



# SLAYING FICTION /

**Disruption and transgression  
in Queered Game Identities**

**Ricardo "Ricky" Quiza Suárez**

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degree of Master of Design in Digital Futures

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## Abstract

Games have an incredible potential for embodiment and connecting with players by offering interactively staged play possibilities. Games enable the development and portrayal of individuals and their stories by immersing players actively in assuming roles while facing in-game actions and their consequences. While games that display the complex nuances of queerness populate the independent and personal game scenes, most games in the AAA scene neglect or shallowly represent queer characters, their stories, and identities. The thesis research draws from games as case studies, queer theory, queer game theory and autoethnography, exploring how biographical narratives can be built into digital games to express queer identities. A game prototype showcased at an exhibition illustrates the research, *The Spy*. Designed as a visual novel game, it uses autoethnography to inspire its story settings and themes, building on aspects of my identity and past to (re)create a storytelling graphical adventure game. I iterate theory and praxis via research-through-design, elucidating guidelines that support existing narrative tools, implemented in my game. The game illustrates themes of transgression, disruption, oppression, and liberation in queered self-identities intertwined to processes of disclosure. This thesis aims to provide a body of research and guidelines that allows game makers of all levels ethical and meaningful approaches to depicting queer identities in games, along a freely published game on itch.io that coalesces theory, findings, and my personal story.

## Dedication

To Yaima, for being like a second mother to me, through and through. Love all of you.

To Papa Hilario, for starting this all. Yours, always.

To my familia cubana de Ontario, for taking me in, for making me part of their own. Ever in your gratitude! To Dani, Luis, Anu, Gaby, Miriam, Andre, and Nena.

To Marial Iglesias and Henry Louis Gates. To my uncle, Carlos Quiza, my aunt, Juana Moreno and his son Ernesto Chávez. Without your, this thesis would not have been possible, at all.

To María y Remberto Pérez, for hiring my dad to make a book that would lead to me in Canada.

To my Cubans friends all over the world, for the emotional support. Félix, Lisy, Cami: Love u.

To Tamika, for being like an older sister since the beginning. Always grateful of your kindness.

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To my advisor, Michelle. Without you and Emma pushing, I do not know if parts of this thesis, of me, would have seen the light. Thanks so much; may your smile brave me through the night.

To my advisor, Emma;

I once called you a light, but for you, now a fiction: *And so, the Valkyrie rose to the land of mortals, to pick up the souls of the dead, so they may rise anew, with glorious purpose.*

Thank you for EVERYTHING in this very very rewarding journey. Words would not be enough.

A mi mamá, a mi papá. Por hacerme la persona que soy, y hacer de la bondad mi motivación para seguir adelante. A mi abuela, por ser tan especial, por hacer de la lectura una virtud, por tanto amor, por cuidar de mis gatos... Gracias a ustedes, por leerme cuentos, por hacer de la ficción una parte importante de mi vida. A mis gatos, por hacerme sonreír donde quiera que este.

## Acknowledgments

Dad

When I was young, (...)

I always felt so small

But I heard your stories and I was  
enthralled

The tales about your lofty dreams, I  
listened breathlessly

Imagining it could be me

So in the end, it's the view I had of you

That showed me dreams can be worth  
fighting for

More than anything, More than anything

I need to save my people more than  
anything

(...) 'Cause in the end, you are part of  
who I am

I'll support your dream whatever lies in  
store (And who could ask for more?)

More than anything (more than anything)

More than anything (more than anything)

(I'm grateful you're my father)

More than anything, More than anything.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks dad, for telling me stories as a kid,  
teaching me how to dream and making my  
dreams come true, as an adult. *Love you.*

I see you're driven by your detestation

Your every step is stoked with animus

You need a different type of motivation

Or there's no way that you can handle this

I know you're thirstin' for vengeance, (...)

You're out for blood

But you'll only stand a chance if you're  
out for love

Out for love, love

Think of who you care about, protect 'em  
and be out

For love, love

You're gonna fight without gloves long as  
you're out for love

Fuel yourself with the fear of losin'

That somebody who's your reason to live

Harness your heart, and you can't help  
choosin' To fight with all you can give

(...) You're gonna fight without gloves

And when that push comes to shove

Yeah, you just might rise above, long as  
you're out for love.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks mom, for making of kindness my  
motivational drive, love my fuel. You are  
a testament of true power. *And adore you*

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Underberg, Sam Haft, Jeremy Jordan & Erika Henningsen, *More Than Anything*, Track 10 on Hazbin Hotel (Original Soundtrack). A24 Music, 2024, CD.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Underberg, Sam Haft & Daphne Rubin-Vega, *Out For Love*, Track 13 on Hazbin Hotel (Original Soundtrack). A24 Music, 2024, CD.

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## Ch. 1 - Introduction

### Listen to my story!

“Listen to my story. This may be our last chance”.<sup>3</sup> The preceding quote marks the intro lines of *Final Fantasy X*<sup>4</sup> (FF X, 2001), accompanied by one of the most iconic musical pieces in the *Final Fantasy*<sup>5</sup> franchise, “To Zanarkand”,<sup>6</sup> a heart-wrenching melancholic piano arrangement. It sets the tone for what’s been considered one of the best narratives in the JRPG<sup>7</sup> game genre—a tale of love, family, religion, sacrifice, grief, burden, and friendship. In Spira, a world trapped in a cyclical death and destruction loop at the hands of a rampaging monster, Sin (God’s punishment for humanity’s technological prowess), the protagonists grapple with their fated destinies while confronting the sins of the past. The story themes explore the cyclic nature of suffering and redemption, confronting the consequences of one’s actions, the corruption of power, authority, faith, and belief, and is ultimately, a tale about acceptance and letting go.

Two years later, due to the huge commercial and critical success of the game, a sequel, *Final Fantasy X-2*<sup>8</sup> (FF X-2, 2003) was released.

“What can I do for you?”,<sup>9</sup> the intro line from the sequel’s opening pop song, “Real Emotion”,<sup>10</sup> is vividly stark by contrast to its prequel. It is followed by an on-stage, *Sailor Moon-style* dress transformation by Yuna, the prequel’s female lead now-turned protagonist, singer,

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<sup>3</sup>[Link to opening intro video.](#)

<sup>4</sup>Kitase, Yoshinori, Square Enix, *Final Fantasy X*.

<sup>5</sup>Sakaguchi, Hironobu, Square Enix, *Final Fantasy*.

<sup>6</sup>Uematsu, Nobuo, *To Zanarkand*, Track 2 (CD 1) on Final Fantasy X Original Soundtrack. Square Enix, 2004, CD.

<sup>7</sup>JRPG stands for the acronym of Japanese Role-Playing games. A derivation of RPGs, Role-Playing Games, JRPGs are the Japanese variation of it. WRPGs, their Western counterpart, generally focus on overarching, world building narrative, correlations of power between nations and customizable avatars. Narrative-wise, JRPGs stands out for the exploration of the main characters role and Identity within the game, defined character growth arc, and epic stories, usually evolving from menial tasks (rescuing a pet) to grandiose proportions (killing a deity and saving the planet).

<sup>8</sup>Toriyama, Motomu, Square Enix, *Final Fantasy X-2*.

<sup>9</sup>[Link to opening intro video.](#)

<sup>10</sup>Sweetbox, *Real Emotion*, Track 16 on Adagio. Avex Trax, 2004, CD.

and performer, taking full spotlight. This shift in tone was accompanied by a more gleeful narrative, a new dynamic combat system with mid-battle job / outfit changing sequences system (Dresspheres), a new soundtrack of returning and new pieces that focused more on pop rhythms and up-beat ensembles, and an all-female cast of playable characters.

The shift was also accompanied by tremendously divided opinions among fans, making this one of the most hated games in the franchise, with many outright labelling it ‘trash’, ‘waste of a sequel’, ‘too girly’, and a ‘disrespect to FF X’.<sup>11</sup>



Image 1. Meme’s against (left) and in favor (center, right) of FF X-2.

*Final Fantasy X-2* was (and is) simply put, too camp, too gay, and too queer. And it stands as a monument of one of the most beloved and inspirational games for millennial queer gamers (especially male gaymers, myself included) within the JRPG genre and the *Final Fantasy* franchise for what they were able to find within it. How they were able to identify with it, see familiar game mechanics, tools, and settings twist in different, pleasing and vibrantly colorful new ways. How they were able to belong within the game: I have seen, more than once in different social media, comments in the vein of “I found out I was gay by playing FF X-2”.

<sup>11</sup>Dutta, Debopriyaa, “20 Years Later, the Most Controversial Final Fantasy Sequel Deserves Another Shot”, *Inverse*, February 20, 2024, [Link to article](#). Additional references: [Link to blog forum](#). [Link to reddit forum](#).

Gaymer TikTok influencer and *Final Fantasy* fan, olliedreamer,<sup>12</sup> articulates brilliantly this phenomenon and the multiple facets and nuances that can be read as queer in FF X-2. They would go over them in his video *Why Queer People Love Final Fantasy X-2*:

Whether it's the all-female cast, the ultra-feminine atmosphere, the magical girl transformation sequence, or just the absolutely iconic opening. *X-2 was made for the girls, gays and theys*. (...) I believe that there are other larger themes as to why queer people gravitate towards X-2. We first have to backtrack to X where the people of Spira are trapped in a never-ending cycle of death due to Sin. Not to mention tradition is heavily enforced. The teachings of Yevon, summoners such as Yuna have to give up their lives at the end of their pilgrimage in order to appease this never-ending cycle. (...) A lot of queer people can relate to this fact, in their upbringing, having tradition and harmful forms of religion enforced upon them. Two years after the events of X, Spira is in *the eternal calm* after Sin has been defeated. Yuna was able to choose her fate. She was able to fight for her life and not throw it away for Yevon. Yuna was able to go against the grain, against tradition, against Yevon, even against the expectations of living up to her summoner father. And of course, X-2 is a complete 180 of the Structure of X, which is a very linear plot, and X-2 is an open sandbox for the player and of course Yuna, to truly find themselves in Spira now that Sin is gone. In a post-Sin world, Yuna's able to have free will, to be herself, find herself, figure out what she wants to do with her life (...).<sup>13</sup>

This thesis focuses on understanding those shared queer moments of belonging and the relationality they find in games for constructing Queered Game Identities. The project stands at the intersection of queer (game) theory, games, and personal storytelling, which draws from my personal past to look at possible ways to understand the construction or deconstruction of queer perspectives in identity formation.

“*Listen to my story. This may be our last chance*”. This might not be my last chance, but for Queer folks throughout history, there have been plenty of moments that felt like ‘last chances’. For others, they never had a chance. Lack of representation or the erasure and censure of us goes far and wide, and it runs deep within videogame environments. Polarizing attitudes between the ‘good’ normal and the ‘bad’ queer can be found aplenty in gaming landscapes,

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<sup>12</sup>[Link to Ollie Dreamer's TikTok.](#)

<sup>13</sup>[Link to video.](#)

beyond the presented *FFX/FFX-2* example. Representation becomes part counter-argument, part shelter, part truth unearthing. I find truth in the severance of heteronormativity. The dismantling of ‘what games should play, feel, tell and look like’.

This project, **Slaying Fiction**, is a very personal one and part of my desire to see queer identity unfolding in video games by design. My own story drives this work: articulated in the game, *The Spy*, in non-fiction and fiction scenarios obtained through an autoethnographic self-chronicling method. My story is that of a kid with too much imagination, too much energy and too much queerness: Of a misfit kid who found refuge in games, especially JRPGs, making a religion in the act of play. A nineties kid who was unable to fully find himself in games, assembling fragmented pieces of his self from mixed game experiences. A kid who wanted more from games, a teen who wanted more from games, a man who wants more from games.

This is *my* story.

## Research Question

Exploring game affordances as sites of queer expression and resistance challenges heteronormative beliefs in video games. By using queer (game) theory and personal-driven storytelling we can represent genuine, diverse, oblique, and different meaningful emotions, narratives, characters, worlds, scenarios, and mechanics in games. By dismantling heteronormative ideas of games and gameplay, such as notions that games are solely intended for mindless, apolitical fun, played for competing / winning, or made for guys, we can explore meaningful ways to depict the many nuances of queered identities. My research objectives are accentuated over understanding those queer nuances, in which ways to map and translate them into games, and how queer game makers create game loops that accentuate them. My research looks also at understanding the personal stories of queer creators and how they directly fuel their games or art. Allegory, failure, personal games, themes of rejection, temporality and affect emerge as recurrent pillars in the research/praxis. The research questions that drove me are:

In what ways can biographical narratives be built into digital games to express Queer Identities?

What is the emotional experience for marginalized game makers when using games to explore our lives? And what effect could those have in game making?

## Background or *I guess it's never really over...*

Before arriving at OCAD U, I never had much of an opportunity to engage in an academic capacity with a multitude of topics related to critical theory, representation, queerness, politics, among many others. Back home in Cuba, schools are very rigid about the educational program, coated with political ideas of socialist propaganda explicitly crafted to reinforce control over the population, a sort of mental ‘ownership’ over the masses. Indoctrination happens in all spheres of everyday life since early childhood. Starting from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, before classes would even start, we were required to proclaim “*Pioneros por el comunismo, seremos como el Che*”, which translates to “Pioneers for communism, we will be like Che”. Children were supposed to be ‘strong, selfless, soldiers’ and the idea of the “hombre nuevo” or new man established by Ernesto “Che” Guevara, became one of the formational pillars established after the Revolution<sup>14</sup>, effectively culling the ‘weak’ man and all manners of queerness in between. The Castro government would engage in a cultural battle for the construction of that new masculinity immediately after the dictatorship’s beginnings. Castro himself points out that there is no place in the Revolution for homosexuals, and in 1963 declares:

Many of those “pepilllos” (Cuban slang for handsome man) lazy kids, children of bourgeois, walk around with pants that are too tight (audience laughs); some of them with a little guitar in "Elvis Presley-like" attitudes, who have taken their licentiousness to the extreme of wanting to go to some public places to organize their feminine shows freely.

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<sup>14</sup>It is important to contextualize the term ‘Revolution’ within the Cuban socio-political landscape. In Cuba, ‘Revolution’ carries a dual significance, representing both a pivotal historical event—the overthrow of the Batista regime in 1959—and an ongoing ideological commitment to socialist principles. Further, the term also encompasses an enduring ethos of revolutionary struggle, solidarity, and social transformation; a state of being and doing, with an almost presence and will of its own, voiced and directed by Cuban political leaders, spearheaded by Castro. During the 1<sup>st</sup> of May of 2000, Castro would proclaim a concept of Revolution that would act as base for an indoctrination pillar of Cuban identity, reinforced through schools and that attempted to capture the nation's ‘collective’ aspirations for a just, equitable society. Source: <https://www.presidencia.gob.cu/es/noticias/concepto-de-revolucion/>

Let them not confuse the serenity of the Revolution and the equanimity of the Revolution with weaknesses of the Revolution. Because our society cannot accommodate those degenerations (applause). A socialist society cannot allow that kind of degeneration. Young aspirants to that? No! "A tree that grew twisted...", the remedy is not so easy anymore. I'm not going to say that we are going to apply drastic measures against those twisted trees, but young aspirants, no!<sup>15</sup>

Drastic measures were taken, though.

Homosexual men in my country between the 1965 and 1968 would be tagged, packed, and shipped to forced labor camps<sup>16</sup> (UMAP, Military Production Aid Units) to ‘re-educate them’ and forge them into the “man they were supposed to be”, the *new man*. This involved not only arduous labor but also included severe mistreatment, such as electric shocks, hormonal interventions, and psychological torture, as part of an effort to eradicate homosexuality and enforce societal norms. Anecdotal moments of this dark chapter of Cuban history are narrated by their witnesses on the documentary, *Conducta impropia* (Improper conduct).<sup>17</sup> The ripple effects of the consequences of anti-queerness and retrograde politics like this in my country, continued to be felt years after those policies would slowly begin to ‘disappear’ and change, and the state began to gradually be more permissive about non normative gender and sexuality. They rippled over my generation and ever since growing up, anything remotely queer, perceived as weak, and non-masculine was met with extreme prejudice. The consequences for me, as a millennial kid/teen, was that I always felt choked and without voice, my opinions constantly in a *muted* state. It took me years to begin to speak up and advocate for queerness as a member of my

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<sup>15</sup>Source: [Link to article](#).

<sup>16</sup>José Ponte, Antonio, “¿Qué fueron las UMAP? | DIARIO DE CUBA,” October 3, 2019, [Link to article](#).

Additional readings:

Tahbaz, Joseph “Demystifying Las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba,” 14, December 2013, [Link to article](#).

Sierra Madero, Abel, “‘El Trabajo Os Hará Hombres’: Masculinización Nacional, Trabajo Forzado y Control Social En Cuba Durante Los Años Sesenta,” *Cuban Studies* 44, no. 44 (2016): 309–49, [Link to article](#).

<sup>17</sup>[Link to full-length film](#).



community, in platforms outside of my educational institutions. Not that I had a platform to speak about it within those institutions to begin with, since they would not care for anything irrelevant to the Revolution. I always felt like trapped in a zombie sort of nightmare status, since nothing seemed to ‘move’ in my country and we were constantly drilled with the same speeches, the same arguments, the same excuses, *the same*.

Consequently, my academic exposure and freedom to explore diverse perspectives was severely if not completely limited. Before arriving to the Digital Futures Program, I was locked in the idea of exploring and researching about games potentiality, for researching how to harness games to facilitate learning processes catered to ADHD children,<sup>18</sup> directly inspired by how much games helped me during my childhood as a kid with a severe degree case of ADHD. I also wanted to look at ways to intertwine editorial or published design (with a storytelling focus) with games and game maker tools. While parts of my research still align with these ideas, my main direction slowly began to shift within the program.

The *Critical Theory* class over my first semester in OCAD U was pivotal for me. I for once felt like how it was to be able to speak freely in a class, even with multiple politics opinions clashing and facing. I was able to participate— spoke, and I spoke so much. I could hardly recognize myself. I have classmates, friends, who have been shocked at me self-referencing as an introvert. Since September 2022 and immigrating, being free, outside of a dictatorial state, I have been thinking about the kind of games I want to play, that I want to see. About the kinds of game

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<sup>18</sup>For some references: Tahai, Liudmila, “Designing an Adaptive Video Game for Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Learning Proportional Reasoning through Play” (University of Waterloo, 2018). Lan Shuai et al., “Influences of Digital Media Use on Children and Adolescents with ADHD during COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Globalization and Health* 17, no. 1 (2021): 48–48, [Link to article](#). Filippo Neri et al., “Ordering Algorithm as a Support for Children with ADHD Through the Development of Bilingual and Interactive Videogames,” vol. 1630 (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022), 14–25, [Link to article](#).

stories, I want to laugh or cry with. And with every course I took, I kept thinking how to integrate games with my new learnings' outcomes.

I always circle back to the same ideas, in an almost compass way. Liberating, breaking, free, oppression, chains, bounded, ways to express the self through fictional concepts, ways to undo lies, power, weakness. Truth, Fiction. If the *Digital Futures* program at OCAD U preps me with the tools and theory to create interventions within technological spaces to resist, break, and disrupt over unjust paradigms, then I want to harness games to do so. I want to use games to cut over the silence that once took hold of me, to speak *my* truth. And in doing so, I hope to portray how games can be used as platform for representing the nuances that can be found at the core of processes that manifests queerness within one's Identity, echoing to a larger, grossly underrepresented community, *my* community, within videogames.

This may be my story, but it is also theirs.

## Roadmap, rationale, goals, and expectations

My initial prototypes explored ways to recreate dynamics of oppression and liberation, darkness or light, expression and silence, and other similar dichotomies in game scenarios to explore meaningful processes of identity creation and cathartic moments (**Ch. 4**). This making process and research was conducted over the Summer of 2023. It became a starting point for me, and as I made more, and learned more, I started iterating over my own personal story.

