PowerGaming:

Queer BDSM and Weird Little Games.

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Abstract

PowerGaming is a series of game sketches exploring the ways Queer BDSM (Bondage/ Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) can inform the development of critically engaged games. More specifically, it is an investigation into the ways the considerations of Queer BDSM, such as the redefinition of pleasure, can be harnessed to create play that promotes queer subjectivities and challenges hetero/cisnormative play. Through designing specifically for the body as a site of brink/edge space, Powergaming uses the methods of feminist pornography to encourage the cross-pollination of meaning across these boundaries, with the ultimate goal of engendering queerly subversive play.

Keywords

BDSM, Game Design, Game Studies, Queer Studies, Embodiment, Virtual Reality, Kink, Brink Games.

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Introduction

I have not always been interested in making games, but my work, regardless of medium, has always orbited sex, has always involved the body. When people ask me how I learned photography I know they are expecting a heartfelt story involving a father and a camera. In truth, when I was younger, my friends wanted excuses to be naked with one another, to be flirtatious and exploratory. I learned photography to make a safe space for all of us, but I also learned photography through making porn. I moved from photography to film and from film to games - in an additive fashion as opposed to linear. While this progression through mediums was paralleled by the content of my work moving farther into fiction and fantasy, the interplay of sex and power, and risk, and exploration, remained a common thread. This is probably why I found such a home in the Feminist Pornography community for so many years, it being so committed to weaving our experiences and politics into our work with sexuality. The shift from photography to film felt like an expansion of the medium, a similar style, a similar intent, a similar content, but into another dimensionality - time. The shift to games felt the same, the expanding of the same intentions to yet another new dimension - this time, interactivity.

I made my first games many years ago. It was at a game jam that was focussed on testing out a piece of software created to make FMVs (Full Motion Video Games) and provided the perfect access point for someone with my background in photo and film into the realm of game design. I had been resisting working with sexual subject matter in my work, but as it was a jam format and a quick turn around I ended up caving into something that was easy and familiar, pornography. I became very interested in using the interactivity of games to express something beyond the consumption of pornographic imagery. I struggled with the idea that as players of games we are most often rewarded for asserting ourselves into the systems we are playing. I wanted to explore the possibilities of creating a system that mimicked some of my favourite sexual experiences, something that balanced or tampered player desire with the desire to please another entity. In this instance, that other became the game. What resulted was a simple puzzle game where the player

was presented with a series of paths, displayed as words. The "winning" choices were those words that had meaning to both the computer and the fleshsack - rip, burn, insert instead of fuck, squeeze, suck. If the players failed to get the hint, or chose to willfully ignore it, choosing to favour the words that only had meaning to them, the game would respond by showing them corrupted footage, punishing them with unpleasant visual and auditory experiences (a personal highlight being a normal pornographic video with its audio replaced by the sounds of someone eating pasta).

While I didn't have the framework to discuss what I was doing at the time, this marked the beginning of my interest in the similarities between game space and BDSM (an acronym based in three pairings of terms - Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) play space and this exploration led me to next adaptation of this life long thread - to Virtual Reality. Virtual Reality, in this lineage, brought my work from being about the body, to being *on* the body. This is where this research sits, at the center of these entanglements.

As new as this realm of inquiry is to me (specifically game design that incorporates BDSM as part of a political porn making practice), threads of it can be found in other areas of academic inquiry. For example, Sicart and Wilson's abusive game design provides a small window into some potential connections. Unfortunately this space is plagued with thick coats of hypermasculine performativity and lack of socio-political awareness (it claims apolitical analysis, as if that exists). Queer games study is another potential avenue for parallel ideology, but often it relies too heavily on theory, and loses sight of its relationship to the body and perverted pleasure practice. When originally mapping out the theoretical framework for this research I had assumed I would spend most of my time drawing connections between these two divergent conceptual frameworks, but, much to my relief, a third option appeared.

Brink games are theorized as games that are designed intentionally to exploit the boundary of the magic circle to in order to produce critical engagement (Poremba 776-778). Through brink we can see the body as something more than content, something more than a vessel containing a

player. For this work, at least, the body becomes a portal between the politic and the pleasure, the history and the fiction, the theory and the identity. The body, as a new dimensionality afforded by virtual reality, complicates the boundary between game space and real space. Brink provides a framework from which to create work that actively engages the messiness of working with the body, or working with different bodies, both within BDSM and within games.

It also allows me to follow my strongest draw in this space, which is its potential for political and critical engagement. The goal of this work is to entangle all of these threads - feminist porn, BDSM, brink design, queer embodiment - into a new framework to engage in designing pleasurable game based interactions.

I might just mean pleasure differently than you're used to.

With all that in mind, some questions I'm exploring in this research:

How might the tools of BDSM be used as a game design tools to promote critical engagement, both with the game structure itself, and outside of the game, to external power structures, laws and norms? The tools of BDSM here meaning the techniques by which BDSM players transform (invert/change) the meaning of their engagement with sexual and erotic activity. Could the frameworks of queer BDSM - its symbolisms, value systems, practices - be used to create play that promotes queer subjectivities and challenges hetero/cisnormative play? How could the intentional occupation of design within brink or edge space encourage the cross-pollination of meaning? Could BDSM practice expose a way to use this transfiguration of meaning to create empowerment/subversion/transformation of self?

Chapter two of this document outlines the methodological process and issues I encountered in developing and undertaking this research. Due to the complex political nature and perceived complicated ethical nature of working with the body, pleasure and identity, this became one of the most difficult but ultimately most rewarding and beneficial elements of this project. Chapter

3 outlines my conceptual framework entwining BDSM, queerness, brink, and virtual reality. Chapter 4 contains an analysis of the literature adjacent to this work. This is broken down into what I identify as the main vertices of where this is situated - painful games, queerness in games, and the physicality of VR and its potential for weird body making. Alongside this literature I've included some examples of games and experiences that are concerned with similar themes. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 chronicle my experience in designing and making the game sketches. Each of these chapters is broken down into 4 sections; a description of the final game, the intention when setting out to make it, the process journal of the actual making, and then the direction for further development. In chapter 8 I reflect on this process of making and what have been the dominant takeaways, and then synthesize these reflections within a broader theoretical context. In Chapter 9, I summarize my experience and present a framework for working with brink and kink.

Methodology

Methodologically, this project has become complex. Originally, I proposed a methodology that incorporates the aims and techniques of feminist porn practice (Taormino) into a more structured and formalized iterative design process.

Feminist pornography can be understood as sexually explicit imagery (and I would extend this to interactions/systems) created with the intent to critique dominant narratives and representations of sexuality, identity and bodies. As Taormino states in the introduction to the Feminist Porn Book,

> Feminist porn uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers. It explores concepts of desire, agency, power, beauty, and pleasure at the most confounding and difficult." (Taormino et al. 9)

In addition to representation, it is critical of many processes of production, requiring the political framework to be applied to not just the product of creation, but also the process. A potential solution to these critiques can be found in co-creation, described by Jansen & Pieters as "actively involving end-users and other relevant parties in a development process, from the identification of a challenge to the implementation and tracking of its solution .

As such, my goal was to work with a small group of BDSM practitioners to ideate, design, and critique the work through various stages of iterative development, in order to help avoid the potential pitfalls of a single viewpoint, and integrate an important element of BDSM interpersonal practice into my process - negotiation. I wanted to center myself, as body of difference, as an important position for making, while continuing to stay critical of my position and without replicating systems of oppression - engaging my own creativity and desire for

making, while continually engaging with and incorporating the creativity and desires of my participants in a way that leads towards exciting experiences and play for multiple subjects.

This was important for many reasons, not the least of which is the development of queer knowledges. Academia and art have a long shared history of problematic relationships to ownership and authorship. In academia, we have required authors, names (and associated egos) to attribute ideas to. As new voices enter the discussion our institutions demand that they corroborate and substantiate their ideas. We call this academic rigor. The problem with rigor is not that ideas within academic institution should not be challenged, defended, debated or critiqued - those are, after all, the main benefits of university. The problem is that this process manifests as a regurgitation of ideas that these institutions have already *attributed value to*. If I am to make a statement about play, games, queer identity, etc. then I am expected to reference the statements that have not only come before, but that have been confirmed as valid (via publication, dissemination, examination, whatever). If you were to need an example of this, the budding field of queer games studies is already dominated by the same few names, the names of people who were in the right place to claim an idea as their own. This process, just like everything else in this world, is contaminated by power hierarchies and as such, privilege becomes the number one requirement to the title of *knowledgeable*. It should not be a controversial statement to acknowledge that our hierarchies of knowledge are broken, something Sara Ahmed identifies as the result of the politics of citational practices:

> I would describe citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies. These citational structures can form what we call disciplines. I was once asked to contribute to a sociology course, for example, and found that all the core readings were by male writers. I pointed this out and the course convener implied that "that" was simply a reflection of the history of the discipline. Well: this is a very selective history! The reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of *these techniques of selection*, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part. (Ahmed)

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I myself have already fallen prey to upholding citation practices that are at odds with my politics - the literature review chapter of this document contains more than one name that I strongly disagree with the attribution of value to - as I extend Ahmed's critique of the maleness of most citations to a critique of toxicity within citational endorsement. But the deeper and more insidious partner to these knowledge development practices within academia is epistemic injustice - an area of much philosophical debate concerned with the ways our social positioning influences who we believe to be credible (McKinnon).

> access to knowledge creation and dissemination (via testimony) is inherently *political*. For example, it turns out that asking *who the knower is* – their identity – matters to our epistemologies. (McKinnon 438)

As someone who has, for most my life, been restricted from accessing institutions of knowledge, largely due to class (which is and was obviously complicated due to my queer- and transness), it has been very important to me to develop a practice that counters the way these hierarchies of knowledge are perpetuated. As someone who exists within whiteness and perceived masculinity, it has been important throughout my life to resist personal ownership of knowledge in that my privilege will forever taint my experience of it. What this means is that I am uninterested in making knowledge claims. I am uninterested in ownership of the ideas presented within this research as I recognize this ownership to be a function of capitalism and beyond that I am highly critical of anyone who needs to stake their claim to a piece of knowledge. I understand knowledge to be social, communal, relative, adapting, and fluid. This may be a function of my queerness, as even my *truth* contains all of these qualities.

Zoya Street's recount of their attempts to queer history as a discipline and a practice of knowledge production ties in here, identifying queerness itself as something that "might be described as a resistance against that coercive attempt to claim knowledge of other people's experiences". They go on:

Queering history does not just mean including queer experiences in accounts of gaming histories. It also means challenging the normative structures of history as a practice, making it more open and flexible and less authoritarian. It means finding ways to embody the role of the historian in an authentic way, rather than posturing in a way that privileges some voices over others. It means abandoning knowledge. It means not knowing anything. (QGS 41)

As people engaged in the development of a new designation of knowledge creation, namely research-creation (or arts based research), we must follow these calls to action to question the very structure and function of knowledge. And we certainly must examine the way our practices are at play with these multitudes of structures. As such, I endeavoured to develop a methodology that incorporated both my understanding of queer knowledge development and that existed in opposition to traditional structures of knowledge. This necessitated the inclusion of other people as I understand knowledge as communally created and wanted to reflect this in the work. Thus, attaining ethics approval was required.

Unfortunately for me, and for the work, I did not receive ethics approval for the project as I had originally conceived of it. The program timeline is brief, and as such, the window for ethics approval is also short. Unfortunately this timeline doesn't allow for multiple back and forths or the negotiation of mess. I knew that this project was going to potentially difficult to get ethics clearance for, so I endeavoured to get my application in as early as possible to allow time for revisions and negotiations. The first round of revisions came and went quickly. The second were accompanied by being called in for a meeting. In this meeting I was informed that I would need to file an addendum each time a game was designed in order to get re-approved for my participants to interact with and test said game. This would involve an unfortunate break of the immersions and rapid development and redevelopment that were some of the major draws to participatory design, but, it was a concession that did not feel optional, so the application was adjusted to agree to addendums at regular intervals throughout the process. Unfortunately, even

after this compromise was implemented the application was returned for more revisions, this time only after multiple requests for an update on the timeline as the winter break was approaching. This third round of requests came just before the winter break and with a growing concern for the state of the project (as it was functionally on hold until approval was achieved and the 3-4 week winter break did not feel like time I had to waste) and a lack of trust that this process would result in approval regardless of the concessions and clarifications made, I decided to pivot.

In short, this means is that even though I was earlier than most of my colleagues in sending in my application for ethics approval, there was not enough time to restructure and reframe and rewrite the proposal enough times to get it to a place where the Research Ethics Board (REB) felt comfortable signing off on it while still providing me the time to actually undertake the research.

It's entirely possible that all the time in the world would not have solved the REB's inability to approve a participatory design practice involving a group of queers who consensually engage in sexual activity that is both legally grey and pathologized as illness by the masses. The problem with these kinds of ethics structures within institutions is that they were never designed by us. They are a top down solution meant to impose a very broad and easily understood conceptualization of safety onto the investigation of research. Which, for many reasons, is crucially important. Where this really starts to fail, though, is when it blocks people it deems as "vulnerable" from undertaking the work *in the ways their community decides is safe*. The irony here is that the communities that have been doing the work of developing the critical consent practices ethics boards speak about - queers, intersectional feminists, kinksters - these are the people that have their ability to consent removed in these processes. I wish I could say I was surprised by the hurdles placed in my path by the REB but as someone whose work and life involves a pretty constant skepticism of the structures that proclaim to enforce our "safety", it was a painfully predictable outcome to have my initial ethics proposal "request for clarification"-ed into oblivion. It was also thoroughly disappointing to see the social biases of the reviewers manifest in the comments and feedbacks of these requests.

