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**Abstract**

In AAA games, minority representation is still scarce and often misrepresentative, but the indie games scene has many examples of inclusion of marginalized groups and minority experiences. How can videogame mechanics be used to better represent the experiences of marginalized groups in AAA videogames? This thesis uses the concepts of procedural representation and character identification to examine rule based play of people with disabilities and people who are transgender in player characters in two free independent videogames. The analysis focuses specifically on player interaction with minority characters to determine how players can identify with them and how processes model experience. Implications for future game development are briefly discussed.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On Wednesday, March 19, 2014, Bioware Montreal Game Designer Manveer Heir hosted a session titled *Misogyny, Racism and Homophobia: Where Do Video Games Stand* at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, California. The event was described online in the session scheduler as intended to “take a close look at the games we create and examine them with a different perspective than normal: how do video games hold up when we examine their contents for potential racism, misogyny and homophobia” (*Misogyny, Racism and Homophobia* 2014)? However, according to Charlie Hall of gaming news website Polygon, the hour long speech from the *Mass Effect* veteran was not simply a glance at how these marginalized groups are represented in games but more a ‘call to arms.’ Heir, in addition to highlighting the current presentation of queer people, women and racial minorities in modern videogames, encouraged the crowd “to push back, to stand up and help change the way minority groups are represented in games” (Hall 2014: 2). Rather than his originally announced narrower focus on only misogyny, racism and homophobia, according to Hall, Heir broadened his coverage to a variety of social injustices including “misogyny, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia and other types of social injustice” (Hall 2014: 3).

“We should use the ability of our medium to show players the issues firsthand, or give them a unique understanding of the issues and complexities by crafting game mechanics along with narrative components that result in dynamics of play that create meaning for the player in ways that other media isn’t capable of,” Heir said (Hall 2014: 5). “These negative stereotypes effect the identity of individuals in these groups. They affect the way people think and treat others in the real world, and perpetuate the social injustices that occur in these different groups” (Hall 2014: 3). The way videogames as a medium portray and allow interaction with their subjects is more important today than it has ever been as games have a larger audience and more ingenuity than ever, allowing them to do more than they have ever been able to do before.

Despite what many people in modern culture seem to think, gamers are no longer a niche audience and arguably haven’t been for quite some time. The dismissals and brush offs of videogames as unimportant recreational toys is ludicrous: ‘I don’t really play games so...’

paired with patronizing sneers are far too common. In fact, the majority of people who play videogames have never been the elusive minority that they have been cast as. Similar to the groups whose representations are up for analysis here, society as a whole seems to have cast gamers into a culturally negative stereotype. It's odd is that the stereotype is so antipathetic as, unlike most stereotypes with smaller populations, this is a category that statistically the majority of Americans fall into.

According to the Electronic Software Association (ESA), which releases a yearly report on the current demographics of gamers, as of 2013 more than half of all Americans play videogames, which is more than 183 million. 62% of this number plays socially with others, rendering that lonely outcast stereotype laughable. This group of considerable size isn't just playing on cell phones or in browser windows subtly hidden from cubicle snooping bosses because, according to the ESA's report, 51% of U.S. households own a gaming console, and those that do have an average of two. While some would have you think that gaming is the pastime of children with fewer responsibilities than their parents, they would be kidding themselves because the average age of a gamer is 30-years-old.

As for gender, when it comes to male or female as the binary under which the survey reports it, the divide lies at 55-45% with men leading as expected, though not nearly at the margins that might be thought considering the demographics of videogame protagonists (white and male). Surprisingly, women 18 and older make up a larger percentage of gamers than males under the age of 18. The image that comes to many people's minds when they hear the word "gamer" of either a man living in his parents' basement or a middle school aged boy dodging homework after school is obviously far from the truth according to these numbers. This fact barrage opening the argument presented here begs the question of why these images and ideas of gamers are so prevalent. Further, they lead us to wonder what other stereotypes of gaming and gamers aren't exactly accurate.

As negative as society's conceptions of gamers are, their view of the games they play is no more positive. If the gamer identity is associated with characteristics like laziness, childishness, and indifference to reality, then the games they play are seen as the source and cause of these ill attitudes. Every time a tragedy occurs if someone who played a videogame in the last ten years enacted it or was somehow involved, it is a wise bet that an association will be made between the game and the act committed. This stereotype isn't helped by the traits predominant of the most popular and well funded games in the industry, First Person Shooters, which tend to be ultra violent and depict white cis-men, that is men whose gender



identity lines up with their birth sexual organs, in dominant power roles gunning down other white cis-men or worse: racial and socio-cultural minorities.

Videogames are by no account the first medium to be generalized on the basis of the characteristics of some of their members. It wasn't too long ago that people feared the actions that the novel might lead people to take. But, unlike the reading of books or the viewing of television which both host immersion and interactivity of their own kind, games are an action-based medium with worlds that must be entered and require input from the player within their worlds in order to 'come alive.' This characteristic inherent to all videogames as what defines them as a medium is likely the root of arguments for their capacity to stimulate certain negative behaviors in their players, and why a distinction is made between them and other more passive mediums. However, some offer an alternate view as to how the immersive and interactive capacities trademark of videogames can affect players.

In *How to Do Things with Videogames* Bogost explains that interactivity as one of the key benefits, rather than negatives, of games compared to other types of media. While we observe what is taking place in a book or in a movie, when we play videogames we become practitioners of that action. This is not to say that all games are incredibly sophisticated in how they allow the player to participate, frankly many games are made up of regimens and tools over art and challenges (Bogost 2011: 141), the idea being that games that focus on regimens are less innovative and expressive than more artistic games featuring challenges for the player. Videogames, Bogost and many others in the field of game studies say, should not be judged only on what can be deemed as the negative action they allow players to take, but the positive action as well. And do not be mistaken, many games, as you will see here, allow for much positive action.

Videogames as a medium are new for their ability to accomplish a particular level of involvement; the first medium with longevity beyond the spur of the moment *Duck, Duck, Goose* that we have created capable of this feat. This characteristic interactivity is one of the medium's defining attributes. With the requirement of user input or action, the subject is arguably closer to the videogame than to the novel or movie, which is the source for much of the criticality brought to bear upon them. However because videogames in their nature are constructions of simulated worlds, as we will delve into and further explain when we discuss Bogost's conception of procedural rhetoric, they also provide us with certain affordances that other mediums do not. Rather than being written accounts about worlds, they can both become those worlds and become entirely new constructions of conceptualized worlds. This is not something overlooked by theorists and thinkers in the discipline of Game Studies.

Hilde Corneliussen in her work on the construction and presentation of gender in the MMO *World of Warcraft* in *World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism* calls attention to games' potential due to their propensity for playing host to these interactive synthetic worlds. Synthetic worlds, independent of reality, can be created and bent to the whims of their creator(s) and allow for play with perceptions and constructions of cultural models that the player can interrogate via operating within the simulation. The ability to model gender in a specific way that can exist contrary to reality is of special interest here in her discussion of *World of Warcraft's* constructions of gender as it is not bound by the rules or constraints of reality (Corneliussen 2011: 65).

However, constructed worlds aren't exclusive to videogames. Literature, television, and film have the capacity to deliver worlds and realities subject to the whim of their creators, but there are further implications for granting people the ability to act inside of this world rather than viewing it from the outside or reading a description of it. Videogames as an interactive medium allow for their audience to take those steps further, beyond simply observing these constructions to acting within them and manipulating their constructions.

One of the key aspects of interactivity in these simulated environments is their ability to simulate social interaction, whether it is in the form of a single player role playing game that allows for play as a character in interaction with NPC's or an MMO that allows players to meet others who have similar and differing experiences around the globe. It is specifically play in simulated environments as marginalized characters that is of interest in this project as videogames are addressed for their exclusive type of representation of marginalized groups.

## **1.1 Research Questions**

How can videogame mechanics be used to better represent the experiences of marginalized groups in AAA videogames? In order to understand and answer this question, we must first answer the question as to how videogames model and share meaning using Bogost's work with procedural representation. From there, we can then discuss how players' interaction with these processes can lead to identification. Then we can use these concepts to break down the representation of people with disabilities and people who are transgender in the selected titles.

The background of this thesis is rooted in game studies, forming a critical examination of a two different independent games created in recent years. By understanding many of the

implicit characteristics of how videogames work and issues with representation in other media, it is proposed here that we can break down and analyze how these videogames present or model queer or disabled people, experiences, and identities with the intent of determining how they represent these two marginalized groups to the player by using methods native to the computer: processes. It is theorized here that this inclusion in videogames is especially important considering how players interact with videogames as a medium, which will be explained in the following chapters.

Further, the important connection between these two very different games is how they present these marginalized groups to the player: as characteristics of the player's character rather than characters with which the player interacts through their own. This raises the issue of how the player identifies with their character rather than another character in the narrative of the game. While accounts of experiences as a disabled or queer person in the first person are many in literature and film, those that model these positions for the audience to be placed into are few as this ability is characteristic of games. It is theorized here that by understanding what is occurring in the representations in these games, their meaning and the techniques by which it is delivered, that future representations of marginalized groups to the player can be improved upon and applied to games with even larger audiences.

## **1.2 Methodology**

As the goal of this thesis is to form an analysis of two contemporary independent videogames that contain representation of a marginalized group through a player character, the research presented within this thesis is done primarily to contextualize and frame the observations in the analysis. In order to understand how a videogame generates representation of its characters, one must understand how games tell their stories. However, prior to diving in to the subjects themselves, one of the primary goals to be achieved before approaching videogames with a goal of study is to answer the question of exactly "how" these games should be interacted with, and indeed how others have undertaken the study of this young medium.

As this thesis's purpose is an informed analysis of a videogames, which differ from a book, show or film which can be read or watched respectively with little difference in what is meant by the use of those terms, a liberal amount of space must be devoted in determining how the artifacts in question are to be approached, elaborating on what it means to 'play.' Just as in literary analysis where there is a distinction between close reading, skimming and

many others, in gaming there is some debate on how the videogame should be experienced in the pursuit of an informed analysis varying by lengths of time, skill level, and involvement in terms of the depth at which the game is examined between the shallow experience of speed running the main quest and deeply plodding through every nook and cranny that the world has to offer. There is enough contention on this topic, even in the less academic world of previewing and reviewing games, that it is worthwhile to briefly explain why stating ‘play’ as the methodology is not self explanatory and elaborating on how *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi* will be played herein.

### 1.2.1 A Brief History of Game Studies

According to Corneliussen and Rettburg (2011: 7) in the “Introduction” chapter of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* which is a collection of works from a variety of disciplines centered on the study of the aforementioned hugely popular MMORPG, the academic study of videogames is fairly young considering the amount of time that computer games have existed. While videogames have been around since the 1950’s - becoming popular via arcades in the 70’s – the field of game studies has only been an independent academic field in its own right for 13-14 years, a comparably short amount of time. Like the medium, the field is young and the full scope of its area still being explored and established.

Games, as in the general term referring to all manifestations of play or sport, have historically not been held in high esteem for study by aestheticists and theoreticians. However, the advent and subsequent popularity of videogames moved gaming from a temporary and non-ephemeral state to a physical carrier more permanent with increased longevity, making games available on demand to analysts and researchers, and thus moving games closer to “the work of art” (Aarseth 2004: 1). While the move to digital opened up space for games to be examined, Aarseth points out critically that this sudden transcendence into permanency had the effect that videogames were mistakenly not treated as a new cultural object requiring a new methodology for study.

Rather, he states that videogames were, and often still are, analyzed haphazardly by those trained in visual or textual analyses with whatever tools are at hand (Aarseth 2004: 1) in what he negatively describes as an act of copying and pasting theories from other disciplines - specifically mentioning film theory, narratology, literature and art history - so

that they can be re-confirmed. In his opinion, this move would have been better forgone in favor of presenting well-argued original analyses that break new ground in the study of videogames. This is not to say that keeping theories from other disciplines in mind when observing phenomena in games isn't important. In fact, theories about the examination of videogames examined in this thesis harken back to other work on textual and visual representation in film and literature and will be discussed and used to frame the approach in addition to theories on disability and queerness used to inform the analysis, but confirming that these theories are evidenced in games is not the end goal, interesting as their recurrence may be. The inclusions of these theories are, in fact, complementary to the work included on representation singular to the videogame medium. "Importing and applying theories from outside fields such as literature or art history can be valuable, but not always and necessarily" (Aarseth 2004: 7).

Ragnhild Tronstad (2011: 254) clarifies the importance of studying games as their own medium further in her work on character identification in *World of Warcraft* by arguing that videogames in particular have their own aesthetic experience, different from other mediums. She argues that videogames cannot be analyzed or observed based on "traditional theories of aesthetics," because unlike viewing a painting or reading a book, games require input from the player in the form of play within their world in a variety of ways. This necessity of play present in videogames interrupts any possibility of free or disinterested consideration of gameplay and its accompanying immersion. She acknowledges that immersion can be instigated by sound, graphics, or story as is the focus of theory Tronstad adapts to videogames (film being a medium with great examples of this occurrence), but in games these are extra-ludic factors (simply put, outside play).

While work in other disciplines, particularly queer studies in light of the topic of this thesis, is valuable, the distinct differences of videogames from other mediums must be appreciated. One cannot approach a videogame like they would a book, a film, or a show, etc. Each one of these mediums delivers an entirely different experience to their audience on the basis of their method of delivery alone, even if that does not determine the message.

As a keen example, *Gone Home* (2013) has been often described as "interactive fiction" and evidences why it is so important to remember the "interactive" aspect of this genre and not simplify it in comparisons to purely written or spoken narratives, even if those types of media are employed within the atmosphere of interactivity. Interactivity is the key aspect to experiencing this story and if one were to write a descriptive book about and including all of the elements of *Gone Home*, the experience of reading it would be entirely

different from that of playing it. It is arguable, as will be described in its analysis, that in removing from it the aspect of interactivity much of the potency of the experience would be lost. In attempting to make the coming out story of a girl in a somewhat hostile home impactful, potency is obligatory, and that potency manifests in the player's ability to move through a dark, empty house amidst a thunderstorm uncovering clues as they creep along the creaky floors discovering the story.

Unfortunately the view that videogames were a medium requiring their own method for study was left unaddressed and the search for methodology, what should have been the initial goal of those seeking to study games, was left remarkably absent for some time (Aarseth 2004: 1).

### 1.2.2 A Methodology of Play

Aarseth (2004: 1) maps out a starting point for building a methodology to study videogames with *Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis*, pulling from past work in the discipline such as that of Konzack who outlines seven different layers of computer games in his effort to construct a methodological framework: hardware, program code, functionality, gameplay, meaning, referentiality, and socio-culture (Konzack 2002). Attention to each one of these layers would effectively contribute to a complete study of a single videogame, but Aarseth concedes that depending on a particular researcher's interest, one layer might be more important than another, though none should be examined in isolation. If one has an interest in representation, for example, particular importance is likely placed on gameplay, meaning, referentiality and socio-culture, but one cannot ignore the existence of the hardware that might determine accessibility based on factors like location or class, or the program code that is the underlying language that dictates every aspect of how the game appears to the player and allows the player to act within the environment.

When it comes to aspects implicit to the medium like Konzack's layers, Aarseth attests in his approach that there are three dimensions that characterize every game in a virtual environment, or videogame as we call them here in shorthand: gameplay, game structure, and game world. Gameplay is made up of how a player interacts with the world, game structure dictates what it is possible to do within the game world and game world gives context for the other two dimensions as the simulated environment in which the game takes place.

Because of computers' natural ability simulate most other phenomena, Aarseth explains that no one field has a lock on computer game (or videogame) research. However, he expresses his opinion that each of these dimensions of a videogame is tied to specific research perspectives (Aarseth 2004: 1). For example he specifies gameplay as a realm for the social sciences, but it could be said that limiting or restricting a perspective to a single aspect of the game is too narrow and creates limitations for informed research. Story is almost always tied to gameplay and game world with exceptions only in the purest of sandbox games like *Minecraft* (2011) that has no storyline tied to the game as an un-modded unit (mods have been created in order to set goals or competitions between players). Specifying the unmodified unit is important as mods can be made to the game in order to set specific goals and change both the appearance and function of different models in the game that includes changing the existence or interaction of a story with the environment.

A study of representation begs a focus on gameplay and game structure, but game world provides important context for what takes place in these two dimensions, especially when determining such factors as realism. In order to present a full account of representation in a game, it is important to observe how each of these dimensions affects the player. This employment of cross-dimensional observation is not specific to representation either, rather a whole host of research disciplines could likely benefit. A study of architecture in *Minecraft* (2011), for example again, would require both examination of the game world for materials and their location, gameplay for how players and the game's designers go about building structures, and game structure for the rules which limit how blocks of grass, wood, stone, etc. can be placed one on top of the other and interact with the player and environment in general. But even understanding all of these dimensions, the question remains how the researcher should go about experiencing these aspects of the game in order to provide an account and Aarseth is dutiful in laying out various approaches.

One of the most important aspects of creating a methodology for studying videogames is determining how to access each of the subjects. Just as books are read and television is viewed, it seems simply common sense that games are 'played.' However, there is a lesser known view that because videogames are written in code, that they should be examined at that level as well. In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost (2007: 62) addresses and responds to this view as it pertains to his study of procedurality in games. He argues that delving into the code that generates the game as players experience it is not necessary for understanding the game's rules.

While he concedes that a breakdown of figures and forms is often established in analyses of verbal rhetoric, a videogame's code, unlike the words of a text, is not typically accessible to the player or to one studying a particular game outside of the developer. Accessibility may be limited for multiple reasons including a lack of understanding of the variety of different codes used to write games and because this code is often intentionally hidden in order to restrict others' ability to copy or steal techniques. Bogost refers to these two different styles of analyses as 'white box' and 'black box' (Bogost 2007: 62).

He explains white box or glass box analyses as "to watch a program's effects and identify actual approaches or problems in its code" (Bogost 2007: 62). The term glass box implies that the analyst can actually see through the box and into the game. On the other hand a black box analysis is to "watch a program's effects and extrapolate potential approaches or problems in its code" (Bogost 2007: 62). In this situation the black box is opaque and the analyst cannot see into the game's code but rather must determine the code's function by the game's performance.

While these two types of analyses typically refer to a task assigned to a tester, they also serve to describe the kind of analyses being put into practice here. The goal of this thesis is not to examine the selected games in order to find breaks, glitches, holes or other problems typical of the tasks of a QA tester, but rather how each game accomplishes representation of queer themes to the gamer using game mechanics. As Bogost says the code of a game is typically not accessible to a gamer; this analysis is purely interested in games at the level of the player experience.

"A procedural rhetorician should strive to understand the affordances of the materials from which a procedural argument is formed." He continues, "it means understanding the affordances of hardware, software frameworks, and programming languages" (Bogost 2007: 63). While it is useful to understand that the experiences of playing these games are rooted in their code, the specific codes that motivate them are not of interest. Of interest here is the level of the game at which the player experiences it, not the particular algorithms that motivate that experience. We are interested in the play of these games in a black box fashion, which is not as simple as it might seem.

In the place of a literacy in terms of the many types of code that lie just beneath the surface of the videogame interface as we interact with them, Bogost advocates for a different kind of literacy (Bogost 2007: 63). Just as we are interested in how gamers interact with these artifacts through play, Bogost is interested in studying how games make their arguments through this same interaction informed by procedural literacy. "This means playing a



videogame or using procedural system with an eye toward identifying and interpreting the rules that drive the system” (Bogost 2007: 64). Arguably, many gamers play in this style as understanding, accomplishing, and exploiting the rules of a game allow for one to more easily overcome them and ‘win.’ This critical interaction is the way an active participant who understands that rules exist in a game plays; it divides them from more casual gamers.

This critical style of play is employed here and is how Bogost’s concepts of procedurality and procedural rhetoric, discussed in the Theoretical Orientation chapter, will be understood and used to take apart the representations in the analyzed videogames. Still, Aarseth argues that playing with a critical eye is not quite enough to accomplish a full or complete study of a particular game. He proceeds to outline some of the different styles of play in terms of the amount that a game should be played as well as the dimensions that exist in every game which play host to their structure.

While Aarseth (2004: 3) points out three main ways to acquire knowledge about games: information from developers, observation of play, and play, he stresses that play is the best form, allowing for study of the aesthetics of games via direct contact with the object of study (2004: 1). However, play is not as straightforward as one might automatically assume: sitting down in front of the television or computer with a controller or keyboard and ‘playing.’ Aarseth clarifies that there are different modes of play that analysts can engage in when studying a particular videogame: superficial play, light play, partial completion, total completion, repeated play, and expert play (Aarseth 2004: 6).

Partial completion specifies play until a certain quest, storyline or perhaps goal is completed, which would be effective if the subject of study is only a short subplot or sidequest, whereas total completion requires playing the game from beginning to end and would be appropriate for a study of an aspect or aspects of the game that pervades the entirety of the storyline, gameplay, or graphics. Superficial play, brief play of only a few minutes, and light play, where some progress is made but little of meaning, are the two least involved and reveal very little about the subjects. Repeated play and expert play, on the other hand, are the most involved, the most time consuming, and the most informative, with both entailing playing a game from beginning to completion repeatedly (Aarseth 2004: 6).

### 1.2.3 Affinity Spaces Informing Play

While Aarseth (2004: 6) still sees the varying levels of play he describes as the best methods for data collection, he does note the importance of both play and non-play in informing analyses. Rather than either being mutually exclusive, he recommends a methodology of play combined with other sources relevant to the subject of study. In his list of possible sources of information outside of the game itself, he includes: previous knowledge of genre, previous knowledge of game system, other players' reports, reviews, walkthroughs, discussions, observing others play, interviewing players, game documentation, playtesting reports, and interviews with game developers (Aarseth 2004: 6).

James Paul Gee concurs with Aarseth's declaration of the importance of what happens outside of the game yet still because of a game in his presentation *Learning with Video Games* on the characteristics of videogames that make them such effective learning tools. He points out that it is often overlooked how much is beyond the game as a package by itself, socially and otherwise (Gee 2012: 0:20). He uses *World of Warcraft's* social raiding dynamics to exemplify how a game can be so much more than what it is on the surface: killing creatures in dungeons with groups of people. In this case, skillsets must not only be optimized by and for the player, but in conjunction with others in the party (Gee 2012: 0:50). While the relevance of this point may be a bit murky, it becomes clearer with his analysis of *Portal*, a single player game, and the social aspect that has grown organically revolving around groups of players coming together and dismantling the complex physics that are a key feature of gameplay, a scientific community encouraging learning of complex concepts that otherwise might not exist.

Gee stresses that games are only a part of the picture when analyzing an aspect of a game because many take that experience into an affinity space, that is a space where people come together due to a shared interest or 'affinity' (Gee 2012: 3:00). These affinity spaces can include those noted by Aarseth, expanded to include: discussion forums (405<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division), fanfiction websites ([fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)), gaming news websites (*Gaming Illustrated*), tumblrs, chat groups, and even shared modifications of the released game. These in particular are all areas of creation, responses of different kinds to the games they revolve around, and have the possibility of allowing for insight into the player's response to their interaction with a game.

Lifelong gamers moving into game studies likely bring with them a wealth of previous knowledge of genre, knowledge of consoles, discussions of games; knowledge that isn't easily acquired through intentional research, but rather through lifestyle. This

knowledge and experience isn't just a leg up, but is perhaps impossible to ignore as it informs how they play and understand the subjects. It is not possible to know how much these experiences affect how a researcher plays and interprets a game, a fact that must be kept in mind reading the analysis. In addition, other players' reports, reviews, discussions, and even interviews play a part in understanding how particular videogames are received and responded to by others. However, it is good to take opinions on forums and gaming news sites with a grain of salt as they often lend themselves more easily to negativity than objective examination.

One of Aarseth's (2004: 6) key points is that it's difficult to set forth a definitive methodology of how to go about studying or analyzing games because, like with other media, it varies greatly depending on who is doing the analysis, why, and what game(s) in particular is/are being examined. These variations are also another reason to be wary of making generalizations about the entire medium based on only a few examples. Bogost (2011: 6), in *How to Do Things with Videogames* advocates for a holistic approach concerned not only with the ecosystem as a whole (videogames as a medium being that system), but each micro-ecosystem (individual game) by focusing on each component and functions of each game. He justifies this arguing that within each larger medium, smaller forces exert smaller waves of change and media micro-ecology steps in to ask questions of these microhabitats, not to make a judgment about the habitat as a whole but to reveal a medium's possible impact on society with attention to a single corner.

