"Just Because It's Gay?": Transgressive Design in Queer Coming of Age Visual Novels

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ABSTRACT

While queer narratives have recently gained greater prominence and attention [35][51][48] both in games and game studies, they still represent a tiny portion of the playable romances available. Even fewer among these represent the potential of what Edmond Chang [12] has referred to as "queergaming," or games which refuse to conform in their narrative, mechanics, and modes of play to a cisgender, white, heteronormative gaze. We argue that meaningful queergaming is impossible within the current norms and genres of so-called AAA, or mainstream. It thus requires space and platforms dedicated to transgressive game design, building on Aarseth's [1] framework of transgressive play. To substantiate our argument, we use an examination of recent queer visual novels built using Ren'Py and released on Itch.io, with a case study of most popular current exemplar *Butterfly Soup* [32] alongside previous exemplars of queer romance in games.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied computing~Computer games

KEYWORDS

Queer games, game romances, transgressive play, visual novels, walking simulators

1 INTRODUCTION

In the awards season of 2017, *PC Gamer* announced a surprising award: Best Visual Novel for *Butterfly Soup*, a tiny, free game made by an individual designer [45]. While *PC Gamer* has, through the years, awarded narrative games for excellence in a range of categories dating back to "Best Adventure Game" in the 90s, the category of visual novel has never previously been included.

PC Gamer has earned industry respect over the last decades as a reliable outlet for capturing unbiased mainstream gaming viewpoints. A survey of games honored in recent award years reveals only a few narrative-centric titles at all. In 2014, *PC Gamer* didn't recognize any games specifically for story but gave the award for best single-player game [41] to *Dragon Age: Inquisition* [5], a game notable for including a range of romance storylines including a few queer prospects [21]. However, the intersection of romance and interactive media typically eschews the experimental and queer discourse of fan communities in favor of heteronormative visual novels and forgettable romance "choice-driven" subplots. For instance, *Bioware*'s games treat queer relationships the same as any relationship and in doing so offer few opportunities to, as Greer terms it, "play queer" [25].

The increased emphasis on narrative games became clearer in 2015, with *PC Gamer* awarding a best writing recognition [42] for *80 Days* [27] and an award of "most original" [43] to *Her Story* [4]. In 2016, best writing [44]went to *Firewatch* [9] which was hailed by games journalists as a beautifully visual and narrative-rich game. *Firewatch* featured a non-traditional story and romance, and the ending inverted typical expectations of many games' narratives. However, in this inversion, it re-centers the story on the pain and suffering of the male protagonist rather than his relationship with his sick wife or the history and humanity of Delilah, the woman he talks to over the radio. Although the minor change in the setting and style do add depth to the story narrative, they don't progress the pattern into a queer or transgressive design path.

To find a queer-centered narrative in the *PC Gamer* awards before *Butterfly Soup* requires a journey back to 2013's *Gone Home* [23] which won best narrative game [40]. *Gone Home* is a game that centers on a queer love story but with a very different emotional tone then that of *Butterfly Soup*, instead it is a narrative where queer voices are absent—there to be

remembered and pieced together—and the atmosphere evokes that of a horror game.

The inclusion of games such as *Butterfly Soup* in year-end lists is therefore an important move for games journalism: such mainstream journalistic recognition reveals both increased diversity in defining game greatness and a desire to look outside traditional spaces and development studios for game making and promotion. This increased attention reflects a growing concern for broadening the discourse of representation in games. However, it does not necessarily reflect any large-scale ongoing cultural and industry change of this kind.

PC Gamer wasn't the only outlet to take notice of *Butterfly Soup*: the game also appeared at #11 on *Polygon*'s top games of the year [50], sandwiched between first person console shooter *Destiny 2* [8] and Nazi-shooter *Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus* [37]. An article in *The Guardian* called the game a "cult hit," noting that, "[g]aming doesn't have the best reputation when it comes to diversity, so it was good this year to see the industry acknowledge the LGBT community" [53]. However, this statement is far too optimistic – the industry isn't behind *Butterfly Soup*, nor can it particularly be credited with the other listed games in the article, which include Christine Love's erotic visual novel *Ladykiller in a Bind* [36] and *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* [22].

