

Twine Game Narrative and discussion about LGBTQ representation

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the narratives of four Twine games, developed by queer identified people, to compare the LGBTQ representation in them to overall representation in the medium, focusing on transgender people. The game industry is dominated by the views of heterosexual, cisgender men, and LGBTQ people represent a small minority of the game developers. Analyzing the textual presence of LGBTQ characters and themes in video games, it was possible to notice that they are very rarely the main actors in the narratives presented, and regarding transgender characters, they are often victims of prejudice. The narratives on the four Twine games, in opposition, have queer characters at the center of the story, and even though they may present instances of prejudice, it is either viewed from the oppressed character's perspective and condemned, or presents negative consequences to the player inside the game's structure. They also manage to bring up relevant issues regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ people inside game spaces and also in society. There are plenty of ways video games can discuss queer related issues, and Twine productions present themselves as a successful example for doing so.

Keywords: Twine, queer, game narrative, representation, gender and sexuality.

1 INTRODUCTION

There's a cultural movement happening recently inside game culture, with the purpose of evolving game's social norms through social justice advocacy. A relevant amount of developers and players are striving to create a community that is both more inclusive and more representative of diverse identities, especially regarding gender. However, those efforts are rejected by a portion of the people involved with the gaming community, that think the medium is threatened by the presence of feminists, or any other advocate for a change in videogame's dominant perspective [17].

To refer to this dominant perspective of game creation, Fullerton and Pearce coined the term "Hegemony of Play". It refers to the set of conventions about the themes, game design elements, and technologies that became standard inside the industry, because they conform to the mindset of the dominant people in the business, who tend to be cisgender heterosexual men. It also tends to conform to market presumptions of what are the preferences of a target demographic that has a bigger presence as a consumer. Therefore, the narratives portrayed in the medium tend to focus on characters and experiences shared by the predominant demographic. And this mindset doesn't limit only the narratives in games, but also the development of new technologies of play. The "Hegemony of Play" is, besides a limiting factor of diversity in the production, also a barrier for innovation in game development [12].

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However, among independent developers, there are women and LGBT identified people creating more personal games that reason closer to their lives. They are no industry professionals; they are novices in the art of game making, who have to develop their games dealing with their limitations. There are plenty of new tools, such as Game Maker, RPG Maker, and Twine, that allow inexperienced users to produce independently, and publish their work with little to no cost on the internet [18].

Among those tools, Twine has come forward as the most representative for queer identified individuals. The "Twine Revolution", a movement lead by trans women developers that has gained some media coverage in the last couple of years, is the representation of a community inside game culture that challenges the dominant mindsets. Those Twine games have narratives that bring up relevant discussion about gender and sexuality, and use a text based platform to do so, going against the industry ideals that strive for the development of complex graphics [16].

However, those games are still at the margin of the game culture, even considering the indie games scene. Even though they have gained some attention by journalists and academics, they are often still discredited and labeled as "not games" by some of them. It is important to confront this way of thinking, however technically limited and unusual those games might appear, as not to have a limiting definition of what video games are and open up new possibilities to explore the medium. One of the reasons why video games are often rejected as an art form is the lack of diversity of the experiences created. To think about games as relevant cultural products, with a social value, there must be more games being produced by diverse people with diverse narratives, and those games must be recognized by the community [1].

This paper will analyze the narratives and game design of some Twine games that deal with questions of gender and sexuality and are developed by queer people, by:

1. Comparing the narrative and portrayal of trans women and non-binary people in those games to other examples in the industry;
2. Analyzing how the game design was built to portray their narratives; how the structure of a text based platform can be used to talk about queer experiences;
3. Figuring out how their narrative structure and language can be used to challenge hegemonic constructions in the medium, both in content and format.

2 RELATED WORK

Before approaching the study on the Twine games, it is important to provide an overview about how gender and sexuality are seen in game spaces, both in the development processes and community of players. It is also important to inspect Twine as a game development tool, to understand how and why it is being used. This section will look into other academic works that approach those two matters.

2.1 The Case on Representation

In the 2015's IGDA (International Game Developers Association) developer satisfaction survey, that interviewed almost 3000 peo-

ple, it was shown that, regarding the gender of the professionals involved with the game industry, 75% are male, 22% female, 1% transgender male, 0.2% transgender female, and 1% other (9 people among those self identify as non-binary). It also questioned about the sexual orientation of participants, in which 73% identified as heterosexual, 12% as bisexual, and 4% as gay [21]. This data points to a game development community numerically dominated by heterosexual men, with a small presence of LGBTQ individuals.

In 2012, there was an agitation on Twitter over the #1ReasonWhy, a hashtag that gathered questions and opinions of people about why there are not enough women working in the video games industry. The analysis of those tweets pointed to some of the reasons why women feel uncomfortable working with video games, which are: the harassment suffered by them in both the player community and work spaces; how their ideas are often ignored by their male counterparts when they are working with teams majorly formed by men; and how they are silenced when they try to bring up their concerns about sexism in the industry. The discrimination suffered by women can also be expanded to LGBTQ people, whose presence as professionals in the industry is even less frequent, and who suffer an even more aggressive rejection by the players' community [4]. Both this Twitter research and the IGDA survey, however not providing definitive data, indicate an homogeneous environment of production, where people with different identities struggle to have their work and ideas valued.

Therefore, the burden of creating queer representation in games cannot fall on the shoulders of LGBTQ developers only. Even though they might be the demographic that is more interested in that representation, this task can be challenging for queer developers, because of the pressure of being public about their identities (at least inside industry spaces), and the prevalence of heteronormative values in the industry [30].

