English 230: Milestone 6 (for Wednesday, November 30th)

We have arrived! Our last three themes, on the topic of action as a medium, wrap up the course:

Interfaces are entwined with choices. They invite input and respond with auditory, visual, and haptic feedback. They also afford character customization and branching narratives: "choose your own adventure" in the tradition of so-called "nonlinear" media, including games. Thus, as [Mattie Brice](#) suggests, "gamers are trained to expect certain things from games, like explicit rules, goals, visual quality, and of course, agency." *With Those We Love Alive* uses roleplay to experiment with those expectations: character customization does not affect the story's ending, the game frequently asks its players to wait, and those same players are then invited to write sigils on themselves and expand interaction, if not *WTWLA*'s entire diegetic world, beyond the screen to blur the presumably sacred boundary between games and actuality. Many choices in the game correspond with rituals or habits, too: click on "the first nail, the second nail . . . the ninth nail, the tenth nail," for example, or conduct a breathing exercise, or sleep seven times to reapply hormones. Such choices remind us not only that play is at once a loop and a negotiation but also why it needn't produce exchange value. We don't have to optimize play in search of the "best choice." After all, the last two choices in *WTWLA* result in the same conclusion. Maybe play instead prompts us to witness or participate in someone else's story, or to reflect on the systems with which we are complicit, or to imagine new systems, or to simply take a break in a milieu where so many of our everyday activities are gamified for data.

Narrative design inevitably confronts the question of satisfaction. Games are assumed to be fun, and their cultures are often about winning or competition. Too few choices or too much repetition may result in boredom. Too many choices or too much difficulty may result in confusion, frustration, or cheating. These dynamics stage a risky space for storytelling, especially when stories address complex social and cultural issues. Yet *WTWLA* and *Celeste*, both inflected by trans lives, show us why games warrant the risk. Their options and "verbs" are expressive: the breathing mentioned above as well as Madeline's dashes and *Celeste*'s "assist mode," which renders the game more accessible to audiences who may be invested in the narrative but not so much in platformers or dexterity mechanics. Although specific outcomes and experiences are never guaranteed, *WTWLA* and *Celeste* encourage players to stick with them and their characters through the end. From this perspective, perhaps satisfying narrative design is best understood to mean "rewarding" rather than "fun" or "victory." Not all games need a narrative or have one; still, ones that do have much to learn from these two games.

Players wonder where they are. Games rarely come with page numbers, and—since experiences vary from player to player—we can't exactly refer to them by minutes or hours, either. Some games come with maps and levels. *Celeste* offers us a 3D view of the mountain we're meant to climb. It's also a book with eight chapters that progressively disclose its narrative and gradually increase its mechanical difficulty. Elsewhere, moving backwards in *WTWLA* is not a little difficult. There are no maps, chapters, or inventories; players must manually track their journey through the branching narrative. In both games, however, the matter of knowing where you is more than merely practical. It's not solely about how much time remains until you roll credits or close the book. It's thematic, too. We're meant to feel Madeline's stubborn ascent and experience the Empress' vertiginous empire. We get lost in that empire, projecting it mostly in a theatre of our imagination. *Celeste* meanwhile tracks every time Madeline dies en route to the mountaintop; in fact, it even tells us to take pride in that macabre number.

Terminology from Milestone 6: interface, player character, non-player character (NPC), worldbuilding, progression, choice, repetition, uncertainty, and satisfaction