The resultant pivot in the structure of this research, unfortunately, weakened its methodological foundations, as it was designed and developed in quite a small (and frankly, panicked) period.

I did still proceed with the game sketching practice, but moved more towards something akin to a critical design process, where the input from participants became replaced with literature and the theoretical and conceptual engagements therein. From this I designed and developed 3-5 small game sketches. Sketches, in opposition to prototypes, can be understood as faster, smaller and more disposable pieces of work, whose "value lies not in the artifact of the sketch itself, but its ability to provide a catalyst to the desired and appropriate behaviours, conversations, and interactions" (Buxton 113). They are the outcomes of the ideation phase, not of iteration and development. This allowed me to follow a few threads I had been engaging with theoretically, design and build a few things quickly from them and then reflect back on the process of these explorations and ideally (with an updated REB applications and approval) engage other community members with them for more insight.

Because my works is very heavily rooted in my personal critique of societal structure and the ways media engages it, critical design felt like the natural fallback space for the work to exist, but as I continued to consider it became more tenuous of an association. If critical design is, as Dunne and Raby identify it, something that "uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life" then maybe this work is that, but only as a matter of positioning; for those out of community (mine), these games may very well challenge the assumptions of the purpose of games and play, but as an in-community conversation these assumptions aren't usually held to begin with. What I mean by this is that part of the difficulty with this framing is that it assumes a normality of assumption and while dominant ideologies are excessively prevalent in design practices, the lack of specificity about what statements critical design is trying to make troubles my willingness to label my work as such. The assumptions I carry around, as a queer kinky person are most likely very far from the assumptions Dunne and Raby are trying to challenge. Further to that, my

concerns lie in the fact that creating from a place of my own experiences will most likely challenge the same target as the work of Dunne and Raby whether it is my intention to do so or not. The question I faced in considering my work as critical design was whether I was creating with the intention of that challenge or if it was just a by product of creating from my experience. If I am creating to center the experience of people like me, and the work happens to threaten these narrow preconceptions, was it critical design all along? This works natures as speculative is also suspect. As a practice of making it contains many speculations about where automation and human sexuality can interact, but as pieces their purpose is not necessarily to carry that speculation forward. Again, this may be more a matter of the assumptions brought into the experience of play. It may also just be my interest in maintaining a comfortable distance between my work and the work of someone who thinks *Crash* is about the cars (Dunne, 75).

Luckily, a thing can be more than one thing and I can both join the critique of Dunne and Raby's critical design as unnecessarily vague and lacking in self-reflexivity (Bardzell and Bardzell 3299) and also hope to develop the practice as something more explicit and nuanced in its political intentions.

To that end, feminist pornography can, in some ways, be understood as critical design practice, but I would argue that where critical design traditionally uses speculation to prompt its questions, feminist porn is more interested in the tool of provocation *based in experience*; the difference here being that speculation is less concerned with the dissemination of community knowledges. This may be a primarily semantic differentiation, albeit I believe an important one, between the product-centric language of critical design (product/use/function/form) and the human-centric language of politics and representational media - in this case feminism and pornography (gender, sexuality, desire, agency, power). Regardless, the intent stays the same as it was when this was a participatory design project: using game making and the methods of feminist pornographic practice and politic as a way to engage BDSM to prioritize marginalized relationships to bodies, sensation and identities through play.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is informed by both queer and game design theories. As discussed in the literature review chapter, attempts to bridge these two fields have already been made, but instead of drawing from queer theory at large (aka that which is mostly concerned with embodiment, affect and representation), this work is primarily concerned with queer theory that is specifically engaged with BDSM practice. As there is not much theoretical groundwork yet laid for this, one text in particular has become central to the framing of Queer BDSM practice - Robin Bauer's *Queer BDSM Intimacies*.

Queer BDSM Intimacies discusses how Queer and Dyke BDSM practitioners create, define and use BDSM for healing, transformation, empowerment and subversion. BDSM itself, in this context, can be understood as an alternate reality space crafted through a practice of critical consent, negotiation and desire, where sex and sexuality can be engaged with to create transformation, transfiguration and self definition of meaning and bodies. Bauer conceptualizes BDSM as intimate theater, something "more real, closer to home, than theater [...] because of its intimate character" (68) , but it could also be understood as a game. Often within BDSM scholarship discussing the identification as game has been challenged as being not serious or 'real' enough of a classification, but as one of Bauer's research participants identifies - "Game does not mean that it is less real. Game stressed the regulative [nature] of the safe, sane, consensual [guidelines]. Games have limits" (67).

While historically BDSM has been conceptualized as theatre, deep play, a serious game, or work, I would like to propose a new conceptualization - as brink game (Poremba). Brink games, or games that occupy a space on the edge of the magic circle, are described as games that allow for forbidden play, games that use their status as "only a game" as a strategic gesture to suspend certain social structures of 'real life' to make particular interactions allowable that may not otherwise be allowed. Brink specifically refers to games that harness this particular position

between reality and the something-different space of games as a way to make a particular statement about either of these spaces, games that occupy this boundary zone and aim to push critique back into reality.

The magic circle is a term used to describe the spaces we assign to be not real life, where the rules and regulations of social interactions are suspended in favour of other set of predefined or pre-negotiated rules. While used colloquially, its origins are rooted in a passage in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*:

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen,. the tennis court, the court of justice etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, ie,. forbidden spots , isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. (10)

Not specifically intended here as a term to describe games, it was cemented as such by Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. The terms has been problematized repeatedly, but in this work we use it for its function as a descriptor for the spaces we socially attribute as *different*, those containing different terms and rules of engagement, such as BDSM.

The temporary suspension of consequences, or what is behind the 'only a game' status described by Poremba, is arguably one of the unique and intrinsic elements of what makes something a game. This space is required for us to allow ourselves to adopt different moralities, experiment, explore, attempt and ultimately, fail (Juul). What's different within Queer BDSM, and why it aligns itself with brink games, is the intentional oscillation and associated occupation of the boundary around this space.

> What forbidden or brink games do specifically is draw attention to the border, and implicate it in their unfolding. In doing so, they destabilize immersion and force reflection on the construct of the game: the explicit and implicit rules and goals. This

requires observation of both the game and non-game, marked and unmarked stated. As such, brink games forces a second-order observation that includes the game frame. In ways, they are more game than the games set back from the boundary, as they additionally self-critique what it means to be a game. But perhaps more importantly, by pulling back the frame of observation, they also reveal the non-game social rules that are implicated in the game. (Poremba 777)

The specificity of Queer BDSM, as opposed to more mainstream BDSM practice, is intentional. A recurring theme in Bauer's research (and certainly in my own experience) is that a crucial element of Queer BDSM practice is in the cross contamination of meaning between reality and play space, not simply in symbolism (present in almost all BDSM), but of identity and selfhood. The play space here is adaptive, relative and reactive to the positioning of its participants; "There seemed to be a need to re-address and rebalance everyday experiences of authority and powerlessness in various ways" (63). The design and meaning of the play within these queer spaces reflects back to the power hierarchies of the real world through its players. And while "cross-pollination occurs, transporting meanings back and forth and constantly transfiguring them" (62), it seems to be in the queering of the practice that this transportation is harnessed for a higher power, to "produce subjectivities, social realities and truths" (177). This game, then, is only semi contained, and uses the affordances of this edge space, this boundary between game space and reality, to cross back and forth constantly, negotiating and renegotiating its players power, both in response to the system of the game, but also in response to the systems of life.

Erotics and the Body

A common place of connection between brink games and BDSM lays in the body, as it is always lurking on the boundary of our realities. VR, as a medium, is something that I have been quite wary of getting swept up by, as it has a current technology-of-the-moment feel and I am suspicious of trends. A firm believer in choosing the medium that is best equipped to deliver the

message (probably a side effect of multidisciplinarity), I wanted to be sure that VR had something specific to bring to the research. But, when thinking through the potential places to explore these ideas - video games, analogue games, electronic games - I always returned to VR.

At one point, I was envisioning a LARP, or Live Action Role Play. I was convinced that the interpersonal elements of BDSM, the adaptability and responsiveness of another human player, was essential to the experience. I quickly realized that this would not be a translation or an exploration, this would be a 1 to 1 interpretation.

> Most interview partners found the term 'play' appropriate for their BDSM, since it is associated with the assuming of roles, creativity, improvisation, art, joy, fun, parallel (fantasy) worlds, suspension of consequences, regulations and self-irony. (Bauer 66)

In other words, BDSM already is a LARP and as such it wouldn't provide a particularly compelling area of exploration or contribution to research.

Traditional screen based video games fail as well, as often they are concerned primarily with representation (discussed further in the Literature Review), and not wholly encompassing of my area of interest which is more focused on the imprinting an experience onto a body. As someone whose history is primarily in representational media it was interesting to reach this impasse. Representation is exceptionally equipped to carry politics, and for many years I have used it to assert viewpoints and craft stories not often represented, but when considering the experience of BDSM it misses something crucial - the body.

Poremba uses the examples of Twister (Hasbro), Intimate Controllers (Chowdhury) and kissing games as games that tease a fissure in boundaries, and in these instances, and certainly in the instance of BDSM, the largest fissure present is through the body. Kissing in a game "never is entirely unreal kissing" (Poremba 776), and certainly the same could be said for arousal. Arousal, and erotics more generally, are tools queer makers often use to subvert. In BDSM specifically

(certainly a queer making practice), "They take up themes of cultural hegemony, infuse them with erotic value, use them for their own pleasure and appropriate them without endorsing the dominant ideologies." (Bauer 73) As queer people, social hierarchies and structures of control are often (en)forced upon us via intimacy and the transgression of our bodily boundaries. Not only in moments of violence, but also in the subtler violations of expected access to intimate knowledge - the questioning of trans people's genitalia being one example. "Because interactions structured by social hierarchy are of an intimate nature in this sense, it is not surprising that power may become eroticized" (Bauer 173), and it is not surprising that this eroticization has become a common site of reclamation. As our bodies are often the site of (violating) transgression in the real world, how, too, can our bodies be harnessed as a site of (subversive) transgression in the game world? What is the erotic potential of the using the body as a site of bleed (Saitta et al. 35) in game design? What reclamation, what queerness can be evoked in the occupation of this boundary?

This is the question that has drawn me back to VR. Or, more specifically, this is what has brought this project back to exploring the queer and erotic potential of the body as a site of brink design, and why is has come to rest on VR as the medium through which to undertake this exploration.

Literature Review

I had assumed, going into this research, that the connections I was interested in making were already in existence, that it was only a matter of looking in the right places. I had assumed that as sexuality and its marginalized identities - both as representation and as mechanic consideration - has been the topic of much discussion within games it was just a matter of time and effort before I found these connections. I had assumed, even though this area of research is still emerging, that buried within the conference papers of events like QGCon and Different Games, or within the the pages of publications like Queer Game Studies and The Dark Side of Play (both focussed heavily on sex and sexuality) would be what I was looking for. This chapter is a brief overview of what I found while I was making a lot of assumptions.

Alongside the literature I have included examples of games and my experiences with them, as objects and moments that contain elements of my intended goals and as provocations for some potential pitfalls that could arise from work with these themes.

Dark themes + Painful Games

Many games deal with the popular iconography of BDSM - pain, restraint, humiliation - and while I do not consider these icons to be a particularly nuanced representation, incorporating these experiences into a game's design is an incredibly nuanced practice. Coined as *abusive game design* by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart , the design practices behind these games are often attempts at straddling the creation of something that is unpleasant and the players impetus (or desire) to continue engaging. While the language choice of abusive is an unfortunate misstep (that I can't help but think situates the authors position in the word), I believe it is meant to identify abuse with its more literal definitions, along the lines of improper use or with the intention of bad effect ("Abuse"). Abusive game design is defined as a creative strategy centered in the intentional countering of user centric and systems centric design, prioritizing a

conversational relationship between players and designers, with the ultimate goal of creating dark play. Dark play, here, is drawn from Schechner's definition as play that involves "fantasy, risk, luck, daring, invention and deception… [it] subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules - so much so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed"(119). The focus and goals of this kind of design practice is on creating play that is personal for its players and where designers prioritize their aesthetic goals through the design of the play experience instead of designing games primarily as systems. Where player-centric game design concerns itself with an implied player model and ease of play, abusive game design positions itself as a dialogue between player and designer that is facilitated through the game (Sicart and Wilson). The game, then, becomes de-centered in favour of the play.

> The game is only the mediator in this dialogue. As such, abusive games design understands games as a personal affair between individuals. (Sicart and Wilson 3)

Sicart and Wilson outline a few different techniques that designers use to create abusive games, titled "The Modalities of Abuse" - Physical Abuse, Unfair Design, Lying to the player, Aesthetic Abuse, and Social Abuse - and identify a few examples of each modalities' application. What is interesting here, in relation to this research, is the parallels to be drawn between these types of game experiences and the practices of BDSM. One category stands out in particular, in Unfair Design, as it functions as the container for a whole sub-genre of games, Masocore. Masocore games (a portmanteau of masochism and hardcore) are games of extreme difficulty that delight in their players frustration. Masocore, by design, searches out the player that longs for discomfort and upset to be a part of their play, it requires a redefinition of fun - from a monolithic concept of hilarity and joy, to something more nuanced and personally unique - and ultimately, in its success, it informs us of a need for games to be designed with an intentional utilization of discomfort. What it doesn't do, however, is incorporate the lessons of masochism into its design.