Higgins [17] affirms that the usual target demographic for games are the "hardcore gamers," and theorizes that there is a market presumption that this group consists of teenage boys who are largely homophobic and sexist. That's seen as a reason for not investing in LGBTQ characters and narratives, who would be rejected by the presumed audience. This standard definition of the gamer as a hyper masculine heterosexual man also limits not only the narratives portrayed, but also the game genres produced. The most prevalent game genres in the industry are FPS (First Person Shooter), RTS (Real Time Strategy), and RPGs (Role Playing Games), which can carry violent content. About FPS, specifically, Visser [34] affirms that the ultra violence can serve to reinforce the dominant power position that cisgender white men hold over racial and socio-cultural minorities, and also as an argument for the idea that video games can be traced as a motivator for violence in real life.

However, this presumption can be questioned. The game community consists of more than heterosexual males, and there is a large number of queer identified people who consume video games. But the industry, in general, seems to ignore that in favor of the heterosexual, male gamer that is seen as the default. Yet, it is also a dangerous idea to develop games striving for better representation while still using the audience as a starting point. Shaw [30] argues about the case of "girl games", in which "Creating a sub-genre of games that appeals to stereotypes of gendered play habits resulted in the "gethorization" of girl games"[p. 233]. The developers that saw the market potential of targeting video games to girls built games based on the stereotypical construction of female play outside of gaming, instead of looking into what girls who are already gamers enjoy playing. Because of that, even though they provide better representation for women, girl games were thrown back as a subcategory of video games, unable to merge with the prevalent game culture.

Yonashiro [37] argues that indie game development is a path

that presents the most interesting alternative for creating narratives with LGBTQ content inside video games. Even though the independent developers community still tends to support some of the hegemonic precedents of mainstream game culture, it is among that community that we can find some instances of production that are challenging those views [16].

Shaw [31] makes a very important point about how discussing matters of representation with a focus on the minority group as a consumer market is an inefficient approach. It has been shown that many of the LGBT identified gamers are not worried about representation in the medium; their concerns are much more related with homophobia inside game spaces. However, that is less an indicative of the lack of importance of representation than it is an indicative of the necessity of thinking about it in a different way. We need representation of diverse people in games, but not only because games are played by diverse people who might wish to identify with the playable characters; it is in behalf of a more interesting and rich cultural product.

2.2 Twine as a Resistance Tool

On Twine's development homepage, the user is first greeted with a simple description of the engine, "Twine is an open-source tool for telling interactive, nonlinear stories". Even though it was originated with the focus on the development of hypertext interactive fiction, it can also be expanded to several different uses, including video game production [16]. One crucial characteristic that can be seen while visiting the website is that it displays a lot of information about how Twine is an accessible tool, easy to use by anyone, regardless of their knowledge about code.

Friedhoff [11] affirms that Twine's development workspace has some similarities to the approach of brainstorm techniques, and is much more related to the creative process of writing than it is to the procedures of programming. The author says "This kind of visual, spatial practice is relatively rare in the coding world (...), but it is very similar to the way many writers plan and organize their stories" [p.4]. The text is not displayed in lines of code; instead, it is shown in various blocks of content, linked to each other to form narrative connections by lines. This type of visual organization is intuitive, and makes it easy for new developers to become familiar with the engine in a short time. Besides being easy to develop in, Twine also produces work pieces that are very simple to distribute. The final product is an HTML page, that can be hosted without any complications on the web, or even be shared through email, considering the small file size.

But the most interesting aspect about Twine development is probably the community that was created around the tool. Friedhoff, again, acknowledges that the community is very welcoming to new developers, providing several tutorials and resources for beginners. But those resources, instead of only mentioning technical aspects of production, also talk about the reasons behind the choice of the game as a medium. They encourage the developer to think about why they chose to make a video game, and then help them envision which methods of construction are connected to the content they are trying to communicate. That helps carving the path for the creation of personal games, expression of the developer's own experiences.

And it was because of this possibility of development of personal games, that the so called Twine Revolution could be started in 2012. It is a movement started by trans women, and then was expanded to other queer identities as well, arguably one of the most relevant resistance efforts in gaming. Kopas [20] makes, in her own words, a bold statement about the matter: "hypertext and digital games are totally trans genres". Twine has presented itself as a platform that is very welcome to diverse narratives, which challenge the default premises of game design [16].

Even though Twine games are primarily based on text, there

are plenty of ways in which Twine can explore visuality and sound within its narratives. The base HTML can be incremented with CSS and JavaScript elements, so as long as web technology keeps being pushed forward, Twine will not become outdated [26]. It is a very interesting tool with numerous possibilities for the development of not only diverse stories, but also new mechanics and logics to be incorporated within the textual narrative.

3 METHODOLOGY

After defining the research's scope as games produced with Twine, the first step was an investigation of the games produced with the tool. Using Keogh's *Just making things and being alive about it: the queer games scene* article [18] as a starting point, the main names associated with the Twine Revolution were discovered, and with those names, a vast selection of games with a defining queer narrative. Among those, four have been selected as the main objects of this research, based on the following criteria:

1. The gender identity and sexual orientation of the authors; it was crucial that the developers of the chosen games were LGBTQ identified. The author's recognition and importance inside the Twine Revolution and queer games movement was also considered;
2. The LGBTQ themes present in the game's text, focusing on narratives relevant to the discussion over the Hegemony of Play, and also about the issues faced by LGBTQ people in society;
3. The game structure and mechanics; considering the use of different elements to complement the text based narrative, as to generate a more complex product and richer experience.

The four games selected were: *With Those We Love Alive* [27] by Porpentine; *Queers in Love at the End of the World* [2], by Anna Anthropy; *Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames* [32], by Dietrich Squinkifer; and *Conversations With My Mother* [19], by Merritt Kopas. The authors are all transgender people, with three women and one non-binary person.