Typically though, Aarseth (2004: 6) advises starting with a research question, as we have done here and like with most research, and examining games that might hold the answer. He advises that the analysis should reflect on the sources used, with attention to selection criteria and where they originated (Aarseth 2004: 7). And in the thought of many both within the field of game studies and members of gaming culture as well, he cautions against generalizations made about the entire medium on the basis of a few token examples from the rich variety of types and subgenres that videogames have to offer (Aarseth 2004: 7).

#### 1.2.4 Merging Play and Beyond

Many works have been published both explicitly outlining a methodology and demonstrating methods for analysis in action. Chapter 2, the Theoretical Background, will expand on the different aspects to focus on in the study of videogames with representation in mind.

That said, repeated and expert play will be the primary methods of acquisition when analyzing the videogames of interest, informed by developer interviews and player responses in the form of the affinity spaces mentioned above, specifically game reviews. Because the focus is on how disabled people and trans people are being represented in the selected videogames and how the player interacts with them, it is imperative to observe that representation through an informed frame firsthand rather than through another, whether by observing play or through recollection.

The very notion that representation of minority groups in specific videogames can or should be examined originates in Bogost's (2011: 2) idea that technology, as a medium, does not perform a specific action based on its status as a method of delivery and Hall's (2014) GDC lecture that called for new investigation in how videogames can be used for social justice. The belief that videogames make people more violent in reality is an example of a contrasting view that would link a symptom to a form of technology as a whole; more relevant, the notion that videogames by default are made for cis-men and encourage heteronormative or homophobic ideas that is the belief which we propose there is evidence against. The dominance of this idea allows for the industry to excuse itself from responsibility, gets in the way of recognition of games that are made for all audiences with all audiences in mind, and serves to limit the positive impact that videogames can have.

However, while the media that videogames carry may be able to affect us emotionally and cognitively, its effects are not guaranteed by or inherently tied to a medium. "It influences us, of course, changing how we perceive, conceive of, and interact with our world" (Bogost 2011: 2), but this influence is not positive or negative by virtue of how we interact with it. Videogames do not have inherent consequences by themselves.

Rather than taking this view, many get caught up in pseudo-firefights, arguing in a binary that leaves little room for critical examination of actual examples of artifacts from technological mediums. For those of either mindset, either technology is an uplifting mechanism or a damning one. In his argument for the study of specific games and their functions over making generalizations about the overall usefulness or effects of an entire medium, Bogost (2011: 2) contrasts the arguments of Nicholas Carr and Clay Shirky. "Carr argues that the Internet has contributed to a decline in the careful, reasoned, imaginative mind of the period between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution" (Bogost 2011: 1). On the other hand, Shirky argues that the Internet has fostered enhanced possibilities for coordination and information sharing, citing the ability of a Korean boy band's fans to effectively protest imported beef (Bogost 2011: 1).

Regardless of individual opinions on this band's specific employment of the affordances of the Internet, both arguments make overarching and inaccurate assumptions about the nature of technology and assume that it must always be either positive or negative when in fact the data they reference are both valid examples of the medium being used in radically different ways. Just as cable subscribers can watch *The Jersey Shore*, the presidential debates, and *Life of Birds* all on the same television set, perhaps even on the same channel package; readers can read Virginia Wolfe and Stephenie Meyer; newer technologically based mediums like the internet or videogames should be afforded this allowance for diversity. The Internet is relevant for the variety of ways it can be used, from the mundane to the remarkable (Bogost 2011: 3)

In *Reality is Broken*, Jane McGonigal doesn't presume to say that videogames should or even could be used as adequate test environments to solve big real world problems, but that videogames can be used for their ability to engage players and change how they think about the world (McGonigal 2011: 298). She points out that while videogames may not be able to accurately model every single aspect of real world issues, they can be used to help understand and solve them. While her focus is primarily on impressing upon gamers practical issues like cooperation, activity, oil and food shortages, etc., games can also be used to help address social issues that aren't so cut and dry (McGonigal 2011: 351). The point is that they 'can be,' not necessarily that they always do or don't. "The medium is the message, but the message is the message too" (Bogost 2011: 5).

In the same line of thought, videogames should not be understood as simply a medium for leisure lacking meaning or application beyond a way to de-stress after work or on the weekends. That type of rhetoric is dismissive and discourages meaningful interrogation of all of the possible uses and applications of the medium (Bogost 2011: 7). Just as photography's definition of bending "light through an aperture" (Bogost 2011: 3) is likely its only commonality across all of its uses and types of photographers around the world, videogames can likely be considered a mature medium for the already documented variety of its manifestations (Bogost 2011: 3). In order to understand a medium's cultural influence, Bogost (2011: 3) presses that the field of uses that it might have must be examined and explored.

This belief is not in contrast to his previous work on procedurality as a defining aspect of games, or the work of thinkers like Marshall McLuhan who suggests that the properties of a medium should be the focus of study. Rather, this work should supplement our understanding of the defining aspects of a medium like videogames. Bogost

acknowledges that the properties inherent to videogames, such as his work on their status as models of experience rather than visual or textual descriptions of experiences, precede their content but “only gets us so far” (Bogost 2011: 4). Thus a combination of these two methods of study will be utilized here, inspired by Bogost, in an effort to accomplish an examination of both content and of delivery in order to provide a full picture of how these videogames represent queerness rather than only a fraction of it.

Three years after Aarseth’s call for videogames to be considered an independent medium deserving of its own methodologies for study, Bogost declares that videogames still struggle for acceptance as a cultural form (Bogost 2007: vii); four years after that in *How To Do Things with Videogames* he continued this call and asked others to “stake out your own tiny corner of videogame earth and see what strange playable creatures might thrive there” (Bogost 2011: 148). Three years later, many of these corners of the videogame ecosystem still lie unexamined.

Bogost cites critic James Newman as saying that there are two reasons that videogames are still not accepted despite their popularity: that they are perceived as a child’s medium to be grown out of and that they are deemed trivial, lacking cultural and social function (Bogost 2007: viii). As we discovered with the opening of this chapter and subsequent discussion, both reasons are laughable considering the demographics of gamers and the richness and variety of experiences possible when we have the opportunity to become participants rather than passive viewers or readers. According to Bogost, where many argue that time and comparisons to dissimilar fields are the best solutions for maturing this young medium, he proposes that “creative progress on the part of the development community and critical progress on the part of the academic and journalistic community require a deeper knowledge of the way videogames work” (Bogost 2007: viii). This thesis is documentation of work in pursuit of that noble goal in an effort to make a worthy contribution to appreciating the legitimacy of this medium.

In order to discuss how representation of minority groups can be accomplished in videogames in such a way as to foster positive change, it is crucial to study exactly how this group is being presented in all dimensions of each videogame up for analysis: gameplay, game structure, and game world. Further, it is important to take into account the context in which these games are being developed, marketed, and played. As we will discover, perceived profit seems to be a huge motive both for a lack of representation of many identities, and increased representation of another, as well as how they are included in these games procedurally when they do appear.

In this case, the single corner of the ecosystem that is videogames we are interested in interrogating is how specific games portray individual members of marginalized groups to the player and how it might affect the gamers that play them. In this case, the validity of whether or not games are a legitimate object of study is not up for argument. The value of the medium is not being discussed, rather what is up for examination are one of its possible functions.

What will be discussed is how the following games employ Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric and Tronstad's character identification in the representation of people who are disabled and a person who is trans. In order to do this the games will each be played numerous times and then they will be broken down into how the player interacts with the processes in each game to produce meaning in the context of the other aspects of the game including narrative, visuals and sound.

### **1.3 Overview of the Subjects**

Each of the games selected for this analysis are very different in some respects and very similar in others. While the narrative themes and mechanics of both games are very different, they are similar in that they place the player in a position likely unfamiliar to them both in games and reality. While many games may include these kinds of characters, these two specifically place the player in the role of these characters rather than an able or straight character interacting with disabled or queer characters.

#### **1.3.1 You Are Disabled Overview**

A free browser based platformer, *You Are Disabled* takes what is typical of the genre and exposes the player to a different reality by changing the dynamic. While gamers are typically allowed to be very able in their choice environments, this title shows the player what it is like to live in their world without having access to all the abilities to which they are accustomed. *You Are Disabled* is a powerful commentary on the face of games and specifically their title characters and how videogames can be used to tell the stories of those who are typically lost in the fascination with being 'able.' While the themes presented are quite different from the four other games in this thesis, the design principles and goals are the same: representation that makes the player think beyond just the scope of recreation, moving into reality.

### 1.3.2 Mainichi Overview

The one game featuring a trans character in this analysis, *Mainichi* is a free downloadable title that has gamers play through a typical day in the life of a pre-transition male to female transgender person, specifically modeled on the experiences of its creator. This game takes a biographical approach in an attempt to aim more at sharing an experience, rather than creating a competitive and challenging environment in which players strive for a high score, which is very much unlike *You Are Disabled* in that respect. Like many independent games, this title has arguably failed to garner an audience sizable enough to make a huge impact.

Players are thrust into the world of this character that they know nothing about (again, unless they do some research outside of the individual game unit), to complete tasks without much direction. Tips as to what the player is supposed to do appear in thought bubbles above the main character's head, and at times the player has the choice to complete these... or not. The plot of the game begins at home and is about the character's journey to and fitting in at a coffee shop where she is meeting her friend. The interesting aspect of this game is that people's treatment of the player character changes depending on the actions they take in a way that helps share to cis players the importance of "passing." Both of which will be further explained in the analysis portion of this title.

## 1.4 Overview of Chapters

In an interview prior to his session at GDC 2014, Heir spoke with Adam Sessler of Rev3Games, a YouTube channel devoted to the gaming industry. Heir addressed the question of whether developers shy away from new territory when it comes to representation due to the level of scrutiny it might bring by saying, "I know if we bothered spending some time researching and vetting our writing and our characters and our thoughts with other people in the industry that everyone is capable of making fair representation that don't have problems" (Heir 2014).

The introduction has discussed why videogames are such an important medium with some of the statistics covering the demographics of gamers in 2013, a strict dismissal of the notion by many that games are to be dismissed as relegated only to children or flighty time wasting. In 2014, it is simply ridiculous that a multi-billion dollar industry that influences



what millions of people read, view, and play every single day, adults and children, has its creations so often overlooked as illegitimate cultural artifacts. It's a denial of reality. The determination that examining the representation of queer individuals in this medium is an important task rides on the premise that videogames are an important, relevant, and influential medium.

If the assertions made in the introduction of this thesis weren't convincing enough, the research done by so many that will be presented in the literature review examine how videogames affect their players: how they work to make them feel a certain way or reflect on certain issues. Play is not simply recreational and does not depart from the conscious when the platform is shut down and play is not simply moving ones hands on the keyboard or gamepad in a specific combination to "win the game." This research will be used to inform the play of the selected games so that an intelligent analysis and discussion can be constructed about the presentation of queer characters and themes in these titles and how they are situated in each game's overall structure.

The Analysis portion of this thesis will break down the play of both of the selected games, discussing how they represent their respective issues through their rules, play and narrative.

The Conclusion chapter will close this thesis with a call for answers to questions left unanswered about minority representation in videogames and briefly discuss what lessons can be taken from these two games and brought to AAA titles.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

The following theoretical background explains the two main theories used to understand and analyze the two videogames in this thesis and focus on how convincing or argumentative representation is executed in videogames as a medium. After breaking down the methodology for conducting the analysis in terms of how the games will be approached and played with an informed background in the introduction, this chapter makes up and informs that frame or background of how to understand game mechanics as they interact with the player to form representation.

It's worth noting at the forefront of this review that the literature collected on representation in videogames is much more substantial than that directly on representation in other mediums. This is intentional; not an oversight or evidence of ill-planned research. Rather, as was discussed in the Introduction, the interest of this thesis is primarily to understand representation, the portrayal of a particular group, as it appears in the videogame medium independent from other media. In light of this, a substantial amount of research is included on how representation is accomplished in videogames and how players interact with and experience it in order to inform an original analysis of how disability and queer themes and people are being presented to the player; rather than research done primarily on disability and queer representation in other mediums transplanted onto videogames.

That said, research on disability and queer representation borrows from the mediums of television and various texts due to an apparent lack of examination on representation of these groups in this medium, but not for how it occurs in those mediums but rather for the possible issues that may also appear in games such as: inclusivity, ableism, heteronormativity, and the implications of media designated for a specific marginalized audience. Put simply, the interest is more so in how queer people and disabled people are represented in these games and how the player can interact with them and less so in developer intent or the legitimacy of these identities in the greater conversations in queer theory. While these issues are important, greatly so, they are simply not included here.

The bulk of the research that follows from game studies and videogames in general is collected from a wide variety of academic sources and ranges from examinations of persuasion inside a model as a central part of gameplay to the use of play to allow for

identification with characters, and representation in the various forms it occurs in games to the importance of paying attention not only to what or who is in a game, but what or who is not.

## 2.1 Procedural Rhetoric

In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost proposes that similar to the study of persuasion in the form of visual rhetoric heralded by the rise of film, photography, and other visual arts, videogames as a medium bring into focus a new kind of rhetoric that relies on the action based nature characteristic of the computer: procedurality (Bogost 2010: ix). While visual and textual rhetoric are certainly still applicable to their respective artifacts when they are hosted by the computer, procedurality is a comparatively new method of inscription and its study allows us to describe the very building blocks of how computers express meaning in an entirely different manner from those more established mediums. “I call this new form procedural rhetoric, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures” (Bogost 2010: ix). Procedural rhetoric is the examination of the special affordances allowed by the inscription in processes by way of code singular to the computer, the focus for Bogost being specifically in videogames.

Raley comments on Bogost’s work in her examination of tactical media, including persuasive games, that in his work there is an emphasis on games being more than just entertainment. “Just as military sims suture education and entertainment, so, too, does persuasive gaming critically comment on matters such as war, national security, and immigration while still retaining the ludic component” (Raley 2009: 85). That is, they form their commentary via gameplay, interaction with the rules and processes that “generate a perspective and a way of thinking about formal systems” (Raley 2009: 85).

Bogost explicitly defines procedural rhetoric as “a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created” (Bogost 2010: 3). “Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code through the practice of programming” (Bogost 2010: 29). But, as with most definitions pulled straight out of a dictionary or encyclopedia, they say what the

thing is without really explaining it. We can best understand and apply the term by breaking it down into its parts.

The concept of procedural rhetoric can be divided up into procedurality and rhetoric. Procedurality, in shorthand, is the way we understand and create processes that model conceptualizations of how systems or objects, social or mechanical, operate. Rhetoric, far from applying only to language or text, can be simply defined as effective persuasion in all of its possible forms. It logically follows when these two terms are combined they mean to use processes persuasively, specifically computational processes (Bogost 2010: 3). Still, these explanations are loaded with specialized jargon that, while accessible to programmers and those familiar with game design, in order to properly break down and analyze games based on these concepts it is prudent to further understand what these terms mean.

To start with, rhetoric is a term that most are familiar with even if they don't grasp its long and changing history and explaining each one of its possible definitions will only unnecessarily complicate what Bogost is interested in and what we are interested in applying. Though Bogost spends a great deal of space in his book breaking down its history, understanding rhetoric's various, changing definitions throughout history does little for the goal of understanding how arguments are formed in videogames. Rhetoric is commonly understood to be associated with persuasion and using or practicing rhetoric is considered the same as practicing methods and means by which we argue. But defining it this way implies an overtness or explicitness; it comes to mind associated with public debates or lawyering in a courtroom. Bogost is interested in a different sort of rhetoric and calls briefly on the work of Kenneth Burke who kicked off an expansion of what is viewed as 'rhetoric' (Bogost 2010: 20).

Burke expands rhetoric beyond its connection to explicit persuasion, specifically oral, and associates it with identification which is how we as humans use symbolic systems verbal and non-verbal to achieve identification in order to "... form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents" (Bogost 2010: 20) and to "bridge the conditions of estrangement that are natural and inevitable" (Bogost 2010: 21). Burke simplifies this concept further into a succinct description that Bogost includes, making it especially easy to break down. "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning' there is 'persuasion'" (Bogost 2010: 21). Basically, where there is meaning there is persuasion, where there is persuasion there is rhetoric.

Meaning -> Persuasion -> Rhetoric

When we precede rhetoric, which is associated with the construction of meaning, with procedure or procedurality, we can focus our discussion specifically on rhetoric in videogames. First we must understand exactly what procedures or processes are as they relate to this medium. Processes are inherent to computers. They are present in the very algorithms that are at the basis of all software development. But this is hardly a good way to explain this concept to those who lack an intimate knowledge of code and how programming and game development is accomplished. We need to make the language, for our purposes analyzing games, less specialized.

More easily we can understand processes or procedures as rules or practices (Bogost 2010: 7). In using the term 'rules' what is referred to is not only very overt examples like 'Don't put your toaster in your bathtub' or 'Don't cross the street without looking,' but more implicit rules as well: socio-cultural practices, social rules, scientific laws, economic rules, human limitations, etc. Rules like gravity that, though not visible, dictates movement among other things. Rules that dictate that when greeted that it is polite to respond. These are not rules that only restrict action, but motivate it as well as allowing for it. While they can be very much set in stone like gravity, they can be broken or subverted as well; prejudice versus acceptance for example.

Bogost (2010: 5) specifically references return policies to illustrate his point about the different types of processes and how they can develop. In the case that one buys a DVD player and takes it out of the box, plugs it in, and finds that it's broken, immediately there is likely a practice in place that allows for the customer to exchange the item for a new, undamaged product. However, in the case that one buys a DVD player and doesn't immediately unpack it due to how busy they are, two weeks later they open it and plug it up to find it's broken, they will likely find that the return policy has expired. If they went to the store, they'll bargain with the salesperson, explain the situation, reason with them and it's possible that they may be swayed to allow the exchange (Bogost 2010: 6).

However, in the case that the return system is digital, a piece of software or a website takes your complaint, it may be that because your return time is outside of their return policy it may not allow for the demand to be made at all. Rather it may check the date, find that it is outside of their guarantee, and decline the request. "Situations like this help explain why we often despise the role of computers in our lives. They are inflexible systems that cannot empathize, that attempts to treat everyone the same." But it's important to note that when the clerk, customer service representative, salesperson, or what have you decides to believe the customer and exchange the product anyway, they are not 'breaking procedure' but creating a

new one, “for example, a process for promoting repeat business, or for preventing a commotion - and seamlessly blending them with the procedure for product returns” (Bogost 2010: 6).

This point is extremely important for our conception of procedures in that they are not simply rules that restrict action, but also allow for it or even motivate it. “Procedures found the logics that structure behavior in all cases” (Bogost 2010: 7). It is a process or rule that motivates the very idea that one is able to return a product, and likewise places it within a certain time limit, and likewise that time limit is motivated by the practice of breaking an item and trying to return it. These logics constitute processes, very generally. Using computers we can materialize them and make them interactive.

Videogames lend themselves more easily to representing processes than a medium made up purely of text because while texts are made up of words describing processes, videogames are simulations made up of modeled processes; they represent processes with processes that are experienced and interacted with by the player. Bogost argues that, “Even though other transcription techniques may be wholly driven by a desire to represent human or material processes, only procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process” (Bogost 2010: 14).

Processes exist in the very foundations of computers, allowing for how we interact or interface with them via the graphical representations they show us on screen. In videogames, these algorithms dictate how everything in the simulated environment behaves. Bogost compares these ‘procedural figures’ to literary and filmic figures “like metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche” in an effort to assist in fostering understanding of processes’ place in how players experience games. When it comes to inscribing processes in the computer, procedural figures “are strategies for authoring unit operations for particularly salient parts of many procedural systems” (Bogost 2010: 12-13).

These procedural figures are recurring and allow for such game mechanics as movement, collision, and gravity that are presented to the player as actions such as jumping, firing weapons, or moving around in the simulation. Everything title from the original *Tetris* to *Call of Duty* utilizes these figures or a form of them. And these recurring processes are not singular to videogames. These procedural tropes appear elsewhere in the computer, as is the case with the mouse icon or the scroll bar (Bogost 2010: 13). These procedural figures in videogames come together to form game engines comparable to literary forms like the sonnet, and game genres like the FPS or RPG akin to film genres like noir or science fiction (Bogost 2010: 14).

But despite the comparisons that can be made to assist in understanding the way videogames are arranged from the bottom up in the terms of other mediums, videogames and computer software in general are different in that they represent processes with processes as their native ability (Bogost 2010: 14). Janet Murray, cited in Bogost (2010: 4), previously uses the term procedural to refer to the computer's signature ability to operate and execute rules. Bogost explains, "one authors code that enforces rules to generate some kind of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself" (Bogost 2010: 4).

Procedurality undeniably separates the study of representation in videogames from that in other mediums. While videogames tend to include visual and textual attributes in the form of narrative and graphics, procedurality adds a whole other dimension to representation. Even though these other attributes are present, they are not the defining aspects of the medium and always operate inside the videogame as part of its procedurality. Though dialogue may be written and considered a textual aspect, the player's ability to choose to execute a piece of dialogue is procedural; the ability to choose a character's appearance, though graphics are visual, is procedural; the ability to take actions or for NPC's to take action in an environment, while possibly dictated by a narrative and presented visually to the player, is procedural when it operates under a set of rules rather than strictly on the rails. Because games are an action and interaction medium, these algorithms determine and restrict how representations – whether it is of people, objects, systems, etc. - can or cannot be interacted with or acted upon.

Every single aspect of a videogame is rooted in rules; everything that the player experiences from what he sees, does or hears is limited and allowed by rules written into the program. Rather than writing about gravity, or cultural customs, or a particular person's experience, videogames allow for one to model it in a simulation that can be explored, tested and interrogated by the player.

Though every aspect of the videogame as the player experiences it is motivated by rules, these are nevertheless intertwined with graphics, text and its accompanying narrative. Each with their own accompanying rhetorical study, these aspects and how they interact with processes cannot be overlooked, but must be discriminated between as one examines procedural arguments versus visual and textual ones. The videogame is a package of many different methods of representation, but it is procedurality that we are primarily interested in for it separates this medium from others as where creators in other mediums write describing processes, programmers write processes to model other processes (Bogost 2010: 9). "Procedural representation is a form of symbolic expression that uses processes rather than

language” (Bogost 2010: 9). That’s not to say that representation in videogames only happens via processes, but rather that representations in text and in graphics are embedded in and are subject to the processes that define how the player interacts with them. Like in reality, rules not only limit behavior, but motivate it as well (Bogost 2010: 7).

A prudent analogy might be found in the famed *Fifa* franchise of football (soccer, for Americans) games. The appearance of the players, the ball, their uniforms, the referees and their penalty cards are graphical aspects. What the refs, the commentators, the coaches and players say is textual, as are the menu screens and text interface features. However, how these players interact with their environment - their uniforms soaking with sweat or rain and their movement in the wind, their poorly aimed slide tackle resulting in a card, the coach’s and players’ angry reaction when a card is awarded, that the ball stops against the goalkeeper’s gloved hands - all of these originate because of rules, processes, coded into the game.

While videogames may have graphics (visuals) and texts (narratives) they are not present in a void. Rather, they importantly and notably are present in a context, a simulated world, which restricts and allows how the players interact with them. Because of this factor, the principles for theoretical examination dedicated to these other mediums as they stand independent is imprudent and too narrow for an inclusive examination of a videogame.

When we put these two terms back together, we can understand procedural rhetoric as expressing meaning - rhetoric - through rules - procedures - and as Burke states whenever meaning is produced it inherently involves persuasion. When rules are modeled in the form of a simulation there will always be an argument taking place about what is being modeled. What is played in a game is never an exact replica of the process as it exists in reality, but rather the programmer’s conception of it.

“Procedural rhetorics do mount propositions: each unit operation in a procedural representation is a claim about how part of the system it represents does, should, or could function.” The programmer is making an argument about how something works by modeling it in a simulation. However, it would be a mistake to presume that all videogames form procedural arguments, even if they do utilize processes and interactivity for the player. Games can be very persuasive in ways outside of the game, convincing the player to continue to play or buy more of the game or items within the game, but this is not of interest to Bogost. Of interest to Bogost is how games comment on or make arguments about reality. “I am interested in videogames that make arguments about the way systems work in the



material world. These games strive to alter or affect player opinion outside of the game” (Bogost 2010: 47).

While many games seek to bring the player further in and away from reality, Bogost’s interest in ‘persuasive games’ delineates them as games which do the opposite: move the player towards reality (Bogost 2010: 47). It would be a grave error, however, to assume that game’s need not accomplish both tasks in order to effectively transmit their argument to the player. In order to be exposed to the procedural representation in a game, the player must be first drawn to play the game and this would be where many games that seek to be persuasive seem to fall short. These games that may model systems and practices procedurally, may still not be affective or effective in transmitting their argument if the game fails to appear to the player as just that: a game. If the procedural model fails to be a game then there’s nothing to be played and it may cause the gamer to lose interest, preventing the model or argument from ever being interacted with.