Masochism, in the context of masocore, has been removed from all connotation of its genesis in kink and sexual pleasure. Games' meaning of masochism appears to be derived from the terms more casual use, something "referring to a glutton for dysfunctional punishment, someone pathologically trapped in a cycle of suffering" (Horn), while within BDSM practice, masochism is part of an often therapeutic practice that involves negotiating and owning one's own relationship to pain and pleasure. One of the biggest differences in these meanings of the term is that masochistic BDSM practice is only half of a dynamic, it requires a sadistic counterpart, something the language of masocore hides (Horn). Which isn't to say that designers of these games are not engaging is a sadistic tendency through their design process, but the positioning here reinforces the pathologization of the players pleasure, it becomes about "getting into someone's head, and making everything they do an act of paranoia" (Sicart and Wilson 4). Personally, I believe this to be the result of framing games as combative instead of collaborative creations. And even while abusive game design holds central to its existence this idea of a conversation, this dialogue is held hostage by the traditional trappings of games as competition and "all about the struggle of the player against the designer" (Sicart and Wilson 4).

If we understand games as power structures, and these power structures as creating the conditions for subjectivities to be created, but not contained, then we can start to understand the need for their design to employ a critical engagement with power. Abusive game design proposes a path to this critique by suggesting that the power is traditionally held by the game systems and their focus on player pleasure and this power structure can be complicated or eroded entirely by designing for the power relation between designer and player. This critique, then, is focused more on the traditional systems of power contained within games, not the inherent power relations created within play as something that happens between humans.

> In the logic of conservative game design … the power structure is a between a player and a system, with the designer vanishing into the background… Abusive game design operates in a different manner: it used the productive capacities of play as a power relation to override the instrumental perspectives that deem the game system as a central

to the play experience, and instead encourages players to focus on the human designer. (Wilson and Sicart 6)

In a later discussion, Sicart highlights the transition from the language of dialogue to that of conversation, stating that dialogue contains within it an inequality of knowledge, whereas "conversational processes set all participants on the same level"(105). This insistence on the possibility of equality is not dissimilar to one of the main elements of heteronormativity, the ideal of harmonic sex (Bauer 3), where private and intimate space, due it's separation from the public sphere (another fallacy, for another time), is "remote from socio-political" life. As queer and marginalized subjects know, this space is "not distinct from socio-political contexts, but is infused with power dynamics just like every other area of life"(Bauer 3). Refusing to acknowledge the power dynamics and contexts that players and designers bring with them into play space functionally erases the players identity. In my experience, the games created through the practice of abusive games design, while critically engaging with the concept of game systems and incorporating tools, techniques and even goals of BDSM, often fail to require their designers to engage critically with their positions of power, both socio politically and as designers. This leads to games that contain within them unidentified preferences for a certain type of player, namely those that have similarly unconsidered positions of power (primarily men). This unexamined privileging of masculinist players and play styles - through the rewarding of aggression, encroachment of personal space, and framing as combat (a la Dark Room Sex Game and Painstation, discussed in the next section) - re-marginalizes already marginalized players.

In short, abusive games design still upholds the binary of pleasure and pain, but challenges the prioritization of one (pleasure) over the other (pain). By identifying many tools of BDSM and, I believe, aligning with some of the goals, abusive games design presents the tip of the iceberg of BDSM-adjacent mechanics in games. Unfortunately what it lacks is any intentional and aware incorporation of BDSM practice and the tools therein, presenting a lack of its own political situatedness, claiming rather that "it mostly not ideological"(Sicart 102) as if this is a possibility within something so concerned with interpersonal dynamics. This situational awareness of

players and design across the boundary of the magic circle is something much more widely discussed in the next section.

Painstation - A painful game

Painstation is a 2 player pong cabinet where the players are subject to 1 of 3 different kinds of pain when their opponent scores against them. By coupling physical pain, competition and play, PainStation exemplifies the potential relationship between sadism, masochism and play. It is an easy piece to connect to the work I want to create as it is one of few games extending the sensory experience into the realm of physical pain. However, the intention of its creations was purely as entertainment, and because of this it avoids some of its more political potential. In their artist statement about the piece, the artists claim they were avoiding the connection to "unusual sexual practices" and prefer to consider painstation "a contemporary dueling system" (//////////fur////), which is unfortunate as this frames the piece within the language of violence instead of pleasure (and really, an awareness of "unusual sexual practices" might have saved them from having to rebuild due to risk of infection). The gameplay itself is where it becomes interesting for correlations to my work.

My suspicion is that the multiplayer nature of the game is part of its success, and that inflicting pain upon your opponent is just as much a part of the pleasure as the adrenaline rush in response to the pain. One of the elements I wish to explore in my prototypes is whether or not this multiplayer element is crucial. Would games that hurt you be as compelling to engage with in single player experiences? What's interesting to me about this question is not the yes or no, but more the who? While it is possible that exploring this line of inquiry fully is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to note that most of the games that include physical pain are multiplayer. When we are reading these games through a kink lens, it is not difficult to understand why this might be - acknowledging player sadism is easy. The unnegotiated infliction of pain on another player is not kink though, and I suspect that this is part of why these games often develop hyper masculine player bases.

The framing of Painstation as a duelling machine allows its players to uncritically engage with their enjoyment of hurting other people, which is the antithesis to BDSM practice. This makes it sound like I am against these types of experiences, which I am not. Moreso I believe it is interesting to ask

people to consider the why of their enjoyment in these interactions, and to create dialogue and space for autonomy of both participants. Technically, Painstation is of interest to me as a game that successfully engages with pain as a mechanic, the impact of public performance on player motivation and endurance. Theoretically, it's a little uncritical for my liking.

Positionally Aware: Queerness in Games

Questions on how to center a queer player or to how to create sociopolitically critical play, that is, play that prioritizes and centers a marginalized player experience, are not new. The conversation has gained popularity in recent years to the extent that it has formed its own area of scholarship under the title "Queer Games Studies".

As this work is positioned solidly within the context of queer games, it is important to establish what that might mean. Often this conversation is centered around questions of representation, both within the narrative of games but largely in regards to the process of making - a very literal call to place queers within games. The other side of this discussion, the one pertaining more closely to this research, is concerned with the question of what possibility exists in games that contain queerness as mechanical and structural integrations. Here I am considering queer as inherently other, a positioning within/outside the margins of society, "as an active, contentious, and necessary resistance to normative forms of intimacy and desire" (De Szegheo-Lang 14). This framing of queer games often occupies a place of conflict with that of queerness in games, as the later gets wrapped up with the commercial space games now occupy and the accompanying conversations about diversity in entertainment media. Queer games as necessarily marginal

objects and experiences are inherently at odds with capitalistic monoliths of the games industry, regardless of their narrative or labourial make-up. A queer character does not a queer game make.

As identified by Naomi Clark, this may be a question of legitimacy. Games have historically been identified as leisure activities, endeavors of pleasure, frivolity and fun for its own sake. More recently, as games become understood as containing deep potential for the creation of meaningful experiences, for change, or for better marketing engagement (think the gamification trend), games have come into their own as something legitimate (Clark 11). The binary being made here is that legitimacy requires serious impact, productive outputs, and commercial viability, whereas illegitimate games are frivolous, fun, and for their own sake, pleasurable. Some queer games, unfortunately, are not immune to this desire for classification, often searching for their own place within legitimate society, shedding their associations with the pleasurable margins in favour of their new position in the productive center. But more interesting are the games who understand queerness as a position of anti-assimilationist practice, the games made intentionally from a place of the illegitimate pleasure.

Just as we have come to understand queerness as something far bigger than its humble beginning in sexuality, pleasure in games is not necessarily a conversation about sex in games. We can use pleasure and illegitimacy to look at the structure and elements of games, separately, and in tandem, to identify potential creative frameworks for the creation of queer games.

Narrative content and its potential queernesses (both as representation or as something to be "read" queerly) have been the primary applications of queer theory within queer games scholarship (Sand; Alder & St Patrick; Clark), again as representation and its diversification have been the focus of much public debate and academic discussion (but will not be the focus here). But the narrative structure of video games, according to Chess, is already Queer,

All video games play with queer pleasure, acknowledging this forces us to radically rethink game texts. While some have argued that video games are not narratives at all, I counter that their narrative form is unrecognizable because they are fundamentally queer narrative. In this way, games do not rely on heteronormative concepts of what a narrative is in the first place (Chess 84).

Video games narratives are concerned primarily with anticipation, with the narrative middle (Chess 85). A queer pleasure, this space of anticipation, Chess identifies that video games essentially lack the "cum shot", prioritizing the tension found in delaying a climax. The climax, somewhat obviously, representing the heteronormative structure of narratives and the ways they are identified as satisfactory.

To be a good story, a satisfying story, there is a presumption that narrative will end productively/reproductively (Chess 87).

Once again we return to positioning and pleasure. Just as our identities reject notions of finality, so, too, do game narratives, occupying multiple timelines, spaces, bodies, looping back in on themselves, moving in a constant circle of departing and returning, something queer game designers are well positioned to utilize in the making of our queer games.

Awkward Fumblings - The Longest Couch

Keyboards, generally, are just keyboards. We type with them. Make words and statuses and do all kinds of neat things, but they generally function the same, and we generally understand how they work. In the Longest Couch , the keyboard becomes something else. Sure, there are still letters and

inputs and WASDs and whatnots, but there are also subtleties and tensions and slight hand brushes and entanglements.

The longest couch uses the keyboard as the single input for a two player game about sex and intimacy. In it one person starts by using the WASD key and the other the arrow keys. Two characters (menfolk, which is important only because of its clear intention as queer) can be seen sitting opposite edges of the couch. Sequences of inputs are listed above their heads. WWSSDAWSD and ←↑→←↓↓→. As the two players complete their respective sequences, the characters on the couch move closer together. As the sequences progress they start to entwine - WA↓↓↑SSD←→↓DS→→. Then they change completely, no longer containing themselves to WASD or arrows. Prompts like JS and CM appear that have to be held instead of simply pressed. J and S are on different ends of the keyboard, as are C and M. In order to reach these numbers players have to break out of their nicely divided half of the keyboard, into each other's side. It would be hard to accomplish this without touching the other player, which is, of course, the point. At some point in your first try the game will end as the characters loll their heads back, declaring "SLEEP WINS AGAIN". The joke is, no matter

how fast you go next time, you won't reach each other. Sleep always wins.

The longest couch is a queer game, in both content and mechanic. Narratively, it is an intentional failure, highlighting, in opposition to traditional structures, the anticipation, the build, the journey. It never rewards with a climax. Mechanically, it takes a simple keyboard, something generally innocuous, and engenders it with intimate and flirtatious meaning - it ceases being a simple input device for a computer and instead becomes a passageway for physical connection, an instrument of queer intimacy.

Let's Get Physical: VR and the Gendered Body

While many styles of game involve physical mechanics, Virtual Reality, in its current headset based form, is a interesting space to look for queerness as it is the only medium that always requires a consideration of the player's body, as its whole technological development is focusses on *immersion* and *embodiment*, shorthand for being *felt* by the body. Other types of game mediums undoubtedly engage the body, or use the body to interact with, and often are also felt on the body, but their technology was has not been developed specifically and uniquely for embodied feeling. What differentiates this technological experience from past experiences is the feeling of physical presence it provides the wearer. Enthusiasms have been expressed for VR as a

potential site for empathy, and while empathetic experiences undoubtedly exist within VR, when examined through the lens of queer theory, and with an understanding of the fluidity and physicality of identity, VR can be a potential site of design for new types of embodied individuality. This new individuality, when taking into account the way humans formulate their identities, becomes a new form of alternative and anti-biological existence, also known as a queerness. These virtual worlds and digital spaces become a type of gender/identity incubator, hatching into the world strange and unique new forms of queer embodiment.

In the making of a VR experience, we are making an alternate body for a "player" to step into (it is interesting to note that the language of virtual reality mirrors the language of performance and performativity – ie. "step into" - implying a layer of meaning not inherent in the "real" world), as the act of donning a VR headset is that of physically placing an avatar on oneself. This integrative process of VR experience is a site of fusion for the character within the experience and the user of the experience. This fusion is the home of an inherent queerness, a melding of our biological bodies with an external digital self. As our most famous digital heroine tells us in the Matrix (The Watchowskis), "your mind makes it real", and as this new reality is not yet fully immersive (our physical biological bodies are required to pilot our VR selves) we are left with a strange and unique blend of our physical bodies and our emotional embodied experience. This is somewhat analogous to the idea of brink games, a technological compliment to the my theoretical framing, as this experience, in and of itself, has the potential to be a site of brink. Our bodies, in VR, are always perched on the edge of the magic circle; never fully a game body or digital entity, still our real bodies, something in game space, but still us. It is also, in its inherent connection and disconnection, not unlike the experience of existing in queer and trans bodies. In fact, it is exactly like it.

> The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the

monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment. (Stryker 238)

As highlighted by Stryker above, our queer and trans existences are often a hybrid of the many worlds we walk between, a construction of social implications, medical science, technology and biology. A monster made of its partial and illegitimate embodiments.

