CRUISING GAME SPACE

Game Level Design, Gay Cruising and the Queer Gothic in *The Rawlings*

By Tommy Ting

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Abstract

This thesis explores the emerging paradigm shift in game studies called queer game studies. Through research creation, this project explores cruising in Stanley Park, Vancouver as an empirical and conceptual starting point to prototype a surreal horror game called *The Rawlings.* Synthesizing queer game studies with theoretical engagement represented by queer Gothic studies, this thesis proposes that if cruising can be understood a form of play with unique dynamic spatial qualities, it might have implications for the discipline of level design in video game development. It is concluded that queer Gothic studies may provide inroads to our understanding of both the sexuality of space and the spatiality of sexuality in queer spaces. Particularly, this thesis investigates how cruising illuminates space with qualities that exhibit markers of deviancy and monstrosity. This project demonstrates the implications of space as monstrous body with its own identity, motivation and desires for queering level design.

Keywords: Queer theory, queer Gothic studies, queer game studies, game development, spatial studies, level design, cruising, research creation, autoethnography, Stanley Park

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Literature and Contextual Review 10
- Queer Game Studies 10
- Queer Failure 13
- Queer Temporality and Spatiality 17
- Queer Historiography 26

Theoretical Review 30
- The Queer Gothic 30
- The Secret and the Spectral 36
- The Monstrous 37
- The Haunted Space 39
- The Queer Gothic and Queer Game Design 41
- Conclusion 45

Methodology 47

Autoethnography of Cruising Inside Stanley Park, Vancouver 52
- Introduction 52
- Findings Part I: The Queer Spatiality of Stanley Park 53
- Findings Part II: The Queer Uncanny of Stanley Park 60

The Rawlings: A Queer Video Game Prototype 67
- Reflections and Future Research 79

Dissemination 80

Conclusion: When All the World is a Hopeless Jumble 81

Works Cited 84

Appendix A: Stanley Park 91

Appendix B: Before *The Rawlings* 95

Appendix C *The Rawlings* 96

List of Figures

Fig. 1 Google Maps view of Stanley Park in Vancouver, BC, Canada 53

Fig. 2 Lees trail post, one of the main cruising trails and Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail..... 55

Fig. 3 Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail..... 55

Fig. 4 A node and landmark inside Stanley Park Lees cruising area..... 57

Fig. 5 Lees trail post, “For Aaron. I know this path, so do you, to this gathering, bodies flame the limbs of trees and light the clearing." 61

Fig. 6 Sketch of a video game set in a forest inspired by the events of Aaron Webster... 68

Fig. 7 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence 69

Fig. 8 Ralph Escamillan in motion capture suit..... 72

Fig. 9 Photogrammetry model of Lees trail post 73

Fig. 10 Screenshot of early version of The Rawlings..... 74

Fig. 11 Screenshot of a dance cutscene in The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence 76

Fig. 12 Screenshot of a dance cutscene in The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence 77

Fig. 13 A different entrance to the cruising area, a log is placed to gesture towards it.... 91

Fig. 14 Homophobic graffiti around and inside the cruising area 92

Fig. 15Assortment of markings, graffiti and rubbish in the cruising area. From top to bottom and left to right: Penis graffiti on a tree bark, “I Heart Uncunt Azn Cock” graffiti on tree log, Arrow sign drew in the dirt of the ground, Various rubbish..... 93

Fig. 16 Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail in October 2018..... 94

Fig. 17 Screenshot of Club Baths 95

Fig. 18 Screenshot of motion capture work..... 96

Fig. 19 Using the mocap data in a game environment 96

Fig. 20 Photogrammetry model of a landmark inside Stanley Park 97

Fig. 21 Screenshot of early version of The Rawlings 98

Fig. 22 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence 98

Fig. 23 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence 99

Fig. 24 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC.. 99

Fig. 25 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 100

Fig. 26 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 100

Fig. 27 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 101

Fig. 28 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 101

Fig. 29 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 102

Fig. 30 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC 102

All images Tommy Ting

Introduction

On November 7th, 1967, the Supreme Court of Canada sentenced Everett Klippert to prison for gross indecency, a legal term to criminalize sexual activity between men. Within six weeks, on December 21st, 1967, Pierre Trudeau, the then Justice Minister in Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson's Liberal Party introduced Bill C-195 which was later passed in 1968 as Bill C-150 Criminal Law Amendment Act. Inspired by the Sexual Offences Act passed by the British Parliament one year earlier, Bill C-150 legalized "homosexual acts" between men over the age of 21 performed in private. Trudeau's famous words "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nations" were spoken in defence of this bill. However, in the years following, from the Stonewall Riots in New York on June 28th, 1969 to Operation Soap, the bathhouse raids by the Metropolitan Toronto Police on February 5th, 1981 to the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando on June 12th, 2016, queer spaces continue to be interrogated, cleansed, raided, gentrified and attacked.

Today, the reality of living queer lives visibly and publicly is still one of fear, danger and death. Digital spaces such as websites, smartphone applications and digital games and physical spaces such as cruising sites and gay bathhouses can offer people safer spaces to experiment with their identity making and sexuality. Cruising, or using urban spaces as sites for sexual activity was first documented by police reports in the 1700s in urban metropolises in Europe. While cruising is mostly understood as an activity exclusive to gay men, straight and non-gay identifying men participate as well (Humphreys 131-135), complicating a normative conception of binary sexuality and suggesting cruising as a queer activity. However, due to the history of oppression, marginalization and criminalization of homosexuality, cruising carries heavy cultural

significance for gay men as a space for community making as well as acts of resilience, liberation and worldmaking (Muñoz, “Cruising Utopia” 33-40). This space comes with a cost due to how the relationship between “public space and sex has always existed in tension with the controlling discourses of urban design” (Gandy 729) and state policing (Ingram 95-125; Higgs 4-5). Today, while cruising sits in a grey area between illegality and legality because of the complexity of public indecency laws, the state continues to persecute men who cruise by raiding popular cruising spaces. Moreover, urban designers have redesigned urban parks such as adding more lighting to make it more difficult for people to cruise (Gandy 730). Consequently, cruising can still be understood as a highly deviant activity of appropriating public spaces for counter normative and illegal sex.

As some people use urban spaces for sexual anonymity and physical intimacy, others are finding creative ways to create digital spaces. In the last five years, the indie video games community has seen a rise of queer identifying artists and designers who are making video games motivated by their queer identities, culture and desires. These video games can be characterized by featuring queer history, stories, intimacy, sensibility and culture in a multitude of ways such as through narrative design, gameplay mechanics and character design. For many of these game designers and makers, intersecting video games with queerness is both a reaction to how mainstream video gaming often tokenizes LGBTIQ people as well as a form of personal artistic and design practice. For example, Robert Yang makes video games that explicitly draw upon gay culture and intimacy; Anna Anthropy challenges masculine and normative preoccupations in traditional game mechanics and storytelling while dreamfeel creates games that tell stories of non-heteronormative experiences, identities and relations. As more artists, designers and gamemakers create games that identify with queerness, a movement called queer

game studies, or the interdisciplinary approach to games studies through queer theory, has emerged to celebrate and study how video games have opened a new world of possibilities for queer lives to take shape, both digitally and physically. Moreover, queer game studies is also a direct response to the lack of intersectionality and queer theory in game studies. Therefore, this emerging field encompasses both game making practices that are explicitly motivated by queerness, which is more aligned with practices of 'queer game design' as well as interpreting queerness in video games that were not necessarily made with that intention but nonetheless express queerness in often unexpected and powerful ways. My deployment of the word queer is supported by the work of queer theorists before me such as José Esteban Muñoz, Jane Desmond and Brett Farmer. To borrow from Brett Farmer, "I use *homosexual* to refer to mainstream representations, *gay* to refer to politicized, self-identified representations, and *queer* to refer to everything that exceeds these two (15). However, I am not so systematic in my writing and "I do use *homosexual* to refer to hegemonic or otherwise traditional definitions, *gay* to refer to modern or subcultural definitions and *queer* to refer to a wider notion of anti-heteronormative desires" (Farmer 15). Regardless of my idiosyncrasies between *homosexual* and *gay*, I strongly standby my usage of *queer* as a sexual, psycho, cultural, spatial, visual, social and political oppositionality to heteronormativity that celebrates deviancy (Ahmed 1; Desmond 11; Edelman 4; Farmer 15; Munoz 1)

Although scholarship in queer game studies has gained momentum in recent years, spatial analysis remains largely unexplored. My master's thesis attempts to map out and draw connections between the physical spaces for cruising and digital spaces in video games through research-creation, an approach to research that combines creative, in my case video game development, and academic research practices. In doing so, I aim to explore some possible

intersections of physical and digital queer spaces and the significance of play and the ludic qualities of both types of space in order to expand on the growing field of queer game studies. To achieve this, I draw from several sources including both theories of queer space and queer Gothic studies, an interdisciplinary approach to studying and understanding the Gothic canon through queer theory, to explore level design. Level design is a field within video game design and development that describes the design of space and spatial arrangement and progression in video games. This inter- and transdisciplinary approach to research creation reflects the socio, spatial and ludic nature of the project's core research question.

> *How might the spatiality of gay cruising sites, such as urban parks, inform spatial mechanics and level design approaches for 'queer game design'?*

In his 2009 book "Level Design: Concept, Theory and Practice", author Rudolph Kremer defines level design as "[the] basic purpose of level design [is] to interpret the game rules, and to translate them into a construct (a level) that best facilitates play" (18). Christopher Totten, another author who has written extensively on level design adds to this definition by suggesting that "level design is the thoughtful execution of game*play* into game*space* for the players to dwell in" (xxiv).

Level design can therefore be understood as the practice of making and designing game maps, missions, stages, environments and worlds for the player to interact with the game in. The high-level responsibility of the level designer is to interpret the narrative and the mechanics of the game into shapes. However, this is a rigid understanding of space and spatial design in games that simply treats levels or gamespace as backdrop to the more important elements of the game. I turn to cruising through theory of queer space and the queer Gothic's rich tradition in

interrogating the relationship between deviant identities and bodies with environment to assist my exploration in expanding such conception of level design.

Central to my research question is the idea of queer space and the queering of space that aligns and identifies with queer theory. Evident examples of queer spaces include gay and lesbian bars, LGBTIQ archives, student formed gay straight alliance clubs, LGBTIQ bookstores and the like. These spaces, though critically important to my understanding of queer space as they lay physical claim to spaces in direct opposition to the dominant spatial hierarchies (Reed 64-70), are not the focus of my thesis. Another example of queer space comes from architectural critic Aaron Betsky who in his book *Queer Space* in 1997 sought to find a certain unique quality and design approach to space that gay and lesbian architects have that differentiate them from their heterosexual counterparts. Betsky found that a gay and lesbian architectural sensibility created spaces that were "useless, amoral, and sensual…lived only in and for experience...the goal of queer space is orgasm" (5-7). While Betsky's writings lead me closer to finding a certain spatial quality to queer spaces, they do not align with queer theory, as queer space in Betsky's book is bound to a sexual identity which would "empty the concept of queered space of its radical potential" (Jacques). This decoupling of queer space from sexuality and its alignment with the radical politic found in queer theory is supported by geographer Natalie Oswin as she suggests that the idea of a queer space which is rooted in a restricted conception of identity formation privileges reified forms of sexual difference as the basis for political action. Oswin argues instead for a "queer approach to space" or a queering of space that extends to a more complex and interdisciplinary set of elements beyond the mere appropriation of space (91).

What is the relationship between cruising, play and space? Turning to one of the most widely discussed concepts in game studies, we may begin to see some connections through the

magic circle. First published in 1938, Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* discussed the importance of the element of play in culture and society and positions play "as a pre-civilized human activity that is resistant to capitalism and rationalization" (Lauteria 2). In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga uses the term "magic circle" to describe a space in which the normal rules of reality in the physical material world are suspended and replaced by the rules and mechanics of the game world (Unterhuber). Using a football or soccer match as an example, the magic circle serves to create a temporary boundary of play where new rules are enforced; kicking a ball into a net is no longer just kicking a ball into a net, it now means scoring a goal. The magic circle may not necessarily have physical boundaries; the players of the game agree on them before entering the magic circle. Using Gandy's interpretation of Michel Foucault's of heterotopias as a "juxtaposition of incompatible elements" (733), magic circle when understood through cruising behave similarly. This is because while typically a person outside the magic circle would be able to view the activity inside, for queer spaces such visibility has not always been possible or legal.

For the uninitiated, the rules and mechanics of cruising are both complex and straightforward. First, depending on where you are cruising, you may take off as many pieces of clothing as you want, this may determine how others will interact with you. Once you're ready, you enter the cruising ground and navigate the space until you encounter one or more person, if interested, you would engage them with no words, just eye contact or a gesture such as a nod. If consented, the two or more of you could become intimate right there, or you may decide to go somewhere with more privacy. Once over, you can choose to exit the space or continue depending on the goal you have set for this play through. Although each cruising ground has its own idiosyncrasies, they all remain similar in that the mechanics to engage with other people are mostly non-verbal and gestural, and because the sites where the cruising takes place always

already exist as spaces for completely different uses, players must be able to pick up on small visual cues in the environment in order to stay safe. If cruising in public spaces could be understood as a magic circle that has a negotiated entry, a set of boundaries, mechanics or rules of play that suspend the normal rules of reality, a goal or goals and an end that signifies the exit of the game then we might able to begin to understand cruising as a form of game. Furthermore, using queer ecologist Matthew Gandy's reading on cruising as an activity that demonstrates the spatiality of sexuality (732), we can begin to see the implications of cruising as the translation of gameplay into gamespace. However, this does not reconcile space as queer; the magic circle is an understanding space as a backdrop to the play that is happening. What about the sexuality of space instead of the spatiality of sexuality?

Queer game studies recently celebrated its first two books published on its subject matter within a year of each other as well as new special issues dedicated to exploring queer games by other game studies journals such as *First Person Scholar*. However, many writers and academics in queer game studies seem to be driven by an almost utopian sensibility in their debates. To counter and to make a mess of the current tendency to couple queerness with utopian ideals in the field and to widen the discussions around the richness and depth to queer game making approaches, I am calling upon the queer Gothic. In part, the queer Gothic reinforces what video games already do best, they both transgress and play with the borders between the representation of life and death, past and present, realism and fantasy, natural and the supernatural to reflect on unspeakable and taboo subjects. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the Gothic has a rich tradition in expressing the dynamic relationship between bodies and space that does not simply treat space as a setting but as the reflection of the character's mental landscape (Palmer 105-106). Despite the queer Gothic's investment in employing radically and conflicting strategies and sensibility to

more utopian approaches, both are striving towards similar goals of finding alternatives from hegemonic culture and to destabilize and challenge heteronormativity and phallocentricity. I suggest that by using a queer Gothic lens, we may be able to locate the messiness, complexity and the often-dangerous reality of living visible queer lives to expand on how queer can intersect play and space.

My thesis begins by reviewing the current literature and video game making practices in queer game studies to demonstrate how artists and designers are making games motivated by queer theory and queerness or 'queer game design'. Next, I present a theoretical review of queer Gothic studies and suggest that we may be able to draw new insights from the field of queer Gothic studies for the similarities between Gothic literary traditions and video games tropes and motifs. I draw attention to the queer Gothic's investment in celebrating the negative affect of queerness by exploring the haunted, the monstrous, the secret and the spectral to offer new perspectives that have been largely unexplored in queer game studies, namely how queer video games can identify with the darker reality of the lived queer experience.

Following, I introduce, describe and interpret my autoethnography of cruising inside Stanley Park in Vancouver. This section combines my personal experience, level design concepts and theory from both queer space and queer Gothic studies. Autoethnography was the chosen methodology to help me answer my research question because it allows for queer identities and voices which have been historically denied legitimacy in the research community to gain validity. In the book *Queer Methods and Methodologies,* over fifteen researchers contributed their insights into how to approach queer research projects. Autoethnography stood out as the methodology par excellence that is able to challenge normative ideologies and discourses by embracing the researcher's role and contingency in their research. (Browne and Nash 21).

Finally, I describe how I used my research findings to create *The Rawlings*, a survival horror game prototype and how making the game helped resolved my research question. Through queer space, the queer Gothic, my autoethnography as well as making *The Rawlings*, I began to see some possible answers to my inquiry. While level design is about designing the space to facilitate play and its accompanying rules and narrative, queer level design expands on that by designing game space that explores and negotiates the relationship between player, game and game space as equal actors. This thesis unravels current understanding of level design by treating space as body, a living and dynamic monstrous thing that the player lives and plays with and against.