In a second step, there was a research on other instances of LGBTQ content inside games, as to generate a comparison basis for the Twine games selected. To achieve that, the first site used was the LGBTQ Video Game Archive [22], since it presents organized lists and very detailed information. However, the archive is still under construction, so it was necessary to find complementary sources of information. After gathering that data, the instances of LGBTQ content were compared, as to find patterns in the narrative construction and character portrayal. The focus was on trans people and relationships between queer women, as a basis for comparison over the twine games selected.

In a third moment, the selected games were replayed, to map out the most important elements used in their design to construct the narrative, mainly related to: how player interaction happens; how information is displayed on the screen; how the written language is used; and other specific and distinguishable strategies. With that information, a defining aspect of each game was chosen to focus on. In *With Those We Love Alive*, it was the use of player actions outside the screen; in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, it was the use of a timer to question temporality; in *Quing's Quest VII*, it was humor and the language of the parody; and in *Conversations With My Mother*, it was the development of an autobiographical narrative.

Finally, a comparison between the narratives of the Twine games chosen and overall LGBTQ representation in games was made. The objective was to find out if they differ about: the importance of LGBTQ identified characters inside the narrative; instances of homophobia and transphobia, and how it is dealt with;

the character agency, how in control of their own narrative they are; queer relationships, and how they are treated in the game, if they are accepted by other characters or condemned.

4 QUEER REPRESENTATION IN GAMES

This section will analyze the representation of LGBTQ characters and queer related issues in video games. First, there is a brief overview of the on-screen representation of LGBTQ identified characters, focusing on examples of transgender people. Second, there are the analysis of the four Twine games cited in the methodology, with a more in-depth look on how they expose their narratives to display queer related issues.

4.1 Overview

Starting from the data compiled by the LGBTQ Video Game Archive [22], it was observed that the majority of LGBTQ identified characters in video games are NPCs (non playable characters), with a few exceptions. In the analysis of the first 15 years documented (starting from the 1980's), it was also noticed that the majority of the incidences are related to gay men, with very few queer women, and roughly 50% of the games were produced in Japan, with United States games dominating a big part of the other half [9].

Another interesting aspect regarding LGBTQ representation revealed by the archive was about the games with the most documented LGBTQ characters: the series *Leisure Suite Larry* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Both those game series are recognized for being targeted at the hegemonic heterosexual male, which might sound contradictory at first, but they are also known for approaching controversial themes in a reckless way, not worried if their content might be offensive or not. And by having the largest number of LGBTQ characters, those two games were also the ones with the most diversity, regarding not only gender and sexuality, but also race and class. However, their narratives are replete of homophobia and transphobia, used as an attempt to create humor.

Notably, a significant part of the presence of same sex relationships in video games comes in the form of optional interactions in RPGs and Simulators. Game series like *The Sims*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Fable*, *Dragon Age*, and *Mass Effect*, among other examples, allow the player to pursue romantic relationships with characters of any combination of binary genders, considering the player can choose if the controlled character is male or female. This sort of portrayal, however important for player identification, is not actually a big contributor to diversity in the narrative, since it puts the choice for representation in the player's hands, and not everyone who experiences the game will see those relationships [31].

And even though the choice for same sex relationships started to become normalized in more contemporary games, character creation tends to be deeply rooted in gender binarism. In the majority of games, you can only choose between male or female for a character gender, and then you are presented with a set of characteristics (body shape, facial features, hairstyle, clothing) for customization specific for each gender. Besides not presenting the option of a non-binary identified character, this mindset also limits the creation of both transgender and cisgender men and women characters, since it relies on stereotypical characteristics associated with each gender, and doesn't allow men to have feminine traits and vice versa.

Nonetheless, some games do subvert that idea, allowing the player to choose a non-binary identity for their character. One example is *Fallen London*, a game that allows the player to choose between male, female, and a third option of gender in the character creation screens, and asks for the character's preferred form of address, that may or may not conform to the gender chosen. Besides that, all items present in the game, which includes clothing and accessories, can be used by the characters with no restriction based on gender [10].

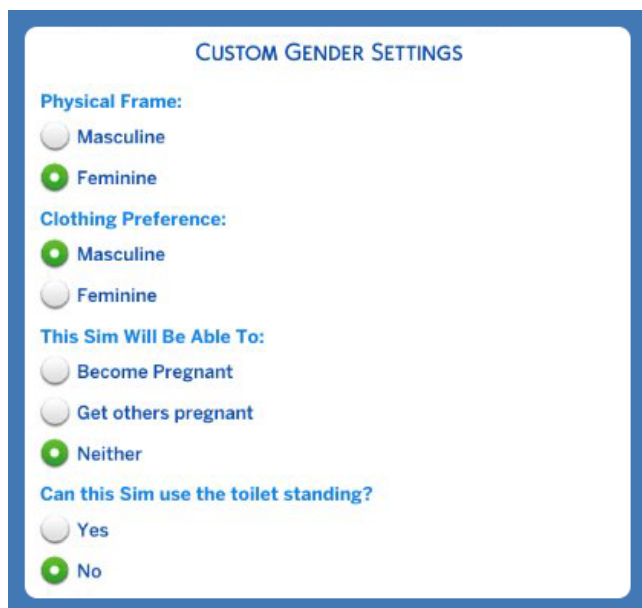


Figure 1: Gender customization options in the updated version of *The Sims 4*

Another example is *The Sims 4*, which has recently received an update that removes some gender limitations in character creation, that were present in the game's previous installments. The customization is no longer predefined by the gender, allowing male characters to wear female coded clothes and even get pregnant, and female characters to choose male coded clothing and use the toilet standing up (see Figure 1 for more details). This decision, however still limited to binary genders (the update did not add an option to let characters identify as non-binary), is an important step to the recognition of transgender identities for customizable characters in games.

