I. INTRODUCTION

Micah and the Terrible, No Good, Very Bad Day is a game created to tell a story of a girl, named Micah, who has an eating disorder. Following in the footsteps of games such as *Dys4ia,* our game does not portray a generalized story about all eating disorders, but rather an individualized narrative that was influenced by the experiences of our group members. The key message that this game eventually conveys is reflective of those experiences: specifically, the game is meant to convey to the player honestly and realistically what it feels like to have an eating disorder in a world in which disordered eating is not only taboo, but deeply difficult to live with. To that end, our game uses several elements of characterization, "queer" gameplay elements, and states of failure that emphasize this reality.

II. CHARACTERIZATION

In *Micah*, the interface of the game prompts 'you' not to eat. However, it is not talking to the player - it is telling Micah what to do, and the player inputs commands for Micah. In our game, the interface itself is strongly implied to be Micah's eating disorder, personified as a ghost in the machine of the narrative's text. This aspect of our game subverts many elements of a typical text adventure, in which the prompts that the game shows to the player are usually treated as a Godlike entity that exists outside of the substance of the game. While this element draws upon inspirations such as *The Stanley Parable* and *Homestuck*, this idea of the personified disorder relies heavily on our own experiences: for instance, it's often been the case that one is upset, angry, or just simply bored of carrying out disordered eating, but finds themselves completely unable to bring themselves to stop, despite their own desires.

In the game, we made these feelings of separation from desires a tangible reality. Micah is a fully developed character who is completely distinguishable from the narrative voice. She speaks directly to the player in the opening scene to say her name, and at times she reacts

visibly to dialogue being displayed to the player. The narrative text takes on a more aggressive tone and demeanor than Micah, and when the disorder is particularly aggravated, it actually takes on its own distinct style of text speaking that replaces some vowels with numbers.[1]

However, while we try to incorporate the feeling of an entity controlling Micah through the dialogue and 'entity' of the disorder as the game's interface, to imagine the disorder as a malevolent entity whispering lies into the ear of an otherwise normal individual is far too simplistic of a portrayal that is, quite simply, not what our game is trying to convey. To separate Micah from her eating disorder entirely would do a disservice to the blurred reality of one's own desires and identity being entwined with an eating disorder. In our own experience, it can actually be rather frustrating to have empathetic loved ones understand a disorder as a wholly separate entity - for instance, dismissal of behaviors that are seen as just "the disorder talking" can feel deeply disrespectful of your own agency and desires. In the end, an eating disorder is nebulous, at times appearing as an entirely different person and at others seeming inextricable from the self. Our game tries to communicate that nuanced reality through several venues: Most importantly, we never let the disorder explicitly control Micah - the player must input commands for her, which complicates the relationship beyond simply allowing the disorder to control her. Moreover, it is similarly important that the 'eating disorder' and Micah have several of the same desires - for instance, both the game and the character of Micah will worry about alarming her friends, as she wants to keep her disordered eating a secret. Finally, Micah and her eating disorder are blended together in a complicated relationship even more in the possible endings of our game, which are discussed in greater detail in the third section.

[1]This element was one of the largest inspirations from Homestuck. Each character has their own "text quirk" and color that makes their typed messages (the primary form of narration in the game) distinct from one another.

III. GAMEPLAY ELEMENTS

The gameplay of *Micah* was based on the genre of text based adventure games (*Zork* is a seminal example) which were chosen primarily for their procedural rhetoric. These games often present a frustrating world, as for instance a player wishing to open a door may find that start“pulling”, “opening”, “yanking” are not valid inputs as the game is only coded to recognize “push”. This inconsistent recognition of commands was immediately evocative of our experiences with eating disorders, as disorders also inflict arbitrary sets of “rules” relating to eating on those who suffer from them that can provoke frustration and anger. Our game features similar frustrating mechanics and inputs to reflect what having an eating disorder feels like, but the open-endedness is also meant to facilitate player immersion as well. Text adventure games can offer a remarkable level of immersion in the game world, as players are given the illusion of having an almost infinite array of possible commands at their fingertips rather than a set array of controls. We hoped this immersion factor would increase identification with Micah and increase the visual and emotional impact of our efforts to “queer” and distort the game’s interface.

Our approach to interface design, specifically the usage of distorted elements, was heavily influenced by queer theory and *Curtain.* Queer theory may seem to be an odd choice for a game about an eating disorder, but as noted by Bonnie Ruberg in *The Queer Art of Failing at Video Games,* “we must understand the word ‘queer’, in its contemporary usage to mean much more than gay, or even LGBT … More abstractly **queerness means both desiring differently and simply being differently**.” In this way, an eating disorder can be thought of an alternative relationship to food consumption, desiring a level of control over one’s needs that differs from the norm. Additionally, those with an eating disorder exist in a different mode, inhabiting a rule of arbitrary restrictions and arcane logic most do not. In this way, an eating disorder may be framed as a queer experience.