This research project is timely and relevant for two reasons. One, it expands on current explorations in queer game studies through addressing the lack of spatial studies within the field. In my literature review, I only found two papers that dealt directly with queer space in games, and two indirectly. Two, a trend in both current queer theory and mainstream queer culture that is celebrating the return to a darker, filthier, more punk and shameless queer past that has been made possible partly by current queer liberation activists and artists who are revisiting queer issues and politics that have been suppressed such as HIV/AIDS. I propose that queer space through cruising, the queer Gothic and level design can intersect together to find new tools and ways to expand queer game studies by exploring how video games can become important sites for queer identity, desire and politics.

Literature and Contextual Review

Queer Game Studies

Like queer theory grew from feminist theory, queer game studies comes from a history of feminist scholars working with bringing feminist issues in relation to video games, analog games and play. Although scholars such as G. Skirrow have been studying the representation of sexuality and gender in games since 1986, deeper engagement in this subject began in early 2000s with important works by Brenda Brathwaite and Mia Consalvo. However, it wasn't until 2012 with the birth of GaymerX, an annual conference "celebrating and supporting LGBTIQ people and culture in the world of gaming" and the Queerness and Games Conference in 2013, an academic conference organized by Bonnie Ruberg, Mattie Brice and Christopher Goetz that the field of queer game studies started to emerge. Moreover, the Different Games Conference, an event that celebrates diversity and inclusivity in games which often includes queer game studies in its programming also began in 2013. Since their conceptions, GaymerX, QGCon and Different Games have all grown considerably and are now cornerstone conferences for queer game studies academics and game makers alike.

In recent years with the publication of *Queer Game Studies*, "the first volume dedicated entirely to queerness and games" (Ruberg, ("Queer Game Studies 101") in 2017 and *Queerness and Play* in 2018 by Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams and Nicholas Taylor, a volume dedicated to exploring how gaming and play can support non-heteronormative experiences, identities and relations, queer game studies has offered a much needed paradigm shift in game studies as well as a calling for queer scholars and theorists to "increase its engagement with popular digital media forms" (Ruberg and Shaw x) by studying and exploring the "influential

role of video games in the contemporary cultural landscape" (Ruberg and Shaw xii). In the introduction in *Queer Game Studies*, Ruberg and Shaw stated that queer game studies, in its usage of queer theory and thinking, is an active break from the existing work being done LGBTIQ game scholarship. The discourses that have dominated LGBTIQ game scholarship has predominantly focused on LGBTIQ players and designers and games with LGBTIQ representation in games, which even though is immensely valuable work, do not provide an understanding of games as having queer potential to "interrogate the systems of the medium" (Ruberg and Shaw x). This potential, as claimed by queer game studies proponents can be mobilized from queer theory, which has a long history of scholarship in exploring states such as failure, disorientation, resistance, disruption and promiscuity as productive sites to critique hegemonic social, political, cultural and economic systems and institutions (Halberstam, "Queer Failure" 3; Freeman 3; Edelman 4; Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia" 34; Ahmed 2-5; Castiglia and Reed 8-11).

Bearing this in mind, queer game studies embraces game and LGBTQ game scholarship but ultimately positions and aligns itself closer with queer theory; using its theoretical framework and interdisciplinary approaches to understand, explore, make, critique and play games. Queer game studies sees the queer potential in all video games, not just ones made by queer identified gamemakers and designers. Despite its infancy, the field has grown substantially since the early 2010s and there is great diversity in the work done under the banner of queer video games. Currently, research in this field encompasses topics such as performing intervention into the act of playing games, using queer theory to inform game design like game mechanics and narrative design, and locating queerness through close readings of games that do not explicitly have LGBTQ content.

A crucial part of queer game studies is to study how queer identifying game makers and designers are mobilizing their queerness to inform their game making and development practices which from hereon is referred to as ‘queer game design’. Drawing from queer theory as well as queer identity, culture, history and stories, queer game designers have explored how queerness could influence game design and mechanics in numerous forms. Many game writers and makers in queer game studies such as Bonnie Ruberg, Jordan Wood, Edmund Chang, Adrienne Shaw, Jordan Youngblood, Whitney Pow, Colleen Macklin and Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas have heed Jack Halberstam’s call to celebrate the inherent failure in queerness as a tactic to queer game design, game systems and the act of play itself. This may manifest in ways such as using glitches, creating impossible time restrictions such as *Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy and games with no win state. Queer theory’s rejection of heteronormative temporality has also been important, allowing game scholars and makers such as Claudia Lo, Jordan Wood, Dimitrios Pavlounis, Gaspard Pelurson, Amanda Phillips, Whitney Pow, Kathryn Stockton and Christopher Goetz to think about new ways of narrative design, worldmaking, gameplay mechanics as well as coming to terms with what ‘queer play’ means and does to counter normative logics of productivity and capitalism in relation to linear reproductive time and futurism. This is demonstrated in video games such as *The Path* (Tale of Tales) where there is only a walk mechanic but not a run, forcing players to experience the game slowly.

Works in in queer historiography by scholars such as Shira Chess, Maureen Engel and Bonnie Ruberg have been influential for game narrative design but has also informed understandings of life and death, and virtual life and virtual death in video. This is expressed in Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi*, where Brice purposefully rejects writing an ending to the game and denying the player the cathartic release or orgasm usually offered by beginning middle end

narrative structures. Other queer writer and makers such as Jordan Wood, Amanda Phillips and Robert Yang choose to illustrate the queerness in games through fantasy, exaggeration, campiness, drag and the grotesque by looking at approaches to game art and character mechanics as well as narrative. Queer sex and its many colourful types, forms and arrangements has also been of interest to scholars and makers such as Mattie Brice and Robert Yang. They draw explicitly from queer sex to inform non-normative gameplay mechanics and player engagement with game systems. Robert Yang's *The Tearoom* which uses public bathroom cruising as the core gameplay mechanic showcases how might queer game designers reference queer intimacies, bodies and sex as a way to inform queer game design practices. Lastly, mainstream practices of game development have also been interrogated by queer game makers and scholars; coming up with new methodologies of game design such as community collaboration or game-making tools that require little to no programming skills such as Twine. Whilst, for the sake of readability and organization of this paper, I have decided to box and categorize using thematic, many of the games and publications I will be considering are deeply complex, as queer theory affords multiplicity and fluidity, and therefore they draw upon multiple if not all of the above categorizations.

Queer Failure

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, author and queer theorist Jack Halberstam explores the concept of failure as a productive mode in finding alternatives to heteronormative and capitalist society. Failing becomes a strategic mode to reject and counteract normative societal goals such as marriage, reproduction and capital success. Failure, as adopted by many queer theorists and

queer games scholars such as Ruberg, is an always-already queer state of being due to an understanding of queer as a non-normative way of belonging and living in this world through actively rejecting institutional marriage and sexual reproduction ("No Fun" 109). Though Halberstam never writes about games directly, many queer game scholars and makers have deployed queer failure as a lens to understanding, finding, designating and designing queerness in video games. Bonnie Ruberg suggests that Halberstam's concept of failing is especially potent for studying games since many games, especially mainstream games, reproduce real life systems, giving win states to players who accumulated the most capital, destroyed all enemy threats or discovered and colonized all lands. In the most obvious manner, failing could be used as a strategy to on purposely play against the game (Chang 17; Ruberg, "No Fun" 109) such as obliging red lights and going the speed limit in *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (Criterion), refusing to fight your opponent and performing dancerly movements instead in *Nidhogg* (Messhof Games) and purposely jumping off the ledge and therefore committing suicide after defeating your opponent in *SoulCalibur IV* (Bandai Namco). In this sense, all games have room for failure and therefore, all games have moments for potential queer liberation (Ruberg, "Playing to Lose" 200).

Games and digital media scholar Edmund Chang offer a slightly different perspective on queer failure and games. Chang suggests that the very code in how games are created are through concepts of Booleans and binaries, which is a normative form of epistemology. Chang elaborates that that while games may offer choice, agency and control, they are ultimately scripted and predetermined by the game system. Therefore, queer game players, makers and writers must understand that "interface, mechanics, programming, platform and electromagnetic states simultaneously ambivalently allow for some flexibility and heterogeneity yet are also determined

and controlling, often in unseen and naturalized ways" (Chang "A Game Chooses, A Player Obeys" 228-230). Nevertheless, Chang is not suggesting that games can never be truly queer but acknowledging that even failure within games is scripted in binaries. Instead of valorizing failure, Chang puts forward the concept of "queergaming*"* ("Queergaming" 5), a term he coined to describe a refusal to play as the implied player, the player that most, if not all, mainstream games are designed for, which Chang designates as "white, male, cis, heterosexual, abled and middle class" ("A Game Chooses, a Player Obeys" 229). Queergaming is not simply a denial to play as the implied player, but also to play against all of the status quo in gaming, which includes developers, game cultures and technologies. Moreover, queergaming is a critical approach to making, playing and thinking about games that use and appropriate the affordances of digital technology to provide alternative queer game play experiences.

Whether failure is a deliberate interventional act of playing against the game system, or coded in as part of the game design, it becomes a powerful mode to explore alternate longings and non-normative desires. Traditional ideas of 'winning' become subverted by finding pleasure, and even success in glamourous failure instead. Failing teaches us that dichotomies such as pleasure and pain, winning and losing, hurt and joy are not on opposite ends of a play experience. Failure in games demonstrates that it can be a productive state in life itself as a strategy to fight against prescribed recipes for success. Indie games, which include many sub-categories of game-making practices, are often portrayed as the alternative to the mainstream gaming culture. In indie games we can find games where the implied player is not "white, male, cis, heterosexual, abled and middle class" and this is especially true for games created by queer game designers. These games, such as *Dys4ia* by Anna Anthropy, *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice and *Curtain* by dreamfeel are examples in what Salen and Zimmerman succinctly describe as

> games that encourage players to constantly shift the game of the game, question what is inside or outside the game; games that play with lamination between players and character, pushing and pulling against the connection through inventive forms of narrative play; games that emphasize metagaming, or that connect the magic circle so closely with external contexts that the game appears synchronous with everyday life. (Salen and Zimmerman 455).

Dys4ia by Anna Anthropy is an indie game that deploys failure as the experience of gameplay. In Dys4ia, an autobiographical game based on Anthropy's experience of hormone replacement therapy, the game frustratingly takes the player through a series of glitchy mini-games that end prematurely. Dys4ia reveals to the player that they may not be in fact in control of the game, suggesting that there might not even be a possible way to "win" at all (Macklin 252).

However, to echo queer game scholars and writers such as Naomi Clark, Merritt Kopas and Jordan Wood, we must be cautious of the glamourization of failure in queer social, cultural and artistic production. While failure can be a powerful and productive tool for understanding queerness, it is also a "precarious form of politics" (Wood 215). To embrace failure as a celebration of queerness can have real dangerous consequences where we might find excuses to keep people who are suffering from an oppressive system, to stay in pain (Clark and Kopas; Wood 215). Moreover, we must be aware of the precarity of what Halberstam's idea of failure means for people of colour, as there currently is a insufficiency in comprehending and including experiences of people of colour in this very idea of queer failure.

For me personally, as a first generation Chinese-Canadian, my great-grandparents did not escape the second Sino-Japanese War to Hong Kong so that my mother would fail, and my father surely did not escape China to come to Canada as a refugee so that my brother and I would fail. I was never introduced to failure as a space for experimentation; I never had second chances. Failure, simply put, is an unspeakable option for me. My conflicting relationship to failure is

reflected by many other East Asian immigrant communities (Chua) who also share a similar experience with failure that has not been accounted for by scholars like Halberstam, Ruberg and Chang. As many proponents of queer theory are increasingly aware, queer theory often normalizes queer as white and male, which the field is actively trying to combat by including more intersectional voices and experiences, so must should queer game scholarship do the same. If we are to truly subvert the implied player as Chang has described as "white, male, cis, heterosexual, abled and middle class", then we need to listen to and take into account for intersectional experiences and knowledge.

Queer Temporality and Spatiality

Drawing from queer theory's ongoing engagement with temporality, from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* by Halberstam, *Cruising Utopia* by Muñoz, *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed and *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* by Kathryn Bond Stockton, queer game scholarship and queer game makers have invested in interrogating the temporal and the spatial in video games in various ways. Jordan Wood argued that, if we are to take, as suggested by digital media scholars Alex Galloway and McKenzie Wark work in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* and *Gamer Theory*, that the idea that game space is a product of social space itself, and as such has the potential to challenge the space that created them, then we might be able to find, recuperate and inscribe queer temporalities and spatiality in video games in order to explore the politics of what it means to live and play in a different time and space (214).

Elsewhere, queer scholar Stockton drew connections between historical popular understandings of queerness as a refusal to grow up into adulthood; a state of arrested development, and mainstream media understanding of playing video games as a waste of time, a childish activity, and a rejection to accept adult responsibilities such as work (225-230). Echoing Stockton's bridging of queerness and video games through a delay or rejection of normative temporality, Christopher Goetz draws upon psychoanalytic understanding of the queer individual's failure to undergo Sigmund Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex. This failure is applied to homosexual men to describe them as boys who were unable to sever association to the mother and seek identification with the father which if successful, would have resulted in a normal healthy functioning heterosexual adult male. The failure according to Freud, is a stagnation in the development into adulthood, rendering gay men as children forever tethered to their mother's womb, incapable of cutting the metaphorical umbilical cord and therefore growing up (241-243). Goetz then draws a connection to video games as a spatial medium through Henry Jenkins' "Game Design as Narrative Architecture*"* and posits that video games space offer queer people safety just as a mother's womb does (244). Both Stockton and Goetz suggest that for many queer adults play then becomes an important tool and activity for queer people to find safety and to reconcile with growing up queer. Furthermore, because of this disorientation in temporality, video games become ideal safe sites where players are able to imagine alternative modes of living and belongings that do not signal to heteronormative and capitalistic temporality.

It appears for many queer game scholars such as Wood, Stockton and Goetz that there is rich conceptual relationship and dialogue between queerness and video games that can be explored through queer theory's understanding of alternative temporality and spatiality while queer theory could benefit deeply from game studies approaches to games and play. If video

games offer a powerful medium that afford players alternate senses of spatial embodiment and temporality (Wood 212-26) and queerness embodies alternative temporal and spatial structures (Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia" 30; Stockton 225-26; Freeman 62) then queer theory gives video games a new political dimension as to how games often "reject linearity, contains multiple unresolved narratives, and offer space-time that reject reproductive norms" (Wood 220). Queer theory's investment in temporality gains new ground by taking a ludic lens to explore the politics of living in opposition to hegemonic time through play. This power lies in how both queerness and video games actively refuse to follow productive, capital rationalization of growing up to working adults by positioning play as a political activity.

A game that propels the player in cyclical temporalities to explore and wander the game environment for queer possibilities is *The Path* (Tale of Tales). *The Path*'s narrative and mechanics challenge players' expectations of what modern games are and can offer. The game is based off of the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood" and begins by offering the player the choice between five playable characters, all of which are girls at different stages of their life. Once you choose the player character, you enter the game environment and it presents to you a very simple rule, walk to grandma's house and never stray off the path. If the player decides to follow the game's instruction, they will quickly realize that that is not the point of the game, because once you reached grandma's house, a scoreboard is presented to you that says you have achieved a low score for not encountering any wolves. In the next chapter, you may choose a different girl, and this time you are compelled to stray off the path to find the wolves.

According to Gaspard Pelurson, *The Path* is a deeply complex game that offers a rich environment to explore queer modes of temporality and phenomenology. The player is forced to explore the game environment slowly as there is no real running mechanic, suggesting the

game's resistance to adopt mainstream gaming character movements that are often "fast-paced, violent and sensational" (Pelurson 12) and instead establishes a mode of gameplay that is slow and exploratory. This slow mechanic resonates with queer theory's ongoing commitment to walk away from a reproductive futurism to explore alternative desires and longings. Pelurson makes a connection from this type of slow gameplay mechanic to a historical queer figure, the flâneur. Reintroduced by Walter Benjamin, the flâneur is a curious male figure who has its origins in 19th century metropolitan Paris. The flâneur is first a foremost, an urban character, who driven by pleasure, idly and leisurely wanders the streets in search for new experiences and pleasures. Due to its nonproductive mode of being that seeks desires in rejecting regimes of work and family, the figure of the flâneur has been recuperated by queer theory (Chisholm 145-94; Ivanchikova 21; Rasmussen and Kenway 24) for its "cultivation of pleasures that are related to 'one's non-instrumental, non-pragmatic experience of space' and ultimately, their refusal to take a respectable socioeconomic, sexual, or gender role" (Pelurson 5). Pelurson suggests that if we recast the playable characters in *The Path* as queer flâneurs, we could read the game with new insights.