Our identities are built in the space where these realms overlap on another, often in jarring and inharmonious ways. The VR performant is maintaining a similar balance, straddling multiple constructions of meaning, complicating the concept of the magic circle. Reading the player-avatar relationship as queer complicates the physical space of VR further. Gerard Voorhees states that all like-gender player-avatar relationships, when the boundary between social and sexual desire is understood as indecisive and mercurial, are guided by a homosocial desire, or, a queerness (Vorhees). This is all well and good for gender-like player avatar relationships, but what of cross-gender dynamics? Helen W. Kennedy uses Lara Croft to argue that these cross-gendering relationships are a potential form of transgender embodiment.

> Thus, in this complex relationship between *subject* and *object* it could be argued that through having to play *Tomb Raider* as Lara, a male player is transgendered: the distinctions between the player and the game character are blurred. One potential way of exploring this transgendering is to consider the fusion of player and game character as a kind of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the (male) player with Lara's elaborated feminine body of pure information. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity. (Kennedy)

Transgendering, here, relies on an identification with the player avatar that I do not think is always present (and is something I think requires more inquiry into - what is the potential for using this transgendering as mechanic?). In VR (and other physical/embodied games) however,

we are not able to remove ourselves from identification as player avatar, as the game is happening through/to/around our bodies. And if all player avatar identification is rooted in queer desire (Voorhees), VR, as a medium, has, built into its very core, queer embodiment as a physical mechanic. Where this becomes even more interesting, and potentially even more queer, is in the repetitions experienced through game loops. It is through repetition, enacted by our bodies, that we perform and develop our genders. And these game loops, in combination with our queer VR avatars, highlight a potential pathway to design new genders and gendered experiences that can be carried with us out of game space and potentially integrated into our "real world" identities.

> identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler 509)

Through VR, and other physical games, we can parallel the way gender functions as a performative repetition of actions to create mechanics for queer physicality, crafting a space of illegitimate embodiments, partiality and transition that requires our players, even if temporarily, to step into a queer body.

While this helps us to design queerness and queer play into our games, my queerness has always been encompassing, and maybe even informed by (chicken and the egg situation here), my relationship to BDSM and while queerness in games has been popular enough to develop a good amount of theoretical engagement, the existent scholarship has not been quite as integrated as I would have hoped. In the following chapter, I will go over the very limited existent scholarship that overlaps queerness, discomfort and sex.

Pain + Sex + Queerness, Oh My.

One of the difficulties I have encountered in doing this research is in situating it within already established academic discussion. BDSM itself often sits within sexuality, and while sexuality in games scholarship exists, it is often concerned with issues of representation or the ways online games spaces can facilitate genuine sexuality for its players, and rarely with BDSM. That, and it's very heterosexual. Queer Game Studies, an emerging genre of scholarship, similarly concerns itself with representation more often than not, and while mechanical concerns are present they often hold queerness to be too theoretical an analysis, drawing their ideas from the more well established roots of queer theory, which often neglects talking about fucking. With the exception of a few sources, detailed below, Sexuality in Games research was not queer enough and Queer Games studies was not sexy enough.

Unfortunately, this conversation may have been compromised from the get go. Most discussion around queer BDSM begins by referencing a talk given by Anna Anthropy in 2012 where she aligns game designers with dommes as people who "receive play" from their players. Mattie Brice summarizes this idea as "dommes can stand in for the game-design role as the person who is crafting an experience for the submissive, and the submissive relinquishes control after negotiating with the somme the rules of the play session" (79). Anthropy herself identifies that the analogy is a little thin, and I would like to think the intention with stating it was more to relate to her making process than to create a soundbyte referenced often as the basis of connection between BDSM and games.

I would like to believe this because this idea has problems. A common problem in BDSM communities lies in the aggrandizing of tops/dom(es)/masters, attributing ideas of skill and proficiency and talent to their role. This over prioritization of tops in kink space is a adaptation of the misogynistic idea that active/dominant (read: masculine) roles are more valuable than passive/submissive (feminine) ones. To attribute the power contained in the design of a rules system solely to the dominant side of a dynamic erases the very active, very crucial, and very

real work submissives and bottoms put into designing their play space. In my experience, it is the bottoms who define the edges of the sandbox, and the tops who are tasked with finding ways to play within them. This analogy is both thin and dangerous.

Anthropy goes on to discuss tabletop roleplaying games, as a space of negotiated power dynamic, where someone assumes the role of Dungeon Master (DM) who is responsible for guiding the players through their games. The connections are easy to make, but what seems to be missing in this analysis, which arguably lies at the center of the success of these RPGs as akin to Kink, is the ongoing negotiation between the DM and players. Tabletop RPGs come in a multitude of flavours, each system offering a slightly different rules systems and affording differing degrees of control and power to the DM and players, some of which require no DM at all. Groups come together beforehand and communally agree on a system they all want to participate in, and more often than not, amend the rules of that systems to their specific desires, creating "house rules". More than that, these games are being played with other human beings, and allow for an amount of reactivity during play that computers cannot accommodate - if players or the DM need to change the rules or the game on the fly, they are capable of doing so as they are all continually and communally creating the play space. While tabletop RPGs appear to contain strong power dynamics, their success is dependant on the same thing as kink play - everyone's continued commitment to upholding that appearance, understanding that at the point at which it is no longer desired by all parties, it changes. In this way, all parties maintain more power and more influence over the creation of these dynamics than they would in non consensual, real world hierarchies of control and power. It is not necessarily equal, as this is an impossibility with interpersonal relationships, but the recognition of all parties role in crafting an experience is central to BDSM and tabletops RPGs, something Anthropy's theory of Dommes as designers does not allow for.

Drawing on Anthropy's talk, Mattie Brice identifies the potentially important position BDSM could have in informing game design:

> If we understand play as the exercising of empathy through engaging contexts, and kink as a type of play design that deeply confronts life contexts, then kink practices stand as a stronger model for engaging people with meaningful play then the ocerly instrumentalized and decontextualized approach to games propagated by contemporary game design (Brice 79)

Using the tools and techniques of BDSM, Brice argues, could be a way to design games that are actually relative to the world they exist in, allowing for players to have real meaningful play experiences through their relationships with real life contexts. I agree that kink provides a way to re-contextualize everyday contexts into something more playful, and I agree that this re-contextualization could prove to be transformative experience of empathy within game context, but I'm skeptical of the focus on pain and difficulty as a crucial element to this transformation - "As kink shows, there isn't pleasure without trial, without going through consensual pain" (Brice 79). I'm not quite sure what compels game designers to make these overarching statements, but anecdotally, this donut I'm having a fetishistic relationship with in my hotel room on vacation is pretty ordeal free. Kink has shown me not that pain is the precursor to pleasure, but simply that it is another sensory option to choose when you are in control of the context.

Bo Ruberg also engages the tools of BDSM, namely masochism, to construct an alternate play space for queerness within games through what she calls no-fun games. Unlike Brice, Ruberg's goal is not to change the nature of play space into something more empathetic, but to challenge the inherent politic and heteronormativity in the language and application of "fun".

> The goal of no-fun is not simply to step into the skin of someone else's adversity, it is also personal, felt, embodied, alarming. Whereas empathy is educational, no-fun hurts for its own sake. In this way, no-fun models a type of queer worldmaking built on the liberating logic of masochism: that pleasure and its meaning cannot be bound by the normative, that new worlds of meaning are created in the moment we embrace new worlds of experience. (Ruberg 115)

Masochism, once again, is undefined, and while the connotation is certainly less aligned with its pathologized uses, such as in masocore, it is almost removed from its BDSM context, while still trying to hold on to the subversive power given to it through BDSM. By referencing Halberstam as the anchor for masochists meaning (as opposed to a BDSM scholar), the implication is that masochism holds inherent resistance, as opposed to being a tool that can be implemented, with intention and negotiation, as part of a practice of resistance. Ruberg is framing their masochism as "an ecstatic rejection of mainstream power structures"(114) and as a stepping "outside of norms of longing and logic in order to embrace failure", and, while I agree that in owning a masochistic enjoyment queer people are able to reject mainstream power structures, this descriptor of masochism is potentially a different realm of application to that of BDSM practice as I can engage with Ruberg's masochism as someone who takes power in existing in a body full of queer failure, but that is different than asking to be punched in the face for the fun of it.

That being said, Ruberg's initial taxonomy of no-fun games - disappointing games, annoying games, alarming games and games that hurt (119-121) - provide a framework for classifying games that is more in line with non academic and colloquial definitions of masochist as "someone who experiences sensual, sexual, systemic arousal or change of state through receiving intense sensation". Midori, a sexuality educator who is quoted above, goes on to describe masochism as a series of tastes, as opposed to a state of being, "I firmly believe that a person is not a sadist or a masochist but that we have sadistic or masochistic appetites". It's possible, within this understanding, to see all game playing as a masochistic, not just that which engages in traditionally negative sensations, which is really where the disconnect between a BDSM centric masochism and a queer theory based masochism comes in. In Ruberg's (and Halberstam's) idea of masochism, the relationship to normatively classified-as-negative experiences - failure, pain, sadness - is required. In BDSM, masochism is more concerned with the experience of sensation, negative or not, as it understands these classifications to be subjective. A shameless pursuit of pleasure is still a masochistic endeavour. The desire to engage masochism for the potential it holds to queer play space is shared between Ruberg's work and

my own, but where Ruberg focuses on the masochism itself as containing disruptive power, I understand the framing of it (and its partner, sadism) to be the site of potential subversion.

This brings us to something I honestly had not considered much before beginning this research - the difference between BDSM practice and queer BDSM practice. It's possible that these are not different, that I am imposing a false binary. It's possible that Ruberg's claims are correct:

> Masochism, and kinkiness more broadly, are themselves forms of queerness, systems of counter-normative desires that, like the no-fun play experience, reject standard understandings of pleasure and create new possibilities for queer experience. (114)

And while it is hard to argue that BDSM practice does not occupy a position of other in contemporary society, I can't help but think there is something to trouble in the above statement. Much kink play and even more kink desire engages problematically with normative structures. Heterosexual people do not become queer through being kinky (always) and men do not become queer by desiring to dominate women.

It feels to me like there is a step missing. On one side we have play and mechanics and rules and on the other we pain and sex and power. Ruberg and Brice and Anthropy all speak of the possibility space created by the way BDSM crosses and entangles these sides, but it still feels like something is lacking. It is possible that the simple infusing of these ideas creates a space of critically engaged play. It is possible that these elements, when mixed and remixed, subvert themselves. It's possible that it's just about making games about BDSM. But I suspect not. I suspect that the ways in which queer people straddle these lines, the way our identities engulf, digest and regurgitate their meanings, the way we transpose and adapt, the way we carry ourselves from space to space, constantly crossing and recrossing boundaries, I suspect that there is something different there. Something inherently queer. And I suspect that this queerness is vital to the adaptation of BDSM to games systems.

Almost as if our social positionings change the nature of our play.

Hurt Me Plenty

I first experienced Hurt Me Plenty at IndieCade East one year. It was in a back corner, protected from view of the main rooms. There was only one person ahead of us and they were already playing, which felt like a miracle at an event where standing in line is the main activity.

I got excited about finally getting to play something.

I watched the person in front of me play while I was waiting.

Hurt Me Plenty is a game of spanking. That's it. A man thing is on all fours in front of you. You can click to spank him. He likes it, till he doesn't. You can keep going when he it no longer encouraging you to. You can keep going when he is actively telling you not to. You can keep going past his safe word. This is all the information I gathered during my 5-10 minutes watching this person in front of me play.

All I actually got to do that day was watch this person play.

I kept expecting them to stop. The safe word flashed red on the screen, the character screamed and called out no. This person, who I was very rapidly developing extreme judgements as to the character of, was not stopping. They weren't even slowing. It felt awkward. My partner and I made faces at each other as they continued to lay into this digital backside. We both considered walking away, but something about the train wreck of in-game consent violation happening in front of us kept us rapt. It had to stop at some point. And it was just a game, right?!

After what felt like hours (but was likely less than 5 minutes) they person got up and walked away. When they turned around I swear they looked ashamed. They scuttle past us. The screen behind them came back into view.

"You have been locked out for 114 minutes"

When you go past the safe word in Hurt Me Plenty a cool down timer starts racking up time. The more you keep going the long you get locked out re-entering the game when you stop. I'm not sure if Yang considered the way this would play out in a public/show setting, but I'm sure it would not have

had the impact it did had I discovered this game in my house, by myself.

This was an interesting moment of bleed. Alone, there may still have been some of this, but in that context I would have been only upsetting myself, only punishing myself. I may have experienced shame had a chosen to push past the safe word, but who would have known? I could have brushed it off as experimenting, seeing what would happen, exploring the game. The impact would have been entirely personal. Not necessarily less impactful, but certainly different.

In a public setting this person had not only violated the boundaries of the game character, but had also shirked the responsibilities and repercussion for their actions, tossing them off to me. Beyond this, I had witnessed their shameful behaviour, and that shame was not game shame, that shame was real. I had witnessed them violate a boundary, and in my witnessing of it, it transcended the boundaries of game space.

