude of "fail" videos constantly accruing views on YouTube. In these videos, players record their own "epic" in-game fails, then post them proudly. Whereas live-action fail videos feature the real-life bodies of people putting themselves and others in peril, the failure in game videos is the failure to play well—or, perhaps more accurately, the success of playing so badly it becomes absurd. A YouTube compilation uploaded in May 2013 composed of clips from games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward, 2011) and *Halo 4* (343 Industries, 2012) promises scenes from "ULTIMATE Gaming Fails."[26] In this montage, avatar after avatar finds a way to self-destruct in violent ecstasy. Players accidentally launch grenades at their own feet or blithely fire handguns into nearby caches of explosives. Game fail videos are most often filmed and uploaded by the very players who fail in them. These players find pleasure, not shame, in the infinite replay of their failure, which comes to function as an inverted performance of non-skill and bravado. The pleasure viewers take in watching these videos similarly speaks to the complex feelings surrounding failure in games. Spectators are likely to enjoy a fail video more if they have played the game in question. Through this identification, they imagine themselves failing by proxy. If, as Juul believes, all players hate failing, who would watch these videos? Who would make them?

Failure as a mode of queer play could be enacted across a vast diversity of video games. From this reflection on the potential pleasures of game failure, a taxonomy begins to emerge. Juul discusses many types of games at which players might fail: games that are difficult to master, games that can never really be completed, games that insult their players, games that make players feel like failures in order to coax them into learning, fair games, unfair games, games of skill, sadistic games, cathartic games, suicide games, and so on.[27] This seemingly endless enumeration makes sense. After all, as Juul asserts, failure plays a role in almost every game. Yet, it is possible to imagine failing in even more ways than Juul lists: Players can fail with their bodies or fail with their minds (e.g., misstepping in a dancing game versus miscalculating in a tactical one), fail through inaction or fail through action (e.g., forgetting to avoid an incoming missile versus stepping in front of one), fail by accident or fail on purpose (e.g., tripping over versus stepping on a ticking bomb). Certain non-normative play practices even bring into question the very concept of in-game failure. Consider, for instance, players who report driving for hours through *Grand Theft Auto*'s (Rockstar Games, 1997–2013) open worlds in the role of "law-abiding citizen," maneuvering their cars cautiously down city streets and refusing to break traffic laws, thereby existing in a prolonged state of playful semi-progression: not quite failure but certainly not success, at least as the game itself presents it.[28]

I want to pause here to stress one distinction that is particularly important for theorizing queer failure in video games: the distinction between failing *toward* or *against* a game system. By this I mean the difference between failing in the way that a game wants players to fail, e.g., flinging one's avatar to a gruesome demise in *Stair Dismount* (Jetro Lauha, 2002) or walking toward the inevitability of death in *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2007) or failing in the way that a game does not want. Establishing what any given game itself "wants" is more conceptually complicated than it may seem—but what I mean by this is simply what outcomes the game instructs and/or incentivizes players to strive for, i.e., what outcomes it rewards versus what outcomes it punishes or even renders impossible. The distinction between failing toward or against a game draws attention to two primary modes of queer play, and in this case queer failure, in video games. In the first, queer play has been

structured into the game by its designers, who have directly if not intentionally incorporated counterhegemonic elements into their game. In the second, counterhegemonic play is brought to video games entirely through the choices of their players. There also exists a third mode, which hybridizes the first two.

What are some ways that failure might come to games as a mode of "playing queer"? I bring in my own experiences here to underscore the ways in which the pleasures of queer play are deeply personal—and also to avoid speaking for the specific pleasures of others. First, to explore the pleasure of failing against a game, players might forfeit, allow themselves to be beaten, or even to be killed. Failing on purpose takes on a particularly queer appeal in fighting games, where the express and monolithic goal is victory. Like many other fighting games—*Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992–2013), *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987–2014), *Dead or Alive* (Tecmo, 1996–2013)—*Soulcalibur IV*'s (Namco, 2008) basic unit of gameplay is the two-person, attack-and-defend match. If players win, the game sings their praises and subjects the loser to a playback of their defeat. In my own experience, however, the game unintentionally offers two ways to play that are more enjoyable than winning. Option one: Let yourself be slowly and beautifully beaten by your opponent. While I am losing, I get the chance to appreciate my rippling on-screen flesh, which I would normally miss while slashing away, and to revel in the physicality of my in-game proxy. With each hit, I am rendered temporarily unable to move. My avatar flies up into the air; my controller rumbles. This long, teasing, self-torture makes me feel tantalizingly present. Option two: Give up on the game after you have already won. The fighting stages in the *Soulcalibur* games frequently end in treacherous ledges. After winning a match, when the loser's body lays motionless on the ground, the winner is allowed a few seconds to gloat. I prefer to take that moment, when success looks certain, to jump off the edge of the level into oblivion. Out I go into the gorgeous, green-blue, soft-focus scenery. I am both victor and failure.

Alternatively, a player might choose to fail against a game through non-action. Racing games are another genre unambiguously oriented toward winning, making them a poignant site for experimenting with non-goal-oriented play. *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (Criterion Games, 2012) presents players with an "open world," similar to those found in

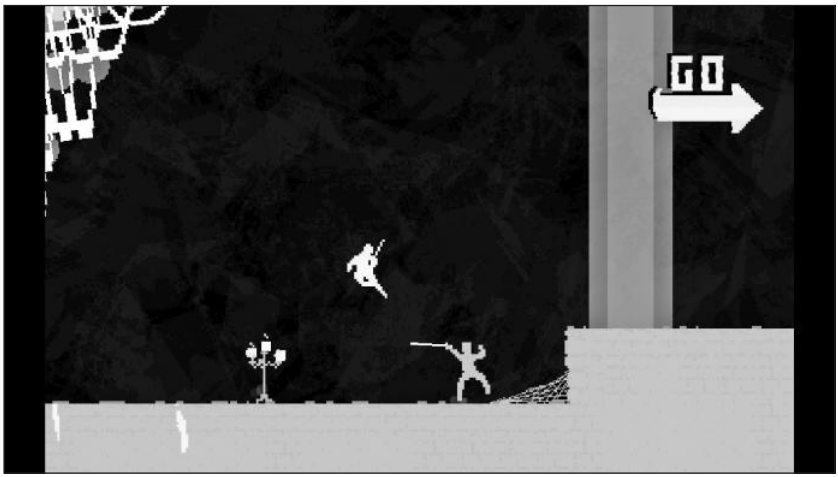

Figure 5.1. *Nidhogg* (Messhof Games, 2014). Screenshot by author.

the *Grand Theft Auto* games, where they can roam a wide network of urban streets dotted with racing challenges. Yet this same open world unintentionally affords players the opportunity to opt out of racing all together. The *Need for Speed* series promises entertainment in the form of fast cars, illegal maneuvers, and high-speed chases. I therefore take great pleasure in driving slowly and respectfully. I stop my shiny coupe at red lights; I follow other cars at a safe distance. The game itches and aches, sending a frantic stream of pop-ups to remind me that I should be off actually playing.

This tactic takes a slightly different form in the independent game *Nidhogg* (Messhof, 2014), which combines fighting mechanics with classic platformer levels. Two players face off, attacking each other with pixelated epees. In this game, I spend inordinate amounts of time dancing (figure 5.1). Since *Nidhogg*'s characters have fast, agile movements, leaping about produces something like an extemporaneous dance. However, because any contact between swordsmen results in a temporary death, I have found that the trick to playing *Nidhogg* queerly is to dance circles around an opponent without making contact. In an appropriately queer paradox, failing (i.e., playing in a way that the game refuses to recognize) requires something like success (i.e., staying alive). These are just some of the many ways in which a player might approach a video game

queerly. They serve to demonstrate how queer play, and particularly queer failure, can be brought to any game. At the same time, they illustrate how playing queer is itself a playful and creative act—an approach to finding alternatives ways of being, doing, and making meaning in games that has the potential to resonate powerfully with queer subjects.

Fail Fantastically: *Burnout Revenge*

While it is possible to fail—or at least to reject the conditions of success—in almost any video game, of particular interest are games that blur the line between failing toward and against the system. These games illustrate, enrich, and ultimately productively complicate thinking around queer play.

Burnout Revenge is such a game. The *Burnout* games, a long-standing racing series, have no explicitly LGBTQ content. They do, however, set themselves apart from other popular racing IPs (like *Need for Speed*) with one of their key features. Whereas most commercially successful racing games focus on impressive cars and realistic driving physics, *Burnout* focuses on the pleasures of the crash. Indeed, these games boast failure in their very title. *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion Games, 2005), released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 2 as the fourth *Burnout* console title, continues the series' obsession with daredevil demises. In *Burnout Revenge*'s primary racing mode, players earn rewards for swiping or "taking down" other racers in a show of sparks and metal. "Traffic Attack" mode ups the ante, making destruction, not speed, the goal of each round. Players, unleashed on city streets buzzing with oblivious civilian vehicles, ram into as many cars as possible without getting caught in head-on collisions. However, it is in the "Crash" challenges that *Burnout*'s fervor for failure becomes clearest. Though the game does not present Crash as its primary mode, Crash mode succinctly distills important elements from across the game, and some form of Crash mode exists in almost all *Burnout* titles.

Succeeding at *Burnout Revenge*'s Crash mode means one thing: failing as spectacularly as possible. Players have their choice of locations and vehicles. While the lightweight cars, designed for racing, have sleek curves and shiny finishes, the heavyweight "crash" cars (all the better to rear-end you with) wear their failure on their automotive skins. The

Figure 5.2. Crash mode in *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion, 2005). Screenshot by author.

paint chips off the sides of an old sedan. A pickup truck, covered in dents, looks like a fighter sporting fresh bruises. After players select a trusty, rundown steed, the game shoots them speeding down a street dotted with obstacles. The goal is to stay unharmed just long enough to spot the perfect crash site, where a traffic accident will do the most damage. A well calculated leap off the side rail of an overpass, for example, might land the player's on-screen avatar car smack into the side of a semi-truck (figure 5.2). This truck, now stopped on a busy highway, swipes other cars, causing a pileup of screeches and explosions. Seventy-two cars in a row, seemingly unperturbed by the danger, happily plow into the player's car without breaking or swerving—compelled by the logic of a world designed and destined for destruction, where the only choice is to crash.

Doing "well" at Crash mode—that is, self-destructing in a spectacular blaze—feels notably *good*. The game has been designed to make it feel this way. Points, dollar signs, and other achievements accumulate on-screen throughout the pileup. *Burnout Revenge* is also rich with cinematic pleasures. Before beginning a level, the game presents a long tracking shot through the peaceful cityscape the player is about to ravage. This establishing shot serves equally as a tactical shot, a chance to plot the exact path of the soon-to-be wreckage. After the player has

crashed, tapping the B button rapidly at the right moment causes their car to explode, sending out an impressive mushroom-cloud boom that breaks apart nearby vehicles. A replay video shows each crash from multiple, dramatic angles, including swooping crane shots that seem to transform the player's humble handiwork into the culminating scene from James Cameron's 1994 film, *True Lies*. Meanwhile the raucous, punk-inspired soundtrack adds aural adrenaline. After the moment of crash, however, the music cuts to silence, broken only by the surprisingly distant sound of crashing cars and the cheers of an invisible crowd of male voices applauding the player's accomplishment. These cheering voices are as confusing as they are congratulatory. This is because there are no people in *Burnout Revenge*. The cars' tinted windows, when they crumble off the side of wrecked vehicles, reveal empty cabs. *Burnout* has no drivers, no pedestrians, no blood, no victims, no victor. Instead, the bodies on-screen are the bodies of cars: their bumpers askew, their windows shattered. The blood is the blood in the veins of the player, who at once pushes to lose and to win.

Is it possible to fail at a game that players win by failing? Yes, but this type of failure looks different than one might expect. In *Burnout Revenge*'s Crash mode, success means going out in a violent blaze. Failing, however, means getting stuck on the shoulder of a highway while your engine lazily puffs out smoke. Imagine this scenario. On their way to impale a tractor-trailer, the player accidentally swipes their car against a bollard. Here their turn comes to an end. The game again offers an array of epic shots of the (in this case decidedly non-epic and unsatisfying) destruction the player has caused. A few other cars spin out around the player's car, but for the most part traffic passes by unharmed. The action-movie pleasure of success becomes fail-video shame, inverted as a display of dullness rather than bravado.

Other moments in the game function similarly. By contrast to Crash mode, the game's primary Race mode technically never instructs the player to crash their own vehicle, no matter how fantastically. If they make contact with another car at the wrong angle, instead of triumphantly sending them off course, the game forces players into a three-second, third-person, non-interactive, slow-motion scene of their own car smashing itself to bits (only to appear, reconstituted and ready to race, once the scene is done). The game wants players to feel inconvenienced

by the crashes in Race mode—and I, for one, do feel inconvenienced. For those three seconds, I squirm as my competitors zoom by. At the same time, Race mode wants players to enjoy the spectacle of their own destruction, even as it incentivizes standard racing goals, like clocking in a record-breaking lap or simply finishing first. The cut scenes of this, the player's undesirable demise, are as aesthetically appealing—shiny metal, flashing sparks—as those in which players receive cash and applause for their failure. The game also uses the same load screens for Race mode as for Crash mode: images of two cars smashing together at great speed. These images foreshadow the crashes sure to follow, taunting players with their imminent loss, and reminding them of the game's real goal, thinly veiled in talk of points and winners: destruction.

Juul addresses the *Burnout* series briefly in the *Art of Failure*, but quickly dismisses it as an unremarkable example in the pantheon of video-game failure. During a discussion about suicide games, Juul notes that a similar suicidal instinct does occasionally appear in commercial games, including *Burnout*, though in less "direct" forms. About failure in the *Burnout* series and its pleasures (or lack thereof), Juul writes: "This experience of self-destruction [in *Burnout*] has an unpleasant aspect to it, but the game presents no human characters, and furthermore restarts immediately after a crash with no cost to the player, hence deemphasizing any human suffering caused." He concludes that the *Burnout* games are "part of a small trend that does not involve the long-time suffering of the protagonist, but rather fascinates through the immediate joyful discomfort of witnessing (bodily) destruction."[29] Again, Juul emphasizes the "unpleasantness" of losing, but with a few new caveats. He proclaims *Burnout*'s brand of self-destruction to be unpleasant, but not unpleasant enough. Without any mangled bodies to mourn, without a suffering protagonist to identify with, player engagement will never rise from petty fascination to true self-flagellation, it seems. Instead, players will continue their victimless destruction without consequence, which by extension renders destruction itself inconsequential. To my eye, contrary to Juul's reading, accidents definitely do come at a cost in *Burnout*'s Race mode. And in Crash mode, they are not the cost; they are the point. Besides which, how can *Burnout*, in which there are no human bodies, be grouped with games that center around "witnessing bodily destruction"—all while shrugging off the game's impact for its

lack of bodies? Most important, Juul is wrong about self-destruction in the game: It is not unpleasant. It is highly pleasurable. In fact, to use Halberstam's word, it is fantastic.

Of course, since Halberstam's book does not reference video games, Halberstam does not discuss *Burnout*. However, his approach to understanding self-destruction helps fill in the missing pieces of Juul's interpretation. By joining Halberstam in insisting on the "queer" in the game's "art of failure," we can reinstate *Burnout Revenge*'s masochistic pleasure. This approach also begins to uncover the full queer potential of playing to lose. Halberstam, in his chapter on masochism and feminism, insists that his readers see self-destruction not as a pathological behavior from which the queer artist needs rescuing, but as a form of resistance against mainstream power structures. He writes, "I propose a radical form of masochistic passivity that . . . offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself. . . . The masochist tethers her notion of self to a spiral of pain and hurt. She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying."[30] Halberstam's masochist, like the loss-driven player, defines herself not through tenacity and recognition, but through her choice to embrace pain and death (one "dies" regularly in games). Juul argues that the suffering that *Burnout* offers (that "immediate joyful discomfort") feels so good that players hardly know whether it is suffering at all. Yet, looking at *Burnout Revenge* through a masochistic lens, the power of such games reveals itself to lie specifically in their combination of pain and pleasure, which scrambles hegemonic prescriptions for success and loss: the pain of seeing the player's automotive avatar splattered on the highway, the pain of not seeing that same automotive avatar splattered on the highway, the pleasure of the fantastic crash when the car/body goes up in flames, the pleasure of living to die another day.

Playing to Lose

What then could be called the queer art of failing at video games? Between queer theory and game studies, this reading of Juul, Halberstam, and *Burnout Revenge* has triangulated a new perspective. To accept the premises of this work is to arrive at the following equation: Failure is integral to games, and failure is queer. Together these assertions lead to

a handful of coherent if controversial propositions: that failure (whether toward or against a game) can be understood as a queer way to play, that failure as a mode of queer play has the power to bring queerness to games with no explicitly queer content, that a game based on failure can be interpreted as a queer game, and that queerness (in the guise of failure, among its many forms) is itself integral to all video games.

Far from being a merely inconvenient and inconsequential obstacle on the road to success, video-game failure matters. It is through failure, along with other modes of queer play, that queer politics and LGBTQ experiences can be brought to games. Together, these claims transform a "straight" game like *Burnout Revenge*—with its fast cars, presumed heterosexual male player base, and war-gasm explosions—as something other than normative or sex-less. The game becomes, in this view, one that plays differently, one that players play differently, and a queer game that queers the values of play itself. If failing at video games is an art of playing the wrong way, every game has its own "wrong way." In *Burnout Revenge*, it might take the form of lingering too long over destruction or playing Crash mode on fort/da repeat as the game tries to inch players toward new levels. In these moments, the beautiful, painful, pleasurable vision of self-destruction, which the player enacts through their queer artistry, itself takes on the quality of a counterhegemonically pleasurable art form.

However, before unambiguously claiming "playing to lose" in the name of queer game resistance, I want to complicate this calculation, as the *Burnout* games themselves demand. Keep in mind the distinction between failure toward and against a system. Here is the particular "paradox of failure" at work in *Burnout*: How can one claim to play queerly by failing in a game where failing is the way to win? In *Burnout Revenge*'s Crash mode, players win when they fail well. In the game's Racing mode, crashing makes it more likely that players will lose, yet the game clearly wants them to take pleasure in crashes. Any way that players fail, they seem to be failing toward the game. At the same time, cultural expectations outside of the game dictate that driving "successfully" does not mean catapulting into a semi-truck, and that succeeding does not mean watching yourself go up in flames. When players crash in a brilliant blaze, then, they both conform to and ostentatiously reject

systems of dominant logic: one belonging to the game, the other belonging to the social context in which it is played.

What would it mean to fail against the game in *Burnout*? It might look quite similar to my dull, lawful meandering in *Need for Speed*. In *Need for Speed*, though, refusing to engage with the goal of the game (racing to win) is relatively easy: All players need to do is not enter into a race. However, in *Burnout Revenge*, opting out takes skill, as described above—and even this form of failure is bound to inevitably fail. Opting out completely would mean driving but not crashing at all, and everything in the game is designed for impact. Like the *Nidhogg* dance, which requires avatar proximity but breaks with avatar contact, playing crashless in *Burnout Revenge* navigates a precarious line. It seems whatever system players choose to fail against, they fail into the arms of another. Admittedly, that basic contradiction does some queering of its own. Try gingerly navigating the streets of *Burnout Revenge* in a stubborn attempt to play at being the good subject in a world gone wrong. It makes driving in the real world, with all its reasonable precautions and normative regulations, seem equally absurd. Embracing failure, even failure in a video game, queers the fundamental notion of success.

Ultimately, the true critical value of *Burnout* is not just in how it exemplifies the pleasures of self-destruction, but also in how it lays bare the infinite and uniquely queer dialectical tangle between system and player, failure and success, pain and pleasure. It models how winning can be equal parts subversive and conformist. It also stands as testament to the revelation that a player's hurt and joy are not contradictory, but interwoven blurs that shape and color experience. When it comes to queer failure in video games, this ambiguity is apt. Games allow us to play at queer failure, to examine it from different angles, to try and fail at failing. Juul posits many reasons why players return to game failure time and again, though they supposedly hate it. One could similarly posit many reasons for why players might play at queer failure. The drive toward queer failure itself reveals a contradiction within the queer art of failing at video games. When players fail at a video game for the hundredth time, they do it better than they did the first time. Whether intentionally or not, replaying failure means replaying toward perfection, failing more and more fantastically. Newer, bigger, more impressive

games to fail at mean more elaborate deaths, deaths rendered more and more impressive by better graphics, an endless proliferation of ways to self-destruct. Perfecting the art of failure, an art defined by imperfection, abjection, and artlessness, puts us back in the realm of paradox. Failing in video games, as an expression of playing queer, requires embracing the paradox, exploring alternate longings and non-normative pleasures as experiences of play.

I close by reasserting this intentionally incendiary conjecture: that if we accept failure as fundamental to games and we accept failure as coded as queer, all games become queer, in a non-representational sense. This does not just apply to games in which players willingly blow themselves to pieces. If we accept the premise that no game can exist without failure, then no game can exist without a mode of experience that might be called queerness. In response then to the homophobic voices who would silence queer thinking as marginal, this conjecture lays claim to all games as fair territory for exploring queerly. It also offers a platform on which queer studies and games studies can continue to intermingle and models how the queer, subversive tensions inherent to any game can be unleashed. To play queerly means to play the wrong way around, to jump our unsuspecting, pixelated avatars into pits instead of over them, to choreograph the most unfortunate disasters. If Juul's art of failure is games, in this sense Halberstam's is also a game, one of the player's making. It is a playful art, a ludic art, which makes a game of one's own living and one's own dying.

This chapter has shown one of the many ways that queerness can be brought to video games through play. In particular, this focus on failure highlights how queer play can reconfigure dominant notions of why players play and what pleasures they take from games. Such work suggests that video games can be understood as spaces of vast potential for queer pleasures, not just the normative pleasures with which they are commonly associated. Thinking of this sort also begins to make space for a wider array of personal experiences in video games, especially those that resonate meaningfully with the desires and identities of LGBTQ people. The idea of "playing the wrong way," which forms a bridge into the next two chapters, shows how play can be a mode of resistance against power structures—though the example of *Burnout*

makes clear that this relationship is characterized by more complicated forces than simple player empowerment. Most important, this juxtaposition between contemporary queer theory and game studies has opened up new avenues for thinking about video games as a medium for nonnormative pleasures that are notably queer.

6

No Fun

Queer Affect and the Disruptive Potential of Video Games that Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt

"Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life," writes Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*. "Do we consent to happiness?" she asks. "And what are we consenting to, if or when we consent to happiness?"[1] This goal, to strive for happiness, is "used to justify oppression . . . and to redescribe social norms as social goods."[2] Such happiness is implicitly heterosexual happiness, argues Ahmed: "There is no doubt that it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledom."[3] In so many narratives, heterosexual love is the "happy ending." Queer experience, by contrast, is marked by negative and difficult feeling. The queer subject deviates from the prescribed path of heterosexual happiness. Says Ahmed, "The unhappiness of the deviant has a powerful function as a perverse promise . . . that is simultaneously a threat. . . . Queer and feminist histories are the histories of those who are willing to risk the consequences of deviation."[4]

If "happiness" is the name for the feeling of validation that comes with conforming to heterosexual prescriptions for human desire, it takes on another name in the context of video games: "fun." To reframe Ahmed's question, must players consent to fun? What oppression does the promise of fun enact? Like the queer subject who deviates from the path of happiness, can a queer player who resists fun enact their own "powerful function," their own threatening "perverse promise," through the embrace of unhappiness?

This chapter represents the second of three that looks to how queerness can be brought to video games by their players. Like the preceding

chapter, which addresses queer failure, this one is expressly interested in play. However, whereas the previous chapter focused on how players can resist the systemic values of a game by "playing to lose," this chapter considers how playing video games can be understood as queer through the ways that players *feel*. In particular, through this turn to emphasize the affective and the phenomenological, I am arguing here against the dominant assumption that video games should be first and foremost "fun." Instead, I posit that games can and do engender a much wider, more challenging, and (importantly) queerer range of emotions. As in the case of queer failure, these queer affective experiences may be intentionally incorporated into a game by its designers—but they may also be brought to a game by its players, to whom video games offer the opportunity to explore alternate ways of feeling, desiring, and being. To play in this way is to play under the sign of what I term the "no fun," a counterhegemonic force that disrupts dominant and implicitly heteronormative presumptions about the affective purpose of video games. Inspired by the non-normative pleasures of LGBTQ and kinky subjects, the no fun challenges the belief (addressed by a network of game studies scholars before me but still widely accepted in games culture and discussions of design) that there is one, universal way to feel good while playing games. It also demonstrates how players can make space within the prescribed boundaries of seemingly "straight" video games for strategies of resistance and for remaking the (game) world through their own queer affect.