Once you re-enter The Path the second time, the first player character becomes unavailable and you choose your next character. This time you are compelled to stray off of the path to meet the wolf, while fully knowing that it might end badly. However, it is important that player is seeking the wolf out, and not the other way around. Pelurson argues that, *The Path* offers two things: the player either obeys the straight line offered to them, representing heteronormative growth, or deviate from the defined path and discover the greater story. By going off the path and seeking out the wolf, the player is intentionally reoriented toward alternative and nonnormative desires and longings that will might end in pain (if the player have

read Little Red Riding Hood then they can guess the outcome of meeting the wolf) but this reorientation offers possibilities of finding liberation and pleasure from pain. After you have played all of the characters, all of them become available to play again, suggesting a cyclical temporality and a queer growth. Unlike mainstream games, *The Path* does not reward player through time spent playing to accumulate experience, instead it propels the player through a gameplay experience that values nonnormative desires such as masochism as a powerful and productive site for queer pleasure and worldmaking.

Gone Home (Fullbright) is another critically acclaimed indie game that prioritizes themes of exploration, domesticity, feminine desires. Although lauded for its lesbian love story, *Gone Home* is a contentious game amongst queer game scholars. Dimitrios Pavlounis argued that while *Gone Home* makes the representation queer content explicit in the game narrative, it fails to distill the nuances of nonnormative desires in its overall game design and mechanics (584-90). Pavlounis draws attention to the deceiving design aspects of the game, particularly how its level design and narrative design masquerade queerness and the game in fact follows normative design structures. In *Gone Home*, the player plays as a young girl named Katie, who comes back to the empty home after a year of backpacking in Europe. The home is foreign to the Katie, as the family moved while she was travelling. Coming home, she finds a note taped to the door from her sister Sam saying she has left and pleads to Katie that she doesn't go looking for her. Katie enters this alien home, and slowly discovers the reasons behind her runaway sister through interacting with various artefacts that trigger audio journal entries throughout the game. In the end, Katie discovers that Sam has ran away with her girlfriend Lonnie. *Gone Home* was highly acclaimed due to its open story, where the player is able to explore the house and the game narrative on their own accord.

Analyzing *Gone Home*'s lead game designer Steve Gaynor's presentation on the design process for *Gone Home* at the 2015 Games Developer Conference in San Francisco, Pavlounis points out that many of *Gone Home* design choices were influenced by Gavnor previous employer 2K Games where he was a designer on the *Bioshock* franchise, a big budget AAA video game. Elaborating on his critical analysis, Pavlounis claims that *Gone Home* uses AAA level design techniques such as gating and lighting to trick the player to think that it is a non-linear game. *Gone Home* is ultimately a game about engaging with a personal archive, the player (Katie) is asked to search the house to find objects that slowly unravels the 'truth' to Sam's story, illustrating a straightforward way of engaging with the past. Despite that the objects are all personal items with emotional sentiment; the level design of the game dictates a linear approach to how the player engages with these objects, suggesting "identity formation as something straightforward and teleological, each step leading neatly into the next" (Pavlounis 587). Borrowing from Sara Ahmed's argument in *Queer Phenomenology* that straight lines represent paths orientated towards heteronormativity, Pavlounis suggests the level design of *Gone Home* does a similar effect; as the player discovers more of the archive, so too do they master the spatiality of the game therefore reproducing logics of conquest, conflict and capital. Queer historiographers such as Howard Chiang and Elizabeth Freeman have argued that queer history or historiography should not be understood as something "to be filled in" (Chiang 17) by adding queer stories to existing conventional historical narratives, but rather disrupting how these narratives are told and ultimately finding different understanding to chronology, temporality and the archive. While this critique of *Gone Home* shouldn't take away from its significant contribution to the indie game development in general, it does bring to the fore that games with queer content do not necessarily suggest queer mechanics or game design.

A game that does gesture towards non-normative and queer spatial and level design practices is *Curtain* (Dreamfeel). *Curtain* is in many ways a similar game to *Gone Home*. Both are indie games that feature two girls that are physically absent in the game (i.e. they only exist as text and audio), both games are set in a domestic space, and they both tell stories of women with same sex desires that fall within the coming-of-age genre. Where they differ though, is in the game art, narrative design, level design and mechanics, which ultimately created two very different types of games. *Curtain* begins outside of an apartment complex, the player who plays Ally and her partner and fellow band member Kaci are coming home after a gig. Once the player enters the apartment, they are unable to leave until the end of the game. Immediately, the game feels disorientating as the art is highly pixelated. Instead of the photorealism that dominates so much of AAA gaming, *Curtain*'s blurry and nonrepresentational art style draws attention to the absence of bodies, focusing instead on the "dynamics, interactions and the ways bodies, particularly queer bodies, inhabit space" (Pow 44). After finding their way into the apartment, the player navigates an extremely alienating domestic space, cut in between hostile and abusive comments from Kaci, the player quickly discovers the heartbreaking story of Ally.

Ally is living in Kaci apartment after a traumatic event that involved her parents, specifically her father. Due to not feeling safe at home anymore, Ally moved in with Kaci, who has also suffered familial rejection. However, the player realizes that Ally is also alienated in Kaci's apartment, even though they are partners. In combination with the pixelated art style, Ally's concerning and dissociating inner dialogue and Kaci's onslaught of abusive comments take up much of the game space as Kaci's dialogue boxes fill almost half the screen, *Curtain* powerfully "reproduces what every day acts and spaces feel like to a queer subject and the feelings of inability, to move freely, to unavoidable experience of failure" (Pow 45). Whitney

Pow further suggests that *Curtain* demands the player to "play an active role in creating a familiar world out of one that is visually difficult to decipher. Connecting the embodied experience of alienation, discomfort, and unsafety within virtual worlds to the lived experience of queer individuals" (44).

While Pow uses Halberstam's queer failure to understand much of the game design and mechanics, in this section I choose to focus on her analysis of how the game's non-normative representation of spatiality can be understood through ideas in *Queer Phenomenology* by Ahmed. Pow eloquently argues that queer phenomenology can be utilized to help us understand queerness as certain embodied mode of being in the world, of inhabiting space, but one that is oriented differently to a normative spatialization that is based on whiteness, colonization and domination. Furthermore, Pow brings up the concept of the uncanny, a Freudian term that suggests something that is strangely familiar but has an unnatural quality that is experienced in an unsettling way. The uncanny as Freud argued, is a spatial construct, and that the more a person is oriented in the world, the less uncanny they would encounter the world (Pow 49). Likewise, in queer phenomenology, Ahmed suggests that queer is also a spatial construct that describes a subject that does not extend into space. When space is not familiar to the subject, the subject may feel out of place and therefore, queer spatialization is "not...extension, but limitation" (Pow 49). In *Curtain*, unlike *Gone Home*, the game space never becomes more familiar, if anything it becomes more confusing and disorientating. While in *Gone Home* each successive object or clue the player discovers opens up new areas in the game map, *Curtain* rejects that idea by creating a space that feels nonlinear, uncomfortable and unsafe.

Once the player reaches the bedroom in *Curtain*, an episode that suggests sexual abuse or rape from Kaci takes place, and the bathroom which was once locked to Ally, opens up. Entering

the bathroom, the game narrative tells you that this has become the only safe space Ally has access to. When the player goes into the shower, another space becomes available to Ally, the player discovers that the shower is in fact a long hallway that reaches to an eerily similar apartment to Kaci's, but in a red colour scheme instead of a blue one. To overcome Ally's oppressive situation, the player must take Ally in between the original blue apartment and the newly discovered red apartment to seek safety. While the game space does extend, the uncanny spatial mechanics suggest that Ally can only imagine agency, safety and new possibilities through embracing and playing with disorientation, discomfort and the pain.

In José Esteban Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz locates queerness as a spatial/temporal construct; a "horizon" of possibility driven by utopian futurism: "queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" ("Cruising Utopia" 1). Harper et al. in their introduction in the book *Queerness in Play*, connects Muñoz's queer horizon with game studies concept "possibility space": "the loosely defined idea that within the play of game, there is a bounded freedom, a space in which there are certain potential actions that can be taken" ("Cruising Utopia" 6). We stray off the path of the "straight line" in *The Path* and find peace in disorientation in *Curtain*. In the end, video games need queerness and queerness needs video games because both create playful temporalities and spaces for alternative possibilities, worldmaking and belongings. The horizon stretches in all direction, allowing us to see what are also possible when we wander off the beaten path. As many queer game scholars in this section have suggested, going off the straight line might be blurry, it might be scary, it will be dark, but it will be worth it.

Queer Historiography

Game studies scholars have long debated whether games should be studied for their storytelling (narratology) capabilities or for their systems of play (ludology) (Shaw and Ruberg ix-x). Many queer game scholars have moved beyond this conversation by exercising queer theory's ability to destabilize structures and systems to disrupt dichotomies. In this respect, while it is important to study game narratives for their queer potential, it is just as paramount to understand games as a medium that allows for a certain playful attitude and engagement with these stories. Drawing from queer historiographers Chiang and Freeman, Pavlounis suggests that the aim of queering history is not simply inserting queer and marginalized voices into existing historical narratives, which prioritizes "progress, integration and success" (Pavlounis 581). Rather, queer historiography and storytelling need to disrupt the very conventions of how history is archived, documented, and told (590-591). For Pavlounis, a queer historiography might be a method of disrupting hegemonic narratives "and their implicit values through more playful, political, and creative approaches to the historical record and to our understanding of time and archives" (Pavlounis 581). Pavlounis suggests that video games offer a rich environment to enact queer historiography (580).

Echoing this sentiment is Shira Chess, Chess argued that traditional forms of Western storytelling have privileged heteronormative and reproductive climax such as placing emphasis on the male orgasm while queer narrative theory "focuses on the pleasurable possibilities embedded in the middle of the narrative" (84). Chess further draws attention to how narrative works in video games, which also thrives in this "middle space" (84). Chess states, "games are fundamentally queer narrative, because games do not need heteronormative concepts of what a narrative is and isn't in the first place...game narratives are placed firmly in moments of delay,

moments of narrative middle...the pleasure [then], is not in the climax, but in the delay of the very climax" (84-85). Chess brings examples such as the classic Nintendo game, *Super Mario* where the player character Mario keeps reaching to the end of a level to only find that the princess (Peach) he needs to save is yet in another castle. Moreover, open sandbox games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (Rockstar Games) offer players seemingly unlimited possibilities in how they can explore the middle space of the game by pursuing numerous side missions or other playful activities. Video games narrative are already queer because they offer pleasure in this never-ending, deviant and nonproductive middle space.

Chess considers two indie games made by LGBTIQ game makers, *Lim* by Merritt Kopas and *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice as games that include queer content as well as utilizing the richness of games middle narrative space to tell queer stories. Inspired by trans people experience in public spaces, specifically being able or not to "pass" which denotes the ability to be recognized by other as your identifying sex. *Lim* is a puzzle-like game where the player moves a square in a maze-like environment while opposing squares obstruct the player's movement. In order to pass, the player is able to utilize a game mechanic whereby allowing the player character square to mimic the opposing squares, which stops violent attacks from them. However, the mimic mechanic makes the game camera become increasingly zoomed into your square, limiting your view of the overall level. If the player takes off their masquerade, the opposing squares will violently attack the player while the mimicking other squares will limit your vision. In the end, the player finds themselves forced out of the maze into a space of nothing.

Mainichi is based on Mattie Brice's own personal experience and struggles as a transgender woman that offers no traditional climactic ending. The game puts the player through

a series of everyday trials and tribulations such as transphobic comments directed at the player from other characters. Both *Lim* and *Mainichi* deny the player of a traditional cathartic ending, suggesting that despite our everyday struggles, we still find a will to carry on, to live to survive another day. It may sound pessimistic, but it is in fact about resilience and strength.

In a different indie game developed by queer game maker Anna Anthropy in 2013, *Queers in Love at the End of the World* offers a different take on utilizing game's narrative middle space to tell queer stories. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is a web-based interactive text game made in Twine, an interactive storytelling game engine. In the first page, the screen is filled with black, and you see the word "Begin." The moment you click "Begin.", the game starts and a timer that is set to ten seconds starts counting down as you try to quickly parse through the story and make your choices. The story is simple, it presents two people and the choices you can make during their last ten seconds in the world. After ten seconds, the game ends no matter what choices you have made, and the text "Everything is wiped away." appears on the screen. You then have two choices, either to click on "Afterword", which directs you to an image that says "When we have each other we have everything", or click on "Restart" which takes you back to the ten seconds before apocalypse where you are presented with the same story and choices once again. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* presents to the player a queer temporality and narrative design that subverts the fairy-tale ending. Claudia Lo suggests that the apocalyptic narrative and ten second timer demands the player to find joy from accepting loss while Ruberg points out that the mechanic of being able to return to the beginning of the game, which she calls permalife ("Permalife" 159) is paramount to understanding the game queer narrative structure.

Permalife is a game mechanic where the player is incapable of virtual death. Permalife has been used by some queer game makers such as Mattie Brice, Dietrich Squinky Squinkifer and Anna Anthropy to "represent a potent trope of expressing both hopes and concerns about existence in the face of an uncertain future" (159). Permalife forces games to be looped forever, creating an experience that permanently exists in the middle narrative space.

Go Queer is a game prototype designed by Maureen Engel is that able to utilize the game middle narrative space and permalife to tell local queer history in fluid and dynamic ways. Inspired by the annual Queer Edmonton Bus Tour that drives around the city while passengers share personal and local history of the sites, Engel turned the idea into a locative media history mobile game application that uses geotagging and augmented reality. As the player wanders the street, the game alerts the player whenever they are close to a site of queer historical significance. Once found, the game provides more clues to the next location and as the player progresses, the clues become messier and more confusing. The clues and stories uncovered by the player are not official documents, but are comprised of texts, photos, videos and other digital media that "exceed not only official history, but also any comfortable history" (Engel 355). How the player encounters each story is significant, as there is no linear route, the player simply wanders the street for serendipity, there is also a potential that the player doesn't encounter any stories at all.

Go Queer maps these fleeting usually invisible moments of queer histories onto the physical spaces of the city, revealing the "incongruity and (non)belonging" (Engel 365) of queerness. *Go Queer*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* successfully showcase the liveliness of queer bodies, lives and stories. Embracing the fatal, the messy and the ambiguous, we find permalife, which is

distinctively not eternal life, but a precarious mode of living that is deeply resilient in the face of persistent oppression from hegemonic culture.

Theoretical Review

The Queer Gothic

On the opposite end of the spectrum from permalife and other utopian-driven acts of affective queer worldmaking, we find a darker, more indifferent, excessive, abject, antisocial, monstrous world. Although seemingly employing radically different strategies, the queer Gothic is also striving towards similar goals of finding alternatives from hegemonic culture and creating ruptures in a heteronormative society. In this section, I aim to engage the rich traditions of the queer Gothic to complicate approaches to queer game design. Like queer game studies, the queer Gothic includes using queer theory to explore queer Gothic novels as well as interpreting and finding queerness from the Gothic canon. As the section reveals, the Gothic is already quite queer and the same could be said that queer theory has always embraced the Gothic. Prevalent themes in the Gothic include the uncanny found in the spectral, the monstrous, the secret and the haunted space and typical motifs of Gothic form - such as the haunted house, the doppelganger, the ritual and the seedy underbelly of an urban city. All these themes and motifs have strong historical and metaphorical ties to queer history, identity and culture. Typical themes in the Gothic, once intersected with queer theory, have deep implications for queer game studies and queer game design.

There is a well-established historical relationship between queer theory and the Gothic tradition as exemplified by scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Paulina Palmer, George E. Haggerty and Jack Halberstam as well as publications on the relationship between the Gothic and video games by Tanya Krzywinska and Evan Kirkland. Moreover, Gothic themes especially in the form of the monstrous has been important for feminist game scholars such as Sarah Stang. Despite this, there is currently a lack of scholarly engagement between queer game studies and the queer Gothic. It seems that while Halberstam's failure displays conceptual links to the Gothic, it has only been interpreted in queer game studies with a utopian outlook while the darker potentials and negative affects of failure have been largely ignored.

I believe that queer game scholarship can extract important ideas from the queer Gothic. In the following section, I begin by giving a theoretical review on prevalent themes in the Gothic such as how the uncanny comes through in the monstrous, the spectral, the haunted space and the secret to explore how queer theory intersect with the Gothic. I then give a contextual review of video games that have conceptual implications to the queer Gothic by embracing Halberstam's queer failure and Sara Ahmed queer phenomenology for their relationship to the Gothic as well as other important queer theoretical texts that deals with the grotesque, uncanny, camp, and horror such as Lee Edelman, Susan Sontag, Paulina Palmer, and Eve Sedgwick to give new insights to queer game design. I approach this section similarly to the literature review where queer is used and applied beyond its representation of queer characters or sexuality and instead is used, through its sexuality, to critique ideas such as binary systems, phallocentricity and concepts of capital success and reproductive futurism.