Findings - Sketch 1 - Meateor

Description

Meateor is a really silly VR game, controlled with a Vive tracker mounted on a harness, attached to the players underpant region. The primary goal is to stop the balls from getting through the hole in floor, by thrusting their hips, which will lower your score. Should you succeed in whacking the balls out of the pit, the score will rise. Players are given 2 minutes to see how they fare.

Intent

Meateor was made quite early on in this project, before many of its edges came into view. It was, in fact, instrumental in helping define and redefine the interests of this work. Originally I was planning to make work primarily about sex and sexuality, but not specifically about BDSM. Meateor was an exploration attempting to translate the tools and language of pornography into interaction design. What would a sexually explicit interaction look like? What are sexual movements? What reads as sexual even when it's not? Ultimately, I was curious about what a pornographic interaction is.

Pornography, while being a familiar tool to me, also felt like an appropriate first attempt at designing on the brink. In Meateor the act of thrusting was intentionally chosen as something that is read as sexual regardless of purpose or context. In the context of VR, where there is often a viewership attached to the player, I thought it might be interesting to see what kind of interactions could be made by designing specifically for the audience.

Making Of

In order to accomplish a goal of thrusting, I needed to make a custom controller which I decided to do using the Vive Tracker since it seemed like the simplest and cleanest solution.

Since the Tracker functions the same as a controller I built for the controller with the goal of just switching it out for the tracker at the end, so all of this development process was with the standard controllers. The goal was to make some kind of spoon or implement to bat the ball out of a pit, with your pelvis (aka, attach Vive Tracker to belt, for fun times). In the past, when working with the Rift, it has worked to just add a 3d object as a child of the controller and whack away! I'm sure there are many reasons it gets more complicated then than, but it has worked. Because of this, I started there. I attached a cube to the controller object in unity and then swung it around! And it connected with almost nothing, it went right though most of the balls. I figure this has to have been a thing other people have solved (people play VR baseball, right?), so off to google I went.

AND I LEARNED VERY IMPORTANT THINGS. It seems that when you are using a Vive controller Unity is live tracking it, which falls outside of the physics timestep set by Unity in order to manage things like collisions. I'm not an expert, so I understand that it's probably much more complicated than that, but still.

One way to work around this is to create an object that is a child of your controller and then create another object that is following it. Unity3d college came to the rescue with their baseball physics video and scripts (https://unity3d.college/2016/04/11/baseball-bat-physics-unity/).

My first experience working with SteamVR was a nightmare, and a large section of time had to be dedicated to troubleshooting errors that should not have been (tracking problems, firmware update issues, etc), but eventually was able to get back into actual game development.

I set up the bat example according to the tutorial and was finally all excited to get back to actually making something. Everything was working as expected. But the bat was not my desired shape, so I built it all out again but with cubes as a generally reference for something that could one day a spoon. And then I noticed a problem. The follower cubers we not aligning their rotation to the leader cubes, leaving them to spin in place.

Since I am a C# expert (I read half a book on it at this point), fixing the problem was easier than anticipated - I understood a code for once. Funnily enough, in Unity3D colleges original post there is a duplicate rotation line that he removes in the video and so the downloadable scripts seems to be the error. So back in it goes.

```
private float _sensitivity = 100f;

private void Awake()
{
        _rigidbody = GetComponent<Rigidbody>();
}

private void FixedUpdate()
{
        Vector3 destination = _batFollower.transform.position;
        _rigidbody.transform.rotation = transform.rotation;

        _velocity = (destination - _rigidbody.transform.position) * _sensitivity;

        _rigidbody.velocity = _velocity;
        transform.rotation = _batFollower.transform.rotation;
}

public void SetFollowTarget(BatCapsule batFollower)
{
        _batFollower = batFollower;
}
```

Fig 1 - screenshot of script, duplicated line.

NOW I CAN FINALLY HIT THINGS WITH A CUBE. SHEESH.

Fig 2: testing of Vive tracker attached to belt loops

For prototyping it was fine to just strap it to someone's belt, but I wanted to bring in something a little sturdier.

Fig 3: Meateor harness prototype

Version 1 of the harness was just a belt with a strap added to that had a ¾ screw mount for the tracker to screw into. This worked relatively well but the positioning of the tracker (which was

sitting a little high), and its lack of movement resulted in a stiffness in player movement that didn't quite mimic a natural thrust.

https://photos.app.goo.gl/bE1HLxJ7Trztibmc8
[video of said stiffness from CFC Prototyping class]

There was an aesthetic dissonance in harness 1, which is recurring consideration in all of these works. It was important to me that the controllers and harnesses and really anything that i was going to end up building be aesthetically appealing. Part of this is the link in this game to sexuality. The harness, which obviously is a reference to strap on harnesses, should be made in a similar fashion. Another part of this is the inclusion of fetish, or at least a recognition of a fetishistic mindset. If I am going to make something sexual, it's gonna be leather, and the intent is for it to be well crafted.

Fig 4: Final harness prototype

I also wanted the second iteration of this harness to also allow for a more natural swing motion, so chose to suspend the tracker on its own strip of leather to allow it to hang away from the body.

This became one of the more interesting considerations of the project as it required thinking about both in game and out of game physics, which until this moment I hadn't realized was a generally lacking element of VR games. A normal VR controller, and even most of the tracker based controllers, are still very stiff in their design, and the physical considerations of their interactions happen primarily in the virtual space. Because of this the swinging motion took adjusting to for most players, as it did not align with their expectations of game controllers (also for other more obvious sexual reasons as well).

Alongside the refinements of physical controller came the digital considerations. Originally the balls were firm, the default structure of a shape in Unity. This was not very satisfying to whack. I wanted to make them jiggly, wanted them to feel more flesh like. So, jiggly they became. In addition to the jiggle I was at a point to consider their textures. Because flesh was the goal, I chose a flesh texture from the internet. At this point the game experience as a whole became quite comedic, and I chose to lean into it. Playing off the balls accident appearances as meatballs, a blood splurt (maybe spaghetti sauce?) was added and it was given a name.

Further Development

So much of the take away from Meateor v1 ended up being centered around the controller itself, and because of this, that is the area I would continue to explore through further development. What are the possibilities if the controller itself becomes something different? This feels like a potential way to incorporate the elements of kink that I felt like were lacking at this point in the project. While the harness could read as kink to a mainstream audience, it's not something that I consider to be infused with kink meaning. However, what if I were to change the controller to be something insertable? If the Vive tracker were attached instead to a dildo? Of course, dildos are not inherently kinky either, but the requirement for partial nudity and the 'wearing' of something insertable while playing a VR game that people could be watching certainly tips the needle. Even further than this I would like to build a gag harness controller which could help with the lacking aesthetic goals of Meateor. Considering a multitude of alternate sexual controllers opens up

possibilities for the game to expand into something that supports the use of multiple controllers at once and could even become multiplayer. The potential mixing of different bodily engagements, both across multiple players and within the same player, is something I would like to explore further as asynchronous play carries more options for queering roles and more opportunities for negotiating different dynamics.

Findings - Sketch 2 - Push It

Description

Press the button. That is the only goal. Push It is a VR game with an irritating red button that makes it difficult, in an assortment of ways, for it to be pressed. Sometimes it needs to be pressed once, sometimes 36 times. Sometimes it's shy, sometimes it's moving fast, sometimes it needs to be pressed with your face. Push It.

Intent

My second game sketch idea came from the literature surrounding masochism in games. As an easy point of connection between games and BDSM I was interested in exploring masochistic mechanics. One of my hopes in these explorations is to discover a point at which something changes from being read as a normal game to being read as something "kinky". Because it is well understood within kink community that sex is not required, pinpointing exactly what makes discomfort the right kind of discomfort is tricky. Does it still need to be framed within sex and sexuality to be experienced as BDSM, or can masochistic actions be separated from sexuality and still contain any of the power granted to them by kink. Obviously, this is also very personal, so the expectations with this piece are not that it will read as pleasurably uncomfortable for everyone who plays it, more so I want it to serve as a discussions piece for what masochism could manifest as and how its manifestation within game space is or isn't different from masochism in play space, and more specifically whether or not those different manifestations carry different potential for critical engagement. Does masochism in games, as a normalized and mainstream interaction, remove its potential for the subversion it carries as something outside of the norm in a sexuality context? If I participate in the same action at the request of a game system as I do at the request of another human within a play space, do they feel similar? Is the

layering of sexuality/sexual identity required for subversive masochistic pleasure? What potential affordances does the digitization of these interactions offer?

Ultimately many of these questions are familiar game design questions. If we remove the layer of sexuality, part of this exploration is about finding the right amount of difficulty or discomfort and balancing that with some kind of player motivation, arguably one of the most base game design goals (Juul 7). It's possible that this question of motivation is in fact where the most interesting part of this inquiry will lie, as it may not be the framing of sexuality that changes the meaning of masochism (if it in fact does in the first place), but it may be more of a recognition of motivational differences. Unsurprisingly, intent may be the thing.

Let's make a game and find out.

The game has only one objective - press the button. My goal was to take something very simple and apply as many different types of difficulties as I could think of. A purely unpleasant game.

Making of

The first step was to brainstorm some ways to make it difficult to press the button.
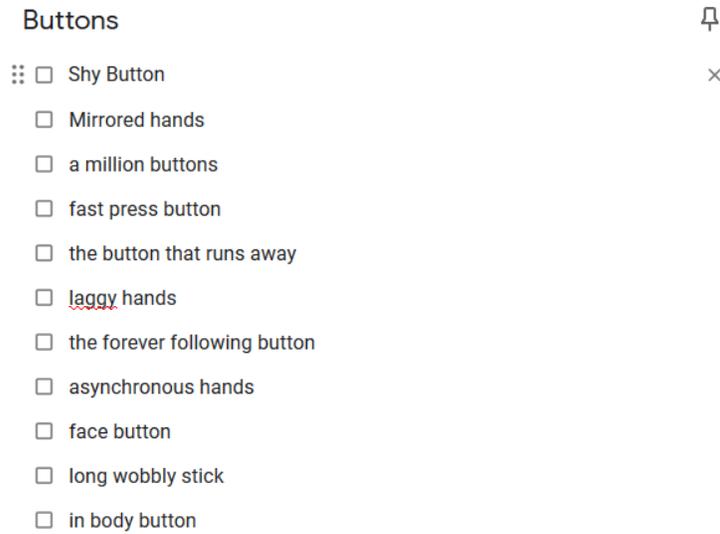
Fig 5: button brainstorming list

The implementation of the first few buttons was quite simple and getting something up and running took very little time. This is especially true because I chose to work with the Oculus and thus avoided a lot of the problems I have experienced in prior projects working with Vive tracking and SteamVR (it's a nightmare). The Oculus may have limited features and movement, but as this game wouldn't involve the need to walk around the appeal of a system that just works won out.

This *Pushable Buttons* (Feisty Crab Studios) video helped me getting the joint situation sorted out to make the button *pop* back into place.
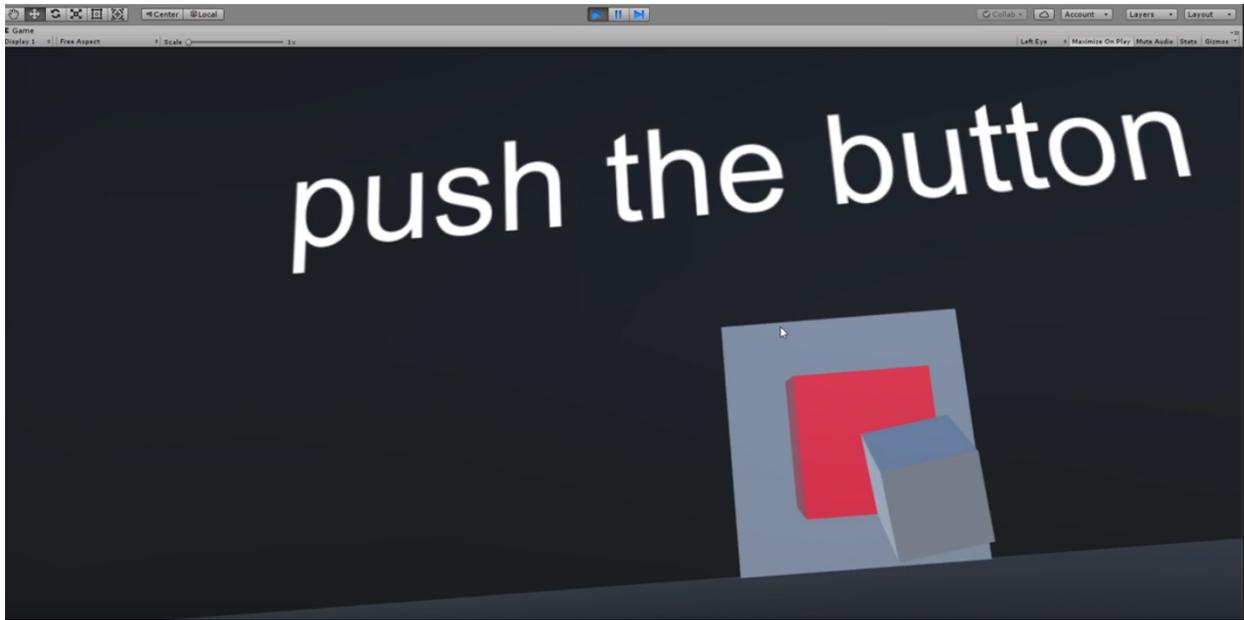
Fig 6: Screenshot of Initial button (video link)

I planned to build out each button as a different scene, to give myself room to experiment without worrying about affecting the other button modes. After copying the scene a couple time to make new interactions I realized it was going to be a lot of work go back and replace the stand in primitive shapes with anything later one, so I took a break from programming to work on *aesthetics*. I have a tendency to get caught up in the mechanical elements when building things but I did not want to forget that the feeling of this game will matter, and that there is a difference between pushing a button in a lego wonderland and pushing a button in a dungeon. I wanted to intentionally draw on some of the - potentially cheesy - symbolism and stylization of fetish and pop kink to make the intention a little more apparent. Also, I really love hard metallic surfaces and darkly lit room. These things may be related.