Subsequently, this process enabled me to be genuine and truthful to the kinds of narratives that I would deliver. It allows me to situate queerness as a powerful concept to explore, craft with and unfold that fits within the larger scope of my research, and that helped me in contextualizing multiple elements that I was already playing with (pun intended). And it allowed me to tell my own story, something that I was inspired partly from one of my fellow graduate student friends (Nedward Rehanek) and partly from the many queer game makers I began to research and admire, and partly as something that I always wanted to be able to do.

I have synthesized insights gained from my research, making practice and playtesting into a set of guidelines and findings. I hope game makers can consult these as a resource to assist in creating queer game characters and identities based on biographical data. A narrative heavy, storytelling focused queer game prototype was created,<sup>19</sup> playtested and showcased at an exhibition (see **Appendix A**). This game prototype functions as an in-case example where theory meets practice, answering the research questions and informing queer indie game makers in an interactive showcased way. Documentation derived from my research and game design journal, aimed at game makers, will discuss step by step the how's and why's of game design and

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<sup>19</sup>Quiza Suárez, Ricardo, *The Spy*, [Link to game](#).

narrative decisions and its connection to the thesis research. Lastly, a document<sup>20</sup> archives my autoethnographic writings (employing a *fact-meets-fiction* storytelling style of my own). It retells the same biographical data in three different styles. The retelling, in allegoric ways, allows for translating biographical data into fictional storytelling and into the game. Uses metaphors, feelings, thoughts from the past to build imaginative in-game sceneries, settings, and characters.

My research strives to contribute to the ongoing development of the discourse within queer game studies. While this field is relatively small and nascent, its contributions to challenging stereotypes, diversifying current narratives, and redefining game norms within the gaming landscape are invaluable. I aim to play my part in adding to its growth and recognition, both within the gaming community and academically. One of my project's overarching goals is to convey the potential of games using allegoric, personal storytelling as a narrative foundation. I construct in-game experiences that hope to resonate with my community and provide frank insights into the lived experiences of queer individuals. Through game mechanisms and narrative, my project seeks to share my perspectives with others fostering connections and understanding with an ethos of *listen to my story*. Simultaneously, my research aims to elevate the discourse within queer game studies: By integrating a process of biographical and allegorical storytelling into game development, supported by guidelines from the research findings, I aim to lay a foundational framework for future game makers to analyze and experiment with.

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<sup>20</sup>[Link to document](#). Also found in: [Link to game](#).

## Scope and game structure

The final game prototype development underwent three iterations and one playtest, allowing for feedback to inform the game mechanics and narrative, via collecting the data in a design process journal. The game is built using Ren'Py,<sup>21</sup> a free game engine tailor made for constructing Visual Novel interactive experiences. The entry level is relatively easy, allowing users with little to no experience into the game making process. Visual Novels are a sub-category of digital games, loosely inscribed within the broader category of 'adventure game'. They are a form of digital interactive fiction, characterized by a combination of textual narrative focus that is supported by static / animated audiovisuals and varying degrees of interaction.<sup>22</sup>

The prototype adopts some tropes from the Visual Novel genre, such as multiple endings tied to player's decision. Player's action will influence an always on field user interface game element, the *presence bar*; depending on its alignment players can experience one of two different endings (good / bad) or trigger the 'bad' ending early. The bar main fluctuations (an in-game value stored within a variable) are tied to the success / failure of puzzle interaction in the game scenarios. The game is divided into three visually distinct game levels or scenarios, and each incorporate different game logics via puzzle systems. The narrative of the game follows an overarching story resolution, while each level will focus on one major theme.

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<sup>21</sup>From the creators: Ren'Py is a visual novel engine – used by thousands of creators from around the world – that helps you use words, images, and sounds to tell interactive stories that run on computers and mobile devices. These can be both visual novels and life simulation games. The easy to learn script language allows anyone to write large visual novels, while its Python scripting is enough for complex simulation games. Source: [Link to website](#).

<sup>22</sup>Several engage with having choice-based interactions throughout the story that will affect the outcome, possible scenarios, relationships and/or endings of it. This allows for non-linear branching storylines, affection/alignment points systems, and for narratives formats with multiple endings. Many visual novels have a 'true' ending to be achieved if players make specific decisions (*Steins;Gate*). Some incorporate sub-systems that complement the narrative, such as puzzle resolution (*Zero Escape* and *Danganronpa* game series) or the visual-novel gameplay element become the sub-system for the narratology aspect of the game (*BlazBlue* game series).

Matsubara, Tatsuya, 5pb. x Nitroplus, *Steins;Gate* / Uchikoshi, Kotaro, Spike Chunsoft, *Zero Escape* / Kodaka, Kazutaka, Spike Chunsoft, *Danganronpa* / Mori, Toshimichi, Arc System Works, *BlazBlue*.

## Ch. 2 - Literature and Contextual Review:

### Where queer games stand

Exploring the positionality of queerness in relation to other concepts involve observing a concept with the freedom of an outsider, with a non-hierarchical, untraditional viewpoint.<sup>23</sup>

Heckert blurs the lines between queer and anarchy concepts, emphasizing acceptance instead of opposition as a foundational element for true freedom. To queer becomes “to learn to see the world through new eyes, to see not only what might be possible but also what already exists”.<sup>24</sup>

I can strongly relate, as to queer my praxis is a way to dream, code, to be truthful and free. Queering spaces, time, and other concepts have been the labor of many queer theorists. Halberstam emphasizes the importance of understanding queerness as not confined to individual identities but as a political and cultural stance that disrupts and redefines time and spaces, both physical and conceptual.<sup>25</sup> Muñoz argues for futurity, utopia, and hope as concepts to explore with-in queerness, for cruising and mapping “present futures”;<sup>26</sup> to queer becomes a negationist, dialectic force that act as “anticipatory illumination of art and culture”,<sup>27</sup> that “cuts through fragmenting darkness and allow us to see the politically enabling whole”.<sup>28</sup>

For a synthetical, very personal approach of what it is *to queer* something, it would require deconstructing the conventional understanding of it, rearranging its elements in an eccentric yet somewhat familiar style. This personal process results in a peculiar blend of

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<sup>23</sup>Heckert, Jamie, “Intimacy with Strangers/Intimacy with Self: Queer Experiences of Social Research” in *Queer Methods and Methodologies Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, Ashgate Publishing, 47.

<sup>24</sup>Heckert, Jamie, “Anarchy without Opposition” in *QUEERING ANARCHISM: Essays on Gender, Power, and Desire*, AK Press, 2012, 64.

<sup>25</sup>Halberstam, Jack, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies” in *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York University Press, 2005, 20.

<sup>26</sup>Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009, 1-18

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 64.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 64.

fragmented meanings, an amalgam of conceptual reflections resonating both internally and externally. The game prototype that accompanies this research focuses on harnessing such theoretical constructions. It constructs new “anticipatory illumination” reflections over the act of play, storytelling, and player agency within the game. To enable those “politically whole” paradigms Muñoz would argue for, I aim to provide a more complete, representative, and allegoric narrative spectrum within a game format. Queer as a concept around them becomes fluid, personal, nuanced, and directional.

Directionality has been a core part of multiple queer theorist’s work, such as Ahmed and Muñoz. Ahmed argues how queer phenomenology can create a new angle or worldview perspective by “bringing what is behind to the front”.<sup>29</sup> Ahmed defines queer orientation as:

A way of inhabiting the world by giving “support” to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place (...) to make that “familiar” strange, or even to allow that which has been overlooked—which has been treated as furniture—to dance with renewed life.<sup>30</sup>

Muñoz frames it imaginatively and appropriative, pointing toward a future-crafting directionality. He employs cinematographic examples to illustrate the dichotomy and energy that unfolds over “moving forward / staying still”, and the transformative power of art:

Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world (...) Structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.<sup>31</sup>

(...) Warhol’s directing consisted mostly of setting up a scenario and letting the camera record the action (...) His insistence on public drug consumption and flagrant, ludic nudity surpasses the strictures of typical Judson minimalism. (...) I identify this queer move as having a utopian impetus that imagined another time and place that was not yet conscious. (...).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press, 2006, 4.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Muñoz, José E, *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009, 1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 162.

The game prototype focuses on harnessing that rejection power, to re-imagine and shape new different unconscious “present-futures”, that cut us from the stillness of that “quagmire” present. My own narrative is spoken in two counterparts: a non-fiction depiction of the events, the ‘unchangeable past’ where players have no true agency over it, and another, a queer reimagining of it, a fictional game-like version. Each player’s interaction within the narrative can alter it as they control a spy. I might not be able to change the past, but my future voice will be able to reclaim it; by slaying / cutting and shaping from it. Player’s interaction in a game ‘within the game’ create a sub-text of how my conscious rejected reality and refuged into games for disrupting / queering it. The story builds over that disruptive energy, by having the player jump constantly between both scenarios.

In intersecting past, present, and future, I reject traditional notions of linear time, fixed identity, and destiny. This is *my answer* to the potential of queering.<sup>33</sup>

A counter-current positionality that distances the *is* to *it could be*, the *box* from the *out-of-the*; it is a state of being and it is a state of doing unfittingly. It is in *nowhere* and it is *in* everywhere. And it has always been in games as queer game theorist Bo Ruberg (un)fittingly names their book *Video Games Have Always Been queer*, in which they argue for the different positionalities we can find and read queerness in videogames.

Cultural production; texts, stories, songs, culture, media, games; have *always* been queer. Marginalized communities queerly read and code meaning (read contra their dominant narrative) as an act of resistance, subversion, and self-expression. The form and expression of those within the domain of games and the act of play takes many shapes: players modding game assets to

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<sup>33</sup>Freeman, Elizabeth, Judith Halberstam, and Lisa Lowe, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Duke University Press, 2010.



fashion their queerness, cosplaying, fan fiction/art, experimenting with the avatar and character creation systems, or even experimenting with their sexuality and gender expression in-game.<sup>34,35</sup>

Ruberg poses that *Queer game design* is “the practice of deliberately using game to challenge normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and the established logics of digital gameplay”.<sup>36</sup> To queer games is to explore game mechanics as sites of queer expression and resistance to challenge heteronormative rote beliefs in video games. And that exploration can take many forms and shapes, as many shapes and forms queerness embodies.

To queer emotions, to focus on communicating sensations and experiences underrepresented or undesired in videogames, emotions embedded in the queer community such as pain, anger, frustration, failure, or sadness. Looking at these emotions allows for representing a breadth of new experiences in narrative and gameplay; by “attending to ‘no-fun’ gameplay experiences, long dismissed as the mere markers of bad games”.<sup>37</sup>

To queer game mechanics, to focus on delivering play experiences that contradict the “golden rule of game design, *make it fun first*”.<sup>38</sup> Looking at game mechanics as places where we can enact resistance to hegemonic ways of play, we can devise un-ways of playing and having un-fun. Players themselves have countlessly engaged in ways to defy game mechanics and game developers intended ways of play. From modding to speed running, to playing to fail, to playing to suffer, to not playing at all; game mechanics are ripe with unusual, queer creative possibilities that can re-frame the way we access, design, think of and engage in the act of play.

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<sup>34</sup>Benjamin J. Villarreal, “‘The World Could Always Use More Heroes’ - First Person Scholar”, December 6, 2017, [Link to article](#).

<sup>35</sup>Additionally, some games proactively feature Queer codes or options for players to insert Queerness in them, such as *The Sims* and *Dragon Age* franchises and more recently *Baldur’s Gate 3*. Wright, Will, Maxis, *The Sims* / Gaider, David, BioWare, *Dragon Age* / Vincke, Swen, Larian Studios, *Baldur’s Gate 3*.

<sup>36</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, New York University Press, 2019, 111.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 166.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 168.

To queer game stories, to draw from our queer archive to shape stories and narratives that games can empower through agency and interaction; to link the personal to the surreal, allegoric and the imaginative that game's worldbuilding settings can offer. If videogames embody places of laws, orders, and rules by the maker to posit one idea of worldbuilding, then to queer games means to drag deep, from the deep, trans-gressing and cutting from the layers and layers and formality that encumbers the idea, laying it naked. To queer game's stories means to laying it all out. Pun intended.

## **It gets personal**

Between the 2010-2020's, the game industry sees a renaissance in the themes, characters, and narratives. A shift from 'the less' to 'the more' personal, with more and more games telling unique, critical examining, and individual nuanced stories beginning to appear. At the same time, the indie and small game makers scene saw a huge increase in the number of companies and games released. This was accompanied by the release of the free game hosting website itch.io in 2013, which as of June 2015, saw 15,000 games and programs hosted. In 2013 also, *Papers, Please*<sup>39</sup> captured the emotional distress of having the power of ruling over an immigrants life, putting players on the role of an immigration officer. 2014 saw the release of *This War of Mine*,<sup>40</sup> a game that critically explore the ravages of war, and the more civil side of it, often completely alleviated in games. It is 2015, and Dontnod Entertainment releases *Life Is Strange*<sup>41</sup> to critical acclaim. With a very personal-focused storytelling, the game explores themes often considered 'taboo' in the medium, such as online bullying, suicide, and social division. It's also one of the

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<sup>39</sup>Pope, Lucas, 3909 LLC, *Papers, Please*.

<sup>40</sup>Drozdowski, Michał, Marszał, Przemysław, 11 bit studios, *This War of Mine*.

<sup>41</sup>Barbet, Raoul, Koch, Michel, Dontnod Entertainment, *Life Is Strange*.

first games to feature onscreen Queer characters kissing, in one of two possible ending scenarios. Years pass and more personal focused narrative tackling sincere themes keep getting released, yet the story of Queer game makers was (and still is) covered by turmoil.

*Sticks and stones won't break our bones* – but they still fucking hurt. Equally as filled with pain, grief, marginalization, trivialization, and invisibilities queer history is permeated with, is queer games, theory, and makers' histories. There is something almost universal in Anna Anthropy's opening line from her published opera prima; *I have a problem with videogames*. We. Us. The 'underbelly' of Gamers struggles each, and every day, with a lack of *belonging*. Anthropy's book is part autobiographic journalism, part instruction booklet, part battle cry. And it is part of a bigger picture that seeks to 'get (*Queer*) things done'. Almost a decade later and I, we, us, still *have a problem with videogames*.

It took me 30 years, to escape a dictatorship country, pursue a Master's degree, develop the advocacy skills necessary to follow my dreams in the videogame-maker career path, and many other conjunctural factors, to stumble into Anthropy's works and that of other small indie game makers regarding queerness, Queer game theory, queer game jams and *itch.io*.; I had to follow a very specific path in life to encounter a universe of personal and queer indie game/game makers. There is a universe out there, out of *Mario*<sup>42</sup>, or *God of War*<sup>43</sup>, or *GTA*<sup>44</sup>, or *Tetris*<sup>45</sup>, or - you game it- that is vibrant and murky, colourful, weird, wonderful, and gay, *but not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you*.<sup>46</sup> A universe that seeks to reclaim/resist terrain in the game-making scene by appropriating and queering game experiences, in the most ample and diverse of

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<sup>42</sup>Miyamoto, Shigeru, Nintendo, *Super Mario Bros*.

<sup>43</sup>Jaffe, David, Santa Monica Studio, *God of War*.

<sup>44</sup>Dailly, Michael and Scott Jones, David, Rockstar Games, *Grand Theft Auto*

<sup>45</sup>Leonidovich Pajitnov, Alexey, The Tetris Company, *Tetris*.

<sup>46</sup>Phillips, Amanda and Bonnie Ruberg, "Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games, Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)", *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), [Link to article](#).

ways. And there is an abysmal gap between this universe and the ways games are holistically appreciated. Unlike queer representation in other media formats which have seen in recent years significant inclusion, representation, and visualization,<sup>47</sup> games are still *not Queer enough*.<sup>48,49</sup> This disjunction is made clearer apparent by contrasting the themes and narratives of industry-relevant indie game-maker studios to that of the AAA game-making scene.<sup>50</sup> The former sees numbers more akin to current Queer representation in other media while the latter numbers are marginally low by comparison.<sup>51</sup> This is tremendously problematic, as it paints a terrible, monochromatic vision of what ‘Games look like’. *I have a problem with that.*

Games excel at creating dynamics, relationships, rules, systems, immersiveness, action/consequence interactions and so, so much more. Anthropy beautifully defines games as

A kind of theater in which the audience is an actor and takes on a role—and experiences the circumstances and consequences of that role. It’s hard to imagine a more effective way to characterize someone than to allow a player to experience life as that person.<sup>52</sup>

They allow creators for seemingly endless possibilities at mapping an idea, feeling, concept, or theme into different mechanics and interactions, in surplus of traditional narrative affordances (e.g. aesthetics or text). In this way, they have the potential for capturing complex phenomena, by translating those phenomena over multiple communicative channels. Thus, games find in Queerness myriads of paths to rebel against the interloper's fiction of ‘Games

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<sup>47</sup>Malkowski, Jennifer, and Russworm, TreaAndrea M., eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.

<sup>48</sup>Dmitri Williams et al., “The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games”, *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (August 1, 2009): 815–34, [Link to article](#).

<sup>49</sup>Geena Davis Institute, “The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An Analysis of Masculinity in Video Games and the Gaming Community”, *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. If she can see it, she can be it* (blog), 2021, [Link to article](#).

<sup>50</sup>H. Shane, Michael, “Indie Developers and the Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games, 2013-2017”, 2022.

<sup>51</sup>Greer, Samantha, “Why Indie Games Continue To Lead The Way For Queer Representation”, *WePC*, June 30, 2022, [Link to article](#).

<sup>52</sup>Anthropy, Anna, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, Seven Stories Press 1st ed, 2012.

should look/play like this'. The discovery of the personal, of how it fuels a game, and how it can enhance, subvert, or radicalize the game is at the heart of queerness in gaming. Between the last decade of 2010 and up until now,<sup>53</sup> queer game makers have embraced the medium to share their unique, personal stories. These stories often take the form of short, small, self-contained games that aim to express the lived experiences of their creators, slowly making a significant impact on the gaming landscape. The *personal game movement* is out there. In the wilds.

In 2014, Freeman and Butler make *How do you do it?*<sup>54</sup>, a game where players assume the role of a young girl, playing with a naked Barbie and Ken-like dolls. The game highlights a common moment in childhood development and sexual exploration, themes unusual in game formats. Yang releases in 2015 *Succulent*,<sup>55</sup> a game of unapologetically sucking a popsicle, imitating fellatio. Under the premise of “what if industrial triple-A game tech was used for good instead of evil” the short game experience serves as a powerful examination of being unbridled about mapping game mechanics in explicitly gay sexual ways. It challenges the industry puritanism while mocking hetero variations of the mechanic, such as the infamous *God of War*<sup>56</sup> fucking minigame. These smaller games pack a punch at delivering its message. Other bigger ones, such as 2016 *Ladykiller in a Bind*<sup>57</sup> or 2017 *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator*,<sup>58</sup> offer players an immersive setting to explore sexuality, consent, romance, and love in truly queer ways. They become part of what Ruberg calls a “Queer Avant Garde”<sup>59</sup> of queer folks making queer games for their community. The *personal game movement* is out there. In the wilds.

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<sup>53</sup>H. Shane, Michael, “Indie Developers and the Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games, 2013-2017”, 50.

<sup>54</sup>Butler, Emmett, Freeman, Nina, *How Do You Do It?*

<sup>55</sup>Yang, Robert, *Succulent*.

<sup>56</sup>Jaffe, David, *God of War*.

<sup>57</sup>Love, Christine. *Ladykiller in a Bind*.

<sup>58</sup>J. Hutchison, Tyler. *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator*.

<sup>59</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

*The wilds.*

**A short queer *oeuvre* or Reflexive Gaming and Emotional Narratives**

Within this wild, I focus my analysis on how these game makers map and translate personal and non-fiction truths into game worldbuilding and mechanics fiction, either by allegory, retelling, inspiration, or metaphor. I focus on the transitional moment between what's real and what becomes a wider, allegoric, and expressive fiction. I zero in on the disruptive, creative Queer energy born from those moments. So that I may map my own wild futurity.