Queer history is dark and messy; gay men were criminalized by sodomy laws until fifty years ago in many Western countries, AIDS wiped out a whole generation of queer men and

women, hate crimes and murders of transgender people is rampant and conversion therapy is still legal in many countries around the world. But, if queer game studies is partly a reaction against the unprecedentedly male-dominant spaces of video games and game studies, then it isn't surprising that queer game scholarship would shy away from signifiers of masculinity found in the Gothic such as violence. Furthermore, Gothic studies with its heavy utilization of Freudian psychoanalysis could potentially be interpreted as contributing to the discourse of queer as pathological. Queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and Brett Farmer acknowledge that while Freudian psychoanalysis and theories of the human psychology is heteronormative as well as "universalizing, ahistorical, and reductive" (Farmer 12), both scholars as well as Paulina Palmer, Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman have applied psychoanalysis through queer theory to reconciled psychoanalysis in ways that are productive and expansive for queer desires and sexuality.

Both Sedgwick and Farmer agree that while the heterocentricity of Freudian psychoanalysis is "damaged at its origin" (Sedgwick 73-74) and "plagued with pitfalls" (Farmer 12), its does have space for queer theory because of how psychoanalysis always understands "sexuality… in relation to the unconscious, [sexuality therefore] cannot be assumed as coherent or guaranteed but as shifting and mobile, constantly prone to lapses, excesses, and conflicting impulses" (Farmer 14). As Farmer noted in Freud's "Three Essays", Freud understands that all desire is perverse and even the most heterosexual subject is capable of homosexual desires (14). For Tim Dean, Freudian psychoanalysis "invalidates the distinction between normal and pathological" and "reveals sexuality in its full complexity, opening up queer possibilities" (132-134). Following these important scholars before me, I am thoroughly aware of the many hazards

of psychoanalysis and its epistemology, however I am committed to use it with vigilance as a strategic tool to expand on queer game studies.

The queer Gothic, with its interest in a darker more deviant modality to queerness, is ripe with potential to productively express the precariousness of queer subjects and the importance of play. Gothic literature, video games and queerness intersect in wildly vivid ways. Popular Gothic characters such as the monster, the ghost, the double are popular figures in both AAA video games and indie games such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware), *Bioshock* (2K Games) and *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio) and *Inside* (Playdead). Furthermore, Gothic motifs and tropes such as "family secrets and the curse, the repressed relationship between mother and daughter, the uncanny city, the breakdown of the family unity on account of paternal incest, and the contrast between benevolent and tyrannical father figures" (Palmer 13) as well as "unhomely homes" (Palmer 15) like haunted houses, seedy areas in urban cities and forests are also all employed heavily in video games. These tropes are featured in games such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright Studio), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow), *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment), *Firewatch* (Campo Santo), *Silent Hill* (Konami) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom). Likewise, these popular archetypes, motifs and tropes all share conceptual similarities to the queer experience, allowing some critics such as William Hughes and Andrew Smith to claim that the Gothic tradition "has, in a sense, always been queer" (1) for its investment in depicting themes that deal with the taboo, the repressed and deviant desires and sexualities. However, as noted by Palmer, queer Gothic studies is a departure from studying LGBTIQ themes in the Gothic by engaging the Gothic critically with queer theory (11). This approach is similar if not the same to queer game studies.

The relationships between queer identities and culture and the Gothic can be traced back to important works in Gothic literature such as Oscar Wilde's 1890 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and more contemporarily in LGBTIQ criticism such as Susan Sontag's *Notes of Camp*, John Water's oeuvre of black comedy films and in queer theory such as Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In *No Future*, Edelman positions a universal humankind politics geared towards a "reproductive futurism" and in opposition to that is the queer. Edelman celebrates with jouissance all the characteristics of queer that was considered deviant by psychoanalysis such as narcissism, and other antisocial behaviours (83). Using psychoanalytic theory, Edelman analyzes Alfred Hitchcock's films to make a case that the efficacy of queerness lies in its negation of social and political order. Edelman urges his readers to decouple "the figure of the "child" from "future" and to celebrate queerness for its embodiment of jouissance and the death-drive (25). Although *No Future* doesn't claim to draw from the Gothic, it does so by referencing the history of marginalization and alienation of queer people and bridges it to the history of horror and monsters. Furthermore, it takes advantages and finds resilience for exactly what it has been disenfranchised for: perverse unnatural sex, exaggerated flamboyance, narcissism, superficiality and immorality.

In 1964, Susan Sontag published an influential essay called "Notes on Camp" which elaborated on the distinctively gay sensibility of camp, finding meaning in the seeming meaningless, depth in the vain. Sontag argued that camp should be understood as political act of resistance because it appropriates imagery and objects from mainstream popular culture and renders them purely for their visual sensibility, prescribing them with new queer meanings and affects. Sontag famously said, "camp sees everything in quotations marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman" (519). The power of camp lies exactly in that it

understands everything is a construct and anything can be a performance. Sontag's camp has had profound implications on understanding the art of drag. Drag, understood through camp, is not only a celebration of the monstrous and specifically the femme monstrous, but it also destabilizes binary gender by showing that it is beyond gender (Westecott 240). Emma Westecott suggested that drag through performance theory can bring to the fore the complex relationship between the player and the player character in third-person video games. Westecott stated that "the drag of much gameplay can be seen in the exaggerated markers of sexualized representation that many games engage" (242) such as bodies that exhibit "both superhuman and hyper-sexualized regardless of which gender is portrayed" (242). This holds valuable consideration for queer game studies to video games as embodied and performative experience for the player.

Many writers in the field of queer theory have noted the original dictionary meaning of "queer" was a synonym for "strange" before it became a pejorative for homosexuality. Palmer suggested there is something to be elaborated on about the strangeness of queerness and the Gothic tradition of "focus[ing] on deviant forms of sexuality that mainstream society defines as taboo or transgressive" (11). Mair Rigby drew connections between queerness and the Gothic with this illuminating statement:

> Queer theory is fascinated with the Gothic because Gothic texts have always been fascinated with the queer, to such an extent that I read the genre as one that is devoted, in no small part, to speaking about the "queerness" at the heart of culture. Like queer theory, the Gothic is a discursive space concerned with difference, otherness, marginality and the culturally constructed boundaries between the normal and the abnormal (1).

In Paulina Palmer's *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*, she suggested queer theory's engagement with the Gothic could be illuminated by analyzing recurring themes in Gothic novels written by queer authors. Expanding on Sigmund Freud's original essay on the uncanny with queer theory, Palmer suggested that if the uncanny is "the disturbing

transformation of the familiar to the unfamiliar they generate, reflect the projection of unconscious fears and desire originating in something repressed which recurs," (2) then this intersects with queer theory's by means of Sara Ahmed's description the queer experience as "dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar" (7).

Critics Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed noted that present day queer consciousness is in a state of collective amnesia, forgotten is the radical queer past such as grassroot activism during the AIDS epidemic. In return, queer consciousness has resurfaced in disjointed ways and now points towards heteronormativity such as gay marriage and military participation as a goal instead (26-29). This suggests an interesting connection with typical Gothic usage of the uncanny in the form of the return of the repressed or secrets, things that "are dead, yet remain unburied, which have been repressed, yet insist on returning in uncannily familiar forms (Newman 117).

The Secret and the Spectral

An interesting conceptual link between the uncanny and queerness is how it recasts the queer subject as ghost, a doubled figure in a heteronormative world. Queer existence is typified by its invisibility and secrecy, and the need to mimic and perform traits of heterosexuality in order to move in the world. However, when revealed, it triggers an anxiety that exposes heteronormativity is a constructed performance. The spectral also has conceptual associations with the lesbian experience as well, as women to women sexuality has historically been nullified under phallocentric ideas of sexuality and culture. If women have been understood as a

symbolization of lack, or void, two women together would be essentially incomprehensible (Edelman, “Homographesis” 197).

The queer spectral and secret are the representations of ambiguity and ambivalence. Freud in his description of the uncanny, describes that ambivalence is what develops “heimlich” (German for “concealed, hidden, in secret”) into the direction of “unheimlich” (uncanny or the strangely familiar). Furthermore, Helene Cixous, through her close reading of Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny”, described the figure of the uncanny as the ghost (224). The queer as the (uncanny) ghost has implications that extend beyond living double lives to the ways in which queer people move in the world. Queer critics further suggest that queer subjects do not live in an alternative culture, but “in a duplicate culture of constantly interrupted and overlapping roles. They must learn to live with ambiguity. Every sign becomes duplicitous, slipping back and forth across a wavering line” (Palmer 8). In Muñoz’s essay “Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling”, he describes that queer evidence is often found in gestures, and these ephemeral gestures “signal a refusal of a certain kind of finitude” (65). Moreover, the ‘queer-as-ghost’ can also be found in the flâneur in it’s lack of movement specificity, orientation, leisure and narcissism.

The Monstrous

The queer subject has often been understood through representations of both excess and lack - similar to the representation of the feminine - and this applies especially in the context of the urban and metropolitan gay male figure such as the flâneur. This excessive gay male figure has deep connections to the monstrous in the Gothic tradition, often depicted as being exaggerated in its physicality and deviant sexualities, but also as a lack as monsters in the Gothic are often understood as soulless, anti-social, and incapable of fitting into society. The monstrous

also provides a connection between queer theory and the abject. The abject as theorized by philosopher Julia Kristeva describes the feeling when one is confronted by one's corporeal reality, or a breakdown in the distinction between what is self and what is Other. For Kristeva, "the abject exists somewhere in between the concept of an object and the concept of the subject, representing taboo elements of the self barely separated off in a liminal space" (Childers and Hentzi 308). The feeling and experience of abject is most commonly used to describe a confrontation with filth, waste, or a corpse - "the abject [is a] jettisoned object…[it] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1-2).

For queer theory, the abject is most productive when considering Kristeva's argument that we must abject parts of ourselves in order to maintain clear boundaries between nature and society, the semiotic and the symbolic. To further develop this idea, drawing upon Freud, Kristeva argued that we must abject the figure of the mother, the object which created us, in order to construct our own identity (8). Herein lies an interesting connection to queerness, as Freud suggested that gay men did not go through the resolution of the Oedipus conflict and as a result, gay men never fully "grow up" and still seek identification with the maternal figure instead of the paternal. This suggests queer as abject, and the abject can be a device to explore the radical and taboo nature of queer such as anal intercourse to disturb and destabilize heteronormative (clean, respectable, lawful) systems and phallocentric culture.

Studies of transgender and transsexuality, while just starting to gain acceptance in Gothic studies, also provide bridges to the uncanny and the abject as a figure of conflicted embodiment. While gay male Gothic writers draw upon the long history of persecution and criminality of male homosexuality to recast gay subjectivity to the realm of the monstrous, lesbian writers have employed a different strategy to engage with Gothic traditions due to how women to women

sexuality has historically been erased to the point of nonexistence due to the unthinkable nature of lesbianism in a phallocentric culture. Lesbian writers tend to reference to "phenomena with uncanny associations such as dreams, darkness and spectrality that exceed the perspectives and values systems of the material world" (Palmer 19).

Although we must be aware that broad essentializations made between gay, trans and lesbian experiences are highly dangerous, they do provide valuable insights when applied with caution. Queer theory must also recognize that different community members within the umbrella of queer should not lose historical specificity as queer itself often verges dangerously close to essentialization as well. The abject is not exclusive to the gay men and the fantastical and spectral are not exclusive to lesbian women. However, one must also study the historical experience of different queer people to understand how these different groups have related and reacted to heteronormativity and phallocentric culture.

The Haunted Space

For Freud, the uncanny also has deep connections with the domestic space, providing a coupling between queerness and space. Freud references the German etymology of the term heimlich ("concealed, hidden, in secret") and evokes that the term has a relationship to the revelation of family secrets. Freud suggested that a "domestic space, though ostensibly warm and secure, [can also be] disturbed by secrets and the return of repressed fears and desires. The implication of a tension of clash between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the strange" (Palmer 15). This has particular relevance to queer existence in what Ahmed suggests as how domestic spaces for queer people can be a site of oppression and alienation (51-53). The

relationship between the uncanny and space is therefore located not in specific physical sites itself, as that would be a contradictory project since the "Gothic challenges that very process of map-making by means of which we might hope to reduce the world to manageable proportions (Punter 4). The uncanny in space is found in its haunting, where spaces and places such as derelict houses, castles and mansions, burial grounds, forests become haunted by the spectral, secret and the monstrous. These spaces not only represent the backdrop of the Gothic story where the characters experience the sublime and horror through transgressive sex, or the performance of taboo rituals and ceremonies, but also as a representation of the internal mental/emotional landscape of the characters.

Space in the Gothic holds other queer significance, as queerness is often understood spatially, such as "the closet" for example. The closet is where we hide our darkest secrets, where we are true selves, but tucked away from the living room and society. *Queer Phenomenology* by Ahmed is especially useful in exploring the queerness of haunted space in the Gothic as she suggests "if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with" (1). Perhaps then, the queer experience could be metaphorically summarized as ghosts haunting homes that don't belong to them; drifting and wandering as they move ephemerally and invisibly in this world. Queering space as they appear and disappear, gesturing towards some unknown queer futures. This ephemerality and invisibility hold significance and leads me to also think of queer spaces as a monstrous yet invisible queer body, a ghost that can only be seen by the initiated.

The Queer Gothic and Queer Game Design

Adopting queer game studies framework to mobilizes queer theory such as queer failure, temporality and historiography to destabilize game design practices and structures of play, I suggest we can expand on such by utilizing queer Gothic studies as well. In this following section, I explore how queer Gothic studies might illuminate queer potential that already exists in queer game scholarship. Namely, I am interested in extracting ideas such as the uncanny in the spectral, the secret, the monstrous and the haunted space to destabilize our understanding of video games.

Robert Yang is a queer game designer and developer whose career has produced many important games for queer game scholarship such as *Hurt Me Plenty* in 2014, *Rinse and Repeat* in 2015, *Cobra Club* in 2016 and *The Tearoom* in 2017 that intersect with the queer Gothic. Many of Yang's games deal with the topics of masculinity in homosexuality, abnormal bodily desires, queer intimacy and sexual consent. Yang's games are not about queer failure, at least not in the same way that writers like Ruberg and Halberstam has conceptualized failure has a low-fidelity modality. In fact, Yang's game art adopts the hyperrealism that AAA gaming often employs. In the same vein, queer temporality and historiography do not offer a rich enough analysis of Yang's games either. Although there are aspects of Yang's games that definitely fit into these conceptual and theoretical frameworks, it currently feels lacking because Yang's games often oscillate between AAA hyperreal art style and subversive game mechanics that are motivated by queerness. I believe that the queer Gothic can showcase how Yang's games are powerfully and productively queer.

In both *Hurt Me Plenty* and *The Tearoom*, Yang presents a small game environment where the player is restricted in terms of mobility within the space. *Hurt Me Plenty* involves the

player to “smack the heck out of some dude” (Yang) who is bent over and crouched on all fours. However, the character who is being smacked will respond to the level of aggression the player is performing and will verbally object the player if the character feels the player has overstepped the boundary of the relationship. The player can then decide to not listen to the character and continue smacking them at the same or with more intensity or listen and accommodate to the character’s wishes. At some point if the consent has been broken, the character will leave the game space and not return for a specific amount of time. Restarting the game is inconsequential to this broken consent, forcing the player to understand and think about their agency in video games and the ramifications of their actions beyond the video game space.

The Tearoom is a “historical public bathroom simulator” (Yang) that draws upon the history of gay cruising and the persecution of such acts. The game starts by telling the player that they are at a highway roadside public toilet in Mansfield, Ohio and the year is 1962. The player walks into the toilet to start the game and they immediately stand in one spot in front of the urinals. With a click of the mouse button, an endless stream of golden urine streams into the urinal. Suddenly the player hears a car drive by and parks in front of the toilet outside. This is when the game informs the player that if they see a police car, they must exit the game immediately, without stating the consequences if they don’t, but they already understand what this is about. This time, the car outside is not a police car so they don’t have to worry. The player hears someone get out of the car and closes the door shut. In a few seconds, a man walks in, they can make eye contact with him for a brief moment, but he quickly glances away, walks to the urinal next to you and unzips his pants. He lets out a big groan and starts urinating. During this time, the player has to strategically make eye contact to flirt with him and to get him to walk over to them. When he does, they get on their knees and lick his gun anywhere from 5 to 50

times until he shoots. After the ritual is completed, he walks away, and the player wait for the next man. No words were exchanged throughout this whole interaction.