The primary goal of this chapter is the refusal of fun, which has long enjoyed a central, even monolithic position in the way that designers, players, and even scholars of a certain ilk talk about how video games should make players feel. In addition, however, I am interested in a second affective register. In just the last few years, fun has been joined in the popular rhetoric that surrounds affect and video games by another, soon-to-be equally idealized experience: "empathy." Among many others, Katherine Isbister has recently written about how video games evoke empathy in players, allowing them to feel for and connect with other human beings as no other medium can.[5] Notably, the language of empathy has also been picked up by both the corporate sectors of the games industry (in particular those promoting virtual-reality devices)

and commentators writing about queer video games. Small-scale games by LGBTQ and especially transgender designers are increasingly being dubbed "empathy games." In its final sections, this chapter performs a critique of empathy, which is simultaneously being used to obfuscate the capitalist, neoliberal instrumentalization of affect—and to justify the problematic, reductionist appropriation of LGBTQ folks' personal narratives by straight, cisgender players. In this way, this chapter springboards from earlier work about moving "beyond fun" by scholars like T. L. Taylor, pushing the rejection of traditional notions of pleasure taken in gameplay further through the concept of playing no fun, with the goal of demonstrating how queer affect can resist dominant narratives about what it means to feel acceptably as game players and LGBTQ "allies."[6]

Playing no fun is simultaneously a political practice as well as a personal one. In mainstream games culture, much of the reactionary discourse that is being used to resist the diversification of video games hinges on the notion that games should be "just for fun." Speaking out against fun also means speaking out for the right to make meaning from gameplay. Most often, when people think of video games that are no fun, they imagine games that tackle hard topics, games that seek to educate or enact "social change," or experimental games that purposefully hurt players in order to reconfigure expectations for pain and pleasure. Alternatively, they may think of ways of playing that blur the line between play and work by making the labors of gameplay explicit and visible, such as the reportedly wearying practice of "gold farming" in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004).[7] In fact, however, many (or perhaps all) video games include some of the elements that characterize the no-fun experience, such as annoyance, boredom, disappointment, sadness, or alarm. In order to demonstrate this, I elaborate here some of the modes of experience we might identify as no fun in games. Because playing queerly is felt on the level of the body, I also draw from my own practices of queer play, as in chapter 5, using the alternate enjoyment that I take in having no fun to demonstrate how queer players like myself might bring their own desires to video games in ways that challenge the forms that affect can take in play and the expectations around which types of feelings during gameplay matter.

Against Fun

I am playing *Super Hexagon*, I am losing badly, and I love it. The 2012 "punishment game" developed by Terry Cavanagh is designed to make me fail, and designed to hurt. A catchy techno beat drives me forward as I attempt to steer an arrow through an oncoming maze of concentric geometric shapes (figure 6.1). The spinning neon puzzle pulses. After only nine seconds of gameplay, I crash into a wall. "Game over," intones a pitiless announcer, followed quickly by the imperative: "Again." And I do play again, and I die again. Seven seconds, ten seconds, six seconds. Game over, game over, game over. For a player like me, this is not training. I am not improving. Honestly, I am just not very good. So why do I keep playing such a difficult game when I know I will never win? Because I don't want to win. I want to fail. I want to feel frustration, annoyance, disappointment, domination, and pain. I want a play experience that is, queerly enough, no fun.

I am playing *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo, 2014), I have chosen to lose, and I love it. Three friends and I are running amok in the newest installation of this long-standing Nintendo racing series. We rev and skid our way through "battle" mode, hurling shells at one another on a sunny,

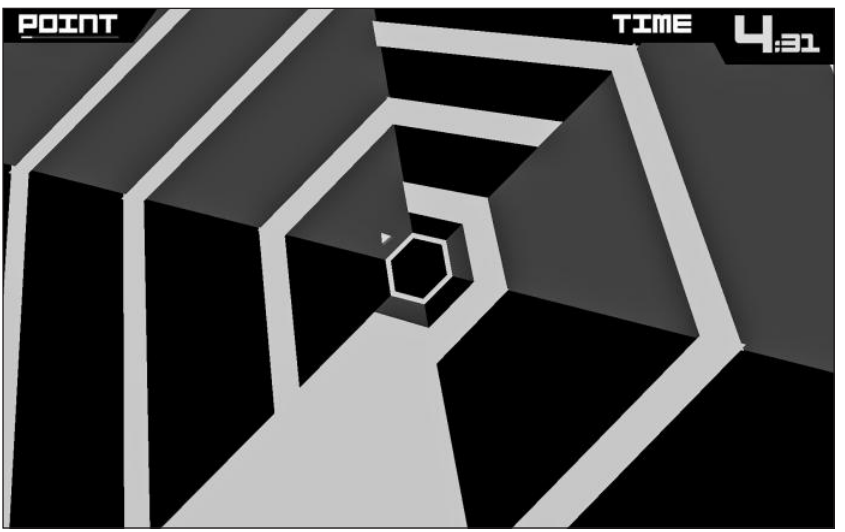

Figure 6.1. Super *Hexagon* (Terry Cavanagh, 2012). Screenshot by author.

Figure 6.2. Battle Mode in *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo, 2014) with the Dry Dry Desert quicksand pit in the background. Screenshot by author.

sandy, Egyptian-inspired course. When the match begins, my opponents scatter and start launching their attacks. As for me, I am blissfully distracted by the transgressive glee of a play mode that allows me to breach the normal boundaries of the course, and I roam the level's landscape at will. Rather than hunt down my fellow players, I stop to marvel at a sucking, swirling pit of quicksand: a particularly frightening race-course obstacle designed to be avoided at all costs (figure 6.2). Joyfully contrarian, I drive my cart into the abyss. Each time my driver respawns, I do it again. A kind of ecstasy takes over—the ecstasy of self-destruction—and I repeat my feat of defiance until all my lives are lost.

I am playing the iOS version of *Stair Dismount*, all I can do is lose, and I love it. In this ragdoll physics simulator (Jetro Lauha, 2009), my goal is to fling a floppy dummy down a flight of stairs or stair-like courses. Thanks to Facebook integration with the mobile release of the game, I have had the opportunity to plaster my own photo to the dummy's otherwise featureless face. He has become my avatar: a compliant, expectant, infinitely fragile little version of myself. As a player, the only choice I can make is in what direction and how hard I push him. Once sent tumbling, his limbs flail, head over heels, cracking and crunching as he

smacks against the stairs. An ever-mounting tally of damage flashes on the side of my screen: broken bones, twisted ligaments, crushed vertebrae. The more hurt I cause to this avatar who bears my face, the more points I earn. If this is fun, it is a painful fun, masochistic fun, fun that takes its pleasure in all the wrong places, fun that brings into question what "fun" even means.

Commonly, game players, game designers, and even many game scholars make the assumption that, above all else, games are supposed to be fun—and that the "right" way to play, the normal way to play, is to maximize normative enjoyment. Fun has long been a guiding principle for designers. Game design textbooks like Raph Koster's *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Brenda Romero and Ian Schreiber's *Challenges for Game Designers*, and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, to name a few widely read examples, emphasize fun as a key marker of a well-designed game (though *Rules of Play* admittedly productively enriches this vision of fun by exploring how "games as pleasure" can also be tools for "transformative play").[8] Even designer Mary Flanagan, who creates art games and serious games—games that strive to communicate social messages—has stated that the experiences that games facilitate for players should be "fun first."[9] Fun is also a guiding consumer principle. Commercially successful video games come in all shapes and sizes from across diverse markets. What they have in common is arguably that they give players the thing they have come to expect: a good time. Because such games are considered "good," and games that fail to be fun are commonly considered "bad," the majority of popular and analytical discourse around video games focuses on games that have been deemed fun. Thus, despite the proliferation of emotional experiences that games can engender, video-game affect and its implications have been understood within relatively limited terms. Even the most prominent examples of games commentators addressing no-fun experiences, such as work by Jesper Juul and Jane McGonigal (discussed in chapter 5), explain away gameplay unpleasantness by putting it in the service of video games' presumed affective goal: fun.

Yet the potential already exists within game studies to overthrow this precedent and embrace the no-fun-ness of play, as well as the messiness of fun itself. As far back as the canonical writings of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, we can find fun described as a transgressive practice that

resists the expectation that pleasure should have a utilitarian value.[10] In her work on "power gamers"—who, like many Esports players today, take gameplaying so seriously that it seems to many they have stripped the fun out of video games—Taylor writes, "There is no single definitive way of enjoying a game or of talking about what constitutes 'fun.'" Instead, certain play practices may themselves "upend . . . typical notions of fun and pleasure . . . highlight[ing] the diverse orientations people can bring to the exact same game."[11] Though Taylor does not reference queerness directly, her use of the word "orientations" compellingly echoes the language of sexual orientation, providing a bridge to the new addition that the present work brings to this discussion of fun: the importance of queer perspectives and queer feeling.

Nonetheless, the expectation that video games should be "fun first" remains dominant. This can be imagined as the "hegemony of fun," a concept I am adapting from Janine Fron et al.'s article "The Hegemony of Play." In this piece, the authors unpack and critique what they describe as a "complex layering of technological, commercial, and cultural power structures [that] have dominated the development of the digital games industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of 'minority' players, such as women and 'non-gamers.'"[12] The term "hegemony of play" refers to the now long-established standards that have been codified through a self-reinforcing system of perceived "conventional wisdom" within the games industry. This conventional wisdom, which claims to know best who plays games and what they expect from gameplay experiences, dictates the contents, mechanics, and presentation of most mainstream, commercial video games. As the authors of the article compellingly argue, however, the hegemony of play is not limited to the design of games themselves. Also under scrutiny are the conditions of a game's production, in which a "hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported." Between the lines of the authors' argument is the implication that the hegemony of play represents a significantly limited view of what experiences players might want out of their games. In this sense, the hegemony of play is a *hegemony of feeling* as much as a hegemony of design. The authors propose to push back against this hegemony by calling for change

within the games industry. I would argue that players themselves can also resist the affective elements of the hegemony of play—e.g., fun—by playing video games in ways that defy normative expectations and instead reflect their own queer or otherwise counterhegemonic feelings.

More than just a matter of best-design practices or scholarly discussion, this question of fun versus no fun gets at some of today's most heated debates about video games as a medium. Fun is central to the discourse of the online, anti-feminist harassment campaign #GamerGate. In anonymous forums and on social media, reactionary gamers have organized around, among other complaints, the principle (discussed in chapter 2) that video games should not be subject to socially engaged critique. Rather, they should remain "just for fun." Long implicit in reactionary gamer culture, where "serious" concerns like discrimination and sexism have been deliberately silenced, the war over fun is no longer a subtle one. As the *New York Times* has pointed out, the game that first incensed #GamerGate harassers, Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest*, is notable specifically because it is no fun—nor is it meant to be.[13] The idea that such a game might bring into question dominant paradigms of entertainment has, it seems, sufficed to incite threats of real-life violence like those experienced by Quinn.

Couched within such vitriol, it is easy to see how an insistence on fun can breed unanticipated social dangers. However, some of fun's pitfalls are less immediately obvious. Focusing on fun also limits new approaches to game interpretation. Today's students of game studies are still primarily trained to analyze video games on the level of "procedural rhetoric," Bogost's term for the semiotics of a game's interactive processes.[14] What new insights could be uncovered by supplementing this structural approach with a phenomenological perspective—by analyzing games for their affective rhetoric: the language of the feelings they invoke, how they communicate emotions to their players, how designing affect is interwoven in the art of game design? Like any art form, video games can and do engender a wide range of feelings. The traditional and often myopic focus on fun forecloses a rich array of difficult or "negative" emotions that can in fact shape a game's message as much as (if not more than) its content and mechanics.

Additionally, as journalist Leigh Alexander has argued, foregrounding fun as a design principle holds back video games in their

public perception as an art form.[15] Designers, says Alexander, will need to allow for a wider range of emotional experiences if they hope to achieve legitimacy in a culture that currently views games as juvenile, fun as escapist, and real art as emotionally challenging. Those who argue for video games' art-form status often compare the history of games to the history of film. Yet who would demand that all films be fun—or even beautiful? Think of all the films that would have to be cut from the canon of cinema if the moving image always had to be, in the most mainstream sense, entertaining. Those are the video games, many of them yet to be imagined, that we cast aside when we insist on fun.

The Queer Potential of Having "No Fun"

Approaching the question of emotions and video games through the lens of recent work on queer affect studies—represented here by Sara Ahmed, but also theorized by scholars like Eve Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, and Heather Love—brings to light the queer potential of resisting the hegemony of fun.[16] Attending to "no-fun" gameplay experiences, long dismissed as the mere markers of bad games, serves as a framework through which to address the affective experiences of players at the margins. Elsewhere in this book, I describe playing queer as a way of doing in a game: whether to win or to fail, to move through space and time too quickly or too slowly, or to halt and refuse to act. Here, I am suggesting that we think about playing queer as a way of *feeling* in a game—that is, a way of feeling otherly or "badly" during play. A refusal to have fun while playing represents, I believe, a rejection of the heteronormative status quo that takes place on the level of the body. In this way, no-fun gameplay experiences form a system of disruptive counter-affects that can productively bring into question the traditional goals of video games, those who play them, and the relationship between games and pleasure more broadly.

Besides, when we talk about fun, whose fun are we talking about? This is an important question. Fun as a focus for video games is problematic in part because fun itself is not a universal and invariable experience. It is culturally specific and personal. Asking this question (whose fun?) is, in fact, an ethical imperative for all games designers. For example, as Mohini Dutta has pointed out, in arguing for the value

of participatory design, what is fun in America is not necessarily fun all over the world.[17] Designers of serious games run the risk of engaging in neo-imperialism when they design games for education in the global south that impose Western paradigms of entertainment on their players. The point I am making here is that "fun" is itself never "just fun." Fun is cultural, structural, gendered, racialized, and inseparable from larger structures of power, privilege, and oppression.

Given the cultural history of the reception of video games, it makes sense that proponents of video games would want to repackage difficult game moments as positive ones. Mainstream culture has traditionally associated video games with antisocial behavior and even rage inspired by interactive, on-screen violence. Yet insisting on the value of moments that do not appear fun is a way to insist that games themselves have value. Fun can be deeply meaningful. Yet there is much more to video games than fun. As a blanket concept for making sense of the (often arguably queer) pleasure of playing games, fun is insufficient at best. It obscures all the moments that "fun" fails to capture: disappointment at an accidental fall from a treacherous platform, distress at the sight of an approaching enemy, a flash of bile when an opponent meets a player in combat and wins. Fun also fails to capture the nuance of happier moments: wonder at the sight of stunningly rendered terrain, elation upon mastering the perfect series of moves, the sublime release of relinquishing one's sense of self to ludic immersion.

Just as no fun gives voice to new perspectives, it calls for new theoretical models. These models must account for and even intimately embrace the affective messiness of play. Contemporary queer theory represents a key site of potential for building alternate approaches to affect in video games. In addition to the writing of contemporary scholars of queerness and affect, Jack Halberstam's work is one place to turn for such a model, as explored in chapter 5. No fun as a system of counter-affects in gameplay also does the work of disruption. In this way, it engenders what I would call "kinky disturbance," as adapted from micha cárdenas "femme disturbance."[18] In these moments, implicitly heteronormative paradigms are destabilized by the willing, playful embrace of alternate modes of feeling. This is the counter in counter-affect: a push-back, a transgression. It recalls Alexander Galloway's concept of "countergaming" and Karmen MacKendrick's concept of "counterpleasures,"

as well as Edmond Chang's "queergaming."[19] What unifies all of these concepts is that they reframe play and desire as possibility spaces for enacting alternative ways of being. They imagine the status quo as an institution whose very foundation can be shaken through play and playfulness. In this way, "no fun" models a type of queer world-making built on the liberating logics of masochism, which dictates that pleasure and its meaning cannot be bounded by the normative, and that new worlds of meaning are created in the moment that we embrace new worlds of experience.

No-Fun Games: Annoying, Boring, Alarming, Sad, Painful

Because it is still relatively rare to focus on play experiences that are not fun, game studies has not yet developed a clear, medium-specific vocabulary for the ways that games generate or facilitate seemingly negative forms of affect. The types of games that could be called "no fun" are as vast and diverse as games themselves. This is because all games contain within themselves the potential to be no fun—even games widely considered great. There are also many different ways that a game can be no fun. Some games, perhaps the rarest subset, are no fun by design. They refuse to acknowledge the golden rule of designers (make it "fun first") and instead intentionally present players with unpleasant experiences. More commonly, games that would like to be fun simply fail. The mechanics they present to their players prove annoying rather than engaging, or their subject matter, envisioned as tantalizing, is perceived as unsettling. Alternatively, no-fun games can be simply so "bad" as to be unplayable, broken systems that take players on meaningless journeys with no rewards.

The examples of no-fun play experiences I describe here range from the unintentionally irritating to the deliberately heart-wrenching. The difficult moments that such games bring to life should not be dismissed as trivial or incidental. Oversimplifying games through the hegemony of fun masks the true affective complexity of play: its messiness, its painfulness, its kinkiness, its queerness. The categories I lay out here are by no means comprehensive or absolute, and often they can be found overlapping in a single game. My goal in offering this list is not to codify the ways in which video games can make players feel, but rather to surface,

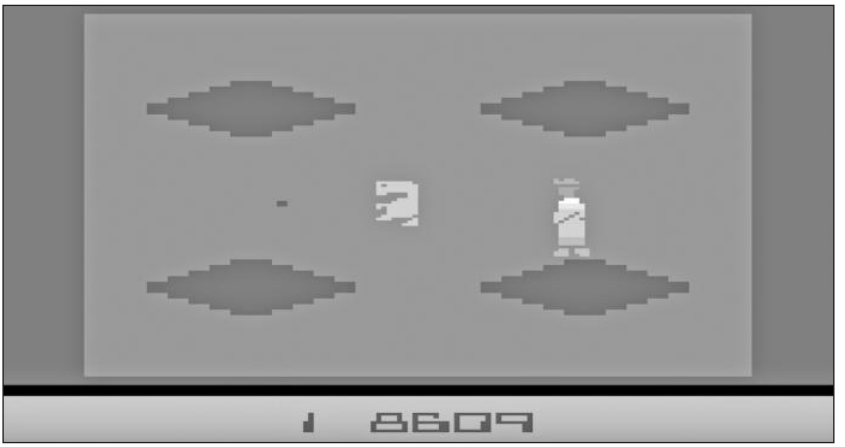

Figure 6.3. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Atari, 1982). Screenshot by author.

name, and bring increased visibility to some of the embodied experiences that are commonly overlooked in discussions of video games and their affective potential.

Disappointing Games

These are games that seem to promise excitement yet fail to live up to expectations. At times, the gravity of disappointment can soar to surprising heights. It is only fitting to include here the title widely known as "the worst video game of all time": the 1982 *E.T.* game made for the Atari 2600 (figure 6.3). Part fact and part urban legend, the tale of *E.T.* suggests that the game was so bad that it nearly destroyed the games industry. Indeed, in 1983, Atari did round up hundreds of thousands of unsold *E.T.* cartridges and bury them in a landfill in the New Mexico desert. In 2013, a documentary crew dug up the landfill, giving new life to the myth of *E.T.* as the game so horrible that its badness could only be trusted to an unmarked mass grave.[20] As reporter Tracey Lien has pointed out, what is fascinating about *E.T.* is that it really is not that bad; it's just not good.[21] *E.T.* is a basic 2D adventure game. Players navigate their character, E.T. himself, through a series of interconnected screens in search of the machinery that will let the lovable extraterrestrial "phone home." But the map is confusing, the controls are glitchy,

and the basic collection mechanic is tedious. Compared to the drama of Spielberg's movie, the gameplay is laughably underwhelming. Yet its content is hardly offensive. The "worst game ever made" is simply and notably disappointing.

Annoying Games

One of the most common ways for video games to fail at being fun is to drift into the category of annoyance. Annoying games make players irritated, frustrated, peeved—often by forcing them to repeat finicky or otherwise unrewarding tasks. *Super Monkey Ball* (Sega, 2001–2012), a 3D precision puzzle game series, exemplifies this annoying quality. Players must roll a monkey inside a transparent bubble down a shifting narrow path, preventing the monkey from falling off the side of the course to its (temporary) doom. The game's controls are unforgiving, failure happens often, and after every mistake players must watch an animation of their monkey flying off into space. Ironically, McGonigal uses *Super Monkey Ball* to demonstrate how player failure is really fun, describing this animation as an entertaining reward that keeps players cheerful even after they lose.[22] For me, the experience of playing *Super Monkey Ball* is very different. Watching these animations may be briefly entertaining for an observer, but for the player they function as punishment: irritating, unplayable moments when agency is deferred and whatever fun the game might offer is denied.

Boring Games

Like annoying games, boring games are common. Ian Bogost, writing in *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*, argues that boredom is, by a roundabout logic, what makes games fun.[23] Yet boring games, games that are truly boring, in fact resist fun. They alienate players by failing (or refusing) to engage them in a way that feels rewarding. Although many games arrive at boredom unintentionally, boredom itself can communicate a powerful message. Mattie Brice's game *Mainichi* (2012) exemplifies how no-fun-ness can be distilled into procedure and implemented with

intentionality into a game's design. *Mainichi* is a short and seemingly simple game; it only takes about two minutes to play. Players experience a day-in-the-life of Mattie, a character who is, like the game's creator, a transgender woman of color. The game's mechanics and visual language are deceptively simple: players maneuver the Mattie sprite through a few rudimentary environments—her apartment, a city street—as she heads to meet a friend for coffee. In typical role-playing game style, the game prompts players to make decisions from drop-down menus. At first, the decisions seem banal. Should Mattie put on makeup? Which side of the street should she walk on? Should she pay for her coffee with cash or credit card? However, these decisions have real implications in the context of gender identity and transphobia. After Mattie puts on makeup, for example, we read the scrolling text: "Good, now I feel like myself." Whether mundane or meaningful, these choices are ultimately futile. *Mainichi* uses the tropes of the role-playing game genre to tempt players into thinking that their decisions matter. But there is no way to win the game, no magical combination of choices that will lead to a happy ending. Every play-through ends the same: with Mattie confiding in her friend that she is unhappy—and then the game loops and begins again, equally banal, equally exhausting and demoralizing, and increasingly boring. This is how *Mainichi* brings its message to life in the body of the player. Boredom is the embodied experience communicated by the game's affective rhetoric. Players who feel bored when playing are getting the message—even if they do not realize they are getting it—and the message is that leading the life of the marginalized and underprivileged person is no fun.

Alarming Games

Another important category of "no-fun" games are those that players experience as alarming, unsettling, or otherwise too uncomfortable to play. This category usefully illustrates the subjective nature of no-fun-ness. Many mainstream games contain violent or sexual content that some players reject as overly objectionable; yet millions of other players experience these same games as fun (e.g., the *Grand Theft Auto* series). Other games seem to incite more universal reactions of alarm.

The infamous *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), in which players navigate falling arrows to repeatedly sexually assault a Native American woman, epitomizes this type of game. *Custer's Revenge* is commonly referenced as an example of the most egregiously racist and sexist titles in the pantheon of video games.[24] Yet rarely is the game discussed with a consideration for what it is like to play. This is likely because the very act of playing it seems morally unacceptable. Yet I would posit that simply knowing that the game is offensive does not suffice to make sense of the uncomfortable feelings it inspires. It is equally, if not more, important to experience the alarm that comes with playing—that worrying sense that a player is complicit when they maneuver the cowboy toward his abhorrent goal. The lesson a player learns from this game is an embodied lesson. In my experience using this game in the classroom (with ample content warnings), after players overcome the initial ethical hurdle of *Custer's Revenge*, they quickly lose sight of the game's problematic content. They come to experience their objective as abstract: dodge obstacles, earn points. This is important, because it serves as a clear illustration of how games more generally can convince players to accept themselves as unquestioning agents of violence, and often racialized or gender-based violence. However, in order to see that for ourselves (and about ourselves), we need to be able to step outside play as fun.