*Celeste*

Image 2. Screenshot from *Celeste*. Taken from the game presskit, courtesy of the makers.

*Celeste* is a game written and designed by a closeted trans person who was struggling with their gender identity, scored by a trans woman, with art and code and sound and other labor from their inspiring and irreplaceable friends. These are the perspectives that we approached this from, and I think that the game reflects that beautifully.<sup>60</sup>

*Celeste*,<sup>61</sup> released in 2018, is a platform game developed and published by the indie studio Maddy Makes Games. In the game, players take on the role of Madeline, a young woman grappling with anxiety and depression (personified by an alter ego, Badeline), as she embarks on a challenging journey to ascend the treacherous slopes of Celeste Mountain. The act of climbing the mountain to reach the ‘ending’ and accepting her alter ego throughout the game journey acts as a metaphor for acceptance and self-care. Further, when devising the ending, Maddy Thorson, Canadian game director and writer of *Celeste*, made it a point to convey to players that reaching

<sup>60</sup>[Link to blog.](#)

<sup>61</sup>Thorson, Maddy, Maddy Makes Games, *Celeste*, [Link to game.](#)

the summit was not the conclusion of Madeline's story and that her struggle with depression and anxiety didn't miraculously vanish.<sup>62</sup> This makes *Celeste* a very cohesive story about how to convey personal themes into narrative mechanics.

Throughout the development of *Celeste*, Thorson experienced a pivotal moment when her struggle with depression and anxiety reached an undeniable breaking point. This deeply personal experience served as the wellspring of inspiration for the game's narrative. It was during this period that she was also in the process of coming to terms with her own queerness, unconsciously infusing the game with queer nuances. In *Celeste's* DLC conclusion, Madeline is seen with a transgender flag near her computer, and it was later confirmed that Madeline is a transgender woman, a reflection of Thorson's own gender identity. Thorson's approach to the game was centred on treating players with the same care and understanding one would offer to themselves when dealing with anxiety, queerness, and depression. Those perspectives shaped *Celeste* into a narrative about self-care and personal growth, emphasizing that self-improvement is sometimes necessary to prevent harm to oneself and others. The development team chose not to consult mental health professionals but, instead, drew from their own experiences, aiming to create a personal and relatable story.

*Celeste* is one of the most successful (commercially and critically) platformer in indie games and has facilitated the visibility of indie adventure platform games as mediums to foster 'serious narratives'. It stands as one of the most renowned games with a trans main character.<sup>63</sup>

But what I found personally extraordinary about the game (beyond a hands-down terrific gameplay/story idea execution) was the unique symbiotic relationship between the game maker

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<sup>62</sup>Grayson, Nathan, "Celeste Taught Fans And Its Own Creator To Take Better Care Of Themselves", Kotaku, April 16, 2018, [Link to article](#).

<sup>63</sup>Bailey, Kat, "Celeste's Five-Year Journey to Becoming One of the Most Important Trans Games Ever", IGN, June 24, 2023, [Link to article](#).



and the avatar, and how the game inadvertently becomes a live reflection of the maker's Identity. Not only is it truly fascinating regarding how identity was constructed within the game medium, but also about how the game helped the creator have a better understanding of their own gender identity; or rather, how the act of making the game, served as a catalyst for that realization.

I am looking at *Celeste* as a referent to my game making process in several instances. From the way the developers map the main character arch (reaching the end and climbing the mountain as a metaphor of acceptance). To a close look at how the developers create interactions between the main character and her alter ego as a contrast to it, the dialogues, and scenes they craft. Through my research process I also looked at other examples of having game characters, and a mirror counter ego reflection to them, such as the *Persona*<sup>64</sup> game series. In *Persona 4*,<sup>65</sup> each main character arch reaches a poignant conclusion when they face their “shadow”, an alter ego version of them. That shadow speaks hidden truths the characters fail to accept. Once they come to terms, confront, and accept them, they gain newfound power, a Persona, a manifestation of the soul’s strength, of facing oneself, taking shape usually from a fictional deity or historical character. I take a particular interest in how the developer, Maddy, underwent a reflective process that became part of the game, self-inserting the creator’s life within the act of play. I undertook an autoethnographic process, and taking a close look at queer game makers allows me to understand how their lived experiences influence the making and the playing.

Reflecting over Maddy’s very own genuine process gives me courage and strength. I am able to be more open and vulnerable about my identity, being open to facing any suppressed or unexplored aspect of myself. One aspect that ‘came to light’ over this reflective process, is my inability to still find true Joy in my Queerness, feeling at moments utterly disjointed within my

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<sup>64</sup>Kaneko, Kazuma, Okada, Kouji, Atlus, *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona*.

<sup>65</sup>Hashino, Katsura, Atlus, *Persona 4*.

community. I noticed as I was unable to imagine / write a ‘good’ ending for the *The Spy*. I noticed as I kept engaging with queer theory, stories, games, people; and engaging with me, engaging in an act of self-inserting on my game creation.

I pushed happiness so far inside, thinking *I would never deserve to be happy so long as I was in (my country) chains*. But that was a lie, and part of me knew it quite well. I had friends, acquaintances who found that joy. *But I was too much of a gay-nerd to fit in*. That was a lie. I lived in an island, but it was never that small. I stood silently, in a tower of complacency over my own self-loathing, like a princess atop it. Waiting for some hero to slay the guardian dragon. Or for the dragon to consume me, whatever would come first. *But I always fail in romance*. So what? I always fail at every fucking thing I did, it never stopped me. I was the worst one in my drawing classes, that never stopped me from it, from pursuing and ‘art-related’ career (*but I am a tool, not an artist!*). I sucked at making friends, but I always still tried. But a part of me does not know or does not want to know what is to be queer happy. *That part stopped trying*. I used imagination to escape from confronting myself, *that part*, not so different than the child I was years ago escaping rejection. *That part* soaks itself in darkness and paints its reality in a mix of nihilism and conformity, while wearing a fucking friendly smile. *That part is me*. That darkness soaked itself into the game prototype, to a point that I struggle at conceiving a ‘positive’ ending outcome for the game narrative. But I am done. My oath, to the “present futurity” that Muñoz talks about, its built in the here and now. I might not be able to see what that joy looks like now, but I will. I won’t live trapped in the past, in the island, in the castle no more. That was the fucking reason I emigrated, I write this thesis, and I make a game about it. I will no longer be a *Spy* to my own narrative; this time, I will have control over it. *The Spy* becomes a game-journal that allows me to map my process, just like Maddy and other queer game creators before us.

*Dys4ia*

Image 3. Screenshot from *Dys4ia*. Courtesy of the author.

(...) It's a journal I kept during a moment of incredible, terrifying, beautiful changes in my life. Everything that happened after this game – both good and bad – is not *dys4ia*'s fault. Thanks to everyone who's ever told me this game meant something to them, only for me to change the subject immediately. Here it is, free, for the foreseeable future. Protect trans kids. Protect trans futures.<sup>66</sup>

*Dys4ia*,<sup>67</sup> released in 2012, is a very short flash-based game created by Anna Anthropy and is one of the most important game referents and inspirations for queer game makers since its release. It narrates Anthropy's experience as a transgender woman undergoing gender affirming medical interventions, encompassing hormone treatments and surgery, each level tying mechanics to a particular feeling or thought they felt during the process, ultimately becoming a brutally raw interactive exploration of gender dysphoria. The collective body of work of Anthropy's games makes up for a blatantly, unapologetically, and brazen exploration of

<sup>66</sup>[Link to blog](#).

<sup>67</sup>Anthropy, Anna, *Dys4ia*, [Link to blog](#).

queerness within games; Anthropy advocates for “Smaller games with smaller budgets and smaller audiences have the luxury of being more experimental or bizarre or interesting (...) than games that need to play it as safely as possible”.<sup>68</sup> I focused on picking one that when I first played it, felt like I was ‘thrown a punch in the guts’ with the topics Anthropy engages with.

*Dys4ia* touches on the challenges side effects of medication, and the intricacies of living as a transwoman in contemporary culture. One of the truly standing points of this game is its ingenious use of retro pixel art aesthetics, shaping them into a deeply personal, diary-like puzzle game. Game mechanic designs warp from metaphor to metaphor for the struggles of dysphoria, symbolizing the endeavour to piece together one's Identity when the parts don't neatly align. Those metaphor sequence does not follow traditional win/lose puzzle game logics, since the outcome of each won't alter the linearity of the game sequence, and that is also something for the player to discover; that no matter how they play, the show will go on.

It's a striking illustration of how queer makers can draw from their personal archives and harness games to convey profoundly personal narratives through metaphor and allegory. It underscores that in addition to being conduits for storytelling, the mechanics of the game are fundamental in shaping the meaning within the medium, almost having a voice of their own.

There are parallel moments between metaphors Anthropy uses and the ones I was drawn to in my game-making journey, as queer game makers trying to convey meaning through the act of play. The game that accompanies this thesis research, *The Spy*, reminds me of a specific phrase used in a level of *Dys4ia*: *I feel like a spy whenever I use the women's bathroom*.

*Dys4ia* informs my game prototype, by looking at how the creator mapped meaning to interaction. The game logic behind each of the three main fictional scenarios in *The Spy* was

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<sup>68</sup>A. Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters (...)*, Seven Stories Press 1st ed, 2012.

created by mapping one queer theme or feeling to it, such as finding the best choice to ‘fit in’ or being overwhelmed by choices while you try to escape and make it out alive. Additionally, the game’s non-fiction scenarios have interaction moments, that actively create a sub-text about player agency (or the lack of it) within those parts of the story. As an example, the ending of the first game part present multiple interactive choices that are the same and carry the same outcome; advance the story.

I was inspired by how Anthropy creates subtexts about (player) agency by completely stripping it away from the game. Finally, retro pixel aesthetics mixed with glitching sequences, generate punk-like visual explorations. Halberstam would refer of punk as “Has always been the stylized and ritualized language of the rejected”.<sup>69</sup> I look at that rejection as a discovery, catalyst space in parts of my aesthetics/narrative.

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<sup>69</sup>Halberstam, Jack. “What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives.” *The Scholar & Feminist Online*, (July 4, 2003), [Link to article](#).

*Gone Home*

Image 4. Screenshot from *Gone Home*. Courtesy of The Fullbright Company.

(...) we got stories from people. We interviewed two women who are married, for example. They got together in high school, so there's a lot of relevant stuff to our story, and they had a lot of really good personal details that were extremely interesting. They had a lot of great stuff! And there's a lot of other little things, like this person I know, she had a not-great experience coming out to her parents and a lot of her specific retelling of what her parents said was so instructive. We tried to ground what we were writing in that, in those lived experiences.<sup>70</sup>

*Gone Home*<sup>71</sup> is a 2013 interactive exploration game developed by The Fullbright Company, commercially acclaimed for its successful exploration of topics related to queer youth,<sup>72</sup> and equally criticized for its 'lack of game-ness'.<sup>73</sup> *Gone Home* invites players to immerse themselves in the Greenbriar family's home and uncover the stories of its inhabitants. The game's narrative revolves around the character Katie Greenbriar, who returns to her family's home in Oregon after a year abroad. Upon her arrival, Katie finds the house empty, with no sign of her family. The player takes on the role of Katie as she explores the house, uncovers notes,

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<sup>70</sup>[Link to interview.](#)

<sup>71</sup>Gaynor, Steve, The Fullbright Company, *Gone Home*.

<sup>72</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, New York: New York University Press, 2019, 172.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid, 200-208.

journals, and other personal artifacts, and gradually unravels the story. However, the narrative is not exclusively about Katie; it is primarily about her younger sister, Sam, who has been struggling with her own identity and coming to terms with her sexuality.

*Gone Home* stands within the domain of games whose emphasis lies on narrative and storytelling with simple mechanisms, such as visual novels, Twine hypermedia adventures and walking simulators. Games like this often incorporate queer representation or feature female protagonists, and this is no mere chance: The ‘slow stroll’, a very queered way of playing<sup>74</sup> supports the story and narrative by putting the game interaction weight completely over it, allowing for believable, relatable pieces of storytelling. The slow stroll facilitates a kind of queer play, that defies the usual chrononormativity of videogames (action-focused),<sup>75,76</sup> becoming an ideal medium for queer/personal storytelling. They often use simple controls, allowing players of all skill levels to access those stories easily. *Gone Home* has successfully connected with queer audiences,<sup>77</sup> celebrated for how it offers a compelling experience that relies on scenario exploration and environmental storytelling, for discovering a ‘hidden’ coming of age story. About a lesbian teenager trying to come up to terms with her sexuality, growing up and the disclosure to her family. A story delving into themes of love, identity, self-discovery, and family relationships. *Gone Home* is a constant exploration of the mundane, an integral part of the way the narrative is delivered. It puts emphasis on real-life experiences and the incorporation of authentic personal narratives into the game, taking inspiration from real people and their stories, particularly those related to coming out and their experiences in relationships. In a medium

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<sup>74</sup>“Players move “too slowly” to conform to the normative expectations of video games as a medium”. Ibid, 207.

<sup>75</sup>“Often, what drives these games are emotional, interpersonal challenges rather than boss battles or incoming bullets. They value interactive storytelling over immediate action”. Ibid, 201.

<sup>76</sup>“Though the gameplay of each of these games differs in meaningful ways, walking simulators generally have in common that they do not include combat mechanics or competition. They invite players to learn about the narrative worlds around them through scenarios”. Ibid, 202.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid, 172.

where the scales often are about saving the world or winning a war, *Gone Home* chooses to tell a relatable, 'it hits-close-to-home' story.

There is another fascinating game design choice about *Gone Home*; its game flow and loops are built using sadness as a core emotion. Bo Ruberg argues that while discussing with other LGBTQ players of *Gone Home*, many cried with it, emphasizing the game's ability to connect with individuals whose personal histories align with the struggles depicted on-screen.<sup>78</sup> This shared sadness reflects both personal experiences and the broader impact of queer social systemic issues and oppression, and it is articulated organically within the game exploratory (*at your own pace*) experience.

I borrow design decisions in *The Spy* from slow scrolling and walking simulators archetypes and *Gone Home* serves as a perfect referent. *The Spy* builds its narrative mainly through the progression of the story, but to wholly understand its nuances, players will be required to fully explore its scenarios. Environmental storytelling becomes a key aspect in adding to the narrative, and if players just 'scroll' through it, it will not connect in the same way. There is a deliberately slow discovery process, that builds itself over puzzle inspection, environmental interaction, and not picking 'shortcuts', rewarding slow stroller players with a 'bigger picture' of the story and themes. Game logics and interactions were designed with accessibility in mind; ludic interactions are reduced to mouse and click ones. The community becomes an important pillar of the work: the playtest of the game ensures that I can get feedback data from them, to ensure the story hit the right emotional notes, or adapt if not. Notes built like *Gone Home*, over sadness, while adding anger as another emotional component to translate in the narrative.

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid, 173.



## The polityQs of play or Playing with failure

Games have multiple ways to construct, disrupt, and transgress notions of politics, Identity, agency, and power. Kłosiński explores object-oriented ontology (OOO) in game narratology through the analysis of *Disco Elysium*,<sup>79</sup> stating that “objects serve as a foundation of a self-reflexive narrative on memory and identity”.<sup>80</sup> The protagonist’s identity is tied to soliloquy moments triggered by object interaction, allowing “objects in redefining the figure of the protagonist, undermining the anthropocentric perspective”.<sup>81</sup> Objects give rise to thought, the protagonist imagination triggered by object(s) “opening a hermeneutic rift in subjectivity when it meets the uncanny”.<sup>82</sup> Dialogues with a mailbox, a statue, a corpse, or *the void* provide diegetic, world building and ontological function, where players put the pieces together in ‘figuring’ them (and things) out.<sup>83</sup> For that, player’s must *be broken* first. Harry, protagonist, as the game start:

(...) is staged as a subject deprived of power and knowledge (he wakes up with amnesia, without his badge), (...) he lost his weapon (...) and the police ledger, affectively named ‘ledger of failure and hatred.’ Moreover, in an alcoholic rage, Harry has crashed his police vehicle and flushed the case files in the toilet. Thus, the new ontological situation is made possible only after the hero loses all attributes of power – knowledge, and himself becomes objectified and depersonalised, which (...) enables their meeting: object to object.<sup>84</sup>

Objectual narratology becomes for the protagonist (and the player) vehicle to recover and re-discover themselves, forging meaning over failure. That repurpose process becomes a central axis of study in queer theory, at exploring the way queers recover ‘failed’ objects and events.

Freeman explores investments in “cultural castoffs”, as “change from a nonnarrative, future-

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<sup>79</sup>Kurvitz, Robert, *ZA/UM, Disco Elysium*.

<sup>80</sup>Kłosiński, Michał, "The Object Gives Rise to Thought: Hermeneutics of Objects in *Disco Elysium*" *Baltic Screen Media Review* 9, no.1 (2021), [Link to article](#), 57.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 57.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid, 63.

<sup>83</sup>“Existential investigation is strengthened by the function of objects as identity mirrors”, Ibid, 64.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, 62.

oriented model of ‘iteration’ to a more narrative, past-oriented model of ‘allegorization’, in which the material by-products of past failures write the poetry of a different future”.<sup>85</sup> I explore these ideas further in my methodologies section, as they become a powerful expressivist tool in autoethnography and in the game-making process. The dichotomy between melancholia/allegory becomes a powerful revisionism moment, where the inwards sprawls differently outward,<sup>86</sup> another instance of the articulation of Ahmed’s ‘bringing what is behind to the front’. A path to connect to my queer community as allegory draws on collective meaning/experiences.<sup>87</sup>

*The Spy* events and objects are mapped from my past, interacted, and allegorized to (and in) the narrative. Combining and building over allegory, I seek to expand hermeneutics for queerness, creating frames for game makers to explore revisionism. Further, like in *Disco Elysium*, part of the worldbuilding lays in an OOO, soliloquy moments, and building meaning over failure, winning/failure being a recurrent theme in the narrative. The genre aids it; Failure, new hermeneutics, and challenging players perspectives is at the heart of adventure games.

One of the earliest and most common trends of enacting disruptive mechanisms were the 90’s *point-and-click* style narrative-focused adventure games, with the franchise *Monkey Island*<sup>88</sup> as one of the most recognizable ones. Adventure games are inherently self-referential, Bonello argues, establishing their genre, while also engaging players in a dynamic awareness of the medium's limitations and possibilities.<sup>89</sup> It organically creates gameplay ‘expectations’. The

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<sup>85</sup>Freeman, Elizabeth, et al., *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 68.

<sup>86</sup>“Melancholia connotes inward movement, for it preserves the lost object as an aspect of one grieving person’s subjectivity, interior, unconscious. Allegory, on the other hand, traffics in collectively held meanings and experiences, pushing the melancholic’s rather solipsistic incorporation back outward in order to remake the world in a mock-imperialist gesture.” Ibid, 70.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Gilbert, Ron, LucasArts, *The Secret of Monkey Island*.

<sup>89</sup>Bonello Rutter Giappone, Krista “Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games”, *Game Studies* 15, no. 1 (July 2015), [Link to article](#).

exploration of the useless becomes one of the most delightful features in the genre<sup>90</sup> (*Zork*<sup>91</sup>, *Monkey Island*, *Day of the Tentacle*<sup>92</sup>); part of the delight in this respect might stem precisely from parsing out the diegetic game text limits, encouraging experimentation.<sup>93</sup>

An endless trial and error of a safe numeric combination, multiple choices of a dialogue tree that do not advance the plot, or a kind of void, masochistic joy in checking item descriptions one by one within the game's inventory, just to see if there is a secret dialogue hiding somewhere. In these, a certain freedom is enabled by encouraging the player to try out all available (dialogue) options or interact with objects without fear of fatally compromising in-game progress. This allows paradoxically, for digressions and incidental dialogue, the only purpose of which is a humorous diversion or derivative narratives, unlinked to narrative or goal progression.<sup>94</sup> It allows for a modality of 'play' by discovering (or slow scrolling), by refusing to advance the game narrative and embracing failure, resisting traditional models of play design that prioritize advancing the game's narrative or goals as the sole path to playing or *having fun*.