Both games confront the player with high resolution, realistic game environments and characters, atypical of many queer indie games which normally utilize lo-fidelity aesthetics and game art. Yang corroborates this in his artist statement on *The Tearoom* in regards to his attention to detail in the modelling and texturing of the urinals, "I even do better than most AAA video games" (Yang). However, despite the extremely hyper masculine and muscular characters' bodies in Yang's games, the character locomotion and mechanics always feel slightly awkward. The way the buttocks jiggle when the player smacks the bent over character in *Hurt Me Plenty* have unrealistic physics and subverts the masculine body as permanently hard to something that is soft, squishy and almost ragdoll like. Phillips noted in her critique of *Second Life* and other AAA video games, that even in virtual worlds and game spaces masculine bodies must "repudiate fatness, disability, femininity, transness and frequently homosexuality in order to main integrity". Yang is able to challenge this by presenting a visually similar hard and muscular masculine body to those in AAA gaming but implements physics that make these bodies to move in ways that invoke the queer monstrous.

In *The Tearoom*, the biologically impossible never ending urination mechanic along with the game environment of the public toilet conjures both scatological desires and the abject to critique heteronormative pleasures. By employing AAA aesthetics in combination of uncanny physics and nonnormative intimacies, Yang is able to access the queer Gothic in numerous and nuanced ways to not only show alternative orientations in the ways queer bodies come together, but also find new alignments for queer desires. In combination of the public toilet, as a designated space for defilement and Yang's decision to use guns instead of depicting the male

genitalia is to ironically bypass censorship laws in *The Tearoom* (Yang), Yang taps into something rather abject. For Kristeva, abject is deeply entangled with jouissance (6), an experience so pleasurable it becomes violently painful, as one could only experience so much pleasure before it becomes something beyond pleasure.

Jouissance has been celebrated in queer theory and queer game studies; the former relates the feeling of jouissance to queer sexuality and its inherent non-reproductivity and historical danger and the latter in relating to the experience of playing video games as a nonproductive and wasteful activity. *The Tearoom* then becomes especially important within the theoretical framework of the abject and monstrous. The guns can be understood as the representation of the death driven qualities of unnatural sexual acts between men and the arousal of performing such acts. As Edelman and others have elaborated, such sexual acts between men have historically been orientated in the opposite of reproductive futurism and therefore, the linear path of life itself. Cruising itself, as noted by Yang's representation of the police in the game, is also a highly dangerous activity. By finding pleasure through playing with self-destructive anti-social behaviours, Yang speaks to how the death drive and the monstrous in his video games are not the literal oppositions to life, but an aesthetic space in which one can find and explore alternative paths to a queer Eros or the desire to live without heteronormativity and reproductive futurism.

There is also something uncanny about Yang's games that I was only able to locate recently. Many of his games feature the same male character, but in different configuration of facial hair, clothing and hairstyles. Palmer argues that "the spectre and phantom, key signifiers of the uncanny, carry connotations of 'excess' since their appearance exceeds the material" (7) and therefore suggests implications with queer. Through Yang's deliberate decision to reuse the same model but in a way where he tries to hide that the models in each game are in fact, the same

model, he unintentionally uncovers the "unfamiliar beneath the familiar" (7), creating spectral phantom male characters across his games, provoking a crisis of what is considered natural and stable. Moreover, this excess also demonstrates the uncanny idea of doubling, or the "compulsion to repeat and different form of mimicry and performance" (Palmer 8) which speaks to queer people need to hide and mimic traits of heteronormativity in order to safely move in a heterosexual world, turning them into something rather haunting and ambiguous, "slipping back and forth across a wavering line" (Palmer 8); ghosts in a straight world.

If we are to understand the abject and the uncanny as productive tools for queer future worldmaking, then we can also understand permadeath, a mechanic whereby if the player dies, then the game must restart without any saved gameplay, not as the opposite of Ruberg's concept of permalife but as death driven desires for alternative futures. Permadeath is a popular mechanic in roguelike games, a subgenre of role-playing games characterized by a dungeon crawl through procedurally generated levels. Although there are no queer video games currently that use this mechanic, I believe if used, permadeath could offer a powerful disruption to teleological narratives of reproductive futurism and capital accumulation.

Conclusion

Insofar, I have demonstrated the richness of queer game scholarship in its deployment of queer theory to look at how might queer game makers, critics and scholars theorize and understand aspects of game design such as character, narrative and mechanics as queer. Space however, has yet to receive the same kind of attention, though Pow and Pavlounis come the closest to talking about queer space in video games, Pow's usage of queer failure and queer

phenomenology favours affective qualities of space while Pavlounis did give design instructions, he only provided examples of heteronormative space, and never touched upon how one would design a queer space in video games.

The theoretical review on the queer Gothic provide crucial inroads into my thesis' exploration on queering level design in video games. The queer Gothic allows me to understand how spaces might take on queer embodiment through the uncanny. This understanding of space provides an exciting theoretical inroad into how the queer might intersect with level design. In the next section I begin to explore how cruising queers space. I utilize the queer Gothic to rethink queer space and queer levels as a ghost, perverse, monstrous body. In architecture, there is also an avoidance of talking about how designers might queer the practice of architecture and instead the conversations often focus the politics of queer desires, intimacies and sexuality that architecture can invoke (Jacques). "The queering of architecture is not a formal or aesthetic response to architecture's role in the constitution of repressive sex-gender-sexuality norms and habits, for there is no intrinsically queer house, dwelling or building" (Jacques). I suspect this is in part due to the fact that, the power of queer spaces might be its invisibility and ambiguity, which is difficult and undesirable to design in the real world. However, video games do not adhere to real world physics. Furthermore, level design thrives in the world of trickery, obstructed vision, double images, trap doors and mazes. Video games might be able to offer a medium to actualize practices and concepts of a queer spatial design through interrogating level design.

Methodology

As a research-creation project, my methodology employs autoethnography of cruising inside Stanley Park in Vancouver, BC as well as designing and making a video game prototype, *The Rawlings*. I visited Stanley Park a total of six times over two different visits to Vancouver, once in August 2018 and once in October 2018. Moreover, as the thesis is primarily interested in the spatial qualities and mechanics of queer space and the queering of space, my autoethnography inside Stanley Park did not take into consideration other actors, users, players and participants in the space as that is both outside the scope of my research as well as being irrelevant to my research question. The objective of my written thesis and the accompanying video game prototype is to contribute to the growing field of queer game studies through queering level design.

To help me make connections between cruising space to gamespace, my autoethnography of Stanley Park was informed by the concept of the magic circle, basic architectural concepts of navigation, space and shapes employed in level design as well as queer Gothic studies. The more I inquired about queer research methods and methodology, the more it became clear that autoethnography offered the most appropriate framework to conduct research on queer knowledge. Autoethnography is a powerful methodology for researchers exploring marginalized subjects and topics especially if the researcher themselves are part of that marginalized community. This is due to the fact that autoethnography is able to return authority to voices from marginalized groups to speak on their own behalf. Autoethnography has therefore been heavily employed in feminist studies, postcolonial studies and of course, queer studies. In *Queer Methods and Methodologies* by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, autoethnography stood out for queer social science researchers because many recognize that queer culture has mostly

existed invisibly in margins and subtext (Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia" 65). Throughout history, due to its illegality, one must read in between the lines to find queerness. To research and locate queer history and culture, other methodologies might rely on archival data which in the case of cruising would mostly exist in police documents. This poses as an obvious problem for queer researchers today as it only tells a biased side of the story. Autoethnography not only returns the source of knowledge to queer people, but it also allows queer people to create knowledge that is unafraid of legal consequences.

The purpose of my research at Stanley Park is to attempt to understand cruising as a form of play to map out and draw connections between queer theory and queer game studies. To reiterate my research question:

> *How might the spatiality of gay cruising sites, such as urban parks, inform spatial mechanics and level design approaches for "queer game design"?*

I chose Stanley Park for multiple reasons. One, I am from Vancouver and I have a deep understanding of the site. Two, I have never visited Stanley Park for cruising purposes, so my autoethnography was able to document my reaction to experiencing Stanley Park in a radically different way. Three, Stanley Park has a dark underbelly that is heavily associated with the cruising site. There was the hate crime and murder of Aaron Webster in 2001 as well as many unresolved cases of missing people over the years. I was aware of the potential danger and after consulting members of the community who frequent the cruising site of the park, I decided that by only visiting the park during the day I would eliminate most if not all of the risks.

The methods I used to collect data from my autoethnographic exploration of Stanley Park were in the form of note taking and photographing and I used my smart phone for both. I took notes by sending text messages to myself. Photographs were taken and then sent back to myself

in the same chat box with notes to describe the picture. Before I started my research, I first visited the site itself with a friend who frequents Stanley Park to better understand how I might approach the space myself. In the first stage of my findings I went inside the park for several hours at a time to take notes and pictures, documenting every thought and feeling I was experiencing. In the second stage, I synthesized my findings with theory of queer Gothic studies. After the autoethnographic process, I distilled my findings and applied them to my video game development process where I attempted to interpret and apply my findings into queering level design.

The magic circle helped me identify the gamespace of cruising while basic concepts of shapes and space used in architecture, urban design and level design assisted me in breaking down Stanley Park into spatial properties as well as identifying how shapes, lines and volume inspire play in cruising spaces. Humans need to recognize and seek patterns in their environmental surroundings, and it is one of the core skills we use to navigate the chaos of an urban city (Lynch 5). Studies of how humans navigate urban cities have been essential to the field of level design in game development. Lead game designer at Naughty Dog Emilia Schatz have cited the importance of Kevin Lynch's book, *The Image of the City* in her approach to level design.

In the book, Lynch studies how people create cognitive maps of the city by asking them to redraw their city out of memory without consulting any maps. From his study and findings, Lynch describes five basic spatial elements from the most important to least that make up how people remember and navigate complex urban spaces. *Paths* are the roads, trails, streets, how we get from A to B (Lynch 49-61). *Edges* are linear element that break continuity from one space to another (Lynch 62-65). *Districts* are areas of identity like Chinatown (Lynch 66-71). *Nodes*

which are a point in space, strategic foci where observers can enter to see multiple perspectives of other core elements such as town squares or a path junction (Lynch 72-77). *Landmarks* are external foci where observers cannot enter but serves as a point of reference in orientation (Lynch 78-82). Schatz suggested that since level design is unlike designing a city, the five basic elements in Lynch's book should be rearranged as landmarks, districts, nodes, edges and paths instead.

As well as paths, edges, nodes, districts and landmarks, I also drew from basic architectural concepts such as mass and void as well as the three basic planes: ground, wall and sky. Planes are one of the four elements that make up space, along with points, lines and volumes (Frederick 20). There are three major types of planes. *Base* plane is the ground; this is the plane we always interact with; we trust the ground for holding us up. *Wall* planes which are primarily used to create boundaries, we interact with them through our visual field and by touch but only by choice. *Overhead* planes are usually out of reach like the ceiling or the sky; overhead planes strike a more emotional tones and are often manipulated and exaggerated in sacred architecture like religious buildings. Schatz expanded on the ideas of planes by considering ground plane as self, wall plane as society and overhead plane as sky or god. Lastly, concept of void and mass were also important to my note taking. *Void* is the lack of volume, the space of possibility and clarity, it doesn't occlude our vision and thus allows for exploration and understanding. *Mass* on the other hand is volume, mass blocks movement, occludes vision, restricts possibilities, creates boundaries and implies what is impossible. In both level design and architecture, void and mass are important concepts to shape and sculpt space in order to inspire movement. Mass tend to push while void tend to pull, the combination of both can create meaningful spaces players can move through.

Treating myself a flâneur, I mostly wandered aimlessly, drifting from one spot to the next by whatever grabbed my attention. I then utilized queer Gothic studies to discover, interpret and synthesize my findings. Especially powerful were concepts in queer Gothic studies that describe queerness and queer spaces as existing within margins, between interior and exterior, physical and mental, familiar and unfamiliar. This is further supported by Ahmed's idea of disorientation in *Queer Phenomenology* where she proposed to reexamine the orientation in sexual orientation as a phenomenological problem. Ahmed describes that queer orientation would be one that is off the straight path, one that constantly orientates us towards other queer bodies and objects that are both familiar and alienating. Ahmed concluded that this spatialized understanding of the interplay between bodies and objects give shape to the space the bodies are in as well as the bodies and objects themselves, suggesting that queer phenomenology and the queering of space is a dynamic and uncanny process (25-30).

In designing my autoethnographic process, I realized that many ideas of queer space and the queering of space in the physical world were abstract and ephemeral, a feeling caught in a fleeting moment. As Betsky states, "queer space" is "a space of difference", an arena of doubt, self-criticism, and "the possibility of liberation" (201). How does one interpret queer theory into insights for queering level design, especially when it comes to game design where scripting languages tend to favour logical, mathematical way of thinking? Despite its binary system, video games often defy the physically impossible and do not oblige to real world physics. Furthermore, unlike disciplines such as architecture, video games offer designers a digital space to be playful and fantastical with its designs. The next chapter provides documentation of how my autoethnographic process took place and details how I experienced, explored and interpreted cruising spaces and the challenges I faced, as well as the limitation of my process.

Autoethnography of Cruising Inside Stanley Park, Vancouver

Introduction

Cruising is the active act of looking for and engaging in sexual activities in public spaces (Humphreys 1-10; Gandy 729). Typical spaces for cruising include urban parks, cemeteries, beaches and public washrooms (also known as cottaging). Although cruising is mostly a same sex activity for men, not all men who cruise identify as gay (Humphreys 25). This may include men who identify as straight or as bisexual or men or men who choose to remain in the closet. Cruising can be understood as a queering of space as described by architecture historian Aaron Betsky as "a space of difference", an arena of doubt, self-criticism and the possibility of liberation, orgasm and amorous relationships (201). Yet, the idea of "queer space should not be elided with queer theory" (Gandy 730), as geographer Natalie Oswin suggests, since queer space remains rooted in a restricted conception of identity formation that privileges reified forms of sexual difference as the basis for political action. Oswin argues instead for a "queer approach to space" that extends to a more complex and interdisciplinary set of elements beyond a mere appropriation of space (91).

Understanding cruising sites through Gandy, Ingram and Oswin we can perhaps conceive cruising as a temporary queer space that is not just a spatial experience embodied by the users in the space, but the space itself is also created and altered physically by the presence of the queer

bodies. Instead of drawing upon scholarly work on the relationship between bodies and space that often discusses space as an embodied experience and therefore denying space the ability to change and be dynamic. Instead, I am suggesting that the space is constantly changing and morphing, and it is due to its users. This conception is a much more complex understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space that is often neglected by academic studies of queer spaces.

Findings Part I: The Queer Spatiality of Stanley Park

> *Queer orientation might be those things that don't line up, which by seeing the world "slantwise" allow other objects to come into view*
>
> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 107

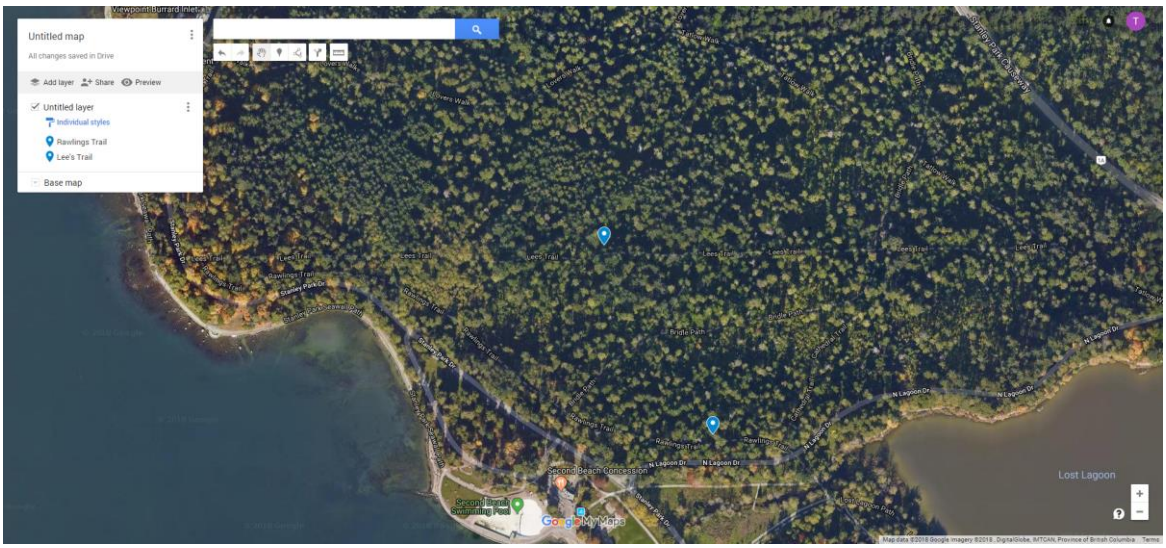

Fig. 1 Google Earth view of Stanley Park in Vancouver, BC, Canada

Stanley Park is a 405-hectare public park in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. Unlike many other large urban parks, Stanley Park is mostly a forest that has grown naturally without the intervention of landscape architects. Due to its natural beauty, the park has become a major attraction for both locals and foreign tourists alike. The park is densely forested by about a

half million trees, including Douglas firs, Western red cedars, Western hemlock and Sitka spruce trees, many of which are hundreds of years old and grow up to 76 metres tall. Within this large dense forest, there are close to 27 kilometres (17 miles) of windy forest trails that are patrolled by the Vancouver Police Department on horseback. The park also features a public outdoor swimming pool (2nd Beach Pool), multiple public beaches (English Bay, Second Beach, Third Beach), the "Seawall" which is a constructed pathway along the perimeter of the park popular with joggers and cyclists and other tourist destinations such as the Vancouver Aquarium and Coast Salish totem poles. However, tucked away from the frills of tourism, off the park trails and inside the forest, there exists a seedy underbelly of somewhat illegal activities by homeless people, sex workers, drug users and cruisers. The park's relative proximity to downtown Vancouver and its extreme density for an urban park created a perfect meeting place for different alliances of people to gather.