Another of the games listed as a sign of progress has an even darker relationship to the industry: Robert Yang's *The Tearoom* [55] offers a poignant historical bathroom simulator based on police monitoring of bathrooms to imprison men under sodomy laws. The designer cites the industry's raging homophobia as part of his inspiration:

"Today in 2017, police still target men who have sex with men – and in video game land, I still have to deal with Twitch banning my gay games by secret trial as if they're the fucking game police. So, to appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex, I have swapped out any pesky penises in my game for the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban – guns. Now, there's nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys' guns, right?" [56]

Yang's words are a testament to a designer frustrated by an industry that leaves him no space. Instead, he has made his own: distributing the game for free with a suggested donation of $5 (and the typical communal remark, "plz buy me a beer" accompanying the suggestion.) These exemplars, then, are not a sign of a growing desire for inclusive narrative design on the part of the industry: they are best understood as a reaction to years of marginalization and absence, enabled by platforms that allow designers to reach communities outside of industry gatekeeping, operating under aesthetic norms that allow independently-made works to be respected and valued.

In a telling moment in *Butterfly Soup*, a suggestion is met with an impassive expression and the remark, "You say that like I'd be interested just because it's gay." Similar critique has often landed on queer narratives across media and platforms that get dismissed as for a niche or outside audience and are rarely recognized for their significance and influence on the larger discourse of media. Queer games have received limited attention

in game studies communities [35][51][20][14], although they have recently been the subject of much-needed focus in Ruberg and Shaw's landmark Queer Game Studies [48] with a corresponding surge of research.

In this examination of *Butterfly Soup* in the context of queer game production using free visual novel creator Ren'Py for creation and Itch.io for distribution, we will investigate the structures and meaning-making at work in these games that exist outside and in opposition to the heteronormative gaze of mainstream gaming. While the mechanics of most game genres are inherently hetero-normative, queer game design techniques embedded in personal expressive platforms have the potential to subvert normative play.

2 GENRES OF TRANSGRESSION

Aarseth [1] defines transgressive play as "symbolic" rebellion through and against the mechanics of a game or genre. Transgressive play is a way of playing within a game or system that isn't designed for the user—not unlike fan fiction, it offers the potential for shaping one's own counter-narratives or other forms of contrary play, such as entering a combat-driven MMO and attempting to progress without violence.

The making of queer, "own voices" games is similarly an act of rebellion against dominant heteronormative narratives and mechanics, and might usefully be understood through the lens of transgressive design: a similarly symbolic rebellion against the practices and narratives of mainstream gaming culture. Transgressive design by its very nature cannot take place in the traditional spaces of the games industry, which through their very norms, design processes, and labor practices leave little space for meaningful queering of game design. Representation fed through the studio process is ultimately packaged and consumed by that process: a player must rebel against the minimal, token narratives of the studio system.

What are the tools of transgressive design, and how do game designers presenting own voices queer narratives work with these tools, norms, and spaces outside of AAA game design? One of the greatest challenges these designers face is that of genre: the traditional mechanics of many game genres don't lend themselves to discourse, romance, or even meaningful character interaction. The platforms that power indie development, including Unity and Unreal Engine, are imbued with the dominant mechanics of the first and third-person shooters as the most accessible models of design; these platforms resist queer gaming, and meaningful queer narratives, by making mechanics outside the dominant genres more challenging for implementation and design.

Other media formats do not deal with this same tension of genre and mechanics in representations of love and identity, and queer narratives across media are becoming more visible. Though film has traditionally given voice only to a limited range of queer narratives, primarily featuring white gay men or lesbians identifiable within certain tropes, the increasing diversity of directors is in keeping with the push for "own voices" representation within media narratives and well

represented through films like *Moonlight* (2016) and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017).

Author Corinne Duyvis created the #OwnVoices hashtag on Twitter to draw attention to the limitations of the "We Need Diverse Books" campaign. One critic summarized:

"There's a long history of majority-group authors (white, abled, straight, cisgender, male, etc.) writing outside their experience to tell diverse stories. Sometimes the characters and stories they create are wonderful! But many times, they're rife with stereotypes, tropes, and harmful portrayals. Time and again, marginalized people have seen their stories taken from them, misused, and published as authentic, while marginalized authors have had to jump hurdle after hurdle to be published themselves." [54]

The "own voices" movement has become a dominant part of the discourse of young adult media, where more visibly inclusive characters and narratives are not always reflected in the demographics of authorship. Similar concern accompanies the space of participatory game design, where the inclusion of communities not typically present in game design studios in the process has been valued as part of representation [29].