As far as trans representation goes, it is filled with instances of transphobia and sexualization of trans women (even though there are also a few examples of characters who are treated well by their narratives). In *Grand Theft Auto V*, the trans characters are portrayed as sex workers, constantly misgendered and made fun of in the dialogue with the main character. There's also a named character, the stripper Peach, who is voiced by a man, and supposed to be interpreted as a trans woman. In the previous game, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, there's Lisa Lynn, a secondary character of a radio show, and is described by its host as a "black transvestite", a very pejorative term. In *Leisure Suit Larry 6*, Shablee, a black trans woman, is seduced by the the protagonist, Larry. When they're about to have sex, Larry finds out she is a trans woman, and vomits because of it, in a clear demonstration of transphobia (as seen in Figure 2). *7 Sins* is described as a life simulation with a sexual approach. The game treats women as sex objects, present only to fulfill the protagonist's desires. It also has a trans woman character, and if the player chooses to have a sexual interaction with her, the character becomes "stressed out", a state that makes the character angry and aggressive [22].

However, some games do manage to display non-stereotyped trans characters, some with actual development in the narrative. One of the most celebrated examples is *Dragon age: Inquisition's* Krem; he has been described as the best transgender character in video games by several media outlets [24, 3, 8]. He is a trans man who has his identity respected by the other characters in the game, and even has conversations about trans issues during the course of the narrative, if the player chooses to do so. In one specific moment,



Figure 2: Example of transphobia in *Leisure Suit Larry*

another male character talks about how Krem is as much of a man as he is, and corrects the player if they happen to misgender him. Nonetheless, the character was voiced by a woman, which has been regarded as a bad decision, because it doesn't involve the presence of actual trans men in the development of the character [15].

There's also a presence of a few characters who have identities that can be interpreted as non-binary. Leo, from *Tekken*, is one of the few playable characters to do so. Leo has been referred to with both male and female pronouns throughout the series, and is presented with characteristics that can be read as both male and female. Even though one of the game's producers has affirmed Leo is a female, there's still some controversy around the character's gender. There is also Flea, a villain in *Chrono Trigger*, who says "Male... Female... what does it matter? Power is beautiful, and I've got the power!" at one point in the game, pointing to an identity that disregards binary conceptions of gender. Also a villain, Kyra in *Gloria Union* behaves in a way that combines both masculine and feminine traits. There's also a presence of specific races that happen to be genderless in games. In the *Mass Effect* series, the Asari are an alien race that only has one gender, presented with traits that could be considered feminine by society's standards. In *Final Fantasy IX*, there is Quina, another example of a playable character, who is presented as a member of genderless race, and can be a part of the player's party [22].

Some games do have playable main characters that happen to belong in the LGBTQ community, and have their narratives show their queerness in a way that is relevant to the story. *The Last of Us* protagonist, Ellie, was revealed to have a romantic involvement with her best friend Riley in the game's DLC (downloadable content) *Left Behind*. The relationship between the two girls was, in fact, the main aspect developed in *Left Behind's* narrative [23]. Curtis, the protagonist of *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh*, reveals to his therapist that he might be bisexual, and is attracted to his friend Trevor, who's openly gay [22]. In *Life is Strange*, the player has the option to get involved romantically with Chloe, and the choice to do so has an impact to how the ending of the story takes shape.

However, those three games end up following a negative trope that is rather common in television and movie narratives with LGBTQ characters: the "bury your gays" trope [33]. It refers to stories that kill a gay character when they are in established happy relationship, or in the process of building one. In *Phantasmagoria*, Trevor is strangled right after he confesses to Curtis that he loves him; *Left Behind* leaves Ellie and Riley to be attacked

by the infected (people that were contaminated with a fungus that transforms them in zombie like creatures), and Riley ends up being transformed into one of them; and one of the final choices in *Life is Strange* involves the death of Chloe to bring the world back into balance, and if you choose to let her live, the whole town where the game takes place is destroyed.

The best place to find games that present queer narratives is probably among independent developers. *Caper in the Castro*, developed in 1988 by a queer identified woman, is the first documented game to have an explicitly queer narrative [36]. It is a murder mystery story with puzzle solving elements, where you play as a lesbian detective trying to find a transgender woman that has gone missing from the Castro, a famous San Francisco neighborhood, important symbol for LGBT activism history.

Following up from *Caper in the Castro*'s example, there are some games produced in the last decade. *Gone Home* was one of the most celebrated games in 2013, and it follows a girl that, after arriving at an empty home, has to figure out where her family went. The main narrative line is about the story of the protagonist's sister, who reveals in her diary that she's questioning her sexuality, while falling in love and getting involved with her best friend. There's also *A Closed World*, a game developed by the Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab, that is an academic project created with the objective of developing a game with meaningful queer content. The narrative is constructed on the concept of forbidden love, where the player has to search for their lost lover, who returned home to marry the person their parents wanted them to. The genders of the characters in the game, however limited to male and female, are all randomized, except for the main character (who is chosen by the player) and the lost lover's new spouse (who is always different from the player's one).

Regarding trans representation, two notable examples are *Mainichi*, developed by Mattie Brice, and *Dys4ia*, developed by Anna Anthropy. Both Anthropy and Brice are trans women, and have their work connected to the queer games movement and Twine Revolution. *Mainichi* and *Dys4ia* talk about the struggles trans women face in our society, with the first one narrating the experiences a trans woman has while navigating through society on a normal day, and the second one dealing with issues of body dysphoria and hormone replacement therapy.

4.2 *Quing's Quest VII* and criticism through humor

The first Twine game to be analyzed is *Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames*. The game's title, in itself, already reveals a lot about its content. The word "quing" is a mixture of king and queen, as a way to address a member of royalty without defining their gender as binary. It points towards a game that deals with characters who have genders different from male and female, which probably reasons a lot with its creators experiences (Dietrich Squinkifer is a self-identified non-binary person). Besides that, the name is also a clear reference to *King's Quest VII*, an adventure game from the 1990's. It presents the nature of Squinkifer's game as a parody, a work that can be used to question important matters regarding the medium.