This summer I visited Stanley Park for the first time to explore how I could find possible connections between cruising, play, and space. As a disclaimer, I am not a stranger to cruising and have visited many popular cruising sites in European and North American cities. Although most cruising areas operate similarly, following similar structure of mechanics and rules of play, Stanley Park really stands out as a cruising site par excellence due to its location and spatiality. I visited the park in a total of three times over the course of three weeks in August 2018 and another three times over a week in October 2018. Before my first visit, I asked someone who frequents the cruising areas of the park to initiate me because of how large the park is and how easy it is to get lost in a forest with no defined paths or trails. As someone who is from Vancouver and has been visiting the park my whole life, I was immediately struck by how different the park presented itself to me once I was initiated into the magic circle.

Fig. 2 Lees trail post, one of the main cruising trails and Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail

Fig. 3 Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail

To conduct my autoethnography inside Stanley Park, I turned on my video game player sensibility as well as basic concepts of space to help me pick up on the numerous visual cues inside the cruising ground as a gameplay and gamespace experience. On my first visit, I began from 2nd Beach Pool, located on the south western side of Stanley Park. As I head towards Lees trail and in the direction of one of the main entrances to the cruising site, I was immediately struck by how man-made it looked, as if it was clearly arranged and composed to allow cruisers to identify the entrance. Using the natural environment, two logs have been strategically placed to form an arrow, pointing to inside the cruising area. Although the trails have a natural edge, which is the forest itself, this entrance creates a special edge, like a door, an invitation to the magic circle inside. As I head inside the magic circle, one of the first things I noticed once I

entered the cruising area are the lack of paths, no longer are the trails well-defined, but the footprints of the men before me. But like a game, players do not expect paths to be obviously presented to them and paths in games are often partially blocked so that players are given the opportunity to find them.

As I trekked further inside the forest, I noticed that the first thing I looked for were landmarks, and in the case of Stanley Park, these were all natural objects such as uniquely shaped large trees, stumps or multiple trees that have fallen on top of each other. I continued my way deeper into the cruising area, I jotted down more landmarks in my visual memory. Eventually I found my way to the first major node or clearings of the cruising ground. These nodes serve as the town square, the place where you can take a break and view the whole area from multiple perspectives. There weren't as much rubbish and trash as I expected; just your usual cigarette boxes, condoms, food wrappers, paper napkins, needles and tents. However, some of these objects do suggest that there might be other people sharing the space and use it for a different purpose. It was eerily quiet and all I could hear were my own breathing, my footsteps, the birds and the bushes and trees rustling in the wind. In combination with knowing that it is a cruising ground, and the spatial qualities (the lack of defined paths and the visual need to recognize landmarks), I immediately felt as if the space was a gamespace. I walked around more, repeating paths I have taken before and eventually found my way out before sunset.

Fig. 4 A node and landmark inside Stanley Park Lees cruising area

On my second visit, I gave myself a few hours before sunset, so I can experience the space longer. I found the same entrance where the two logs are placed in an arrow shape and started walking inside. Although this time around I was much more aware of the lack defined paths, I still managed to get lost repeatedly. Since I was using my smartphone extensive to take notes and photographs, I quickly noticed that the GPS on my phone was not working, probably due to the extremely dense forestry. I came across numerous path junctions and tried to use the landmarks to guide me, but I kept repeating myself. I got lost multiple times but eventually I found myself inside the first node. From here I was able to regather myself and much needed visual information such as a landmark. I started by going off the main node into smaller more densely forested areas, keeping the landmark in sight so I don’t get terribly lost. I tried to return to the main node from every exploration and noticed how different this node felt spatially every

time. I realized that this might because the paths are undefined, therefore the edges also kept changing, creating an unstable, disordered and disorienting but dynamic space.

Dwelling on Christopher Totten's word *dwell* in his description of level design. I began to interpret the space as a space I am co-living with, a home. But this home is strange and unhomely; I felt as if I have entered a house, but as soon as I leave the living room, the walls in the house have been rearranged. The structure of the house is still there, just like the perimeter of the cruising area will always be there, the main trails do not change, but the inside, the edges and paths are constantly shifting. Suddenly, the home was not so homely, and it reminded me of Paulina Palmer's and Freud's writings on the haunted house and the unhomely home. However, I began to question - what if space is not just an embodied experience, what if we understand space as body?

This brings me to another architectural concept of space that is used in level design; planes. The overhead plane is interesting because not only is the park outside and therefore the overhead plane (sky) is way out of touch, but it is emphasized by the giant west coast trees, creating a spiritual experience similar to the effect columns in Gothic architecture strike. The wall plane inside Stanley Park, however, do not really exist, or more precisely, it is continuously moving and shifting. The analogy of wall plane as society is both poetic and appropriate here because the lack of definable wall planes inside the cruising ground in Stanley Park create the feeling of disorder, chaos and lawlessness; suspending, even for a brief moment, that society, especially a respectful, lawful heteronormative society, does not exist. If space is body, then queer space is a monstrous body, shapeshifting and disobeying any spatial order.

On my last visit in August 2018, I spent a bit more time circulating the perimeter of the cruising area first, trying to find more visual cues like the log arrow. To my surprise, there are

many more of these natural edges that serve as portals into the magic circle of the cruising area. I also discovered various homophobic graffiti (see fig. 14) both outside and inside the cruising area that show the disapproval of the activities that are happening inside the park. As I have mentioned before, I am very aware of the dangerous nature of cruising, and especially Stanley Park where hate crimes have been committed. However, as preposterous as this might sound, the visual evidence of enemy threats gave the space another ludic dimension. It also allowed me to realize that the boundary of this magic circle is extremely porous and thin, and it exists within a world where queer sex is still looked down upon with contempt. This time I took a new entrance into the cruising ground and again, tried to experience the space by embracing both the familiar (the landmarks) and the unknown (new paths and edges). As I go in for the last time, I was able to better appreciate the graffiti, trash and other domestic objects left by people living inside the park which remind you that the magic circle is conterminously shared with other users, players and participants.

During my last visit, I started to realize how the lack of spatial hierarchy inside the space was a distinct opposition to the designed spaces such as architecture and urban cities. However, cruising spaces are not "wild" homogenized spaces either, they are littered with obvious human activities (see fig. 15), from markings on the ground (see fig. 16) to graffiti (see fig. 17), to logs and branches placed strategically in places that only the initiated can see (see fig. 18). This space is a secret space, an invisible space that exists on top of a visible space, appropriating it for queer sex. Inside the park, I never felt content with settling in one place, rather this space of disorder constantly pushed me to explore and wander. Lastly, drawing from the spatial concept of void and mass. I began realizing that the lack of definable void and mass due to the dense forest of Stanley Park is what kept pushing and pulling me on repeated meaningless trajectories. Stanley

Park never gave me clear instructions to where to go to next, instead its chaotic spatial elements contributed to the feelings of disorder, disorientation, the uncanny but also a deep sense of jouissance.

Findings Part II: The Queer Uncanny of Stanley Park

> *I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvelous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it.*
>
> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* 1890.

In October, I revisited Stanley Park again for three more visits. The first visit was to see if my experience would be different from August and the second and third visits were less autoethnographic and more to collect data for my video game prototype such as capturing photogrammetry data of various objects inside the park as in-game assets. As I approached the main entrance from Lees trail, I noticed it has changed. The branches that once created a door have disappeared, but the logs remain in the same place (see fig.19). I would say my experience this visit was relatively similar to my visits in September due to the fact that many branches, human created markings in the ground and other shrubberies have moved or disappeared due to weather. Therefore, despite some familiarity with the space, many areas felt unrecognizable and new. During my second and third visit, I was mostly there to take photos of different objects in the space for photogrammetry but I noticed something very important on the Lees trail post, there is a poem etched by an anonymous person dedicated to Aaron Webster, the man who was

found beaten to death by a group of teenagers. They attacked him specifically because he was gay, and the teenagers were aware of men who cruise at Stanley Park.

Fig. 5 Lees trail post, "For Aaron. I know this path, so do you, to this gathering, bodies flame the limbs of trees and light the clearing."

My autoethnography suggests that the many layers of a space used by different groups of people not only creates a space with multiple usages and meanings, it also creates a multitude of different spatial experiences that are constantly shifting, changing and reorganizing according to its users and players even while the actual physical space itself remains mostly the same. Due to its chaotic and disorderly nature, I had to reorder spatial patterns every play or walkthrough, creating gameplay experiences that are site specific but spatially different each time. This uncanny spatial experience that constantly teeters on the familiar and the unfamiliar can be drawn to to how space is treated in the queer Gothic, creating the feeling of the uncanny in

familiar urban and domestic spaces such as the haunted house as well as being an extension of the character's mental landscape. Mark Wigley powerfully defined the uncanny as "not-being-at-home" (110), as an experience of alienation from the house while inside it. To begin my interpretations of my findings from Stanley Park through the Queer Gothic, I draw upon Gothic scholar Palmer's references to many of Ahmed's passages in *Queer Phenomenology*, "it is certainly desire that helps generate a lesbian landscape, a ground that is shaped by the paths we follow in deviating from the straight line" (20). Palmer further points towards the uncanny similarities of the Gothic tradition to *Queer Phenomenology*, "[queer phenomenology is the] dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar" (7). Through this rich interpretation of the Gothic through a queer theoretical lens, I can start to perceive the spatiality of Stanley Park as shaped by my queer sexuality and desire as well as the dwellings of other queer bodies who are there with me. Following on Ahmed once again, if a queer phenomenology is also seeing and experiencing the world spatially as "slantwise", allowing certain objects to come to view while disabling other objects, then this further demonstrates my experience inside Stanley Park where I found the queer space of the cruising site as a space embedded within already existing space. While normally people with straight orientation will be unable to see the hidden space, people like me who perceive and navigate the world slantwise could. My slanted orientation allows me to see things in between, uncovering hidden spaces that live on a slanted dimension.

Drawing upon the Gothic's investment in expressing the unknown and unfamiliar such as the superstitious, the taboo and the spiritual through rituals, we can also extend that to understand the cruising as a ritual or ceremony that transforms spaces from familiar into the unfamiliar. Understanding the historical importance of cruising as well as the setting of dense

forest, bodies meet and collide in Stanley Park to evoke feelings of "horror, the sublime or a sense of continuity with the past" (Palmer, 105). As Palmer documented, the rituals in the Gothic tradition usually display "compulsion to repeat" (8) such as feverish ceremonial dances and descriptions of repeated sightings of ghosts and other spectral doubles. These ceremonies and rituals "hinge on secrets, disclosing them to the initiated while protecting them from the world at large, or illustrate the importance of liminality, bridging the gulf between the familiar material world and the unfamiliar realm of the supernatural" (136). The mechanics of cruising does certainly conjure itself as a form of queer ritual that defies bourgeois rules of respectability (Halberstam 111) as well as heteronormative familial values. Moreover, while performed in the Gothic space of a forest, shares many characteristics with rituals and ceremonies in how it accesses the supernatural through deviant sexual activities. As I reflect back on how I feverishly walked repeatedly along the same paths back and forth, to and fro inside Stanley Park, I can understand how cruising allows participants, users and players to transcend logic and the rational into "uncanny 'enthrallment', as one moves from feeling separate from the landscape to experiencing an 'interpenetration of subjective and objective reality" (Day 29). The space of the forest became a representation and an extension of my psycho-emotional space of my desires.

In Freud's *The Uncanny*, he described a personal experience of the eeriness from artifacts such as wooden carvings of animals inside a haunted house that seem to come to life at night to prowl the rooms. This experience supports my findings at Stanley Park as I found the forest not just alive, but moving, shifting and changing shape. The paths created by footsteps were gone the day after a rain and strong winds kept blowing trees down, and players and users move objects around strategically to their fancy. The phantom of the forest aroused the spectral in numerous forms, both spatially as well as bodily, transforming the natural space into the supernatural,

outside the realm of the explicable and language, lawfulness and order. Spectrality in the Gothic is often represented in forms such as the body double and ghosts, and the queer Gothic relates to spectrality through discussing queer bodies as phantoms since they are an invisible minority as well as the haunting of queerness to a non-origin queer utopian past. In the case of Stanley Park, the cruising space itself becomes spectral. The space is haunted as it is both visible and invisible, the ghost of Stanley Park is where a nostalgic queer past, a chaotic queer present and lost queer futures come together.

Freud describes another personal anecdote in The Uncanny where he was trying to navigate his way out of a foreign Italian town. He gives an account of the feeling of anxiety of being lost in a foreign city and the "compulsion to repeat" (Palmer 8) paths over and over again without realizing in order to find a way out. The anxious feelings of unfamiliarity in new spaces often brings Freud back to the familial, and specifically, the mother's womb to find comfort. As we find ourselves in unfamiliar places and spaces, we often try to reconcile this feeling of the uncanny with the familiar which often is our birthplace and familial experience. Derrida argues that there is always a familial domesticity to the uncanny, pointing out that "haunting implies places, a habitation, and always a haunted house" (Derrida 86). However for queer people, our desire for familiarity is not always related to the familial, as for many, our experience of the familial is actually one of alienation. We can turn to Ahmed once again for advice on this matter, "lesbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending into space through tending towards other women" (102). If other queer bodies and objects in the cruising space is where my desire is directing me towards, then these become markers that exhibit both the familiar and the unfamiliar. In the cruising ground, I am compelled to move in the desire of other

familiar queer bodies, but they also appear as doppelgangers or ghosts from another past, creating a space both homely and strange.

The uncanny of cruising at Stanley Park is a poetic analogy to a queer experience and existence. To complicate queer space even further, perhaps it is more than just the rituals, the spectral and the uncanny. Using the word *dwell* once again, what if this dwelling of queer space represents the womb, but that has been alienated to something closer to the grotesque, a porous body of monstrosity, a Frankenstein of deviant sexualities, materialities and the supernatural. In Halberstam's book, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters,* he makes a connection between queer sexuality and 19th century Gothic monsters, which were often depicted as an amalgam of othered race, class, gender, and sexuality (Halberstam 1-5). If queer bodies find strength and power in embracing the monstrous, then perhaps queer space can as well. The uncanny of queer spaces showcase a different type of relationship to familiarity and homes. It displays a relationship to other objects, bodies and space that is haunted by queer memories. Queer space transcends beyond the rational and the orderly, a jouissance beyond the pleasure principle.

Although queer scholars such as Matthew Gandy and Gordon Brent Ingram have documented extensively the relationship between space and cruising, both have neglected the dynamism of space and focused instead on the participants and other living organisms in the space itself. Although it seems impossible to decouple body from space, the idea that space can only be experienced somatically falls short to describe my autoethnography. Building onto my thought from earlier, space is both an extension of my body/mind and therefore, behaves like a body as well as an embodied experience. Gamespace in video games can express this beautifully through immersive gameplay, where the player experiences and feels the video game as an

embodied experience as well as an interactable experience that has its own identity and motivations. Queering level design can expand its current understanding on the field as a discipline that translates gameplay into gamespace to take into consideration the game's characters and the player. Level design then becomes both an embodied experience of gamespace as an extension of the player emotional state through the playable character as well as gamespace as digital body. Level design can tap into this dynamic relationship between player and game by designing space not just for the gameplay and for the player and where might their emotional state be at that point of the game but also as an independent entity with its own motivations and desires that might counter the identity of the player and the game.

In this chapter, I documented my findings from Stanley Park, using both concepts of space and as well as synthesizing these findings with the ideas of the uncanny, spectrality, the monstrous and the ritual from queer Gothic studies. I concluded that, while difficult to pinpoint, queer spaces and the queering of space exhibit characteristics that often defy and transcend ideas of logic, rationalism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, familial values and respectability. These are spaces that exist on top of existing spaces and often invisible to the uninitiated, a magic circle that cannot be seen unless you know the secret. While within these queer spaces, the relationship between the materialities and sexualities of objects, bodies, spatial properties and other living and nonliving organisms collide to create a dynamic space that often confusing, deviant, maze-like, radical and most importantly, playful. In the next section, I use the synthesized findings from this chapter to come up with level design and spatial mechanic ideas to prototype a queer video game.