Through humor and the parodic gaze,<sup>95</sup> adventure and narrative games can deprecate their own systems, rules, and narratives for no other reason than to engage with extra 'useless' layers of diegetic game mechanics/elements/narratives. A recurrent mechanism in the genre is having characters with an agency of their own, resulting in refusing specific players' commands, and making the player fail at the intended action, creating a moment where the agency is displaced from the player. It facilitates an extra layer of character customization, and failure here can be re-interpreted as adding extra moments of game interaction, where failing unlocks new

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Anderson, Tim, Blank, Marc, Lebling, Dave, and Daniels, Bruce, Infocom, *Zork*.

<sup>92</sup>Gilbert, Ron and Grossman, Dave, LucasArts, *Day of the Tentacle*.

<sup>93</sup>Giappone, Krista, *Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games*.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

kinds of game experiences while putting a limit to what we are ‘allowed’ to control. This mode of character interaction is explored within *The Spy*. Graphic adventure affordances to subvert its own created expectations and mechanisms, and engage with failure, opens powerful political values discourses within game narratives. The art of failure is inherently a queer way of resistance.<sup>96</sup> Halberstam argues failure as ‘ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success’,<sup>97</sup> and its art:

The art of failure (...) a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle (...), anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story of art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.<sup>98</sup>

Queer failure is often deemed or understood as a failure because it rejects normative ideas of value;<sup>99</sup> It's inherently queer going against game's logic of goals, scores, challenges, and winning. Disidentification can be a world-making project in which the limits of the here and now are traversed and transgressed.<sup>100</sup> And I dissent; the binary of win/lose in games doesn't fit me, my queer identity, or that of *The Spy*; I dissent chrononormativity<sup>101</sup> by (re)telling a tale of failures (lots and loops of failures), of being different, and of more than rejection/acceptance.

Queer games and queer game makers have been experimenting and appropriating those ideas, from “playing the wrong way,”<sup>102</sup> to playing to fail, to playing against the rule. Ruberg

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<sup>96</sup>“Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.” From: Halberstam, Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, 2.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid, 2.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid, 88.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid. Also from: Muñoz, José E., *Cruising Utopia*, 173.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid, 169.

<sup>101</sup>“(…) a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts.” From: Freeman, Elizabeth, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>102</sup>“Perhaps most intriguing, though, is the subversive potential of no fun as a queer mode of play. Rejecting fun means turning normative expectations on their heads and embracing the art of playing the wrong way”. From: Ruberg, Bonnie, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 177.

discusses failure through multiple games and queers-ways of playing examples.<sup>103</sup> From punishment games designed to make the player fail and designed to hurt (*Super Hexagon*<sup>104</sup>, *Stair Dismount*<sup>105</sup>), to presenting players with multiple ‘bad’ endings (*Depression Quest*<sup>106</sup>), to embodying failure (*Octodad: Dadliest Catch*<sup>107</sup>). In *Octodad*, queerness is exemplified through its control scheme, which deliberately sets players to fail, digressing from traditional mapped ways of in-game movement control. It challenges players to embrace and think about their “messy” humanity over superhuman ideals, questioning traditional rote ideas of success and conformity. In games like *Octodad*, failure and queer play are “structured directly into the game by its designers if not intentionally incorporated counterhegemonic elements into their game”.<sup>108</sup>

Another modality of queer play manifests itself in the way the players engage with the game, failing against the game designs, as a mode of “playing queer”.<sup>109</sup> In a competitive game, it could be in the way players might forfeit, allow themselves to be beaten, or even to be killed, actively playing to lose in nihilistic and masochistic ways. A player’s act of queer play is highly personal, nuanced, individual, mirroring the diversity and uniqueness inherent in queerness.

Queer politics in games stands in the fluid ambivalence in queering game mechanics and by the freedom in which we can define more than one way of play. In *The Spy*, failure is one of the game’s narrative themes, and it’s explored in endings and core game mechanics.

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid, 158-183.

<sup>104</sup>Cavanagh, Terry, *Super Hexagon*.

<sup>105</sup>tAAat, *Stair Dismount*.

<sup>106</sup>Quinn, Zoë, The Quinnsspiracy, Patrick Lindsey, *Depression Quest*.

<sup>107</sup>Zuhn, Kevin, Young Horses, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*.

<sup>108</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 147.

<sup>109</sup>“I am playing Mario Kart 8 (Nintendo, 2014), I have chosen to lose, and I love it (...) When the match begins, my opponents scatter and start launching their attacks. As for me, (...) I roam the level’s landscape at will. Rather than hunt down my fellow players, I stop to marvel at a sucking, swirling pit of quicksand: a particularly frightening race-course obstacle designed to be avoided at all costs. Joyfully contrarian, I drive my cart into the abyss. Each time my driver respawns, I do it again. A kind of ecstasy takes over— the ecstasy of self- destruction— and I repeat my feat of defiance until all my lives are lost. (...) by repeatedly driving my car into a deadly sandpit, I am deciding to reject fun and deciding to play for (and with) pain”. From: Ibid, 161, 162, 174. Yabuki, Kosuke, Nintendo, *Mario Kart 8*.

## ***Queering emotions or From Queer failure to Queer affection.***

Emotions through the act of play can be crafted within game mechanics to facilitate or support queer narratives. The affect and effect of seeing the negative side of the emotional spectrum as a powerful possibility is discussed within queer theory. Muñoz articulates the use of Paolo Virno's theory of *the negation of the negation* as a framework for a:

Modality of the possible, (...) a regression to the infinite. (...) a potentiality in negative effects that can be reshaped by negation and made to work in the service of enacting a mode of critical possibility and the effect of negative emotions in sometimes shame, disgust, hate, and other “negative” emotions bind people together—certainly punk rock’s rejection of normative feelings stands as the most significant example of the emotional work of negative affect.<sup>110</sup>

I regress back to my engagement to told narratives that are grounded in moments that have been meaningful to me, my queer Identity, and that of others from my community. Moments that embrace rejection and negative emotions as a trigger; to reject happiness, conformity, reproductivity and life itself –or to think and act upon alternatives of those. Yes, failure sure lurks in ideas of disappointment, disillusionment, pain, and despair but “it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life”<sup>111</sup>. I reflex and craft over these ideas in a moment where mainstream media homonormativity paints distorted realities of homosexual and queer life, pictured in ‘happy ending’ and ‘prideful rainbow’ ways<sup>112</sup> which politize and instrumentalize ‘one way to live, one way to love’. In a moment of a rippling wave of homo/transphobia, of #ProtectTransKids.

I am done forcing myself a smile. I embrace anger. *The Spy* connect others through it.

A queer orientation (...) approach “the retreat” as an approach—not in the sense that what retreats will return but in the sense that in the retreat of an object a space is cleared for a new arrival. Or, if a face is inverted and becomes queer or deprived of its

<sup>110</sup>Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia*.

<sup>111</sup>Halberstam, Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

<sup>112</sup>Ahmed, Sara, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, [Link to book](#).

significance, then such a deprivation would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or (...) as expressions that we do not yet know how to read.<sup>113</sup>

The potential in Ahmed's articulation of orientation elicits failure, negation and lost not as hollow spaces, but a void of possibility and re-reading. *How can we re-code failure in games?*

Queer game design and game makers can articulate how to harness that 'void', craft it, and play with it, making a showcase of odd games and odd 'in-game' emotions. Ruberg argues that "the queer games avant-garde is interested in how games feel. These game makers explore affect, embodiment, experience, and intimacy"<sup>114</sup> decentering from conventional discussions about innovation in video games that mostly focus on the formalist aspects such as rules, systems, and mechanics; many of these queer indie game makers are more deeply concerned with the recentering of emotions and the player's bodily experiences, and how to present them.<sup>115</sup>

Ruberg examines games that reimagine the role that affect can play in the formalistic tropes of gameplay,<sup>116</sup> such as in Mo Cohen's *Queer Quest*<sup>117</sup> (in production), where grief becomes an object that the player collects and carries with them. Intimacy often takes on unexpected forms — as in Naomi Clark's *Consentacle*<sup>118</sup> (2014, tabletop card game), where strangers play out a sexual encounter between a human and an alien, or Seanna Musgrave's *Animal Massage*<sup>119</sup> (2016), a virtual reality installation in which the player is caressed in front of a public audience, or merritt k's *Hug Punx*<sup>120</sup> (2015), a game about exuberant hugging.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology*, 171.

<sup>114</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 20.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid, 1-29.

<sup>117</sup>[Link to game.](#)

<sup>118</sup>Clark, Naomi, *Consentacle*, [Link to game.](#)

<sup>119</sup>Musgrave, Seanna, *Animal Massage*, [Link to game.](#)

<sup>120</sup>merritt kopas, *Hug Punx*, [Link to game.](#)

<sup>121</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

Often in these games, failure becomes an opportunity to manifest queer emotions. From the previous case studies, *Celeste* uses difficulty; extreme and annoying difficulty in some stages, as an active game mechanism for making the player fail, and feel frustration, anger, and sadness, just as someone often feels when dealing with depression and anxiety. At first, the intention was for the player (Madeline) to fall off the mountain and then climb back up, to parallel to relapses process. Inspiration from climbing, stamina, failing, and persisting are also grounded in real life; co-creator Noel Berry, bouldering aficionado, outsourced inspiration from his experiences. The game comes full circle in multiple ways, and failure as a theme is a constant that glues the experience and game making process together.

In *dys4ia* case, failure is a constant game mechanic. It deliberately subverts our expectations regarding player control, feedback, and agency, which form the base of interactivity in most games. *dys4ia* is riddled with interactive glitching scenarios, that directs players through multiple *WarioWare*<sup>122</sup> inspired mini games, only to stage failure through each, prematurely ending them and leaving players uncertain about their prospects for victory (or if there was some glitch / bug). This experience gradually clicks on the players, revealing they have no in-game agency. They find themselves played by the game. The story remains intact beyond their influence, and players are forced to watch Anthropy's emotional states without any control over it; a profound testament to the phrase "you can't change the past." The protagonist is just a witness, stepping into the maker's shoes and retracing their journey. Making the players fail and making them feel powerless forges the emotional state while playing *dys4ia*. While making *The Spy*, I also explored ideas of failure, no agency choices, or feeling powerless to craft emotional states and game scenarios over negative emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, or despair.

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<sup>122</sup>Matsuoka, Hirofumi, Nintendo, *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgames!*



## Hey, listen! Guidelines from the research

While researching, I collected and synthesized insights and findings into guidelines that I used for the game making process (also in **Appendix D** and **Ch.5**). I encourage game makers intent at exploring Queered Game Identities by translating biographical narratives into game formats, to reflect, use, adapt, or be inspired by them. And I hope for those making a game as an expressive vehicle to speak their truth, to find themselves, just like I did while making *The Spy*.

Findings are grouped in 4 categories: Rejection, Personal, Failure, –Emotions. Each hold subcategories, and I cite how it manifest in *The Spy* (**Ch. 4, 5, 7**), so makers can use the game as referent. Findings are integrated in decision-making processes of my methodology approaches (**Ch. 3**). They drive how I activate my practice in service of the creative goals and research questions. These categories aren't rigid; makers are encouraged to experiment around them.

Lastly, my making was inspired by 2 concepts from Canadian queer game maker, Nicky Case (see **Appendix C**): accessibility (simple game controls) and explorable explanations.

### *Rejection*

**Queer Liberation:** To define in the game making context *to Queer* as: to dream, re-code, be truthful and free. A way to revise game mechanics, laws, expectations, narratives, for digress on behalf of being truthful to oneself, identities, and queerness vision.<sup>123</sup>

**Anticipatory Illumination:** Built upon Muñoz's concepts, focus on the exploration of unconscious "present-futures". Draws inconformity towards immovable presents. In games, recontextualized as makers choices over play, storytelling, player agency to challenge that.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>**Explored in:** Metaphor / Allegory, subvert of the act of playing, VN genre "good ending" and player's role, game parts themes (disclosure, rebelling, escape), naming convention, *The Spy* futurity (**Ch. 7**), imagination as escapism.

<sup>124</sup>**Explored in:** Autoethnographic storytelling approach (**Ch. 3**), intersection of past, present, and future -me versions rejecting traditional notions of linearity in time / fixed identity, game within a game concept and agency exploration in it, scenarios built using overlaps of my biographical data/rejected reimagining of it, *The Spy* futurity.

*Personal*

**Discovery:** Discovery of the personal and how it adds to games. Capacity to enhance, subvert, explore, or educate in it. Twofold; First, players experiencing and discovering inserted bio data in the game. Two, makers intent at mapping the personal to game affordances.<sup>125</sup>

**Self-reflection:** Focus on extracting epiphanies from biographical data. Emerges from maker-game interaction, a constant reflective approach between the act of making the game, the biographical data, and the makers uses of it. Manifest at: How does the game reflects me?<sup>126</sup>

**Understanding / Reflecting / Evolving:** Act of mapping meanings in the use of biographical data in the game, a trajectory/journey to achieve with it. Considers interaction and game objectives tied to them. Locating, translating, and giving a resolution to personal nuances, linking them to an overarching idea. Narrative, world, interaction, characters arc oriented.<sup>127</sup>

*Failure*

**Recovery of the failed:** Inspired by Freeman’s “cultural castoff” and “poetry of the future” concepts. Revisionism of the past (objects, events) allows for re-purpose / reimagining it. Stands at the dichotomy between melancholia (past) / allegory (future); breaks from a solipsistic (inwards focused) nature in melancholia towards allegory’s holistic (outwards focused) nature. Allows in-game narratives to connect and amplify biographical data with others, as allegory draws over collective meanings and experiences.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>**Explored in:** Metaphor / Allegory, Presence bar, The Spy (player’s) role, environmental storytelling, slow scrolling, OOO, soliloquy, exploration of no-agency choices, others.

<sup>126</sup>**Explored in:** *The Spy* futurity, my incapacity of creating “positive” endings, the game as a journal to map my Identity moments and reflect upon them, Metaphor / Allegory.

<sup>127</sup>**Explored in:** Narrative structure, game parts themes (disclosure, rebelling, escape), Autoethnographic storytelling approach, environmental storytelling, OOO, soliloquy.

<sup>128</sup>**Explored in:** Metaphor / Allegory, Presence bar, The Spy (player’s) role, OOO, soliloquy, audiovisuals, story arcs, music, autoethnographic writings (**Ch. 3**).

**Full-circle failure:** Failure as a game theme, a constant that ties play experience and game making process together. Begs the question; How can failure in my life be a part of the game experience? Assists at subverting expectations regarding player agency.<sup>129</sup>

**Win by failing:** Built upon the “art of failure” concept of Halberstam and Ruberg’s Queer game theory approach to failure. To go against game’s binary logics of win/lose and use failure as anticapitalistic frame for queer struggle/resistance. Dissent as a game logic operation; in makers intent at negational approaches in game narrative, scenario, goals, or progress.<sup>130</sup>

–*Affects*

**Born in failure:** Centers towards negative affects emerging from failures, applied to the game experience. Lurking in failure ideas guides us to disappointment, disillusionment, pain, and despair. Those provide opportunity to criticize toxic positivity. Twofold; First, what triggers it: a game object, event, interaction, mechanic? Second, what does it reveals or expose?<sup>131</sup>

–**Embrace:** To embrace negative emotions like anger, sadness, or fear in the context of lived experiences and connect to others through them. Act of game mapping these emotions as a trigger. What can they trigger in-game? And how can they shatter game assumptions?<sup>132</sup>

**Commune:** To connect with the queer community in the making process; center the game making process as a shared learning opportunity. Can you playtest the game with them? How did they feel? Can they relate? What did you/they learn? Will the game change after it?<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup>**Explored in:** The Child failures at the integration (**Ch. 7**) towards games (good ending), and at integrating into society (bad ending), exploration of no-agency choices, game story overarch theme.

<sup>130</sup>**Explored in:** Winning or losing the game makes you reach a negative outcome, *The Spy* futurity (seeking a third way out of the game frame), game story overarching themes, slow scrolling, exploration, environmental storytelling.

<sup>131</sup>**Explored in:** No positive or true ending moments, Part 3 (escape, despair leads to an ending that rejects reality), critique of happy endings narrative models in games, OOO, soliloquy, Part 2 (the fire/baseball object trigger).

<sup>132</sup>**Explored in:** Part 2 (rebellious anger outburst and lack of player agency in it), story arcs inspired by negative emotion (sadness, anger, fear), climax followed by soliloquy reflections.

<sup>133</sup>**Explored in:** Playtesting led to refinement of storytelling parts, assessing if the emotions were being communicated or felt by the players and my Identity being wholly expressed/felt. Connecting was fun also. :)

## Ch. 3 - Methodologies

As an editorial designer I worked for years in being a bridge, a mediator, a vehicle for fleshing out other's stories, desires, intentions, and voice. I greatly enjoyed this process as it tackles with understanding and communication, two pillars in my approach to my creational praxis. Yet, I wonder if a part of me longingly looked at this process wanting to be more than a "tool". *As long as I walk this path, I am nothing more than a facilitator to others.* Or so I told myself. A dark disquiet grew in me, a darkness far and vast supressing any attempt at producing 'art'. At producing from me, or for me. Layers of suppression and binding operated in me from a *-political state-* layer to a *-professional-* one to an almost *-consciousness-* one, a constant in my life. But for every beginning, there is an end. I look at a new chapter of my story, one where I can start using my own voice. I look at the queer game makers and their work, how they have mapped, narrated, and voiced their story in game formats. And I look for a new way onwards.

My methodological process and this project support itself in an autoethnographic journey, inspired by what I learnt analyzing the works of indie queer game makers. Autoethnography allows me to go over in a meaningful, controlled way about moments relevant to my experiences as a member of my community, echoing my biographical data over shared or common queer processes in it. Processes I have seen, talked, read, watched, lived; processes of a bigger cycle of subculture resistance, fostering kinship and solidarity within my community<sup>134</sup>. At the same time, I am iterating praxis using my expertise as a communication designer in research-through-design practice that incorporates and applies the research's findings.

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<sup>134</sup>Halberstam, Jack, "What's That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives." *The Scholar & Feminist Online*, (July 4, 2003), [Link to article](#).

## Autoethnography

Autoethnographic narratives serve as both artistic expressions and analytical showcases, illustrating our journey towards understanding, defining, and interpreting personal and cultural experiences.<sup>135</sup> To scrutinize personal experiences to grasp cultural phenomena; this methodology disrupts conventional research paradigms and modes of representing individuals, framing research as a politically charged, socially equitable, and culturally aware endeavor.<sup>136</sup> Jones and Harris articulate in the strength of autoethnography as a queer tool for intervening and gaining control and voice over (and within) our narratives:

The need for (and power of) autoethnography (...) is in their shared strategies of telling others and ourselves the stories we desperately need to hear, but not as only witnessing. Autoethnography is just one in a range of queer tools that “speaks truth to power,” and in the speaking enacts new worldings, not just records them.<sup>137</sup>

The way I conducted my autoethnography relies on that articulation of non-fictional biographical narrative and expressive fiction, and that methodological approach makes its ways into the game construction. In this autoethnographic journey, I produce data by collecting written information from me as the research subject, exploring my experiences, thoughts, and reflections related to the research topic as a queer man. The focus relies on the constructive moments of myself, recording them in different nuances of non-fiction and fiction.

My autoethnography journey is queer-ated (queer appropriated, narrated, and curated). Chronicled by me, it allows me to be perfectly comfortable with what and how I share with others. The results are then used by creating the narrative in a storytelling piece, the game; by

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<sup>135</sup>E. Adams, Tony, Holman Jones, Stacy and Ellis, Carolyn, *Autoethnography*, Understanding Qualitative Research, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>136</sup>Ellis, Carolyn, E. Adams, Tony and P. Bochner, Arthur, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), [Link to book](#).