Bogost notes that many games that seek to be persuasive emphasize too much on visuals rather than the persuasive action via procedurality (Bogost 2010: 48). He uses as an example the tendency for an emphasis to be placed on good graphics that may not designate an effective rhetorical argument. However, “visual fidelity implies authority,” and so visuals may play a sizable role in how players perceive a game. We see plainly that games that look better do sell better, and games that look more relative to reality take advantage of that closeness whereas more abstract games may see that their arguments are not easily interpretable.

For example on the side of games that are extremely abstract in their art and thus problematizes people’s ability to understand what is being modeled, *The Marriage* has been described by its creator Rod Humble (2007: 2) as a failure for the explanation it requires. “I wanted a game that the graphics and other elements took second stage,” Humble says. “This is also the reason there is no sound to the game, any element I could remove that got in the way of the game itself I did” (Humble 2007: 3).

Bogost (2011: 13) characterizes what Humble artistically presents in *The Marriage* as procedural representation of an idea, rather than an argument. However, even as simply as two squares, one pink and one blue, processes are being used to model an experience and processes are excluded in favor of these ones. Despite Humble’s intent to remove completely the visual aspect, the presence of pink and blue squares, one larger than the other, and not equal blue or pink squares paired together, makes a statement all its own to the player. While it may not be a procedural argument, a visual argument is being made embedded in the

procedurality of a marriage. This example emphasizes the futility of discarding the visual in favor of the procedural, as the visual is the conduit by which players experience processes.

One should be conscious of the visual whether it is to pull the player in or to make a statement in concert with the acting processes, but that doesn't mean it has to be overly complex. Rather, the visual can be used to emphasize the processes at work to the player. While process is the method that is individual to the medium, it is impossible to ignore that they work in cooperation with visuals and texts. Just as a toned down, abstracted visual interface can serve to make the processes more pronounced, so too can a more realistic graphics set that still fails to replace its procedural aspects.

In *Papers, Please*, the gamer takes the role of a border agent in charge of checking passports and other papers to determine who will be allowed to enter Arstotzka. The entirety of the game takes place inside of the booth at the border, highlighted in dullness by monochromatic colors and a set of rigid constructions and procedures that the player must execute. What is important in *Papers, Please* is the modeling of the experience of a border agent subject to the laws of his country and enforcing them regardless of personal political inclination. A comparison to a cog in a machine would be prudent. The player is just an operator at the border, at the bottom of the bureaucratic food chain, stamping passports approved or denied and applying whatever seemingly nonsensical regulations and limitations are passed down from on high.

The checkpoint, which is the primary setting of the game, serves to give context for the action that the player must take to complete the game. In the dark confines of the booth, picking through papers, profiling potential threats, the act of being an immigration officer turns into mindless repetition in a dark room. However, the processes in action in this title serve to be more than a rhetorical argument for the player to tease out and contemplate.

In the repetition of processes, players sink into and experience the emotional fatigue of this position initiated by the processes at work in the game. Rather than simply being a systematic model of immigration laws that the player must tease out, the player is affected by the laws in that they restrict and force actions to be taken over and over again. Just as in games where players lose themselves in rhythm like *Guitar Hero* or to methodical movement and sighting in *Battlefield 4*, players lose themselves here in the checking of a few details and stamping of a passport. In executing this process the player moves closer to the rhetoric taking place and experiences it as an actor within the simulation rather than simply a player viewing the character from the outside.

## 2.2 Character Identification

In explaining procedural rhetoric, Bogost (2010: 20-21) refers back to Burke's expansion of rhetoric as a basis for his understanding of procedures functioning to produce meaning in videogames. Bogost understands rhetoric as a means to achieve identification in order to form attitudes or induce action by other people. When creating a videogame in which the player is inherently involved, it is important that they identify or relate specifically to the character that they are playing which is their connection to the simulated world with which they are interacting. In puzzle games this isn't necessarily true as the player interacts with the world simply through the control interface and a pointer or other selection tool and play as themselves in the first person, but in character driven games like role playing games, adventure games, platformers and first person shooters, the gamer must play a character.

In many games, the player takes the role of a character that is typically straight, white, cis-gendered, male and able. In many games, one being *Mass Effect 3* which is a game with both queer characters and characters with disabilities, the player designs a character based on their choices and thus it can be made in their own image or perhaps in another's. The player may be exposed to the experiences or limitations of being queer or being disabled, but those positions are relegated to another character and not necessarily the player. Likewise, in *Gone Home*, the player takes the role of a sister returning from abroad and learns of the experience of her sister coming out rather than actually going through that experience first hand. In both, the themes of queerness, disability, and further racism and prejudice, are for the most part located in non-player characters.

In the games of interest in this thesis, the player character is the one that is in a marginalized or minority position. As the player explores the processes of interest, they are explored through the character that they act on. Rather than being processes that are used to model systems separate from the player character, formal systems like economics or politics, the processes in these games are modeling an experience, specifically the experiences of the in-game character's real life counterparts. Rather than being similar to the modeling of economic systems and values in *The Sims*, the games here are closer in their representation to *Papers, Please* as it represents the life of an immigration officer at the border.

Because the player's position in regard to the procedural representation has changed, subject to the system rather than simply manipulating or interacting with it from the outside

akin to changing graphics on the front of a cereal box (Bogost 2010: 33), how they interact with and are affected by the processes changes as well. The process, rather than dictating win or loss conditions or the point of the game, dictates how the player interacts with the game and how the processes affect their play. Different processes and thus different forms of persuasion or rhetoric are taking place when the player character is subject to the rules within a videogame rather than simply enacting or interacting with processes; when a player plays a character interacting with a minority character versus when they play a minority character. In both instances the same processes may be present in the program, but the player's position in reference to them changes and whether they are actually subject to them or simply viewing a character subject to them is at stake. It would be analogous to say that different rhetorical moves are taking place with different effects according to from what subject position the player 'reads from.'

Bogost cites Burke's use of rhetoric as the way in which humans can identify with one another, but players can more than just understand processes objectively, they can be subject to them as well via identification with the character that the processes are enacted on. Being put into the place or role of a character allows them to identify with that character or empathize with them in a variety of different ways. In her chapter in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, Ragnhild Tronstad, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo and has been publishing in game studies since 1998, discusses the relationship of a character's appearance and capabilities with the player's ability to identify with the character they are playing (Tronstad 2011: 249). "There are different ways of understanding 'identification.' On the one hand, identification with one's character may be understood as the player entering a state where he or she has an experience of 'being' the character. On the other hand, identification may be understood as experiencing what the character experiences, but without the feeling of being identical to it — that is, with a consciousness of the character as an entity other than ourselves, but with which we can identify" (Tronstad 2011: 251).

Identification and empathy for fictional characters is not a phenomenon singular to videogames, but it might be said that videogames have a special propensity for initiating this experience and evoking this feeling of connection with a character given that they are being played by the gamer rather than being read about or viewed passively on screen. The very concept of empathetic identity discussed in Tronstad's work originates in Margrethe Bruun Vaage's differentiation of types of spectator engagement in film (Tronstad 2011: 215). Here, we examine how Tronstad takes these concepts and understands them as they exist in the

player of videogames. Given that both of the games analyzed for how they allow for play of a minority character are up for analysis here, how their appearance and capabilities of the character help or hinder the player's ability to empathize or identify with them is important in determining if the representation is affective.

To take a moment to define our terms as well as give context for Tronstad's use of these theories, when Tronstad uses the term 'character' in her work it refers specifically to the character as a representative for the player in a videogame when it takes on or has an identity separate from the player, which she would argue is every playable character - PC's not NPC's (Tronstad 2011: 259). Her focus in the article we are discussing and using to analyze character identification in single player games is on the player's avatar in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. In *WoW*, players can create a character however they desire, modeled after themselves should they fit the narrow options available in character creation, or with an identity separate from the player at the outset which for role players and non-role players in the meta game is still played as an identity separate from their own (Tronstad 2011: 259). She argues that even when a character is created in the player's own image without a separate identity originally in mind, over time the character will develop their own in game identity separate from the player themselves through acquisition of in-game history, making various in-game decisions, and other venues of development such as leveling, class specialization, and questing.

The theory does not only hold true in only massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft*; in single player epics like the *Mass Effect* series where players have the option to even more closely model their character after themselves by the end of the very first of the three installments in the series they would already have a very different character than the one they started with, because it is simply not possible at this point in time to account for an unlimited range of possibilities of choices and decisions in games. This inevitable separation of player and character that takes place in a videogame is an important factor for identification to occur with the character as another entity with experiences of their own (Tronstad 2011: 251).

Identification is also not a simply defined term when describing a player's connection with their character and Tronstad spends a great deal of space explaining how identification happens and what the implications are for the player. Her examination of character identification in videogames is the main concept that will be taken from her work in this reader that focuses mainly on roleplay and game mechanic limitations. While interesting, the

only role of interest for the purposes of this thesis is the one that the player takes when placed in the role of a marginalized or minority character in these games.

Tronstad primarily utilizes the work of Margrethe Bruun Vaage, a former postdoctoral fellow in Trondheim whose work centers on emotions and morality in spectator engagement in film and television and currently lectures at the University of Kent, to explain two different ways to understand identification in videogames: ‘sameness identity’ and ‘empathetic identity.’ Vaage refers to the phenomenon where a player enters a state where they feel one with or the same as the character or a state of ‘being the character’ as sameness identity (Tronstad 2011: 251). Alternatively, empathetic identity as explained by Tronstad characterizes identification where the player does not feel identical to the character, but still feels as though they are experiencing what the character experiences (Tronstad 2011: 251). Because of the nature of videogames to develop a separate identity through gameplay, as Tronstad explains and as was explained previously in this chapter, empathetic identity is much more likely to be accomplished than sameness identity in this medium. Additionally, the games allowing for presentation and play of a marginalized perspective that are analyzed here fail to allow for such acts as character creation that might allow the player to create their own likeness within the simulation, contrary to many other games.

While Vaage’s concept of empathetic identification was conceived in terms of audience connection with characters on screen in film, Tronstad adapts it to understand how players can identify with characters in videogames. More complex and varied than simply experiencing emotionally the same as the character you are playing, Tronstad clarifies that Vaage considers empathetic identity to be on a “continuum of empathetic experiences ranging from the affective to the cognitive, in which true empathy only occurs in the middle position” (Tronstad 2011: 251).

Affective empathy, or embodied empathy, is the purely emotional feeling of an experience. Empathy that is specified or considered purely affective affects players by causing them to feel or experience the same that the character is on screen. A prudent illustration of affective empathy at work in video is the experience of seeing someone endure or react to emotional or physical pain and the viewer feeling an echo or conception of it though they may not know for sure the feeling of that pain. For example, when seeing an American football player tackled incorrectly and subsequently their tibia and fibula snap in an unnatural direction, visible through the skin and muscle of their leg and the viewer feeling the urge to recoil as phantom pain crawls up their shin; seeing someone cry and feeling the urge to cry with them in sadness; or even feeling the urge to laugh with a character without

knowing what is funny. Vaage uses the term emotional contagion, which you can see on the far left end of the spectrum, as a term to describe these purely affective experiences where the viewer (or for our purposes, the player) is affected by the person or character on the screen strictly at an emotional or ‘feeling’ level (Tronstad 2011: 251).

At the other end of the spectrum, Narrative empathy is defined as having an understanding of the character’s experience cognitively or intellectually. The alternate to embodied empathy, cognitive empathy is not purely feeling but thinking or having an understanding. In film, for example, in film when seeing a character make a decision and understanding why or seeing a character in pain and understanding it as legitimate would be cognitive or narrative empathy in action, subscription to the situation presented. Vaage uses the term perspective taking to refer to situations in which the viewer participates in this empathy devoid of emotional involvement (Tronstad 2011: 251).

Tronstad quotes Vaage saying, “Empathy is thus a dynamic phenomenon. It has both an embodied aspect related to emotional contagion, and a narrative aspect closer to perspective taking. Empathy may start through both perspective taking and emotional contagion, but without some element of narrative empathy, we only experience emotional contagion. Conversely, we only experience perspective taking if we do not have some degree of matching bodily feeling. To some degree both embodied and narrative elements are needed for an experience to be empathy” (Vaage 2006: 32-33) (Tronstad 2011: 252). Both ends of the spectrum can be described as exclusive ways of empathizing that can combine to produce ‘true empathy,’ according to Vaage via Tronstad, which is a mixture of feeling and understanding. Real empathy, she argues, requires both for the viewer to cognitively understand the position of the character and emotionally at least somewhat feel what the character feels about what they are experiencing.

While, as we have declared previously, Vaage’s work focuses specifically on film, her thought on empathy easily makes the leap to games as if anything they are more involved when it comes to the viewer. It could be said that in order for the player to truly empathize with the character that they are playing, they must experience what is happening on screen somewhere near the center of this spectrum: feeling what the character they are playing is feeling, but also cognitively understanding their character’s position in the world and the actions they can or should take. Tronstad warns, though, that while narrative empathy is one of the most prominent points in Vaage’s argument, videogames as an entirely different medium are experienced differently by the consumer than film or television and thus may put more emphasis on embodied or emotional empathy (Tronstad 2011: 252).

In order to understand and explain how the experience of embodied empathy takes place with characters during playing videogames, Tronstad utilizes the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist at Claremont Graduate University, on the aesthetic experience called flow: a term from the discipline of psychology used to characterize total immersion in an activity (Tronstad 2011: 253). Tronstad succinctly describes the achievement of flow as it takes place in the context of videogames saying, “The character now becomes an extension of the player while still being perceptible as a separate identity with which the player may identify through either embodied or imaginative empathy (or both), depending, among other things, on the visual, fictional, and ludic context of the gaming situation” (Tronstad 2011: 254). For gamers entering flow during the state of player, this would be total immersion into the game where the hands, controller and screen seem to disappear and the gamer enters a state of optimal experience, but it is important to keep in mind that the character is still acknowledged by the player as a separate entity whose experiences are that of the character not the player, that they are not one and the same (Tronstad 2011: 254).

Tronstad states that in order for flow to take place in the play of a videogame there are a few prerequisites. Perfect balance between the challenges of the game and the player’s ability to complete them, an internalization of the game’s controls, and knowledge of the in-game environment lower the distance between the player and the character and thus make flow more likely to occur (Tronstad 2011: 259). Some games lack traditional level-based challenges; *Gone Home*, for example, is an exploration game where the player is free to take time to pursue objectives without the hindrance of time or in-game enemies. The game also takes place in a real world context and an environment familiar to the player, which means having to acquire less knowledge about the game’s world in order to subscribe to the legitimacy or structure of the story. But that does not necessarily mean that flow is more easily acquired, though the margin of difficulty being significantly lowered may allow a wider audience to acquire access to this state of embodied empathy.

While it might be thought that access to flow in the play of a particular game is more universal with the diminishing of a skill requirement, allowing more people to experience empathetic identification with the subject, it is more so that as Tronstad says, “there must be a perfect balance between the challenges posed and the player’s ability to overcome them” (Tronstad 2011: 253). It may be, in fact, that games that lack challenge fail to encourage the experience of flow for another reason: that they encourage the opposite in a kind of detachment of disinterest. In the same way that a repetitive activity of ease such as



indiscriminately clicking a button may be easy but prone to encouraging boredom and detachment, a game without challenge more likely fails to encourage flow necessary for embodied empathy in favor of broader chances for the player to engage in narrative empathy; *Cookie Clicker* versus *Guitar Hero*. However, make a game too challenging for the player to engage in flow with its interface and accompanying engagement with the character sacrifices not only embodied empathy, but access to the narrative as well. Put simply, in order to bring about flow (if identification for ‘true empathy’ with the character is the goal), it is imperative that the developer balance difficulty evenly with the player’s ability to succeed without sacrificing narrative aspects in order to allow the player to cognitively engage with the character.

If, as Tronstad says, flow is an imperative part of fostering player identification with characters, then flow is an important aspect to consider when discussing the affectiveness of a particular game’s sharing of a queer or disabled experience via a player character. In discussing role playing in *World of Warcraft* using the concepts of empathetic identification and flow, the argument is complicated by the fact that in role playing in an MMORPG like *WoW*, there are three identities to consider: the player, the character in game, and the conception of identity that the player wishes to role play through the character in game alongside of the capacities of the player’s in game representative. When it comes to single player games that lack the character creation dynamic, the situation around these concepts is simplified in some ways and complicated in others. In the games we are considering here we have: the player and the character. While this may be problematized by the player’s attitude or division from their character, the player is not invited to produce or create an identity in the guise of the character: he is given one.

Taking on new identities as a player is not a new concept: Master Chief, Lara Croft, Sam Fisher, Mario, Duke Nukem, the list goes on, are all examples of identities that are already present when the player arrives. What happens when the player is invited to take the role of someone very different from that list of some of our most popular characters in gaming culture is one of the key points of this thesis presented in the analysis. While Tronstad’s argument that embodied empathy overshadows the appearance of narrative empathy may be true in a very player controlled and driven MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*, a game lacking a main character independent of the player or even a main storyline of experiences that the character must be played through, many games do rely on important narrative aspects, even when it is embedded in the procedurality natural to videogames discussed in the previous section. The narrative nature of videogames is still present and

important, but better embedded and interacted with in way different from other story telling mediums. Even in games like *Battlefield 4* or *Halo 4* that emphasize their combat game mechanics in play against others online over story, there is a narrative present in the construction of a player position as the assault class soldier or the elite spartan, even if the ‘story mode’ is never even touched.

Narrative empathy, when discussing marginalized groups in videogames, is far more prominent than embodied because of how rare it is that the player is put into the minority or other perspective. In *Gone Home*, the presence of narrative and an attempt at fostering narrative empathy in the player is more pronounced because the player’s character is an extension of the player interacting with the character that is quite literally telling the story through narrative elements such as notes left in the form of diary entries left for the player, read to the player in the writing character’s own voice with its accompanying intonations and emphases. We can see by this example alone that one can hardly make a blanket statement about narrative empathy in games. While the pitches in her voice and your relationship to her in game as you play the sister evoke the feeling of being in her situation, it is narrative elements that bring this about. That said, this dynamic changes when instead of being the character hearing about these experiences, the player is subjected to them during play. Procedurality allows for this experience and is why when discussing play of a character embodied empathy is so important, even as narrative empathy contributes to the player’s experience.

When Tronstad discusses flow in her chapter of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, she is doing so in order to analyze the achievement of flow in roleplay outside of game mechanics or alongside game mechanics in *World of Warcraft*. She concludes that roleplay’s capacity for development of separate character identity, both from oneself and the game, makes empathetic identification more likely than sameness identification. In an MMO it is quite common and a well-established trend, with devoted servers, for people to roleplay in the game with their characters with other people, but ‘roleplaying’ as in playing a role is common of videogames in general.

Even in a series like *Mass Effect* where the player has an influence on the content of their character, it is limited by game mechanics not present in purely meta roleplay. Characters are developed in these types of games through decisions made within guidelines restricting and allowing for appearance, personality and background. Therefore even in the case that players might start out modeling their character after themselves, they would be steered away from sameness identification, as videogames on the whole cannot yet account

for limitless choice possibilities. Furthermore, the games discussed herein do not give the player the choice of being disabled or being queer: they are given no other alternative.

For some gamers, they may be playing in these titles someone who is like themselves, but most will not and in any case no two experiences are the same. No room is made for sameness identification here as the character and the player are not one and the same, rather the player is given the opportunity to take the role or position of the character for a time giving the developers the opportunity to have the player experience empathetic identification with them. From Tronstad's use of these concepts from film and psychology to evaluate how a player can connect and empathize with their character in *World of Warcraft*, we can see that this is a factor to be considered when discussing the development of games that put players in the position of an other, and in analyzing how they will be affected by that play. It may be that the gamers here, *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi*, have an edge in their procedural modeling of these experiences when it comes to how the player will interpret them because of the position in which they place the player: as the character subject to the rules in place.

While the flow and empathetic identification are not a universal experience for all games and certainly not the be all end all for determining whether a game affects the player, it is an important aspect of the experience of playing as the marginalized to consider. The engagement to look for in such a situation is different from critical judgment and understanding; rather it is engagement that elicits consideration of people who are disabled and people who are queer beyond being an abstract concept or the experience of other that the player will never know or have to deal with and thus does not matter. The aim is to determine if these games open up a space for consideration of these experiences, a space for criticality which can be accomplished in a variety of different ways.

## Chapter 3: You Are Disabled

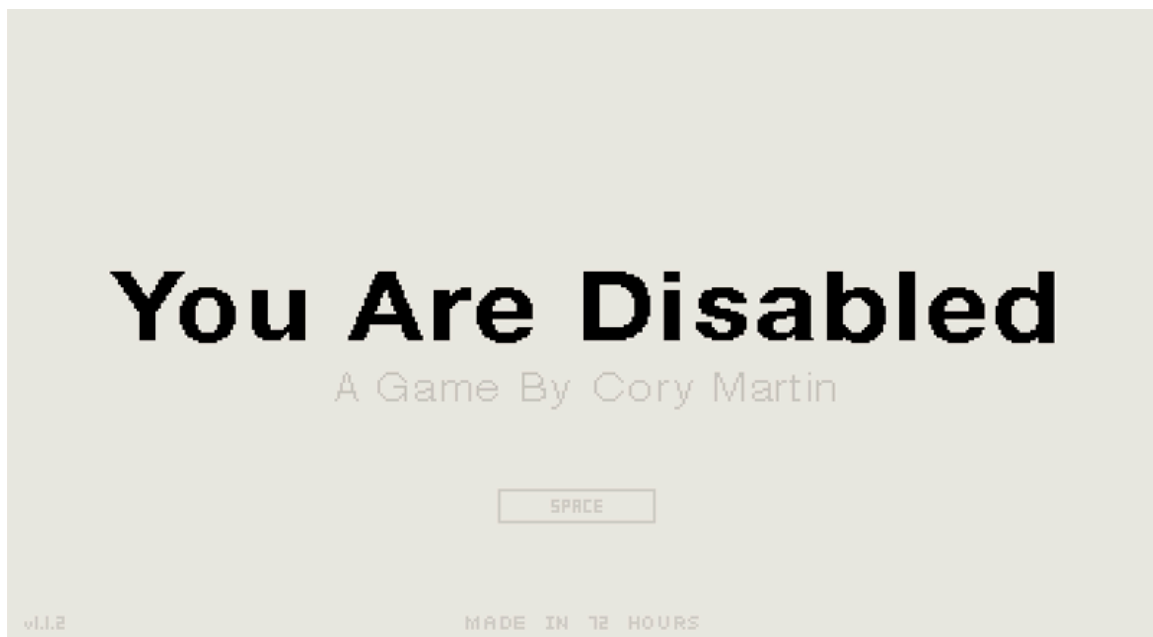


Figure 1. Title screen of *You Are Disabled*

Juxtaposing two very different marginalized groups, those who are disabled and those who are queer, may seem to send the message that these two massive groups that contain an infinitely diverse experiences within them are somehow similar or the same. At the outset, it is important to declare that as not the point at all. Rather, like women and people of color, people who are disabled and people who are queer have been on the periphery of the videogame industry with very few representatives and even less in the most popular of titles. The theoretical background chapter covered sections on how games produce meaning differently from other mediums and how players interact with characters through this unique method of play and identify with whom they are playing. Because the excuse most often given for the lack of inclusion of minority groups is a lack of player interest, of interest in these analyses is how marginalized groups can be represented in games in interesting, engaging, and thought provoking ways for the player not unlike the ways that popular protagonists of triple-A titles are acted as in their respective worlds.

In order to analyze how these two games represent people with disabilities and people who are queer, these analyses will break down *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi* by using the concepts of procedural rhetoric and character identification. Using Bogost's and Tronstad's work, how these games share experiences with the player can be better understood and their

effectiveness discussed. *You Are Disabled* was selected expressly because of how it represents disability in the process of movement in the game, a mechanic that is typically similar across most titles and very much complicated by the presence of a disability. However, that is not the only way in which the game models the experience of being disabled as many other visual and textual elements come into play as well and will be discussed in this chapter.

While it is a risky and potentially alarming move to discuss physical and mental disabilities in tangent with queerness, given that they can be very different, each bears certain similarities that make such a comparison intriguing: both have a history of marginalization in the form of social exclusion that has limited them both in the past and currently, and likelier than not they must overcome hurdles placed in their way by others for aspects of themselves outside of their control. In addition, both can be and are represented in videogames in a variety of different ways with *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi* being only two examples of quite a few instances over the span of videogame history. Characters in videogames that have a disabilities include: Jeff “Joker” Moreau of *Mass Effect*, Kota of *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*, Lester Crest of *Grand Theft Auto V*, and Professor Xavier of any number of the *X-Men* games.