The Rawlings: A Queer Video Game Prototype

I have been making work and doing research for this thesis and *The Rawlings* well before my autoethnography at Stanley Park in August 2018. In fact, I started my explorations into queer game design through level design, cruising and space in November 2017 during my first semester at OCAD University. I first laid out the theoretical groundwork for my investigations through familiarizing myself with the history and practice of cruising, close playing of games by Robert Yang such as *The Tearoom* and *Rinse and Repeat* and reviewing journal articles and books on queer space and game studies. In January 2018 I enrolled in a graduate studio and seminar class taught by Professor Emma Westecott at OCAD University called "Digital Games" where I made an 3D exploration game sketch set in a gay bathhouse called Club Baths (see fig. 20) which drew on personal experiences in gay bathhouses as well as a poem that I wrote in 2016. Club Baths is a first-person exploration game that blends genres of interactive fiction, digital poetry and puzzle game. After a full day of archival research work inside the office at a gay bathhouse, the owner calls you and suggests that you take a break and explore the premises. As you wander down into the neon lit space, you encounter a world of strange temporalities, queer poetry and campiness, all of which blurs the contours of reality with the wet slippery surfaces of fantasmatic. Club baths is about falling in love and falling out of love all in the span of one evening.

Fig. 6 Sketch of a video game set in a forest inspired by the events of Aaron Webster

However, before I embarked on making *Club Baths*, I pitched a video game that is very similar to The Rawlings; it was a game set in a forest and took the murder of Aaron Webster as the main narrative of the game. At that time, I did not feel confident in making such a complex and ambitious video game and after some short experiments in Unity 3D, I decided to put this first idea in the backlog and came up with *Club Baths* instead. Later in July 2017, I was in a rapid prototyping class also taught by professor Emma Westecott where I revisited this initial idea of a video game set in a forest inspired by the murder of Aaron Webster. I explored turning the game into a third-person shooter, as I was interested in exaggerating and appropriating the violence in mainstream video gaming. All of these initial explorations, sketches and proof of concepts heavily influenced how I approached making *The Rawlings* as well as helping me identify which set of theory and tools I needed to embark on this research creation project.

Fig. 7 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence

My approach to this specific game development process was to use my autoethnography to come up with the level design and environment art of the game and then let my readings and engagement with theory distill into all levels of my game design process. After completing my autoethnography at Stanley Park, I began writing my game design document for the video game prototype. The game design document allowed to me clearly see the implementations, features, mechanics and art I would design in the prototype. The game, *The Rawlings*, is a third-person survival horror game for the PC. At the edge of a forest park, the player who suffers from amnesia, finds themselves lost and without any recollection of how they got there. To find answers, the player goes into the forest, but the more the player pushes forward, the more the forest pushes back. In this section, I will go over in detail the high- to low-level design choices and implementations and how I was informed by my autoethnographic research as well as the theory from queer Gothic studies I was drawing from.

Referencing Ahmed's proposition to understand sexual orientation as a spatial inquiry in *Queer Phenomenology* as well as Muñoz's idea of ephemerality of queer gestures in "Gesture, Ephemera and Queer Feeling", I implemented in The Rawlings is a dance or dance-inspired gestures inspired by queer dance such as vogueing and ballroom culture performed by the player character to interact with other non-playable characters (NPC), solve puzzles by triggering new spatial arrangements to open new paths. I explored this further by thinking about how not only does queer sexual orientation take us off the well-defined path to capital success and reproductive futurism, queer bodies are also positioned and spatialized in a way that suggest something slanted and off-course. The slight bounce in the way gay men wrists bend, the sass in the way our hips move, all briefly defy how straight hard masculine bodies are expected to move in this world. Furthermore, referencing how queer theory has recuperated the figure of the flâneur as well as practices of cruising, I became interested in how gay people in the past and present have developed a body language of gestures to not only communicate to each other, but also as a way to gain access to spaces that are otherwise invisible and secretive. It is almost as if this body language act as magic spells that open portals to another dimension. This complex and dynamic relationship between body and space fit into my explorations into queer Gothic studies where ideas of the ritual and well as the haunted sites supported my observations and findings. I was also inspired by vogueing and ballroom culture where body language and movements are choreographed to imitate, in an almost uncanny manner, heteronormative culture. In the end I realize that there is no queer space without queer bodies, and queer bodies perform and move in ways that suggest the uncanny; close enough to pass but not quite there, it is a constant negotiation of invisibility and visibility.

I interpret this into *The Rawlings* by using as least text as possible, leaving much of the story through environmental storytelling and dance. To really showcase this dance, I recorded most of character locomotion as well as the dancing through motion capture technology in a collaboration between me and a choreographer and dancer Ralph Escamillan. It was paramount for me to capture this animation data myself with another queer person and not simply appropriate animations intended for a female character onto a male character. By doing so, it allowed me to explore the relationship between queer bodies and queer spaces in video games to investigate what queering game space may look like. The walk animation the playable character uses puts him on his toes with a bit of a swing in his hips. When the player tries to run, the playable character is almost immediately taken off the straight path, going slantwise with uncontrollable movements in his body that repudiates straight and hard masculinity. The player then has to work with the camera in order to put the playable character on the intended path. The dance mechanic shows the playable character moving in a soft and wave-like movement that is rarely seen in male video game characters. The three dance cutscenes in the game were also all choreographed and captured with Escamillan. Each dance was made collaboratively using a keyword; jouissance, abject and monstrous.

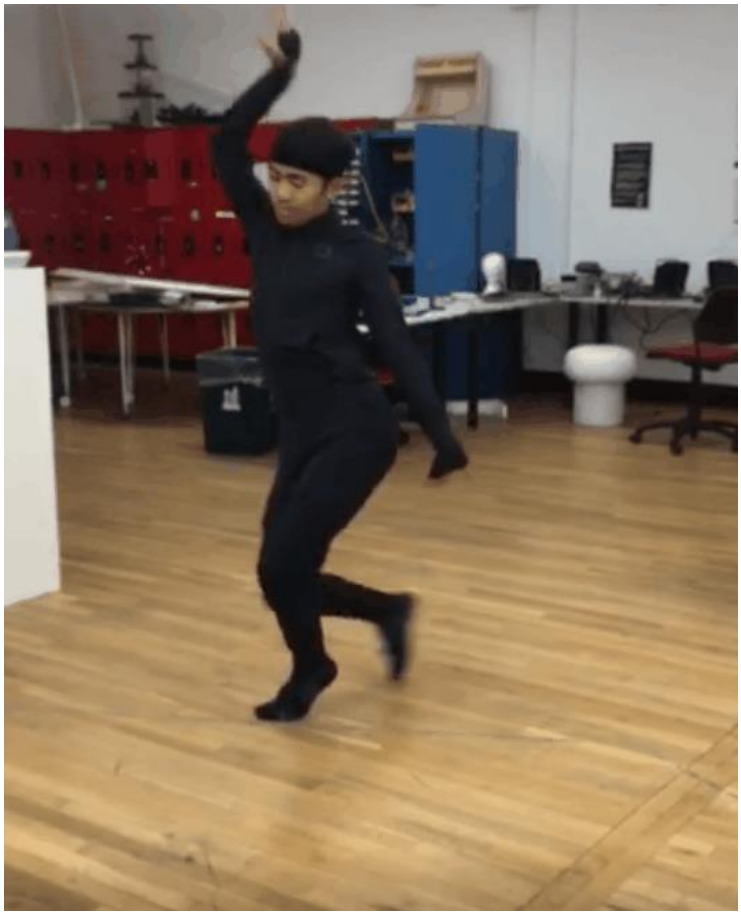

Fig. 8 Ralph Escamillan in motion capture suit

The making of the game environment and level design in *The Rawlings* were influenced by my experience inside Stanley Park as well as themes in the queer Gothic. I used the map of Stanley Park to make the basic layout of *The Rawlings* and drew from ideas of repetition and unclear paths and markings to block out the environment. I then turned to the themes and motifs of the haunted space to start designing how the player experiences and interacts with the forest. Almost everything in the game environment is moveable, and therefore the spatial arrangement of the level can be shifted by the player and is never stable. I implemented this by creating specific spots in the game where the player can dance to change the spatial arrangement of the environment and the player must strategically arrange and reconfigure the forest in order to

trigger the dance cutscenes and solve the puzzle of the game. This liveliness of the forest alludes to the uncanny of haunted spaces and suggests to the player that the space cannot be trusted.

Fig. 9 Photogrammetry model of Lees trail post

Drawing from the way settings and sites in Gothic literature often represent the psycho/emotional landscape of the main character in the story, the forest in *The Rawlings* plays a huge role in both communicating the story of the playable character to the player as well as being what both the playable character and the player have to overcome. Although there is an unshakeable feeling of danger looming over the forest, it is exactly through the feeling of danger and unease that the Gothic communicates pleasure and transgression. Furthermore, the symbolism of Gothic settings often suggests a mental space, these places (like the forest) are

metaphors for the main character's internal struggles and desires, further pointing towards that the dynamism of space lies in the relationship between body, mind and space. The art style used to create the environment also articulates the feelings of danger, distrust and deviancy. I mainly used and reused the same few assets to create the environment, however in some areas I swapped out the textures of the same models with ones I created in order to create feelings of uncanny in the environment. This quite literally suggests something that is recognizable yet unfamiliar; the thing has the shape of one thing but the texture of another. The final game environment juxtaposes natural objects and elements with unnatural textures as well as a flat transparent ground to create a space that expressed the idea of space as a monstrous porous body as well as the dream space of the playable character. The flat ground was inspired by many early science fiction films such as *Barbarella* by Roger Vadim starring Jane Fonda as well as surrealist paintings by Salvador Dali where the ground perspective is often shown as flat.

Fig. 10 Screenshot of early version of The Rawlings

Blood is used and featured heavily throughout the game in both the environment as well as the characters to display ideas of death, violence and abject but also more importantly,

community. Each dance cutscene activated and interaction with the NPCs causes the environment to bleed more, and once the blood reaches a certain level, the player is able to perform the last dance cutscene to win the game. The way I used blood in the game is loaded, it is a reference to HIV/AIDS and the history of abjection of gay people through our blood, but blood is also a symbol of sacrifice, bond and family. I am reminded of the story of Greg Louganis, who at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, hit his head on the diving board causing him to bleed into the pool. The injury and event forced him to come out to the public on his HIV status. I was also inspired by recent published research in neuroscience that suggests that memories behave similar to viral infections. Blood is used in *The Rawlings* as a metaphor for community but also as a symbol for sacrifice, ritual and collective memory. The player in the game starts off without any memories, and the goal is to retrieve his memories through dancing with ghosts of himself in the forest. Each dance triggers memories that prick, a taboo orgasm, an infection of pleasures. As the player is damaged by each dance, the environment bleeds with him, alluding to a dynamic relationship between body and space. Blood is used then to allow the player to find meaning through negotiating themes of death, violence and trauma while also placing them in a collective and communal space.

Fig. 11 Screenshot of a dance cutscene in The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence

This brings me to the player and the other NPCs in the game. I used the same model to create the player character as well as the NPCs, the only difference is the clothing of the characters. I made this decision because I wanted to further illustrate the feeling of uncanny through doppelgangers. Once the player meets that the other characters inside the forest, they realize that the NPCs are just versions of the playable character. I wanted to suggest that the NPCs are ghosts of the player character that represent the player's lost memories. Photogrammetry was used to create some of the key important interactable objects such as the initial trail posts as well as the major landmark. Likewise, to using motion capture to insert queer bodies into my game, photogrammetry allowed me to inject site specificity as well as hinting at the uncanny once again. Using photogrammetry, I was able to take an object that exists in the world and insert it in a digital environment. However it is critical that I kept the original intention of the object (i.e. the trail post is still a trail post), but with the added context of how I experienced it in my autoethnography (i.e. the landmark was only a landmark because I utilized

it as a landmark). This is paramount as it speaks to the kind of uncanny alienation explored in the Gothic.

Every single decision in how I constructed the scene of the environment from creating textures to use interchangeably on the same game assets, photogrammetry, motion capture, moveable environment, blood and the flat transparent ground was to create an effect that expresses the magical, fantastical, and uncanny through juxtaposing the hyperreal with the surreal.

Fig. 12 Screenshot of a dance cutscene in The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence

Finally, The Rawlings is a survival horror game. Survival horror as seen in games such as *Silent Hill* (Konami) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom) is a video game genre (as opposed to action survival horror which is more of a first person shooter meets survival horror such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog)) that tends to favour environmental storytelling and gameplay mechanics that include light combat, exploration and puzzle solving. These games also tend to have fewer NPCs, leaning more on environment storytelling and level design. Moreover, there is an

established relationship between survival horror and the Gothic (Kirkland 108-122). Survival horror is one of the closest genres in video games to the Gothic literature tradition as it treats the game environment as a representation of the emotional and mental space of the player character rather than staging the game level as the backdrop to where the gameplay takes place. As I was doing my theoretical review on queer Gothic studies, it became clear to me that making a survival horror game would communicate the theory I was drawing from the Gothic the strongest.

While I have outlined design decisions above that would traditionally fall outside the category of level design such as character animation, I wanted to demonstrate that all my choices were informed by my investigation into queering space and level design in video games. To answer my research question, if level design is about the design of space in a game environment that serves to support a certain mood in the specific narrative arch and as a backdrop to a specific gameplay mechanic then queering level design expands on that by understanding on gamespace as a dynamic body that is contingent on the nuances in the relationship between player, game narrative, gameplay and space. I am reminded by the stage design of *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett in 2014 at the Young Vic in London, UK where Winnie, the main protagonist of the play is completely embedded waist-deep by the environment, a huge mound in the centre of the stage. As the play progresses from the first act to the second act, the mound grows and goes up to Winnie's neck. The level and gamespace is a monstrous body tethered to the player and other elements in the game with its own identity, story and motivations.

Reflections and Future Research

Making games is hard. Making a game by yourself is even harder. Making a game by yourself in 5 months seemed impossible. However, I am pleased that I did everything myself in the end. Conducting the autoethnography as well as designing, programming and making art for my game prototype was a deeply illuminating and gratifying process. My research and methodology also presented many challenges along the way. Although my thesis focuses solely on the spatial elements of the cruising area inside Stanley Park, it was difficult to leave out documentation of the other participants in the space, as they were also important contributors to the overall experience of Stanley Park. I would encourage future researchers on this subject to design a research methodology that is able to be inclusive of other participants of cruising spaces which may lead researchers on prototyping a queer multiplayer game.

A second challenge was to create the game myself. I originally intended to hire a programmer to help me script the game, but I still couldn't find anyone suitable by December, so I decided to do it myself. This was a monumental task, especially for someone who only has a basic command in game programming with no background in computer science. Although I shocked even myself with what I was able to accomplish, I would encourage future researchers in this field with more programming experience to focus on queering level design from a scripting perspective as well. Due to the fact that I decided to take on the monumental task of scripting the entire game myself, I put off the art making part until the very end and I wish I could have polished the visuals more. Despite this, I am extremely proud and happy with the final result and I will continue working on it after the thesis exhibition to finish it.

This chapter, *The Rawlings: A Queer Video Game Prototype* describes the video game prototyping process in this research creation project, from my engagement with the queer Gothic

to my autoethnography in Stanley Park, to designing, programming and creating the art for *The Rawlings*. It showed how I instantiated the findings from my theoretical review and autoethnography into designing a video game prototype which in return, contributed to my exploration in the former. My aim of this research creation project was to create a video game prototype that challenges and expands on the current literature of queer game studies, and to create a queer video game that is radical departure from current queer video games that embraces and celebrates the darkness and messiness and the punk roots of queer. The next chapter I will document the numerous public presentations I have given on my research as well as nod to the earlier iterations this thesis has gone through.

Dissemination

This research project has gone through numerous iterations, but it all originated from one paper I wrote in Dr. Keith Bresnahan's Issues in Environmental Design course taken in the fall semester of 2017. The title of that paper was called *Queer Materiality in Video Game Spaces: heterotopia, virtuality and sexuality*. I presented that paper at graduate student conference organized by the art history department at Western University in London, Ontario called *Inward<->Outward* in January 2018. In March 2018, I presented a second version of the paper, which was called Cruising *Heterotopia, Queer Play in Video Game Space* at another graduate student conference organized by the philosophy department called *Considering the Contemporary* at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. In April 2018, I presented the paper once more at an annual conference held at The Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York called *Theorizing the Web*. In July, my paper was accepted to the annual *Canadian Game*

Studies Association conference which was part of Congress 2018 at the University of Regina. This was a big accomplishment for such a young scholar like me. Unfortunately, I fell ill two days before the conference and ended up at the emergency room and could not attend. Lastly, I rewrote many different sections of the paper and included a new section on my autoethnography at Stanley Park and presented a new paper, now called *Cruising, queer play in video game space* at the annual Queerness and Games Con held at Concordia University in Montreal in September.