I momentarily thought about doing all the modelling myself, but quickly reconsidered when I remembered the timeline of this project, so took to the Unity Asset Store to find something to ease the process. A holiday sale presented me with this wonder Modular Research Center, which is extremely my jam, so I bought it and dug in.

Such Shiny!

So Reflection!

Oh wait… I don't know anything about reflections in Unity.

I brushed up on how lighting works with a video I often return to when I forget things - Lighting in Unity - and found another video (BRACKEYS) by the same person on reflection probes and the like (which honestly, I didn't even know existed until this moment in the process). After fighting with both of those things for some time (one day I will master emissive materials and be able to make neon lighting that looks good), I settled on something that had the feel I was going for and returned to developing the button modes.
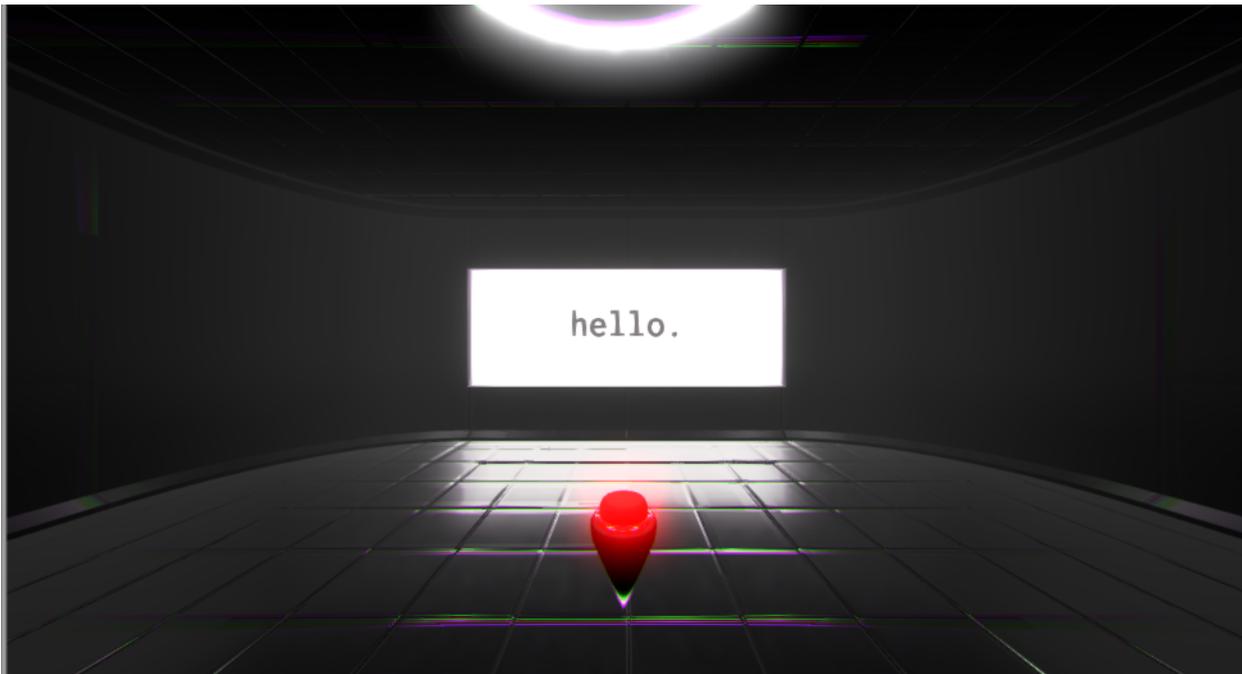
Fig 7: Screenshot of final 3D game environment and lighting.

As I was working on these first few - shy button, mirror button, the button that needs you face - I realized it might be interesting to not have them sit alone as singular game modes to be cycled

through, but for each of these to be written as traits the button could turn on and off and thus mix and match, breaking the potential monotony of gameplay and providing a potentially unique experience for the play. This would require the buttons to be programmed differently as the way I had been working was not with the intent of them existing in the same scene. I started rewriting the first few to sit on top of one another and tested out playing around with stacking and unstacking them.

I abandoned this path pretty quick as I realized that I did not have the programming chops to make it all work well, and ultimately I was interesting in making the individual modes as perfect as possible. Stacking and unstacking them got buggy real fast and the was taking away from what the actual focus of the game would be. Relieving the player of monotony was not the point. I backburnered that plan except for one very nice element that came from it - press to randomize. Because I had rewritten them all to sit within the same scene it was very easy for me to randomize which mode would be active when that mode was completed. I could have said when the button was pressed but some require multiple presses.

A rundown of the modes and the thoughts that brought them about:

Shy Button

The shy button would like you to move very slowly as to not startle it. Should the players hands (the controllers) or the players head (the headset) move faster than the allotted threshold the button will jump to a new random position within reach. I wanted to give it a little bit of human affectation so as the player gets closer it starts to shake with anticipation/fear.

The intention with this button was to make something where the player needs to maintain hyper awareness and tension in their body. This came from reflections on watching people play Superhot VR (Superhot Team). In Superhot the game advances only at the speed you move. Because it is in the action genre most players try to outmaneuver the game with speed. As an

example Superhot is the only game I have ever had someone punch me from because this speed method tends to make people feel very immersed, aka they forget real world exists and flail about accordingly. What's interesting about Superhot is that the play style tends to be very gendered. Women, after a couple fails, tend to slow down and become strategic in their movements while men continue to try and barge their way through. It is the first game I have experienced that does such a good job of inverting expectations of play style. While the button is nowhere as sophisticated as this and does not draw on the expectations of the action genre to be part of its puzzle, I did want to explore this slowness and tension.

It is, of course, problematic and incorrect to assert that gender = play style, but the ways socialization can manifest in the solving of problems and the quickness with which this can appear when put in a moment of failure is still interesting. For this project the goal is to make games that center a different kind of player, so identifying some baseline assumptions - ex people who ID as men tend to be more comfortable asserting themselves aggressively through their bodies - is somewhat required in order to explore who and what has been left out of design. These statements are also important in identifying problematic behaviour, such as the example above, in order to not continue to design games that reaffirm masculinity as the correctly assumed physicality to bring to a game.

In short, please forgive me my generalizations as I am trying to use them to punish toxicity in game play.

Mirrored hands

In this mode your hand markers are moving in the opposite direction along one axis. This plays on a similar theme as the shy button in that the movement required to press the button is slow and considered at first. Originally I had envisioned it being the opposite movement entirely (along every axis) but after some testing it was far too frustrating and the goal is just the right amount of frustrating.

A million buttons

The most monotonous. There are many buttons. Press all the buttons.

This one is particularly irritating when it randomly generates more than once in a row. Pressing all the buttons only to be met with a whole new batch of buttons has made me restart my own development session more than once just to avoid having to press them all again.

An unexpected and great discovery in this mode is the potential for physical fatigue from something that is not physically rigorous.

Fast moving button

The opposite of the shy button, this one just jumps around all the time and requires you to keep that attention sharp.

In opposition to the other modes it's feels more upsetting as it takes a moment to realized that speed has become an element.

The button that needs your face

Ever dreamed of being one of those drinking bird toys? Well, now is your chance. This button cannot be pressed with your hands and will only recognize your face.

Pressing the button once, or rather figuring out that you need to use your head did not feel particularly satisfying, so I included a script that randomizes the amount of face presses required in order to move on to the next mode. The screen encourages you to keep going, sometimes repeating itself.

Unintentionally I made a fitness mode. Or I'm very out of shape. One of my first tests resulted in me having to bend to press the button upwards of 20 times and I was *tired*. This unintentional difficulty made it my favourite mode.

After the buttons worked

While there were many more button modes that I had brainstormed, I stopped at 5. It felt like enough get a sense of what the game would be like. I struggled for a while, as I always do, with how to end it, how to wrap it up. What was the ultimate win? Games need a win condition, right? In The Art of Failure, Jesper Juul states that "the feeling of escaping failure [...] is central to the enjoyment of games". This is within a larger conversation about games as something that provide access to overcoming inadequacies, more of then than not, ones that the games themselves create. This relationship with failure - through exploration, trial, and replay (afforded by games having "no necessary tangible consequences") - is the unique quality of games. This hinges on the idea that this failure is overcomable, that the value of games is in its lessons and progress and ultimate win. Which I am not arguing against, creating safe spaces for people to explore their real and fictional inadequacies and insecurities and providing potential pathways to feeling triumphant in the face of them is most likely why games have the potential emotional effect they do and most like also why so many queer makers have chosen them as a medium to carry their stories. But in the context of this research, these assumed ideas of progress, of moving past, of triumph, reinscribe potential meanings onto the primary game loops and journeys. The requirement for an end, for a win, often reinforces the idea that we *endure* the game in order to *receive* a reward. This loop is fine, I have no problems with this loop, it's a good loop.

But what if that wasn't the loop for this game?

What if this game was infinitely looped? No win condition, no end. What meaning does endurance carry when it is not in pursuit of reward? This requires a restructuring of the concept

of failure, or potentially an abandoning it as an analytic tool altogether. Removing the win condition, and the associated failure condition, could help to make a more purely masochistic game. This is tricky, though, as pushing a button doesn't carry any masochistic power in and of itself. It is only by playing with the expectation of a win condition, through the assumptions and trappings of a game, that the button press gains meaning - there is an expectation that pressing the button will achieve some progress. But it does not.

It's just a button press. That is difficult. Forever.

Further Development

This game sketch does a good job of incorporating my theoretical interest, it makes an unapologetically masochistic statement, it certainly fit itself into Ruberg's no-fun games. It's not, however, a very good game. It has entertaining moments, mainly born of frustration and panic, which are two of my favourite game experiences, but something is missing. This is potentially a pitfall of academic endeavour, or possibly a personal failing, or maybe it's just that making games is hard. But really, what it feels like to me, when I play it, is that it's missing the kink. Unsurprising as its intention from the beginning was to explore the potential BDSM endeavours without the lens of sexuality. I was curious as to whether or not these kinds of conceptualization and engagements with masochism could hold without their connections to kink and sexuality. And it's possible that they would, for someone else, but the lacking context of sex, of fetish, of arousal or explicitness, to me, makes its read simply as a game. Not a queer game, not a kink game, not a critical game.

Those ties remain theoretical.

Because the intention was to see what kind of experience this focus on isolated masochism would result in, the games failures are not really failures, just insights. If I were to continue developing it the primary goal would be integrating these theories more clearing, adding layers of sexuality, using representational media (video, audio, etc) to make more apparent the link to sexuality and pornography and politics. As it stands it was what it intended to be - an exploration.

Findings - Sketch 3 - Liaison

Description

Liaison is a multiplayer fetish game about awkward intimacies. Players wear leather head harnesses equipped with Vive trackers to track them in physical space and vibrators for haptic feedback. Their goal is to maintain an exact distance from one another while sustaining eye contact.

Intent

> How did it happen that I ever allowed myself to believe that winning the game was a more meaningful victory than my enjoyment of how we were playing together? (De Koven 5)

Coming off the making of Meateor and Push It I felt it very important to make something multiplayer. I had had an idea a while back about a game where two players must hold eye contact, by being literally strapped to one another, for a specified amount of time. Originally I had envisioned this as being an Arduino based game where the two players would be connected via a stretch sensor, the computer asking them to hold an exact and precise distance from one another's face. I pictured much hilarity and difficulty as they tried to help each other get the distance right, moving closer and pulling apart, compensation for one another's movements, all while maintaining silent eye contact (some kind of mouth covering appeared in my mental imaginings). I wanted to make a very strong aesthetic statement of fetish so planned to craft leather head harness with which to affix all the hardware for the electronics.

Multiplayer felt important for this game for a number of reasons. One of the takeaways from Meateor and Pusht It was just how crucial other people were to the experience of the game. As with many games, VR inhabitation often straddles this line between player and performer (not necessarily a binary), which makes an audience a somewhat crucial part of the experience. In these games, the audience becomes almost a second player, or maybe more accurately, the audience becomes the access point to the full game. They can all certainly be played alone, but that is only part of the experience. The function of the audience in VR is similar in this way to the function of the audience to BDSM scene, optional but with great impact.

> If you are doing something challenging to you, and it about surviving something challenging, an audience who thinks and feels that what you are doing will ramp up that feeling of being challenged. Everyone else in the space is nervous, or inwardly rooting for you, or pushing you with encouragements. However, if what you are doing is challenging to you, and the witnesses are unimpressed and express that fact, it can deflate the power of the ordeal, or inversely make it even more challenging with the feeling of "why is it so simple for everyone else?" (De Koven 117)

For a moment I considered designing something with a literal translation of what Lee Harrington describes as a guide in BDSM terms - "The person leading or staying with a person who is going on an energetic journey; the person running the *Altered State* experience or holding space for those experiencing *Altered States*" (Harrington 377) - which in the context of VR already takes place often on many parallels could be drawn on to design from. But really, as BDSM is something that exists between individuals, I wanted to include at least one truly multiplayer exploration within this body of work.