*You Are Disabled* was created by Cory Martin, an amateur game developer, specifically for the Ludum Dare Game Jam, a 72-hour event in which developers and other creators of games come together typically under a particular theme to create short ages under a small time limit of about 48 hours (Martin 2013: 1). *You Are Disabled*, unlike those examples, is not a huge triple-A title. Rather it is a browser based game with a much smaller budget and audience hosted on a few different sites including Newgrounds and Kongregate as well as the website for which the game design program used for its creation: Stencyl. The game design program, which is typically a choice for those newer to game development, requires little to not actual ‘coding’ work and provides developers with an easy to use interface with the various options available in the program. Creators so inclined have the option to dig into the rules in the background behind Stencyl’s interface, but it is not necessary as Stencyl provides in its interface many tools and options designed to meet the needs of the game designer.

“StencylWorks is the tool that brings game creation to everybody. We take out everything that isn’t fun about game creation so that you can focus on ‘finding the fun’ by creating great games” (Q&A with Jon 2011: 1). But though it may be fun, it is still not easy. While the program takes some of the math out of physics implementation, it doesn’t design

graphics, narrative, or the logical work of implementing all the tools that Stencyl provides. It is an especially important factor to note that this title was created using Stencyl, a game design program meant for use by those with little to no actual coding skills, because it allows for the creation of games with little formal education. This low slope of difficulty makes for a more accessible creation tool for those who might be more graphically or narratively inclined or lack the funds with which to pay for classes in game design.

Because the very game design tools utilized in the creation of *You Are Disabled* allows for creative work without dabbling in the underlying code, it further validates the use of black box over white box analyses proffered by Bogost and engaged in here. As the processes in this game are put into place by the designer at a black box level, so too can the game effectively be analyzed with the same interaction with processes in play rather than taking apart the underlying language piece by piece. That the program the designer chose to use is more accessible and cheap does diminish the amount of time and work still necessary in order to produce a game of this caliber in such a short amount of time.

Naturally in line with our proposed methodology and the argument proposed again here, information was primarily informed by play and fleshed out with information and reports both from the developer and players on the affinity space that is the world wide web. Being hosted on multiple sites no doubt helps increase its visibility and allows for observance of player responses to the game, but it does make it more difficult to accurately gauge the size of its audience. We do know that on Newgrounds alone the play count is well over 100,000 plays, hardly comparable to big budget productions but sizable all the same.

Free to play to anyone with a link or able to Google, Bing or Yahoo to find it, *You Are Disabled* can be played on any web browser and mimics the game mechanics common to one of the most common genres in this medium: the platformer. Visit Newgrounds or Kongregate and at any one time there is probably more than one platformer linked from the very front page. Gamers, and even those who wouldn't consider themselves such, know platformers even if they do not know the definition of the exact term. Probably the most famous platformer as well as one of the oldest is *Super Mario Bros.*; not to be confused with 1981 arcade giant *Donkey Kong*, which is also a platformer, but contrary to the former title is more simple and dissimilar from platformers of today.

As it is practically general knowledge in the western world who Mario is and what almost all of the *Mario* games center on, it is truly the best example for comparison in understanding how *You Are Disabled* works and why the developer chose to include particular rules, dialogue, game mechanics and visuals. *You Are Disabled* borrows almost all

of its mechanics or rules from this title and others like it for a very specific reason that can be found explicitly in its title: to represent disabilities. Arguably, playing *Super Mario Bros.*, or at least the rules of the platformer, is an experience many hardcore gamers and even non-gamers are familiar with. *Super Mario Bros.* can be considered an ideal representative of the platformer as Mario has the ability to jump over bottomless pits and see enemies long before they reach him, characteristics that are typical of the genre. The game is by no means easy, but Mario has no faults of his own that expressly hinder the success of the player. The player is limited only by his own reflexes, gaming ability, and enemies of the main character outside of the foe characters in the game: koopas, goombas, etc.

In short, *You Are Disabled* is a platformer, a genre of videogame that centers on navigating a character through obstacles that can be overcome by movement. Each screen is standalone rather than the entire level being one continuous screen, which means that once a screen has been completed there is no going back and when the player dies they simply reappear on the same screen. By using the platformer genre to share his message about living with a disability, Martin broadened his impact immensely in contrast to if he had gone a different direction and used a genre that was far less approachable, less well known or without these very defining and known characteristics. Because the platformer genre is so well known and, in terms of the videogaming industry, quite old, it allows for the rules that are in place in *You Are Disabled* contrary to other games like it to be even more pronounced. It is the effective combination of these concepts of interest that sets forth *You Are Disabled* as a prime example for study as well as comparison to other games attempting to allow players and developers to identify, understand and create complex character representations of marginalized groups.

### **3.1 The Procedurality of Disabilities**

When writing about people with disabilities, in this case a game featuring characters with disabilities that are abstract representations of reality, it is arguably prudent to appreciate the sensitivity of the topics talked about and strive to present a fair, yet informed account. The National Disability Rights Network, a non-profit membership organization that works to advocate for those with disabilities, is just one of many groups that releases helpful suggestions and guidelines when it comes to discussing and writing about individuals with disabilities especially so that they are not inadvertently or unintentionally presented in a

diminishing or negative way in which people are reduced “to a series of labels, symptoms, or medical terms” (*Reporting and Writing About Disabilities* 2014: 1). The work of organizations and guidelines like these are also useful for examining the implications of the textual representation in *You Are Disabled*, which may be seen by some as actively reducing people to a disability in how they present their characters: nameless other than their characteristic that separates them from those who are non-disabled. This labeling is done at the start of each level when the characters are presented to the player with no information other than “You are crippled/illiterate/blind/spastic.”

The introduction at the beginning of each level, which specifically calls attention only to the player’s current disability, is textual rhetoric, but graphically it is notable as well in that the players are not even privy to the character’s face as a ghost like mask conceals it.



Figure 2. The characters of *You Are Disabled*

To clarify here at the outset of the discussion of the game, this visual and textual representation is not meant as an endorsement of how people with disabilities ‘should’ be represented. Instead, what these ghost-like masked characters are likely meant to say is that anyone can have a disability and that there is no defining appearance of a ‘disabled person.’ In the context of the game it might also be said that this is another expression of how people with disabilities are seen in society, as people define them by their disability, rather than them as an individual. The latter theory is more likely considering the procedural argument that the overall game is putting forth regards how people with disabilities are often treated as other, lesser, or broken people; not that they should be treated this way, but that often in horrifying ways they are.

The guidelines put forth by The National Disability Rights Network, while fantastic for informing sensitive writing about these issues in the media and academically, fail to put forth good programming practices thus making it difficult for them to be used to analyze the procedural representation here as well as analyses or creation of videogames that might take place in other contexts. Of course, there is less demand as procedural representation of these groups in games is less common, but perhaps it might be more common if organizations set



out to freely offer suggestions and tips so that developers might be less fearful of misrepresenting these groups which is so often given as the excuse for a total lack of representation at all. Like examinations of the portrayal of queerness, there are a plethora of critiques on representation in the mediums of literature and film, but an apparent hole when it comes to videogames despite their huge audience.

Likely, the lack of research in this area is due to, again like with the case of queer representation, a lack of characters who are disabled. Videogames as a medium tend to be frequented by very 'able' protagonists and a refuge for ableist views as well. The general notion is that gamers want to play 'strong,' 'competent' and 'able' characters, in single quotes because of the incorrect implication that people with disabilities are not or cannot be strong, competent and able. This rhetoric is the same reason that protagonists tend to be male; the generalization is that women don't play videogames even though statistics show a much different demographic picture. It is the use of these words, likely unintentionally, that guidelines like those put forth by the NDRN point out as problematic in what they mean for those they describe and those they do not.

In *Reporting and Writing about Disabilities*, NDRN addresses the importance when writing to "use first person language," a principle common of AP style for newspapers and news articles in general, that the NDRN says is commonly overlooked when the person being discussed or presented is disabled. "Stated simply, first person language places an individual prior to her or his disability." It is immediately apparent that this is not what is happening in *You Are Disabled*, but that does not mean that its message should be dismissed outright.

Because *You Are Disabled* is a game, not a book, film or journalistic article, it must be viewed in a different light based on the message being sent and on the context which is the medium by which it is delivered. Videogames model processes, and here what is being modeled is the experience of having a disability in the context of a platformer; this is not a description of a person who is disabled or their disability itself in a literal fashion or in a world modeled after reality or even how it should be in reality for those that are disabled. Unlike the style of representation and meaning produced in games made that glorify actions, this title is in the business of something very different. *You Are Disabled* is made to inflict upon the player the feeling of what it is like to be treated by NPCs in despicable ways because of something that they cannot change rather than depict that treatment as acceptable and in that venture *You Are Disabled* models a world that is specifically not made for the player and inflicts upon them the unfair difficulty of navigating it.

What sets *You Are Disabled* apart from the typical game is that the protagonist is ‘not able,’ but rather disabled. Instead of a single protagonist that is very much like Mario, there are four characters that the player is put into the role of randomly upon beginning the game. This game takes some of the rules typical of the platformer, specifically the rules that usually aid the player most (their abilities inside of the world to see, jump and run) and turns them on their head. The object of the game for the player remains the same: reach the end of each level. However, their companion on this quest is a character with one of four disabilities that in this environment tend to be more of a hindrance than a help. They are, in the terms that the game uses: crippled, illiterate, nearly blind and spastic. With each of these characters’ play there are a few aspects of the level that changes namely the requirements to succeed.

Most importantly, the rules that affect how the player character interacts with their environment changes, but this is accompanied by both graphical and narrative changes as well. Blindness, naturally, is not only manifested in that the player is told that the character is nearly blind, but that they effectively are as well and their play is undoubtedly affected by it in the blacking out of the screen, illiterate characters keep the player from understanding text and crippled characters on screen cannot walk and thus are slowed in their progress towards the end. However, it is not their appearance that most affects play, which is most of interest in the analysis of games and the trait that videogames have which separates them from other mediums. It is specifically how they play as in their game mechanics that is of interest.

### 3.1.1 Crippled

The most user-friendly player character in the game due to its ease of play and thus the best to begin with for those new to *You Are Disabled* as a feeler for the context of the game is the character referred to as ‘crippled.’ Though the term is loaded with a history as a slur for those who cannot walk, cripple is the term that the game uses to inform the player of the type of disability that they are currently playing with and the use of the slur acts an indicator as to how the player should expect to be treated in this title: “You are crippled.”



*Figure 3. You are Crippled*

This pronouncement of status places front and center the peculiarity of the situation that the player is in: playing a platformer as someone who cannot walk, a characteristic not familiar to protagonists of videogames and especially not platformers. Players are left to pull themselves along the ground at a painfully slow pace towards a sign that, when they get close enough to use the command to read gives the reason for their sudden drop down into the sewer: “You are not fit to live alongside humanity.” This along with the eerie music playing in the background sets the tone for the rest of the level.

The creator goes to great lengths to embed the message of the game by intertwining narrative and procedural aspects. Not only can players not run and jump as they would typically be able to do in a platformer, but the textual narrative delivered through signposts and interaction with non-player characters highlights the rules and procedures that have been put into place that act on the player to share the experience of a person who cannot walk by adapting an experience that the gamer knows and understands well: the classic platformer. Faced with an inability to walk and a lack of any device to assist them, the character must drag themselves along the ground in a demoralizing manner causing each screen, as simple as they may be to traverse, to take what feels like a lifetime. Further intertwining procedure and textual narrative to share this experience, because the player’s character cannot walk or jump, there is no way for them to overcome the obstacles ahead on their own.

Because the character and thus the player cannot walk or jump, he is forced to ask for help over the obstacles that are typical of a platformer: pits, gaps, lava and ledges. However, the grim reaper-esque characters stationed throughout the level are not as kind as they look -

which as it is not at all - leaving the player with snide remarks and comments when they do help.

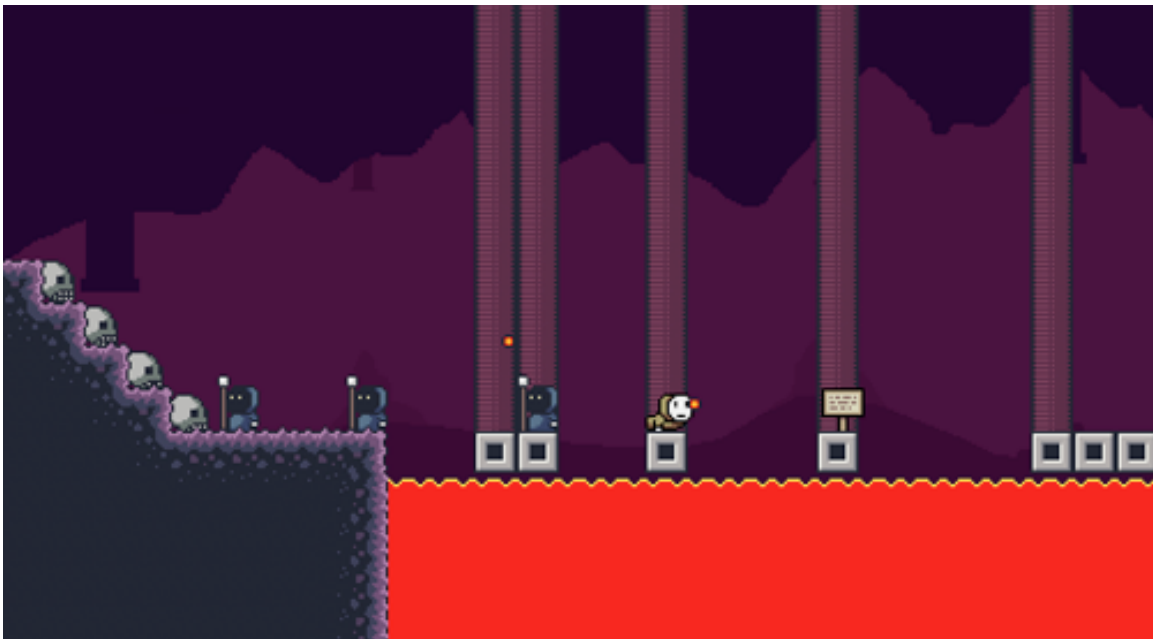
“You’re absolutely worthless.”

“Haha, your legs don’t work.”

“Do you know how annoying it is to help you? Ah well, it’ll be worth it.”

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you broken?”

As bad as it is, as demoralizing as it is, to read these remarks and be helped, the sting is twice as brutal when instead they trick you, take advantage of your disability and put you in a position in which you cannot overcome and rather must fling yourself to your death and start over the screen.



*Figure 4. Stuck on a ledge with no way out*

The action that players are forced to take is especially poignant as the obstacles that they must ask for help to overcome are ones that typically would be very easy. If one were playing Mario instead of a character unable to walk or jump, the platforms placement puts them among the easiest of challenges that the player is typically asked to overcome. The fact that they cannot do this once simple task is what most sticks out during play and is affirmed by the narrative put forth by the NPC’s.

“You want equality? Use your legs.”

“Your parents must have been disappointed when they saw you pop out.”

### 3.1.2 Illiterate

The level during which one plays the character that is illiterate is by far the most and least textual as it draws attention to the hindrance that illiteracy can be in a world entrenched in text, but utilizes a procedural rhetoric in the rules of the game that propose to make literacy a requirement. Literacy is not a skill inherent to the platformer experience, unlike mobility in the form of walking or jumping which makes the character that cannot walk's disability so pronounced. Here, illiteracy is hardly noticeable until the very end of the level.



*Figure 5. You are Illiterate*

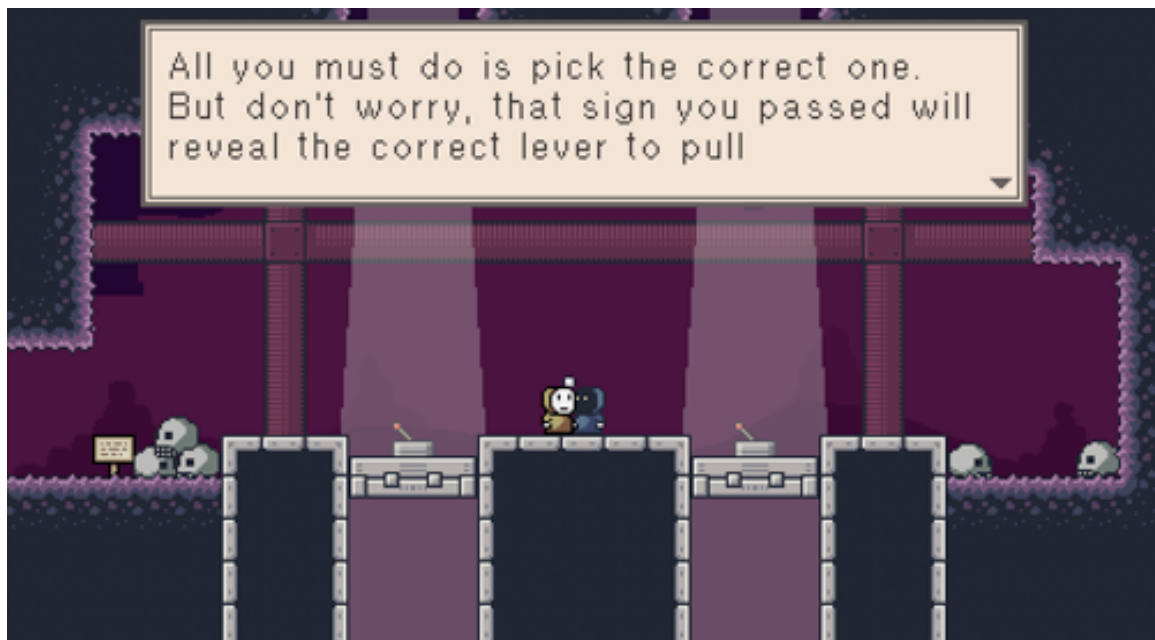
The first indication of the presence of the disability takes place in the very opening of the level, “You Are Illiterate,” stated explicitly to the player, ironically in text that the player can only read if literate. The inclusion of illiteracy, the inability to read, as a disability may be confusing at first as generally disabilities are first thought of as physical impairments. However, when one considers the effect it has on the person who is illiterate or the cause for that illiteracy which may be rooted in another disability then the reason for its inclusion is apparent. In addition, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual” (ADA Amendment Act of 2008).

The illiterate character is quite different from the character previously discussed who could not walk, run or jump. This character is not limited from completing the level on their own by physical impairments, but rather the inability to decipher written text. This disability renders all of the signs distributed throughout the level as “incomprehensible.” Fortunately, throughout the level it is portrayed to the player as no big deal and doesn’t effectively limit the player or include a change in platformer game mechanics.

Players don't need the directions likely on the signs to run and jump over lava pits and from platform to platform. The player and character may not be able to identify shortcuts, hints or directions on the signs, but what does it matter as long as you can walk, run and jump to complete the level without it. That is the rhetoric that is at play in this title, but of course, it's all simply too easy.

As the level progresses the game becomes incredibly challenging, not because or due to the inability to read the signs, but because without the grim reaper-esque characters' teleportation assistance some of the timing and jump accuracy is difficult to summon. For players who already completed the crippled level, they may at times find themselves thinking how much easier it was when they could not walk and could simply ask non-player characters to move them through the stage.

If or when the player works through all of the challenges and makes it to the end of the level there will initially be some elation or making it all the way to the end, past all of the extremely difficult challenges before that inevitable sense of doubt sets in. Upon talking to the reaper stationed in the last screen the catch is revealed.



*Figure 6. The choices are not as apparent as they seem*

"Is it true? You're the one who cannot read a single word? Ha, I never thought I'd actually meet someone so stupid. But it can't be true. Surely if your life depended on it. To your left and right are two platforms, and on each platform is a lever. One of the platforms will rise to the surface and free you from imprisonment. The other will lower and bring you to the wizard's domain. All you must do is pick the correct one. But don't worry, that sign

you passed will reveal the correct lever to pull. Perhaps if you try hard enough, you'll actually be able to read it."

Obviously, no amount of staring at this "incomprehensible" sign will allow the player to discern what it says. Procedurally speaking, this is not something coincidental. If the developer had wanted to make an argument that illiteracy is something that can be overcome by 'trying harder' then they could have modeled that dynamic in game. In actuality, the intent of the developer initially was to make it so that what was said on the signs would be integral, or at least a significant help, in completing the level. Unfortunately, due to the time limit of the jam he ran out of time.

Instead, what is modeled is the attitude that some hold in reality being held by a decidedly obvious villain, a character rooting for the player's failure so that he might be enslaved. No amount of commanding the character to read by hitting the down key will make the sign any more understandable to the player. What is modeled here is that literacy is not a skill achievable by simply 'trying harder.' None of the NPC's pause and try to help the player character learn to decipher the signs, there is only judgment, frustration and negativity; none of which are helpful in fostering literacy.

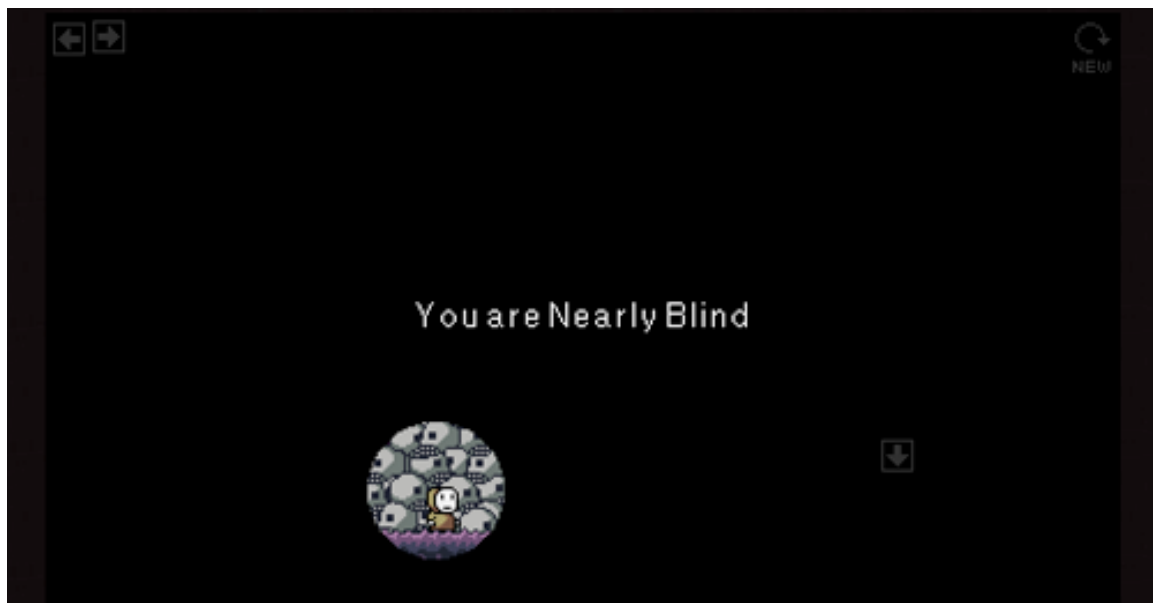
What is modeled here are attitudes that are wrong about literacy as proven by their modeled ineffectiveness. The developer, in this simulation, has programmed no way for the player that is likely literate to decipher these signs for their character. The player realizes now that even being able to run and jump, what would have allowed them to easily overcome the challenges of the person who could not walk, they are still defeated by their lack of ability to read the directions on the sign. Even the player's own ability to read is meaningless as their body in game betrays them, just as the body of the one who cannot walk limits them from climbing a small ledge. They are forced to fall to the wizard's domain, limited from succeeding by the character they play.

With illiteracy, it is worth knowing simply to be fully informed about developer intent in the design of this level that initially the signs were intended to be functional in making the level much more easily beaten. However, according to his blog, this plan never came to fruition due to the time limit (Martin 2013: 4). In effect, illiteracy does not markedly affect the play of the level until the choice at the very end. While this may be making a point about the effects of the disability, it also operates as it is located among other disabilities in the game to make the player reflect on play as the character that cannot walk which, while frustrating, was no doubt much easier when it comes to purely the level of challenge.

Speculation can be made about how the directions on the signs might have been effectively integrated. Platformers, *Super Mario World* specifically, has a plethora of invisible platforms or secret paths that are often discovered by accident or through hints offered by others on the internet. However, it is not necessary as illiteracy renders these signs incomprehensible anyway and the procedural argument at the end combined with the reflections inspired by the level's difficulty serve to help the player identify with what is happening on screen.

### 3.1.3 Nearly Blind

Argued among players in responses to the game as tied for the position as the most difficult level, playing the character who is blind is nearly as difficult as implied by the very idea of it. At the beginning of the level the character drops down into almost total darkness. "You Are Nearly Blind."