The game play starts with a presentation of the playable character, who is referred to using the second person. It presents a brief description of the character's surroundings, and also describes them if the player chooses the option to do so. It characterizes the protagonist as "the most gorgeous person of indistinct gender of the universe", defining their non-binary identity. That description also points to how the narrative treats its main actor: by complimenting them, and putting them in a position of importance inside its fictional universe.

Later in the game, the player can also choose how their character presents themselves in the world, with clothing, makeup, nail paint, among other characteristics. It gives the player options of el-

ements that could be coded as both feminine and masculine by our society standards (for example, a long skirt or a kilt) but without actually coding them in game. The language of the written text, using singular they pronouns to refer to its non-binary characters, also makes an effort to never treat them as either male or female.

Additionally, the player character's companion in the story is genderqueer, an identity that also belongs inside the non-binary spectrum. The player can also choose to pursue a romance with this companion. This possibility is very compelling, because it portrays not only two different non-binary characters inside a same narrative, but also a romantic and sexual relationship between them, which is a rare occurrence inside media products. It can offer a new perspective regarding sexuality definitions. A relationship between two people who identify outside the gender binary cannot be classified as either heterosexual or homosexual, since those definitions are closely related to the existence of two opposing genders.

However, the most interesting aspect presented by *Quing's Quest* is probably how it manages to criticize some of the hegemonic positions inside the game community. It was produced for *Ruin Jam*, a game jam created to question an idea shared by some members of the community that feminists, LGBTQ advocates, and other people striving for more diversity inside game spaces are "destroying" video games [29]. It does so by presenting a narrative replete of absurd situations and extremist points of view, and making fun of them. By presenting a context based on absurdity, it questions the validity of those claims.

The narrative follows the player's character and their companion traveling across the universe in their ship, the *Social Justice Warrior*. They had run away from their home planet, *Videogames*, when it was taken by the *Misogyners*, who exiled anyone that they deemed too different from them. But one day, they are found by the *Misogyners* police, who were sent to arrest them, and have to fight for their freedom. They defeat their enemies through dancing, and after doing so, have to choose between either destroying, taking over, or running away from *Videogames*.

Some terms used in the game to name groups of characters and places are related to the context of discussion of representation in games: the spaceship that is named *Social Justice Warrior*, a pejorative expression used by some exclusionary members of the game community to refer to anyone who tries to question the hegemonic values inside game culture; the planet *Videogames*, in a clear reference to the medium itself; and *Misogyners*, a term built by joining the words misogynist and nerds, to talk about people who could be identified as part of the game community, but who follow sexist values and are hostile towards women.

Another important aspect of the game is how it treats the non-binary characters as heroes, and the *Misogyners*, men who are trying to exclude people from the game community, as villains. It goes on the opposite direction of some examples inside mainstream game culture, that portray the trans and gender non-conforming characters as either antagonists or NPCs, but not as the main actors of the narrative.

The main character is described as a builder, that used to create things in *Videogames* before the *Misogyners* invaded. They are also seen as rebel, who wants to build things their own way, which often deviates from the planet's norm. However, they had to stop building new things when they were exiled from *Videogames*, that happened to be taken over because of economic pressures. This could be read as a direct criticism of the Hegemony of Play, that favors a certain type of game development, often with economic profit as an objective, leaving other different efforts in the margin.

Besides criticizing the lack of diversity in game production, it also condemns the exclusionary practices towards LGBTQ identified people in society. In a certain moment of the game, shown in Figure 3, the *Misogyners* try to arrest the protagonist and their companion. The game lists the reasons why they are being arrested;

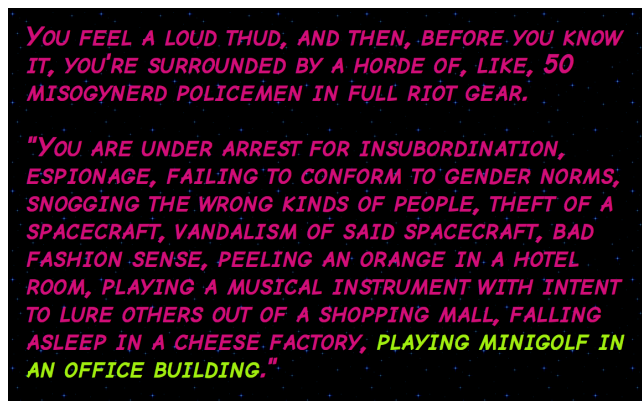


Figure 3: Screen of *Quing's Quest VII*, listing the reasons why the protagonist is being arrested

some of which are “failing to conform to gender norms”, “snogging the wrong kind of people”, among some ridiculous arguments, such as “peeling an orange in a hotel room”. When comparing queer identities and relationships to common activities, the game makes fun of discriminatory speech, pointing out to how questionable it is to judge and exclude someone for their gender identity or sexuality.

And in the end of the narrative, the player is faced with the decision of whether to destroy *Videogames* or leave the planet behind. Although those options may seem negative at first, they actually represent a possibility of building a new point of view about the medium. If the player chooses to destroy *Videogames*, they are presented with the possibility of building a new version of the planet in the same place, and if they decide to leave, it is to try to find a community that welcomes them someplace else. Either way, the game points out to a future where the protagonist continues to create and contribute to video games, in an authentic way. It is a powerful message to anyone trying to make video games that challenge hegemonic ideals, both in the medium and society; their work is valid and they don't have to stop. As Higgins [17] affirms, “The killing of videogames is not a moment in history, but instead a lasting cultural trend”[p. 202]. There is a movement on video game development to portray feminist, socially aware ideals, and those creators will keep striving for a medium with more diverse representation.