The push to "own voices" faces additional challenges of knowledge and access: participation in STEM spaces is difficult for those othered and alienated from these same STEM cultures and traditions. Platforms such as Twine are frequently associated with queer narratives and experimental design [19], in large part because they exist outside the STEM culture and dominant discourses. Some of the most nuanced examples of queer representation have been examined within Twine's text-dominated gamespace [6]. However, Twine's text-based experiences are less recognizable to outside players as games and face additional challenges in their acceptance and impact on the industry.

Designers forefronting transgressive design frequently use tools that allow their work to enter more mainstream gaming spaces, confronting the dominant paradigms and heteronormativity of those genres. Works that make use of community-oriented technologies like Twine can face significant backlash from the "traditional" development community, much like those faced by Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* [13].

Within visual game genres, two forms have become primarily associated with queer narratives: the walking simulator, a genre usually built in 3D game engines with an emphasis on character or environment rather than combat; and visual novels, a genre usually built in 2D and influenced by dating simulators and other character-centric forms of storytelling. Contrasting the dominant exemplars of queer narratives in each of these forms reveals the importance of the platform and genre to the story that is being told, and indeed to supporting and enabling transgressive game design.

2.1 Walking Simulators and Queer Narratives

The genre of the walking simulator has long relied on fragments of memory and flashbacks in lieu of interaction. There's certainly a pragmatic history of this: walking simulators were one of the original genres of 3D, and even animating the water posed a challenge for the early game engines powering genre-founding titles such as Myst [26].

Walking simulators as a genre use the narrative aspects of the game to focus on the interplay of relationships, usually through the recognizable lack of these relationships within the gameplay. This model of highlighting the strain and play of interpersonal relationships is a very useful tool when attempting to tell the stories of the marginalized and lost. For those who are often made to live on the fringes of acceptable society—constantly balancing their interactions with others over the fear of being cast out—this mode of play is integral to creating a complex and immersive experience. Although not the exclusive locus of this research, two of the most cited queer narrative game examples fit into this genre and illustrate the strong potential for queergaming.

While walking simulators initially relied on empty spaces and abandoned buildings for hardware and software reasons, the continued reliance on them in games such as *Gone Home* is not a technical limitation but a deliberate design choice.

In *Gone Home*, the player inhabits the classic perspective of a mostly un-fleshed-out character exploring a space that should be familiar. Through exploration of the "mystery" surrounding the absence of the other family members from the house, the player is invited to come to know these people in a way that the character herself apparently never bothered to. Through the perspective of exploring the home, the viewer is invited through the POV character to also explore the relationships held within through a new light, helpfully easing the disorientation of in medias res. The game's *PC Gamer* nod noted how well this use of distant storytelling suited the medium:

"It's been said that *Gone Home* subverts our expectations of what a game experience should be in order to tell a different kind of story – but what I like most about it is that it's not about throwing away what games are good at. Games are a form of communication that demands mutual participation. Good games expect your critical engagement, and treat you like someone capable of interpreting situations and environments intelligently without the need for hand-holding. There's something positive and hopeful about entertainment that wants you to be active, not passive." [40]

However, there's a fundamental passivity to the game that contradicts this praise, particularly where the queer-centered narrative is concerned. This conceit becomes particularly painful as it is clear the player inhabits a sibling of a woman whose coming out story caused a family schism: the player is not a participant in the queer romance that has been heralded as one of the central parts of the narrative and is instead an outsider, so distanced that the sister's romance is a complete surprise. This distanced gaze continually invites the player to observe the

Figure 1: The inescapable tragic ending of Life is Strange.

queer romance through a lens of judgement, watching the impact of the romance on the family unfold in a 90s drama lens.

The obsession with the coming out story as the defining experience of queer love is not a new one for media: as Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet [49] reminds us, the ever-present closet is a distinguishing feature whether the door is opened or closed. The loneliness of the walking simulator is emblematic of the larger loneliness of the closeted life. Given the nature of *Gone Home*, where hunting through the items in the house looking for diary pages is how the player advances the story, the open or closed aspect is quite literal since failing to explore an area can leave information behind and undiscovered. The nature of the coming out process as being many small revelations about oneself and others is also clear in this style of play, since it mirrors the many coming outs that people experience with their self, family, and friends.