Sad Games

Sad games make players melancholic, heartbroken, even tearful. Like many genres of no-fun-ness, sadness frequently appears as one among several affective elements of a play experience. Thus, though sadness might be imagined as the opposite of fun, it is not necessarily mutually exclusive with games that are commonly considered good. However, sadness is rarely a central subject in discussions surrounding these games. *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), a queer coming-of-age story that has received positive attention from LGBTQ games communities, illustrates this juxtaposition well. Though much has been written about *Gone Home* from the perspective of queer experience, the way in which the game resonates with the "unhappiness" of LGBTQ lives that Ahmed articulates has been rarely addressed. In her review for

Polygon.com, games journalist Danielle Riendeau describes *Gone Home* as a "master class in how to tell a personal, affecting story in a video game."[25] However, little critical attention has been paid to the feelings of sadness that *Gone Home* stirs in its players. In my discussions with other queer players, many have reported crying while playing the game. These tears are evidence of the game's ability to connect with players whose own difficult personal histories mirror those represented on-screen. Yet these tears should not be dismissed as merely personal. Sadness is woven into the fabric of the game itself; it is shared by many LGBTQ subjects and relates to systemic social issues and oppression. Interestingly, by contrast, games with more "universal" relatability, like *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), have been described as profound specifically because of their ability to impart sadness and even grief to the player.[26]

Games that Hurt (by Design)

In addition to games that communicate negative emotions like frustration or sadness, some games intentionally play with the experience of pain. In these games, suffering is built into the core mechanics. The pleasure of such games is an inherently masochistic pleasure, a pleasure that playfully calls into question the nature of fun and taunts players with the enticing taboo of their own demise. Both *Super Hexagon* and *Stair Dismount*, discussed above, are examples of games that hurt on purpose, where hurt is built into the game. The former is designed to "punish," whereas the latter is designed to tantalize and torture by proxy. Other games, like the *Burnout* racing series (Electronic Arts, 2001–2014), explored in chapter 5, emphasize self-destruction. Even widely popular social media games like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) play with the dynamics of pain and pleasure through mastery and submission. The free-to-play model arguably creates a contract between game and player not unlike that between dom(me) and sub, in which the player agrees to start and stop playing at the will of the game. It is worth noting, however, that these play experiences, though seemingly counternormative, nonetheless represent an affective inclination toward the game system. That is, players experience hurt in accordance with the design of the game, conforming to its rule sets in order to succeed through suffering or submission.

Games that Hurt (by Player Choice)

Any game can be made no fun if a player chooses to reject win conditions and play the wrong way. Playing the wrong way can itself take many forms. Most visibly "wrong" are those play experiences that lead to death rather than success. In such moments, losing might be painful, but it can also be a pleasure, a choice, and/or a creative act of rebellion that operates within yet pushes back against the system of a game. When I choose to play battle mode in *Mario Kart 8* by repeatedly driving my car into a deadly sandpit, I am deciding to reject fun and deciding to play for (and with) pain. A particularly interesting example of this type of emergent, painful behavior can be found in *Get On Top*, an unassuming mini-game hidden within the party game *Sportsfriends* (Die Gute Fabrick, 2013). In this seemingly simple two-player game, two crash-test-dummy-esque figures stand on a flat stage holding hands. Each player, controlling one dummy, attempts to smack (or more likely flop) the opponent's body to the ground. Any successful hit will abruptly dislodge the opponent's head. Like pendulums, the figures' limbs flip effortlessly and absurdly; almost any movement of the joysticks results in a knockout. In theory, players rack up points based on their number of successful kills, but death is so easy to come by that the nature of the game quickly shifts. Pairs of players are likely to find themselves working together to explore the most dramatic and unlikely ways to decapitate their avatars. Designed as a competitive game, emergent play reshapes *Get on Top* as a collaborative exercise in mutual self-destruction.

Games that Hurt (by Accident)

It is also important to account for video games that hurt, not because their designers wish them to or because players approach them with the goal of having "no fun," but because of some flaw in their design. To date, for example, this has been true of many virtual-reality (VR) games, which are notorious for making players feel physically sick.[27] Eyestrain, dizziness, and increased heart rates have also all been reported by users of early generations of the *Oculus Rift* after only a few minutes of gameplay. The hurt that comes with current VR

technologies is more than a matter of personal discomfort, however. In fact, video-game developers working in the emerging field of VR report that motion sickness is one of the biggest technical obstacles to the commercial and creative viability of virtual reality. Nausea, for one, comes with real implications for dynamics of gender within digital cultures. Both official studies, including work by danah boyd, and a significant number of anecdotal reports have shown that women are more likely than men to experience nausea when playing VR games.[28] Like no fun more broadly, the issue of experiencing nausea as a response to digital media is a feminist one. These experiences of VR demonstrate one of the most legible ways that playing video games can literally hurt—bringing the body very clearly and directly into dialogue with queer affect and play. Here, it becomes clear that to talk about affect in games, and especially queer affect, is not just to talk about feeling in an abstract sense—but also to investigate, in a real, material way, the place where games meet the body.

* * *

What unifies each of these types of no-fun play experiences is the meaning that we can find located in what is commonly described simply as "bad" play. Rather than inspiring players to play harder, faster, or better, these unpleasant emotions communicate their own messages. At times these messages run counter to the dominant narratives of the games themselves. Certainly, they run counter to dominant thinking around fun. In this sense, they form a network of counter-affects, negative emotions that challenge how players imagine that playing video games can, does, and should feel.

Why is it important to challenge game designers, players, and commentators to reimagine the relationship between fun and video games? As much as it is a personal matter, no fun is also a matter of diversity. Fun as a monolithic principle silences the voices of marginalized gamers and promotes reactionary, territorial behavior from within privileged spaces of games culture. Moving beyond fun, by contrast, opens up whole genres of possibilities, many of them queer. The spirit of no-fun is the spirit of alternatives, of disruptions, of difference. No fun is a valuable mode of thinking for game designers, for example, because it has the potential to prompt them to reconsider assumptions about what

games can and should do. It draws attention to emotional experience as something both personal and political and highlights the broader cultural implications of fun.

Talking about no fun is also a way to talk about new scholarly and creative horizons. Every experience of annoyance, anger, sadness, and hurt comes with its own value, its own message, and its own transformative potential. Lingering over no-fun play experiences offers the opportunity to explore video games themselves more fully. The relationship between game and player is intimate, tangled, and not always easy. Although mainstream developers designing their games for commercial success may still rely on fun as the gold standard of effective player engagement, independent developers and the burgeoning numbers of DIY designers have the opportunity to play with what is no fun. At the same time, emphasizing no-fun play experiences renders visible the emotional complexity that is already inherent to games, the blend of fun and no fun that has been there all along.

When we, as players and scholars, talk only about fun experiences, we exclude from our discussions all of those moments in otherwise enjoyable games when we in fact had no fun. We also shut out of sight all of those games we have picked up and played for only a few hours, even a few minutes, and never played again because we found them boring, frustrating, or bad. These too are meaningful experiences, meaningful games, games worthy of attention, not because they are good but because their badness is itself a rich site of meaning. Attending to no-fun-ness allows us to return to these moments of interaction previously dismissed, discarded, and forgotten.

In a similar vein, opening up these discussions around fun also offers important opportunities for self-reflection. Are the affective experiences of all players imagined as equally limited, or are some players granted the privilege of more emotional complexity than others? A quick Google image search, for example, suggests that hegemonic media culture envisions negative emotions like anger and boredom as potentially acceptable responses for white male game players, but not for non-men or players of color. In instances like this one, Google image search, although far from comprehensive or objective as a scholarly tool, serves as a useful window into our culture's visual shorthands for slippery concepts. Searching for "boys playing video games," or sim-

ply "playing video games," turns up scores of images of white, male children with controllers in their hands, expressing everything from ecstasy to confusion to rage. Searching for girls and people of color playing games turns up all happy, smiling faces. Players who fall outside of the stereotypical gamer norm are only acceptable as visible subjects when they are having fun.

Exploring no fun is also an integral step for those who wish to explore video games' artistic potential. Although reactionary gamers push back against the notion that games can be more than "just for fun," mainstream America continues to question whether the medium can rise beyond its juvenile reputation as mere entertainment. As has long been true for literature and film, emotional complexity is seen as a tenant of powerful storytelling. While the goal of gameplay is rarely storytelling in its traditional form, the same expectations hold true for video games, whose interactive experiences can be as affectively rich as any narrative. However, I do not mean to suggest simply that games should evolve, become more serious, or grow up. Indeed, they would perhaps do better, in the words of queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton, to "grow sideways."[29] This concept emphasizes that the potential for emotional complexity is already present in video games as we know them. Artistic legitimacy, if that is indeed something games wish to strive for (and we would do well to remain wary on that front), can be attained, in part, by shifting perspectives on the medium as it already exists today.

Perhaps most intriguing, though, is the subversive potential of no fun as a queer mode of play. Rejecting fun means turning normative expectations on their heads and embracing the art of playing the wrong way. Lingering over sadness, annoyance, or pain frequently represents a rebellion against not just dominant expectations for video-game play, but also a rejection of the stated structure of a game itself. These counter-affects destabilize the status quo. They are simultaneously no fun and playful, unpleasant and pleasurable. By nature, video-game interactivity seems to offer players agency, while simultaneously dictating and strictly limiting the extent of player choice. Embracing the no fun enacts a different type of agency. It means choosing destruction, frustration, and alarm. These are not generic experiences nor default choices. They are felt, in the body, as the self wrestling with the messy intimacy of an affective queer partner: the game.

The Problem with Empathy

Though fun still holds the most prominent position in the pantheon of game emotions, in just the past few years "empathy" has become an increasingly important buzzword. Game designers, marketers, researchers, scholars, journalists, and players all seem to be part of the move to reframe video games as "empathy machines"—interactive experiences that allow players to feel what others feel. In *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, Katherine Isbister articulates this turn toward empathy as a response to the long-standing misconception that video games stifle rather than inspire emotional response and interpersonal connection. "People who aren't on the inside of the game world often tell me they fear that games numb players to other people, stifling empathy and creating a generation of isolated, antisocial loners," she writes. However, argues Isbister, "Games can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences."[30] What is notable in this quote is, first, the privileged place of empathy in Isbister's statement about emotions and games. Only empathy is called out explicitly, while other "positive emotional experiences" are grouped and remain unnamed. This represents a shift from earlier research into the ways that video games incite emotional responses, such as that by Nicole Lazzaro, which also looked at so-called negative emotional experiences like anger (though admittedly with the express goal of better understanding and thereby incorporating into games those elements that constitute fun).[31] Also of note is the way that Isbister positions empathy in opposition to stereotypes that cast video games as emotionally and socially harmful. Empathy takes on the role of the gaming's redeemer. Implicit in this formulation is the belief that empathy itself is incontrovertibly of value—that feeling with and for others is fundamentally and universally a good thing.

The rhetoric of empathy has also become prominent in the more corporate sectors of the "game world," and particularly in the advertising material for virtual-reality hardware and video games. After its stint in the limelight in the 1990s, the promise of immersive VR has now returned to video games. At the least, it can be said that VR devices are, for the moment, proving themselves to be financially viable consumer products. Many players and game-makers alike are, at present, eager to see

VR take on an even more central place in games. In the second half of 2016 alone, publications as prominent as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Wired*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*, to name only a few, ran featured news stories celebrating the ability of virtual reality to make players more empathetic. A *Wired* article titled "Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine?," for example, follows a common formula.[32] The reporter describes a scene in which players put on virtual-reality headsets and "step into the shoes" of another, seeing "through the eyes of a child, a woman, a stranger, a close friend, [or] a disabled man." Citing a TED talk by a film producer working in VR, the piece posits that virtual reality "connects humans to other humans in a profound way never before seen in any other form of media, and it can change people's perception of each other." A TechCrunch report on VR documentaries titled "Virtual Reality, The Empathy Machine" makes its case even more directly: "What if you really could walk a mile in someone's shoes? Shared perspective breeds understanding."[33]

This surge of interest in video games and empathy has directly intersected with LGBTQ issues in gaming. Apart from VR, the games most often described (by commentators, not by their creators) using the language of empathy are small-scale, queer games. These games are part of a wave of what I describe in the conclusion of this book as the "queer games avant-garde." Games of this sort, often developed by individual or small teams of LGBTQ designers, have largely been made possible by the increased availability of accessible game-making software of the sort described by Anna Anthropy in her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.[34] Among some of the best known of these games are Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012) and Brice's *Mainichi*, both of which translate elements of the designers' experiences as trans women into gameplay elements. Many non-LGBTQ players have praised these games for supposedly allowing them to feel what it is like to be transgender—to go through gender transition or to face day-to-day transphobic harassment.[35] Yet, Anthropy herself (along with other queer game-makers, including Brice, merritt kopas, and Robert Yang) has been vocal about challenging the notion that her game, or any game, could actually allow players to feel what she has felt.[36] Many of the same queer designers whose work has been deemed "empathy games" have responded with new projects that highlight what Dan Solberg calls "the problem with empathy."[37] This

work, as queer games scholar Diana Mari Pozo has argued, "show[s] how framing queer game design in terms of empathy risks displacing queer, particularly transgender women, game designers and their fans from their own movement, foregrounding instead the emotional edification of cisgender and/or straight audiences."[38]

What work is the rhetoric of empathy doing in the context of video games and queer affect? In one sense, empathy is being used to legitimize games, to demonstrate through affective experience their status as good (i.e., normatively acceptable) citizens in the system of contemporary media. At the same time, empathy is deployed to sell video games—or, perhaps more accurately, to sell a promise of immersion and emotional connection that by extension drives the sale of a new generation of gaming hardware. The reason this formulation of empathy should be considered problematic, in addition to its general impulse toward neoliberalism, can be identified most clearly in its application to queer games. Specifically, what is appropriated when queer games are claimed as "empathy machines" is what it feels like to be queer. In these instances, empathy is the name for the consumption of queer affect itself. The player imagines themselves as inhabiting a mimetic experience that meaningfully replicates the embodied emotions of the LGBTQ subject. "Walking in another person's shoes" and "seeing through another person's eyes" are fittingly embodied metaphors that describe the colonization of the queer bodies, which is repurposed as a tool through which straight, cisgender players actualize their self-congratulatory beliefs about what good LGBTQ "allies" are supposed to feel. Yet queer affect itself resists this colonization and rejects the narrative of empathy through the very limitations of gameplay. A queer video game like those described through the language of empathy may last only a few minutes. By contrast, to feel as a queer subject truly feels, one must live the full, long length of a queer life, with every moment of its joys and its pains. That is not to say that straight, cisgender players should not play these queer games. Instead, we need an adjustment of affective expectation from empathy (an appropriation of queer experience) to compassion (an increased awareness of and sensitivity toward queer experience).

Critiquing empathy, like critiquing fun, is founded on the urge to resist hegemonic beliefs about the value of affect—whether those hegemonies dictate how a game should make players feel, what social uses

a game should have, or who has the right to lay claim to queer feeling. Whereas the totalizing belief in fun overshadows the full range of emotions that video games can engender, the newly emergent fetishization of empathy acknowledges that games give rise to a fuller range of difficult emotions. Yet, in the same instant that it acknowledges the value of emotionally difficult games, empathy repurposes the no-fun play experience in the name of the heteronormative status quo. It complicates and indeed problematizes the political resistance enacting by "playing queer" by inviting non-queer players to engage in a kind of queerness tourism, offering them the opportunity to take their turn and "playing at" queerness. In this way, the rhetoric of empathy, applied to video games that reflect the experience of LGBTQ subjects, strips the act of playing queer of its own self-sovereignty and turns LGBTQ lives into a game. However, straight, cisgender players need not "walk in the shoes" of a queer person to meaningfully and respectfully encounter difference. As an alternative to empathy, a more productive affective model for togetherness can be found in Donna Haraway's notion of "becoming with," wherein two subjects can stand together, see each other, and value one another without attempting to possess one another or become one.[39] Straight players can "be with" queer lives, thereby learning to value them in ways that are important for the larger push toward social justice in video games and beyond.

A Call to Play beyond Fun

I end here with a call toward playing "beyond fun," to recall Taylor's words—not just as an edge case within a specific player community but as a larger practice for re-approaching and reimagining video games. No fun is an imperative as well as a mode of experience. It is a call to queer world-making, a call to build alternative spaces both personal and cultural, a call to think about masochistic play as a site of potential rather than pathology. It is a call to think, play, and study games queerly—to challenge what is straight and normal, to find the counternormative in games but also in ourselves as players. Even with no LGBTQ characters on the screen, any game has the potential to become a disruptive site of queer subversion. Not all games are fun, but all games can be no fun. Turning attention to the seemingly unpleasant allows us to uncover

underexplored modes of experience, both as players and queer subjects in the world. No fun is also a call back to our bodies, a call to feel what players are not supposed to want to feel, a call to resist the normative thinking that dictates that the only games that matter are games that are "good" in the most traditional sense, and that the only players who matter are the ones who have fun playing them. In this way, no fun is also a challenge: a challenge to the status quo and a challenge to ourselves. Let us play boredom. Let us play anger. Let us play what hurts. Let us play in ways that are just as different and just as queer as we are as players. And let us take that hurt, modeled by the embodiment of gameplay, and carry it with us, driving us to find other playful, powerful, and overlooked sites of counter-affective potential in our lives both on-screen and off.

"Do we consent to happiness? And what are we consenting to, if or when we consent to happiness?" These are the questions from Sara Ahmed with which this chapter began. Do we consent to playing "just for fun"? And if or when we consent to fun, what are we consenting to? An important component of bringing queerness to video games is challenging the way that playing games feels. Continuing to focus on fun (at least fun in its most limited definition) re-inscribes the hegemony of play, in much the same way that focusing on empathy re-inscribes the already privileged position of straight, cisgender players. By contrast, looking at gameplay experiences that go beyond fun creates new spaces for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins. Yet an insistence on queer affect, as a mode of playing queer, is a complicated and at times contradictory business. On the one hand, playing in ways that are "no fun" enacts a kind of queerness by rejecting the promise of happiness, intentionally deviating from the path of fun, and making space for alternate pleasures in video games. In this way, players have an opportunity to bring queer affect to video games of any and all sorts, creating experiences that resonate with LGBTQ subjects in ways that move beyond "representation" and instead exist on the level of emotions and the body. Yet, as in the case of empathy, the promise of "playing queer"—i.e., having the chance to play the queer experience, or treating queer folks as objects whose affective experiences can be played and thereby consumed—does not always enact resistance, but

can instead feed back into an oppressive regime. This is not to say that empathy in video games never has value. Yet it is important to look beyond the "good" that empathy supposedly does to ask what purpose it serves. When is queer feeling in games doing the work of the status quo and when is it doing the work of resistance?

7

Speed Runs, Slow Strolls, and the Politics of Walking

Queer Movements through Space and Time

To play a video game is to engage in ways of moving through space and time. Each genre, and indeed each game, marks the player's relationship to temporality and spatiality differently. Whether a player moves in two-dimensional space (as in a side-scroller), three-dimensional space (as in a first-person shooter), so-called 2.5D space, or even one-dimensional space (as in Robin Baumgarten's 2015 *Line Wobbler*) contributes significantly to the experience and meaning of the game. This also holds true for the spatial world that a game creates. Level design is a key element of development. Within a given level, certain spaces may be designated as safe (e.g., the ledges a player attempts to leap onto in a platformer) or designated as unsafe (the pits into which that same player may fall). The rise of large-scale, open-world games has fostered an increased enthusiasm for spatial expansiveness. Popular AAA games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) have been widely lauded for allowing players to roam what seem like endless landscapes.

The ways that video games construct time are likewise diverse. Some games use time to mark the end of multiplayer matches. Others use time to judge achievement (as in racing games). Still others use the idea of playing with time as a primary game mechanic; well-known games in this category include *Braid* (Number None, 2008), *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo, 2000), and titles in the *Prince of Persia* series (Ubisoft et al., 1989–2013). "Play-through time" is one of the basic criteria by which game reviewers describe video games. How long a game takes to complete is closely tied to the economics of games (e.g., whether a game is considered by players to be worth its cost) and to the perceived divide between so-called hardcore versus casual games. The longer a game's play-through time, and the longer an individual player plays that game, the more hardcore they are each considered to be. In this way,

time and space in video games have serious implications for identity as well as gameplay.

Though the list of spatial and temporal elements in video games that I have just enumerated may seem long, it only begins to scratch the surface. I open with this list to demonstrate that space and time are compelling and expansive frameworks through which to understand video games—frameworks that call out to be considered closely, theorized, and (in the analytical sense) appreciated. Yet the specific mechanisms of players' movements through time and space have too rarely been, to date, the focus of games scholarship (an exception to this is Soraya Murray's work on how games communicate meaning through the architectures of their navigable in-game spaces).[1] In this chapter, I am proposing one way of approaching temporality and spatiality in video games that I believe to be particularly generative: through queer theory.

Queer theorists like Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love, and Jack Halberstam have argued for what they call "queer time" and "queer space"—or, as I refer to them here, queer temporality and queer spatiality. In contrast to "chrononormativity," the set of expectations that dictate how individual lives and larger historical narratives should progress, queer temporality (and, by association, queer spatiality) represents a resistance to the standard logics that dictate what one should do, where, when, and at what speed. The artistic works that these scholars use to illustrate their theories of counterhegemonic time and space are drawn largely from literature and film. However, queer time and space can also be found operating equally, perhaps even more prominently, in video games: whether in the way that games are designed or the way that they are played. Indeed, along with queer failure and queer affect, queer temporality and queer spatiality can be seen as core elements of queer play.

Video games offer an array of possibilities for thinking through what Freeman calls "time's sexual politics (and the temporal politics of sex)."[2] In order to explore what forms queer movement through space and time might take in a video game—as well as the political stakes of this queer movement—I look to two types of non-normative play: speedruns and walking simulators. Speedrunning is the practice of playing games at breakneck speed, often by taking advantage of glitches that allow players to leap between levels, drastically altering the game's temporality and spatiality as intended by its designers. So-called walking simulators, by

contrast, are a category of game in which the player's main mode of interaction is uncovering a story by moving slowly through an environment. Unfortunately, these games have been widely derided in mainstream gamer culture and the term "walking simulator" has been used primarily as a pejorative. Together, the resistance to chrononormativity found in speedrunning and walking simulators represent two possible approaches for discovering queer space and time in video games: the former as an emergent player practice and the latter as a designed experience.

What interests me in both speedruns and walking simulators is that they offer opportunities for gameplay that stand at the intersection of temporality, spatiality, sexuality, gender, agency, and resistance—an intersection at which the very ontologies of video games begin to break down. Though moving unusually fast and moving unusually slowly may seem like opposite approaches to playing video games, they both represent challenges to dominant standards of what it means to play in ways that are normal, valuable, or right. By enacting alternative models of relating to time and space, they also embody alternative forms of desire: the desire to rush, the desire to linger. Because of their cultural associations, speedrunning (an arguably masculinist mode of play that emphasizes superlative mastery) and walking simulators (a genre that comes under regular attack from those who would seek to limit diversity in games) make appear unlikely sites for bringing queerness to video games. Yet, through concepts of queer temporality and spatiality, both can be reimagined and reclaimed as facilitating queer play.