4.3 Autobiography in *Conversations With My Mother*

In opposition to what it is seen in *Quing's Quest*, which takes place in a highly fictionalized world and presents an allegorical narrative, *Conversations With My Mother* tells an autobiographical story. It is, as the title suggests, a conversation between the author, Merritt Kopas, who is a trans woman, and her mother, who is struggling to accept Kopas' gender identity.

The player takes the position of Kopas' mother, as they talk about her transition process, as well as how she's building her identity as a trans woman. The player controls what the mother says in the conversation, shaping Kopas' response according to their speech choices. The player can decide how to refer to Kopas, whether to use her real name or not, feminine or masculine pronouns, and the topics of conversation, that range from harmless talk about makeup to a private discussion about hormones.

Similarly to *Dys4ia*, another example of autobiographical game, *Conversations With My Mother* invites the player to reflect on how they perceive transgender people in society. But while *Dys4ia* uses a first person perspective, where the player controls a trans person, providing an experience where the players see themselves in the position lived by the author [6], *Conversations With My Mother*

takes the narrative from an outsider standpoint; the player is interacting with, and not playing as the trans person. It is a form of exploring how cisgender people see trans women, to provoke a reflection on how they should behave around them.

It is a game about language, in essence, about navigating how you can speak to and refer to transgender people, which fits well with the choice of a text based platform. It discusses issues regarding the right of choosing your own name and your own pronouns, and also about which conversation topics are appropriate to talk about or not. The choices inside the game are not related to actions, but to words: the player chooses the expressions in which the mother will communicate with Kopas. And by choosing the words to communicate, the player builds the interaction and relationship between the mother and the daughter; the more respectful they are towards Kopas' identity, the more ending possibilities they get.

And those ending possibilities are what shows the biggest aspect of the autobiography in the game: the player is linked to some tweets written by Kopas about her relationship with her mother, in real life. The player catches a glimpse of what Kopas herself experienced, without any attempts at fictionalizing the narrative. This is a good strategy because it approximates the player to reality, bringing them to a position where they can actually question how they would act if they had a transgender relative.

Regarding themes related to family relationships, *Conversations With My Mother* shares with *Gone Home* a narrative about a family member discovering and navigating somebody's queerness: in *Gone Home*, Sam, the playable character's sister, and in *Conversations With My Mother*, Kopas, the daughter. It has a fundamental difference, however: while in *Gone Home* the narrative only tells Sam's story, with the player choices having little significance to how the narrative follows, *Conversations With My Mother* gives the power of narrative construction to the player. How Kopas responds is completely related to the words chosen for communication.

And because of that, the game can display instances of transphobia in its narrative: the player can misgender Kopas, by refusing to call her by her real name or using the wrong pronouns, which questions the validity of her gender. Nonetheless, the narrative punishes the player if they choose to do so: the interactions that tend to be more negative towards Kopas' identity end up without a resolution, they don't display the tweets in the end of the playthrough. It becomes a broken conversation, pointing towards a distant relationship between the mother and Kopas. If the choices are more welcoming, however, the player gets to see more of Kopas' thoughts and feelings revealed through the tweets, representing a certain proximity between mother and daughter, and a healthier, more comprehensive relationship.

4.4 *Queers in Love at the End of the World* and temporality

Queers in Love at the End of the World, unlike the other Twine works presented before, is a very short game with a simple premise: the player controls a character who is together with their lover at the end of the world, which will happen in exactly ten seconds. The game sets a timer for those ten seconds, and the player is presented with some options of actions to do with their partner for the remaining time they have to live, in a context of intimacy: kiss her, hold her, take her hand or tell her something. Each choice leads to even more choices, in a chain of actions that will not reach an ending in the time that was given for the narrative to happen.

There are only two characters present: the one controlled by the player, and the lover. The characters are not described in any moment of the game, it only provides two pieces of information about them: first, the fact that they are queer, stated by the game's title; and second, the lover's gender, who is presumably a woman, stated by the use of feminine pronouns. The lack of description indicates that those characters could be anyone, leaving the player

with the power to fill the blanks and construct their identities.

Therefore, the game doesn't actually present on-screen representation, since there is no certainty on how those characters identify regarding their gender and sexuality. However, the use of the word "Queers" in the title, which could be easily substituted by "People" if the intention was to present a universal narrative, is not accidental; there is a narrative relevance of stating that those characters are queer. It is important for Anthropy's narrative to be defined as a queer statement, because although it describes feelings that could be shared by any kind of person, it still contains some particularities specific to queer experiences.

Queers in Love at the End of the World could be interpreted as a representation of the concept of queer temporality, described by Halberstam [14]. Queer temporality states that the experience of time by queer people is different from heteronormative conceptions of temporality, because their lives are not clearly defined by a narrative based in the institutions of family, marriage and reproduction. Halberstam also points out that the historical violence suffered by queer people in society, and how much they were affected by the AIDS epidemic, provokes a change in mindset about how to live time: since they can expect to die at any moment, to have their relationships reach a sudden end, it is important to live the present and enjoy every second of it, as quoted "The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now," [p. 2]. The whole structure of the game is constructed around that concept; the timer marks the substantial lack of a future, with no possibility of changing that outcome, therefore the player can only choose to cherish the last moments before the end.

The destructive aspect of the story could also be compared to the narratives that portray the Bury Your Gays trope, since it presents the death of queer characters while they are sharing an intimate moment, similarly to what happens in *Phantasmagoria* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. But the point in *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is to show this destruction; the character's death is expected from the start, the game is a race for experiencing the most you can in the limited time you have. It presents the player with a limited time from the start, as a narrative element. As Brice [5] affirms, "It unearths desires and worry in a world where things are fleeting, a world where people are so frequently hurt." Queer people live in a world that condemns their relationships and their identities, being hurt by a society where they are rejected. There is a rush to enjoy things as they don't know how much time do they have to do so, until they get rejected again.