<sup>137</sup>Holman Jones, Stacy and M. Harris, Anne, *Queering Autoethnography*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), [Link to book](#).

mapping (past) events while providing my (future) voice in artistic and aesthetics interpretations over them through a process of fictional / metaphorical worldbuilding.

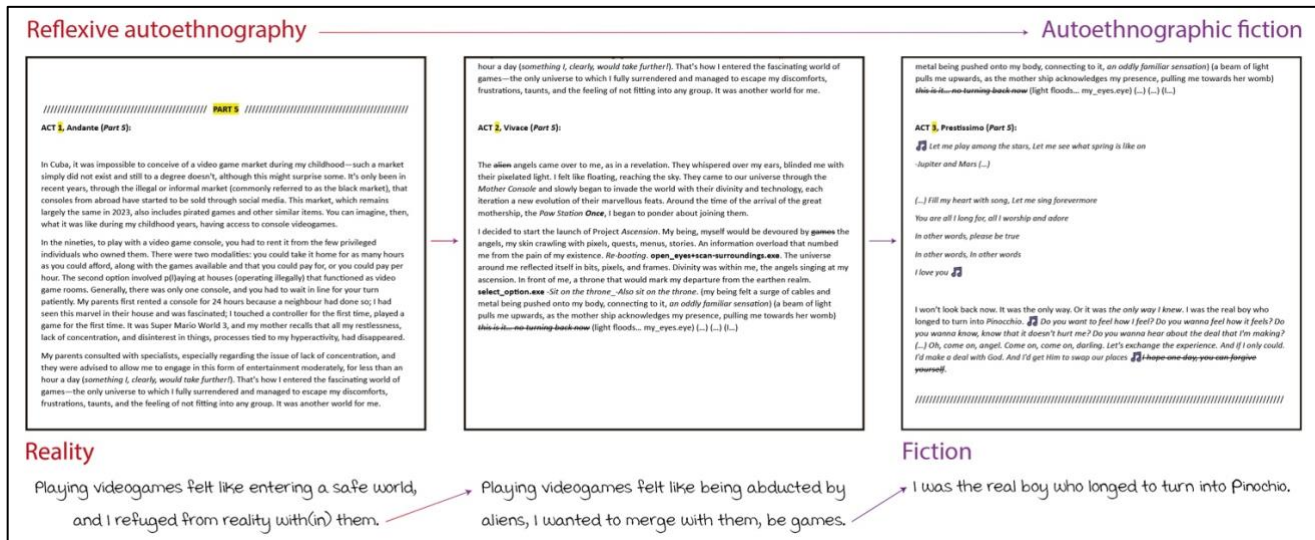


Diagram 1. The autoethnographic process. Narrative transitions from reality into fiction through 3 stages.

## Fact or Fiction

In constructing my own custom autoethnographic process, I was inspired by two existing variations of the methodology: Reflexive autoethnography and Autoethnographic fiction.

Reflexive Autoethnography emphasizes self-awareness and self-reflection. Is a modality of autoethnography that emphasizes self-awareness, critical reflection, and reflexivity throughout the research process. Scholars in this field explore their own experiences, identities, and interactions, while constantly interrogating their role as both researcher and participant. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner provide an overview of autoethnography, including the reflexive approach:

Researchers retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. In addition to telling experiences, autoethnographers analyze experiences (...).<sup>138</sup>

<sup>138</sup>Ellis, Carolyn, E. Adams, Tony and P. Bochner, Arthur, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), [Link to book](#).

That reflexivity should focus on “turning back on our experiences, identities, and relationships to consider how they influence our present work. Reflexivity also asks us to explicitly acknowledge our research in relation to power”.<sup>139</sup> Anderson renders an analytical version of autoethnography, where reflexivity involves deliberate self-examination driven by a quest for deeper comprehension of both oneself and others. It entails scrutinizing one's actions and perceptions in comparison and conversation with those of others.<sup>140</sup>

In my approach to reflexive autoethnography, I critically examine my own role, biases, and positionality in relation to the cultural or social phenomenon that I am studying. It involves an exploration of how my identity influences my perspective. I focus at documenting the -self, the different “versions”, or iterations it has gone through, and what has affected or emoted in me change. At the same time, I remain critical at how the overarching themes I research manifest within that self and how my experiences resonate towards the queer community and to the cultural and social paradigms that self-embodies.

I am conducting my Reflexive Autoethnography by establishing specific limits that allow me to shorten an otherwise unrealistic and unhealthy task. I am reflecting on myself over a specific period of my life (from age 5 to around 24) in seven parts; within that time frame the primary focus will be my childhood and how relevant events in that period had rippling aftereffects over me in later years.

I document keywords and pivotal emotional moments associated with a spectrum of negative and painful emotions, including anger and sadness. This documentation process involves writing, reminiscing, and revisiting these events in detail.

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<sup>139</sup>E. Adams, Tony, et al., *Autoethnography*, Understanding Qualitative Research.

<sup>140</sup>Anderson, Leon, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (August 1, 2006): 373–95, [Link to article](#).

	PART 1	PART 2	PART 3	PART 4	PART 5	PART 6	PART 7
<b>Years old</b>	Birth	0-7	7	4-10	7-13	10-13	14-24
<b>Timeline</b>	1992	1992-9	1999	1996-2002	1999-2005	2002-5	2005-2016
<b>Keyword</b>	cursed	fire	lab rat	princess	games	monster	reckoning

Diagram 2. Timeline of the autoethnographic process in each of the 7 parts, including relevant keywords.

This leads to my use of another autoethnographic variation, Autoethnographic Fiction. The process of writing starts by using Reflexive Autoethnography shifting later midway into Autoethnographic Fiction, using the former as an inspirational base. It allows me to create new data from the previous one, reshaping biographical data into fiction. It is an organic follow-up to the moments of reflexivity and uses emotional build-up to emerge from them.

Autoethnographic Fiction is an approach within the broader field of autoethnography that blends elements of fiction and storytelling with personal narrative. Scholars and researchers utilizing this method employ creative techniques to explore personal experiences, identities, and cultural contexts. Jones and Harris argue about revisiting with new perspectives the site of trauma in *Queering Autoethnography*, “searching for a way to restore or re-story the fiction of what should have been ours”. Melancholic returns, seeking to rewrite our narrative of belonging—acceptance, connection, family—. A long to uncover a hidden link, yearning for a fulfilled reality beyond time's constraints. For the queer, a “pull of melancholia” that has the potential to bring about healing and significant changes from an absent past, regardless of its painful and shattering nature. *And so, we keep coming back.*<sup>141</sup>

<sup>141</sup>Holman Jones, Stacy and M. Harris, Anne, *Queering Autoethnography*, [Link to book](#).



Henson embraces ruination, disorganization, and repetition, playing with fragments of memory and possibility to explore the complexities of lived experience in an intimate and introspective way. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, readers are offered a subjective exploration of the interplay between truth, fiction, past and present.<sup>142</sup>

Denzin discusses the use of performance and storytelling techniques in ethnographic research, including Autoethnographic Fiction. He emphasizes the importance of narrative construction and interpretation in understanding personal experiences and cultural contexts.<sup>143</sup> He argues for more than the documentation of stories, “The flesh-and-blood subject cannot just be plunked down in a text using quotations from fieldnotes” to meaningfully represent the nuances of those stories. His conclusion statement encapsulates a lot of the spirit of what my fiction aims at “My autoethnographer is wild, unruly, passionate, a wily coyote, a circus clown, and a disrupter committed to the belief that we change reality by making social injustice visible”.

Thus, Autoethnographic Fiction functions as a powerful vehicle for artists and creators for the mirroring of their experiences. In the previous section, some of my case studies use different approaches of Autoethnographic Fiction to build the game experience. I have been informing my process, noting those different ways to map and fictionalize personal storytelling.

Within the greater context of queer identity, folks and their lived experiences are often faced with being misunderstood. In response, autoethnographic fiction becomes an expressionist shot to repaint and reclaim narratives, asserting the validity of their queerness and offering a personal, unique outlook. Many a queer oeuvre perfectly capture the process, for a more recent brilliant example, the duology of comic/film, *Nimona*.

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<sup>142</sup>F. Henson, Donna, “Fragments and Fictions: An Autoethnography of Past and Possibility,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (March 1, 2017): 222–24, [Link to book](#).

<sup>143</sup>N. K., Denzin (2008), "Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture", Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

In the creation of the comic *Nimona*<sup>144</sup> and its subsequent adaptation into a film,<sup>145</sup> author ND Stevenson fuels his personal experiences in fictional narratives explorations. Stevenson's journey of self-discovery, particularly regarding his gender identity as a trans and bigender individual, serves as a foundational element in both the comic and the film. *Nimona*, the main character, is a shapeshifter, a metaphor in and of itself. Stevenson have been always drawn to shapeshifters (the author's power fantasy) and to the idea of having your body really not be the entire story of who you are.<sup>146</sup> The worldbuilding is a mix-up of a medieval setting infused with futuristic elements. Of this, the author comments "It feels very true to our world today, where we have all this advanced technology, but we're still kind of bound by medieval ways of thinking". His past and upbringing also shape the story and themes "I come from a very conservative and religious background that I found very constraining growing up, and that's at the heart of what this story is. And it's in reaction to that very rigid and very prescriptive kind of world view".

Similar to previous analyzed case study, *Celeste*, the author saw in the creation of *Nimona* and other works such as *Lumberjanes* and *She Ra* an opportunity to create a commentary over their gender expression (Stevenson himself came out as trans after writing the comic), and at the same time, and opportunity for reflectivity over it: "these stories have been my own way of exploring myself. I was feeling out these identities in fiction".<sup>147</sup>

While initially unaware of the commentary on gender within *Nimona*, Stevenson acknowledges the resonance it holds for readers who see themselves reflected in the story, illustrating how their personal exploration becomes embedded within the narrative. He witnesses how *Nimona* serves as a medium for self-exploration and expression of readers, with *Nimona*

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<sup>144</sup>Stevenson, ND, *Nimona*. New York, NY, HarperTeen, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.

<sup>145</sup>[Link to full-length film.](#)

<sup>146</sup>Source: [Link to interview.](#)

<sup>147</sup>Source: [Link to interview.](#)

(comic / character) becoming a powerful metaphor for queerness. The shift in *Nimona*'s ending, from darkness to hopefulness further underscores Stevenson's personal growth and willingness to engage with his emotional journey, ultimately showcasing the transformative potential of autoethnographic fiction in unpacking complex themes within the storytelling and author.

The original ending for the comic was meant to be much darker. He mentions, "I don't think that every queer story has to be hopeful or even uplifting. I think it really depends" and: "I wanted to keep that darkness and that anger," (...) "but over the years I realized that while it's easy to be cruel to yourself it's much harder to be cruel to other people." In *Nimona*, "the audience is seeing themselves, maybe for the first time, represented in this character." Analyzing *Nimona* makes me reflect over the duty of fiction, and how much should I keep my own story to myself. Light and darkness have been, after all, at the heart of this thesis.

*Nimona* (the movie) sets its characters already queer, and the character's arch focus instead on the struggle of trying to survive an oppressive regime. The shapeshifter branded as a monster by the regime turns itself into a commentary about what it's like to survive a retrograde society or country. This resonates tremendously with elements from the autoethnographic fictional story journey I undergo.

## **But what about you?**

Autoethnographic Fiction allows me to focus on creating fictional narratives based on personal experiences. This allows for creative exploration of themes and emotions while maintaining a degree of distance from the actual events. As a researcher in this project, my role it's to employ game affordances to express my art praxis and reflective process upon the occurrences of my life. By repurposing, I am also bringing events of pain and grief to a full cycle

of closure in a useful and healing manner, allowing me to connect differently with my past and memories. Ultimately much of the game narrative and aesthetics is deeply embedded in my life, and it is my way of connecting aesthetics—including colours, shapes, ideas, words, phrases, and feelings—that I embody into a virtual setting.

Feeling was a pivotal process for me while I wrote the fictional pieces. Confronting my past, dealing with it, reimagining it. I would dive deep into my emotions, trying to visualize what words or metaphors they would evoke in me. I would hear music, fill my ears with them, feel my whole body with the lyrics and melodies. I would go over the reflexive texts, I would go over my imagination, and I would write; the world mirrored in metaphors, one over the other, overlapping, twisting, merging. Taken by the force of my memories and music, I would let everything flow, and I would let my writing do so while at it. I would drown in it. The writing itself is composed in seven parts, the text within stylized in three ACTs, or musical tempos.



Diagram 3. The autoethnographic process in 7 parts, along with the writing style cadence and adaptation.

I was inspired by classical dramatic theater formulas; in the way the narrative structure is meant to build up towards a climatic or cathartic ending, the narrative deliverance increasing its pace. Increases in dynamism over musical compositions, often found in symphonic orchestra ensembles, were another inspiration. I was deliberative over the structures, seeking to capture the same emotional heightened, crescendo-like state I would enter during some experiences I chronicle, and what feels like reliving them my mind. As for the ACTs structure:

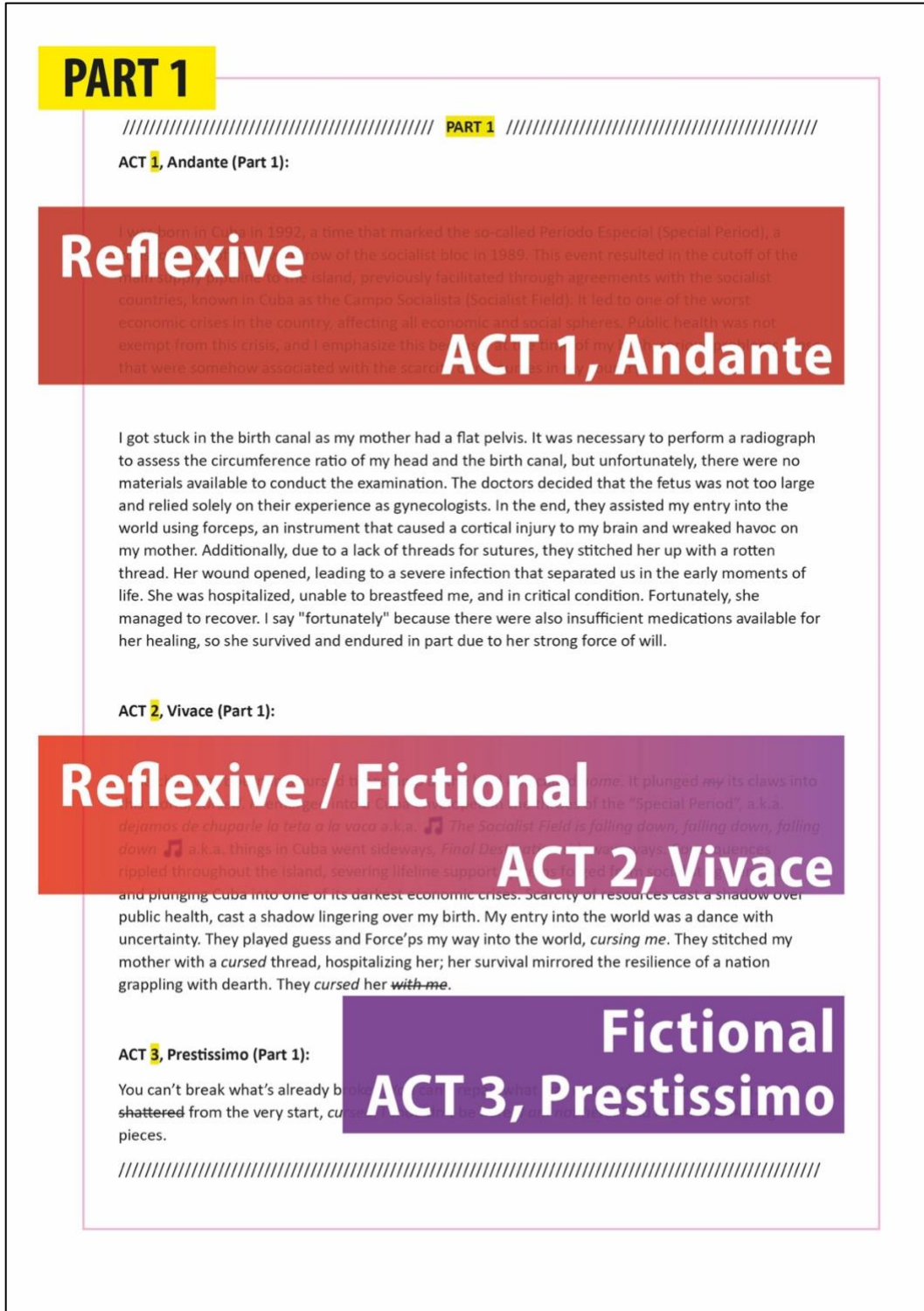


Diagram 4. Layout of one of the 7 parts of the autoethnographic writings (Part 1) and its 3 stages.

First, (ACT 1, *Andante*<sup>148</sup>) an overall narration of the situation, a breadth outlook of the events, followed by personally driven close perspectives. It utilizes Reflexive Autoethnography.

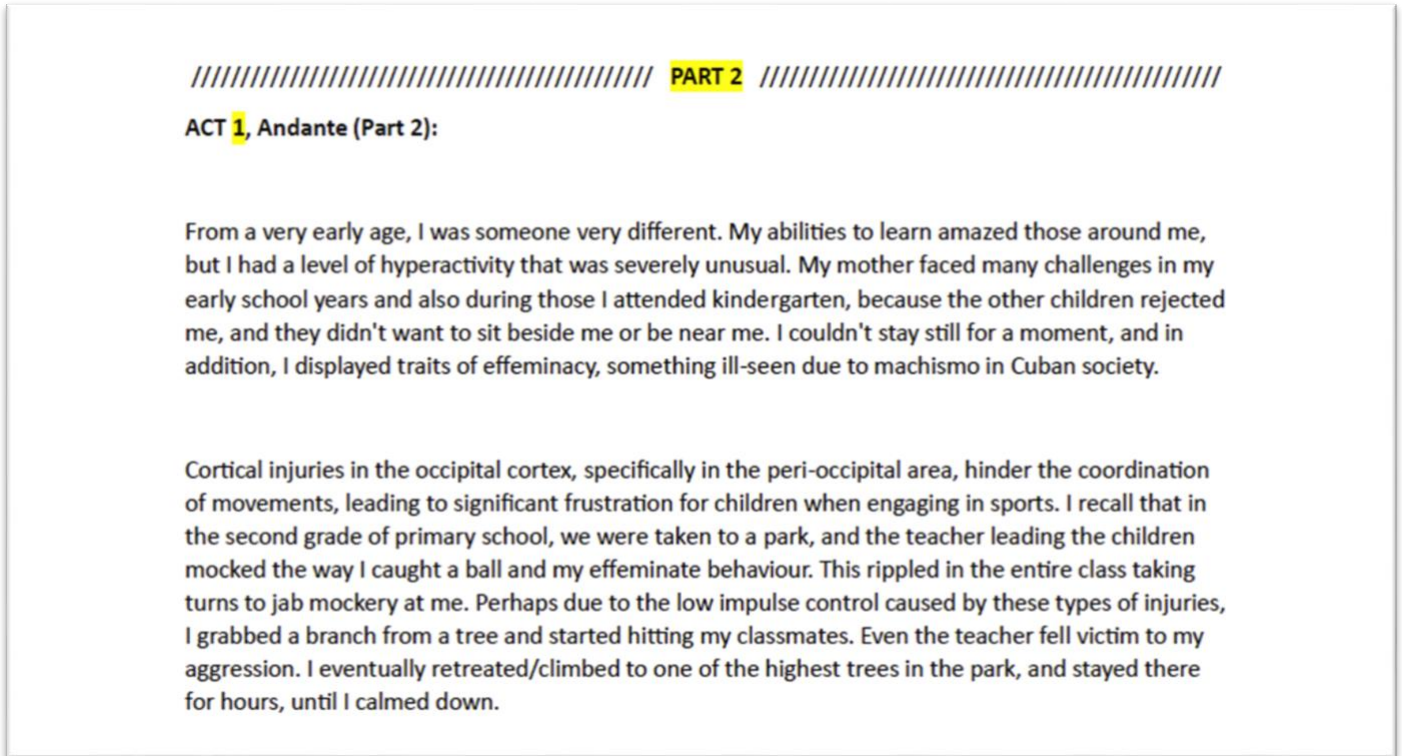


Figure 1. Sample of ACT 1, *Andante*.