Although not a standard of the genre, *Life is Strange* [16] blends the walking simulator style game with the more traditional point and click adventure games and a style of choice-driven. These mechanics allow for a more character-driven approach than *Gone Home*, centering on the storyteller rather than the voyeur. The game also does not separate the main character, Max, from the community in which she is a member. However, the central love story of the game is a tragic one as seen in Figure 1, falling into the trope of "dead or evil" lesbian that haunts queer narratives in mainstream media even as it fails to center the love story as a driving part of the text.

Further complicating this narrative is the release of a prequel, *Before the Storm* [15], that is far more focused on centering a queer narrative and love story between Max and her partner Chloe. However, its potential as a love story is hindered by the knowledge of where it is going. As one reviewer observed: "*Before the Storm* leaves the prior game's romantic ambiguity behind. By chronicling the events before Chloe meets Max, we get an intimate look at Chloe's budding relationship with Rachel, which was the catalyst for the original game. It appropriately feels like convincing teenage love with a romance that is reckless, idealistic, and beautiful." [18] But it is also doomed, removing the last human connection the main character has managed to successfully form. Although taking the time to focus

on this queer relationship is promising, ultimately it falls into the same "doomed queer love" tropes.

2.2 Visual Novels and Ren'Py

The visual novel is a relatively understudied form within games studies and journalism. Many visual novels are independently made and circulated, thanks in part to the prominence of Ren'Py as an open-source tool for accessible game design. Ren'Py was originally released in 2004 and has been updated regularly to include additional features and mechanics as well as a detailed tutorial that models conversational actions and choices for new creators.

While Ren'Py is distinct from a platform such as Twine in that some code (and, perhaps more importantly, some fairly demanding syntax requirements) are part of the engine as shown in Figure 2, it is also has a very human-readable layer on top of the game engine. The importance of the platform to the queering of games and game design cannot be understated: the default aesthetic of visual novels is very open to interventions and experimentation by individuals and small teams. The default is 2D, with an emphasis on reusing graphics by altering expressions or clothing, and there are many generators and free backgrounds available for use in games.

This sub-indie combination of low barrier to creative entry and achievable assets makes the genre an ideal space for queer gameplay, as games can be made and exchanged as part of personal play, the online gift economy, or hosted on sites such as Itch.io, where "choose your own price" models dominate with an assumption that games are typically free to play. Most importantly, these games do not have to meet the expectations of gatekeepers such as Steam or perform in a crowded marketplace to be successful at their goals. Frequently, these games are in line with the economy of fanfiction, and the Ren'Py library includes many transformative works.

This model of cheap, personal, and democratized game-making encourages a wider variety of representation and storytelling than the mainstream game market. Previous studies of gendered character representation in games have noted a tendency towards hypersexualizing women more than men [17:732]. Visual novels and the related dating simulators, while primarily situated in Japanese gaming, is no exception to this overall trend but does present this sexualization differently. However, as more people have access to create games using these tools, each user can create their own representation and share their own stories, increasing diversity.

While the term visual novel is commonly used to describe the resulting products of tools such as Ren'Py, the genre of the dating game (or ren'ai geemu) is more specific. Dating games are those in which the player's avatar has several romance options, and his or her interactions with different characters will move the player character towards or away from dating that particular character. Because of the heavy reliance on dialog and similar visual styling, these are often categorized together with visual novels.

Visual novels have the potential for more nonlinear storytelling, while dating games frequently feel like a choice
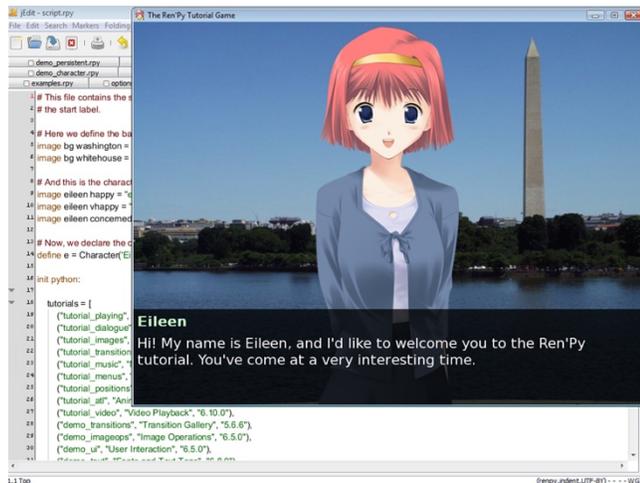
Figure 2: The Ren'Py Tutorial Game.