I believe it is not coincidental that many games used to exemplify Brink are multiplayer. The inclusion of another person, collaboratively, or competitively cannot fully be contained to game space. Our interpersonal relationship and interactions within gamespace will carry meaning

outside of gamespace. We have all had friends who are bad losers, or overly competitive, and it becomes difficult, as play space is shared, to not let those feelings of conflict affect our friendships in real life. In a Well Played Game, De Koven speaks to the often unspoken contract players enter into when playing games together and the potential upset that we can experience when that contract is broken. This contract is not detailed in any game rules or mechanics, but instead exists just outside the barriers of the game, is created and recreated at the point of entry into play. It is, most importantly, how we establish our sense of safety.

> The safer we feel in the game we're playing, the more willing we are to play it.(De Koven 8)

The easiest example of games' potential for relationship bleed is the moments when another player threatens or breaks this sense of safety. But what are some of the ways that bleed can exist within the context of safe play space? This is where intimacy becomes an interesting tool.

I wanted to design a multiplayer game to intentionally toy with intimacy. I was and am curious about how intimacies formed in games affect intimacies outside of games, or what playing with intimacies could look like. I wanted to focus in on the player to player dynamic, make it explicit and central. The audience had served as a second player in the past, but for this game I wanted to remove the requirement for a witness and design something that could be experienced fully by only its players, something that is potentially its' strongest form when played in private.

These were the goals: multiplayer, intimate, explicitly fetish.

It is possibly for something competitive to be played in a collaborative manner, but as mentioned in an earlier chapter, competition, as it is so intrinsically linked with masculinity, is often a scapegoat for toxic behaviour, and as such, I wanted this game to be consciously collaborative.

I think mechanically, this is where we have the chance to situate the queer player. The combinations of these elements feels queer. Alternative intimacies, layered in fetish, in a environment of collaboration, expressly in opposition to masculinist competition. Feels pretty gay.

The Making Of

As I set out to actually make this game one of the difficulties I kept coming to was the limitations of Arduino. I was not thrilled with the idea of wires all over the place, or having to make pouches to contain all the electronics. I knew it would be messy, wnd while I am usually here for messiness, for this game I wanted something clean, something polished. So I started to brainstorm/look into other potential technologies that could accomplish the same thing.

I briefly considered using a computer vision/a camera, specifically the Kinect, but that felt programmatically complex and I refused to believe that there was not a way to simply track two objects in space and to feed that info into Unity.

Of course, this is what VR technology does constantly, but VR in its current incarnation is a headset based experience. But maybe it didn't have to be? I started to wonder whether or not it was possible to just used the tracking component of something like the Vive. Since I had used the trackers in the making of Meateor, this felt familiar and possible. A quick internet search revealed that many people had already been trying to do this - a few of whom had provided some example paths to running SteamVR without a Vive headset connected. As of the writing of this, I had not been able to get any of their solution to work, but as I considered it further I realized I didn't really have to. The potential concession of having the headset sit on the floor in a corner still provided more elegance than building out and arduino based system. And it provided me with much more freedom to change and test different game interactions as the players would no longer need to be attached in order to track their relative distances from one another. I would also

have other kinds of data that could be incorporate, like direction facing, height, movement speed, etc.

There is also something valuable, research wise, in all of these games utilization VR technology in very different ways.

Fig 9: First prototype of head harness

I started by making a prototype head harness. Most harnesses that include mouth coverings are done in a similar style, so I assumed there were many reasons for that and sketched out a similar design. The prototype felt quite comfortable but in considering the added weight of the Vive tracker the final design had one extra strap around the forehead. I did consider mounting the tracker on the mouth covering as it would be stable and flat (easier for programming and raycasting), but the trackers would then be at risk of hitting one another when the players faces are brought close together.
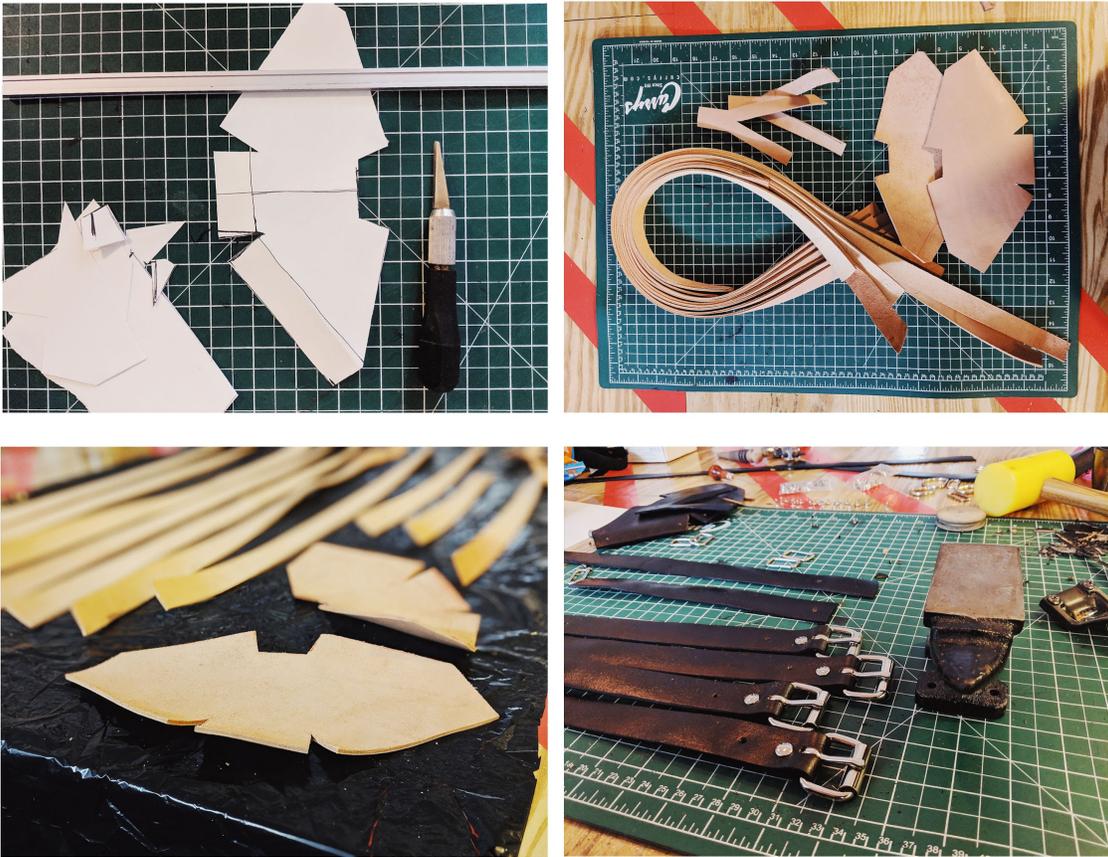
Fig 10: making the second prototype (stencil, cut raw pieces, prep for dying, dyed piece)

Thus, a fetish pony was born.

Fig 11: Second prototype without Vive tracker
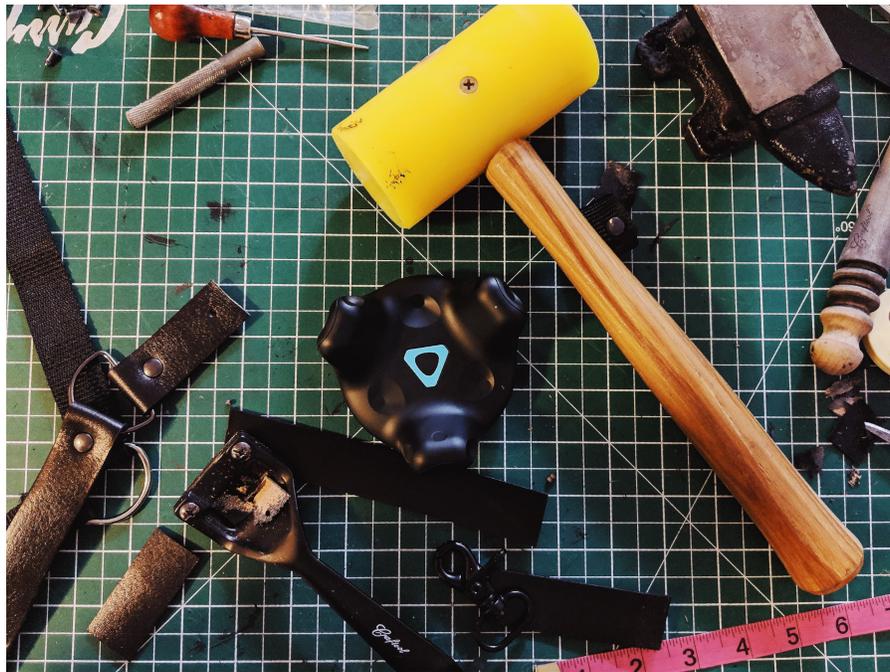
Fig 12: workspace with Vive tracker

Fig 13: Final prototype, in parts and together, with Vive tracker

The first milestone programmatically was getting all the technology working. As is my usual experience working with SteamVR, the first few days were dedicated just to getting the Headset recognized and tracking properly. Updates to the SteamVR tracking system had occurred since my last experience working with Vive trackers, so while I was anticipating having to keep the controllers connected in order for the trackers to track, it turns out that this was a hurdle only for performing room setup. Using SteamVR 2.0 in Unity to set up the trackers was simple.

On of the difficulties I encountered in designing this game was how to indicate to the players that they were pointed in the right direction and either needed to get closer, move farther away or hold position. Using a screen would require the players to turn their heads away from one another and as such, is not really an option. Haptic feedback would be ideal, but unfortunately, the trackers do not have haptic feedback built in so any solution would have to be an additional technology.

Enter Buttplug.io

Buttplug.io "is an open-source standards and software project for controlling intimate hardware, including sex toys, fucking machines, electrostim hardware, and more" (qDot). Essentially buttplug hijacks (or allows you to create) outbound haptic signals and re-routes them to bluetooth enabled sex toys. I was hoping to use Buttplug to provide feedback to the players on where they needed to move through incorporating it into my Unity project. There was an elegance to using an already created sex toy as an element of a controller that I was drawn to, as the objects themselves are often very well made. Not only that, but using something made for sex (Buttplug) to control something else made for sexual stimulation (a vibe) to transmit data for a game kind of about sex (Liaison) but not as any kind of actual sex thing, felt right.

One option for using Buttplug is a C# library, which I was hoping to integrate into my Unity environment, but unfortunately, after having 3 advanced programmers look into it, it became clear that this integration was far outside of the scope of the project. Option two was to use the Game Vibration Router, which is a small app that runs alongside games and connects the haptic feedback to the vibrators. There is one major problem with this solution, and that is that there is only one output signal, so both/all players would be receiving the same feedback. This presents a new set of design challenges. How could I use one channel to communicate information to more than one player?

I wasn't ready to give up on Buttplug, largely because I found a type of vibe (the we vibe Verge) that could integrate nicely with the harnesses I had already made, and the alternate avenue to haptic feedback would require many arduinos, aka many wires, and I feared the DIY electronics look. By using the Verge I could have players experience small vibrations on the back of their necks, without any extra wiring or hardware. But again, the one channel problem. If I were to build out my own solution, I would have access to each player individually and would be able to send different information to each of them, which is probably the stronger game design choice, but felt like the weaker aesthetic choice. I have experience many VR experienced where players are strapped into vests and attached to dongles and I did not want my players to become so encumbered with electronics that the fun of the experience was lost.

Considering the difficulties of a single signal output presented by buttplug.io, I returned to the drawing board to brainstorm ideas for player feedback, ultimately settling on the three most accessible elements of the technology - vibration, sound, and the screen. When displaying an early tech test to my colleagues and faculty members, my primary advisor suggested adding a third player to the mix. Three channels, three players. The goal was still the same, a hot/cold indicator for the correct body placement, but one player would be making the sound louder, one the colour brighter and one the vibration stronger.

At this point in the project I received ethics board approval, so was finally able to take my prototypes to testing.

Observations from Testing

Unsurprising for anyone who has worked with experimental technology, the testing was marred by tech issues. Inconsistent bluetooth connections meant that the vibration output was a less than pleasurable experience. That being said, on the whole participants were enthusiastic and engaged with the explorative and unclear nature of the game.

A part of these enthusiasm was centered on the harness itself, which, the more I explore the realms of custom physical controllers built with the intention of sexualizing/queering play, has become one of the larger moments for reflection and success in this work. These controllers are not subtle in their fetishistic ties and serve as a filter for the kind of player this experience is designed for. They contain an explicitness that harnesses both the goals of feminist pornography - as definitively sexualizes objects - and the tools of brink - as objects whose meanings and associations deny their classification as only "game controllers'. The engagement of fetish, the use of black leather, the sensory experience of mouth covering, these are all tools of BDSM that have infused these controllers with the power to change the meaning of a simple action (moving one's head) into something titillating and engorged with aesthetic symbolism.