I am grateful that my research and research topic have been well received by the academic community, and I am especially thankful to have been offered so many opportunities to present my research publicly.

Conclusion: When All the World is a Hopeless Jumble

> *Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high*
> *There's a land that I heard of, once in a lullaby*
> *Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue*
> *And the dreams that you dare to dream, really do come true*
> Garland, Judy. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Wizard of Oz, 1939.

In the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* directed by Victor Fleming and produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Dorothy played by Judy Garland, gets caught in a tornado and escapes the ordinariness of black and white Kansas to the extraordinary and colourful Land of Oz. Throughout Dorothy's new adventures, she befriends a group of characters such as the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion. Together they defy all odds and unite with their positions of social differences to defeat their threats and obstacles. An iconic coming-of-age story, central to Dorothy's capacity to grow, adapt and overcome in this new virtual world is

memory. In the Land of Oz, Dorothy's memories create a space that allows her to interpret and re-imagine her way to a greater life (Castiglia and Reed 73-112). Memories gave shape to Dorothy's desires, collapsed time and hybridized space (both the real Kansas and the virtual Land of Oz), alienating homelands but also creating new forms of belonging (Castiglia and Reed, 73-112).

The Wizard of Oz has been celebrated by gay male subcultures not "as a wholesome validation of heterosexual family values...but as a celebratory affirmation of queer difference." (Farmer 47). The story of Dorothy and the "friends of Dorothy" (a "friend of Dorothy" has become a code word in gay male subcultures to denote a gay man) is canonized by LGBTIQ community as a symbolic narrative of queer experiences and biographies and an affirmation of queer identities (Farmer 47). The narrative of the Wizard of Oz as well as the biographies of its characters have deservedly received attention and analysis from queer theorists. However, another central element of Wizard of Oz that has not received as much attention in queer scholarship is how the Land of Oz, which includes Winkies Land, Gillikins Land, Munchkins Land, Quadlings Land and of course, Emerald City is a rather queer space itself.

In the "Marvellous Map of Oz", Munchkin Land is represented on the left side of Emerald City, suggesting that it is in the West, and Winkies Land on the right, suggesting East. In fact, West and East are reversed in the Land of Oz, Munchkin Land is East of Emerald City, but represented on the left while Winkies Land is in the West but appears on the right of the map. Many readers either overlook it or mistaken the map's reversed orientation as an error. Drawing from *Queer Phenomenology* once again, the disjointed cardinal directions in the Land of Oz is significant as it suggests a queering of space through its disorientation. Moreover, the lands in the Wizard of Oz represents a place and space for Dorothy to reimagine a better future in Kansas.

Although filmmaker John Waters have expressed the irony and sadness over Dorothy's return to drab heteronormative Kansas as opposed to staying in queer utopia (Waters), this may also suggest that experiences of virtuality can also offer us new tools of resilience and hope in our day to day reality.

Digital spaces have become an integral part of many queer people coming-of-age and their day-to-day experience in the physical world. This thesis proposes that queering of video games space is necessary and critical to open new possibilities video games to become important tools for queer people to imagine and to enact alternative futures in a world full of straight paths, defined edges and one single landmark. My project is indebted to and inspired by past artists, scholars and activists such as the Situationist International and Henri Lefebvre who were deeply committed to reimagining humans' relationship to urban space as a politic for resilience and liberation. My goal is to demonstrate that through the queering of game space, we may begin to see how video games might become potential sites for the queer political imagination.

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Appendix A: Stanley Park

Fig. 13 A different entrance to the cruising area, a log is placed to gesture towards it.

Fig. 14 Homophobic graffiti around and inside the cruising area

Fig. 15Assortment of markings, graffiti and rubbish in the cruising area. From top to bottom and left to right: Penis graffiti on a tree bark, "I Heart Uncunt Azn Cock" graffiti on tree log, Arrow sign drew in the dirt of the ground, Various rubbish

Fig. 16 Entrance to cruising area from Lees trail in October 2018

Appendix B: Before *The Rawlings*

Fig. 17 Screenshot of Club Baths

Appendix C The Rawlings

Fig. 18 Screenshot of motion capture work

Fig. 19 Using the mocap data in a game environment

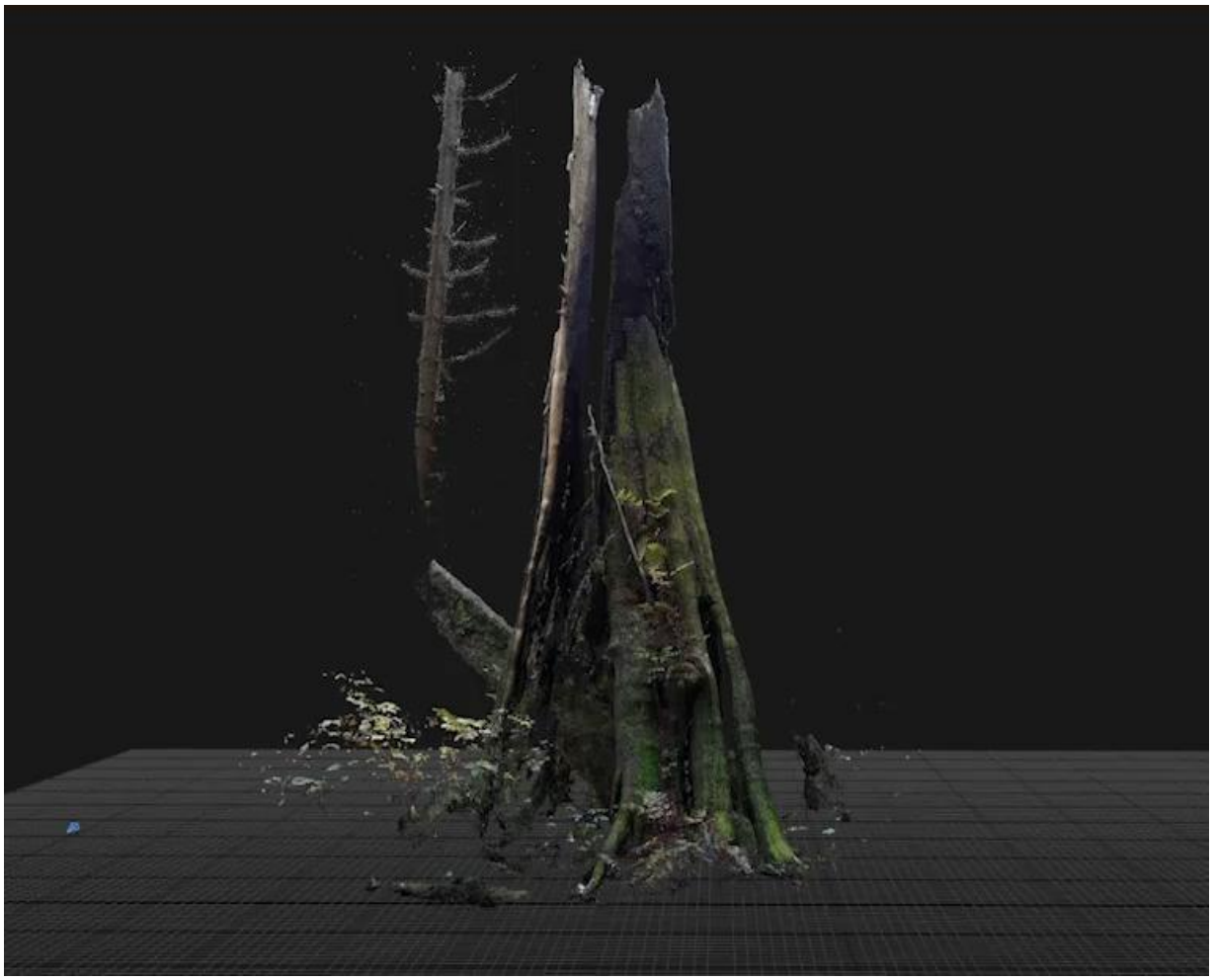

Fig. 20 Photogrammetry model of a landmark inside Stanley Park

Fig. 21 Screenshot of early version of The Rawlings

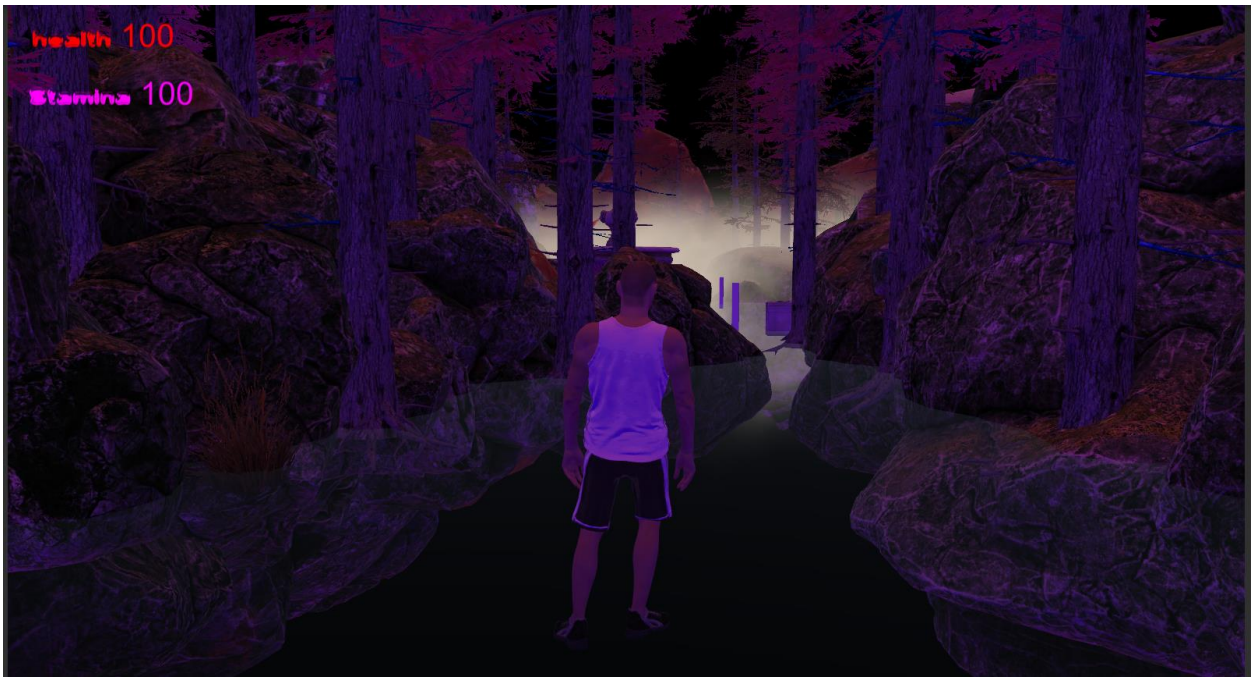

Fig. 22 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence

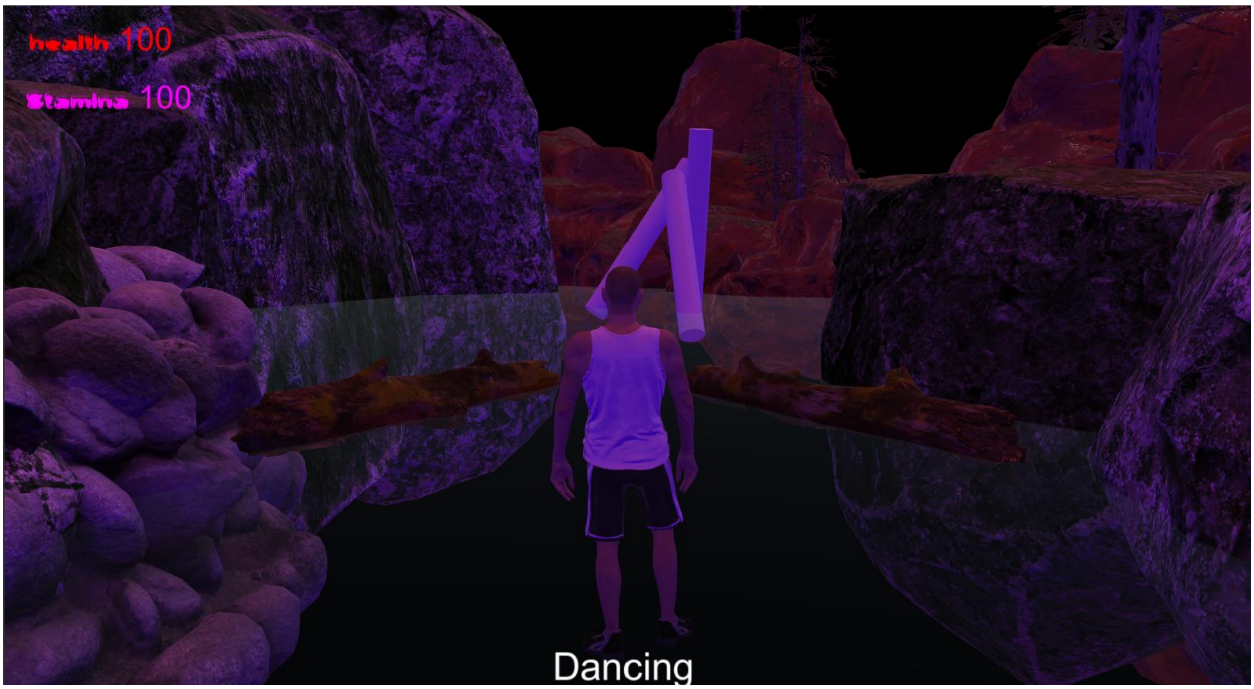

Fig. 23 Screenshot of The Rawlings 4 weeks before defence

Fig. 24 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

Fig. 25 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

Fig. 26 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

Fig. 27 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

Fig. 28 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

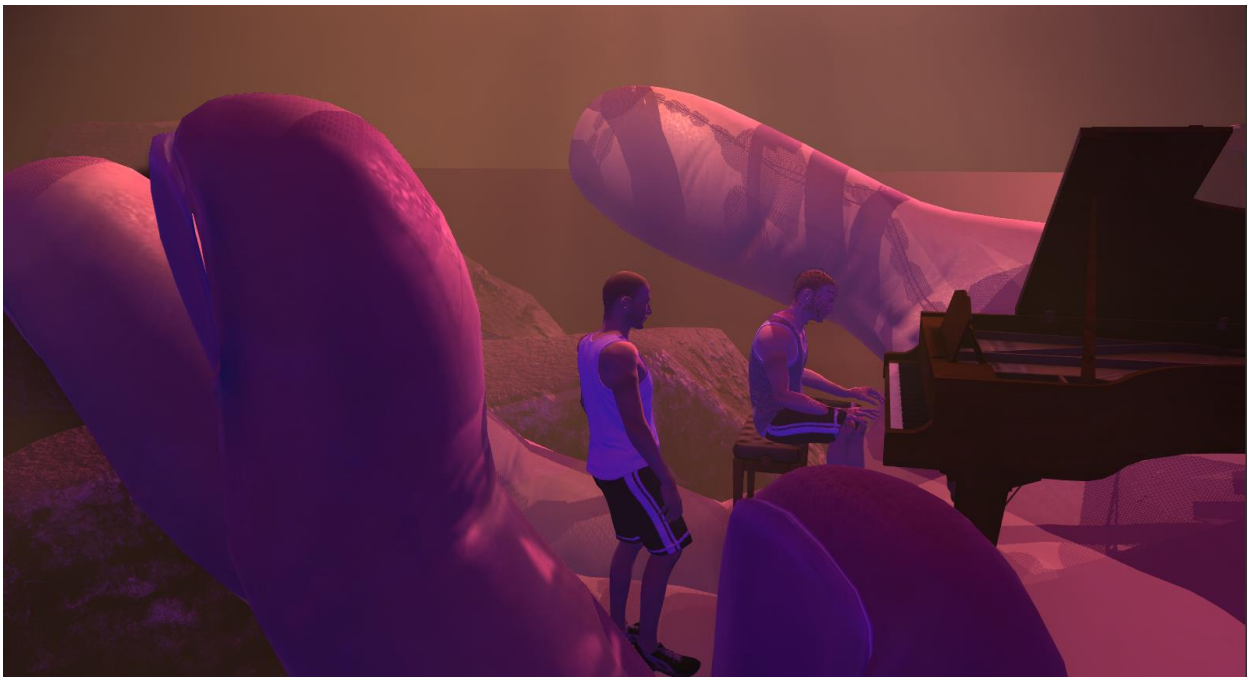

Fig. 29 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC

Fig. 30 Screenshot of The Rawlings presented at the thesis exhibition show at TMAC