between a few set paths emphasizing different relationships: "...the visual novel overtly calls upon players to participate in the production of the text as integrated agents. In placing the interactor in a finely grained imaginary setting wherein he or she is required to deploy both text-analysis capabilities and puzzle-solving skills, the visual novel forges an innovative way of presenting and receiving the narrative experience" [11:9]. Dating simulators, with their explicit goals and narrative thrust, often offer less variety: the "puzzle" to solve is the relationship rather than a larger narrative arc.

These games are less frequently localized, perhaps in part because of what Picard refers to as the Japanese video game industry's attempts at a "permeable insulation" in which games that are "distinctly 'Japanese'" are aimed at the domestic industry [46]. Even dating games which lack the explicit tie to manga and originate outside of Japan, keep a visual heritage that ties their characters and situations to manga:

"These genres (visual novel, dating sim, eroge) derive from manga and can even be considered "audiovisual manga" in which reading is the main pillar of the work and the player's decisions determine the progress of the story. These genres have gathered some following outside of Japan, thanks to imports, but only in small, dedicated niches" [39].

Many games within these genres are never localized for audiences outside of Japan. This is also a matter of practicality: given these games would require extensive translation, as well as the navigation of unfamiliar characters, franchises, and norms in some cases, the corresponding sales would be unlikely to compensate for the effort [38:4].

Dating simulators are often put into the category of casual games without an apparent emphasis on skill, in part because of the apparent simplicity of what the game evaluates: conversational prowess from within a limited set of options.

Table 1: Top 20 games on itch.io tagged with both Ren'Py and LGBT

Title	Creator	Date	Tags
Butterfly Soup	Brianna Lei	May 29, 2017	2D, Anime, Female Protagonist, Romance, slice-of-life, yuri
Mermaid Splash! Passion Festival	Sofdelux Studio	June 6, 2017	Anime, Cute, Dating Sim, Fantasy, Female Protagonist, mermaid, yuri
Syrup and the Ultimate Sweet	Nami	Oct 31, 2015	2D, Anime, Cute, Fantasy, Female Protagonist, Multiple Endings
Loan Wolf	Team Rumblebee	Nov 1, 2016	Fantasy, Multiple Endings, Romance
Arena Circus	Minyan	Apr 26, 2016	Comedy, Fantasy, LOVE, Otome, Romance
Romance Detective	Nami	Feb 14, 2016	2D, Detective, Female Protagonist, Romance, yuri
her tears were my light	Nami	Mar 30, 2016	2D, Anime, Female Protagonist, Romance, Space, Time Travel
First Kiss at a Spooky Soiree	Nami	Oct 23, 2016	Anime, Fantasy, Halloween, Multiple Endings, Romance, Spooky
Tunnel Vision	Nami	Sep 5, 2016	Anime, Cute, Female Protagonist, ghosts, Romance, Spooky
Romance Detective 2	Nami	Aug 21, 2016	Anime, Detective, Female Protagonist, Multiple Endings, Romance
//TODO: today	Boys Laugh +	Mar 31, 2017	Colorful, Cute, Dating Sim, Mutiple Endings
An Otaku's Guide to Santa's Reindeer	Anomalis	Mar 31, 2017	Fantasy, Female Protagonist, nanoreno, Otome, voice-acting
Daddy Lies	StudioSenpai	Jan 2, 2018	Demo, drama, Multiple Endings, Romance, yaoi
Who We Are Now	Spincut	Feb 15, 2017	gay, queer
LINGERING	Ceylon Entertainment	Mar 10, 2018	Gay, mental-health, Mystery, Pixel Art, Romance, straight

Often dating sims introduce a double-meaning to the word "score," tracking the player's conversational gambits: "In dating sims, the player typically controls a male avatar whose goal is to date, and converse with, various female characters in order to form a romantic relationship...the gameplay is largely dependent on statistics. For example, the player's success in conversation with a girl may be measured according to his or her choice of apposite lines of dialogue, and the overall score improves or worsens accordingly" [11:8]. This emphasis on male avatars is less visible in games originating from the US and European market, where dating simulators are more likely to be picked up and in turn made by those who are already fans of imported anime romances.

