

English 230 Worksheet for Week 11

With Those We Love Alive, by Porpentine Charity Heartscape and Brenda Neotenomie

Today we're going to conduct a live playthrough of this work and try to visually represent our path as we go, with particular attention to terms such as "choice" and "satisfaction." *Choice*: What possible actions, or "verbs," does the game afford the player? (Does less choice = boredom? Does more choice = confusion? Where's the variety? Where's the repetition?) *Satisfaction*: To what degree are desirable outcomes attainable? (How uncertain are the outcomes? How predictable are they? Is frustration necessarily an effect of the unattainable?) Before we get to all this, below is a brief description of the work, accompanied by some links to relevant material.

Available in the [Electronic Literature Collection](#), Porpentine Charity Heartscape and Brenda Neotenomie's *With Those We Love Alive* (2014; *WTWLA*) is a "weirdfem dark fantasy where you design artifacts for a skull empress. It was made in Twine. Sometimes you draw on yourself with marker." Brief bios for both artists appear alongside the work in the ELC: "Porpentine Charity Heartscape's games and curation have contributed to the popularity of the accessible game design software Twine. She's won the XYZZY and Indiecade awards, had her work displayed at EMP Museum and The Museum of the Moving Image, and been profiled by the *New York Times*, commissioned by *Vice* and *Rhizome*, and she is a 2016 Creative Capital Emerging Fields awardee. Brenda Neotenomie is a composer, graphic artist, and game designer. Her works include *Bellular Hexatosis* and the OST [original soundtrack] for *With Those We Love Alive*," which was written in HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. You can download all the work's [source files](#), if you wish.

The work begins by breaking the fourth wall with the following reminder, written in second person: "nothing you can do is wrong." This reminder echoes Marina Kittaka's *Secrets Agent* as it bypasses, or at least complicates, the assumption that games are always challenges or puzzles with (hidden) solutions. Players are then asked to select which month they are born in. Twelve options are listed; among them are "Five, the Angel's Egg" and "Eight, the Snake's Milk." Next, players select the "element" and eye colour for their player character (the protagonist), whose pronouns are she / her. This protagonist is given a name by her parents, but she then decides to select from a book a different name for herself ("Cade Umdor," for example). *The player character's name depends on the player's initial choices*. This moment is a key dimension of [how Porpentine represents trans lives in WTWLA](#) and across all her writing. (Portpertine says, "I inflect trans lives across my stories. The cyborg bio-implant genitals of *Sky in the Room*, the estroglyphs of *WTWLA*, the vampire schoolgirl sucking on estrogenated blood in *Love is Zero* . . . imagining practices as unique as each universe.") Once the player character chooses her name, she is visited by an "agent" of the "Skull Empress." She leaves her apartment to live in the Empress's palace, where she has her own chambers and is expected to share the products of her talents as an artificer.

After players spend a bit of time in *WTWLA*, they may notice that a lot of the writing is fragmented yet evocative: "canopy of leafbone" and "vials of melter," for instance. Again, they are addressed in the second person, and—as they click through the narrative—they are prompted to perform specific actions, often without any other options available: "take a breath," "lick your lips," "wait," "leave," "get to work," "silence," "draw a sigil" . . . These choices may link "you" as the player with "you" as the player

character. Perhaps you, the player, take a breath (or several) or draw a sigil on your arm. When options are provided, a player's choices (purple links) may also shape how the story unfolds. As an artificer with access to an array of materials, what will the player character make for the Empress when asked? A mask, diadem, or gauntlet? Will it be made of dronesteel, lake crystal, or heretic bone? Such choices are especially palpable when the player character communicates with other characters, like Sedina, in the story.

Write your note:

Sedina,

I'm begging you not to do this.

They will **never forgive this.**

Please understand...**we can be happy far away from here.**

Signed,

The one who loved you a long time ago

Leave the note under her door

At other times, the choices are more like habits or rituals, such as when players click each of their ten nails for Sedina to paint them. Nothing happens after the first nine clicks. Players must complete the nail-painting ritual for the player character to progress in the plot.