Among the existing works of game scholarship and game-making that address queer time and space is writing by Kathryn Bond Stockton and Christopher Goetz respectively on notions of growth in video games.[3] Both authors argue that video games can be seen as queer through their cultural association with childishness, and the related call for games to "grow up" in order to be taken seriously as an art form. A handful of queer designers have also made games that invite players to interact with time and space queerly. Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2014), which is played for ten seconds again and again on a loop in the last moments before the apocalypse, is a prime example.[4] By raising questions about movements through the time line of life—both in terms of lived human lives and lives in video games—a game like

Queers in Love raises many issues, such as those around permadeath (a game mechanic in which all of a player's progress is lost each time they die), and by extension what could be called permalife, along with the biopolitics and necropolitics of gameplay.[5]

Of the many perspectives through which to approach temporality and spatiality in video games, I have chosen to focus on speedrunning and walking sims here because these practices so clearly bring together space and time, and also because they resonate strongly with both current trends in queer theory and established queer figures such as the "flâneur." Their political stakes as they relate to gender and sexuality in games culture are also immediate and apparent. Yet the message of this chapter extends far beyond speedrunning and walking simulators. Considering queer temporality and spatiality sheds light on some of the key ways in which queerness can be brought to video games through play—as well as to sectors of games culture, such as speedrunning communities, that might seem otherwise unrelated or at times even hostile to queerness.

Queer Temporality and Queer Spatiality

In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman calls for queer theory to pursue "rethinkings of temporality in the name of sexual dissidence."[6] Indeed, temporality, narratives of progress, and their queer limits can be seen as key underlying concerns across a range of queer theory work, such as Lee Edelman's writing on the death drive, José Muñoz's writing on queer futures, and Stockton's writing on the sideways growth of the queer child.[7] While temporality has represented an implicit area of interest for queer theory going back as far as the work of Michel Foucault, the subject of queer time has become a more explicit focus in the field over the past decade.[8] In addition to Freeman's scholarship, work like Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* and Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* have explored the relationship between queerness and culturally prescribed structures of time.

Founded on the idea that our conceptions of space and time are social constructions, theorizing in this area has sought to deconstruct and denaturalize beliefs about temporality and spatiality.[9] Shared across these works is the drive to articulate the deep-seated relationship between

normativity and cultural expectations around time. Freeman gives this nexus the concise and compelling name "chrononormativity."[10] To be chronormative, writes Freeman, is to live according to a "coordinated, carefully syncopated tempo" of life events, many of which are inextricably tied to expectations around gender and sexuality, such as romantic coupledom and reproductivity.[11] Halberstam terms this hegemonic, reproduction-driven temporality "repro-time": the idea that it is "natural and desirable" to have children and to have them on a certain time line, whether "ruled by a biological clock" or by "strict bourgeois rules of respectability."[12]

Importantly, chrononormativity and the social constructs of acceptable movements through time and space relate to homosexuality as much as to heterosexuality. The sense that there is a correct way to progress through one's life and through one's cultural history has also profoundly shaped the expectations placed on LGBTQ lives and the preferred interpretations of LGBTQ history. One of the key critiques that theorists like Freeman, Love, and Halberstam level against dominant formulations of temporality is that narratives of progress have been used to limit the stories that can be told about LGBTQ people in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Queer subjects are often implored to envision and work toward a "better life," leaving little room for the complexities and pains of modern queer experience.[13]

However, rather than being linked to neoliberal narratives of linear progress, queerness is in fact far more closely tied to other ways of being in relation to space and time. Queer lives, says Love, are "intimately bound up with backwardness": a grappling with a past marked by loss and shame.[14] Understanding queer lives and their relation to history requires "dwelling" in the "dark places" that do not fit the vision of a better life. Writes Love, "Advances such as gay marriage and the increasing media visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence."[15] It is notable that Love uses the word "dwell" here, as it implies that the work of the queer scholar also resists normative expectations of temporality and spatiality—refusing to move on, so to speak, and instead choosing to linger so long in the past that these dark places become a kind of residence.

In opposition to chrononormativity stands "queer time" and "queer space." The two notions are fundamentally linked. Writes Halberstam, "A 'queer' adjustment in the way in which we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space."[16] Indeed, for Halberstam, queer temporality and spatiality are central to the definition of queerness itself:

> "Queer" refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. "Queer time" is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge . . . once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. "Queer space" refers to the place-making practices . . . in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.[17]

Additionally, queer temporality is directly related to the complexities and contradictions of queer history. At once associated with both the avant-garde and a longing to reclaim the cultural debris of the past, writes Freeman, the queer "turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, and sideways to forms of being and belonging."[18] Instead of complying with repro-time, queer subjects often prefer to live "aslant to dominate forms of object-choice, coupledom, family, marriage, [and] sociability" and appear "thus out of synch."[19] As we move into an analysis of gameplay below, let us take with us these core concepts—including the idea that queer movements through time and space are characterized by "nonnormative logics" and appear "out of synch" with dominant "temporal frames."

Queer temporality and queer spatiality do more than stand in contrast to chrononormativity, however. By rejecting hegemonic constructs of time and space, they also resist and thereby destabilize chrononormativity itself—demonstrating other ways of living within and making meaning from experiences of space and time. "Part of what has made queerness compelling," writes Halberstam, "has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new narratives and alternative relations to time and space."[20] Queer temporalities disrupt "conventional accounts

of youth culture, adulthood, and maturity. Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death."[21]

Along with many others, this is one particularly striking example of a resonance between conceptualizations of queerness and video games. Among games' primary characteristics is their ability to create different worlds with different forms of agency: to imagine life as it might be led according to different rules. Those who do not conform to chrononormativity, in the ways in which they live their lives or the ways in which they play, establish space for difference. "Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present," writes Love.[22] In this way, queer space can be understood as one made for and by queer subjects—but also one in which queer subjects make their own meaning from being present in the world. Video games already contain within themselves the potential for disrupting normative time. Describing the experiences of players in massively multiplayer online games, Celia Pearce has reported that "social phenomena . . . tend to happen at an accelerated rate. . . . Players often report losing track of time. . . . Friendships and romantic relationships appear to develop more quickly, and the growth and decline of communities seems to progress much faster than would the case in [the] real world."[23] Strikingly, Pearce observed this acceleration most notably in the days before the imminent server shutdown of the virtual world Uru.[24] As in Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, the specter of an in-game apocalypse heightens the already distorted temporality of play space.

Chrononormativity emerges from culture on a broad scale. Yet all of the elements of chrononormativity can also be found operating, in their own ways, in video games. Indeed, understanding constructions of time and space through the lens of queer theory is crucial for identifying both the imposition of hegemony and opportunities for resistance inherent in play. Chrononormativity can be found operating in video games in two main modes. First, we might look for it in the internalization and reproduction of social norms that exist outside the game. For example, a game might build its narrative around traditional notions

of linear advancement from childhood, to early adulthood, to reproductive coupledom. The second mode of chrononormativity, however, is more specific to video games. Like many art forms, the medium of video games has its own standards for temporal and spatial progress: how long a certain type of game will take to play, how far a player must travel between save points, how quickly a player is meant to pass through an area. In the context of video games, chrononormativity names a set of foundational logics that have come to shape how games are designed and experienced in relation to time (and, by extension, space). Like the larger tenants of chrononormativity established by the queer theorists quoted here, these logics are today so deeply engrained that they have become all but invisible. However, by considering queer modes of play through temporality and spatiality, we have the opportunity to make these practices once again visible—and to search for the "nonnormative logics" that have the power to reshape the dominant temporal and spatial frames of video games.

Speedrunning: Practices and Communities

Darbian, a speedrunner streaming his gameplay to viewers in real time via the popular website Twitch, is playing *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985).[25] Though he does not know it yet, he is about to break what is, as of December 2, 2016, the world record time for reaching the end of the game's first world, i.e., its first set of levels. As soon as the game begins, Darbian hits the ground running, taking Mario at top speed through the side-scrolling, 2D environment (figure 7.1). Floating past in the background are the clouds made famous in the art games world by Cory Arcangel's piece *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), the result of another kind of emergent play with games, now part of the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum in New York.

At first, Darbian, who clearly has run these levels many times before, does not know that he is making record-breaking time. A camera records his image and voice as he plays; viewers greet him and ask questions through a chat feed, and he casually answers, occasionally taking his eyes off the game. With perfect timing, he proceeds through the opening level: jumping over goombas (mushroom-shaped enemies) and under blocks, landing squarely on a warp pipe, which takes him

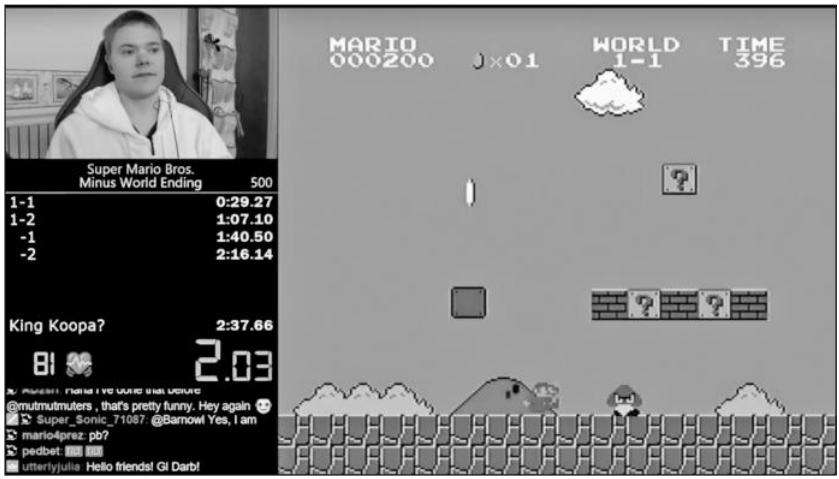

Figure 7.1. Darbian speedruns *Super Mario Bros.* on Twitch. Screenshot by author.

into a subterranean area (or "dungeon," in game parlance) where he leaps through a room full of floating coins. Though it takes him only a second to make it to the exit and into the next area, Darbian groans. From extensive and meticulous practice, he knows that his timing was off by an instant, and he calculates the frames he lost with his mistake. There is no doubt that Darbian has memorized this game by heart. One minute and three seconds into his speedrun, he hops on top of a sideways-facing warp pip. At first, it appears that he has made a misstep—but instead he lands on an invisible platform, a glitch in the game, that allows him to run straight through a solid wall and save himself considerable time. Now Darbian has begun to realize that he is on track for a world record. He is wearing a biometric device that monitors and displays his heart rate on-screen alongside the clock that counts the precise milliseconds of his run. His pulse begins to rise. "Let's do it," Darbian says to his viewers, minimizes his chat window, and focuses in. He takes Mario flying over another above-ground level, leaps through another glitch in the final underground level, and hits the final screen with an enormous grin.

This is an example of a speedrun. Speedrunning is the practice of playing a video game as fast as possible. To do this, speedrunners use their detailed knowledge of a game and (often) its glitches, which al-

lows them to traverse game spaces far more quickly and in ways that the game's developers likely have not intended. Different players may undertake speedruns with different objectives at different times. In certain speedruns, players may be attempting to finish a particular game level, or to reach the game's final credits; in others, they may be playing for 100 percent completion of the game or to collect all of a certain item.[26] While any video game can be speedrun, certain games are more commonly played in this way than others. Among the games most often speedrun are those from earlier-generation consoles, such as the NES, the SuperNES, and the Nintendo GameCube. At the top levels of performance and competition, much of contemporary speedrunning takes place on live online video streams hosted by sites like Twitch, where popular speedrunners can garner followers numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Speedrunners also perform at live community and/or charity events, like Games Done Quick, called speedrunning marathons. In this way, speedrunning expands the notion of non-traditional play described in the previous two chapters by opening it to player communities and cultures in addition to play by individuals. Along with other organized, player-based practices like modding, speedrunning can be described as a metagame, a concept explored by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux.[27] A metagame is a secondary set of game-like practices that operates according to its own rules and treats video games as raw material for new modes of play.

As a subculture and a collection of overlapping communities, speedrunning understands itself to be more inclusive than other sectors of games culture. Some viewers of speedrunning live streams have noted that speedrunners seem significantly less likely than other game streamers to use offensive language while they play.[28] This temperament has perhaps emerged because, to operate on a social scale, speedrunning requires a shared code of ethics and conduct, such as a set of agreements about what constitutes proper play and what constitutes cheating.[29] Speedrunners often learn from one another. Together, these communities build an ever-expanding knowledge of games that are often speedrun and, over time, push forward collectively to faster times. This creates a sense of camaraderie that reportedly gives speedrunning communities a supportive tone even as individual players push themselves toward peak performances.

At the same time, when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, the politics of speedrunning culture are far from perfect. Speedrunners are still overwhelmingly male. A number of threads related to speedrunning that appear in Reddit forums begin with the question, "Why are there so few women who speedrun?"[30] The answer appears to relate to visibility. Top speedrunners frequently stream footage of their faces and/or voices while they play—and many female gamers have long since learned that outing oneself as non-male in gamer spaces can quickly lead to harassment. In at least one case, transphobia contributed to a world-famous speedrunner's decision to stop playing professionally.[31] After beginning hormone therapy, she received a large number of hurtful comments from members of the very community that had previously supported her. With that said, it is perhaps surprising that hypermasculinity and misogyny appear less frequently in speedrunning culture than one might expect—especially as compared to other arenas of competitive gaming and Esports.[32] The goal of playing a game as quickly and as perfectly as possible would seem to match closely with the often toxic performances of straight masculinity through gameplay described by scholar Derek Burrill, though the tenor of the spreedrunning community suggests otherwise.[33]

This does not mean that speedrunning communities see their practices as queer, as I do and will argue in a moment. Queerness and other socially engaged notions of subverting play remain largely absent from the rhetoric that surrounds speedrunning. Yet alternative forms of player agency are key to what draws speedrunners to the practice. Successful speedrunning requires playing a given game tens, even hundreds, of times. Though this can be tedious, it allows players to drastically extend the life of the games they care about beyond the intended play-through time. Through speedrunning, players can also transform supposedly bad video games into "beautiful" ones, in the words of one speedrunner, precisely because these players value the very same things that traditional players find undesirable, like glitches, accidental "skips," and other places where a game seems to break down.[34] In this way, even though speedrunners may not describe themselves as subversive, the metagame of speedrunning raises many questions that shake the foundation of how video games are defined. "When does a game start and end? What is the definitive version of the game?," ask Boluk and Lemieux in their discus-

sion of speedrunning.[35] To that I would add: Who gets to set the rules for how a game is played? Who decides what is valuable in a game? How long is too long (or too short) to play a game, or to inhabit a game world, before the meaning of play is fundamentally changed?

Speedrunning as Queer Play

In light of its non-normative relation to standards of time and space in video games, speedrunning can be understood as a queer gameplay practice. Admittedly, in certain senses, speedrunning seems to run counter to many of the characteristics of queer game design and play described elsewhere in this book. For instance, as opposed to games that engender queer experiences by embracing "goal-less-ness"—that is, by rejecting the assumption that video games and by extension human experience should be winnable—speedrunning is all about achieving goals: the fastest time, the highest score, the world record, etc. In this sense, speedrunning also seems antithetical to the ethos of queer failure. In a successful speedrun, a player can never fail, even for an instant, because failure takes time. If playing in the mode of queer temporality involves lingering, creating queer space by disrupting progress, and dwelling in moments that others pass by, then how can speedrunning be queer? After all, speedrunning is pure progress: an avatar always running forward, never pausing, forever passing through. One answer lies in the fact that achieving a "successful" speedrun actually requires dying (so to speak) many, many times. Commonly, as soon as speedrunners sense that they have made too many mistakes in a run to meet their goal, they will restart the game from the beginning. For each record-breaking play-through, a speedrunner has likely started and prematurely ended hundreds of attempts at the game. In this sense, speedrunning is its own "queer art"—one that appears to conform to mainstream notions of success yet contains within itself countless failures.

However, there are many ways for a video game or an approach to play to "wear its queerness," to borrow a phrase from Love.[36] Indeed, a number of aspects of speedrunning can be interpreted as enacting queer time and space. For instance, the idea of goals itself can be productively complicated through speedrunning. Speedrunning does not merely replicate the goal orientation standard in so many video games; rather, it

elevates goal orientation to a hyper-focus, choosing to ignore certain elements of the game as designed in order to intentionally reset the terms of gameplay. Speedrunning communities have demonstrated that goals themselves can be established by players, rather than by designers. At the same time, speedrunners disrupt and denaturalize the often unquestioned logics of in-game accomplishment by approaching each game with a variety of different goals, such as full completion, reaching the end of the game, or collecting certain items. Speedrunning also denies broader cultural ideas about goals outside the game—for example, the "middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" that imagines "longevity as the most desirable future, applaud[s] the pursuit of long life . . . and pathologize[s] modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity."[37] In contrast to this hegemonic way of thinking stands the speedrunner, who seeks to use their "life" (in the parlance of video games) as quickly as possible. Though they could have many lives, they want only the one, and they want to reach its end as fast as possible. At the same time, they also have and give away lives with great speed—in that they start, quit, and restart games until they get them right.

The most direct way that speedrunning engages with queer time and space, however, is through its rejection of chrononormativity. As mentioned above, chrononormativity takes on its own life within video games. In addition to the cultural norms of temporality in society at large, the term can describe the accepted standards for how time operates in gameplay. By definition, speedrunners play faster than the game they are playing intends them to play. If this were not the case, they would simply be players—neither speedy, nor running. Because they play so fast, speedrunners also stand in a queer relation to game space. They speed through areas that they are meant to pause in, perhaps to explore, to strategize, or to wait for the right moment to dodge past enemies. When speedrunning, by contrast, game spaces become negative spaces: precisely navigated open passages rather than environments. In this sense, speedrunners set their own terms for the value and experience of existing within spatiality.

To conceptualize how speeding through video games can create queer time and space, it is helpful to turn back to the queer scholars whose work is discussed above. Freeman, for instance, describes the mechanisms of chrononormativity in these terms: "Corporations and

nation-states seek to adjust the pace of living in the places and people they take on: to *quicken up* and/or synchronize some elements of everyday existence, while offering up other spaces and activities as *leisurely*, *slow*, sacred, cyclical, and so on and thereby repressing or effacing alternative strategies of organizing time."[38] I have italicized the words "quicken up," "leisurely," and "slow" here to highlight the importance of speed to Freeman's description. Taken in light of the culturally prescribed divisions Freeman is articulating, speedrunning can be seen to disrupt imagined divisions between the fast and the slow. Playing games is widely seen as a leisurely (i.e., slow) activity undertaken in "down time" or "free time." When this slow activity is drastically sped up—that is, when video games are played at top speed—the result is a mode of play that resists the dichotomy between what is typically perceived as fast, productive time (e.g., time spent working) and slow, wasted time (e.g., time spent gaming). By transforming gameplay into something entirely un-leisurely, speedrunning creates an "alternative strategy of organizing time" within video games and refuses to comply with the prescribed "pace of living"—or, in this case, the pace of playing.

This speediness, which queers the time and space of the game, can also be seen mirrored in the meta-elements that surround the practice of speedrunning. During Darbian's run of the first world of *Super Mario Bros.*, for example, the fast pace of gameplay is increasingly matched by the quickening of the player's own heart rate, which begins at 75 beats per minute and finishes at 109. In addition to this embodiment of queer temporality, the ways in which Darbian's viewers engage with his speedrun also echo his non-chrononormative relation to time. Once it becomes clear that Darbian is on track to beat the world record, the chat feed on his Twitch page is flooded with comments, which pour in so fast that they become unreadable. At this moment of collective euphoria, excesses of speed result in the breakdown of space (e.g., the chat box), queering the function of comments by disrupting meaning made through communication, transforming utterances from content into performance.

In addition to the speed at which speedrunners play, other key elements of speedrunning can be understood in relation to queer time and space, such as the practice of using glitches to circumvent areas and

improve play times. Edmond Chang and Jack Halberstam have both argued that the glitch represents a site of queerness within video games: the place where code breaks and the game world reveals its cracks.[39] At the same time, as Boluk and Lemieux point out, speedrunning communities have complicated this idea of the glitch by embracing glitches as features (rather than bugs). "The game is law," write Boluk and Lemieux. Whatever flaws are part of the game's code, making use of them in speedrunning is fair game, because they are part of the game as it was released.[40] When speedrunners like Darbian use glitches to hop between game spaces, they are not breaking the game but finding alternative ways to move through it. By literally walking through walls, as in the case of *Super Mario Bros.*, these players change the temporality and spatiality of the game in significant ways—stepping through passages where there appear to be none and circumventing major steps on what can be seen as the chrononormative time line of gameplay.

Speedrunning also entails what could be called queer forms of knowing, especially in relation to time and space. A successful speedrun requires a markedly detailed knowledge of a game. In particular, a speedrunner must know the layout of a game's level (its spatiality) and the timing of its enemies, platforms, etc. (its temporality) perfectly in order to execute a skillful run. By playing a game or a level again and again, a speedrunner commits these elements to memory. Yet this memorization cannot stay on the level of the conscious mind. It must also penetrate into the body, taking on the form of an intuitive sense of the optimal way to play. This way of knowing can be described as queer because it requires an internalization of the game into the embodied experience of play. It represents a form of non-heteronormative intimacy that develops through the player's extensive knowledge of the game. In a video recorded during the Summer Games Done Quick marathon, for example, we see speedrunner KosmicD12 perform a run of *Super Mario Bros.* in front of a room of 20–30 attentive onlookers (figure 7.2).[41] KosmicD12, a calm, confident teenager, explains his precise movements as he plays. It quickly becomes clear that he knows every inch of the game. "I'm going through this room because it saves three seconds," he says as he passes through a dungeon area with floating coins. While he plays, he gives tips on how to affect the randomization of enemies in the game and the precise way to jump on a piranha flower (one of the regular

Figure 7.2. KosmicD12 demos a speedrun at Summer Games Done Quick. Screenshot by author.

enemies in the game) without dying. As is common at speedrunning events, a sofa has been set up for KosmicD12 to sit on while he plays, replicating the environment of playing at home in one's living room. The overall scene is one of care and closeness between player and game that is almost domestic—like the dynamic between live-in lovers who know each other's every peeve, quirk, and pleasure.

Through its relation to queer temporality and spatiality, speedrunning adds new facets to the concept and characteristics of queer play. It suggests additional ways that video games without LGBTQ content can be played queerly. Indeed, as the rise of speedrunning communities via platforms like Twitch demonstrates, video games not only offer players the opportunity to explore queer time and space—they actively inspire this type of emergent play. Conversely, as queer theory sheds new light on player practices like speedrunning, speedrunning also suggests additional dimensions to queer theory's formulations of temporality and spatiality. Among the mechanics of queer temporality, Freeman lists asynchrony, anachronism, anastrophe, belatedness, compression, delay, ellipsis, pause, repetition, and reversal: all of which disrupt "a vision of time as seamless, unified, and forward moving."[42] From the perspective of game design and games studies, this list is intriguing because it sparks visions of how each of these temporal modes could be (or already has

been) translated into game mechanics—suggesting an array of possible games—present, past, and future—that engage with time queerly.

In addition, the practice of speedrunning suggests that we must add another mode to Freeman's list: speeding. To speed is to go faster than chrononormativity deems acceptable, to rush from start to finish rather than to accomplish the goals of personal and historical growth at acceptable intervals. Calling speeding a mode of disruption also productively complicates the imagined divide between queer temporality and narratives of progress. The speeding subject, as a queer subject, does move forward—but they move forward at such a pace that they overwhelm the temporal order, rushing to the end of the chrononormative time line and thereby revealing it to be short-lived, short-sighted, and ultimately insufficient.

The Gender and Sexual Politics of Walking Simulators

Standing in contrast to the "running" of speedruns is the "walking" of walking simulators. While "walking simulators" have been much discussed in games culture, they have less often been taken seriously from an analytical perspective. Yet walking simulators as a category represent an important area of critique specifically because the notion of the walking simulator is closely tied to ideas about gender, sexuality, and the ontologies of video games. A consideration of the politics of walking simulators sheds light on the perceived divide between acceptable and unacceptable forms of play in video games, and points tellingly toward how that divide is often understood along the lines of straight versus queer movement through time and space.

The term "walking simulators" describes a category of games that tell stories through player movement and environmental exploration. Game-makers rarely label their own games as walking simulators, for reasons that will become apparent. Much more commonly, "walking simulator" is a label that is applied to a game by disapproving reviewers, players, or critics. Among the games most often cited as examples of walking simulators are: *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), *Virginia* (Variable State, 2016), *FireWatch* (Camp Santo, 2016), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015), and *Lieve Oma* (Florian Veltman, 2016)—as well

as these games' early predecessors, like *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 1993) and *Riven* (Cyan Worlds, 1997).