3 EXAMINING REN'PY ON ITCH.IO

To better understand Ren'Py as a platform for queer game design, we examined games built in the platform and released on Itch.io. Given the popularity of Itch.io for personal and independent game release, it is an ideal platform for examining the current state of a small game category such as this.

The subset of games chosen for this study was selected using creator-tagged platforms and content within Itch.io. Platform tagging is optional on Itch.io, so the use of this tag to find corresponding games will produce only a sampling and not an inclusive look at games on the platform. However, given there are 2,237 games tagged as visual novels, the set of 560 tagged as produced with Ren'Py provides a strong data set.

Of those 560 Ren'Py tagged games, 92 are tagged by the creator as LGBT as of March 20, 2018. In relation to the 486 games that are tagged LGBT in total, this is approximately 1/5th of the LGBT games having been tagged with Ren'Py, suggesting the platform is a popular choice for LGBT games.

Interestingly, within this subset an additional 1/3 (32) games are marked as featuring a female protagonist. LGBT is the most popularly used tag for marking queer content: a search for gay and Ren'Py returns only 6 results by comparison, while queer and Ren'Py returns five (three of which feature queer robots). Anime centric tags yaoi and yuri appear more commonly, but frequently in addition to LGBT. Notably, the tag "straight" is only used by one Ren'Py game and appears in conjunction with LGBT (see table.) This suggests a continued emphasis on marking queer content, while straight content goes unlabeled and unmarked with genre tags such as "Romance" shared between queer and heteronormative games.

Table 1 shows the top twenty tagged games marked as both Ren'Py and LGBT, when sorted by popularity. The games range in their release date from 2015 to 2017, and some creators are represented with multiple titles. The tags column lists any additional tags other than LGBT and Ren'Py included with the game. Overwhelming, the games listed here and those within this category are personal works attributed to a single creator, potentially with additional credits for translations, music, or visuals elements. A few exceptions, such as *An Otaku's Guide to Santa's Reindeer*, involve larger teams working primarily in the context of game jams. The works are almost entirely listed at

Figure 3: A reaction shot from Diya

Itch.io's popular "Name your own price" level, in some cases with incentives such as art PDFs for certain price points.

This study reveals both the significance of Butterfly Soup as a crossover success (receiving more attention within mainstream gaming publications than other titles on this list) and its situated development within a community of Ren'Py users engaged in similar production, and particularly providing greater representation of female protagonists and lesbian romances than other games communities.

4 CASE STUDY: BUTTERFLY SOUP

Recent release and surprise critical hit *Butterfly Soup* is an example of the visual novel style, and while it is far from the only queer narrative to emerge in the visual novel genre, it is one of the most successful. The game serves as a case study for the significance of the "own voices" discourse to meaningful queergaming and transgressive game design; the designer, Brianna Lei, both identifies as queer and has made the discourse of self-representation part of her discussions both in interviews and in the design documents accompanying the game's release. It also serves as a powerful exemplar for the aesthetics, pricing, and relationship with mainstream discourse that accompanies this type of game release. Contextualizing *Butterfly Soup* and its positive, intersectional narrative is an important step in defining and analyzing transgressive game design's potential to disrupt mainstream game design practices and challenge normative narratives.

4.1 Brianne Lei's Game Design

Brianna Lei's previous game release, *Pom Gets Wi-Fi* [30], was built in RPG Maker 2003, a low-cost game development tool with several premade assets frequently available for next to nothing in Humble Bundles and other licensed sales. Given the general availability of the development platform, there are numerous communities of support and distribution for games made with this engine. This makes it an ideal engine for transgressive game design: an individual can work within the space and create a conversation-driven narrative without need of external training or support.

Pom Gets Wi-Fi might not immediately appear to have the poetics of queer games: however, the subversive play is clear in the creator's notes and the aesthetics, "My self-indulgent mess of a first game, starring an entire cast of dogs!!!! Made on RPGMaker 2003 with the intention of being the happiest, least scary game ever made on that engine." Released on August 8, 2013, the game circulated through Tumblr with nearly 20,000 notes as of 2/4/2018 [33]. Unlike many games which attempt to steer clear of pop culture elements and in-group humor to avoid appearing dated, *Pom Get Wi-Fi* leans into internet culture aesthetics and jokes. Between the narrative style and existing distribution channels, *Pom Gets Wi-Fi* had good success.