*Figure 7. You are Nearly Blind*

Players will likely be immediately surprised at the inclusion of a character who is nearly blind as the ability to see is practically imperative to the platform experience, as well as it might be considered by most to be in life. This character is not completely blind, however, rather nearly so. Unlike the character who is illiterate, this character can read signs so long as they are close enough for them to see, but their line of sight is just a small circle close around the character casting everything beyond in pitch black darkness.

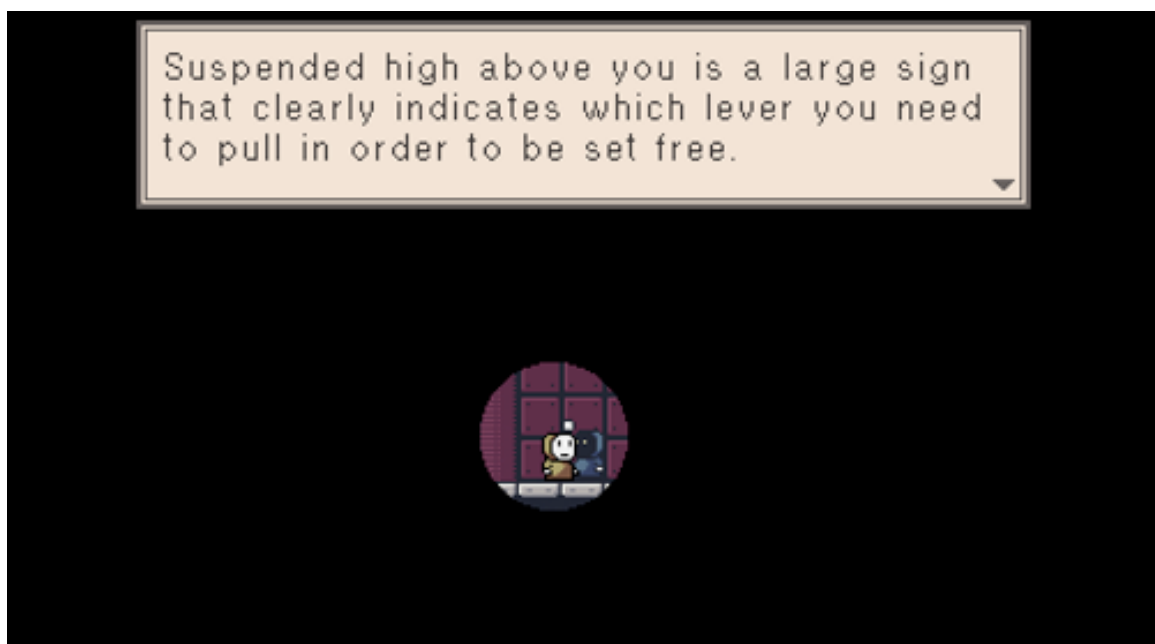
Typically, the range of a jump, the distance over a lava pit or even the distance from platform to platform is at least double this character's line of sight. With an inability to see if



the player has depressed the arrow key or spacebar in just the right combination and timing, the player must rely on muscle memory acquired from repeated failures as well as their past play of the other characters getting familiar with the controls and how they interact with movement in the game. Likely having gone unnoticed in other playthroughs of the game, the platforms makes a faint drumming sound as they disappear and reappear around the stage while the fireballs make a popping sound as they leap forth and descend back into the lava which the player must use to help time their jumps correctly in order to keep from falling to their death.

The entire level plays much differently when the dynamic of sight is removed. As difficult and taxing as this game is when you simply cannot read, it is night impossible when players can see only a few pixels in front of themselves. Rather than a game of skill and reflexes, the determinants of success end up being dumb luck, muscle memory and perseverance.

When players finally reach the end of the level, if they make it, they find just as in the character that was illiterate: a choice. It is characterized by once again two platforms with levers, but no visible signs posted for the player to try to read. Instead, upon talking to the reaper nearby, players discover that there is a sign according to the reaper, but it is beyond your character's ability to see placed far overhead. Despite all the work to get to the end, the player is once again destined to fail, defeated by their disability. What takes place is simply 'not fair' and players feel this sentiment as evidenced by player reports in the comments.



*Figure 8. An unreadable sign out of sight*

After all the work that players put forth they are once again defeated by factors outside of their control, something very unfamiliar to the gamer who is familiar with being powerful and oftentimes unbeatable in a videogame.

### 3.1.4 Spastic

The last character, tied in difficulty with the nearly blind character based on sheer challenge of play, is referred to as “spastic.” Like with the use of ‘crippled’ by the game, this is a term loaded with negative connotations in many cultures. In the United States, being referred to as spastic is often meant to mean a klutz or clumsy person and often not intended by the person speaking to be associated with a disability, but according to a BBC article in 2006 written in light of Tiger Woods using the term to refer to himself after a bad day on the green, spaz originates as a negative term used to refer to someone with cerebral palsy.



*Figure 9. You are Spastic*

“‘When people say ‘you’re such a spaz’ they’re talking about someone with cerebral palsy,’ says Nancy Salandra from Philadelphia ADAPT. ‘People use it all the time but they are wrong. It’s part of the language now, like retard, but it doesn’t make it right’” (Rose 2006: 3). Rose also includes a quote defining what the term refers to according to Babs Johnson of National ADAPT, a grassroots organization of people with disabilities fighting for disability rights, “‘It would be looked upon as someone having a fit or seizure or something like that. Body movements that you can’t control’” (Rose 2006: 3).

Rose digresses from the specific incident of Tiger Woods using the term to explain that there is a lengthy history of minority groups reclaiming words such as the use of the term nigger by black people and queer or queen by the gay community. It is not so much what is said but how it is said, in what context and by whom (Rose 2006: 2). However, in this context spastic is in an obvious way not being used in an endearing manner. As with the other levels and other characters, the term is used here as a slur to put down the player, a spoof of the power of the words that a player might use or have used in reality to put down others.

Negative attachments to the term aside, the behavior of the character could be associated to those with ADHD, muscle spasms, or simply a lack of muscle or motor control as a side effect of another condition. The character is without any immediately obvious signs of disability, lacking blackness surrounding the character on screen that signaled near blindness or a nearby sign to cue knowledge of one's illiteracy. The disability is only apparent after the player drops to the ground and takes a few steps forward with a sudden jump or turn against the player's direction. Randomly timed jumps, changes of direction and movement impede the character that the game refers to as spastic and work to up the difficulty and frustration of completing even the simplest tasks familiar to the platformer.

The character who is blind was extremely difficult for its demands on muscle memory and the other senses, but this character is difficult because while the player can see exactly where they need to get to, and even get within a touch of being there, a sudden movement will inevitably foil their efforts, leaving them to start the entire screen over again effectively destroying morale. In a platform game where minuscule but exact movement is necessary to avoid obstacles like fireballs and land on platforms the size of the characters feet, playing a character that randomly moves, stands still, or jumps in an unpredictable direction is a massive impediment to success. At the same time, the player is likely thankful that they don't suffer from any of the other disabilities in the game with a hope that this character will be the one with which they can escape as he can read, walk, jump and see.

Players responded most negatively to this character, finding random movement even more challenging in this setting than being nearly blind. This makes sense given that when a character dies they only have to start over the screen rather than the level and repeating the screen over and over again the movement combination will remain the same for the blind character. An inability to control the character's movement takes some of the player's skill out of whether they will complete the screen and places it in luck as they are faced with an unpredictable combination of movements required to succeed. One player in particular responded that there should have been a counter or timer to tell the player when there would

next be a sudden uncontrolled movement. While this would make the game considerably easier, it is also highly unrealistic and it takes little thought to appreciate why it is totally random.

As the game is a modeling of disabilities in a platformer setting, it makes sense not to include a timer in the interface for the player as a person with cerebral palsy or other disability that is associated with sudden movements would not have that luxury. Having a timer would make the level considerably easier and defeat the accuracy of the modeling in game. Despite the sheer frustration many express the difficulty of this character in particular, the character referred to as spastic is the only one with which the level can be beaten and the sewer escaped.

### 3.2 The Importance of Genre

Normalization and the act of normalizing is often a term used to refer to media, in this case videogames, that takes what might be considered by some in reality to be abnormal and makes it normal. It could be said that videogames have a special propensity for this act due to their nature of creating and modeling their own virtual environments independent of the societal and physical constraints of reality - their own virtual worlds. People who in reality might be othered by factors such as skin color, physical ability, sexual orientation or gender identity in these worlds may be treated differently: treated as one of the ‘majority.’

There is a whole host of issues attached to being ‘one of the majority.’ As Richard Goldstein writes viscerally of the homocon who betrays other queers for a seat at the right’s table, often becoming one of the oppressors in their ambition to be accepted as ‘normal’ (Goldstein 2002: 6). Thankfully, this kind of normalization at the expense of others is not Martin’s motive. Rather he uses what is already ‘normalized’ in videogames to make a profound and impactful statement with his own decidedly different characters.

As Bogost succinctly describes in his explanation of processes, procedurality and rules in a computer often many of these rules come together again and again over time in figures that are combined with other figures to form tropes and genres. When playing a game of a particular genre, or even one that looks like another game that has been played, we naturally have expectations of it that arise from our previous experiences or knowledge. It is the same reason that one can recognize *You Are Disabled*’s foreboding music, dark environment and

grimy scenery. Likewise we recognize the processes that have appeared again and again that demarcate the type of game that we are playing and what is expected of us in order to ‘win.’

From the very start, *You Are Disabled* presents itself as a platformer and as such certain rules or procedures are expected of it. *Super Mario Bros*, the class NES game, is one of the most prominent platformers in popularity and also one of the oldest in this genre. It is truly the best game to use to describe the genre as few people don’t know who Mario is on an at least basic level, and most of those interested in a paper on this topic have likely played it extensively.

*You Are Disabled* puts a not so subtle twist on the archetype of the platformer that the player’s character is always very able. They can usually jump high, run fast, and is the player’s biggest benefactor when it comes to making it to the end of the level. Because this is typically the case, players expect this and that it is different makes a very pronounced point. In *You Are Disabled*, it is important that the game is traditional enough for its genre that players make the association with other games in the platformer style so that they appreciate its many differences. In the platformer, and many other games as well, typically the player is in control of someone who is ‘able.’ His speed, his reflexes, his jumps, and his ability to stop and pivot on a virtual dime define Mario. The only thing hindering the player from reaching his goal or the end of the level, whichever or both, is within themselves, set in their own ability to play and computer enemies within the game whose goal it is to hinder the player. Mario, and in platformers the majority of protagonists, are the player’s biggest allies in achieving success.

This trope repeats itself over and over again in other genres as well which further cements the assumption that the player will recognize the dynamic as missing. The protagonist is strong, powerful, an achiever, a leader, able to succeed. When this dynamic changes it is noticed. In *Call of Duty 4*, after the player fights through hordes upon hordes of enemies and makes it out of the combat zone, a nuclear bomb goes off, bringing the chinooks with the player and teammates down. Rather than moving on immediately to the next mission or ‘chapter’ in the story, the player is surprisingly brought back to the scene, waking up in the mess of nuclear fallout, left to live out the last few minutes of his life completely alone in the devastation left by nuclear attack.

When this game was released, there was a great deal of media about this scene because of its rarity, even oddness, in how out of place it was. Players are accustomed to being Master Chiefs, always finding a way out - a way to survive. This experience of not making it, of no one coming to get them, for an FPS player especially, was new and a

strangely out of place jerk into reality. In *You Are Disabled* the protagonists are all characters who are limited and kept from completing the game using traditional methods by their disability. These are not Professor X's, who though uses a wheelchair overcomes its would be limitations by using his fantastic mind powers to slow time and lift objects including himself. *You Are Disabled* models real people with disabilities placed into a world that is not designed for them, just as reality is not designed for them.

Platformers have a similar dynamic. The player is usually a Mario, a Prince (of *Prince of Persia*), or a Sonic. *You Are Disabled* turns this dynamic on its head, using what people expect to have even more of an impact, much like what was done in *Call of Duty*. The typical platformer protagonist could be considered 'normal' as they are the common playable character with common characteristics in these games. The four protagonists, playable characters in *You Are Disabled*, are anything but normal.

That Mario, Sonic and the Prince of Persia are all strong, fast, agile characters is not simply thought or written into existence. Because they are characters in a game rather than literary or visual works, they are programmed. As Bogost explains, everything about these characters and how they can act in their environment is doable because of the rules that are or have been put into place. In *You Are Disabled*, that the rules are different from the norm makes their existence notable. It is further notable that while the presence of these disabilities may impede the player and make success much more difficult, it is also that much more rewarding as every character can make it to the end of the level and is only prevented from success by the devious workings of a bigoted enemy.

### **3.3 You Are Disabled in Effect**

*You Are Disabled* is artistic in its representation in that those with disabilities likely will never have to leap over pits of lava or overcome the kinds of obstacles present in the game, but they do have to deal with obstacles in the real world like bustling grocery stores, crowded sidewalks along busy streets and public buildings made inaccessible. A person who lives with uncontrollable muscle movements does not have to avoid burning to death in a lava pit, but comb their hair or maneuver a glass of water; the person who is illiterate may not need to choose a platform to escape an evil wizard, but a platform on the tube or the signs and directions that litter our everyday lives; the person who is blind or nearly blind does not leap without seeing towards a block suspended mid-air, but a crosswalk or a set of stairs leading

to where they need to go; and the person who cannot walk does not have to ask for someone to teleport them, but to grab an object placed thoughtlessly out of reach or navigate places made inaccessible with stairs or narrow entries.

The rules of this game were made to share an experience of the frustrations and difficulties of having a disability with the player by taking a situation at which they are accustomed to being adept, the platformer, and limiting the likely able player with the rules that people with disabilities must operate by in their every day lives. By taking the mantra of sensitivity seminars, pamphlets and activist groups about living with a disability and turning it into a playable experience in a situation familiar to the gamer, the message is made both personal, understandable, and relatable. It takes for what an 'able' person is 'out of sight, out of mind' and places it squarely within their view.

In an FX episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, the show's gang known typically for their horrendous ideas realizes that they can use disability trick people into treating them differently after Charlie is temporarily confined to a wheelchair after they run him over with their car. Their offensiveness to the audience of the show is intentional as they use wheelchairs, crutches and a Vietnam war veteran costume to get the attention of strangers, easy dates and lap dances from strippers free of charge. Of course, they are only 'playing' being disabled and can immediately return to total physical ability when the situation demands it, and do so frequently in the episode.

Though on the surface it may seem insensitive in its quest for laughs, *It's Always Sunny* comments thoughtfully on the attitudes of many of those who are not disabled by manifesting them in their unlikeable characters on screen. The viewer is not invited to think of their behavior as 'good' or 'acceptable,' but horrifying and grotesque. When we grumble at having to park at the back of a parking lot or even an entirely different parking lot from the building we need when there are accessible parking spots available that, "It must be nice," even if it is not seriously what we mean, it is revealing of a buried sentiment. While the gang illustrates this sentiment for us to see on screen by showing their 'play' as people who are disabled, *You Are Disabled* uses play in an alternate way to put us in a situation which we are familiar with overcoming and showing how having a disability prevents or keeps it from being as easy as we're accustomed to, sans the ability to just stand up from the wheelchair.

While the game is not literally modeling real life experiences of those who are disabled, it is adapting those experiences to another setting in this medium: the platformer. While someone who is disabled will likely never have to leap over pits, dodge fireballs or pick a platform to escape an evil wizard, they do have to overcome or deal with other

challenges present because the world in reality is constructed for the ‘able,’ just as this mythical platformer world is. While the bottomless pits are never going to be encountered in daily life, there are situations that may seem just as insurmountable, for a variety of reasons.

In *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*, a report compiled by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council in Australia, the Chair of the council, Dr. Rhonda Galbally AO, prefaces the collection of submitted experiences and accompanied discussions by saying that many of the community (society) believe disability to be someone else’s problem and that without accounts of first hand experiences they will continue to believe that things are at least better than they once were. The anonymous submissions serve to give a look at what it is like and the challenges that are faced by those with disabilities today (Deane 2009: vi). “If I lived in a society where being in a wheelchair was no more remarkable than wearing glasses, and if the community was completely accepting and accessible, my disability would be an inconvenience and not much more than that,” said one submission citing one of the most frequent issues raised: social inclusion and barriers to participation (Deane 2009: 12). Another expressed that, “I do not expect to get access to the pyramids or Uluru but I do want to get into all of the library and all of the community center” (Deane 2009: 14).

Others expressed that their impairment is a reality in their lives, but the disability is rather caused by environmental and social constructions. Indeed, it is disability in that sense that is modeled here as it is the construction of the world that places the character in an ill fitted position and that manifests as ‘disability.’ If one looks beyond the graphics on the screen of industrial blocks and lava pits, they see a model of challenges and how they might seem to those for which they are not made to be overcome. In reality, moving platforms are stairs, signs out of reach or sight might be shelves or cabinets places far out of reach or sight. For a person who is not disabled, opening a cabinet or traversing a set of stairs to get to the office is thoughtless, as thoughtless as it is for Mario to jump onto a ledge to collect coins.

Just as in *You Are Disabled* the world has not been constructed for the characters, many structures in reality are not designed for those who are disabled and even things that are designed for those with disability may not be accessible. As one person attested of their experience on a campus of finding that they could not access the ‘wheelchair accessible’ toilets because their motorized scooter did not fit, “The mobility of people with disabilities to access the facilities that everyone else in the community takes for granted - cafes, public buildings, swimming pools, libraries, sporting facilities and movie theaters - limits their independence and compromises their quality of life” (Deane 2009: 42).



A game, or even the general ‘play’ that is advanced by projects such as those who invite people to ‘act’ like they have a disability for a period of time using wheelchairs, blindfolds, etc. should never be mistaken for the experience of the real thing, or intend to be interchangeable with reality. Rather, they can open a space for critique of those thoughts like, “It must be nice to be able to park there,” or when you judge the person who ‘doesn’t look handicapped.’ “Procedural representation is representation, and thus certainly not identical with actual experience. However, procedural representation can muster moving images and sound, and software and videogames are capable of generating moving images in accordance with complex rules that simulate real or imagined physical and cultural processes” (Bogost 2010: 35). Raley cites this also as the purpose of tactical media, a category in which *You Are Disabled* easily falls into; but one might argue it is not only tactical media that should take this action.

Often, tactical media is restricted to games with the express purpose of making a point with little fun or entertainment value of its own (serious games and often many independent persuasive games could also fit this description). One of the things that *You Are Disabled* does correctly is act as tactical media while not sacrificing challenge, fun and thus entertainment. Like its more traditional platformer counterparts, it requires practice, reflexes and skill to complete at least some of its levels. Many of the game mechanics from more traditional platformers are still intact and just as in *Mario*, players feel the pull of the challenge to complete and escape the sewer.

*You Are Disabled*’s successful representation occurs not in its summoning of pity for the people which the characters represent, but respect as the characters fight against adversity and most often overcome. Because this game was posted in a community setting for play, the reactions and responses possible don’t have to be guessed at. From self reports, it is apparent the effect that the game can have, though it may not necessarily have for all players.

The reviews of the game are mixed, but most are positive rather than negative averaging at 3/5 stars. The negative reviews are based primarily on the sheer difficulty of some of the characters with it described multiple times as “impossible” or “near impossible.” The dynamic of playing with a disability angers gamers and many do quit without progressing very far into the more difficult levels. However, many of the reviews are positive and serve to shed light on how many experienced this title.

As serious and dark as the game is, filled with a very negative modeling of the experiences of people who are disabled, players though peeved at the unfairness of it often react positively to the experience, with many reports of enrichment. Many of the reviews

comment statements along the lines of you're supposed to want to quit, you're supposed to get tired of trying again and again only to fail. That's what the rules of the game are trying to inflict: hopelessness caused by factors outside of the player's control. Many of the positive reviews expressed that they were moved by this gameplay dynamic.

Very little has been written about this game outside of media associated with the Ludum Dare Game Jam and an occasional let's play, so all of the player responses and reactions to the game were taken from websites where the game was posted to be played. As is common of gaming community sites, there is a great deal more troll comments than actual reviews, but from the three sites at which the game is hosted an even and fair number of positive and negative reviews were available. The following is a sample of two positive and two negative reviews that make valid points about the play of the game and the imagery and messages steeped within it.

"I was practically blind for my play through. At first I thought my vision was too limited, but then I remembered that this is a game about being disabled so it makes total sense. I like how you can barely see lava and have to make repeated leaps of faith and have to get through by trial and error. I liked the music a lot, was creepy but also had that mario 3 dark world feel to it. Though the level with vanishing block, spikes on the ceiling, was a ridiculously annoying," via Stencyl appreciates the challenge of the game rather than putting it down as a hindrance to their enjoyment of the game.

"This would probably be a lot better if there was an indicator of which way you were going to move during spasms so you could have a moment to react and counter move. Probably would make a better game without the spasms anyway," via Kongregate complains about a lack of a signifier giving warning before the spasms to let the player which direction they are about to move and when. However, it fails to appreciate that a person that has spasms doesn't have this luxury and if the game in question is trying to model the disability accurately this cannot be included.

"Having autism, and having some disabling challenges, this game spoke to me. I get it's an art game and it's pretty good in that nature. It actually made me stop playing for a bit because the whole theme that you're in hell because you're disabled and not worthy is very... True. Real. I've faced that prejudice, I face it every day and it meant a lot to me. My first playthrough got me spastic, and it was pretty hard the further I got, so I didn't beat the game as I would have if I had illiteracy or something else. But from what I did see (Stopped at the room with the yellow F blocks, the sign says someone knows how to do "it") I haven't yet tried again, not sure if I can; I feel like the constant painful messages from the signs were too

much for me and it's not worth that, but I understand it wasn't personal, hahaha. The gameplay was simple, and it felt like coping with your disability was able to be achieved by those more perseverant than I, those who wouldn't be turned off by the message. NT's, as the people with my specific disorder call "normal" people, would have a better time with this, but it was pretty nice. I feel like the message was the only innovative part of the game, the rest was good but as I said, pretty boring and simple. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but you did so well with the underlying themes that I feel you could've thought of more ways to platform around. Again, I haven't played the whole game so there very well may be, but I don't think so," via Newgrounds speaks for itself.

“As a person who works at a hospital with rehabilitation patients, I understand where you're coming from with this. However, like a few other users noted, I think the subject matter could have been handled better. As silly as the term "differently-abled" is made out to be, it really is an accurate term when talking about how people work around their disabilities. Yes, everyday activities can be more difficult, but they can still be performed. Aside from that, though, I liked the artistic design, and I didn't have any issues with the control. Overall, not bad!” via Newgrounds calls attention to some of the terms that the game uses as an alternative to terms that have been embraced by the community such as ‘differently-abled.’ That said, just as in reality, the player can reach the end of every level and it is only the actions of the enemy that intentionally takes advantage of the character’s disability that keeps them from success.

When processes, structures, rules or experiences that we encounter in society are modeled in a game, they are not copied and pasted as they exist by default. What is produced is the author’s conception of those rules or processes based on both their own experience and how they wish for them to be experienced by the player. The player sees here a conception of the experience of being disabled placed into an abstract setting that is familiar, interesting and challenging for the player. But furthermore, the player experiences a conception of what it is like to be subject to the rules of the game rather than just interacting with and cognitively understanding them as a system or structure outside of its context.

What is seen over and over again in the self reports in reviews by players of the game (seen above in this section), and what is readily experienced in most games of this genre, is flow and namely the feeling of being jerked out of it by such characters as the one who experiences sudden spurts and stills of movement. As discussed in the previous section, movement and reflexes play a huge role in the platformer and likewise total comfort with the controls is necessary to transfer those reflexes into precise movements inside of the game.

The total concentration necessary for success in *You Are Disabled* fosters flow, while the intense difficulty of the challenges combined with the player's knowledge that they are achievable drives immersion and a want to reach the end of each and every challenge.. However, each character's disability is an impediment to that goal in this setting which causes frustration for players both at the game and at themselves for failing over and over again because of factors outside of their control.

As we see from the responses of many players, somewhere amidst their anger and experience of being jerked out of flow with the game upon every death is identification with what it must be like for who these characters represent in reality. But this is not to be confused with actual experience as the game provides for a modeling of the experience by a simulation as a proxy. In another chapter of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, on a completely different topic from Tronstad, Jessica Langer notes in her analysis of race representation in *World of Warcraft* of a risk that players taking the role of a marginalized character may be inclined to think that they actually have a be all end all understanding now of what it means to be a member of a minority group (Langer 2011: 102). In understanding empathetic identification, Tronstad delineates that this is not the case in playing videogames in which the player's character is constructed to have its own identity. In her explanation of sameness identification versus empathetic identification, she explains that the player is not invited to believe that they 'are' the character, but that the play as the character understanding that they are separate. *You Are Disabled* falls under the model of the character as separate as the players are not invited to create their own representative, but takes on the role of another.