She paints

the first nail

the second nail

the third nail

the fourth nail

the fifth nail

the sixth nail

the seventh nail

the eighth nail

the ninth nail

the tenth nail

This [romantic friendship](#) with Sedina and the choices involved along the way exist in tension, if not overt conflict, with the institution or abstract power that is the Empress's dominion. Following the Empress's orders as well as making her gifts, which she never refuses, entails a sort of complicity with violence, trauma, and the sacrifice of others under her rule. Choosing to survive with Sedina, on the other hand, resists and arguably refuses such complicity. Porpentine writes in her notes for the game: "When I watch most media there's this unspoken belief that feminine lifeforms can't survive on their own, can't

have spaces of their own, can't have relationships of their own. I try to go against this with basically everything I make. *WTWLA* is a friendship between fems.” And, importantly, it is a friendship in a world where the player character cannot dream and is tempted by the pleasures and power of artifice—of making masks, diadems, gauntlets, and many other items at her worktable—to fill that gap, to dream, to heal.

When you woke up, you could no longer dream. In one night, it felt like you had dreamt all the dreams of a lifetime. It felt like an eternity of fire. Like what should have come slowly, gently, unfolding delicately at the whirling dance of your years, had instead been accelerated at a ruinous speed, burning **away**.

One way (among many, to be sure) to interpret *WTWLA* is that it's a work about customs and the labour of survival. The player character frequently returns to the palace courtyard, where her choices—from which players select—include visiting the balcony, her chambers, the garden, or the city. She must also sleep to progress through time, and sleeping seven times results in the action, “reapply hormones.” Sleeping may also result in the Empress asking her to work or requesting a gift from her. This repetition in both character and player behaviour results in a fiction that is neither sprawling nor unruly; it is instead about which customs to reject and which rituals to embrace.

P.S.: Did you meet the slime kid? See the HTML from *WTWLA* in the image below. She is in the source but easily missed in the browser.

```
need a shorter breath[exhale]{$breath = &quot;short&quot;}}\n\n[[I need a medium breath[exhale]{$breath =  
&quot;medium&quot;}}\n\n[[I need a longer breath[exhale]{$breath = &quot;long&quot;}}</div><div tiddler="now"  
tags="base" created="201409271556" modifier="twee"  
twine-position="2950,4070">&quot;Please--&quot;\n\n&quot;&lt;&lt;replace &quot;I just wanted to spend time with  
you.&quot;&gt;&gt;I just wanted to spend time with you.&quot;\n\n&quot;Sedina--&quot;\n\n&quot;&lt;&lt;replace  
&quot;Stay in your room and don't interfere.&quot;&gt;&gt;Stay in your room and don't  
interfere.&quot;\n\n&quot;...&quot;\n\n&quot;Goodbye, &lt;&lt;name&gt;&gt;.&quot;\n\nShe [[closes|note writer]] the  
door.&lt;&lt;endreplace&gt;&gt;&lt;&lt;endreplace&gt;&gt;</div><div tiddler="mazelike" tags="base"  
created="201409301929" modifier="twee" twine-position="290,1270">This alley leads to a dead end. The stone is stained  
with smog and acid rain.\n\n&lt;&lt;if $hormone_day is 4&gt;&gt;A [[Slime kid]] is  
here.\n\n[[Return|City]]&lt;&lt;else&gt;&gt;A puddle of green slime is  
here.\n\n[[Return|City]]&lt;&lt;endif&gt;&gt;</div><div tiddler="burning" tags="base" created="201409120217"  
modifier="twee" twine-position="3370,2250">She grabs at the buried tubes, claws at the seals, tears the caps  
[[free]].</div><div tiddler="hunting" tags="music empress" created="201409011212" modifier="twee"  
twine-position="290,3650">&lt;&lt;fadeoutsound &quot;audio/wandering.ogg&quot;&gt;&gt;&lt;&lt;fadeinsound &quot;audio/  
creep.ogg&quot;&gt;&gt;&lt;&lt;replace &quot;The empress is hunting humans today&quot;&gt;&gt;The empress is hunting  
humans today.\n\nHer flier hums through the [[sky]], moth wings slicing sunlight.&lt;&lt;endreplace&gt;&gt;</div><div  
tiddler="another vial" tags="base" created="201409120142" modifier="twee" twine-position="3370,1830">You take out  
another vial of melter.\n\n&lt;&lt;cyclinglink $body x &quot;Pain&quot; &quot;Pain...&quot;  
&quot;Pain.&quot;&gt;&gt;\n\n[[Yes|pain]]</div><div tiddler="pretense" tags="music base" created="201409271309"
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