The game's fame is due in part to a pewdiepie Let's Play video, but primarily might be attributed to the net-savvy, meme-filled humor of the game itself and Pom's own obsession with all things Tumblr-worthy and queer (a quote -- "IT'S YAOI O'CLOCK"). After being picked up by one of the largest YouTube personalities the game saw a much greater circulation and created an awareness of Lei's design perspective and visibility for her future works.

4.2 Intentionality and *Butterfly Soup*

Butterfly Soup follows the lives of four queer Asian-American teenagers with a shared love of baseball: Diya, the jock; Min-seo, a rebel facing a number of challenges at home and school; Noelle, a successful but overwhelmed student; and Akarsha, the game's wild card. Figure 3 shows a screenshot of the game featuring Diya. The diversity of the group resists tokenism: no one character has to stand in as the only woman of color, or the only queer character. The game is linear, following Diya and Min-seo's romance across a backdrop of school, family, and baseball problems. It stands out among the popular games examined in Table 1 for both its emphasis on entirely main characters who are women of color and its slice of life narrative, while genre fiction remains popular in Ren'Py production.

While a sizable portion of internet culture and humor may be dismissed with the branding of being random for random's sake, Lei's designs are rarely slapdash but often deeply consider the setting, characters, and her intended outcome for the playing audience. The designer's artist notes, released as a PDF for those who donate at least $5 when purchasing the game, contain further insight into the design goals behind the characters. The design choices for Diya reflect a desire for more diverse body representation, as summarized in the designer's notes: "It's subtle, but you can see that Diya has arm hair in the game. I wanted to design a character who had visible arm hair, yet was considered beautiful by others. I was insecure about body hair when I was younger because I didn't see other girls with it" [31].

Brianne Lei notes an original intention for angst in one of the pivotal scenes that is instead played for humor, "I originally wanted their reunion to be very angsty, but it felt so corny and forced. I kept ruining it with random funny things like Min angrily kicking a trashcan over and going "OW" because it hurt her foot". Often coming out or queer coming of age stories focus on the negative repercussions of leaving the closet. Those

seeking more realistic depictions, like *Gone Home*, talk of splitting families apart, while some take a more metaphorical route, like *Life is Strange*, with a natural disaster and magic powers acting as the destructive force of recognizing queer love. For Lei to pursue a humorous approach breaks with traditional media narratives about gay characters stemming back as far as the Hays code, a 1930s restriction on "indecency" in film that curtailed humorous and queer-coded performances (particularly drag) in favor of restricted and silenced queer narratives [7].

One reviewer observes the significance of the cinematic approach to putting these characters on screen: "And although you 'play as' Diya or Noelle or Akarsha or Min at various points in the game, you don't literally view the environments through their eyes. The camera (static as images are) moves around more cinematically. In a genre well-known for its male gaze and invisible protagonists, it's a wonderful and necessary touch" [47]. This viewpoint evens the presentation of the characters by making the POV character equal to the other actors on the screen, continually reminding the player of the body they are inhabiting and the importance of that character's gaze as present. Between this and the cinematic backgrounds the characters are clearly embedding and engaging in the world and with each other.

The choices in *Butterfly Soup* are not tied to major tenets of identity: the characters are all queer women of color when the game begins, and the player is not invited to customize or recreate them, but as one reviewer noted "*Butterfly Soup* didn't let me pick which member of an anime menagerie to fall in love with, but whether I taught someone to say 'hi' in my native tongue or tricked them into saying 'I like to fart' is a choice *Butterfly Soup* left in my capable hands" [10].

These quirks are also part of the game's humor, which is a rising and powerful part of queer gaming: as in the recent surprise hit *Dream Daddy*, these relationships may be serious, but they are not powered by angst or drama. Unlike the horror-esue opening to *Gone Home* (which is partly to blame for the genre confusion that accompanied the release, where the coming out story is presented as a mystery to be solved), the game makes no secret of its characters or its focus on their daily lives. Additionally, *Butterfly Soup* is situated in the day to day, unlike *Life is Strange* which makes the decisions of your character part of a supernatural larger than life story.