Just as the viewer may empathize with what they see on screen, the player here is exposed to the harsh words of the NPCs and the challenge of perching on the edge of a block before plunging into the fire. But even in this title which does such a fantastic job at depicting the life of a person in a world not made with them in mind, *You Are Disabled* has a few issues. Each of the characters that the player is assigned randomly varies in difficulty by a high margin. While the character who is crippled is beatable by virtually anyone as they require simply crawling about the level and hitting the action key, spastic and nearly blind require a great deal of time and effort mastering the controls and layouts of each screen. The difference in difficulties between levels in the game is not a problem all on its own - many, if not most, games escalate in difficulty as more levels are beaten - but this game assigns levels randomly which means players are not guaranteed to be assigned to the easy character at the start, which would allow them to become familiar with the game. In the reviews, many players state this as an issue in saying that they were assigned spastic or nearly blind in their

very first run and proceeded to quit out of frustration because they felt it was impossible to beat.

This issue keeps the game from being able to get its message to the player by virtue that if people do not play then they do not interact with the system and it is written off as yet another horrible browser game on the internet with no message at all. But, even more importantly for how we are viewing games in this paper, having a difficulty scale unsuited to the player inhibits the possibility of flow and its accompanying identification which is so important for have the player feel what the character in this situation is feeling. Many players got the most out of the character who could not walk because of the lack of challenge present and with that experience completed were more willing to work harder to complete the quest of the illiterate character. On Newgrounds, the medals (this website's form of achievements which players can earn and show off on their profiles) laid out below the game screen hint to the observant player the difficulty of each character and in logically the order they should be completed in: Crippled - 25 points, Illiterate - 50 points, Nearly Blind and Spastic - 100 points each. However, on other websites that lack a reward system where the game is hosted and indeed here as well as indicated by the comments, players would better benefit from a fixed order in the levels rather than the randomized order as it stands now.

The randomized characteristic doesn't effectively break the game or deaden its message as players can simply hit the random button and try to beat the game with all the characters in any order, but it does likely scare off a few who only stick around for that split second they find is extremely difficult. Think if one turned on *Guitar Hero III* for the first time and were assigned "Through the Fire and Flames" by DragonForce or dropped straight into Bowser's Castle on Super Mario 64 - it wouldn't bode well for the game's play-count or player morale. It is a basic game design concept to start off easy, introduce the player to the controls and allow them to get comfortable in the environment, before ramping up the difficulty. *You Are Disabled* is something different for allowing the player to flip through characters to get to the starter level, but not guiding them to it and forcing them to complete one before another. As one reviewer put it, they expected the character that is crippled to be the most difficult by virtue of their disability and they turned out to be the easiest.

The apparent express intent of the game was to model the possible experience of having a disability procedurally in a way that would affect the player, and we can see here exactly how it did its job fantastically utilizing these principles of design and analysis. However, procedural rhetoric is not always utilized in the service of positive or just social ideals that should not be overlooked in our analysis of two games from the independent

social justice side of the equation. Often it is used to manipulate for the ends of marketing giants or the violent ends of military industrial complexes.

The following analysis is an examination of representation of a different group, albeit one that is also atypical of the videogame medium. As has been demonstrated here, representation even in videogames occurs in a variety of ways, but of interest primarily as the central characteristic of videogames that delineates them from other mediums is their procedurality; that everything textual and visual in a game is interacted with on a procedural basis. By understanding how the rules of the game limit and allow for players to interact in the simulation, we can tease out the argument being made and the experience being modeled within. The same principles used to understand the presentation of those with disabilities in *You Are Disabled* can be used to analyze the representation of the transgender experience in *Mainichi*.

While the setting for the modeling of a transgender experience is different, in many ways it is very similar. Like *You Are Disabled*, *Mainichi* places the player in a position that is not only unfamiliar to them, but subjects them to the treatment that people in reality often receive because of that position. This is something alternative to many of the big budget games that feature queer characters as it does not play out as though homophobia and transphobia are non-existent. For example in *Mass Effect* the narrative plays out as if homophobia is some bygone of the past while racism and xenophobia are still prevalent. In *Saints Row IV* the player can choose any sex and, further, genderbend with no gender segregated relationships, clothing or characteristics save for a penis or breasts which can each be de-accentuated to the point of non-existence (which could be thought of as a pseudo representation of binding for FtMs or tucking and taping for MtFs).

Both types of inclusion definitely serve their own purposes and neither is more valid than another as it is refreshing to be able to play a character that is similar to oneself without the worry of prejudice, but games like *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi* are specifically made to call attention to issues that do exist for people of these groups, issues that need to be brought to the attention of gamers who may not have the opportunity to know a person who has a disability or a person who is transgender.

## Chapter 4: Mainichi



Figure 10. *Mainichi* title screen

Different from *You Are Disabled* both in the group's experience that it models and in how that representation takes place, *Mainichi* puts the player into a day in the life of a male to female transgender person. Where *You Are Disabled* models the experience of having a disability in an otherworldly context that is familiar to the player as a gamer, using genre to express limitations or process of a disability, *Mainichi* takes an experience that most humans know well - meeting a friend for coffee - and models what that experience is like for a specific transgender person: its creator Mattie Brice (Brice 2012: 2). Where *You Are Disabled* emphasizes movement in an environment not made accessible to the character physically, *Mainichi* emphasizes navigating an environment which is physically accessible, yet at the same time inaccessible due to social constructions.

*Mainichi* models the practice of meeting a friend for coffee as a transgender person from the moment the character wakes fades into view in their apartment and needs to get

ready for their day to the natural dialog that occurs between friends and employees at the shop. As a very short game that models only a snippet of the life experience of an MtF transgender person, *Mainichi* obviously does not seek to be a game representative of all transgender or queer people's experiences or even how a person might respond to the situations presented in the game. Instead of pursuing that likely impossible level of inclusion, this title simply displays a snippet of one individual's life that happens to have aspects common to many trans people.

*Mainichi*, a word in Japanese suitably meaning 'every day,' is a simple role playing game made in RPG Maker VX that is unlike the game previously discussed in its genre and accessibility. Best suited for the game genre 'interactive fiction,' *Mainichi* lacks the challenges so apparent in a platformer like *You Are Disabled*. Rather, this title is about exploration not of a large environment or level, but of a small environment and the choices and ensuing experiences possible within it.

The experience of getting ready in the morning to go and meet a friend is likely familiar to everyone. But as players will realize by playing through the game, that practice is not experienced the same by everyone. Not everyone travels through their day-to-day lives uninhibited as many queer, and disabled people especially looking back at the previous chapter, know.

Mattie Brice, the game's creator, describes the inspiration for the story and interactions within it succinctly. "This is an experiment in sharing a personal experience through a game system. It helps communicate daily occurrences that happen in my life, exploring the difficulty in expressing these feelings in words. As well, it stands as a commentary of how we currently use game design for broad strokes of universal experiences instead of hyper-personal, and often exclude minority voices" (Brice 2012: 2).

*Mainichi* is downloadable for PC and Mac, using Wineskin which is a wrapper for PC programs used to port them to be playable on an Apple computer, for free. The game itself puts the burden on the player as, unlike *You Are Disabled*, it lacks an explicit end. Players can complete one playthrough in under five minutes, or test the possibilities within the game for over an hour. For the purpose of this thesis, *Mainichi* was played on a Mac using Wineskin for a multitude of playthroughs in order to tease out all of the dialog and action possibilities and their effects in the game as well as appreciate the style of player that a never-ending game is meant to foster.

#### **4.1 Procedural Decisions and Effects of Being Trans**



It might be hard to believe that one can procedurally model a complete minority experience in a game that can be less than five minutes long, and *Mainichi* doesn't even attempt to do so. What this title does do is model a single event that most people experience on a regular basis in their own lives. Whether it be a coffee or sandwich shop, rural or in a big city, the experience of preparing for one's day, moving amongst other people, and having basic interaction with employees is common to life across the globe.

RPG Maker VX, like Stencyl, is a game creation tool made for those who don't necessarily have the skill-set that comes with a degree in computer science or game design. With an easy to use interface, this creation tool allows for game design to not be limited only to those select who can afford an education. You won't be making *Mass Effect* or that new *Halo* installment, but as a way into a medium that is dominated by a narrow set of experiences, RPG Maker and programs like it stand to allow for new ideas and perspectives into a medium by people who typically wouldn't have a proverbial voice.

While the creator is fairly simple and thus many of the titles produced for it follow in that same path, it is possible to share complex experiences utilizing game mechanics that the construction tools allow for, such as changing or alternate reactions based on action by the player. This is exactly what Brice has implemented here. While the overall narrative remains the same regardless of player action, preparing for one's day > traveling to the coffee shop > having coffee with a friend, the actions taken by the player as well as their choice of dialog affects how other non-player characters interact with them on this journey.

It is the nature of the game and its entrenchment in dialog that makes it a form of interactive fiction, not unlike the popular 'choose your own adventure' novel genre. The primary difference, as is with all games, is that this title is interactive in more than just dialog as players are also free to move about in the small world made up of the player character's house, street and coffee shop. It is the allowances and limitations of the movements, choice of dialog and conclusion that make the procedural argument and share the meaning of *Mainichi*.

Even with its entrenchment in dialogue as the carrier of narrative, *Mainichi* is played according to rules and processes from beginning to end that both restrict the player from taking particular actions and allow for them. In each playthrough of the game it is how the player operates within the rules that determine the story. How the game does this will be illustrated in the first section of this chapter.

Though there are only nine decisions that can be made in each playthrough of the game, it is challenging to concisely and completely account for all of the possible combinations and their effects without mapping every single one of them and including what amounts to basically a transcript describing the game in the thesis. While that could account for every decision possible in the game, it would be a poor representative and would only serve to be a lifeless table standing in place of the complexities of play experienced in the title. Rather than transcribing every complete playthrough in such a scientific matter, what has been included in this thesis instead is a transcription of what a single playthrough of this game looks like, coded to separate: the parts of the narrative that remain the same across every playthrough, the decisions that can be made by the player, and the effects of those decisions.

#### 4.1.1 A Sample Playthrough

The following table contains the entirety of one possible playthrough of the game. Words lacking any special formatting signify constants that occur or appear in every single playthrough regardless of decisions made by the player. Italicized text indicates that the words involve a decision made by the player directing the player character. Words in bold reflect the effects of the decisions that do not appear in every possible playthrough of the game.

Apartment fades in from black showing the character standing in their room. The character appears to be a black female dressed in a purple sweater and white blouse. Considering her sprite level of detail, it is difficult to see with the screen at default zoom. Without being triggered, she says to as much the player as herself, “Looks like I still have a couple hours before meeting up for coffee. Probably should start getting ready soon.”
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Upon the player hitting the spacebar (action key), the dialogue closes. The character then turns to face her bed as a speech bubble appears over her head with ‘...’ within it before saying, “Or I could be lazy and take a nap until then. Tempting.”
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Upon hitting the action key again, the character once again thinks to herself ‘...’ before saying, “I should try being more positive today.”
--

Upon hitting the action key once more, the player is finally free to explore their environment, wander around their home which appears to be a decently sized apartment. As the player does so by using the arrow keys to direct the character from their overhead view, there is some dialog by the PC that directs the player as to some of the possible actions that they can take. Upon entering the living room, the character
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says, “I do have some time to spare. Maybe I can get away with playing a video game before I leave?” Upon entering the kitchen: “Pretty sure I have some food in the fridge.” Upon attempting to walk past the over-the-sink mirror in the bathroom, the character will stop, face the mirror, and a ball of scribbles signaling a bad mood will appear in a speech bubble over her head accompanied by, “I really shouldn’t leave the house without some makeup.”

After wandering around the house and reading all of the reflective dialogue, or not, the player must choose what actions they want to take.

*When moving to the bathtub and hitting the action key the dialogue, “Hm, is it time to bathe and shave before going out?” with the player having the option to ‘Jump in’ or ‘Nah.’ ‘Jump in’ is selected with the dialogue reaction, “God, how is it still cold this time of the year? I’ll never get used to it.” The screen then fades to black while the character showers with the dialogue, “Ooh, that’s a good idea for a game...” “Ow! Not the knee again!” When the bathroom fades back into view, “Aww, the water was so warm...”*

*Upon hitting the action button on the sink and mirror, “It’s only coffee with a friend, but I probably should put on my face before leaving.” With the options ‘Pretty up’ or ‘Skip it this time.’ When the player chooses ‘Pretty up,’ the character says, “Just think of it like painting.” and the screen fades to black with the dialogue, “Once you start, you can’t go back really.” “There. I look like me again.”*

*Upon using the wardrobe in your room, “Maybe I should put on something extra nice.” with the options ‘Dress Up’ or ‘I’m just seeing a friend’ appearing. This implies that the character is already dressed in a sense and this just means changing specifically to go out. When the player chooses to dress up, the character says, “It feels good to look good.” “I really shouldn’t, but heels make all the difference,” as it is faded to black. When the screen fades back in and the character has changed, they now have on purple shoes (presumably the aforementioned heels), a light blue blouse, and more vibrant sweater as well as earrings. “Wardrobe’s looking a little thin, but I’ll make do.”*

‘Time is up’ as indicated by an exclamation point appearing above her head and then the dialogue, “Looks like it’s time to go. Don’t want to keep her waiting.” At this point the character can take no other actions other than leave the apartment. No amount of time leaving the game idle or wandering around the room will affect the narrative, but they can no longer interact with the game system, the fridge or the bed.

Out on the street it becomes apparent that the player’s character lives in a decent sized city by the plethora of crosswalks, people, and the bases of the buildings that appear to be large. The environment is obviously intended to simulate hustle and bustle, but with a few things awry. At this point the player has the option to cross the street and avoid the crowd gathered on the same side of the street as her apartment, or cross the street and then cross back when she reaches the coffee shop.

*Heading towards the coffee shop in the most efficient way possible fails to appear as explicitly a choice as the other decisions in the game, but is rather a choice based on how the player simply decides to move their character. No matter the decisions taken place prior to now, moving down the street through the crowd will evoke responses from the NPCs. While there are many NPCs on the street, not all interact with*

<i>the player directly, and only a few in say glancing or looking in the PC's direction.</i>
<b>Someone turns and looks at the player as they try to pass, stopping you and saying, “Oh, I love your hair!” to the reaction by the character of a contented musical note in a thought bubble over her head. In the first group of people on the sidewalk, three people's eyes follow the player as they pass.</b>
<b>As the character continues up the sidewalk, a well dressed bald man approaches the player and stops them, saying, “Hey there sexy” met with a ‘...’ of saying nothing by the PC other than the ellipses in the thought bubble over her head. “That's a hot dress you have on.” The PC reacts with a scribbled ball in the thought bubble over her head before the player regains control again and is able to move forward. His gaze is added to the number that follow the player.</b>
<b>A grey haired woman stops the PC and asks, “Oh! You have such cool hair! Can I touch it?” and before the PC can respond the NPC reaches out and touches it, saying, “It feels so nice!” to the reaction of a surprised exclamation point, and then an irritated ball of scribbles.</b>
The player character is stopped a fourth time, a grey haired boy approaching saying, “What's up pretty?” followed by a ‘...’ from the payer in a thought bubble and then “Hey slow down, I want to talk to you.” Implying that the character has independently from the player tried to avoid him. At this point there is a brief pause before the NPC backs away saying, “Holy shit, YOU'RE A MAN! FUCK!” which the PC reacts to with the now common scribble ball and a sign of anger by the NPC. As the PC tries to move past him he calls out in all caps signifying a yell, “THAT'S SOMEONE'S *SON!*” and continued signs of anger in the speech bubble over his head in the form of a cruciform. As she moves toward the crosswalk, he continues to yell after her, “DID YOU SEE IT!? WATCH OUT FOR THAT MAN!” with more signs of anger. His gaze follows the player all the way until she enters the coffee shop.
The player enters the coffee shop to find it crowded with people sitting alone or with others, in conversations and not. No one's gaze follows the player's movements.
When the player moves farther into the shop, an NPC notices her and turns to gaze at her, calling out, “Hey Mattie! I'm over here!” When the player inevitably moves to her table which is situated before they can reach the coffee counter, a heart appears over her head implying the affection that is obvious in her words, “Hey there hun. Do you mind getting me coffee while I finish up this call? You know my favorite!” There is no way to interact with anyone else in the shop by the player's own direction. Rather, the game restricts interaction only to specific people and only at certain times.
The player is left only with one option: to move the character, Mattie as they now know, to the cashier to order their coffee.
<b>The cashier responds immediately, upon the action button being pressed while facing him, “Hello there Miss! Can I get something started for you?”</b>
Mattie orders she and her friend's drinks, “May I please have a hazelnut latte and a chai?” The cashier responds, “No problem. Paying with cash or card today?” The player is given a choice: ‘Cash’ or ‘Card.’
<i>If the player chooses ‘Card,’ Mattie passes it over the counter with a, “Here you go.”</i>

**With the credit card or debit card in hand, the cashier still in a friendly manner thanks her, “Thank you very much... Miss-er, Mr? Brice.” As it is indicated by the scribble ball over her head, Mattie gives a non-verbal response of discontent at the fumble of pronouns while the cashier has a speech bubble over his head appear containing a sweat drop which most often in manga indicates confusion or embarrassment before saying, “Um, your drink will be at the other end...”**

The player must then move their character through the coffee shop to get her drinks from the barista. When the player hits the action button to interact with him, Mattie says to herself and thus the player, “Oh, it’s that cute barista...” with the option to either ‘Catch his attention’ or ‘Sneak away when you can.’

*If the character chooses to ‘Catch his attention,’ she says, “Hey there! How’s it going?”*

**The barista NPC reacts in this playthrough with an exclamation point followed by, “Oh, hi! It’s nice seeing you again.” A heart then appears over his head before he expresses interest in the player’s character saying, “If you’re sticking around, maybe I can sit with you on my break?” Mattie responds back with a, “Sure! That would be nice!” Barista: “Right on. Are these yours?” Mattie: “Yes! See you soon.” followed by a musical note of content being expressed over her head.**

The player then, presumably after receiving she and her friend’s drinks though there are no visual cues to suggest so due to the limitations of the game’s creation tools, has no other option but to carry them back to her. While the player may wander about the coffee shop for a lengthy amount of time if they so choose, there are once again no other actionable objects in the environment.

As the PC walks back to the table, they will automatically stop as they proceed past it and set down the drinks saying, “Caffiene [sic] delivery!” with their friend responding with a contented heart over her head and saying, “Just in time!” before the screen fades to black.

**When the window fades back in from black, Mattie is sitting across from her friend, each with their respective cups of coffee. At this point there are no decisions left to be made in this playthrough and the player has only to be subject to the effects of their decisions up until now. This playthrough’s decisions result in the friend responding to the player character’s disposition coming out of getting a coffee date during the barista’s break: “You seem chipper today! Everything going well I take it?” A musical note signaling good mood appears over the PC’s head along with her response: “Well... You know that cute barista over there? I think he’s going to ask me out!” The NPC appears to have a ‘...’ over her head followed by, “Him? I mean, do you even know him? I feel like I see him flirting with all the girls here.” Mattie responds, seeming to take her friend’s comments as well meaning concern, “You know I don’t get asked out that much! Let me enjoy this chance!” with a heart over her head. Her friend continues, “I mean... Does he know? You know? I just don’t want you to get hurt.” This is met with a disgruntled scribble ball over Mattie’s head before the screen fades to black and the game starts over...**

The following sections break down and examine the decisions made by the player, their effects, and other aspects of the game organized by their location: at home, on the street, or in the coffee shop.

#### 4.1.2 Preparing for Her Day

The player seems to enter Mattie's world in *Mainichi* abruptly, as though beginning watching a movie at a single scene halfway through the plot. There are no pointers as to controls, something atypical even of independent small time browser games of today, when the window fades in from black post displaying its title, a word that means 'every day' in Japanese hinting at the story for those in the know. While the character who appears to be a typical black female at this point in the game, stands by her bed at the start, it is apparent in the progression of decisions offered to the player that she has not recently awoken as she comments to herself and player how nice it would be to take a nap.

This is the first in what becomes common in this short game: interior dialogue that as apparent by the content is meant to both steer the player in what they should do and help the player understand or make sense of the rules of the game. As recorded in the sample playthrough in the previous section, the player is free to wander the entirety of the apartment and as they do by using the arrow keys is met with their own character's dialogue informing them about what actions are possible to take: taking a nap, taking a shower, putting on makeup, dressing up, playing videogames, or having a snack. During the first playthrough (it is implied and expected that the player will accomplish many) the player only knows of a time limit by the PC's suggestion that she should get ready soon as she only has a few hours.

Truly, there isn't so much a 'time limit' as an 'action limit.' The player may not realize that there is a limit on how many actions they can take before they must leave when their character suddenly exclaims that they must do so. While there are six possible actions that can be taken in the apartment, they can only take so many and thus must prioritize and divide which they would prefer to do. Certain actions take longer than others, some actions cannot be executed unless another is done first, and some actions once done prevent other actions due to a lack of 'time' left. All of this makes for a series of decisions that the player may not even realize they are locking themselves into.

In the sample playthrough that was included in order to give a pseudo diving board from which to leap into the discussion, the player chose to take a shower, put on makeup and dress before 'time' ran out and the character had to depart to meet her friend. This is one in a surprising number of combinations that work to affect the narrative of the rest of the game.

One might decide to nap, eat a snack and play videogames; nap, shower and put on makeup; shower, dress up and snack; the list goes on and on. What is also interesting is that, similar to how the character directs the player as to what is possible to do, they also comment on actions that the player takes. We already reported that, for example, when the player hops in the shower the character exclaims how cold it is and that they thought of a good idea for a game, a gesture to Brice's status as a game designer and this game being a model of her own experiences. Such gestures to universal experiences (the coldness of the water and brainstorming in the shower) serve to aid in connecting the player to this character, but others also give insights into the player character's life, and the life of the developer.

If the player opts to eat some food from the fridge, Mattie says, "Haven't been eating well lately... Maybe I can sneak in some food before leaving." If the player decides to have Mattie play videogames, "It's been a while since I've had some free time for games." These statements invite the player to ponder what they are missing having entered this ongoing story without a background of the character's situation. "I don't get enough sleep these days..." "It would be nice to start dreaming again. It's been a while."

The protagonist only has so much time in her day, as all people do, to accomplish so much and as the player does in their own lives, they must prioritize the tasks of their character, Mattie, in the game. They may have more tasks than they typically do in their own lives, they may have less, but regardless here they must decide what they want to do in a very limited amount of time and experience what happens because of it. In order to put on makeup and dress up, Mattie must skip eating. If the player takes a nap and a shower, then there isn't time to play videogames.

Up until this point the character could very well be a cis-gendered woman getting ready for her day. There are a few hints, especially regarding the character's dialogue when the player directs them to interact with the bathroom sink and mirror to put on makeup: "I probably should put on my face before leaving." "There. I look like me again." While many women regularly wear makeup and would not leave the house without it on, saying in the sole company of the player and themselves that they are putting on their face lends a hint at the character not seeing herself without makeup as her 'true self.'

McCloskey comments on men wondering about her employment of makeup and her view of it as a transgender woman. "Makeup was no longer sexy at all, or even very feminine. It was a duty, work, not a joy." She continues of the chore, "Makeup must be done the one best way you can figure out and then never varied. It's like putting on a uniform"

(McCloskey 1999: 246). Her experience rings harmonious with that of Mattie's: "Just think of it like painting." "Once you start you can't go back really."



*Figure 11. It's like painting*

However, it is not until Mattie and the player venture out onto the street that they are exposed to the reason behind their timed morning routine and further who they are by virtue of how they are treated by others. Players find that their choices in how they prepare for their day somewhat have an influence on how their day goes. As far as the character is affected by how NPC's react to them, the player is given a new perspective on this person's experience.

#### 4.1.3 Commuting on the Street

When the player leaves the apartment, the game window fades to black before fading back in to a nondescript street. Up until this point the player has made decisions in the form of text choices that if this is their first playthrough may seem trivial. However, from this point in the game forward the choices that the player has made and will make are seen to have an impact on the narrative.

When the game fades back into view, Mattie is seen standing outside of her apartment that the player just directed her out of. The street is one familiar of urban areas (the only



places one can typically walk to a coffee shop or see crowds randomly gathered on a sidewalk). However, the cars that line the streets are unmoving, idle as if time is standing still.