Though the gameplay of each of these games differs in meaningful ways, walking simulators generally have in common that they do not include combat mechanics or competition. Instead, they invite players to learn about the narrative worlds around them through scenarios such as: walking through a young woman's new family home (*Gone Home*), hiking around an island with a mysterious past (*Dear Esther*), or mushroom-hunting in the woods (*Lieve Oma*). Often, what drives these games are emotional, interpersonal challenges rather than boss battles or incoming bullets. They value interactive storytelling over immediate action. Because narrative elements are often triggered when players enter a new area or find a new object, the rate at which these stories unfurl is mapped to the pace at which the player-character moves through the game. To the extent that they can be called walking simulators, these games could also be called looking simulators, lingering simulators, or observing simulators. Rather than speeding players along from challenge to challenge, they invite a slower and more contemplative relationship with the games' rich visual and material environments, a relationship that is often structured around strolling, stopping, and seeing. In this sense, though the term "walking simulator" is usually meant as an insult, it does helpfully and accurately point toward what makes these games unique: that they offer players time and space to exist and explore. As Melissa Kagen has noted in her writing on the gendering of the genre, in walking simulators "wandering is not wandering away from the plot; wandering is the game."[43]

Walking simulator, as a term, came into common usage within games culture around 2012, with the release and subsequent debates around *Dear Esther*. Though some indie designers have spoken in favor of the label, it is still largely seen as derogatory.[44] Calling a game a walking simulator is a way to mock and deride it, suggesting that the entire game can be reduced to little more than a simulation of what is imagined to be the most banal, uninteresting, and easiest of activities: walking. The term is more than a slight, however; it's a rallying cry for reactionary gamers who believe that video games of this sort are "duplicitous nongames" that should not be considered games at all.[45] As many online articles, blog posts, and forum threads attest, each new release of a

high-profile walking simulator has raised renewed outcries.[46] Echoing the rhetoric of #GamerGate, angry commentators accuse these games of being platforms for "social justice warriors" to promote their liberal identity politics.[47]

Indeed, though the explicit content of the debate around walking simulators focuses on gameplay, the implicit stakes of the debate are deeply tied to issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. It is no coincidence that many walking simulators include LGBTQ representation or female protagonists. Even the basic claim that the mechanics of these games are insufficiently game-like has gendered implications. In games culture, masculinity is commonly associated with "hardcore" games, i.e., games with a heavy emphasis on combat and skilled gameplay, whereas femininity is associated with "casual" games, i.e., games that can be picked up by a wide variety of players and do not require extensive preexisting skill.[48] Though for many game studies scholars today, the question of what does or does not count as a video game seems passé, the backlash against so-called walking simulators demonstrates that the question of what makes a game "real" still has immediate political stakes for the place of diversity in the medium.[49]

What makes "walking simulator" a pejorative term? This seemingly simple insult serves as a window onto a set of unspoken cultural logics about what kinds of movements through time and space are valued within the chrononormative standards of video games. Game scholars like Alenda Chang and Miguel Penabella have observed that the term provides insights into attitudes within games culture around interactivity and environmentalism, to name just one of the issues that walking simulators raise.[50] Chang also points out that a more logical fit for the term walking simulator might be games like *QWOP*, described in chapter 3, which truly tasks the player with attempting to walk, or game-like interactions with biometric devices like the Fitbit. Yet the basic fact that this label functions as a term of derision speaks to a belief about *walking* itself as it appears in video games: that, when it is made the focus of gameplay, it is considered laughable, boring, or simply bad. This belief can be broken down into two basic sub-beliefs: first, that movement is insufficient to constitute meaningful gameplay, and second, that the movement found in so-called walking simulators is too slow. (A counterpoint to this might be the infamous *Desert Bus*, a game developed by

Penn & Teller in the mid-1990s, in which players drive in painstakingly slow real time between Tucson and Las Vegas—a game which, far from being derided by mainstream games culture, has a cult following within this same culture and was recently re-released for VR.)[51] Presumably, the gameplay elements that walking simulators are imagined to lack, in contrast to "real" games, are combat or other explicit obstacles: mechanics that would make the player not only a walker through the game terrain but also a conqueror.

Almost all critiques of walking simulators focus on the first sub-belief, that a video game should have more challenging interactive elements in order to count as a game. However, as the juxtaposition between walking simulators and speedrunning reveals, this second sub-belief—that walking simulators move too slowly—is of equal importance. Upon closer scrutiny, what divides walking simulators from other games, and therefore part of what divides games that are derided by games culture from those that are accepted, is a matter of pace. After all, though speedrunning communities represent only a small portion of games culture, speedrunning is generally considered a valid and laudable mode of play by mainstream gamers. By contrast, walking in a walking simulator is seen as disdainful. Coded into this belief system is a problematic hierarchy of gendered association within video games (running becomes associated with masculinity and straightness; walking becomes associated with femininity and queerness). Even this imagined divide between slow and fast must be brought into question. To assume that walking is so easy as to be banal, or to claim that the steady clip at which most characters in walking sims actually do walk is "slow," reflects an ablest worldview that takes for granted normative expectations about the speed of the body in motion.

Slow Strolls through Queer Time and Space

Despite the discriminatory beliefs behind the origins of the label, "walking simulator" is a term that is ripe for reclamation. On the one hand, resisting the pejorative connotations of the label represents an important step in claiming the validity of video games that invite players to move and explore rather than to fight. Yet, why accept the cultural logics that dictate that walking in a video game is a bad thing? Instead, I propose

that we flip the script on the gender and sexual politics of this genre. Rather than dismissing the term "walking simulator," we can reframe it and take seriously its queer implications. Indeed, walking simulator is actually a robust category with hundreds of games on both Steam and itch.io, online game publishing platforms, which suggests that many of those who make games (and especially small-scale, alternative games) are beginning to embrace this term. Walking simulators are already associated with women, queer folks, and other subjects who do not fit the image of the straight, cisgender, male gamer—both in terms of these games' content and their creators. What is more, as those who dislike walking simulators readily attest, these games are challenging the ontologies of the medium. In walking simulators then lies the potential to imagine visions of difference and resistance through play.

The mechanisms of walking simulators as *walking* games can be directly tied to longer histories of queer figures in motion. In particular, the flâneur has long been understood in relation to queerness. As represented in nineteenth-century French literature from authors like Charles Baudelaire and Honoré de Balzac, the flâneur slowly strolls the urban streets. The flâneur's purpose is not to get from one place to another, but rather to meander and observe. Though some scholars have applied the "flâneur" label to women and female characters, flâneurs are typically imagined to be men.[52] These men are also closely associated with dandyism and cruising, and thereby with queerness. In many ways, the figure of the flâneur parallels the player-character in a walking simulator. Amidst the bustle and speed of the increasingly modern city, the flâneur is notable for his slowness. This form of movement, the slow stroll, is core to the way that he interacts with the world. He is goal-oriented only to the extent that his goal is to wander. It is through wandering that he comes to know the city around him and the people in it. In this way, as for the player in a walking simulator, the flâneur's experience is primarily characterized by making meaning from experience via a constant but languid movement through both time and space. This movement stands in marked contrast to normative expectations—either for the urban dweller or the video-game character.

These parallels between walking simulators and the queer figure of the flâneur are far from coincidental. As can be seen through dialogues with queer theory, the gameplay of walking simulators is directly tied

to expressions of queer temporality and spatiality. In contrast to supposedly "real" games that allow players to move quickly and confront challenges, walking simulators insist on the value of the slow stroll, and thus they facilitate a genre of queer play. By structuring the player's experience around walking and observing, rather than running and fighting, these games disrupt the chrononormativity of video games. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam writes that "inaction and passivity" can be recategorized as "weapons of the weak" that enact resistance by "stalling the business of the dominant."[53] Inherent in the use of the term "walking simulator" as an insult is the belief that these games are characterized by inaction and passivity—i.e., that nothing substantial, in terms of gameplay, really happens in them. Yet, this is precisely what walking simulators do with that supposed inactivity: they stall the business of the dominant. By moving slowly, by lingering longer than game chrononormativity deems correct, the player-characters in these video games stall time and space. They take pleasure in tarrying as they pass gradually from area to area, often stopping to observe, refusing to rush through a game world or play according to a traditional tempo. In this way, the experience of walking simulators is queerly "out of synch" (Freeman's term) with heteronormative gameplay.

The resonances between walking simulators and theories of queer time and space also speak to what walking simulators, and the experience of going slowly in video games more generally, have in common with speedrunning. On the surface, it would seem that speedrunning and slow strolling are opposite approaches to playing video games. Speedrunners run; slow strollers walk. Speedrunners play to achieve a goal as quickly as possible, by necessity ignoring the nuances and distractions of the game world; slow strollers take their time, soaking in a game's details and tangents. Yet, crucially, what these forms of play have in common is that they both enact alternative—and indeed queer—relationalities to space and time. Both speedrunning and walking simulators resist the standard logics that determine how players should move through video games and at what speed. Just as going too fast can be understood as a mode of queer temporality, so can going too slowly. In each of these instances, the work of resisting chrononormativity and hegemonic logics about spatial relation is mapped directly onto the body, in the form of the in-game avatar who actually walks or runs across the

screen, and who jumps between glitches or halts in place to ponder the unfurling of the game world.

Through notions of non-normative time and space, it is also possible to imagine video games more broadly as enacting queer temporalities and spatialities. Even games that are played neither too fast nor too slowly can be understood as queer in their relation to hegemonic logics of time and space, as those logics exist outside of video games. Much of mainstream culture outside of games still considers video games to be a "waste of time." What if, as with the word "queer" and the term "walking simulator," we were to reclaim the notion that video games waste time? Halberstam, for instance, talks about "the feeling of time wasted, of inertia or time outside of capitalist propulsion" as an expression of queer temporality.[54] This is yet another way to bring queerness to games: to find value in the insults hurled at the medium and thereby disrupt the social system that sets the terms for what approach to time and space is right, and what approach is wrong. At the same time, video games add additional layers of complexity to the vision of chrononormativity put forth by queer theorists. In video games, players are often given multiple lives. Dying and starting again is actually part of the narrative of normative game progress. As compared to the expectations of society at large, this represents a distinctly non-chrononormative vision of movement through time and space. Yet, within the dominant standards of video games, chrononormativity takes on different characteristics—suggesting that queer versus "straight" relationships to temporality and spatiality can be multivalent, context-specific, and even contradictory.

Through queer theory, both speedrunning and slow strolling emerge as queer ways to play video games. Given speedrunning's connections to straight, male gamer culture and the pejorative association of walking simulators with issues of gender and sexuality, both may seem unlikely play practices to explore through queer lenses. Yet, once recast and reframed through conceptualizations of queer temporality and spatiality, they reveal themselves to enact expressions of alternative desires and logics of moving through time and space. Simultaneously, this work suggests additional new perspectives that could be productively brought to the study of speedrunning, walking simulators, and other forms of movement in games. Notable among these is disability studies. However, the possible routes for making sense of time and space in video games

Figure 7.3. An example of natural terrain used for multiplayer combat as depicted in *Halo 5* (Microsoft, 2015) promotional video. Screenshot by author.

are, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, as vast and diverse as the mechanisms of time and space in video games themselves. Like many areas of interest throughout this book, the messages communicated through experiences of time and space in games merit increased and ongoing investigation on the part of game studies and queer studies scholars alike.

Yet, even in arguing for the importance of queer time and space in video games, it is important to complicate this vision of nonchrononormativity. In chapter 5, I discussed the difference between failing *toward* or *against* a game. Here, too, in the context of queer temporality and spatiality, a player can move in accordance with or against a game's intended design. After all, in walking simulators, players move "too slowly" to conform to the normative expectations of video games as a medium—but, within the constructed system of each individual walking simulator, they are complying with the prescribed movements of the game. Yet, as speedrunning demonstrates, players can also bring this mode of queer play to other games, games that have been designed according to standard logics of temporal and spatial movement. When it is speedrun, *Super Mario Bros.* becomes a race course, its landscape twisted by the glitches that allow players to leap between levels. This

kind of emergent queer play can also be brought to video games by going intentionally slowly or even stopping. Many video games include areas that are not coded as important for the progression of gameplay. Players with basic video-game literacy know that they are supposed to rush through these spots in order to reach "useful" areas where items will be found or action will take place. When players choose to linger in supposedly unimportant corners of the game map, or simply stand still in a game world that is trying to drive them forward, they also "stall the business of the dominant."

I close with one specific example of this kind of emergent queer play, which demonstrates with particular poignancy the personal and political power of choosing to go slowly. In a recent conversation, a game designer with a long history in the games industry told the story of how she goes hiking in *Halo*. *Halo* (Bungie et al., 2001–2015) is a popular AAA first-person shooter series. While some *Halo* games include a single-player campaign mode, competitive multiplayer matches are the heart of *Halo*. These matches exemplify the type of violent gameplay that many from outside gaming imagine when they think of video games. Players carry a variety of weapons out in front of them, shooting and striking at each other in a race to rack up kills. The culture around *Halo* is distinctly "hardcore," hyperstraight, and hypermasculine. This game designer, by contrast, does not play *Halo* to fight. Instead, she reports that she uses the multiplayer online features of the game to go for long walks with her friends through the natural terrain of *Halo* levels (figure 7.3). In these moments, the spaces of the game, which are designed to maximize possibilities for dynamic clashes between players, are instead repurposed for slow, virtual strolls through nature. The time of gameplay is used not for violence or confrontation but for observing the carefully rendered landscape and conversing with friends. In its peaceful re-appropriation of the game, hiking in *Halo* represents a subversive act. Strolls through the countryside take on a notably political valence, recalling the walking of labor walkouts and protest marches. Even in this most heteronormative of video games, queer movements through time and space offer profound opportunities to play with alternative ways of being in the world.

Conclusion

Video Games' Queer Future: The Queer Games Avant-Garde

I began this book with a call to reimagine the history of video games. In order to make space for LGBTQ identities, lives, and desires in games today, I argued that we must turn backwards and lay claim to the queerness that has existed beneath the surface of digital games from their earliest forms. The assertion that "video games have always been queer" has served as a through-line and a rallying cry that resonates across my analyses of the many games discussed here. What drives this claim is the refusal to tell the story of diversity in gaming as it has always been told: as a history of exclusion. By taking up classics of the medium (like *Pong* and *Super Mario Bros.*) and long-standing fan favorites (like *Portal*, *Burnout*, and *Halo*), I have demonstrated that even those games whose assumed, established meanings seem time-tested and incontrovertible can be reinterpreted through a queer lens and made new. Looking to forms of queerness beyond representation, and specifically forms of queer play, has offered an important opportunity—for this work and for the work of queer game studies scholars to come—to tell a different narrative about gaming's past, one in which LGBTQ players have always belonged, even as they have been marginalized by mainstream games culture. To remake video games' past through queerness is an explicitly political project. It models and enacts a radical, alternative understanding of what games are, what they have been, what representation means in a video game, and who has the right to see themselves in games.

At the same time that this project has turned to the past, it has also been intimately tied to the present. Queer play, as a form of transformative work through which players are making video games queer, is happening all around us. Contemporary issues in gaming, such as the rise of harassment campaigns and the increasing yet often problematic corporate initiatives to bring diversity to games, have also served as a

backdrop to this critical project even at its most theoretical moments. These issues establish the immediate stakes of arguing for the place of queerness in games for the real, lived experiences of LGBTQ subjects. In this way, they give a sense of urgency to the work of establishing games as queer that feels very much of the here and now. This pressing need for engagement with the present as well as the past has been reflected in my reinterpretations of games that speak to recent trends in game development—including a number of independent video games like *Octodad*, *Realistic Kissing Simulator*, and so-called walking simulators. In addition, I have attempted to underscore contemporary player practices, like speedrunning, that are bringing queer experiences to games today, even if the games that are being "played queer" were released years ago. Through its emphasis on embodiment, intimacy, and affect, this research has likewise rooted itself in the present by foregrounding what it feels like to play games: their materiality, their queer pleasures, and their queer pains in the individual moment of now. Yet, as Adrienne Shaw and I have argued elsewhere, now-ness is always slipping into the past, and the present of games can never fully be separated from games' history.[1]

This conclusion represents a step in a different direction: toward the world to come. Rather than looking simply to the past or the present, it turns toward the future. What lies in store for queer video games, queer play, and the place of LGBTQ subjects in gaming? While the answer is unknown, I present here what I believe to be one of the crucial elements of the way forward—for queerness in video games, for video games themselves, and for the broader landscape of LGBTQ art-making and its presence in digital culture. In what follows, I offer highlights from the work of those who are bringing queerness to video games on a wide-reaching social scale, pushing the games industry in new directions and fundamentally changing how we understand the power and potential of the medium.

I am talking about what I call the "queer games avant-garde": a network of queer game-makers working individually or in small teams to make scrappy, impactful, and indeed revolutionary video games that relate directly to lived LGBTQ experiences. These games and their creators are not radical simply because of their inclusion of queer content. Many of these works are also innovative in their forms, interweaving

queer themes with queer design in order to challenge the normative logics that traditionally have dictated how games are played and how they communicate meaning. In this sense, the queer games avant-garde, like other avant-gardes before it, is pushing the boundaries of video games as an artistic medium. The queer games avant-garde also represents a fundamental shift in the ways that games are made. In contrast to the AAA games developed by large, risk-averse studios, these games are the indie-est of the indies. Often, they are built using software tools like Twine, which make game development accessible for creators without extensive backgrounds in coding, and turning to self-publishing distribution platforms like itch.io to share their work with the world.[2] As many have noted, these tools are opening the field of game-making to a much wider and more diverse pool of designers.[3] Though queer games are not the only works coming out of the phenomenon that Anna Anthropy describes as "the rise of the videogame zinesters," queer game-makers are among the most active, productive, and visible figures in this new wave.[4] Whether by creating games that relate directly to LGBTQ issues, or simply by creating games while queer, these folks are leading the charge toward a more politically engaged and indeed queerer future for video games.

The relationship between queerness and futurity is admittedly a messy one. Throughout this book, queer theory has served as a guiding framework, as well as a valuable point of friction, for making sense of sexuality, gender, and identity in games. Yet, in many instances, queer theory warns against narratives of progress and linear change in culture—especially when it comes to LGBTQ subjects and their history. To represent progress as a straight line, and even to privilege progress over an interest in the past or the present, runs the risk of silencing critical parts of queer experience: those darker, more complicated truths that do not fit neatly into the time line of a world that is "getting better." I think that the queer game-makers whose work is discussed here would agree that the relationship between video games, queerness, and the future is equally messy. However, queer theory, even in its most skeptical moments, does leave space for this kind of stumbling, complicating, uncertain, and yet hopeful futurity: a utopic vision that is impossible, perhaps, but crucial nonetheless. José Esteban Muñoz calls this the queerness that is "not yet here," sitting perpetually on the horizon.[5] Rather than

promoting hegemonic paradigms of progress, the longing of queer subjects for these "embarrassing utopias," as Elizabeth Freeman terms them, is a way of resisting the normative belief that a "better" future means a safer, simpler, and more useful one.[6] It is a strategy for setting our own terms for the future, as queer people, through fantasy and longing.

Even as I assert that the queer games avant-garde is showing us one possible path forward, I am not suggesting that path is, in any sense of the word, straight. Among the themes that have emerged across the analyses of video games included in this book is the complexity of queer movements: movements of desire bounced back and forth between paddles, movements of the body as it walks or wriggles, movements through walls via glitches and architectural orifices. This list goes on—but what it demonstrates is that such movements never advance simply forward. They proceed at odd angles, or they create rips in their environments and warps between spaces, or they linger so long on goal-less tasks that they appear not to proceed at all. The future of queerness in video games, led in part by the queer games avant-garde, will move in much the same way, I suspect. To an extent, this is how that thing called "progress" in the realm of video games and LGBTQ issues already moves: in fits and starts, in roundabout motions, in work that rushes in from the margin and is inevitably forced back out, in vectors of influence that are not always recognized or validated but are powerful all the same, in the passing of inspiration from today's queer game designers to tomorrow's queer game designers, who will continue to struggle with the idea of the future and their place within it.

The Queer Games Avant-Garde

The year 2012 marked the beginning of a rise of small-scale, indie queer games, many of them made by trans women and other LGBTQ creators: the frontline of the queer games avant-garde. As journalists, players, and other game-makers began to take notice, they gave this phenomenon many names, from the "queer games scene" to the "personal games movement" to (most commonly) the "queer games movement."[7] However, to call this a queer games "movement" is potentially misleading. The term suggests that the games in question are being produced by one specific, clearly defined community. In truth, the work that can be

associated with the queer games avant-garde emerges from a network of interpersonal, professional, geographic, and artistic connections that have been sometimes direct and other times indirect, sometimes strong and other times tenuous. For instance, some game-makers have now been producing work within this network for years, while others have stopped in briefly or produced a single game before moving on to other endeavors. For a period, Oakland, California served as a hub for this type of game-making. However, as rent prices have continued to rise in the Bay Area, several designers making queer work have moved to other cities—simultaneously creating a kind of queer games diaspora and also planting the seeds for new queer game communities in places like New York, Seattle, Portland, and Montreal. Many of the designers involved in the queer games avant-garde are in direct dialogue with one another. A sizeable percentage are (or have been) collaborators. Some are (or have been) close friends. Others are (or have been) romantic partners. Yet there are also game-makers whose work deserves to be considered part of this avant-garde whose personal connections to this network are tangential. In short, to establish definitive boundaries around who does or does not belong to this network would be a counterproductive task. It suffices to say that this avant-garde exists, that it is thriving against the odds, and that the force of its presence in the gaming world is becoming undeniable.

Why call these games and their creators an "avant-garde"? The term calls to mind a number of earlier artistic movements, some of which do have much in common with games, like dada and surrealism. However, through this implicit comparison, it also raises the ongoing and often reductionist question of whether games are art—a question that brings with it the problematic structures of legitimization that dictate who gets to decide the answer. Whether or not games should be considered art is not my primary concern here. I proceed from the basic assumption that games are, of course, art; if they do not always resemble art as it has been traditionally conceptualized and codified, that is all the better. At the same time, I believe there is something valuable in the idea of the "avant-garde." Avant-garde-ness has been defined in many ways. In *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*, Brian Schrank describes his conceptualization of avant-garde games as they differ from mainstream ones. Though there are elements of Schrank's book, such

as his dichotomies of political versus formal and radical versus complicit games, that are worth calling into question, Schrank's definition of avant-garde games could clearly be applied to the types of queer games I am highlighting here. "The avant-garde challenges or leads culture. The avant-garde opens up and redefines art mediums," writes Schrank.[8] As for avant-garde games, they "show how the medium can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people."[9] This is precisely true of today's queer games and queer game-makers. They are challenging and redefining what games can accomplish, bringing a more diverse range of content to games and to game design, and through their creative work making space for the "kinds of people" often overlooked by the game creators who came before.

Even as we celebrate the queer games avant-garde, however, it is important not to idealize it or reduce the struggles of queer game-makers by focusing exclusively on a vision of artistic "progress." These creators are often drastically underpaid for their labor. They are frequently the targets of harassment from reactionary sectors of games culture, and for this reason many have worked briefly in this area before deciding to leave games entirely. Even when their games are lauded by a wider gaming public, these games are commonly repackaged and repurposed in the name of the hegemonic interests. This has been the case, for instance, for a number of figures in the queer games avant-garde whose games are being widely labeled as "empathy games" even though, as I discussed in chapter 6, their creators have argued vehemently against empathy and the notion that a game can allow non-LGBTQ players to meaningfully "step into the shoes" of queer people.

Much as the perspectives and backgrounds of the creators who make up the queer games avant-garde differ, the topics that their games address are myriad and diverse. These topics include gender transition, transphobia, sex education, BDSM, polyamory, non-binary identities, abusive relationships, cruising, and hugging, to name only a few. The tone, aesthetics, and genres of these games also vary. Some are romantic, some unabashedly sexual, some subtle in their connection to queerness, some overt. Some are representational, others abstract. Many of these games are deeply personal and emerge out of the life experiences of their designers. Through my work on the annual Queerness and Games Con-

ference, I have had the honor of getting to know many of these game-makers. Among the most best-known outside of queer game circles are Anna Anthropy (*Dys4ia*, *Queers in Love at the End of the World*), Mattie Brice (*Mainichi*, *Eat*), and Porpentine (*Howling Dogs*), all of whom have been profiled by major news outlets, evidencing the increased visibility that their games have brought to LGBTQ issues in video games. Many other artists working in this area have not received the same level of mainstream recognition but are nonetheless producing engaging, moving, strange, silly, and above all deeply queer games. Some of these include Aevee Bee, Nicky Case, Naomi Clark, merritt kopas, DREAMFEEL, Christine Love, Andi McClure, and Liz Ryerson.