For Brianna Lei, this emphasis on the familiar was also a source of challenge, as she describes on the game's FAQ: "A few times making *Butterfly Soup*, I actually thought, 'Is it realistic for that mix of people to be friends?' even though my childhood was literally like that, in real life. It's crazy how not seeing it in media can mess with your head." [34] Brianna Lei writes of her emphasis on this realism when approaching design:

"I also wanted it to feel a tiny bit cringey, like my actual teenage years. For example, I vividly remember that during my high school orientation, one of my classmates responded to things by saying 'F4', which was a keyboard shortcut for a facial expression in the MMORPG MapleStory. High school for me was such an

embarrassing meme and reference-fest, even before the word 'meme' came into regular usage." [52]

Her translation of her own experience (however traditionally ignored by the media) is an essential element of the game's "own voices" appeal. One reviewer on the game's significance:

"The entire games industry, from AAA to the smallest bedroom indie, could spend 10 years making nothing but games about gay dads in suburbia — or queer South Indian women — and still be a million miles from encompassing those experiences. The point of diversity and inclusion, in any artistic medium, is not to be comprehensive. It is not to render the mysterious mundane, or to reduce the art of transformation to simply looking into a mirror. As I play through the lives of the characters in *Butterfly Soup* or *Dream Daddy*, these highly specific experiences are at times strange, but they are not estranging." [28]

This is an important aspect of queering the play experience. So often in media narratives about queer lives or coming out stories the othering of the experience is made clear to the audience. Following the original Hays code standards these characters had to suffer for their deviations from "normality" or realize the error of their ways. The construction of so many of these stories was made to deliberately create a moralistic parable about the dangers of queer living and cast queer characters as suffering and tragic. To have simple, day in the life, stories which do not estrange the audience without also normalizing the queer coming of age experience is a large step forward in representing the lived lives of queer people.

Ultimately, the game's refusal to be understood as anything other than queer representation is an important part of its appeal. Under features, the game's creator includes "harold they're lesbians," a reference to a text post that circulated around Tumblr based on the reported experience of a user attending a showing of *Carol* [57]. While the game does not explicitly deal with representations of sexuality (unlike Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind*), the identities of the characters are not open to erasure or reinterpretation: they are not implied or paratextual but embedded in the game's essential context.

5 CONCLUSION

The games that powerfully explore gender and sexuality exist in spaces and platforms on the margins. Often when it comes time to write queer stories, the pressure is either to create the historic, tragic story or to swing the opposite direction towards the perfect character. For example, *Genderwrecked* [2], made in Ren'Py, invites the player to speak to apparent monsters and gain their confidence and friendship in a queer post-apocalyptic society of sorts. As one reviewer observed:

"There's a lot of pressure on creators to create queer characters who have neat and clean lives with no handholds for bigots—a pressure to have queer stories where the characters live figured-out lives, without trauma that reminds fans of their own pain, even if the creators themselves don't live figured-out lives and

might not even know what a life without trauma is supposed to look like. *Genderwrecked* defies any pressure to be the right kind of representation. Nobody here is anything like perfect: some of them don't know who or what they are, some of them hurt in ways that can't be fixed, and some of them will just screw with you even if you try to help" [3].

Stores featuring queer characters who do not have their lives all figured out and perfect, but who also do not succumb to the standard tragic storyline fill a needed and important gap. They represent a lived experience that resonates with the intended audience of queer individuals and aid in creating empathy for those who live their lives in more normalized identities.

The dependence of queer game design on free and open source platforms cannot be overstated. *Butterfly Soup*'s creator lists, in addition to Ren'Py itself, includes open source audio editor Audacity as a tool, as well as Clip Studio Paint (which has free trials as well as low cost versions) and Adobe Illustrator. Such tools also power communities of sharing not unlike those that form around games themselves. Gray's [24] study of black lesbian gamer community formation emphasized the importance of their spaces as "the few spaces that value the articulation of marginalized interests and viewpoints…[wherein] they build social cohesion and establish alternative and equally valuable interpretations of what it means to be Black, Woman, Lesbian, Poor, and geographically isolated in many contexts." Edmond Chang defines queergames as requiring "non-competitive, productive, judgmental play." Queer game design then, requires the same underlying principles of a sharing economy, reliant on platforms whose dominant mechanics and structures are non-competitive. These styles and needs are not core to the principles of mainstream game design or to the tools that industry tends to create. The existence of alternative tools remains as important to the creation of queer and transgressive games as the existence of creators wanting to tell their stories.

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