At this point the player has a choice unlike the types of decisions made previously in the game's play, a choice more similar to those in *You Are Disabled*: of movement. There are two ways to get to the coffee shop up the street from Mattie's apartment: cross the road to where fewer people are loitering or remain on the same side of the street as the coffee shop but be forced to maneuver through the crowd. This decision is integral to how the narrative plays out as crossing to the vacant side of the street or walking on the street itself limits the player from interacting with any of the NPCs idling on the sidewalk. On the other hand, moving through the crowd guarantees interaction with NPCs in the form of dialogue.



*Figure 12. One can cross the street or brave the crowd*

Depending on the player's actions prior to this point there are a few different scenarios that can play out on the street, each with different implications. Regardless, at this point in the game the character will be 'outed' as transgender not only to everyone on the street, but the player as well in the case that they had not read about the game prior to

playing. We've already reported what happens to Mattie in one scenario in the sample playthrough, but it is best to re-examine that situation in order to better understand the others.

In the sample playthrough where the character showered, put on makeup and dressed up, the first interaction with NPCs upon moving down the street entails a compliment seemingly made innocently to be nice. "Oh, I love your hair!" is received well by the player as indicated by the musical note over her head. Such well-meaning compliments between women are not all that rare after all in the United States. At this point there is nothing to feel negative about or be threatened by as the character is obviously passing, not being read by the other characters in the game or the player if this is their first playthrough.

What is 'passing?' Passing has often been talked about in relation to being a member of one racial group, but being accepted as another, most often in terms of people of color passing as white and thus having access to white privilege. In the same style, passing for a transgender person involves not being 'read' as the sexual organs that they are born with and thus mis-gendered by the person 'reading' them (McCloskey 1999: 164). "Thus passing privilege becomes far more significant to us throughout the course of our lives. Passing privilege is passing undetected as a member of the majority - white, straight or non-transgendered" (Xavier: 1).

At this point the player may not even realize this as the situation. After all, someone with birth privilege, "being born into a physical sex that matches your internal gender identity" (Xavier: 1), playing the game likely does not recognize the rarity of such a kind compliment unattached to a nefarious transphobic motive. In the case that the player does not do all three (shower, makeup and dress up), the NPC that compliments her hair simply remains silent, her gaze following the PC as she walks by in this game's version of a staring or gawking fashion. In fact, depending on the decisions made by the player a varying amount of NPCs will watch the player, eerily turning on the spot to keep her in their view. This is not the only way that the player is made to feel different.

In the sample playthrough this did not happen, but unless the player chooses to spend their time in ways other than putting on makeup and dressing up, one of the NPCs that only watched Mattie in the sample playthrough speaks to her friend in a voice loud enough for Mattie to hear given that the dialogue appears on screen in the player's interface. "Oh my god, look. Is that a boy or a girl?" The friend to which she speaks responds quickly with an embarrassed sweat drop over her head, saying, "Shhh! They'll hear you!" The first NPC responds back, "But isn't that gross!?" The friend having the exchange with the person gawking rudely doesn't actually defend Mattie against her comments, but appears

embarrassed of her and doesn't use an incorrect pronoun either; rather, she refers to Mattie as 'they' which is at least gender neutral.

A ball of scribbles appears over Mattie's head as it did in the sample playthrough under other conditions that will be addressed here, signifying her hearing and feeling unhappy about how they see her. However, this is not the only way she can be othered on the street, and not the only circumstance under which it happens in terms of the player's previous decisions. The next possible interaction only occurs under the circumstances in the sample playthrough, just as the first interaction did regarding the compliment of Mattie's hair.

Under other circumstances the well-dressed bald man only gawks at the player's character just like the other NPCs, but in the case that the character passes, he feels confident enough to harass her as a woman. "Hey there sexy." "That's a hot dress you have on." Just as in the case during another playthrough and another interaction, a thought bubble appears over Mattie's head filled with the disgruntled angry scribble ball.

'Damned if you do, damned if you don't' best describes this impossible situation which they discover via their play of the game. If the character doesn't pass she must deal with people's words and judgment of how she looks and her 'real gender.' If she does pass, she, like cis-women everywhere, is forced to tolerate harassment by misogynistic men who objectify her for the gender they read. So much for 'passing privilege.'

As a trans-woman of color, passing does not necessarily shield the player from othering actions by NPCs either. Though nearly at the coffee shop, a grey haired woman stops the player with an exclamation. "Oh! You have such cool hair! Can I touch it?" The question is surprising in and of itself, but what is doubly unexpected is when the NPC seems to reach out and touch the character's hair without permission to Mattie's initial surprise followed by dismay.

This daring move of intimacy may be surprising and difficult to understand for most people. Many may not even know that this is actually a thing that many people do to black people. Antonia Opiah, the founder of *un-ruly.com* and creator of *You Can Touch My Hair*, a film about the fascination with African-American hair, told the New York Daily News that, "Women say it made them feel like they're different or strange. It made them feel vulnerable." According to Opiah, "It makes them feel like they're some sort of an alien. And I do feel like it's different when a white person asks than when a black person asks the question" (Murray 2013: 4).

During the course of the film based on the 2013 Union Square exhibit, many women of color echoed Opiah's sentiment in the interview. Some women even protested the *You Can*

*Touch My Hair* exhibit with one saying, “It’s a matter of educating and I personally don’t see what education comes from someone touching. I think there doesn’t need to be any touching. I mean, you know black women or women of color generally genetically have bigger backsides. Do you need to touch my butt to know why I have, why I’m genetically predisposed to have, a larger backside? No, you don’t. Or you can just walk around and accept that people are different” (Opiah 2013).

Accepting difference is the point of contention in this game and people’s lack thereof is what the developer is modeling in the title: both difference of race and, more center stage, difference of gender identity. This lack of acceptance of difference continues to be gestured at especially in the player’s last interaction on the street, which occurs across every single playthrough of *Mainichi* and is likely to be considered by players to be the most poignant. Where previous interactions have ranged from kind to offensive, this is the only that degenerates into outright harassment leaning towards the threat of violence.

A grey haired man who approaches the player, blocking them from passing, initiates this last interaction in broad daylight out on the street. “What’s up pretty?” Mattie responds with a ‘...’ over her head, choosing not to respond. The player here has no power, no ability to form a response, limited by the rules of the game. It is made apparent in the NPC’s words that the PC has tried to move past him when he says, “Hey slow down, I want to talk to you.”

At this point the confrontation escalates from just street catcalls akin to what a previous character committed as this NPC realizes that the character is trans and seems to explode. “Holy shit, YOU’RE A MAN! FUCK!” A cruciform appears over his head, a symbol that often appears in manga to indicate anger or irritation. When the player once again has control of their character and attempts to move away using the keyboard controls, the man yells after them: “THAT’S SOMEONE’S \*SON!\*” accompanied by the continued signs of anger. Then as the player continues to move away, he yells at her back, “DID YOU SEE IT!? WATCH OUT FOR THAT MAN!” with more symbols indicating anger.

This transphobic dialogue emerges from the view of trans people as deceivers who actively try to depict themselves as something they are not in order to trick the heterosexual. As Talia Mae Bettcher, Professor of Philosophy at California State University, says in her writing on understanding transphobia and its motivations, “‘Deceiver’ is reserved for trans people who pass as non-trans in the gender of our choice - but who are subsequently ‘exposed’ as ‘really’ another gender” (Bettcher 2006: 204). She explains that the reason behind this violent response is that gender presentation is taken by people to be an indicator of genital status. “Trans people who are taken to ‘misalign’ gender with sex are taken as

deceivers because they have, through their gender presentation, given ‘incorrect information’ about what is between their legs” (Bettcher 2006: 205).

According to Bettcher, this intertwining of gender representation and genital representation is part of a larger system of heterosexual interaction: men interpreting feminine attire as provocative and thus an invitation to advance (Bettcher 2006: 206). In this situation in *Mainichi*, the character experiences harassment triggered by her perceived gender representation and thus genital status as a woman, and then transphobia when she is perceived as a ‘deceiver.’ This interaction happens regardless of the player’s decisions prior, in every single playthrough unless the player chooses to take the alternate route by crossing the street to get to the coffee shop.

At this point the interaction on the commute to the coffee shop is over. Just as the player lacked the agency as restrained by the rules of the game to initiate conversation with NPCs, they are powerless to respond both during and after. Rather, they must be silent, unable to walk away as they are harassed and unable to defend themselves. This may not be the case in every real life occurrence of these situations, but rather this is the experience modeled for the player in this title. Like *You Are Disabled* removes from the player certain aspects of the platformer rules to make a point, *Mainichi* does the same with interactive fiction and role playing games.

*Mainichi* removes from the player agency in the game, the ability to respond or choose when to take action. They are completely subject to the will of the NPCs, forced to hear what they have to say without an ability to respond and forced to cross the street to avoid it. Using the rules of the game, the developer shows the player how they experience literally such a basic practice as commuting to meet a friend. The game progresses further inside of the coffee shop, modeling for the player the little details that in this trans-woman’s life are hurdles and obstacles to being treated ‘normal.’

#### 4.1.4 At the Coffee Shop

At long last, when the player has finally made it to the coffee shop and enters through the door, she is met with a fairly dark intimate environment crowded with people both having coffee with others and alone. Unlike on the street, regardless of the player’s decisions in getting Mattie ready to go out, none of the NPCs turn to look at the PC whether because they are too engrossed in their conversations, do not notice or simply do not care. As the player

moves Mattie further into the shop, one of the NPCs turns with an exclamation point and calls out to the player letting them know where she is. Procedurally, this design decision makes sense as while Mattie will undoubtedly recognize her friend the player may not.

The player is not yet free to move about the shop as when they try and pass by their friend's table she stops Mattie with a heart over her head, saying, "Hey there hun. Do you mind getting me coffee while I finish up this call? You know my favorite!" At this point the player now has the ability to roam the coffee shop as they please, but like in other areas of the game only has the ability to interact with the cashier, which initiates a continuation of the story. The interaction with the cashier in the process of ordering drinks is most interesting because it is an example of a person that is completely un-malicious in their efforts.

One might say that the cashier here is an in-game example of someone who is not ill meaning, but simply not knowledgeable of trans people and thus is confused on what to do in this situation. There are three possible ways for the cashier to greet the player that vary based on how many of the practices gendered feminine that they engage in before leaving the apartment. Across all of his greets to Mattie, there is no signifier of ill meaning or malice, unlike the girl on the street who poked fun at the player's character and said that the idea of trans people is 'gross.'

In the case that Mattie is 'passing,' the cashier immediately refers to her as 'Miss.' When the character fails to do any feminizing practices (makeup and dress up) the character is referred to by the pronoun "Mr.." And when the character only performs half of them (dress up but no make up or vice versa) the cashier stumbles before using no pronoun rather than guessing. In the situations where the cashier uses Mattie's correct chosen pronoun or no pronoun, there is no reaction by the player character. On the other hand, if the cashier uses the wrong pronoun the now familiar scribble ball appears over her head.

After she orders she and her friend's drinks, the cashier responds with a question all of those in the western world are familiar with hearing many times a day. "Paying with cash or card today?" What is a thoughtless decision for many, for Mattie is a moment where she will either continue to pass or will be revealed as transgender to the cashier based on the clash between the signifier on her card and the gender she is performing. Still, the cashier's response is not malicious.

If Mattie has passed up until now, when the cashier reads her card his response is hesitant as he goes and continues responding based on the gender she presents before backtracking to the gender on the card. "Thank you very much... Miss-er, Mr? Brice." he responds with an interrogative as though unsure and looking for confirmation from the

character. The confusion of gender is not received well by the character, however, as indicated by the scribble ball over her head.



*Figure 13. The cashier is unsure if he responded correctly*

The cashier reacts with a sweat drop typically indicative of embarrassment or confusion as he confirms that her drink will be at the other end of the bar with the barista. For the player, this response based on their choice of cash or card models for them the intricacies of passing and issues that arise when a person's gender conflicts with their records for one reason or another.

This small decision given to the player and the consequences that come about because of it is a side effect of the many legal hurdles that prevent transgender people from changing their documents to line up with their gender identity. Further, seeing Mattie's reaction from her perspective serves to make the player more aware of what they say and how it affects the trans person they are speaking to. In the case that Mattie does not pass, but is not clearly presenting as male, the cashier is gender neutral and continues to be when he is handed cash: a small effort. This situation and the player's role within it serves to increase awareness of the complexities of being trans and how people are treated because of their gender identity. Especially if the player is a person typically on the other side of this situation, it can help them appreciate the details in how they speak to people.

As the character moves to the other end of the bar they must move past all of the NPCs seated around the shop. As before, no one bothers to watch them, very unlike the behavior of NPCs on the street, which raises questions about the differences culturally between the two crowds. Though there is a music box in the corner in addition to all of the people seated around the room, there is once again no way to interact with anything or anyone other than the barista who continues the somewhat fixed narrative. When the player directs the character to interact with the barista via the action key, rather than the barista immediately reacting, Mattie opens the dialogue this time to speak to the player and share her feelings about the man behind the counter. Across all playthroughs, regardless of the comments of those on the street that might have shaken her confidence, she confides in the player and puts the choice in their hands. “Oh, it’s that cute barista...” she says and gives the player the choice to act on her interest of ‘Sneak away when you can.’

In the event that the player chooses to sneak away, she simply takes her coffee and returns to the table where her friend is seated unhindered, but if she decides to ‘Catch his attention’ one of two things can happen that influences how this playthrough of the game will end. How the player chose to prepare Mattie to go to the coffee shop influences how the barista responds when she says, “Hey there! How’s it going?” As seen in the sample playthrough, if the character took a shower, put on makeup and dressed up then the character passes and the barista responds with obvious attraction, accepting and responding positively to her interest. “Oh, hi! It’s nice seeing you again.” with a little heart over his head. “If you’re sticking around, maybe I can sit with you on my break?”

Mattie responds confirming that would be nice and after receiving her drinks a musical note is displayed over her head expressing her excitement, likely both at having her identity confirmed and at someone showing interest in her in such a way to want to talk to her over coffee much unlike the advances made on the street. Her excitement, as we will explain, continues into her conversation with her friend, but if Mattie does not ‘pass’ the story is different. Unless the player executes all three of the actions in the sample playthrough, her interest is shrugged off by the NPC with a “Oh, hi dude. Not bad. Are these your drinks?” While not negative, this response indicates the character has been read as male and after thanking him for the beverages a dysphoric scribble ball appears over her head and her feelings influence her discussion with the friend waiting at the table.

The final interaction in the game, the final moment that the entire game has worked up to, the end goal of everything the player has done so far in the game, can have three different endings depending on what the player has done up until this point and how the



character has been affected by them directly and how the NPCs have treated the character because of it. The ending that is most common comes about whether the character has passed or not, as long as the passing character chose to sneak away rather than start up a conversation with the barista. After Mattie returns to her friend, the screen fades to black before fading in again to reveal she and her friend sitting across from each other at the table with two cups of coffee between them. The feather boa donned friend says, “You look down. Is everything going okay in life?” Mattie responds with, “You know, the usual. It’s hard to feel happy sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t care what people think of you! Your friends love you and that’s all that matters.”

“... Thanks.”

Though a little naive, Mattie’s friend doesn’t seem to intentionally overlook Mattie’s feelings. Even if Mattie doesn’t care what people think, harassment on the street or people confusing your gender can take its toll on morale. The love of friends is not really enough to drown out the cacophony of voices on the way to and in the coffee shop that challenge, dispute, or diminish Mattie’s gender identity. Mattie’s friend represents the position of a well meaning but misguided ally, an opinion only confirmed by how she acts in the two other possible endings.

In the playthrough that Mattie does pass and catches the attention of the barista, she returns to her friend noticeably excited as we know by her reaction. “You seem chipper today! Everything going well I take it?” Mattie reacts with a musical note over her head signaling her good mood before explaining, “Well... you know that cute barista over there? I think he’s going to ask me out!” From here the conversation begins to devolve into Mattie’s friend eroding her confidence.

“Him? I mean, do you even know him? I feel like I see him flirting with all the girls here.” Mattie seems to give her friend the benefit of the doubt and takes her words as well meaning concern: “You know I don’t get asked out that much! Let me enjoy this chance!” with a heart over her head. This response fails to satisfy her friend’s ‘concern’ and naturally her next response reveals the real root of her ‘worry.’ “I mean... Does he know? You know? I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

Mattie’s scribble ball of discontent making an appearance lets the player know exactly what she means by “Does he know?” Does he know you’re trans? Does he know you’re not a ‘real woman?’ Does he know he’s being tricked? For Mattie’s friend, having

coffee with someone requires coming out and revealing every specific detail of your gender identity, as if her friend sits down to coffee with the disclaimer: ‘I am cis-gendered!’

Karen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, in “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity : Gender Normals,” Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” compare the interaction of transgender people and ‘gender normals’ (cis-gendered people) in sexualized and non-sexual situations in two case studies in order to explain how gender and sexuality are tied together and argue that gender’s alignment with genital status is deemed more important in sexualized situations. Within, they include testimonies by a few trans people in such situations as the workplace where women can accept trans-men in such masculine positions such as doing heavy lifting and killing spiders (non-sexual) but not in relationships with female bodied people (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 450). “In sexualized situations, women frame transmen as deceptive—tricking women into seemingly heterosexual relationships without the necessary biological marker of manhood. At a volunteer organization Peter participated in for many years, before and after his transition, he developed a flirtatious relationship with a woman volunteer. He says, ‘We were flirting a bit and someone noticed. She pulled me aside and said, ‘Does she know about you? I am concerned she doesn’t know about you. What is going on between you two? This is totally inappropriate’” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 450).

In many of the situations cited, women were accepting of FtMs in situations that were deemed non-sexual, but were totally the opposite in terms of flirting and dating situations. Transmen are deemed as deceptive, as if they are trying to trick straight women into homosexuality. “In these situations, women re-gender transmen as biological females passing as men in an attempt to trick women into homosexuality” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 450). This accounts for both the explicit transphobic reaction by the man on the street and the more covert transphobia of the friend who warns Mattie off of sitting for coffee with the barista because it is deemed sexualized and thus an act of deception by the transwoman.

While both of these instances serve to call into question this friend’s intentions, the last one is especially overstepping and invites a statement of opinion directly from the player’s character on a rather touchy issue in the trans community. In the case that Mattie takes a nap, showers and puts on makeup but lacks the time to dress up, she isn’t read by others on the street or in the coffee shop as decisively one gender. As you’ve read, even the cashier remains gender neutral in his interactions rather than referring to her as Miss or Mr. at least until she hands over her credit card that effectively outs her. When she tries to catch the

attention of the cute barista, she is read as male and her mood culminating from all these interactions combined carries over to her conversation at the table.

“Hey. You’re looking crushed. What’s the matter?” it starts out, very similar to the more common ending. Mattie responds the same as before, “You know, the usual. It’s hard to feel happy sometimes.” However, her friend’s response is much different, “Maybe... You should consider a therapist? I mean, I’ve read some success stories about taking hormones and I think you’d do great on them.” Mattie responds, “I wish I didn’t have to change myself” to the appearance of an irritated scribble ball over her friend’s head.

It is indeterminable what about Mattie in this sequence of events in particular triggers her friend to feel the need to suggest she go on hormones. Whether it is how she looks given the regiment she took to get ready, the treatment she has received so far that day that shows on her face, or a combination of the two. This suggestion does clash with the idea of the well meaning accepting friend who loves Mattie and thinks she should ignore what others think about her because ‘they don’t matter.’ If changing herself to change how others treat her is a viable solution then those voices on the street do matter contrary to her earlier suggestion that she should only care about the opinion of her friends. Further, this idea originates from a binary focused perspective of men and women where those whose gender identity does not line up with their body’s sex must change their body’s sex (Bettcher 2014: 1).

“The wrong-body models proper has two versions. In the weak version, one is born with the medical condition of transsexuality and then, through genital reconstruction surgery, becomes a woman or a man (in proper alignment with an innate gender identity). In the strong version, one’s real sex is determined by gender identity. On the basis of this native identity one affirms that one has always really been the woman or a man that one claims to be. In both versions, one is effectively a man or woman ‘trapped in the wrong body.’” (Bettcher 2014: 1). Bettcher goes on in her work on rethinking the transgender model of being ‘stuck in the wrong body’ versus being beyond binary to understand the issues in thinking in terms of both models exclusively.

When Mattie’s friend suggests she go on hormones, it is part of the medical enforcement of this male/female binary and when Mattie declares her wish not to have to change her own body (inferred: for the comfort of others) is disrupts that effort to the discontent of her friend. This game does not go so far to have Mattie declare her trans\* or genderqueer identity outright, but does express her stance in relation to this issue in the trans community: how her gender identity lines up with her body in words free of more jargon-esque terms that might lose the layman playing this game after stumbling across it online.

Mattie is not arguing here for a particular model through which to view all trans\* people, but rather giving an account of her identity and experience. The notion that all transgender people are trapped in the wrong body is not correct, and in this ending Mattie stands as a procedural representation of that experience and the consequences of it in a binary bound society that sees ‘real men’ and ‘real women’ as having some birthright or surgical correction to lay claim to their gender. As Bettcher attests, there isn’t a single transgender experience or even definition of what exactly is ‘trans\*.’

“Many of the trans people I know identify as men or women or as trans men or women. Many of us have not undergone genital reconstruction surgery, and many of us do not want to; however, some of us have, and some of us do. Some of us have surgically altered our bodies in different ways (and some have not), some of us take hormones (and some do not), and some of us have had silicone injections (and some have not). For the most part, we believe our genital configurations don’t undermine facts about who we are. For example, some of us trans women are very clear that we’re unequivocally and entirely women (even female) while firmly disavowing any interest in genital reconstruction surgery. By contrast, some of us do not identify as men or women at all, and some of us take “trans woman” to mean someone who is indeed beyond the binary. Our self identifications are generally complex and hard to pin down. Indeed, the very meanings of gender terms are not stable. They’re both variable and contested” (Bettcher 2014: 7).

To suggest that Mattie go on hormones is to endorse the wrong-body model and likewise endorse the dominant understanding of what a man or women is and that in order for Mattie to be considered a ‘real woman’ she must undergo hormones and/or surgery to correct her ‘wrongness’ (Bettcher 2014: 8). We see the manifestation of this ideology in the playthrough where Mattie gets a coffee date with the barista and her friend questions whether he knows about her (implied trans identity). This can be seen as further symptom of her transphobia as it implies that Mattie is pretending to be something she is not, a man, to deceive the barista, assumedly heterosexual (Bettcher 2014: 9).

## 4.2 Winning Trans

Apparent in the previous section on procedurality in *Mainichi*, this game has many more textual and narrative aspects than *You Are Disabled*. It is also a very different game overall in genre and in the inclusion of challenge and by beating that challenge ‘winning,’ contrary to

this game which emphasizes a story rather than arcade-esque jump and dodge mechanics. In short, *Mainichi* utilizes procedural elements as all games do, but embeds its story in them rather than using the rules themselves to tell the story. Where *You Are Disabled*'s point is made directly in the rules placed on the player, *Mainichi*'s is made in textual action and reaction limited and allowed by the rules.

One of the ways that *Mainichi* is so different from *You Are Disabled* beyond genre is that it lacks 'challenge,' and this factor is not inherently tied to its difference in genre. Interactive fiction does not necessarily lack challenge. *Gone Home*, for example, while lacking the challenge of evading enemies and obstacles, challenges the player in exploration to find things - objects within the world. It could be said that this end goal keeps the player invested even when they lack an influence on the story.

In *Mainichi* the player does influence the story, but as was explained in the previous chapter in a discussion of the impact of the decisions made by the player, it is an exercise in futility: that is the exact point that the game is trying to make. Even where the game challenges the player to make decisions that will lead them to the 'right ending' as typical of interactive fiction's novel brother - the choose-your-own-adventure book - the player realizes a few tries in that the 'good ending' is suspiciously missing from this tale. Akin to the player of the 'crippled' character in *You Are Disabled*, the player is denied their just or right reward, but this is not a new or novel mechanic.

While *You Are Disabled* denied certain characters success in order to keep the player coming back to be reincarnated into a character with a different disability with which to test their mettle, *Mainichi* denies the player such an ability. The player is forced instead to accept what they cannot influence or 'win' in the game which serves a function all its own. It is a twisted version of *Groundhog Day* where it is not Bill Murray's character that needs to make a change or learn a lesson, but instead the player and those that the NPCs represent that are the weatherman.

In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul sets out in the second chapter to propose a definition of a game by outlining six features that every 'game' has. Three of these features have to do with the outcome of the game and limit the term to activities that have a variable, quantifiable outcome, have a valorized outcome and have an outcome to which the player is attached (Juul 2011: 36). First printed in 2005, the face of videogames has changed quite a bit and we find now that many so called games, popular and lesser known, fail to meet all three of these requirements, *Mainichi* being one such game.