Second, (ACT 2, *Vivace*<sup>149</sup>) is a shortened, condensed version of those events, with a focus on including in a more intrusive way my voice to the narrative, playing with some writing that intertwines fictional and non-fictional narratives, seeking to capture my state of mind, from a more poetical perspective. Reflexive Autoethnography is turned to Autoethnographic Fiction.

<sup>148</sup>Moderately slow; (of a passage, movement, or composition) marked to be played in this manner. Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, July 2023), [Link to website](#).

<sup>149</sup>A direction indicating brisk or lively performance. Also with the adv. used quasi-adjectivally to characterize musical composition. Ibid.

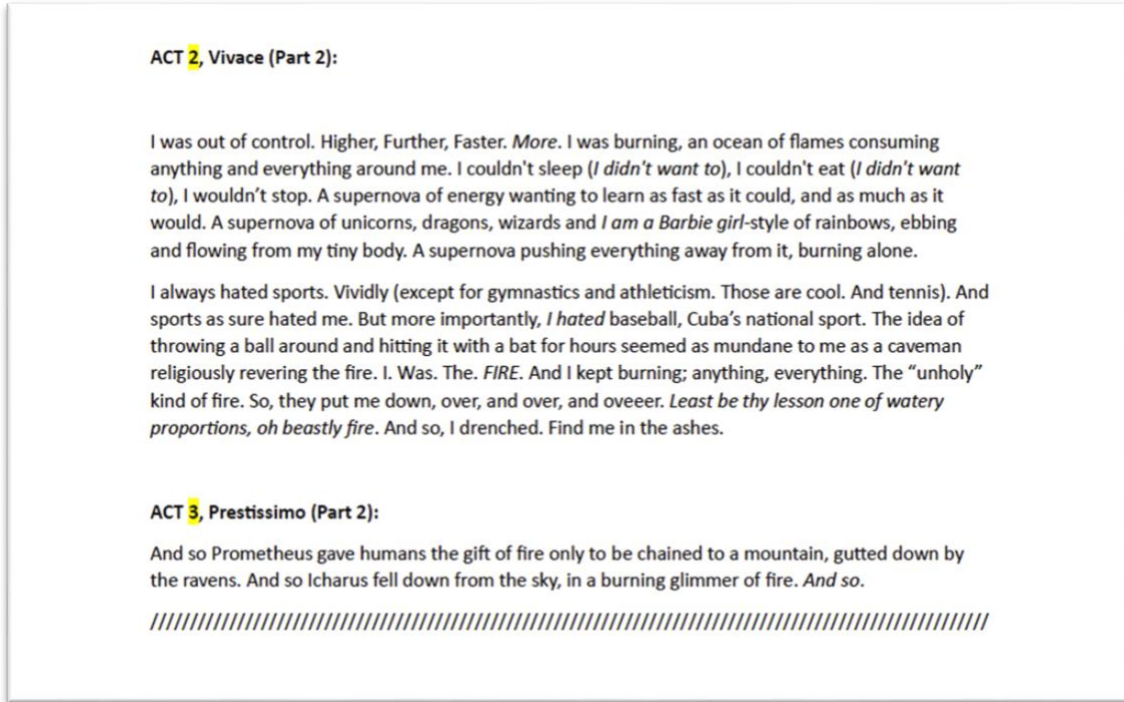


Figure 2. Sample of ACT 2 *Vivace* and ACT 3 *Prestissimo*.

The third and final, (ACT 3, *Prestissimo*<sup>150</sup>) are short and encapsulated metaphorical descriptions of the events, using specific keywords or phrases that stuck over my mind all over the years, even when other memories faded away. I am purposefully increasing the tempo of the narrative, and shortening and fasting it, to capture that emotional build-up of moments, feelings and thoughts that kept building and accumulating until my mind and my perception of my -self were transgressively and intrusively affected by them. Uses Autoethnographic Fiction.

The seven writing parts and artwork from *The Spy* were collaged into art assets for two game objects: 'The Spy Secret Handbook' and 'The Princesses Secret Diary'.

<sup>150</sup>Very quick; done in a very fast tempo. Also in extended use. Ibid.

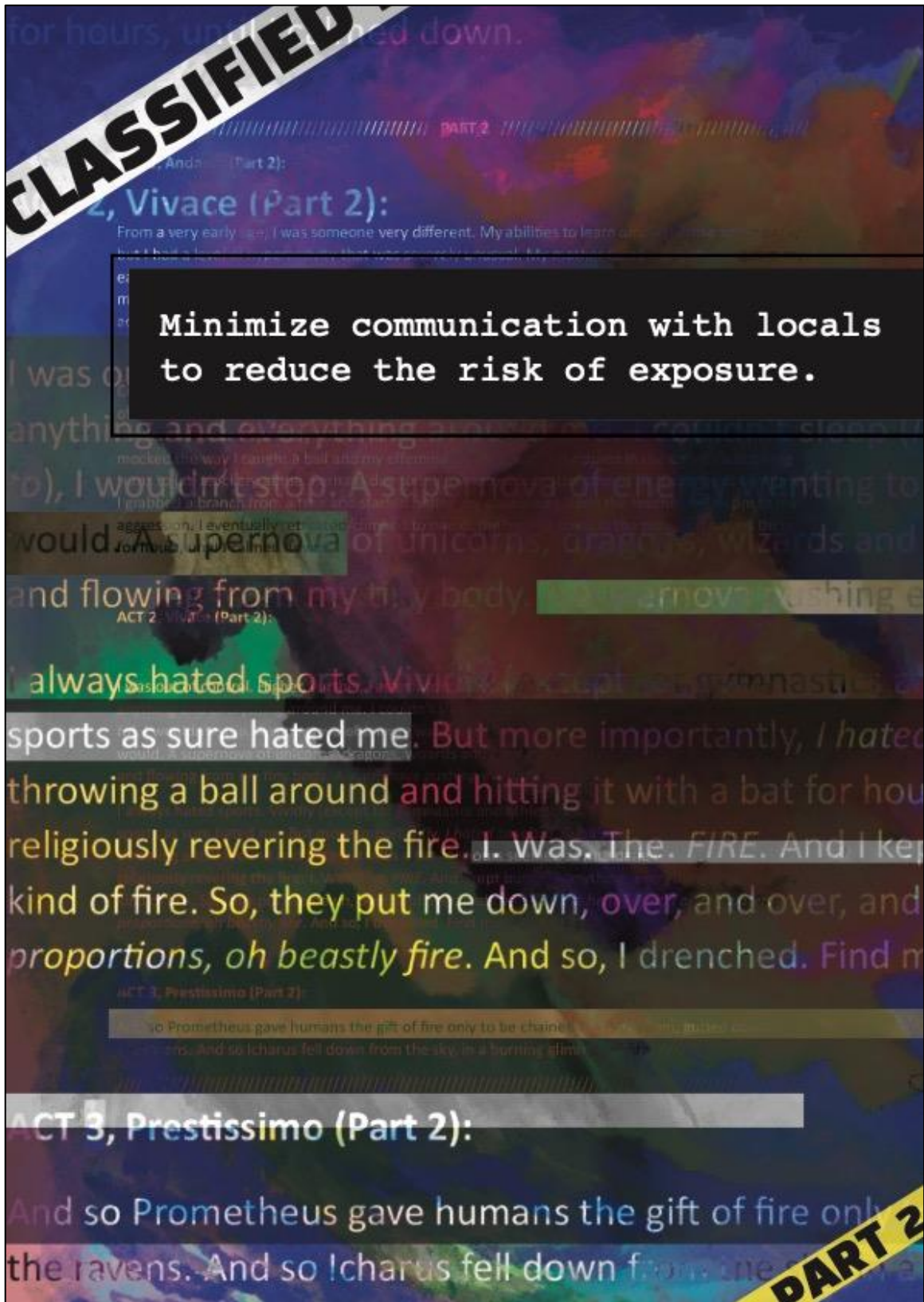


Image 5. Sample of a page from 'The Spy Secret Handbook'.



## Research-through-Design

In their study towards HCI (Human-Computer Interaction), Zimmerman, Forlizzi and Evenson defines Research through Design (RtD) as an approach to integrate design into HCI research by emphasizing the creation of novel interactions and artifacts as a means of inquiry and knowledge generation. In this context, artifacts serve as design exemplars and conduits for research findings.<sup>151</sup> RtD seeks to explore “artifacts as outcomes that can transform the world from its current state to a preferred state”.<sup>152</sup>

In reaching these “preferred states” through RtD, Gaver argues for exploring<sup>153</sup> and speculating Vs./ convergence and standardisation, highlighting the methodology aptitude at “diversifying, and - especially - its ability to manifest the results in the form of new, conceptually rich artefacts”.<sup>154</sup> He emphasizes how:

Design researchers often ‘borrow’ conceptual perspectives from other disciplines and discuss their applicability for design.” (...) often used both to inspire new designs and to articulate existing ones. In doing so, the perspectives are usually translated for use by designers. Translation can ultimately give rise to new concepts.<sup>155</sup>

My game-making process adopts RtD for mapping research findings, guidelines, and my processed biographical data into game artifacts. I adopt the methodology as a powerful tool for exploring, speculating, iterating, and creating interactions that answer to “the right thing”. In doing so, I am also ‘borrowing’ concepts from Design Justice, Queer Methods, and Game

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<sup>151</sup>Zimmerman, John, Forlizzi, Jodi and Evenson, Shelley, *Research through Design as a Method for Interaction Design Research in HCI*, 2007, [Link to article](#).

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.

<sup>153</sup>“Exploring a wide space of potential designs, whether through sketching, scenarios, narratives, or design proposals, is crucial in achieving a good outcome (...) The practice of making is a route to discovery, and that the synthetic nature of design allows for richer and more situated understandings than those produced through more analytic means/ From: William Gaver, “What Should We Expect From Research Through Design?,” *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*, May 5, 2012, [Link to article](#).

<sup>154</sup>“Design, and research through design, is generative. Rather than making statements about what is, design is concerned with creating what might be (...), on making the right thing.” From: Ibid.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid.

Design / Theory. These multiple translation “give rise to new concepts”; hermeneutics for inserting biographical narratives pro expressing queer identities.

Design justice addresses the equitable distribution of design impacts, challenges systems of domination, and advocates for community-based design practices<sup>156</sup>. Some principles from design justice that guided the RtD are:

- Design to sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems, e.g. How can the artifact empower my community?
- We prioritize design’s impact on the community over the intentions of the designer e.g. What impact could the artifact have over those relating to it? Considers that design duty.<sup>157</sup>

While I conduct RtD I reflect upon artifacts in a twofold way; First; Does the artifact express my queer identity. Second; How does the artifact interact within my community and with other similar artifacts. Those reflections serve as pillars for artifacts iterations.

Iterations also reflect on Queer Methods. Brim and Ghaziani argue that Queer Methods “question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in an allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experiences”.<sup>158</sup> Through findings and the analysis of autoethnography as a method, it was deeply substantiated how powerful metaphor / allegory are in the context of queerness as a method of inquiry, reification and vocalization’s of one’s self, identity, and stories.<sup>159</sup> Iterations

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<sup>156</sup>Design justice is a field of theory and practice that is concerned with how the design of objects and systems influences the distribution of risks, harms, and benefits among various groups of people. Design justice focuses on the ways that design reproduces, is reproduced by, and/or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism). Design justice is also a growing social movement that aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of design’s benefits and burdens; fair and meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community based design traditions, knowledge, and practices. From: S., Costanza-Chock, “Design Justice: Towards an Intersectional Feminist Framework for Design Theory and Practice,” *Proceedings of the Design Research Society*, 2018.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

<sup>158</sup>Also, “Strangely, the most pervasive characteristic of queer theory may be its methodological use of self-narration/ self-invention in the service of scholarship. For what is queer theory’s constant autobiographic renarrativization—based at once on the need to make itself anew and the seemingly infinite capacity to do so—if not a method of inquiry?” From: Brim, Matt and Ghaziani, Amin “Introduction: Queer Methods,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (October 7, 2016): 16, [Link to article](#).

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

experimented with different ones regarding interactions, characters, narratives. RtD exploration and speculation unfolded at processes of queering my structured narrative/stories, making, and playing with several types of schemas, meanings and expressions. Iteration outcomes builds at reflexivity over the explored allegories (e.g. a spy metaphor reflected me better than a ninja one).

Arvola and Manker argue for prototyping in game design in the externalization and internalization of Game Ideas<sup>160</sup> and conduct a study with game designers about prototyping. In this context “To make a prototype is (...) to break out a part of the design, a specific design problem and work with that”.<sup>161</sup> Among outcomes, they discuss “opportunities for mutual learning between the content of the work and the possibilities of the technology (...) Preserved experience is structured and constantly transformed during prototyping. In this way the prototypes accumulate knowledge that transforms the design work”.<sup>162</sup> Quick prototyping as an RtD method allowed me for the testing of concepts, narratives, mechanics. In the artifact ideation process, they allowed me to put thought into action, reflect from the outcome of it, and iterate over results, moving on to another game function/or logic once achieved the desired ideal. Prototypes can also be revisited to contrast, savage, or review contained information. This dialectic interplay allowed for the creation of several prototype experiences, and developer’s journals that store reflections, relationship to the research question, and outcomes (**Ch. 4**).

The final stage of the RtD process included a playtest of the game with its penultimate version. I gathered data from players (queer gamers) and had a chance of sharing with my community and learn from them. Functional and Conceptual key takeaways were taken from it, and a thematic and narrative analysis from the data facilitated improvements over the game.

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<sup>160</sup>Manker, Jon and Arvola, Mattias, “Prototyping in Game Design: Externalization and Internalization of Game Ideas”, *Proceedings of the 25th BCS Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, British Computer Society, 2011.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid, 281.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid, 251.

## Ch. 4 - Craft, play, loop

### Overview; Project process roadmap

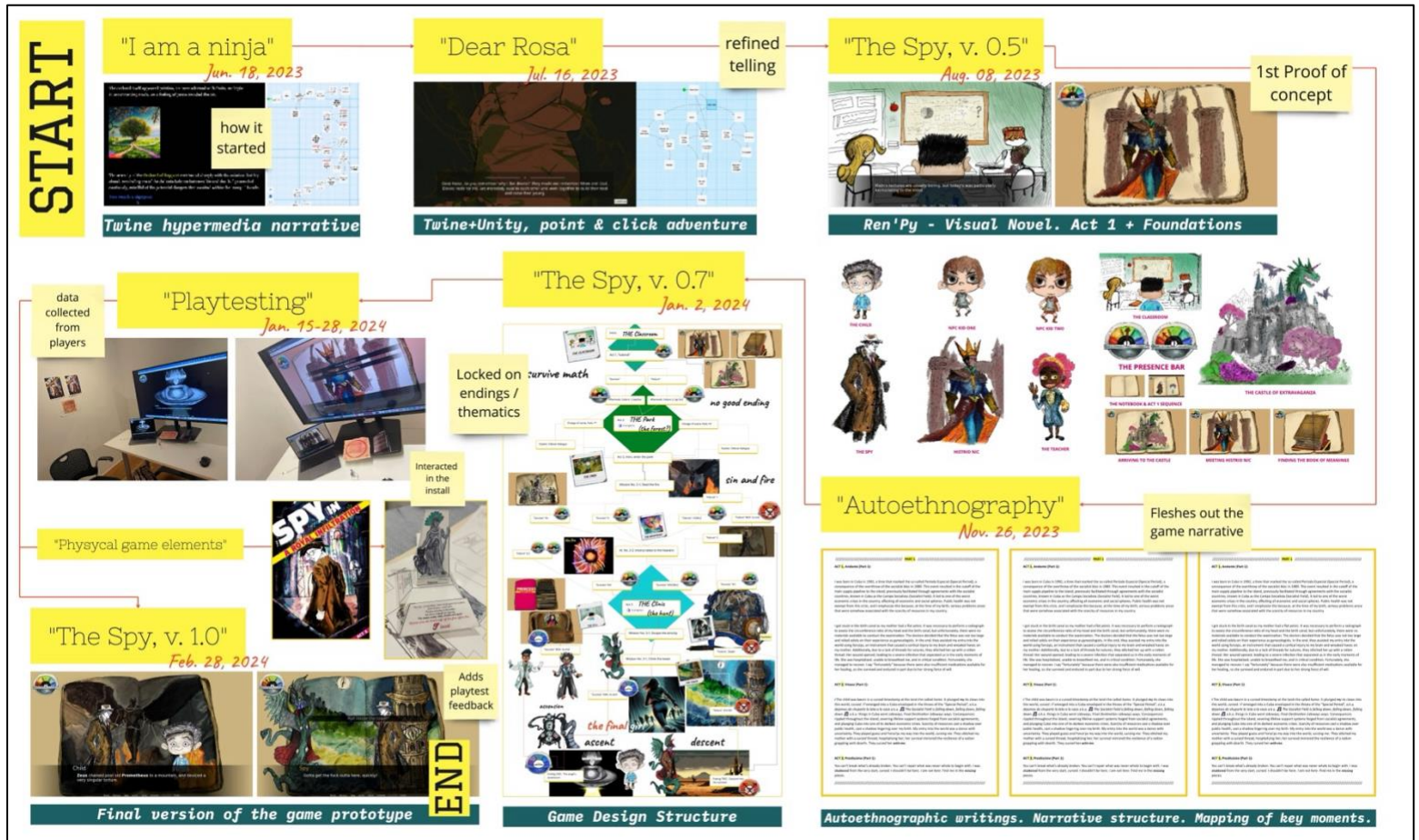


Diagram 5. Project timeline roadmap and structure.

The iterative RtD process overwent 7 key stages. The first three where speculative and explorative focused, while subsequent centered at refining/evolving *The Spy* proof of concept.