And according to Anthropy [13], this game was written as she was in the end of a relationship, in a way to express her feelings of loss. It shares some of the autobiographical values with *Conversations with my Mother*; although it takes place in a fictional universe and presents fictional situations, it comes from a place of reflection over a creator's own experiences. Even though it is a narrative rooted in queer experiences, her idea with this game was to translate what she was feeling in a way that people could understand and relate to. This corroborates Shaw's [31] affirmation that games don't need token representation to engage players, they need compelling experiences. A queer person can enjoy a narrative with a cisgender or heterosexual protagonist, just as much as a cisgender heterosexual person can enjoy and relate to a story with a queer character in the center. It takes the premise that anyone, of any gender and orientation, can experience desire, love, and loss.

4.5 Glory to *With Those We Love Alive*

Finally, there is *With Those We Love Alive*, a game designed by Porpentine to talk about love and companionship between people in an oppressive world. The protagonist is a person who works for a tyrannical monster queen, and when encounters an old friend from her past, decides that she doesn't want to live in those conditions anymore, and fights her way to escape.

The player controls a person whose gender is not explicitly stated in the narrative, but it is possible to assume that it talks about a transfeminine character, either a trans woman or a non-binary feminine presenting person. There are several clues revealed in narrative that point out to this assertion: the protagonist chooses a new name in the beginning of the story, in place of the one given to her by her parents; she has to apply hormones in certain points of the narrative cycle; and she expresses her gender with feminine coded elements, such as dresses and nail polish.

Besides presenting a trans protagonist, the main relationship in the game is also implied to be between two transfeminine people. It is not necessarily a romantic relationship, but a way of showing the intimacy of two queer people who have shared similar experiences, and the support one can get from their own community, as Porpentine [28] affirms, "WTLA is a friendship between fems. The game's metadata describes itself as "romance", but nothing sexual happens, they don't really flirt. I wanted to talk about romantic friendship, about intimacy outside the binary of platonic/sexual". The protagonist's friend is her reference for safety, the motivation to disconnect herself from the harmful world they live in, and it is precisely because they are very much alike, separated from that world. In the end of the story, the protagonist is seen escaping, as she defeats the empress agents that were trying to stop her and her friend from leaving, taking complete agency in her narrative. And she manages to succeed because of the companionship and the support of a person that she feels connected to.

The world where the game takes place in is imaginary and surreal, often presenting situations of horror and violence. It helps to create a sense of otherness, distancing the player from that environment. World building in science fiction works can be as much of a tool to talk about queerness as the introduction of LGBTQ characters. Using a fictional universe to show societies with different norms than our own, be them more liberal or more tyrannical, is also a resource to display questions of how queer identities belong in social spaces [35]. The language used to describe this space, as well as how the game structure works and the music, are used in an effective way to provoke a feeling of exclusion from the world. Porpentine also employs the use of neologisms, creating a language that is very much her own, different from what is usually seen on written narratives. As an example, *Quing's Quest VII* takes place in a world that is as fantastic as *With Those We Love Alive*; however, the former is presented with a more familiar language and a referential universe, while the latter tries to distance itself from any feeling of familiarity.

There's no textual representation of transphobia or homophobia, since the game doesn't explicitly talk about trans identities. However, it is possible to perceive that the protagonist suffers with oppression, because of the construction of the game's universe. She feels alone and trapped by a tyrannical society controlled by a cruel leader, and by other people who collaborate with that tyranny. It brings up a discussion of a queer feeling of otherness, there to represent how LGBTQ people often feel disconnected from a world hostile to their identities. The whole concept of repeated actions and working mindlessly to a tyrannical monster queen corroborates to an idea of oppression- not only for being queer, but also considering issues of class, questioning poverty and slave work.

The most interesting aspect of the game, however, is how it connects to the player, allowing them to actively participate in the construction of the narrative. In certain moments in the middle of the story narration, the game asks the player to draw symbolic sigils on their skin (examples of the sigils can be seen in Figure 4). This can be interpreted as a design choice that challenges a notion that the definition of the rules in digital games is a task constructed only by the developers, with the players choosing what to do in conformity to those rules, but not actively building anything [12]. With the introduction of the sigils as a crucial element, the player takes



Figure 4: Some of the sigils drawn by players of *With Those We Love Alive* (from: <http://animalnewyork.com/2014/making-love-alive-game-leaves-mark/>)

place in an active construction of the narrative, gaining some control over the rules: they can choose to draw the sigils or not, draw them in skin or paper, on themselves or somebody else, or even do it in a new way completely imagined by them.

And those sigils, which are, at first sight, a personal symbol of each player, ended up shared by them on various web spaces. The presence of those sigils structures the game in a way where the narrative doesn't end when it reaches the credits page, it continues to be built by the players outside its original space, transcending it and taking it to new places. And the game recognizes it; on the final screen, Porpentine added a link to the page in her Tumblr blog where she collects people's photographs of the sigils drawn in their bodies. *With Those We Love Alive*'s glory lies in that exchange, a work that not only delivers an experience, but lets its players build it along.

5 DISCUSSIONS

When comparing the representation of LGBTQ characters in those four Twine games to other relevant instances in the industry, there were two main differences found. First, there's the protagonism of trans and non-binary characters, who were at the center of the narratives on all four games, while they tend to be only supporting characters and villains when they are represented in the medium. Second, there was no presence of homophobia, and only one instance of transphobia in the Twine games analyzed. It happened as a player choice in *Conversations With My Mother* [19], and the game structure makes sure to not endorse that point of view, delivering an incomplete narrative to the players if they choose those options.