For the purposes of this conclusion, I have chosen to focus on three game-makers: Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer, Robert Yang, and Seanna Musgrave. I have selected these three because their works are among my personal favorites in the queer games avant-garde, and because they each merit considerably more scholarly attention than they have yet received. Together, their games give a sense for the wide range of work taking place in this area. They also illustrate how the queer games avant-garde is bringing queerness to video games on a scale that reaches out beyond their individual games by inspiring alternative visions of how video games can represent difference. This too is a form of "playing queer": the invitation to players and games of all kinds to find different pleasures, different identities, and different futures in video games.

Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer: Non-Binary Gender Identities and Beyond

Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer (they/them pronouns) is a game designer, new media artist, and musician. They are best known for their 2013 game *Dominique Pamplemousse* in *It's All Over Once the Fat Lady Sings!*, a hand-crafted, stop-motion, musical point-and-click adventure about a gender non-binary private detective (figure C.1). In addition, they are also a prolific maker of interactive experience of many sorts, including work that blends text, visual elements, and performance. Much of this work is inspired by earlier game genres, such as text adventure games. Among the characteristics and themes that tie together Squinky's diverse and growing collection of works are an interest in queer and

Figure C.1. *Dominique Pamplemousse* (Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer, 2013). Screenshot by author.

genderqueer identities, reflections on interpersonal communication and awkwardness, music, and humor. To date, their work has been the subject of two solo shows, including the summer 2016 "Squinky Hates Video Games," held at the New York games gallery Babycastles.[10] At times, Squinky's work is deeply personal or expressly political, directly responding to issues of discrimination and social justice in video games. At other times, it is silly, lighthearted, with a penchant for sparkles and a catchy tune. Often, these two modes overlap in the same games. When Squinky speaks about their work at conferences or other events, their presentations often involve mid-talk dance breaks. In this way, Squinky's work strikes a balance between addressing the difficulties faced by queer subjects, along with many other folks, while also inviting players to enjoy the experience of exploring these issues.

Along with its claymation aesthetic and the penchant of its characters to break out into song, Squinky's *Dominique Pamplemousse* is most often discussed as a game with a non-binary protagonist.[11] Dominique, a down-and-out detective hired to solve the mystery of a missing rock star, does not have a definitive gender identity—at least not one that the player learns—and other characters often communicate their confusion as to how to address Dominique. Yet, to an extent, the emphasis

on Dominique's non-binary gender from the games press has obscured the other ways that queerness operates in this game—as well as numerous intersectional issues, like race and socioeconomic disparity. The white characters who hire Dominique (Dominique themself appears to be a person of color, though the question of their race is not explicitly addressed) are represented as comically wealthy, while Dominique cannot even pay the rent on their small, mouse-ridden apartment. Among the other notable but less commonly addressed aspects of *Dominique Pamplemousse* is the intimate quality that comes from the fact that all elements of the game—from the clay characters, to the diorama-like, cardboard sets, to the tuba music that plays in the background of many scenes—were made by Squinky. Their voice, their humor, and quite literally their fingerprints appear throughout the game. The result is an experience that feels material, human, and contemporary even as it draws its cues from polished, long-established genres like the film noir (the entire game is in black and white). In the face of the grandiose narratives found in most mainstream games, *Dominique Pamplemousse*'s everyday-ness is just as much a challenge to accepted tropes of mainstream video games as Dominique's gender. When the game first begins, for instance, the player must wait to use Dominique's clunky old laptop until they can steal signal from their neighbor's wifi. This is not to say that gender is not an important element of *Dominique Pamplemousse*. However, the game itself goes beyond the simple inclusion of a non-binary character. At times, the confusion around whether Dominique is a "sir" or a "madam" actually acts as a game mechanic, allowing Dominque to pass for male or female as the situation requires. Moments of gender trouble, so to speak, are also some of the game's funniest moments. When a character asks whether Dominique is a boy or a girl, Dominique replies, "Neither, seeing how I went through puberty ages ago."

Squinky's 2015 work *Coffee: A Misunderstanding* incorporates many of the same themes as *Dominique Pamplemousse*, including gender identity, performance, and humor. In most other ways, however, *Coffee* looks like a very different game. Its subject is a conversation between a web comic artist (Artemis) and a fan (Zeff) who follows Artemis on Twitter; its setting is a café adjacent to an event venue where a fictional

convention called AwesomeCon is taking place. The scene begins when Zeff approaches Artemis and asks to sit down and chat. As Squinky themself has written about the piece, *Coffee* was inspired by the types of social interactions that take place at video-game conferences: sometimes unpleasant, sometimes touching, but almost always awkward.[12] Combining video-game elements and interactive theater, the game is played in rounds, with four volunteers from the audience as participants per round. Each participant is given an iPod Touch, on which their lines will be displayed. Audience members volunteer to take on the role either of the "puppets" playing Artemis and Zeff or the "drivers" who make the decisions about what the two will say to one another. By nature, this setup lends itself to starts and stops in conversation, mirroring the uncomfortable jitters of the interaction between Zeff and Artemis. This scene is played through multiple times by different audience members, and new information is revealed each time. Depending on the dialogue choices the participants make, it is likely that audience will eventually learn that neither Artemis nor Zeff are cisgender and that both identify as queer. As the characters stumble through a discussion about their identities, the audience gets to know them and laughs along with their bumpy moments. Squinky has observed that *Coffee* particularly resonates with queer audience members, many of whom can relate to Artemis and Zeff's experiences around shifting gender identities. Writes Squinky, "The ability to act out familiar situations to exaggerated comedic ends seemed to be particularly cathartic."[13]

It is yet another game of Squinky's that I find best encompasses the most striking elements in their work and the particular approach to representing queer experience that their games embody: *Quing's Quest* (2014). *Quing's Quest* is a sci-fi, tongue-in-cheek, text-based adventure game made using Twine (figure C.2). It is also a direct response to #GamerGate. In this game, players take on the role of a gender nonbinary royal escapee from the planet Videogames, which has been overrun by invading Misogynerds. The Misogynerds are now in hot pursuit of the protagonist's stolen ship, the Social Justice Warrior. (Among the crimes prosecuted by the new overlords of Videogames are "failing to conform to gender norms" and "snogging the wrong kinds of people.") On the one hand, this is a vision of a video-game culture post-apocalypse. Much of the game is dedicated to reflecting with nostalgia on how beau-

Figure C.2. *Quing's Quest: The Death of Videogames* (Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer, 2014). Screenshot by author.

tiful and full of promise games used to be. In the game's final moments, faced with the choice of whether to blow up Videogames, the protagonist considers trying to save the planet—but quickly decides that there is nothing left to save. This is a dark message for the medium and the place of queer and otherwise marginalized creators within it. Yet the tone of *Quing's Quest*, in typical Squinky fashion, is colorful, dynamic, and full of life. Whereas many Twine games have a minimalist aesthetic, *Quing's Quest* is visually and aurally vibrant. The text shimmers and sparkles; upbeat lounge music plays in the background. When the protagonist and their sidekick face off against the Misogynerd police, they defeat them using the power of dance. One by one, the police officers explode in bursts of glitter. Indeed, the game's message is ultimately one that mixes sadness and anger with hope. After the player blows up the planet of Videogames, the following text is displayed: "You can see the beginnings of a new planet forming. . . . You see what it might become one day: a place of acceptance and abundance and freedom and justice and love and happiness. All you have to do now is build it."

Robert Yang: Spanking, Cruising, Selfies, and Games about Sex between Men

Based in New York City, Robert Yang (he/him pronouns) is an indie game developer and teacher. Though Yang has been designing games since 2008, he has received the most attention for his more recent work, much of which includes overt gay themes and unapologetically sexual content. Some of these games include *Succulent* (2015), which Yang describes as a "small game about watching a dude slowly/erotically stick a thing in his mouth," and *Stick Shift* (2015), a "driving game about pleasuring a gay car and bringing it to climax"—along with *Hurt Me Plenty* (2014), *Rinse and Repeat* (2015), and *Cobra Club* (2015), which are discussed at greater length below.[14] As of this writing, Yang's newest game is *The Tearoom* (2017). Set in a men's restroom, the game harkens back to gay male cruising cultures like those described by Samuel Delaney and Laud Humphreys.[15] Each of these games is made using the same development engine and a number of shared assets—like the ubiquitous buff, scruffy, dark-haired, white, male character who appears in each of these games and rarely is fully clothed. A selection of Yang's games is available on Steam (though Steam has censored some of his work), the online game distribution platform, where the front page on his personal store comes with the warning: "Content in this product may not be appropriate for all ages, or may not be appropriate for viewing at work."[16] The page itself features a screenshot taken from first-person perspective of a man with no shirt on, a beer resting suggestively on his stomach, and a noticeable bulge in his jeans. Among the game-makers in the queer games avant-garde, Yang is arguably the boldest in his direct, even pornographic representation of queer sex and other erotic exchanges. Yang has also spoken about the importance of increasing sexual content in video games. "I make games about sex . . . because I feel no one else will," he told GamesIndustry.biz in 2016.[17] "By and large, even AAA games you might associate with gay sex aren't really about gay sex. I firmly believe we can all do better."

In the few short minutes that they take to play, Yang's games explore longing, consent, and the gay male body. *Hurt Me Plenty*, for example, is a game about communication and kink—or, in Yang's words, "spanking the hell out of this dude." The player takes on the role of a top negoti-

ating and delivering a spanking to a man in his underwear who waits on his hands and knees. To move their character's outstretched hand, players flick the mouse: either softly, medium, or hard, depending on the desires of the sub. The game foregrounds the importance of listening to one's partner (a poster in the background of the scene reads "No power exchange without negotiation"), and firmly chastises players who continue spanking even after they have been asked to stop. If they repeatedly ignore their partner's safeword, players are actually blocked from playing *Hurt Me Plenty* itself. Their copy of the game goes into lockdown for 18 days and cannot be accessed. This communicates a firm message about the importance of consensual kink. Players who cannot be trusted to respect the boundaries of this negotiation also cannot be trusted to play the game. Along with other examples of work from the queer games avant-garde like merritt kopas's *Consensual Torture Simulator* (2014), Anna Anthropy's *Mighty Jill Off* (2008), and Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016), *Hurt Me Plenty* is one of a limited number of video games to represent BDSM, kink, and forms of sexual expression that mix pain with pleasure. Kinkiness is a mode of queerness that has not received the same level of social recognition as other forms of LGBTQ identity. Yet kink represents a rich, vibrant set of practices and communities with direct ties to a variety of queer issues. As the queer games avant-garde continues to push the boundaries of representation, hopefully kink will have an increased presence in this work.

A second game of Yang's, *Rinse and Repeat*, takes players into the group showers in a men's locker room. As the game begins, the player looks around to see a row of identical naked men rinsing themselves off along one wall. In an instant, the game switches into a dramatic slow-motion view as another naked man—wearing a pair of sunglasses, his genitals blurred—walks toward the player and stands next to him in the shower. By moving the mouse, the player helps soap up and scrub down the man (figure C.3). While the player scrubs, the man responds by moaning or offering words of encouragement like, "Yeah . . . work that shit." If players rub too softly or too roughly, red text appears instructing them to change techniques. As in *Hurt Me Plenty*, communication and consent are key to whether the player succeeds in *Rinse and Repeat*. When the player has done their job well, trust builds between the character and the man, and a bar of hearts begins to fill at the bottom of the

Figure C.3. *Rinse and Repeat* (Robert Yang, 2015). Screenshot by author.

screen. Over time, players progress from washing the man's back to his abs, to his ass, to his biceps. If players wait long enough, disco lights turn on, the player is asked to wash the man's face, and his eyes fill up with a rush of the words, "I wish we could just live in this feeling forever." In this sudden, surreal shift, multiple disembodied hands appear to stroke his face—and the game ends in a confusing flurry. For a game about washing off a wet, muscular stranger at the gym, the queer implications of *Rinse and Repeat* are more complicated than they may initially seem. On one level, the game depicts gay male erotic interactions, which (as Yang himself asserts) rarely appear in video games. On another level, this is a game that is not afraid to challenge the logics of representation. As they progress through the various stages of washing the man's body, players likely imagine that they are working their way to a climax that involves genital contact. Instead, the game culminates in a dreamlike scene, the queerness of which lies in the fact that it is at once intimate and, by any traditional characterization of intimacy, deeply strange.

As in *Rinse and Repeat*, gay male hookup culture is also the subject of *Cobra Club*, Yang's game about taking "dick pics" and sharing them on a dating app reminiscent of Grindr. Much of the gameplay consists of trying to snap a good photo of the player-character's body, which is naked and initially seen in the mirror from the waist down. Play-

ers can adjust their skin color, camera filters, and level of erection. In a special, semi-secret mode, they can also adjust the size of their penis and testicles, and make their genitals stretch and point at odd angles. Though the character's face is blurred, he is clearly standing in a family bathroom, with a framed needlepoint hung over the toilet that reads, "God bless our home." At one point, his mother knocks on the door and asks, "Hello, are you done in there?"; at another, she admits that she knows he is taking "penis pictures" and assures him that she loves him anyway. Throughout the game, computer-generated chat messages from other app users pop up on the player's screen. Players can flirt and send photos, though those photos eventually get stolen, supposedly posted on Tumblr, and eventually confiscated by the government (for reasons that are never quite clear). While *Cobra Club* shares many of the same themes as *Hurt Me Plenty* and *Rinse and Repeat*, it also highlights Yang's sense of humor. It simultaneously pokes fun at and revels in "dick pic" culture, making the gay male body the site of play and suggesting that queer erotic practices are taking place behind closed bathroom doors in even the seemingly straightest of households.

Seanna Musgrave: Analogue Play and Queer Visions of Virtual Reality

Seanna Musgrave (she/her pronouns) is a game designer based in Portland, Oregon. She is part of the Portland Immersive Media Group, which works primarily in experimental approaches to virtual reality (VR), though she has also produced work outside of the collective. Of the three queer games avant-garde artists discussed here, Musgrave is the most recent to enter into the work of queer game-making. Though her portfolio is not yet as extensive as that of Squinky or Yang, the pieces she has designed and collaborated on to date represent valuable additions to the discussion around queer games. They point, for instance, toward the place of analog game design in the expression of queerness, as well as the queer games avant-garde's growing engagement with and reimagining of VR. In a recent artist's statement, Musgrave writes that her interests include "exploring the boundaries of games and interactive art, new technologies such as AR, VR and AI [augmented reality, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence] and how they will affect everyone,

Figure C.4. Suggested body part card images for *Dysforgiveness* (Seanna Musgrave and Laura E. Hall, 2015). Image reprinted with permission from the designer.

and new ways to find personal connection." Musgrave's work has been exhibited at events like the independent games festival IndieCade and the Queerness and Games Conference, as well as at galleries and other art spaces in the Pacific Northwest. The two games of Musgrave's that I address here are very different in form, but they both speak in meaningful ways to the techniques and potential of extended modes of queer game-making.

The first of these two games is *Dysforgiveness* (2015), which Musgrave developed in collaboration with game designer Laura E. Hall. Musgrave and Hall describe *Dysforgiveness* as a game "about changing your body through physical, intimate collaboration with friends."[18] The game is entirely non-digital, with a DIY feel, and is played by a small group of players. At the beginning of the game, each player is given a set of cards with hand-drawn images of body parts, such as breasts, nipples, genitals, and pubic hair (figure C.4). These cards are attached to the players' clothes using Velcro. Players also receive a card that represents their own ideal body schemas: which parts they would like to go where. Now the players must work together to reposition and exchange their cards. Be-

cause they cannot use their hands to move the cards, players must press their bodies against one another and transfer the cards using the Velcro. By design, the *Dysforgiveness* challenges notions of personal space, and players must explicitly communicate their needs and mutually consent to their plans before touching. The goal, in Musgrave and Hall's words, is for each player to "get as close to their own ideal bodies and possible, and to help their friends get their ideal bodies too." Whether they will ever fully achieve their ideal body remains an open question, but along the way they are likely to experience a telling mixture of closeness, camaraderie, appreciation, awkwardness, self-consciousness, and frustration.

In a certain sense, the game's relation to queerness is clear. *Dysforgiveness* explicitly translates elements of the experience of body and gender dysphoria into gameplay. The game brings into question the assumption that the bodies we are born with are the bodies that feel right to us and suggests an alternate version of the world in which subjects can swap parts with friends in a kind of free and open exchange. However, the game's queerness also lies in its physicality and the kinds of intimacy it creates. The body part cards are hand-drawn, and, in their promotional material, Musgrave and Hall encourage others to make their own sets of cards. This tangibility is reflected in the touch between players. Even the game's more fumbling moments have meaning. I have had the opportunity to watch play-throughs of *Dysforgiveness* twice, and both times it seemed to me that players often struggled with the Velcro itself, which can sometimes either refuse to stick or let go at inopportune moments. I found that this complicated the more utopian implications of the game in valuable ways. Even when players communicated effectively, agreed on their goals, and pressed their bodies together at just the right angle, the Velcro would sometimes refuse to budge, or body parts would fall to the ground. These moments seemed to me like reminders of the actual difficulties of changing one's body and achieving a personal ideal, recalling the many legal, financial, medical, and cultural obstacles that transgender folks face around hormonal transition and gender confirmation surgery.

Standing in productive contrast to *Dysforgiveness* is Musgrave's *VR Spa: Animal Massage* (2016). *VR Spa* is a project of the Portland Immersive Media Group. At a moment when VR has skyrocketed to prominence

as the supposed new frontier of mainstream gaming, projects like this represent an intervention in the uses of the medium. More an interactive experience than a traditional game, the project involves a number of short, soothing activities that players interact with using the Vive VR headset—such as standing in a suburban backyard and blowing leaves, or laying on a massage table in the open air, surrounded by palm trees. In her statement for the piece, Musgrave describes *VR Spa* as "relaxing and surreal." *Animal Massage*, on which Musgrave served as lead designer, is one of the components of *VR Spa*. Players engage with the experience of *Animal Spa* by laying down in a comfortable, padded spot, wearing the VR headset, and looking around them at a soothing landscape. Meanwhile, Musgrave introduces real-time elements that blur the line between the physical world and the game world. Among these elements are what the player sees as two kittens, who appear to paw and cuddle with the player. Out of the game, the kittens are represented by two fuzzy mittens that Musgrave wears on her hands; these map to the kittens' in-game movement. Musgrave sits quietly and closely beside players, brushing their arms and cheeks with the mittens, creating the impression that the soft, furry kittens are touching the player in the game.

What makes *VR Spa*, and *Animal Massage* in particular, unique among existing VR work is that it resists normative expectations about the uses of virtual reality by designing experiences that are at once political, calming, and even bizarre. *Animal Massage* is intentionally designed to minimize player movement, which is the main cause of VR motion sickness, a widespread problem with current VR technologies that has been shown to disproportionately affect women players.[19] In the face of corporate claims about VR's potential to create unprecedented levels of player immersion in games focused on shooting and other forms of violence, *VR Spa* offers an alternative, deliberately peaceful vision for the types of affecting experiences that VR can provide. Though *Animal Massage* does not include explicitly queer content or speak directly to LGBTQ issues, as *Dysforgiveness* does, it resonates in compelling ways with the themes that emerge from the queer games avant-garde. Among these themes are intimacy and the material relationship between designer and player. Musgrave uses her own body (i.e., her mittened hand) to bring physical sensation to gameplay. Yet this closeness between Mus-

grave and her player is also rendered delightfully absurd. Where have these kittens come from, who are suddenly nuzzling the player? Due to technological constraints, the mapping of the mittens to the kittens is imperfect, and at times they seem to glitch and jump. These charming, surreal moments suggest an approach to virtual reality that is notably queer—giving heteronormative, hypermasculine tropes of violence in video games a backseat to other forms of pleasure, like laying back and allowing oneself to be immersed in the love of virtual kittens. In this way, Musgrave's work demonstrates how the queer games avant-garde is working—and might increasingly work—in forms that blur the physical and the digital in order to explore hybrid experiences of queerness.

Video Games' Queer Future

Though the works of these three game-makers differ in many ways, together they suggest a picture of the themes that emerge from the queer games avant-garde. Some of these themes are similar to what we might expect from a network of games and creators who are explicitly engaging with LGBTQ issues. Questions of gender identity appear in a number of these works, for example, as in Squinky's *Dominique Pamplemousse* and *Quing's Quest* and Musgrave's *Dysforgiveness*. Queer bodies also feature prominently here, most notably in Yang's games, including *Hurt Me Plenty*, *Rinse and Repeat*, and *Cobra Club*, but also in the body-swapping mechanics of Musgrave's analogue game. Other themes that connect these works are subtler, yet no less central. Queer pleasure plays an important role here, though this pleasure takes many forms. In *Rinse and Repeat*, it is the erotic pleasure of showering with other men, whereas in *Animal Massage* it is the pleasure of calm and affectionate contact in a medium that much more often features heteronormative aggression.

A number of themes also appear across these works that extend beyond what we might expect of queer games. Presence and performance are among these themes. They are most visible in Squinky's *Coffee: A Misunderstanding* and Musgrave's kitten-mitten mechanic in *VR Spa*. Humor, playfulness, and a tangible materiality (whether in the form of a claymation fingerprint or a smack to a character's backside) are also notable forces in these works. While queerness is a crucial part of each

of these games, they also share that they situate that queerness within larger worlds of experience and meaning. In this way, they offer representations of LGBTQ subjects whose lives are defined by more than their genders or sexual identities. This point is key, because it reminds us not to pigeonhole or tokenize the game-makers in the queer games avant-garde by reducing their work to only its queer elements.

These games represent a fraction of the small-scale, queer games that are currently pushing the medium of video games in new directions. However, precisely because this selection can only gesture toward the full range of queer games being made today, it also demonstrates the wealth of ways in which creators in the queer games avant-garde are bringing queerness to video games. In 2013, when my co-organizers and I began work on the first Queerness and Games Conference, we were often met with skepticism from both academics and developers, who seemed to believe that the possibility space at the intersection of LGBTQ issues and video games was limited at best. As the diversity of this work evidences, however, games in fact offer a nearly infinite array of opportunities for reflecting on and expressing genders, sexualities, identities, and desires—even, and perhaps especially, those that do not conform to the hegemonic norms long imposed on video games. Unlike AAA video games that often include LGBTQ content for reasons of commercial gain, these games have made a commitment to social justice, political engagement, and that thing called "diversity" on their own terms.

If this is the future of video games, the future of video games is queer. Queerness describes a way of remaking the world as well as a way of desiring within it. Indeed, to call these games and their creators part of an "avant-garde" suggests that they are at the forefront of the medium. If these games do in fact give us a glimpse of the landscape of video games to come, that landscape will be a place that explores and embraces a much more inclusive vision of what it means to play and who has the right to see themselves represented in games. It will also come with an ongoing reimagining of what lies beyond representation and what representation means. This will toward an alternative futurity, this interest in a horizon that is not yet reached, can also be identified in these games themselves. Yet the visions of the future they present are ambivalent. In *Quing's Quest*, making games and games culture more inclusive first requires nothing short of destroying video games as we know them

today. These games remind us to beware the narrative of progress that promises that video games will simply get better. Instead, these games provide us with models for a path forward that twists, turns, and looks backwards even as it moves ahead. These models take distinctly queer yet nonetheless hopeful approaches to the future.