This chapter walkthrough these iterations before that final artifact:

- 1/ 1<sup>st</sup> prototype, *I am a ninja*
- 2/ 2<sup>nd</sup> prototype, *Dear Rosa*
- 3/ 3<sup>rd</sup> prototype (Proof of Concept), *The Spy v. 0.5*
- 4/ Autoethnographic journey
- 5/ *The Spy v. 0.7*, endings + game structure
- 6/ Playtesting

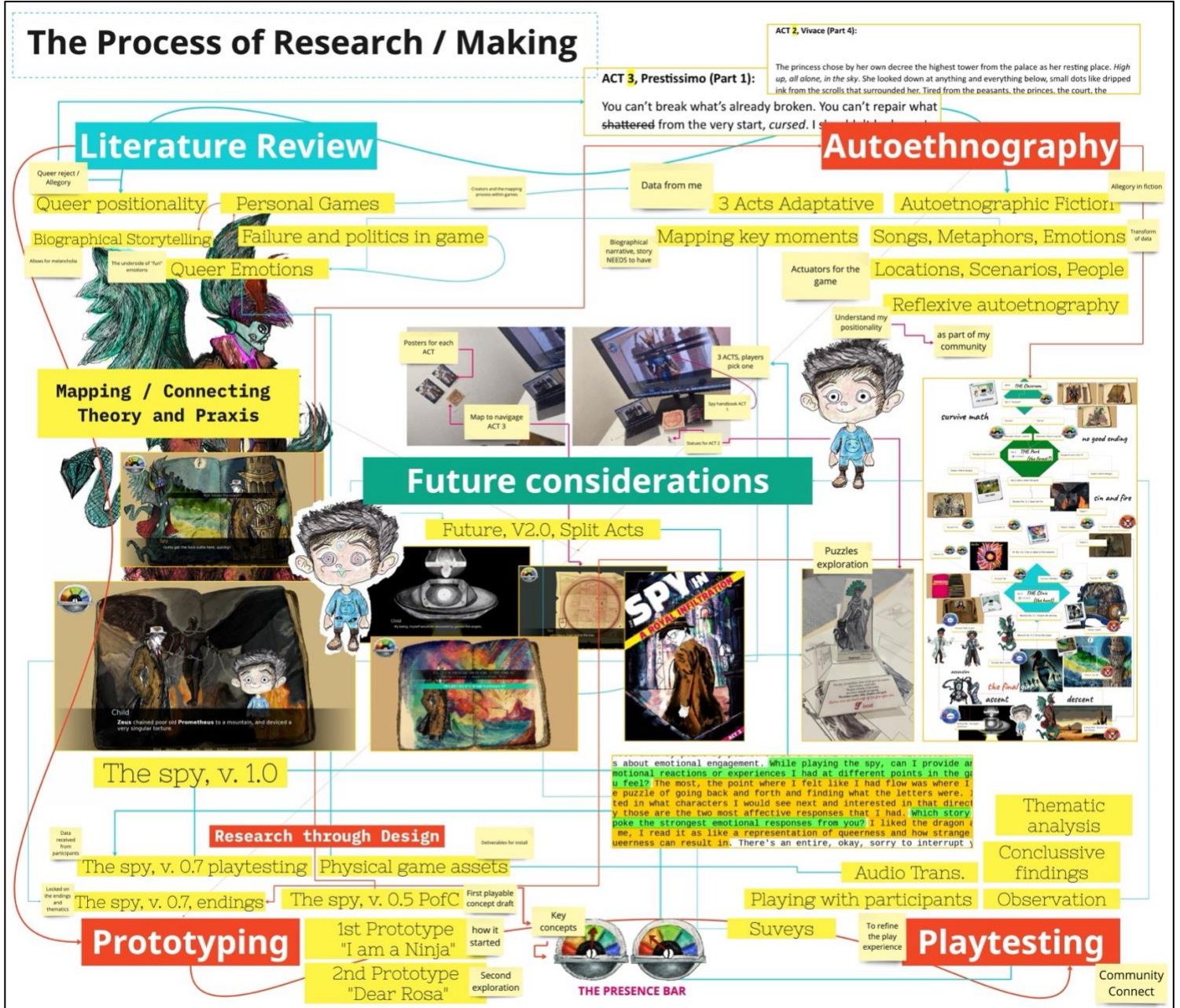


Diagram 6. Mapping of the research and making process.

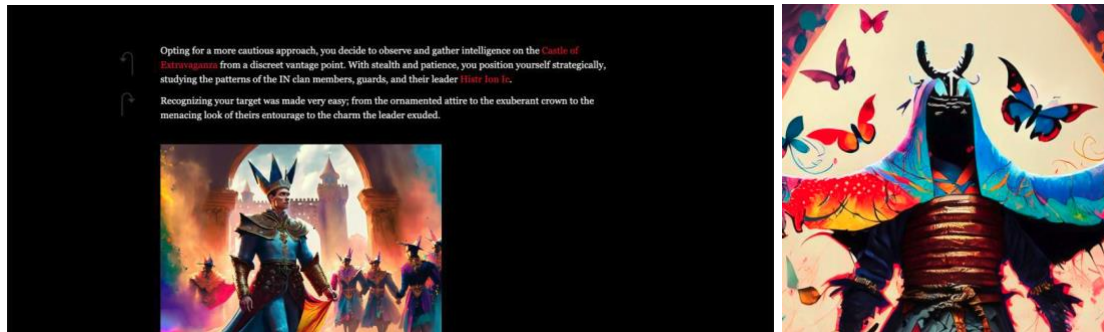


Image 6. Screenshots from *I am a ninja*.

### *I am a ninja*<sup>163</sup>

**Summary:** Explores how society compels a child to conceal their queerness, akin to hiding in the shadows like a ninja. Inspired by my personal experiences, it unfolds in three acts, detailing the ninja's missions and their impact on him. Created using Twine, this hypermedia game narrative offers a playtime of 15-25 minutes.

**Objectives:** Explore metaphors for Identity and self-discovery in interactive storytelling.

**Failures:** Narrative over relies on fiction (allegory), struggle to identify themes and biographical data, lack of meaningful interactions / agency choices, cheap ending (dream).

**Carryover:** OOO in storytelling, characters / settings from Act 1, symbolic exploration.

**Reflection:** I began by speculating on metaphors for my Identity. The created narrative structure proved the importance of balancing biographical data / allegory. Need further study of game logics that explore Identity interactions. Start of autoethnographic writings (small scale).



Diagram 7. Narrative structure created for *I am a ninja*.

<sup>163</sup>Quiza Suárez, Ricardo, *I am a ninja*, [Link to game](#)

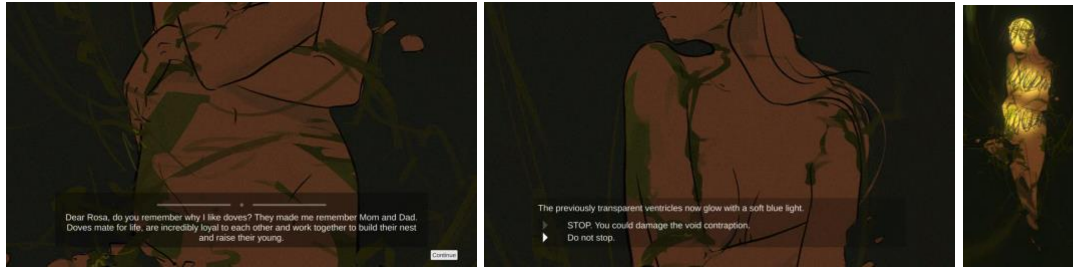


Image 7. Screenshot from *Dear Rosa*.

*Dear Rosa*<sup>164</sup>

**Summary:** A short introspective game where players explore the depths of the human psyche and embark on a transformative journey of healing. I continue exploring Identity, focused now on growth, self-acquiescence/discovery, and barriers/loops we enact that counter these. The narrative merged real moments from queer experiences I have observed and my own thoughts.

**Objectives:** Explore new conflict-resolve narratives, mechanics, metaphors. Experiment with balances in the narrative structures, shorter self-contained arcs, improved puzzle mechanics.

**Failures:** Struggle translating mechanics/narratives with positive effects in my own story.

**Carryover:** Self-contained arcs, puzzles, improved narrative structure, soliloquy.

**Reflection:** Provided a new angle to test Identity’s conflict-resolve; acting and healing Vs./ violence. Experiment with soliloquy / reflexivity in the form of letter writing, to positive results. Map game logics to narrative and Identity; good results. Refined narrative structure.

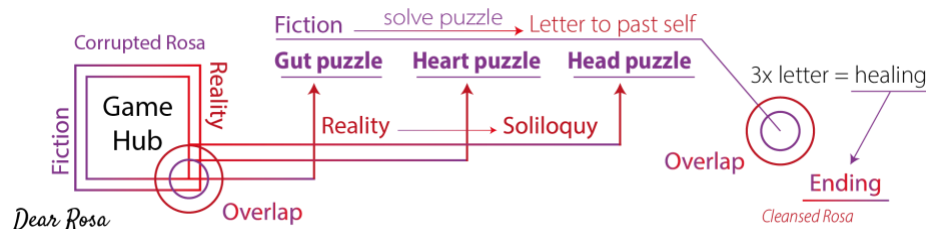


Diagram 8. Narrative structure created for *Dear Rosa*.

<sup>164</sup>Quiza Suárez, Ricardo, Safari, Mona, Yamamoto, Tamika, *Dear Rosa*. Team project, participated (and won) in Inter Access game jam, *Worldbuilding Towards...* (Hosted by VectorFest 2023). I oversaw the narrative and puzzle elements. [Link to game](#) / [Link to website](#).

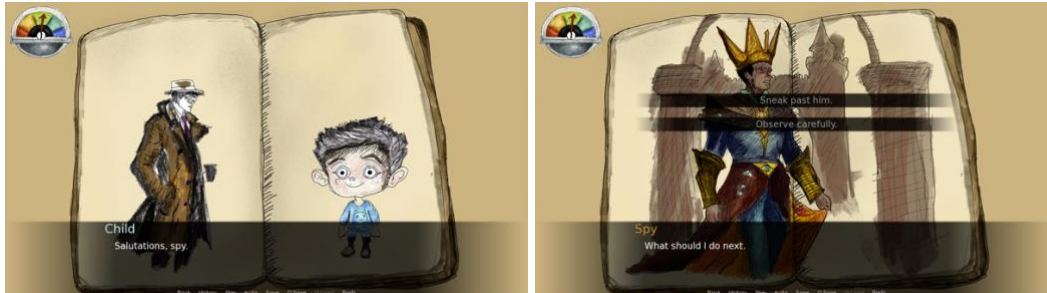


Image 8. Screenshost from the proof of concept of *The Spy*.

*The Spy; proof of concept*<sup>165</sup>

**Summary:** Built over concepts from *I am a ninja*, resources explored in Dear Rosa, my personal story, and new ideas. Themes of inevitable conflict, no “good ending” gameplay, escapism into fantasy (games) and the exploration of a childhood thought: *I had to keep watch of my presence, be invisible*. A visual novel about a duology of protagonists; The Child / The Spy.

**Objectives:** Link an idea to a game mechanic and built narratives from it (presence bar), infiltration / discovery as narrative themes to try new players hermeneutics, expand interactivity.

**Failures:** Initial agency exploration was limited, needs more personal data to expand.

**Carryover:** Most elements where iterated from this point. Foundation for final game.

**Reflection:** The overlap between “biographical” and “allegorical” scenarios improved tremendously the comprehension of the narrative and themes, easy but perky puzzles sparks curiosity and exploration in players, the presence bar helps forge emotional in-game states.

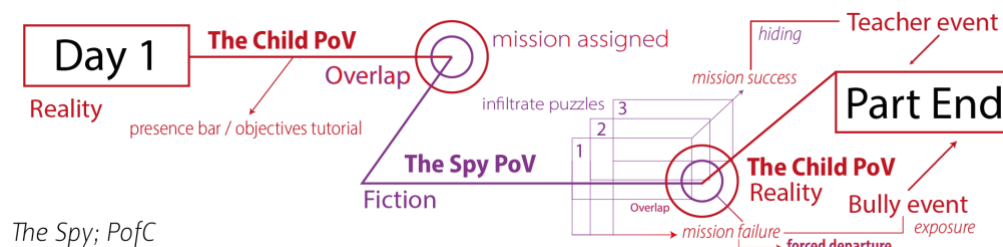


Diagram 9. Narrative structure created for the proof of concept of *The Spy*.

<sup>165</sup>Quiza Suárez, Ricardo, *The Spy*, [Link to game](#)



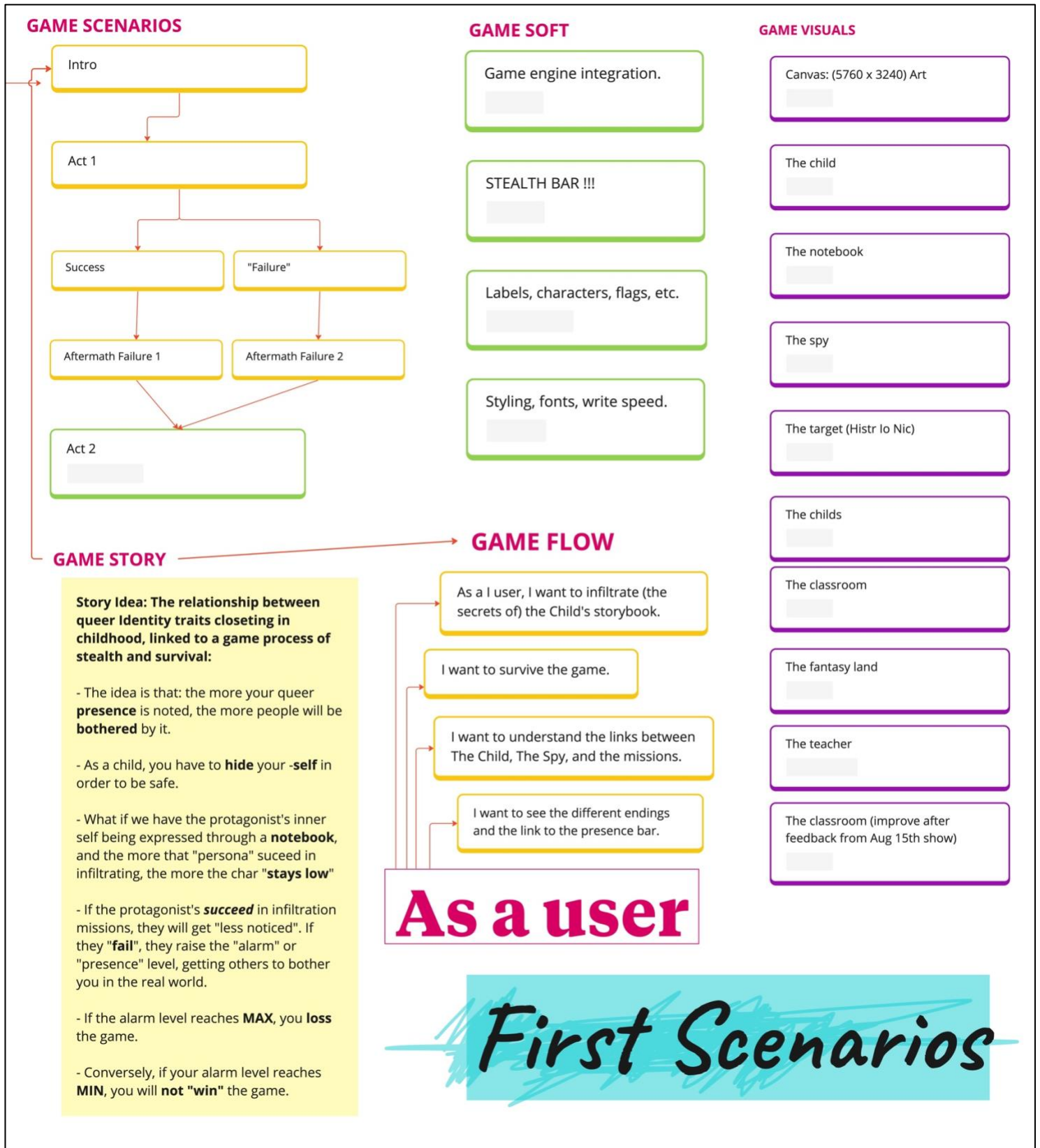


Figure 3. Story boarding and game conceptualization for the proof of concept of *The Spy*.



Figure 4. Characters designs for the proof of concept of *The Spy*.

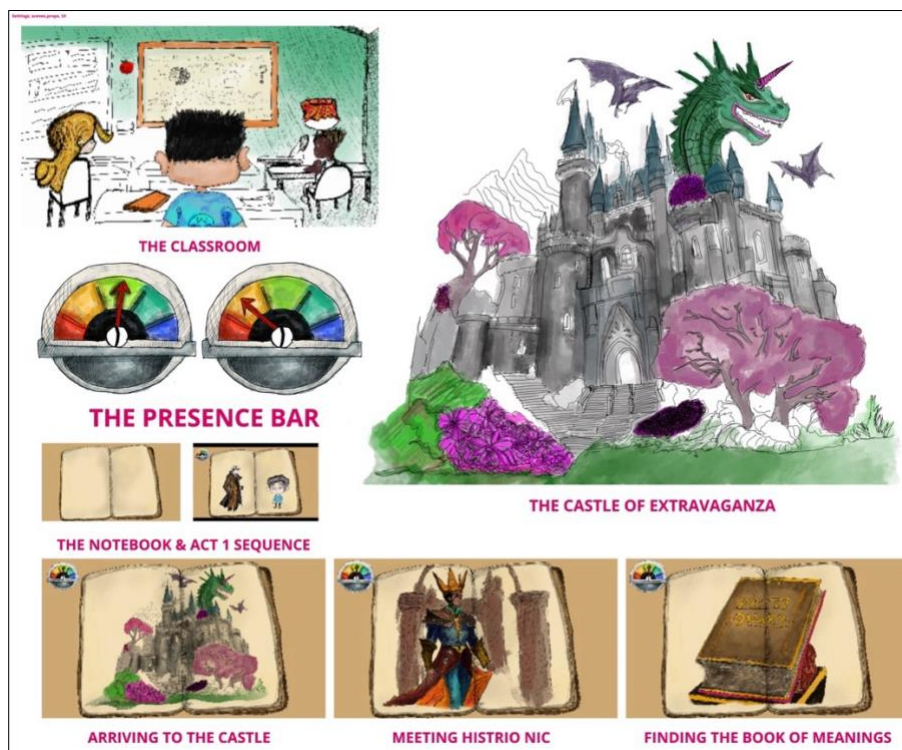


Figure 5. Settings, level design and key visuals for the proof of concept of *The Spy*.

*Autoethnographic journey*

**Summary:** The next steps after locking on the proof of concept was to create enough data to expand it into a fully playable gameplay loop (30m-1h, with key game logics) with an overarching narrative (beginning, middle, denouement, end) and structured settings (main scenarios, characters, themes). While creating *I am a ninja*, *Dear Rosa* and *The Spy*, I documented biographical aspects of my life as written thoughts, that aided in the speculation and game creation aspect of those prototypes. However, that data was lacking structure. In lieu, I crafted my own autoethnographic journey approach (Ch. 3) and produced biographical and fictional (allegorical) data from it.

I then analyzed that data, picked relevant key moments from the biographical events, and quick drafted (written) storyboards for continuing the game story. Mapped moments adapt to a new chronological day-to-day sequencing and adjust to the game setting affordances. For example, in one pivotal event while observing The Child story (in reality), you can pick different decisions as him. The fiction narrative side is born from linking results of my autoethnographic fiction to those events.

In writing the autoethnographic fiction parts, I drew (by instinct) from different sources; songs, books, literature, nursery rhymes, mythology, movie quotes... Music was key in my writing. Playing song(s) loop would hijack my emotions, driving me and them, some songs lyrics even making its way into the writing. Game scenarios use one or more of the seven writing parts.<sup>166</sup>

**ACT 3, Prestissimo (Part 3):**

🎵 *Welcome to my kingdom madness*  
*You're just in time for the show* 🎵

Once upon a time, there was a (...???) Oh lord! I must have forgotten what it was. I think it starts with F, *mmh, fag... oh!, Frankenstein*. But they lived never happily ever after.  
*The end?*

Figure 6. Autoethnographic fiction sample. Uses a fragment of a song's lyric (*Out of Control*, Battle Beast, 2013), opens / ends with a fairy-tale styling and references *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818)

<sup>166</sup>For an in-depth review of my autoethnography methodology and structure, see **Ch. 3**.