Even while the narrative of the game in the form of NPC interactions changes, there is no complete playthrough that is more desirable than another and, indeed, no way to win in any markedly satisfying way. However, like *Minecraft*, these characteristics do not necessarily denote *Mainichi* as ‘not a game’ and it can be illustrated how these characteristics serve to make a very valid point to the player that might not have been conveyed otherwise. Brice’s title is not the first to utilize the never-ending mechanic, and it is arguable that others have used the same process to make points of their own.

In her discussion of persuasive games as tactical media, Raley observes that currently the category is focused more on description than prescription (Raley 2009: 86). We find that in both *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi* this emphasis on description rings true as each of the games models the experience of being disabled and being trans respectively in their own ways; more abstract in the platformer and more literally in the interactive diction role playing game. However, both model the experience to express how it is rather than particular actions that should be taken to address it. “Persuasive games take care to model causality and consequences; within them, critical arguments are made via the emphasis on the effects of gameplay actions” (Raley 2009: 4). *Mainichi* does this much more explicitly than *You Are Disabled*.

Whereas *You Are Disabled* limits typical action to form its argument, *Mainichi* links player action regarding what practices they take part in to prepare for their day and the way they are treated both on the street and in the coffee shop, thus an emphasis on the effects of gameplay actions. In addition, the major theme of the game is specifically how player action does not necessarily have a major change in the narrative or NPC effects on the player character.

Newsgaming, a team that works on creating games that make arguments about major international news, created a game called *September 12: A Toy World* in 2003 (Raley 2009: 86), that models the function and effects of drone strikes in the Middle East. In the game, the player is presented with an overhead view of a miscellaneous Middle Eastern city and a targeting reticle small enough to imply accuracy, but large enough to have obvious collateral damage. The player is charged with using the targeting reticle to aim at and fire missiles at apparent ‘terrorists’ moving about the city below. However, when fired there is a delay between the trigger and its arrival at the target inevitably causing more collateral damage in terms of civilians. With the destruction on the ground, civilians stop to grieve before flashing rapidly and then turning into militants themselves.

*September 12* never ends and nothing is truly resolved. Rather, the player fires and kills, more terrorists appear and the cycle begins again. In the same way, *Mainichi*, which suitably means ‘every day,’ never ends either. The player who is invited to make decisions about what practices they take part in, see their effects, and meet their friend before the window fades to black and the entire cycle starts over with the player able to make different decisions to see their effects plays through the narrative. Just as in *September 12* where there is no point at which all of the terrorists are dead and the game is won, there are no winning conditions that the player can fulfill where they get the best responses to make the character feel the best about themselves.

Raley says of *September 12* that the game teaches the player that with the method of action provided to the player, drone bombing, they cannot reach the win condition that might exist, elimination of the enemy. “It violates one of the basic principles of game mechanics, then, by making winning impossible” (Raley 2009: 86). And indeed like it is for the crippled, illiterate and blind characters in *You Are Disabled*, in *Mainichi* there is no way by which the player can ‘win,’ at least within the game. The designers at Newsgaming explain *September 12* as a simulation by which to explain parts of the war on terror. In *September 12*, those aspects of the simulation have a clear message: the best way to play is to not play at all.

But what does this same unwinnable mechanic mean in a much different context? To point out a different perspective of *September 12*, we must first delve further into Raley’s commentary on the game. “On the one-dimensional space of the map there is no underground, no caves, cellars, or other sites to provide cover from prevision-guided munitions and thwart the missions of surveillance and reconnaissance. In this respect, *September 12* offers the fantasy of optical power, of the ability to keep your target in constant sight, and the fulfillment of a “global vision” promised by satellite and drone technologies. There are further convergences between the game and the discourse on enmity. Within this game space, the enemy proliferates as an anonymous swarm, just as the cells of al-Qaeda are imagined to reproduce. In sum, *September 12* illustrates a model of defense that strikes first against a virtual, unknown, and unknowable enemy” (Raley 2009: 86-87).

Raley gathers from *September 12* that the best way to win is to not play, but in reality as well as in the context of the game that is not really an option: games are meant to be played after all. Rather, the player may be meant to understand that the rules in the simulation are broken. They cannot succeed and execute the goal with the tools that they have, so the tools must change. Drones cannot appreciate the complexities of the town beneath them, only

seeing the flat landscape rather than the layers of civilization below not unlike the deceptive imagery in aerial missions in *Call of Duty 4*.



Figure 14. An overview of a town not unlike September 12

However, the game does not account for this option, rather ending with its rhetoric of what does not work rather than what does.

Likewise, *Mainichi* may at first glance seem to unintentionally push a similar argument: that the best way to escape transphobia is to not be trans (i.e. The best way to keep collateral civilian kills from occurring is to not use drones). This type of rhetoric is even stated expressly by the friend who encourages the player's character to go on hormones in order to pass as non-trans and thus feel better about herself by avoiding scrutiny and judgment. But as Mattie expresses in her wish to not have to change her body, this is not a viable solution for the character or an available solution for the person playing them. Rather, what the game expresses in the normalcy of her every day routine, unprovoked and unwelcome critiques by strangers and friends, and her inability to remarkably impact that treatment regardless of her actions, is that what is broken in this game is not the character and the rules she is entrenched in, but the NPCs around her.

In both of these games, *Mainichi* and *You Are Disabled*, it is not these characters that need to change, but the world around them that rejects them as illegitimate, unworthy, unnatural or not 'able.' "A 'you-never-win' game could be considered a tragedy, for example, a game with a goal that the player is never meant to achieve, not because of a



player's lack of aptitude but due to a game design that embodies a tragic form" (Bogost 2010: 85). In both *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi*, the proffered or perceived method by which to succeed is deceptive. Reaching the end of the stage and changing how you present yourself in each game respectively fails to bring about the player's expected 'win.' The game, as is the society they represent, is simply broken and rather than a solution being given, the players are expected to ponder it for themselves and the games steer their players in a general direction with their representation.

### 4.3 Mainichi in Effect

*Mainichi* is more literal in its representation, forgoing the methods that *You Are Disabled* employed by taking the process of disability and modeling it as an unchangeable characteristic within the game that restricts and allows for the abilities of the player which abstracted disability as this unchangeable factor in movement, sight and understanding. In this way, Martin's project was impersonal in that it modeled the physical factors of several groups where *Mainichi* is the game representation of Brice's personal experience as a member of two minority groups: first as trans and secondly a woman of color. In *Mainichi*, the process of being a trans person and the responses by others is made explicit with the player given an involved role in what Mattie does, how people respond to that, and how she in turn responds back (or does not as she feels she lacks agency and thus the player is given none).

Here, the player is burdened with the responsibility to make a set of decisions and then subsequently exposed to the effects as the character experiences them - as the character's real life alternative experiences them. There is little in the way of metaphor; where *You Are Disabled* had grim reapers in place of the demeanors of real people and lava pits in place of stairs, *Mainichi* has virtual people on the street in place of real people on the street. The situation modeled in this game, a practice in and of itself, is one which all players are likely familiar with and have experienced in many ways depending on their environment and their own identities. For a person with a disability, a person of color or someone who is queer let alone trans, the experience is not unfamiliar based on gawking and hostile treatment, but this experience of walking down the street is not happening in a void.

The rules of the game, the decisions that are modeled and put forth to the player, that connect a trans person's gender presentation with treatment by others (strangers and friends)

and in turn how the character feels about themselves model multiple experience(s) had by trans people with infinitesimal possible differences from person to person. But the goal was not to create an all-encompassing representation of transness, rather one particular moment in one trans person's life. A diversion from games that attempt to include every experience, but rather an emphasis on one experience sharing the 'feeling' of a position. In Brice's own words, "I would say *Mainichi* lets someone feel rather than tells them what to feel. It's a key difference to create empathy instead of telling the player what's right to think" (Brice 2012: 5). In this title the player is not invited to make moral judgments of right and wrong such as in *Mass Effect*, they are invited to make everyday amoral decisions and deal with people's responses following.

From the description of this game it may seem as though it is less procedural or that procedurality takes a backseat to text and visuals in this title, especially considering *You Are Disabled's* employment of process ahead of an environment that is very nearly arbitrary to the point: the process of disability in the characters. Whereas, in *Mainichi* the processes are rooted in an adventure game style divisions that "could be replicated in numbers without any sort of cultural representation" (Brice 2012: 6), except that they include visual touches and textual touches that personalize the experience and give it the context that carries the message. The procedurality includes the narrative allowing players to tease out the connection between the practice of performing a gender and treatment by others towards the character based on that gender, whether as a passing woman or a trans woman. Further, the multiple responses from a friend that say to Mattie that the problem lies within herself echoing the testimonials by trans people that gave their reason for altering their bodies to live up with their gender identity.

"It makes life much easier. Imagine a transsexual going to a gym who had not had bottom surgery. Might cause a bit of a stir in the women's locker room. The same would be true for a female-to-male walking into the men's locker room... I guess the hypothetical is that you're in a car accident and your clothes are torn, and the paramedics show up and they're like, 'She's a girl. Wait, wait, what's this?' So that identity is better for everyone else on the outside. But to myself? It really made no difference, whether I had surgery or not. The surgery completed me, a complete transformation, and since my personality type said, 'Let's finish the job,' that made the most sense. But part of the reason I had the surgery was not only for me, but was for society, just to make society feel more at ease" (Nagoshi, Brzuzy and Terrell 2012: 13).

Especially at the end of the game, in one possible ending at least, Mattie's friend pressures the character towards this decision, representing the very real pressure that trans people experience with Mattie responding with her wish not to change her body. Through giving the player the opportunity to make decisions for the character, seeing how they are treated because of them or in spite of them and how the character in turn feels because of it, the player sees the connections between all three. It is a view that many players might not get to know at all otherwise and thus makes them aware that it even exists, even if they may be directly opposite their position as typically.

In *How to Do Things With Videogames*, Bogost calls attention to games' ability to put people in another's shoes in a unique way, referencing specifically a game called *Darfur is Dying* which allows the player to take the role of a child in Darfur who must venture out of hiding to find a well in a desert in order to retrieve water for his family (Bogost 2011: 18). Like with *Mainichi*'s unwinnability, the game is different in that position that it puts the player in unfamiliar to them which is a theme common to *You Are Disabled*'s characters being so unlike their counterpart, Mario, as well. A Darfuri child is not Sam Fisher of *Splinter Cell* or Edward Kenway of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Where Fisher has dark camouflage and night-vision goggles, and Kenway has his unrivaled ability to blend into a crowd and fight off enemies with his hidden blade, the Darfuri child has no special abilities to assist in hiding from the militia that will kill him if he is discovered. Rather than allowing the player to experience the thrill of taking on the role of a character larger than life, the goal of *Darfur is Dying* is to put the player in a role that entails fear and uncertainty that is so much more challenging than Fisher's, Kenway's or their own.

Bogost observes in *Darfur is Dying* that, "weakness is all the player ever gets. There is no magic to invoke, no heroic lineage to appeal to, strength adequate to survive is simply inaccessible" (Bogost 2011: 19). Whereas in *You Are Disabled* there is an ability to succeed in at least one character and at least reach the end of the level in all the others, *Mainichi* has no win condition. The trans experience in *Mainichi* is similar to the child's experience in *Darfur is Dying*: while there are some responses that can change with each decision made, people using the correct pronouns for example, the overall day-to-day experience is inescapable.

There is a sort of privilege that comes with being a straight cis-gendered white man, an advantage to this status. It seems the case that most games in effect transfer this status onto their players when the main character has this identity and is treated as such within the context of the game. Thus games, like what they can do with the role of a person with

disability or the Darfuri child, can cast the player in the role of a queer individual, whether it be transgender, gender non-conforming, gay, lesbian, bi, pan, and so on, and expose the players to the disadvantage that comes with this status. It does not tell the player what to think about the issue, but shows them the issue or at least a conception of it. *Mainichi* is a prime example of a game that attempts to share this kind of not often seen experience in games.

But why is it not often seen in games? On top of the aforementioned fear of misrepresentation, “Critics argue that frail situations are no fun. Feeble characters do not wear shoes anyone wants to wear” (Bogost 2011: 23). In discussing *World Without Oil*, Jane McGonigal, in her book about gamification called *Reality is Broken*, approaches the question of why people would play serious games tackling real world issues over another videogames (McGonigal 2011: 311). She theorizes that in taking a real world problem and turning it into an optional virtual experience, a different approach is taken that motivates more interest and curiosity. There is a negative pressure that comes with the decision to change in reality that is absent in regard to in game behavior (McGonigal 2011: 311).

In the context of LGBT or queer representation, the player is allowed to interact without societal pressure unless it is coded into the environment. In fact the option to express prejudice may not even be an option. Games are allowing for interaction with this target under-represented group in a rule-regulated environment free from judgment and open to exploration. Made in just a week, Brice’s game shows how experiences can be shared in such a way. Brice explains in an interview with Polygon that, “I wanted her to understand something about my life that I couldn’t communicate with words. It was about communicating certain things through a system to my friend” (Keogh 2013).

From the few reviews and comments that have been made, it can be seen how well this communication has been received beyond the initial scope of just her friend. Less easily accessible because it must be downloaded, the lack of an option to play in browser online also limits the ease that comes with being able to respond in moments right where the game is played. However, much can still be gathered in terms of thoughts on play of the game and the concept itself.

Tess Young, who blogs about games among other things at the Chic Monster Blog, wrote that what impressed her most about the game is its use of game mechanics to share its message. After leaving the house and her normal routines behind, she describes her interactions on the street as they felt to her (Young 2013: 3).

“Now that I've left the comfort of my house, experiencing what felt like an otherwise regular Saturday afternoon, I would expect that the rest of the game might follow suit. But as I walk a couple blocks, I'm being showered with insults and degrading remarks. I'm just sort of frozen in place as people yell at me like its some kind of Pokémon encounter. All I ever did was walk by. Alternatively, I could take the long way to the cafe and avoid all the crowds, but what kind of solution is that? In both cases, I as a player felt a true loss of agency. Normally this is considered bad game design because it irritates players when they have no control over what they do. Imagine then, what it must feel like to experience this in real life. Being the social butterfly that I am, what a terrible thing to be ostracized by "regular" crowds that I just enjoy being a part of and mingling in. So much was said in that single moment of the game; it was a masterful stroke of design.”

The loss of agency here is exactly what is intended to be depicted and felt by the player in the game. A loss of ability to take action in a game is often seen as a bad move as games are intended to be interactive as a medium, but this is what makes Brice's portrayal of a trans experience in this situation “a masterful stroke of design.” The player is invited to feel frustration, as they cannot fight back against these ‘enemies.’ And this lack of agency in some parts is highlighted by the knowledge that the ability to make decisions is possible in others. The trans person in this situation feels this same frustration as they suffer uninvited critique and even harassment.

On the other hand, some found aspects of the game weren't well tuned to the gamer who expects certain things in the way of mechanics or signifiers as to what is going on; who expect games to be more explicit.

“The use of game as a medium was inspired but brings with it a certain obligation to the form. I'm referring to the lack of an “ending’ or any sort of sign that I was playing ‘correctly’. Again, as an art piece, I feel it succeeded brilliantly – it left me with a lasting thought-process to mull over, and I will be sharing the experience with others. However I think it is important as a game designer/writer to recognize that gamers get frustrated when they don't have some sort of reciprocating input. The first time a new day started and the dialogue was all the same, I assumed I had done something wrong or perhaps that the game had glitched out and restarted. I wasted day two and three doing the exact same things as day one, and sitting through the same text, simply to establish the game mechanics. This confusion made it difficult to connect with the game during the middle section of my experience. This frustration added to the artistic merit of the project (life doesn't have clear rules of gameplay, life usually doesn't end after one day, often every day feels the same, and

it's very difficult to make valid action/reward connections ahead of time) while detracting from my overall emotional reaction to the piece while I was playing. Instead of thinking about the social situations, I was spending fully half of my mental energy just trying to figure out if I was 'playing the game right'. In hindsight, this fits right in with the artistic themes you were trying to present, but I think with a little more of an eye towards the 'game' aspect of the piece, more people would be willing to play it long enough to achieve an emotional response. I'm fairly certain most of my less dedicated or intellectual gamer friends will stop 'playing' the game after the second day turns into a slow repetition of the first" (A commenter on Brice 2012).

They state that the game incited confusion that kept them from being able to "connect," and that it lacked a reciprocating input. It is especially their mention of the lack of these qualities "detracting from my overall emotional reaction to the piece" that brings us back to Tronstad's discussion on flow and empathetic identification. *Mainichi* lacks many qualities that other games have: sound, optional interactivity, challenge, etc. While the character is visibly affected by the words of others in game, there is nothing that acts as a consequence of this for the player.

The game lacks challenge and goals, something *You Are Disabled* does have, and something that encourages flow that in turn allows for the player to more easily identify with their character. While the game, as many attest, makes one think about the issues it presents, it does not necessarily encourage feeling what the character feels by virtue of its mechanics. It forgoes taking advantage of its game status in this way in favor of modeling the system of performing gender and transphobia in the way that provokes uninvolved consideration as an insider audience. It provides perspective well, but not necessarily empathy in the embodied manner that Tronstad says of games.

But what the game does well is model the connection between action and effects of being trans and what the player can change in the game, what they cannot and what they might be able to change in reality. As Young attests in her review that in the past interacting with a trans person frightened them and that even now she is hesitant to approach them. "My takeaway from the game was, perhaps it's time my reservations on the subject stop deterring me from getting to know someone. I don't believe I or anyone else should have a responsibility to do this, but I feel it is the right thing to do" (Young 2013: 4). The more trans people, and queer people in general, appear in games as complex characters, the more people might become educated about them, their perspectives, who they are, and with information perhaps comes openness and acceptance.





## Chapter 5: Conclusion

While initially in the planning and executing of this thesis the interest was in studying and breaking down queer representation in videogames, on the journey to get to the finish line that is a completed project what may have been unwittingly accomplished is something different. The life of a gamer involves sinking into many roles and constantly exploring new worlds. Risking confirming the stereotype of my generation that we are fickle and can't pay attention to one thing for any longer than a few seconds, it is impossible to ignore when one happens upon something genius. Rather than writing only an analysis on queer representation, it seems this wandering towards the Master Degree has gone in another, albeit wonderfully satisfying, direction resulting in more of an analysis of representation. When it comes to *You Are Disabled*, *Mass Effect 3*, *Mainichi*, *Gone Home* and *Dys4ia*, the commonality may not be queer representation, but it is representation of a marginalized group that the player interacts with rather than views without being directly involved or without the ability to have an effect on.

In place of an apparent failure to come up with a groundbreaking result or answer as to the effects of queer representation, what is presented instead is an analysis of representation of marginalized groups that lends itself to improving representation of queers and those with disabilities and many others in the future. It shows that it might be possible to utilize these concepts intentionally in game design in order to improve situations for these people in reality. Akin in journalism where the first step of improving minority representation is to keeping that representation in mind in your writing, the situation for other marginalized groups can be improved in reality through conscious game design.

Successful or effective videogame development and play are literacies, each in their own right. We find that literacy is not only understanding that s-t-o-p means to halt, but so

does  and  and 停止. In the same way that comprehending a text is literacy, understanding a sign, a motion, and a marking is also literacy. Playing or developing a game is a literacy.

Videogames have their own language, many languages in fact. Their entire existence is based in these algorithmic or process languages that dictate all of the possibilities inside a



game. It's far from debatable when one goes to write or understand this code that a level or specialized literacy is involved. But not only is a literacy required to understand what is going on in the background of a game, but what is in the foreground as well even if it is on the level of designing games in a more accessible program rather than in complex code.

Put a controller, a joystick, or even a plastic fake *Guitar Hero* guitar in someone's hand and you'll see the amount of time it takes for them to learn to 'read' the game they're playing. For a gamer experienced with FPS's, not only is the link between the triggers, buttons and control sticks with their actions in game completely intuitive, but so are the characteristics of good FPS gameplay: crouching behind barriers, checking corners, reloading when an area is cleared of enemies, picking up ammo, shooting when the enemy is far and knifing when they are close enough to do so, moving when they are seen, staying still when they are not, knowing that height is an advantage and those windows are a prime target for grenade throwers. Experienced gamers know it intuitively when the physics are off, when the graphics aren't matching up with the processes, when something that's supposed to be there isn't and vice versa.

Gamers spend a great deal of time immersed in these alternate worlds, learning them as required in order to be successful and complete the challenges proffered by the game. Overlooking what is being absorbed during this practice is foolish, yet so many do so as long as it works in their favor. People use this practice to dismiss games, 'they make you violent,' 'they desensitize you,' but it's easily argued based on prior research by the likes of Bogost, McGonigal, Tronstad and Raley, and further here, that this simply isn't true - at least not on the large generalized scale that people would have you think. Judging the medium based on a few of their examples, both positively and negatively, is unfair to the gamers, developers and publishers that strive so hard to play and produce meaningful artifacts.

For McGonigal, games can be great for their ability to expand our way of thinking, our teamwork, and our approach to potential problems. For Bogost, videogames are great for their expanse of uses, as with any other medium, that should be catalogued and examined individually. Raley's interest is how games tactically make arguments and clear a space for criticality. Here, we examine games engaging in this practice, breaking them down into their parts, analyzing what they are doing and how they are going about it. These games seek to, and may very well, change how we view, think about and consider specific issues, specific people and very specific attitudes by putting them into a context that highlights their existence.

As we turn to the future, we see this very year the rise of virtual reality headsets as both Microsoft and Sony begin development on companions to the newest generation consoles, the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, heralded by the success and fascination last year with the Oculus Rift. While empathetic identification is already felt with the achievement of flow in games as we know them currently, devices that are able to effectively model immersion in 3D worlds in a convincing manner for the player beyond the limits of a single screen have the potential to change the way we experience videogames, and specifically how we experience games that have messages like those found in *You Are Disabled* and *Mainichi*.

While the two games analyzed here for their representation of disabled and transgender minority groups respectively have audiences that are fairly limited when compared to AAA titles, many independent games are breaking out onto the popular gaming scene with award winning success, games that also tackle issues of social justice in an original way utilizing the affordances that only this medium has to offer.

“*Papers, Please* is a great example of the things that you can absolutely do and what *Papers, Please* does, it doesn’t just represent it right? It creates game mechanics around the socioeconomic thing of being an immigrant or working at the border of a quasi eastern bloc country. And actually, that’s even more interesting to me, because what videogames do well is interaction. So if we only handle things in the narrative layer, we’re just doing what movies and books and everything else can do. But we start building mechanics that codify the ethnocentrism and nationalism which is what *Papers, Please* does, you start to actually understand that game better and understand the problems and actually like, ‘Oh, I understand how these systems were built and that system makes me do possibly racist or ethnocentric things.’ That’s how I felt playing the game and it was kind of eye opening and powerful” (Heir 2014).

Sessler responded with the follow-up, “I think at the end of the day that’s one of the things we’re really not taking advantage of in games. Because of the interactivity, because you really have to make assumptions and read things. There is so much more opportunity to explore, if not societal ills, then kind of wake us up to certain preconceptions. I want to believe we’re going to do this. I’m looking to you to kind of make the case to me that there really is an opportunity out there to see games move into that territory” (Heir 2014).

Fortunately, it is not that gaming is going to do this, but that it already is. The independent game scene is chock full of ideas and work that seeks to represent experiences that are not white middle class straight cisgender male; games with huge audiences and stacks of awards like *Gone Home* or *Papers, Please* and games that are lesser known but still

demonstrate affective game design principles that might be utilized in the design of big budget games that don't necessarily sacrifice more accurate representation for profit under the impression that 'games with black/female/queer/disabled/Latino/poor protagonists just don't sell.' The fact of the matter is that games do not sell when they are poorly designed. Simplified, stereotypical, archetypal characters cannot headline a successful game.

As Sessler says, "This is not shaming the games that currently exist. This is trying to broaden what games can do and should do. It's not at the expense of one for the other" (Heir 2014). What is proposed in this thesis is not that all games should have a motive, in essence that they should all be a kind of tactical media. Rather, this thesis demonstrates how games can represent minority characters in such a way that they are procedurally interesting, well thought out and meaningful for the player. While the titles discussed here have a very small audience and limited reach, they can be used as examples of how to use game mechanics to talk about minority perspectives in blockbuster games.

Contrary to the mantra that 'politics should be kept out of games,' politics are already in games. Whether through misrepresentation or outright exclusion, a conception of our ideas, beliefs, culture, and morality is being presented to players. An argument is already being made. Those who advocate for understanding games and interrogating what is occurring within them and what it means to players are only teasing out what already exists. The real question lies in how game developers can use this information to change the face of videogames, to make interesting characters of all kinds that players want to play.

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