Much as queer game studies remains grounded in the lives of LGBTQ subjects who make and play games even as it dialogues with queer theory, this future is not an abstract one. The elements of queer game analysis, design, and play that seem most theoretical are actually among those with the most immediate impact on video games and those who care about them. Every day, I see more and more students—the same students who will soon go on to be the next generation of game developers—take up the work of queer game design. Those who are already progressive in their thinking know that representation matters: not just LGBTQ representation, but also the representation of people of color, of diverse body types, of non-neurotypical people, and many more. Yet, especially for those students who themselves identify as queer, what most energizes them is the idea that queerness as an *ethos* can be discovered in and brought to video games: that they can design games, interpret them, and play them queerly. I see this same passion ignited in the work of queer game studies scholars, who also are steadily increasing in number. Even in the face of reactionary outcry from mainstream games culture, this longing toward queer thinking that has been ignited moves us toward a future for games and games scholarship that places identity front and center and boldly insists that video games are always political. It lays claim to the right of queer scholars, game-makers, and players to tell their own stories about video games and the place of queerness within them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the product of many years of thinking about, talking about, writing about, and doing community organizing around the intersection of queerness and video games. It was written primarily during the fall of 2016, but threads within it span my time as a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Southern California, and now as an assistant professor at the University of California, Irvine. My many thanks go to the individuals and programs that supported my work at all three institutions, without whom the writing of this book would not have been possible.

Thank you to the Berkeley Center for New Media for being a much-needed locus of interdisciplinary scholarship and for fostering this work in its earliest forms. Thank you to Berkeley professor Abigail De Kosnik, whose mentorship and enthusiasm continue to guide me in my path as a digital media studies scholar. Thank you to the USC Provost's Postdoctoral Scholars Program, which gave me the opportunity to spend two years among a truly amazing group of game-makers, educators, and students in the Interactive Media and Games Division. Thank you to Tracy Fullerton and Richard Lemarchand, who oversaw my work at USC with encouragement and insight. Thank you to the Donald Bren School of Computer and Information Sciences and the Department of Informatics at UC Irvine, and in particular to my chair professor André van der Hoek, for believing in the importance of my writing and allowing me to complete my postdoc before beginning my tenure-track position, during which time I wrote this book.

What I love most dearly about doing the work of queer game studies is the vibrant sense of community that it has brought into my life. The annual Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), of which I have had the honor of serving as lead organizer from 2013 to 2017, has been an invaluable site of support and energy for me as I have explored this network of LGBTQ issues and video games. Many inspiring game-makers,

scholars, and activists have served as my collaborators on our ever-evolving team of conference organizers. They have also become, in the process, some of my dearest friends. My heartfelt thanks go to Jasmine Aguilar, Mattie Brice, Chelsea Howe, Christopher Goetz, Terran Pierola, Teddy Diana Pozo, Chuck Rosloff, Dietrich "Squinky" Squinkifer, and Zoya Street, the organizers who have worked with me to build the event between 2013 and 2017, as well as to the hundreds of speakers, arcade presenters, and volunteers (and the thousands of attendees!) who have made QGCon the beautiful, temporary queer games utopia that I am proud to call my home.

Queer game studies is collaborative by nature. It is not enough to write about deconstructing systems of power and competition; we must also live this ethos and support one another. Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to work with and learn from an exceptionally supportive network of fellow queer game studies scholars. They have made me a better feminist, activist, and citizen as well as a better scholar. I am particularly grateful to Adrienne Shaw, my co-editor on the volume *Queer Game Studies* (2017), Teddy Diana Pozo and Christopher Goetz, my co-editors on the "Queerness and Video Games" special section of the journal *Camera Obscura* (September 2017), and Amanda Phillips, my co-editor on the forthcoming "Queerness and Video Games" special issue of the journal *Game Studies*. In addition, my thanks go out to the many scholars and game-makers who have trusted me as an editor and an advocate for their work.

A number of individuals have helped me refine this project as it has reached its present form. I am grateful to Eric Zinner, Lisha Nadkarni, and Dolma Ombadykow at NYU Press, as well as to Karen Tongson and Henry Jenkins, the editors of the Postmillennial Pop series. Thank you to my manuscript reviewers, whose insights were invaluable, and to T. L. Taylor for her helpful feedback. Thank you to Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, who worked with my piece "Playing to Lose" for its first appearance in their collection *Gaming Representation*, as well as to Charles Morris and Thomas Nakayama, who were the editors of my article "No Fun" when it was first published in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. Parts of my introduction were inspired by writing I did for the journal *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, for which Kara Keeling served as my editor and guide. Thank you to all.

Finally, my thanks go to those loved ones who have helped make this book a reality in their own ways. Thank you, Eli Peterson, for making me feel like a person on days when I am lost in writing. Thank you, Kathryn Levine, for being the best graduate school compatriot that a queer upstart could ask for. Thank you, Scott Jon Siegel, for your unbridled encouragement of my work. Thank you, Jeffrey Ruberg, for the fact that you keep a copy of *Queer Game Studies* next to your bed—and for that one time, after you had spent the weekend volunteering for QGCon, that you told me that, even if you weren't my brother, you would still think I was really cool.

* * *

Portions of this book have been previously published. A slightly shortened version of chapter 5 appeared in Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (2017). A similarly shortened version of chapter 6 appeared in the *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2, no. 2 (2015): 108–124.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Flanagan, "The Complete History of LGBT Video Game Characters."
2 Puar, "In the Wake of It Gets Better."
3 Love, *Feeling Backward*, 10.
4 Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 224.
5 Fron et al., "The Hegemony of Play," 1.
6 Jones, *Gaming in Color*.
7 Wingfield, "Feminist Critics of Video Games."
8 Berrey, "Diversity Is for White People."
9 Taylor, *Play between Worlds*, 113.
10 Janiuk, "Gaming Is My Safe Space."
11 Baume, "Why Gaming's 'Breakout' Gay Character Matters."
12 Frank, "Overwatch's New Comic Confirms Game's First Queer Character."
13 Crecente, "Varus."
14 The LGBTQ Video Games Archive is available at https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/; the Queerly Represent Me project is available at http://www.queerlyrepresent.me/.
15 Ruberg, "Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content," 168.
16 Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.
17 Malkowski and Russworm, *Gaming Representation*, 2.
18 Higgins, "Is the Word 'Queer' Offensive?"
19 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*; Edelman, *No Future*; Stockton, *The Queer Child*.
20 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.
21 Kagen, "Walking Simulators," 282.
22 Chess, *Ready Player Two*, 4.
23 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*; Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*.
24 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Aarseth, *Cybertext*.
25 Taylor, *Play between Worlds*, 9; Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle"; Juul, *Half-Real*, 168.
26 Examples of this abound, but perhaps the most widely discussed is the independent game *Depression Quest* (2013), for which its designer Zoë Quinn has received ongoing harassment. Numerous forum threads and YouTube videos have been dedicated to angry diatribes about why Quinn's game should not count as a game—for example, a Steam thread titled "This is not a game." Thread started August

25, 2014, accessed October 7, 2016, https://steamcommunity.com/app/270170/discussions/0/3522158465415033O/.

27 Flanagan and Nissenbaum, *Values at Play*, 3; Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 223.
28 Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*.
29 Kennedy, "Lara Croft."
30 Aarseth, *Cybertexts*, 19–21; Galloway, *Gaming*, 18; Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 328.
31 Shaw and Ruberg, "Imagining Queer Game Studies," x.
32 Phillips, "Welcome to *My* Fantasy Zone."
33 Chang, "Love Is in the Air."
34 Nakamura, "Queer Female of Color."
35 Clark and kopas, "Queering Human-Game Relations."
36 Lauteria, "Ga(y)mer Theory."
37 McDonald, *Digital Love*.
38 Cullen, "Who Watches the Overwatchmen?"
39 Cross, "The Nightmare Is Over," 180.
40 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 5.
41 Williams et al., "The Virtual Census," 820.
42 Malkowski and Russworm, *Gaming Representation*, 2.
43 Ibid., 3.
44 Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 39; Sundén, "A Queer Eye on Transgressive Play," 174.
45 Alder and St. Patrick, "Beyond Representation."
46 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 22.
47 Sedgwick, *Between Men*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
48 Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 4; Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, vii.
49 Stuart, "Video Games and Art."
50 Baume, "Did Dragon Age?"
51 Greer, "Playing Queer."
52 Taylor, "Play as Transformative Work"; Schleiner, *The Player's Power*.
53 Galloway, *Gaming*, 125.
54 Consalvo, *Cheating*, 2.
55 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 39.
56 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvii.
57 Keeling, "Queer OS"; Gaboury, "A Queer History of Computing"; cárdenas, "Shifting Futures."
58 Lumb, "The Bizarre History of Vibrating Controllers"; Yang, "On 'Feminist-WhorePurna.'"
59 Welles, "On Minorities and Outliers."
60 Entertainment Software Association, "Essential Facts."

CHAPTER 1. BETWEEN PADDLES

1 Wiegman and Wilson, "Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," 3.
2 Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, xiv–xv.

3 Ibid., 25.
4 Sarkeesian, "Ms. Male Character."
5 Ochalla, "Ms. Pac-Man Used to Be a Guy."
6 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 50.
7 Ibid., 21.
8 Ibid., viii.
9 Ibid., 66.
10 While the established works of queer theory that have drawn from *Between Men* are too numerous to list here, some of the most notable examples among them are: Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 55; Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xiv; Doty, *Out in Culture*, 169.
11 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 144.
12 See for example Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation."
13 Segdwick, *Between Men*, 17.
14 McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies*, 1.
15 Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*; Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*.
16 Marks, *Touch*, xi.
17 Ibid., xiii.
18 Ibid., xvi.
19 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 2, 22.
20 Ibid., 2.
21 Cerankowski and Milks, *Asexualities*.
22 Turkle, *Alone Together*, 1.
23 Levy, *Love and Sex with Robots*, 22.
24 Leigh, "Mediated Sexuality in ASMR Videos."
25 Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, xvii.
26 Kafai and Fields, *Connected Play*.
27 DiSalvo, "Gaming Masculinity," 110.
28 Bagnall, "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies," 140.
29 Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 6.
30 Goldberg, *All Your Base Are Belong to Us*, 26.
31 Payne and Alilunas, "Regulating the Desire Machine."
32 Macklin and Sharp, *Games, Design and Play*, 35.
33 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 51.
34 Ibid., 52–53.
35 Ibid., 53.
36 Alexander, "Playing Outside," 56.
37 See, for example, Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 40–44.
38 Kennedy, "Lara Croft."
39 Sarkeesian, "Women as Background Decoration."
40 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 50.
41 Ibid., 53.

42 Ibid., 52, 57.
43 Ibid., 55.
44 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
45 Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 48.

CHAPTER 2. GETTING TOO CLOSE

1 Miller, "Anal *Rope*," 124.
2 Bizzochi and Tanenbaum, "Well Read"; Inman, "Electronic Texts and the Concept of Close Reading."
3 Nakamura, "Putting Our Hearts into It," 35.
4 Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 2.
5 Chang, "Close Playing."
6 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 65.
7 Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture?," 410.
8 Entertainment Software Association, "Essential Facts."
9 Sampat et al., "Game Developer Harassment."
10 Quinn, *Crash Override*, 4.
11 Chess and Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes," 208.
12 Cross, "The Nightmare Is Over," 180.
13 Cross, "Press F to Revolt," 26.
14 Ruberg, "On Race in *Resident Evil 5*."
15 Epler, "The Privilege of Default."
16 Jones, *Gaming in Color*.
17 Ruberg, "*Portal* Is for Lesbians." Note that the comment quoted here was deleted from the site by the author in 2008 because of its offensive nature.
18 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 97.
19 Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle," 408; Boluk, "Feminist Killjoys and Magic Circle Jerks."
20 Miller, "Anal *Rope*," 121.
21 Malkowski and Russworm, *Gaming Representation*, 2.
22 Miller, "Anal *Rope*," 122.
23 Ibid., 137.
24 Ibid., 134.
25 Ibid., 124.
26 Ibid., 123.
27 Ibid., 125.
28 Miller, "Hitchcock's Understyle," 1.
29 Ibid., 13.
30 Ibid., 14.
31 Ibid., 27.
32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 15.
34 Rigney, "*Portal* Designer Kim Swift Won't Let You Take Her Toys Away."

35 A number of blog posts at small-scale and personal websites touch on queer themes in *Portal*, including my own 2007 post mentioned above. In addition, see Yamasaki, "The Significance of Death."
36 Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 179.
37 Miller, "Anal *Rope*," 130.
38 Ibid., 131.
39 Ibid., 129.

CHAPTER 3. "LOVING FATHER, CARING HUSBAND, SECRET OCTOPUS"

1 Jones, "Do the Locomotion," 90.
2 Gril, "The State of Indie Gaming."
3 Fron et al., "The Hegemony of Play," 2.
4 Fisher and Harvey, "Intervention for Inclusivity," 26.
5 Kuchera, "Octodad Shares the Reality of an Indie Hit."
6 Thread started on Steam community forum on February 21, 2016 by commenter "Rent a mumble" under the heading "Slightly LGBT nature?," accessed October 31, 2016, https://steamcommunity.com/app/224480/discussions/0/405692224237333312/.
7 Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 4.
8 Barker, 2013, "Interview."
9 See, for example, Krug, *Don't Make Me Think*.
10 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 11.
11 Bagnall, "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies"; Marcotte, "Queering Game Controls"; Sicart, "Queering the Controller."
12 Phillips, "*Bayonetta*, Femme Disturbance, and AAA Queer Desires."
13 Fron et al., "The Hegemony of Play," 4.
14 Flanagan and Nissenbaum, *Values at Play*, 1.
15 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 187.
16 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
17 For example, see the Steam Community forum thread titled "[Spoilers maybe] The children's father." Original comment posted February 4, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2017, https://steamcommunity.com/app/224480/discussions/0/540732596802538592/.
18 Pendlebury, "How the Heart Warming Tale of the U.S. Octuplets."
19 Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low*, 197.
20 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 31.
21 McRuer, *Crip Theory*.
22 Murray, *On Video Games*.
23 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 149.
24 Chen, *Animacies*, 11.
25 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 3.
26 A notable exception to this is Phillips, "Dicks Dicks Dicks."
27 Williams et al., "The Virtual Census," 830.

CHAPTER 4. KISSING FOR ABSOLUTELY NO REASON

1 "About Realistic Kissing Simulator," IndieCade Festival, accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.indiecade.com/games/selected/realistic-kissing-simulator.
2 Purchese, "Don't Snog Your Arm."
3 Clark, "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyways," 6; Yang, "new game: 'Hurt Me Plenty.'"
4 Grace, "Playing with Affections, Digitally."
5 Alder and St. Patrick, "Beyond Representation."
6 I draw the concept of de-gamification from game designer Andi McClure. McClure submitted an abstract for a keynote to the 2015 Queerness and Games Conference that outlined this concept. McClure's talk was accepted, but she was ultimately unable to attend. However, with her permission, McClure's abstract was published on the QGCon website and can be found at the following address. Accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.qgcon.com/2015-speakers/degamification/.
7 Flanagan, *Critical Play*, 6; Frasca, "Rethinking Agency and Immersion," 170.
8 Grayson, "Stop Licking Yourself."
9 Grinberg, "Facebook 'Real Name' Policy Stirs Questions around Identity."
10 Though the rhetoric of "realness" in queer communities can be traced at least as far back as the late 1980s, as in its appearances in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (director Jennie Livingston, 1990), a more contemporary example is the ongoing afternoon drag party in San Francisco that operates under the name "Daytime Realness." Daytime Realness Facebook page, accessed December 2, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/DaytimeRealness/.
11 See for example O'Connor's "Have You Played . . . Realistic Kissing Simulator?"
12 Vincent, "Don't Let Realistic Kissing Simulator Teach You How to Kiss."
13 Grayson, "Stop Licking Yourself."
14 Clark, "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyways," 7.
15 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 80.
16 Strauss, *The Game*.
17 Ray, "All Balled Up."
18 Dicheva et al., "Gamification in Education," 75.
19 Alexander, "Playing Outside," 56.
20 Clark, "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyways?," 11.
21 Cross, "Press F to Revolt," 28.
22 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.
23 Lemon, "8 Video Game 'Demakes' You Can Play Right Now."
24 Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 27.
25 Lemarchand, "Microtalks 2015."
26 See for example Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 25.

27 The most literal corollary to this hypothetical game is *Every Day the Same Dream* (Molleindustria, 2009). For an exploration of the critique of social systems that the game enacts, see Soderman, "Every Game the Same Dream?"
28 Ruberg, "Permalife," 166.
29 Though *Consentacle* has not yet had a commercial release, Clark provided me with electronic copies of the game's rulebook and the cards images to work from for the purposes of this analysis.
30 Some of these exceptions will be addressed in the conclusion in my discussion of the queer games avant-garde. For an earlier survey of video games that do include sexual elements, with a focus on AAA and mainstream games, see Brathwaite, *Sex in Video Games*.

CHAPTER 5. PLAYING TO LOSE

1 Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 5; Consalvo, *Cheating*, 2; Postigo, "Of Mods and Modders," 300.
2 Taylor, "Play as Transformative Work."
3 Ruberg, "Playing to Lose"; Youngblood, "'I Wouldn't Even Know the Real Me Myself.'"
4 Juul, *The Art of Failure*.
5 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.
6 Ruberg (moderator), "The Queer Arts of Failure."
7 De Koven, *The Well-Played Game*; Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*; Isbister, *How Games Move Us*; Anable, *Playing Feelings*; Consalvo, *Cheating*; Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, *Values at Play*.
8 Taylor, *Play between Worlds*, 70; Sicart, *Play Matters*, 3.
9 Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 5.
10 Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 116.
11 Ibid., 118.
12 This tradition can be traced back to the nineteenth-century writing of sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, themselves appropriating terminology from literary works, such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*. For an overview of this history, see Byrne's *Aesthetic Sexuality.*
13 For a recent scholarly study of BDSM communities, see Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*. However, for texts that reflect perspectives from within contemporary BDSM communities, I recommend writing by Dossie Easton and her collaborators, such as *The New Topping Book*.
14 Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 2.
15 Ibid., xi.
16 Ibid., 2.
17 Ibid., 9, 15, 5.
18 McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, 77.
19 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 89, 88, 187.
20 Burrill, *Die Tryin'*.

21 Ruberg (moderator), "The Queer Arts of Failure," 202.
22 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.
23 Consalvo, *Cheating*, 2.
24 In the span of only a few years, a number of so-called gamification companies have sprung up, offering consultations on gamifying corporate environments. The reports, both positive and negative, on workplace gamification are far too many to list here, but a 2013 Forbes.com interview, titled "How Gamification Is Going to Change the Workplace," gives a taste of the rhetoric that surrounds this trend: Dan Schawbel, "How Gamification Is Going to Change the Workplace," Forbes.com, October 7, 2013.
25 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
26 "ULTIMATE Gaming Fail Compilation Fall 2013," May 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpROt6ipiwE, retrieved March 14, 2014.
27 Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 31, 48, 52.
28 See, for example, "Legally Driving VS GTA Driving (Warning: May Be Boring)," posted by user Vishal Shenoy, July 3, 2015, accessed December 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YkoiRCZCfg.
29 Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 100.
30 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 131, 144–145.

CHAPTER 6. NO FUN

1 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 1.
2 Ibid., 2.
3 Ibid., 90.
4 Ibid., 91.
5 Isbister, *How Games Move Us*.
6 Taylor, *Play between Worlds*, 70–71.
7 Dibbell, *Play Money*, 88.
8 Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 340.
9 Lien, "Tapping into Player Psychology."
10 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 2; Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 5.
11 Taylor, *Play between Worlds*, 70–71.
12 Fron et al., "The Hegemony of Play," 1.
13 Hudson, "Twine, the Video-Game Technology for All."
14 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2.
15 Alexander, "Playing Outside."
16 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Love, *Feeling Backward*.
17 Dutta, "Designing for the Other."
18 cárdenas, "Blah, Blah, Blah: Ke$ha Feminism?"
19 Galloway, *Gaming*, 124; MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures*; Chang, "Queergaming."
20 Kohler, "How Obsessed Fans Finally Exhumed Atari's Secret Game Graveyard."
21 Lien, "Why E.T. Wasn't the Worst Game in History."
22 McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, 77.
23 Bogost, *Play Anything*, 5.

24 As an example, see Plunkett's "Rape, Racism, and Repetition."
25 Riendeau, "Gone Home Review."
26 Tanz, "A Father, a Dying Son, and the Quest to Make the Most Profound Videogame Ever."
27 Wingfield, "To Bring Virtual Reality to Market."
28 boyd, "Is the Oculus Rift Sexist?"
29 Stockton, *The Queer Child*.
30 Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, xvii.
31 Lazzaro, "The 4 Keys 2 Fun."
32 Alsever, "Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine?"
33 Constine, "Virtual Reality, The Empathy Machine."
34 Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.
35 Gann, "Playing at Empathy."
36 Priestman, "The Sequel to *Dys4ia* Explores the Failure of Empathy Games"; Anthropy, "Empathy Game"; Brice, "Empathy Machine"; Yang, "If You Walk in Someone Else's Shoes."
37 Solberg, "The Problem with Empathy Games."
38 Pozo, "The Trouble with 'Empathy Games.'"
39 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3.

CHAPTER 7. SPEED RUNS, SLOW STROLLS, AND THE POLITICS OF WALKING

1 Murray, *On Video Games*.
2 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxiv.
3 Stockton, "If Queer Children Were a Video Game"; Goetz, "Queer Growth in Video Games."
4 Lo, "Everything Is Wiped Away."
5 Ruberg, "Permalife."
6 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxiv.
7 Edelman, *No Future*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Stockton, *The Queer Child*.
8 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xii.
9 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 6.
10 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxii.
11 Ibid., xii.
12 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 5.
13 Love, *Feeling Backward*, 3.
14 Ibid., 5.
15 Ibid., 10.
16 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 6.
17 Ibid., 6.
18 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.
19 Ibid., xv.
20 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 1–2.

21 Ibid., 2.
22 Love, *Feeling Backward*, 8.
23 Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 47.
24 Ibid., 129.
25 darbian, "(2:35:255) Super Mario Bros. Minus World ending speedrun *World Record*," Youtube.com, December 2, 2016, accessed December 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbh97h9wtkE&t=9s.
26 A breakdown of the various goals that speedrunners may attempt to achieve can be seen on the schedule for the 2017 Games Done Quick marathon, accessed December 22, 2016, https://gamesdonequick.com/schedule.
27 Boluk and Lemieux, *Metagaming*.
28 Tsunderin, "AGDQ, Female Speedrunners, and Reasons Why Their Visibility Is Nearing Supersonic," January 15, 2016.
29 "Racing Rules," SpeedRunsLive.com, accessed December 22, 2016, http://www.speedrunslive.com/faq/rules/.
30 Some examples of these threads, accessed December 22, 2016, include: https://www.reddit.com/r/speedrun/comments/2rilcg/no_female_speedrunners/; https://www.reddit.com/r/GirlGamers/comments/1lp5lt/are_there_any_female_speedrunners_like_seriously/; https://www.reddit.com/r/GirlGamers/comments/402m8x/speedrunners/.
31 http://kotaku.com/one-of-the-worlds-best-speedrunners-cant-speedrun-anymo-1752274907.
32 Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*, 110.
33 Burrill, *Die Tryin'*.
34 Grayson, "One of the World's Best Speedrunners Can't Speedrun Anymore."
35 Boluk and Lemieux, *Metagaming*, 43.
36 Love, *Feeling Backward*, 7.
37 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 4.
38 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xii.
39 Chang, "Queer Glitches"; Halberstam, "Queergaming."
40 Boluk and Lemieux, *Metagaming*, 46.
41 SpeedDemosArchiveSDA, "Super Mario Bros SPEED RUN in 0:19:52 (No Warps) by Kosmicd12 #SGDQ 2013 [NES]," Youtube.com, October 27, 2013, accessed December 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzvgMS7caNI.
42 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxii.
43 Kagen, "Walking Simulators," 282.
44 Kill Screen Staff, "Is It Time to Stop Using the Term 'Walking Simulator'?," *Kill Screen*, September 30, 2016, accessed December 22, 2016, https://killscreen.com/articles/time-stop-using-term-walking-simulator/.
45 Kagen, "Walking Simulators," 289.
46 Singal, "Why the Video-Game Culture Wars Won't Die"; Thier, "'Everybody's Gone to the Rapture.'"