Fig 14: Participants in harness controllers making eye contact

The other area most focussed on by participants was the exploratory nature of the experience. While all of them caught on quite quickly to the goals of the game and were quick to find their correct positions (encountering the intended strange and sometimes intimat body positions along the way), once there there was a strong draw to use their bodies to manipulate the sensory experiences by trialing different movement actions (such as headbanging to manipulate sound volume in and out in rapid succession). In discussions afterward this was restated as the most engaging element, and it was suggested that it become the main focus of interaction, allowing the

players to control the aesthetic makeup of the experience for the other players. This brings up and interesting line of inquiry as to the importance of the classification as "game", as the move away from goals and failures has the potential to complicate its status as such. But this leads to an interesting question of power and control. As clearly stated, my goal with this work was to incorporate the input of participants as much as possible, to reflect the way I believe queer community, knowledge, experience, art and play are created in reality, as a waying of sharing and incorporating powers and influences beyond my own. The feedback here urges me to develop this experience outside of many understood game structures, but one persists - the magic circle. While participants were interested more in exploration than they were in goals, the affordances of the framing of *game space* in regards to bodily closeness and contact were fully taken advantage of.

Fig. 15: Close bodies

Further Developments

My intention with future developments of this game are more deeply expressed in the conclusion where I detail my main insights gained from these works and propose a framework of intent.

They are mostly centered around integrating as much of the feedback as possible - different controllers could help with both the desire for different roles and some of the technical difficulties faces by so many similar devices. Iterating on the feedback signals to prioritize clarity of communication to the players is of high priority. The development of this sketch into a full game prototype will also involve a more in-depth design consideration of goals and rewards, something I plan to incorporate more of my community into designing with me.

Discussion

I think there is a tendency with this work to make broad statements. It's tricky. We use and hear words like research and knowledge and I think the inclination is to prove something. As marginalized folks this is doubly true as we fight back daily against the ideas that our contributions are not valuable. There is a pressure to adapt our work to the structures that be, even if self enforced, as these structures are resistive to adapting to our work.

I have never been good at subtlety, and my work is often very polished. I have fought for a long time to make work that stands strongly against its critiques, and does so with enough technical and professional proficiency so as to counter it being woman's work, queer work, or untrained work (a shorthand for my upbringing in poverty and subsequent lack of education). Now that I am perceived as a man, my technical proficiency and professionalism matter almost not at all and these hardships become framed as a part of my triumphant narrative, but these habits run much deeper than the fictions we create through "man" and "woman". Coming into this work I wanted a space alternate to that, alternate to my history. A space to explore and create and learn that did not require me to adapt my work to capitalist structures. I stumbled, for a while, stuck in my old habits, trying to squeeze my goals and interests into a nicely understood framework, conceptually and methodologically. As you have read, that didn't go according to plan.

But that upset, that difficulty, it taught me something significant, something I have found comfort in many times when things have gone astray. It taught me that when we are talking about research, when we are talking about exploration and learning, when we are trying to make meaningful contributions - it has to be messy. It has to be about individuality and subtlety and grey area. The binaries cannot stand.

Fig 16: Me being called out on Twitter about what my work is about (lang)

Grey area and messiness and subtleties is where this work lives, and maybe these subtleties, that I often ignore because they are not making a large enough - an explicit enough - statement, are actually valuable in their subtlety, in their ambiguity. Maybe there are many ways to enact subversion, many ways to queer a medium.

This has lead me to understand the work I have been doing differently - this is not a games thesis. This thesis is a little bit about design, a little bit about art, a lot about queerness and sex and power and kink, a good amount about making through a politic, through an identity, a little bit about exploration and safety. It's a continuation of over a decade of work and also many new ideas. It's full of messiness and entanglement and subtleties and successes and failures. And it has resulted in some weird little games.

...

It may seem incorrect to refer to works that include leather head harnesses and three people's bodies climbing over one another as subtle. But what I really mean is that the lessons are in the

subtleties, the queernesses that could be easily overlooked. What I mean to say is that it's not just the big over the top black leather harnesses that make these experiences queer, it's the collaboration, the consideration of bodies, of space, of size. It is the play that is allowed for, not the play that is designed.

I see brink games as requiring two major elements - the threat of bleed and subversion. Bleed is easy as arguably all games contain it; *bleed in* occuring when "when a players' ordinary lives influence the game" and *bleed out* happening when "the game influences players despite the protective framing" (Montola). Bleed, in this way, feels easier to identify than exactly what makes a game subversive. For me, this subversion must be political or personal, the usefulness of designing for brink not being in its ability to critique game space but in its ability to "extend beyond games and into society's own self-description" (Poremba 777). Recognizing that games are a practice of inscribing and reinscribing fictions onto a human player is a great starting place. This may be a personal description, but it has come to be my working conceptualization of what a game is. We could use the language of "magic circle" - itself a fictional boundary we pass through in order to engage with a fictional space - or we could describe a temporary suspension of consequence a la Juul (7) - which is another fiction that becomes problematized as we culturally start to investigate the impact of games - but the interpretation remains the same; for a game to exist you really only need two things - a fiction and a player. For a brink game to exist that fiction needs to be vulnerable.

Narrative, mechanics, physicality - these are all tools we use to inscribe our fictions onto our players and sometimes this inscription fits, sometimes there is no tension between the game's definition of player and the player's definition of self. These moments, I believe, are mostly reserved for the most normative amongst us, as games are mostly designed for a generalized *player*, a generalized *person*, and that generalized person seems to always take on the shape of a cis, white, hetero, able-bodied man. Sometimes you get to swap one of those descriptors out for something else, but usually it's only one and that doesn't allow for the complexity and

intersectionality of what players actually are. I'm tempted to conceptualize these games as mean games (mean here being average, interior, the anti-brink).

For the marginalized player a mean game represents a moment (or moments, or hours or lifetimes) of friction. This friction inscribes and reinscribes the label of other onto us as we play (an example of the aforementioned semi-constant bleed) , attributing normalcy to that generalized shape of *person*. But maybe a way to design subversion into our games is the active occupation of this bleed function - by designing specifically for a marginalized player - as a way to intentionally cause friction to a different kind of player. This works in multiple ways. The application of friction to the normative person's experience creates a dissonance between heteronormativity and rightness, between whiteness and ease. This centering of different experiences instead assigns these values - ease, normalcy, rightness - to marginalized, complex, conflicted and intersectional identities.

This is a player defined game, and stands in opposition to the game defined player. Obviously systems have limits, and a computer based game system is never going to be as adaptable and reactive as games between people (another likely reason all my literature references multiplayer experiences), but I don't think it has to be. The lesson I've taken, from working with BDSM, from working for brink and from working with myself as a touchpoint, is not that we need other people to create systems with us, but that we need people to create systems that consider us. I'm not talking about considering us as players, I'm talking about considering us as people. I'm talking about games whose systems are designed in parallel awareness to systems of power. I'm talking about an end to repetition, to controllers being the same, to playing with only our hands, to requiring rewards, to failing. I'm talking about an end to user centric design, to catering to the largest mass of sameness you can find. I'm talking about an end to the fiction of ease.

I'm talking about making weird games for weird people who like weird shit.

Conclusion

This undertaking of this work, was, in it's own way, an ordeal.

Through it I have explored some potential manifestations of BDSM practice and teachings through game sketching. Meateor, the first sketch, was an exploration of sexuality, pornographic symbolism, custom controllers and the relationship between VR player and the audience. Second, through Push it, a small sketch about masochism, as something already engaged in by games, but this time from a kink positive approach. And lastly, through Liaisons, the 3 player body puzzle sketch, investigating further the use of custom controllers, fetish interfaces and bodily entanglement. All three sketches are aligned in their intent to engage the body as a site of brink design, and their use of brink design to center a queer kind of play, and a queer kind of player.

My hope is that this can stand as its own guide for future makers of queer games, that it contains within it many provocations about the use of bodies, the designs of player, and the structures of power we design. That the methodological entanglements might help to inform future methodologies, future practices centered in the explicit integration of queer sex and power. I had hoped that the pieces themselves, be they sketches or prototypes, would be stronger in their carrying in of these provocations, that they would themselves be a larger part of the contribution to the community. Unfortunately (maybe not?), what has transpired is a little bit off from that goal. To understate the impact of the Ethics board on the output of this work feels inaccurate, but it is also not something I wish to belaboured and rehashed. That being said, the work suffered. What was once intended to be a piece created through communal knowledge development and community engagement became more an experience in how to negotiate community identities under structures of power and control. Maybe not so far off, then.

I hope, now, that this work can help people interested in furthering these explorations, that it may act as a structural underpinning for game makers (or artists and designers from any discipline) who need help in overcoming the barriers of making we can be met with.

> The Ordeal Path is that which shakled you out of your comfort zone. By using purposeful and intentional pain, suffering, challenges or endurance, an individual is pushed past or through their perceived limits. Whether the ordeal is mental, physical, spiritual or psychological, you come out the working changed or transformed, opened up to a world beyond those limits. (Harrington 88)

In summary: a framework for brink kink

I don't think much of a leather harness between friends. Or some floor crawling. Or a good pelvic thrust. The communities I oscillate between, and the friendships I cultivate are comfortable with these seemingly intimate acts. We've created space, out here on the margins, for intimacies to be safe.

When I started this work I thought the 1 to 1 would be clearer, the connections between brink games and BDSM space are so numerous that I envisioned the resultant games to have clearer parallels. I thought the games would be kinkier. If BDSM is about power and control, sensation and restriction, motivation and failure, then the explorations of BDSM in games would surely involve all of those things as well. Instead, the body took precedence. The designs themselves emerged less from the engagement with queer games theory and more through ruminations on what makes queer bodies game. These games are, of course, queer games as I have come to understand them. They are games that exist on the margins, in active opposition to norms. They are games that employ strange pleasures. They are games on the brink.

The frameworks that have emerged through this research have manifested more as insights about intention and how to incorporate that into my making process. Through the development of these game sketches, the engagement with the literature, and the playtesting feedback, I have identified

4 (totally not exclusive) main areas of consideration for design with kink, queerness and brink in mind.

Control + Authority

Control is hard. As we have seen primarily in the Literature Review chapter, games (and specifically queer games) have traditionally assigned control (and authority) to the game designer. This is a potentially problematic framing when trying to incorporate politic and social positioning into our designs. A counter to this, that brink games are uniquely positioned to tackle, is to consider the power dynamics of play, both between players and between player and system/ designer.

What affordances and allowances are our players engaging in the design of their own play? How can we employ control as a mechanic of subversion? Are we giving some players control over others? Is this a strategic choice? It's important to consider how the power dynamics of our games create and maintain relations to power dynamics outside of game space, and to ensure that we are not re-enforcing the marginalization of our players. How does this inscription of power onto a player reinforce or resist that's players lived experience? We can use this boundary crossing as a moment to queer power, to messy it, to make it complicated and unclear.

Using power and control as mechanics in our games can easily highlight our players lived experience with it, and the disconnect between a players power in game and their power in life feels like one of the easier way to trouble the status quo. Use unharmonious power relations to comfort those are used to them and discomfort those that are not.

Roles

Roles go hand in hand with control. One of the potential problems for players of my multiplayer game was that everyone had the same role. Had I incorporated different roles I would have given players an opportunity to self define more of their playstyle, and to negotiate the assignment of these roles (and their associated power dynamics) as a entry point to the play space. This is

something I plan to incorporate into further iterations of the game as I think asymmetrical play allows for a wider player demographic. Let bottoms be bottoms and such.

Roles are, primarily, a multiplayer concern in this work, but certainly can extend to the realms of single player experiences as well. In multiplayer play (both kink and game) we rarely pair up with people of identical inclinations or skill sets, and it is the complementary nature of difference that is often at the heart of the enjoyment of these experiences.

When we are talking about pleasure based communal experiences it becomes even more important to acknowledge in our designs that many peoples pleasures have a relational back and forth and the negotiation and exploration of different roles is a large and often overlooked part of play. Asking questions not just about what the game wants from the players but also about how the players are empowered to find new interplays, how they can collaborate with or sabotage each other, what power their respective roles permit them, and how might this interact with their identities.

Audience

Often, the audience is another player. This is especially true in the context of physical and VR games as frequently there is at minimum a guide and at most a crowd. These voyeurs have the power to impact our players play, through both positive and negative feedback loops. And not only this, but they are having their own playful experience, one that is its own translation of sadism. The voyeur in these games is often bearing witness to our players struggles, successes and failures; they make the experiences our players have more vulnerable, more real. They also have the potential to violate the boundaries of game space, which can go very wrong when, for example, they bring external shame into the circle. They can, when utilized with intention, be an access point to brink, constantly teasing reality through their witnessing.

The Body

This fundamentally boils down to a question of what kind of body are we designing for? In the use of default interfaces, especially when those interfaces are very physical (such as in the case of VR) we assume a default body, which is often at odds with our goals. How can controllers, modified or custom, change our rules of engagement? Recognizing that our bodies often carry with them many elements of our identities, desires and pleasure (especially for many queer/trans/kink folk), consider how our games can interplay with these elements of self. This isn't to say that default controllers and interfaces can't be used, moreso a call to make more considered and intentional choices around their use. Potentially the largest thread present through this work is that when we are designing for brink, the body cannot go unconsidered.

It was hard, at times, to understand how these small sketches could be capable of containing all these deep theoretical and political entanglements. But as a I reflect back on the methods and practices used - the explicitness of feminist pornography, designing for the body as a site of brink, the perverted intimacy - I start to understand this resistance to classification as a critical element of their design. A critical element of their queerness. The boundaries are, of course, very blurry.

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