Curtain, which tackles a more obviously queer experience, uses its interface to subvert player expectations, showing a way of desiring and existing differently. In traditional games "the software interface is used simultaneously to make present and to obscure … In *Curtain*, however, Dreamfeel **queers** the interface: it is used pointedly and visibly to communicate an emotional and affective reality."[2] An opportunity thus presented itself in our game to queer our interface, bringing the player closer to the affective nature of what it is to live with an eating disorder. The screen blurs, colors invert, and text is scrambled in the input buffer if Micah hunger increases to dangerous amounts, representing the impaired mental capacity caused by hunger. Increasing anxiety from not fulfilling the requirements of her disorder or greater scrutiny from concerned friends causes screen elements to shake while restrictions on what characters can be used in text commands serves to convey the feeling of frustration that the arbitrary rules of an eating disorder gives rise to. These elements serve to "queer" the interface as *Curtain* did, taking advantage of the unique affordances offered by our interface to give a more impactful sense of our "queer" subject.

IV. ENDINGS, FAILURE, AND REPLAYABILITY

All of the endings of our game are, in a way, failures. This is not meant to be an explicitly pessimistic message, but it *is* meant to be indicative of the fact that as long as you are playing within the boundaries of an eating disorder, there is only really the option to lose. While there is no way to 'succeed', it is crucial that the game doesn't blame Micah or make the reality of living with a disorder seem foolish in a way that reflects negatively on those who suffer from it - rather, the tone of the endings is meant to be one of realistic futility. After all, this story doesn't talk about Micah in longer terms than one evening. There isn't a rapid fix, or any longer narrative rather than a brief window into the life of someone suffering from a mental illness.

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[2] Whitney Pow, *Software Interface as Queer Orientation in the Video Game Curtain*

Each ending communicates a different message based on how the player progressed through the game:

1. The first ending (the anxiety ending) occurs most often when the player persistently tries to get Micah to eat. This ending, as such, communicates a meaningful reality about why disobeying the "distinct" narrative was also perhaps disrespectful of Micah herself as well. Gameplay that disobeys the 'eating disorder' triggers the most character distinction between Micah and the disorder voice. As such, this ending pushes in the opposite direction, making clear that *Micah* felt too anxious and had to leave. This ending attributes the ending to her own boundaries, which builds on the previous importance of keeping the disorder and Micah intertwined.
2. The second ending (the concern ending) occurs after Micah's friends notice her behavior through any way. This ending emphasizes the double-edged sword of telling your friends - increased visibility can lead to difficult conversations, frustration, and raised anxiety. Having family and friends know about your disorder is one of the easiest ways to start to get better, but it is also an extremely vulnerable position to be in. This ending's text makes Micah actually feel worse than a happy ending in which her friends help her get better, emphasizing the difficulty and non-straightforward paths of recovery.
3. The third ending (the success? ending) is by far the most contentious. Rather than the first two endings, it implies that the player might be complicit or should have done something to help Micah and go against the commands of the interface, rather than play the game as well as possible. This ending, that appears when the player manages to successfully complete the task of not becoming anxious or alerting Micah's friends, is a rebuke to what otherwise might be a

successful playthrough. It also is the ending that most meaningfully highlights the relationship between the game, the player, and Micah as a character.

Taken altogether, the endings seem to implicate the player in ways that are incoherent with one another. However, the endings are not necessarily reflective of *our* beliefs (or even a morally righteous belief) about what the player should have or shouldn't have done - instead, they are meant to feed into each other. The first ending (shown after the player has forced her to eat) provokes the player to replay in a way that would not force her to eat. The second ending (shown after the player has failed to hide her behavior) provokes a replay that successfully hides it from her friends. The third ending (shown after the player is 'successful' in not eating and not alerting friends) implies that the player should have done something to help Micah and tries to provoke a sense of obligation in the player, a sense that things could have gone differently and there may be a way to help her, that there is still hope. In a bit of a meta sense, each one prompts the player to replay the game in a different style than you just played. In doing so, the game tries to prompt the player into continuing to act within the harmful framework of the eating disorder. The endings of the game loop the player into an unending cycle of pointlessness that only breaks when the player decides to stop playing. In *Micah*, there is no recovery narrative. The game, through its many dimensions, merely shows one small facet of what it means to live with an eating disorder.