There were a few instances of mainstream games with compelling, three dimensional transgender characters, with the most notable example being *Mass Effect*'s Krem. However, it is important to take under consideration that Krem is a man, and that trans women representation in the mainstream is mostly still connected to sexual contexts, being objectified and disrespected. The situation is very different when trans women are the ones telling their own stories (which happens not only on Twine, but in other platforms as well), exposing their point of view about the issues they face; it brings the trans characters to the position of main actors inside a narrative.

It is also important to think about how queer representation can happen in different ways besides portraying explicitly LGBTQ identified characters on screen. The idea of sharing specific queer experiences, as it is done in *Queers in Love at the End of the World* [2] and in *With Those We Love Alive* [27], which don't explicitly determine the character's identity, but talk about the experiences lived by their designers as queer identified people, is just as important

in the building of a socially aware medium, with a cultural value capable of provoking socially relevant discussions.

On another approach, to think about the structure of the games analyzed, it was possible to observe that two of them, *Conversations With My Mother* and *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, could not be developed in a graphical based environment, as they are essentially text games. In *Conversations With My Mother*, the narrative revolves around the language used with trans people, so it is necessary to deal with words and expressions directly; and in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, the ideas need to be transmitted fast, since the narrative lasts only ten seconds, and words provide a much faster and more concise communication in the game's context. The other two games are not as deeply rooted in a text-based construction, but do manage to use the chosen platform in interesting, effective ways. In *Quing's Quest VII* [32], it portrays a parody based on the structure of text adventure games, which is a clever alternative for criticizing the medium; and *With Those We Love Alive*, uses neologisms and a cyclical narrative structure to effectively build its oppressive world.

Besides that, three of those games are successful in constructing narratives that effectively challenge the Hegemony of Play. *Quing's Quest VII* does it on its content, while *Queers in Love at the End of the World* and *With Those We Love Alive* also present a structure that goes against the default. *Quing's Quest VII* uses the medium itself to explicitly criticize the hostility LGBTQ identified people and women face inside game communities; *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is a game that lasts only 10 seconds with no victory conditions, where the incompleteness is a key narrative element; and in *With Those We Love Alive*, the introduction of the sigils shares the construction of the rules with the player, which is relatively unseen on digital games.

Twine games present themselves as an interesting exploration of the video game medium. Although the platform might look simple at a first glance, there are plenty of ways to develop different structures of play with it, specially with games focused on narrative. However, the biggest contribution Twine games have to the game community and even society is indeed regarding its approach on queer related issues. The subjectivity given to LGBTQ characters on Twine is where the platform draws its strength, and differentiates itself from other initiatives of game development.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Twine needs to be recognized as a very relevant platform inside game development spaces. Visser [34] affirms that, in a context where there's a strive for more realism and more powerful graphics, it is crucial to pay attention to what message the game wants to display and how to use the resources available to do so. Sometimes, a simpler structure will be more effective to portray some concepts than a very technological, realistic one. The use of Twine, however probably because of the need of simplicity in a context of a no budget production with small teams, is not a shortcoming, and the narratives analyzed are effective in displaying the main ideas proposed by their creators.

It could be an interesting strategy for game developers and researchers to observe how the queer narratives on Twine are built, and how other platforms can be used to approach the same discussions and concepts. Most games portraying LGBTQ people focus on the narrative development, but queer experiences can be told in many ways that don't involve this focus. For example, Merrit Kopas' *Lim* uses simple colorful squares to talk about violence against queer people, using the gameplay to build an effective metaphor. If bigger companies, with more resources and budget, actually took interest in developing products with a concern about social awareness, they could produce influential games with a crucial cultural value.

Nonetheless, it is also important to analyze the context of how

Twine games are being produced, and how LGBTQ developers are treated by the industry. Indie games, especially personal ones produced with small teams, don't make a fraction of the money AAA games (developed by consolidated companies with high budgets) do, and some developers are really struggling financially [16]. There needs to be an effort to give value and space to those games and developers, and also to understand the financial context of personal game development inside the system, trying to find alternatives to accommodate the needs of everyone. It could also be interesting to compare the presence of LGBTQ themes and characters in video games to the one in other mediums, such as movies, television shows and comic books, to try to find similarities and differences of expression of those themes with different structures.

Another important point that could be approached on future research are intersectional studies, about representation of other minorities, regarding race, class, nationality and people with disabilities. There's an intersection of all those aspects in the identities of many people, and all of them must be considered in order to portray three-dimensional characters who can represent real people, and create games that can bring identification for everyone. As Conn [7] affirms, the presence of diverse protagonists does not mean that the narrative of a cisgender, heterosexual, white men should no longer be told, it just offers new points of view, and the representation of a world that is more relatable to all kinds of people.

Finally, this paper is not trying to affirm that only queer identified people can talk about queer related issues, or that Twine is the only hope for positive, non-prejudicial LGBTQ representation. There are some recent efforts in mainstream games to make the medium more diverse; it will be interesting to observe if AAA games will eventually reach a point of having a queer protagonist introduced for all players, and not only presented as an option. According to Shaw [31], players don't choose what games they want to play because they share aspects of their identities with the main characters, so there's nothing pointing to a defining reason why a mainstream game with a queer protagonist could not be successful.

Peele [25] affirms that "Among other things, television, movies, the Internet, music, and fashion provide various normative discourses that simultaneously teach us and reinforce the division between the acceptable and unacceptable" [p.2]. Taking the standpoint that video games are a valid cultural manifestation, it is crucial to understand its importance in the process of shaping society's values. If most games produced reinforce hegemonic views and present narratives that revolve around the same type of character, they medium ends up being a platform that advocates for the permanence of the same social norms. In contrast, by using the medium to portray the realities of queer experiences, games can effectively contribute to a bigger acceptance of LGBTQ identities in society.

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