47 Hicks, "Why 'Walking Simulator' Video Games Have Become So Political"; Kain, "On Walking Simulators."
48 Kagen, "Walking Simulators," 278.
49 For an example of a recent game review that demonstrates that this mode of thinking is still actively shaping the dialogue around video games, see Cooke's "It's a Game, I Guess?"
50 Chang, "On SpeedTrees and First-Person Walkers"; Penabella, "Why Are We So Afraid to Walk?"
51 Good, "Desert Bus Comes to VR at Long Last."
52 Ivanchikova, "Sidewalks of Desire."
53 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.
54 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place*, 7.

CONCLUSION

1 Shaw and Ruberg, "Imagining Queer Game Studies," xviii.
2 For an extensive collection of queer games made using Twine, see kopas, *Video Games for Humans*.
3 Ellison, "Anna Anthropy and the Twine Revolution."
4 Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.
5 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
6 Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.
7 Alexander, "Playing Outside," 61; Keogh, "Just Making Things and Being Alive about It."
8 Schrank, *Avant-Garde Videogames*, 1.
9 Ibid., 3.
10 Graves, "At Babycastles."
11 See for example Chambers, "Indie Game *Dominique Pamplemousse*," and Moser, "Dominique Pamplemousse Commits the Sin."
12 Squinkifer, "Conferences, Conventions, Conversations, and *Coffee*," 175.
13 Ibid., 182.
14 Yang's descriptions are taken from his personal website, accessed December 16, 2016, http://debacle.us/.
15 Hernandez, "Erotic Video Game Will Let Players Get Sexy in the Bathroom."
16 "Radiator 2" store on Steam, accessed December 16, 2016, http://store.steampowered.com/app/385370/agecheck.
17 William, "Robert Yang."
18 Video: "IndieCade 2015—Dysforgiveness," YouTube.com, uploaded May 1, 2015, accessed December 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD7RkPJe4sw.
19 Mason, "Virtual Reality Raises Real Risk of Motion Sickness."

WORKS CITED

Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Alder, Avery and Joli St. Patrick. "Beyond Representation: Queer Mechanics in Tabletop Games." Presentation at the Queerness and Games Conference, Berkeley, CA, October 27, 2013.

Alexander, Leigh. "Playing Outside." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Alsever, Jennifer. "Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine?" *Wired*, accessed February 9, 2018, www.wired.com.

Anable, Aubrey. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Anthropy, Anna. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.

Anthropy, Anna. "Empathy Game." *Auntie Pixelante*, accessed December 1, 2017, http://auntiepixelante.com.

Bagnall, Gregory. "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Barker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Barker, Sammy. "Interview: Octodad: Dadliest Catch Developer Talks Tentacles, PS4, and Fishy Disguises." *Pushsquare*, August 25, 2013, http://www.pushsquare.com/news/2013/08/interview_octodad_dadliest_catch_developer_talks_tentacles_ps4_and_fishy_disguises.

Bataille, Georges. "The Notion of Expenditure." In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Baume, Matt. "Did Dragon Age: Inquisition's LGBT Characters Impact Game's Sales?" *Advocate*, May 18, 2015, www.advocate.com.

Baume, Matt. "Why Gaming's 'Breakout' Gay Character Matters." *Advocate*, July 12, 2015, www.advocate.com.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
Berrey, Ellen. "Diversity Is for White People: The Big Lie Behind a Well-Intended Word." *Salon*, October 26, 2015, www.salon.com.
Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 179–222.
Bizzochi, Jim and Joshua Tanenbaum. "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences." In *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, edited by Drew Davidson. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011.
Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.
Bogost, Ian. *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
Boluk, Stephanie. "Feminist Killjoys and Magic Circle Jerks." Presentation at the Queerness and Games Conference, Los Angeles, CA, April 1–2, 2017.
Boluk, Stephanie and Patrick Lemieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
boyd, danah. "Is the Oculus Rift Sexist?" *Quartz*, March 28, 2014, http://qz.com.
Boykin, Keith. *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America.* New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005.
Brathwaite, Brenda. *Sex in Video Games*. Newton, MA: Charles River Media, 2006.
Brathwaite, Brenda and Ian Schreiber. *Challenges for Game Designers*. Rockland, MA: Charles River Media, 2008.
Brice, Mattie. "Empathy Machine." *Alternate Ending*, June 30, 2016, www.mattiebrice.com.
Brice, Mattie. "Play and Be Real about It: What Games Could Learn from Kink." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
Brown, Damon. *Porn and Pong: How Grand Theft Auto, Tomb Raider and Other Sexy Games Changed Our Culture*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2008.
Burrill, Derek. *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
Byrne, Romana. *Aesthetic Sexuality, A Literary History of Sadomasochism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
cárdenas, micha. "Blah, Blah, Blah: Ke$ha Feminism?" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (2012): 176–195.
cárdenas, micha. "Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 6 (2015).
Cassell, Justine and Henry Jenkins, eds. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

Cerankowski, Karlie June and Megan Milks, eds. *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Chambers, Becky. "Indie Game *Dominique Pamplemousse* Tackles the Gender Binary through the Majesty of Song." *The Mary Sue*, February 28, 2014, www.themarysue.com.

Chang, Alenda. "On SpeedTrees and First-Person Walkers." Presentation at the UC Irvine Critical Game Studies Conference, Irvine, CA, May 15, 2016.

Chang, Edmond. "Close Playing, a Meditation on Teaching (with) Video Games." *Ed(mond)Chang(Ed)Agogy*, November 11, 2010, www.edmondchang.com.

Chang, Edmond. "Queer Glitches, Or, the Recuperation of Vanellope Von Schweetz." *Ed(mond)Chang(Ed)Agogy*, October 7, 2013, www.edmondchang.com.

Chang, Edmond. "Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in *FrontierVille* and *World of Warcraft*." *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 6 (2015): 6–31.

Chang, Edmond. "Queergaming." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Chess, Shira. *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Chess, Shira and Adrienne Shaw. "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying about #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208–220.

Clark, Naomi. "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyway?" In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Clark, Naomi and merritt kopas. "Queering Human-Game Relations." *First Person Scholar*, February 18, 2015, www.firstpersonscholar.com.

Consalvo, Mia. *Cheating: Gaining Advantages in Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

Consalvo, Mia. "There Is No Magic Circle." *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 408–417.

Constine, Josh. "Virtual Reality, The Empathy Machine." *TechCrunch*, February 1, 2015, https://techcrunch.com.

Cooke, Caitlin. "It's a Game, I Guess?" *Destructoid*, September 22, 2016, www.destructoid.com.

Crecente, Brian. "Varus: The Remaking of a 'League of Legends' Hero." *Rolling Stone*, November 29, 2017, www.rollingstone.com.

Cross, Katherine. "Press F to Revolt." In *Diversifying Barbie & Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2016.

Cross, Katherine. "The Nightmare Is Over." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Cullen, Amanda. "Who Watches the Overwatchmen?: Queer Game Fandom." Presentation at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, San Diego, CA, April 12–15, 2017.

De Koven, Bernard. *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Dibbell, Julian. *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

Dicheva, Darina, Christo Dichev, Gennady Agre, and Galia Angelova. "Gamification in Education: A Systematic Mapping Study." *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 75–88.

DiSalvo, Betsy. "Gaming Masculinity." In *Diversifying Barbie & Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2016.

Doty, Alexander. *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Doty, Alexander and Corey K. Creekmur, eds. *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Dutta, Mohini. "Designing for the Other: Serious Games, Its Challenges, and Mindful Play." *First Person Scholar*, March 4, 2015, www.firstpersonscholar.com.

Easton, Dossie and Janet W. Hardy. *The New Topping Book*. Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 2003.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

Ellison, Cara. "Anna Anthropy and the Twine Revolution." *The Guardian Games Blog*, April 10, 2013, www.theguardian.com.

Entertainment Software Association. "Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: 2015 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data," accessed December 1, 2017, www.theesa.com.

Epler, John. "The Privilege of Default." Presentation at the Queerness and Games Conference, Los Angeles, CA, April 1–2, 2017.

Eskelinen, Markku. "The Gaming Situation." *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001).

Fernández-Vara, Clara. *Introduction to Game Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Fisher, Stephanie J. and Alison Harvey. "Intervention for Inclusivity: Gender Politics and Indie Game Development." *Loading . . . The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 25–40.

Flanagan, Jack. "The Complete History of LGBT Video Game Characters." *Daily Dot*, December 11, 2015, www.dailydot.com.

Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Flanagan, Mary and Helen Nissenbaum. *Values at Play in Digital Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure*. Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Frank, Allegra. "Overwatch's New Comic Confirms Game's First Queer Character." *Polygon*, December 24, 2016, www.polygon.com.

Frasca, Gonzalo. "Rethinking Agency and Immersion: Video Games as a Means of Consciousness-Raising." *Digital Creativity* 12, no. 3 (2001): 167–174.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Fron, Janine, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce. "The Hegemony of Play." Proceedings of the 2007 Digital Games Research Association Conference, Tokyo.

Gaboury, Jacob. "A Queer History of Computing." *Rhizome*, February 19, 2013, http://rhizome.org.

Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Gann, Patrick. "Playing at Empathy: Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*." *Gamechurch*, January 2, 2013, http://gamechurch.com.

Goetz, Christopher. "Queer Growth in Video Games." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Goldberg, Harold. *All Your Base Are Belong to Us: How Fifty Years of Videogames Conquered Pop Culture*. New York: Random House, 2011.

Good, Owen S. "Desert Bus Comes to VR at Long Last." *Polygon*, November 27, 2017, www.polygon.com.

Grace, Lindsay. "Playing with Affections, Digitally." Proceedings of the 2014 Meaningful Play Conference, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, October 16–18, 2014.

Graves, Cassidy Dawn. "At Babycastles, Squinky Makes Video Games for the Awkward in Us All." *Bedford and Bowery*, July 12, 2016, http://bedfordandbowery.com.

Grayson, Nathan. "Stop Licking Yourself: Realistic Kissing Simulator." *Rock Paper Shotgun*, May 12, 2014, www.rockpapershotgun.com.

Grayson, Nathan. "One of the World's Best Speedrunners Can't Speedrun Anymore." *Kotaku*, January 11, 2016, http://kotaku.com.

Greer, Stephen. "Playing Queer: Affordances for Sexuality in *Fable* and *Dragon Age*." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 5, no. 1 (2013): 3–21.

Gril, Juan. "The State of Indie Gaming." *Gamasutra*, April 30, 2008, www.gamasutra.com.

Grinberg, Emanuella. "Facebook 'Real Name' Policy Stirs Questions Around Identity." *CNN*, September 18, 2014, www.cnn.com.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Halberstam, Jack. "Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Hernandez, Patricia. "Erotic Video Game Will Let Players Get Sexy in the Bathroom." *Kotaku*, October 11, 2016, http://kotaku.com.

Hicks, William. "Why 'Walking Simulator' Video Games Have Become So Political." *Heat Street*, September 28, 2016, http://heatst.com.

Higgins, Melissa. "Is the Word 'Queer' Offensive? Here's a Look at Its History in the LGBTQA+ Community." *Bustle*, February 4, 2016, www.bustle.com.

Hudson, Laura. "Twine, the Video-Game Technology for All." *New York Times*, November 14, 2014, www.nytimes.com.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

Inman, J. A. "Electronic Texts and the Concept of Close Reading: A Cyborg Anthropologist's Perspective." In *TnT: Texts and Technology*, edited by J. R. Walker and O. O. Oviedo. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003.

Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

"Is It Time to Stop Using the Term 'Walking Simulator'?" *Kill Screen*, September 30, 2016, https://killscreen.com.

Ivanchikova, Alla. "Sidewalks of Desire: Paradoxes of the Postmodern *Flaneur* in Contemporary Queer Fiction." Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2007.

Janiuk, Jessica. "Gaming Is My Safe Space: Gender Options Are Important for the Transgender Community." *Polygon*, March 5, 2014, www.polygon.com.

Jones, Ian Bryce. "Do the Locomotion: Obstinate Avatars, Dehiscent Performances, and the Rise of the Comedic Video Game." *The Velvet Light Trap* 77 (2016): 86–99.

Jones, Philip, director. *Gaming in Color*. MidBoss, 2014.

Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Kafai, Yasmin B. and Deborah A. Fields, *Connected Play: Tweens in a Virtual World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Kafai, Yasmin B., Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes, eds. *Diversifying Barbie & Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2016.

Kagen, Melissa. "Walking Simulators, #GamerGate, and the Gender of Wandering." In *The Year's Work in Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons*, edited by Jonathan P. Eburne and Benjamin Schreier. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2017.

Kain, Erik. "On Walking Simulators, Game Journalism and the Culture Wars." *Forbes*, October 5, 2016, www.forbes.com.

Keeling, Kara. "Queer OS." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 152–157.

Kennedy, Helen. "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis." *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002).

Keogh, Brendan. "Just Making Things and Being Alive about It: The Queer Games Scene." *Polygon*, May 24, 2013, www.polygon.com.

Kocurek, Carly A. *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Kohler, Chris. "How Obsessed Fans Finally Exhumed Atari's Secret Game Graveyard." *Wired*, April 29, 2014, www.wired.com.

kopas, merritt. *Video Games for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation*. New York: Instar Books, 2015.

Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Phoenix, AZ: Paraglyph Press, 2004.

Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2000.

Kuchera, Ben. "Octodad Shares the Reality of an Indie Hit: $4.9M in Revenue for 2.7 Years of Work." *Polygon*, February 2, 2015, www.polygon.com.

Lauteria, Evan W. "Ga(y)mer Theory: Queer Modding as Resistance." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 12, no. 2 (2012).

Lazzaro, Nicole. "The 4 Keys 2 Fun," Nicolelazzaro.com, accessed December 1, 2017, http://www.nicolelazzaro.com/the4-keys-to-fun/.

Leigh, Emma. "Mediated Sexuality in ASMR Videos." *Sounding Out!*, December 14, 2015, https://soundstudiesblog.com/tag/mediated-intimacy/.

Lemarchand, Richard. "Microtalks 2015: One Hour, Ten Speakers, Games and Play and Us." Presentation at the Game Developers Conference, San Francisco, CA, March 4, 2015.

Lemon, Marshall. "8 Video Game 'Demakes' You Can Play Right Now." *The Escapist*, March 1, 2016, www.escapistmagazine.com.

Levy, David. *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

Lien, Tracey. "Tapping into Player Psychology for Games for Change." *Polygon*, April 23, 2014, www.polygon.com.

Lien, Tracey. "Why E.T. Wasn't the Worst Game in History." *Polygon*, June 3, 2014, www.polygon.com.

Lo, Claudia. "Everything Is Wiped Away: Queer Temporality in *Queers in Love* at the End of the World." *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 2 (2017): 185–192.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Lumb, David. "The Bizarre History of Vibrating Controllers: VR Precursors, Occasional Sex Toys." *Playboy*, October 6, 2016, www.playboy.com.

MacKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Macklin, Colleen and John Sharp. *Games, Design and Play: A Detailed Approach to Iterative Game Design*. Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2016.

Malkowski, Jennifer and TreaAndrea Russworm. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.

Marcotte, Jess. "CGSA2017: Queering Game Controls Slides and Talk." June 4, 2017, http://tag.hexagram.ca.

Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Mason, Betsy. "Virtual Reality Raises Real Risk of Motion Sickness." *Science News*, December 6, 2016, www.sciencenews.org.

McDonald, Heidi, ed. *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2018.

McGlotten, Shaka. *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013.

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

McGonigal, Jane. *SuperBetter: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver, and More Resilient—Powered by the Science of Games*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

Miller, D. A. "Anal *Rope*." *Representations* 32 (1990): 114–133.

Miller, D. A. "Hitchcock's Understyle: A Too-Close View of *Rope*." *Representations* 121, no. 1 (2013): 1–30.

Moser, Cassidee. "Dominique Pamplemousse Commits the Sin of Telling Instead of Showing." *Kill Screen*, accessed December 16, 2016, https://killscreen.com.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

Murray, Soraya. *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Nakamura, Lisa. "Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 1 (2012).

Nakamura, Lisa. "'Putting Our Hearts into It': Gaming's Many Social Justice Warriors and the Quest for Accessible Games." In *Diversifying Barbie & Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2016.

Ochalla, Bryan. "Ms. Pacman Used to Be a Guy . . ." *The Gay Gamer*, December 17, 2009, http://www.thegaygamer.com/2009/12/ms-pac-man-used-to-be-dude.html.

O'Connor, Alice. "Have You Played . . . Realistic Kissing Simulator?" *Rock Paper Shotgun*, November 10, 2015, www.rockpapershotgun.com.

Payne, Matthew Thomas and Peter Alilunas. "Regulating the Desire Machine: *Custer's Revenge* and 8-Bit Atari Porn Video Games." *Television & New Media* 17, no. 1 (2016): 80–96.

Pearce, Celia. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Penabella, Miguel. "Why Are We So Afraid to Walk?" *Kill Screen*, October 27, 2015, https://killscreen.com.

Pendlebury, Richard. "How the Heart Warming Tale of the U.S. Octuplets Became a Seedy Story of Self Indulgence." *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2009, www.dailymail.co.uk.

Phillips, Amanda. "*Bayonetta*, Femme Disturbance, and AAA Queer Desires." *In Media Res*, November 13, 2014, http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org.

Phillips, Amanda. "Dicks Dicks Dicks: Hardness and Flacidity in (Virtual) Masculinity." *Flow*, November 27, 2017, www.flowjournal.org.

Phillips, Amanda. "Welcome to *My* Fantasy Zone: *Bayonetta* and Queer Femme Disturbance." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Plunkett, Luke. "Rape, Racism, and Repetition: This Is Probably the Worst Game Ever Made." *Kotaku*, October 7, 2011, http://kotaku.com.

Postigo, Hector. "Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-Based Digital Game Modifications." *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 300–313.

Pozo, Diana Mari. "'The Trouble with 'Empathy Games.'" Presentation at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, March 22–26, 2017.

Priestman, Chris. "The Sequel to *Dys4ia* Explores the Failure of Empathy Games." *Kill Screen*, September 10, 2015, https://killscreen.com.

Puar, Jasbir. "In the Wake of It Gets Better." *The Guardian*, November 16, 2010, www.theguardian.com.

Purchese, Robert. "Don't Snog Your Arm, Play Realistic Kissing Simulator." *Eurogamer*, May 23, 2014, www.eurogamer.net.

Quinn, Zoë. *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight against Online Hate*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2017.

Ray, Jetta. "All Balled Up: Consent, Pinball, and the End of 'Sex as Conquest.'" *First Person Scholar*, February 2015, www.firstpersonscholar.com.

Riendeau, Danielle. "Gone Home Review: Living Room." *Polygon*, August 15, 2013, www.polygon.com.

Rigney, Ryan. "*Portal* Designer Kim Swift Won't Let You Take Her Toys Away." *Wired*, June 21, 2012, www.wired.com.

Ruberg, Bonnie. "On Race in *Resident Evil 5*." July 27, 2007, *Heroine Sheik*, www.heroine-sheik.com.

Ruberg, Bonnie. "*Portal* Is for Lesbians." *Heroine Sheik*, October 17, 2007, www.heroine-sheik.com.

Ruberg, Bonnie. "Permalife: Video Games and the Queerness of Living." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 9, no. 2 (2017): 159–173.

Ruberg, Bonnie, moderator. "The Arts of Failure: Jack Halberstam in Conversation with Jesper Juul." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Ruberg, Bonnie. "Playing to Lose." In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.

Ruberg, Bonnie. "Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw." *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 2 (2017): 165–173.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

Sampat, Elizabeth et al. "Game Developer Harassment: How to Get Through." Presentation at the Game Developers Conference, San Francisco, CA, March 2–6, 2015, https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022004/Game-Developer-Harassment-How-To.

Sarkeesian, Anita. "Ms. Male Character—Tropes vs Women in Video Games." November 18, 2013, www.youtube.com.

Sarkeesian, Anita. "Women as Background Decoration: Part 1—Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." *Feminist Frequency*, June 16, 2014, https://feministfrequency.com.

Schawbel, Dan. "How Gamification Is Going to Change the Workplace." *Forbes*, October 7, 2013, http://www.forbes.com.

Schleiner, Anne-Marie. *The Player's Power to Change the Game: Ludic Mutation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

Schrank, Brian. *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Shaw, Adrienne. "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies." *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010): 403–424.

Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Shaw, Adrienne and Bonnie Ruberg. "Imagining Queer Game Studies." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

Sicart, Miguel. "Queering the Controller." *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. (2017).

Singal, Jesse. "Why the Video-Game Culture Wars Won't Die." *New York Magazine*, September 30, 2016, http://nymag.com.

Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Soderman, Braxton. "Every Game the Same Dream? Politics, Representation, and the Interpretation of Video Games." *Dichtung Digital*, accessed December 1, 2017, www.dichtung-digital.org.

Solberg, Dan. "The Problem with Empathy Games." *Kill Screen*, January 13, 2016, https://killscreen.com.

Squinkifer, Dietrick. "Conferences, Conventions, Conversations, and *Coffee*." *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 2 (2017): 175–183.

Stockton, Katherine Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

Stockton, Katherine Bond. "If Queer Children Were a Video Game." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Strauss, Neil. *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*. New York: ReganBooks, 2005.

Stuart, Keith. "Video Games and Art: Why Does the Media Get It So Wrong?" *The Guardian Games Blog*, January 8, 2014, www.theguardian.com.

Sundén, Jenny. "A Queer Eye on Transgressive Play." In *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play*, edited by Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson. London: Routledge, 2013.

Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Tanz, Jason. "A Father, a Dying Son, and the Quest to Make the Most Profound Videogame Ever." *Wired*, January 2016.

Taylor, T. L. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

Taylor, T. L. *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

Taylor, T. L. "Play as Transformative Work." Presentation at the Queerness and Games Conference, Los Angeles, CA, April 1–2, 2017.

Thier, David. "'Everybody's Gone to the Rapture': Why Do People Hate 'Walking Simulators'?" *Forbes*, August 26, 2015, www.forbes.com.

Tsunderin. "AGDQ, Female Speedrunners, and Reasons Why Their Visibility Is Nearing Supersonic." *Lady Geek Girl*, January 15, 2016, https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Vincent, Brittany. "Don't Let Realistic Kissing Simulator Teach You How to Kiss." *Destructoid*, May 23, 2014, https://www.destructoid.com.

Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Weiss, Margot. *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Welles, Brooke Foucault. "On Minorities and Outliers: The Case for Making Big Data Small." *Big Data & Society* (2014): 1–2.

Wiegman, Robyn and Elizabeth A. Wilson. "Antinormativity's Queer Conventions." *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1–25.

William, Mike. "Robert Yang: 'The game industry needs to get laid.'" *GamesIndustry.biz*, March 18, 2016, www.gamesindustry.biz.

Williams, Dmitri, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory. "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race, and Age in Video Games." *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (2009): 815–834.

Wingfield, Nick. "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign." *New York Times*, October 15, 2014.

Wingfield, Nick. "To Bring Virtual Reality to Market, Furious Efforts to Solve Nausea." *New York Times*, March 4, 2015, www.nytimes.com.

Wolf, Mark J. P., ed. *The Medium of the Video Game*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.

Yamasaki, Lisa. "The Significance of Death, Cake, Companion Cube, and the Potato in the *Portal* Series." *Well Played* 5, no.1 (2016).

Yang, Robert. "If You Walk in Someone Else's Shoes, Then You've Taken Their Shoes: Empathy Machines as Appropriation Machines." *Radiator Design Blog*, April 5, 2017, www.blog.radiator.debacle.us.

Yang, Robert. "new game: 'Hurt Me Plenty.'" *Radiator Design Blog*, December 2, 2014, https://www.blog.radiator.debacle.us.

Yang, Robert. "On 'FeministWhorePurna' and the Ludo-material Politics of Gendered Damage Power-ups in Open-World RPG Video Games." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Youngblood, Jordan. "'I Wouldn't Even Know the Real Me Myself': Queering Failure in *Metal Gear Solid 2*." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

INDEX

Italic page numbers refer to figures

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bonnie Ruberg, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. They are a scholar of gender and sexuality in digital media and co-editor of the collection *Queer Game Studies* (2017). Ruberg received their PhD from the University of California, Berkeley and completed a Provost's Postdoctoral Scholarship in the Interactive Media and Games Division at the University of Southern California.