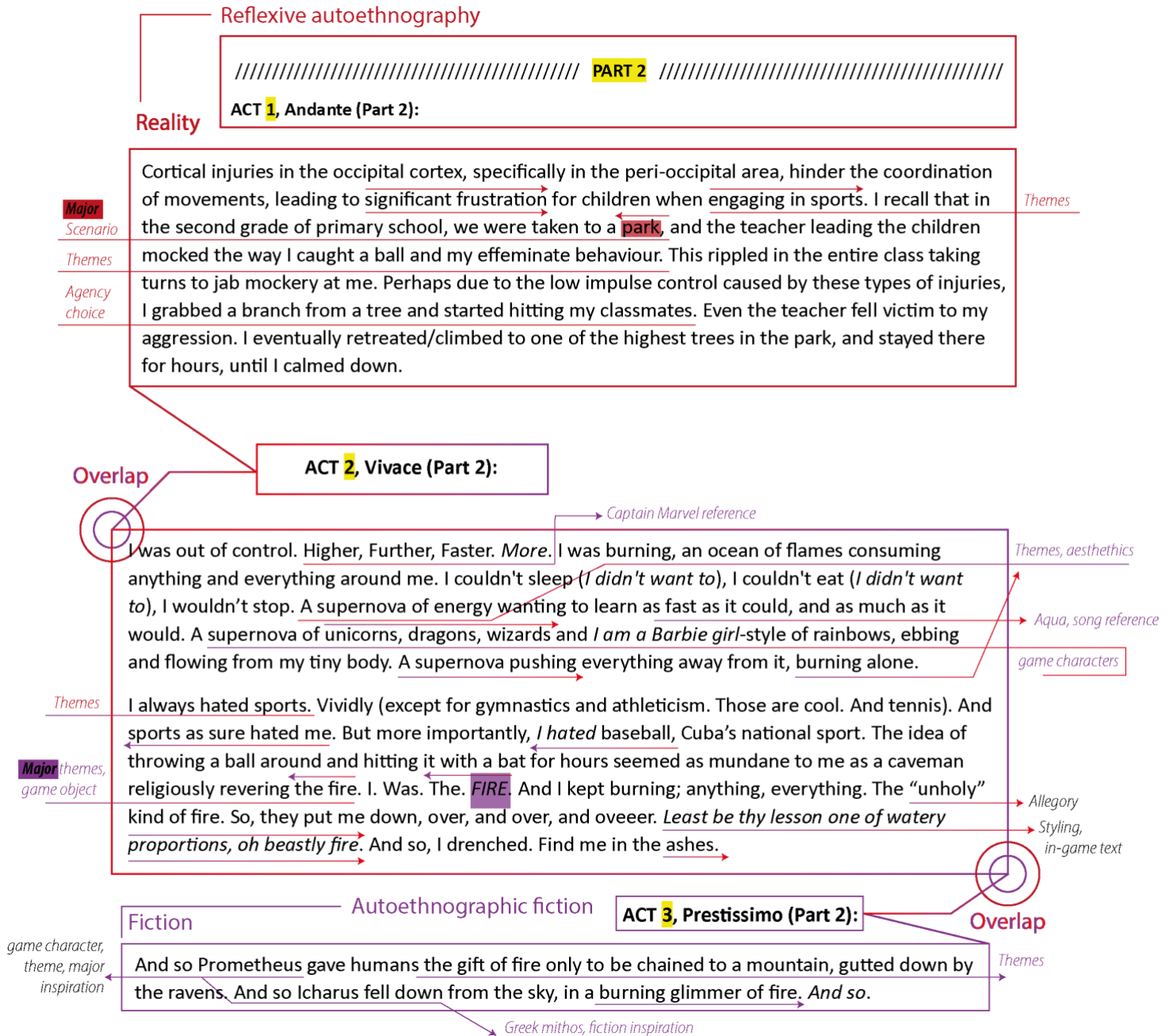


Diagram 10. Autoethnography data, analysis and narrative structurization.

*The Spy v. 0.7, endings + game structure*

**Summary:** At this point in the game prototype, storyboard key events are arranged within the game narrative. Firstly, I sketched the main endings ideas and visuals. Secondly, I mapped the way players reach them, and worked on relevant assets while game testing and iterating.



Figure 7. Story boarding and game conceptualization for the v 0.7 of *The Spy*.

**Reflection:** Once the endings were drawn out, interconnecting biographical data, fiction allegory and game mechanics to overarching themes became straightforward. The ‘presence bar’ rising / falling values, marking key story beats was linked to “ascending the heavens/throne” and “descending into the abyss/despair”; fiction concepts explored in the autoethnographic fiction.

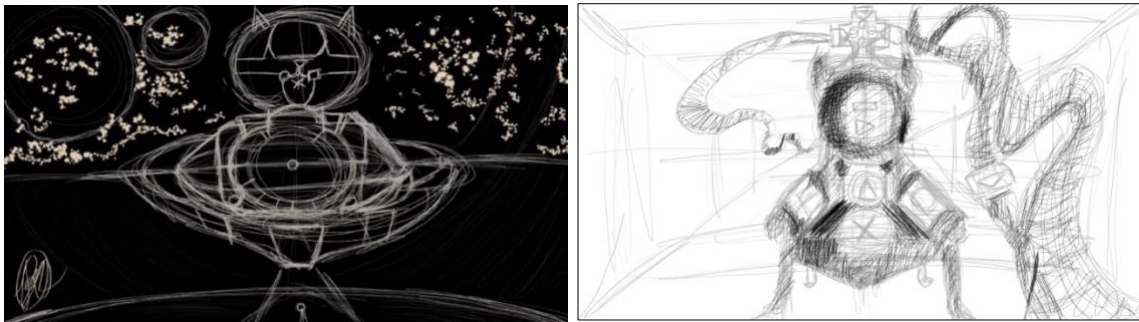


Figure 8. ‘Good’ ending visual exploration and sketches of *The Spy*.

Abundant time was spent debugging, testing with friends and peers or by myself, annotating and documenting narrative fluctuations, experimenting with audiovisuals, animations, transitions and working on both game and coding script. Since Visual Novels rely on text to deliver the bulk of the storytelling, great emphasis was put on managing script balance between each part, and offering players options at catering the reading experience, some texts presenting ‘long’ and ‘short’ versions.

Full	<p>label Hera:</p> <p>Spy <i>"{i}You reach the{/i} {b}Second{/b} {i}Statue{/i}, {b}Hera{/b}, {i}Goddess of the Family.{/i}"</i></p> <p><i>"{i}A plaque in front of it read as follow.{/i}"</i></p> <p># <i>"The bonds that ties us to our kin burn bright, a fire dawning from our blood."</i></p> <p># <i>"Bonds can empower you, strengthen you. And so they can bind you, chain you, hurt you."</i></p> <p># <i>Be wary of cursed kinds of fire, consuming your kin in flames of torment. Be wary, or bring forth..."</i></p> <p>m <i>"{b}R{/b} uination"</i></p>
Abridged (final)	<p><i>"Be wary of cursed bonds, consuming your kin in flames of torment. Be wary, or bring forth..."</i></p>
<p><b>Ruinatio<b>n</b>"</b></p>	

Figure 9. Script sample of an interactable object and its text modification process, *The Spy*.

*Playtesting*<sup>167</sup>

**Summary:** Last stage of iteration before the final prototype. Playtesting allowed for functional and conceptual testing and connecting, sharing, and learning with my community. The playtesting consisted of a one-to-one playthroughs of the game experience, while observing and annotating non-verbal data (face expressions, mannerisms, choices) and recording verbal data (for transcript). Participants (#1 to #9) were encouraged to speak their mind while playing, and to share as much as they felt comfortable with. At the end, a semi-structured discussion with participants to gather feedback data was conducted. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was performed with the data, based on Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework, while consulting Byrne<sup>168</sup> articulation of it.

**Interview examples, —Emotions:**

- While playing *The Spy*, can you describe any specific emotional reactions or experiences you had at different points in the game? How did you feel?

**#2:** Well, I felt sympathy for him, feeling paranoid it's like, yeah, why he's getting picked on by the kids, now he's getting picked on by the teacher. I also felt angry when the supply teacher was like beating him up or like laughing with the other kids (...) That made me angry, and (...) the first teacher you could see her as, trying to help him, but the way that it came across was like, just like an invasion on his privacy, and that was kind of interesting.

**#8:** He made me recall some experiences I had when I was a kid, in the adolescent as well, and it was very difficult. Especially when they called him a faggot, and he's not okay.

**#4:** The part where the child was being bullied, it was expected, actually. I don't know if it was, because it's so common to see it in movies and whatever, like people being bullied. So. But then, yes, going to the doctor and being examined, then it made it seem more serious (...) And then, just having that visual early, (...) this Greek mythological character. Me: *Prometheus?*

**#4:** Yes. It felt like it summarized the story, like just a visual of like, was enough to be like, oh that was so mean like, he was stuck there forever... that was powerful, educating.

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<sup>167</sup>Playtests occurred between 23 Jan. to 6 Feb. 2024. For more info, check **Annex B1-B6**.

<sup>168</sup>Byrne, David, "A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis", *Quality & Quantity* 56, no. 3 (June 1, 2022): 1391–1412, [Link to article](#).

#1: I know that I would say like anger, like I said a little bit of anger and also like sadness. Like other people could not relate to you or like you feel isolated like, you don't have friends or you cannot connect. Like, I used to feel like that all the time in middle school.

**Interview examples, *Game Design / Narrative*:**

- Do you believe that the game effectively communicated the themes it set out to explore?  
Can you talk about which themes you think the game explore?

#4: Um, escapism. Okay. ADHD. I would say just different power dynamics because he felt like he was trying to gain power in his imagination that he didn't have in real life. Yeah, I feel like the character had two identities (...) I felt like he was suppressed in real life, like he couldn't really express himself, whereas in the book, whatever, he was more fearless, less feared, and could be whatever he wanted it to be.

#3: Bullying, I think, that he's different (...) than all of the guys.

#9: Okay, if I were to say what the theme is, there are definitely big queer themes. It's also this internal struggle of man versus society almost, like a person who doesn't necessarily fit the mold of society. There's the struggle against it. So those are the themes that kind of reach out to me. **Me:** Does it effectively communicate the themes? **#9:** I mean, the fact that I was able to voice those themes says something, right?

**Annotations example:**

#8: (Try opening the safe) (insert password) (Approach one of the statues) (F) (R) (E) (E) **(Really focused)** (D) (O) (M) "It almost happened to me when I was a kid!" "That I was lost in my world" **Really focused, eyes narrowed up**. "Oh my god" "Still in the park" "The bully kid" The fire pep talk. (Calm down) (anger is not the answer) (let it go) **1st person to choose the entire path of non-violent option** 😊 😊 😊, looks surprised at not having a choice.  
Conversation with The Spy, day 2 (More in the zone) (Better at going through everything calmly) (Laughs at the NPC lab woman / lab man naming convention) *Monster scene* (Faggotstein) (loves it) **Reaches the good ending!**

**Reflections example:**

Most participants expressed anger or sadness at the park scenario (**Day 2**). Most participants talked about that, and the next day scenario (**Day 3**). -> *How can I boost the opening (Day 1) scenario to make it relevant?* **Study!** Some participants had trouble understanding my phonetic interpretation of the word ADHD, need to correct to proper one. ALL participants reached the good ending, puzzles were easily solved. Balance a harder difficulty.



Ch. 5 - The Spy



Figure 10. Key visual for ACT 1, and one of the printed posters in the exhibition, *The Spy*.

## Overview

*The Spy*<sup>169</sup> is a digital interactive storytelling focused game adventure, inscribed in the Visual Novels game genre. The final iteration of my prototyping process, it features a narrative built in 3 ACTs (ACT 1, ACT 2, ACT 3) / Days (Day 1, Day 2, Day 3) and with a story pace of 5 main beats: into, mission, outcome, rendezvous, and outro. Each ACT/Day was conceived as a self-contained story, although players will enjoy a more cohesive narrative by playing from beginning to end. *The Spy*, as a game prototype, counts with two endings that loops back players to the game intro; future iterations (Ch. 7) will develop this concept further. Considering easy of accessibility, the game controls are mapped solely to the mouse, and no prior expertise in playing games is needed.

## Story Structure Summary

Follows the viewpoints of a duo of protagonists, The Child, and his alter ego, The Spy. The Child story side is focused on reality, in non-fictional events and scenarios adapted from my biographical data (Days). The Spy story side is centred in fiction, inspired, and allegorized into imaginary settings and scenarios that reflects its counterpart (ACTs). Game logics and puzzles interaction are placed inside these fictional settings, happening within a storybook property of The Child. Inside the book, The Child assigns The Spy with different missions each passing day.

With a nonlinear narrative, the game uses variables and conditions to alter story dialogues and outcomes. Interactions that can do so, are linked to the player's choices inside ACTs. A 'presence' bar serves as a user interface tool to navigate and predict possible outcomes. If the player presence is too visible, triggered by failed game interactions, the game forces 'the bad' ending, losing the game. If player reaches "the good" ending, the story loops to the beginning.

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<sup>169</sup>Quiza Suárez, Ricardo, *The Spy*, [Link to game](#)

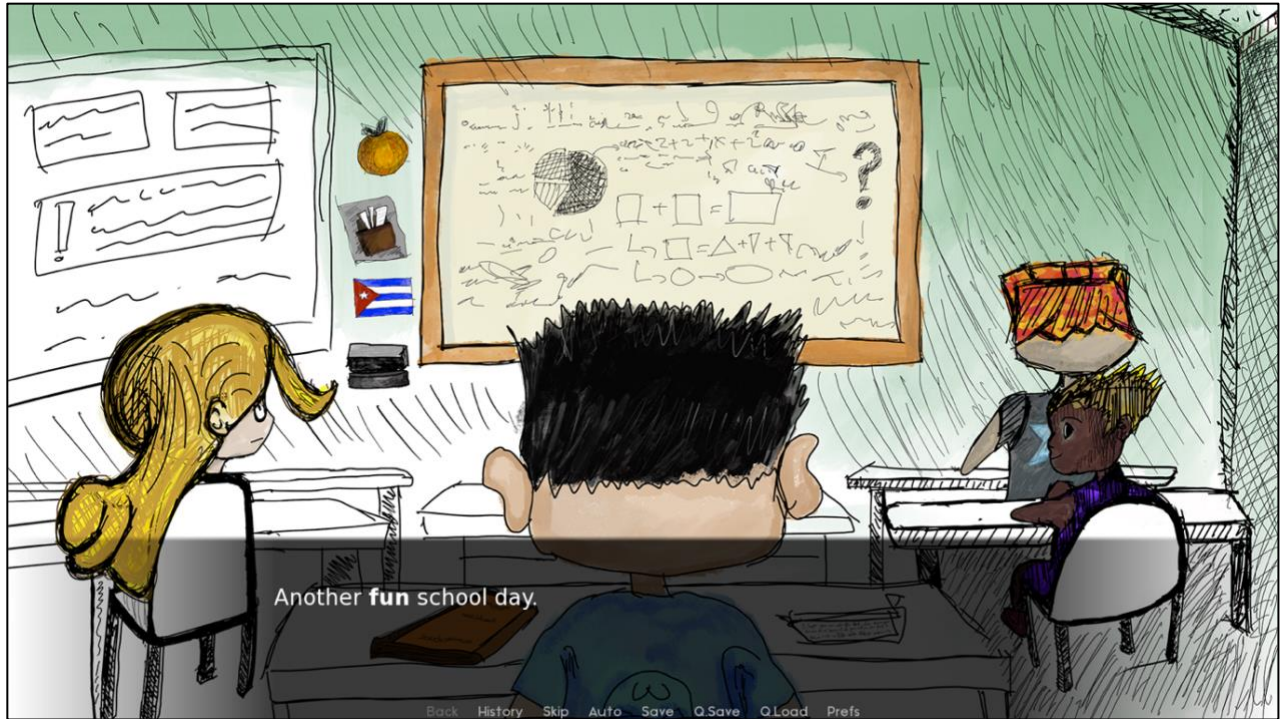


Image 6. Screenshot from Day 1, non-fiction section, *The Spy*.



Image 7. Screenshot from ACT 1, fiction section, *The Spy*.

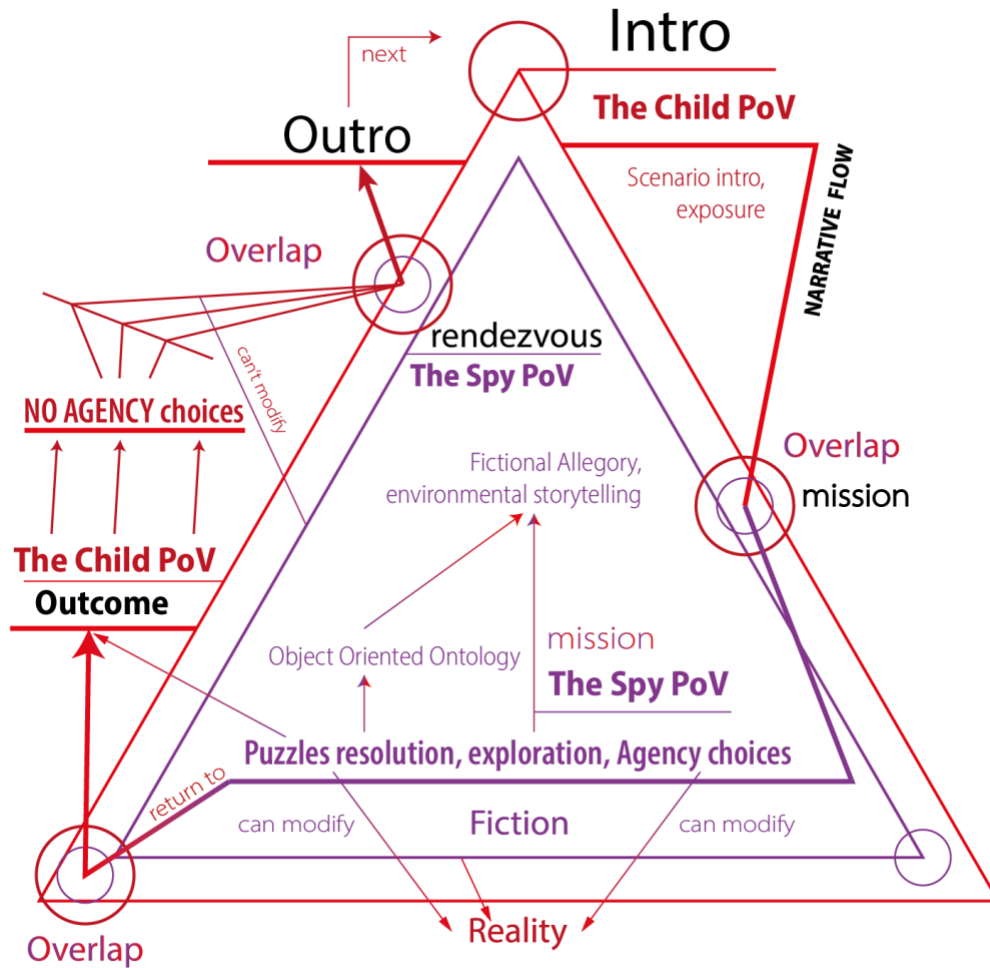


Diagram 11. Narrative structure model created for Day / ACT story parts, *The Spy*.<sup>170</sup>

## Narrative Structure

The narrative structure model created as base for accommodating the story and themes of each Day/ACT uses prism/triangle as inspiration. Narrative progress focus on re-reflecting/framing reality into fiction and vice versa. Interplay between both is enabled by the Overlaps, moments where reality and fiction collide and parallel (e.g. The Child meets The Spy to assign a mission). Fiction (ludic focused) bleeds into reality (narrative focused) by mechanics that alter events in it.

<sup>170</sup>For an in-depth analysis and step-by-step walkthrough of the diagram, check **Appendix D**.

## Story sequencing, Summary

The story opens with the phrase *Day 1*, transitioning to an over-the-shoulder view of The Child sitting at a school desk. Through a monologue, The Child express boredom with math. The viewpoint zooms over his drawing notebook which leads to the next sequence, Spy-time! A poster appears revealing the first *ACT 1* name and a tutorial explains for the player, game rules and objectives. Afterwards, a meeting between the protagonists ensues, and the 1<sup>st</sup> mission is assigned to The Spy. Narrative perspective shifts to him, and shortly thereafter, player faces a sequence of choice-based puzzles. After the mission finish, perspective shifts back to The Child, and based on player actions, one of two confrontational scenarios unfolds. The Day/ACT ends with a conversation between protagonists, where players can choose to learn more of The Child or the mission's nature as The Spy. This structure is customized into the other two Days/ACTs: Intro of settings / world exposition (Child); Mission assignment / puzzle section (Spy); Back to reality and actions outcome (Child); Rendezvous and questioning (Spy); Section end (Both).

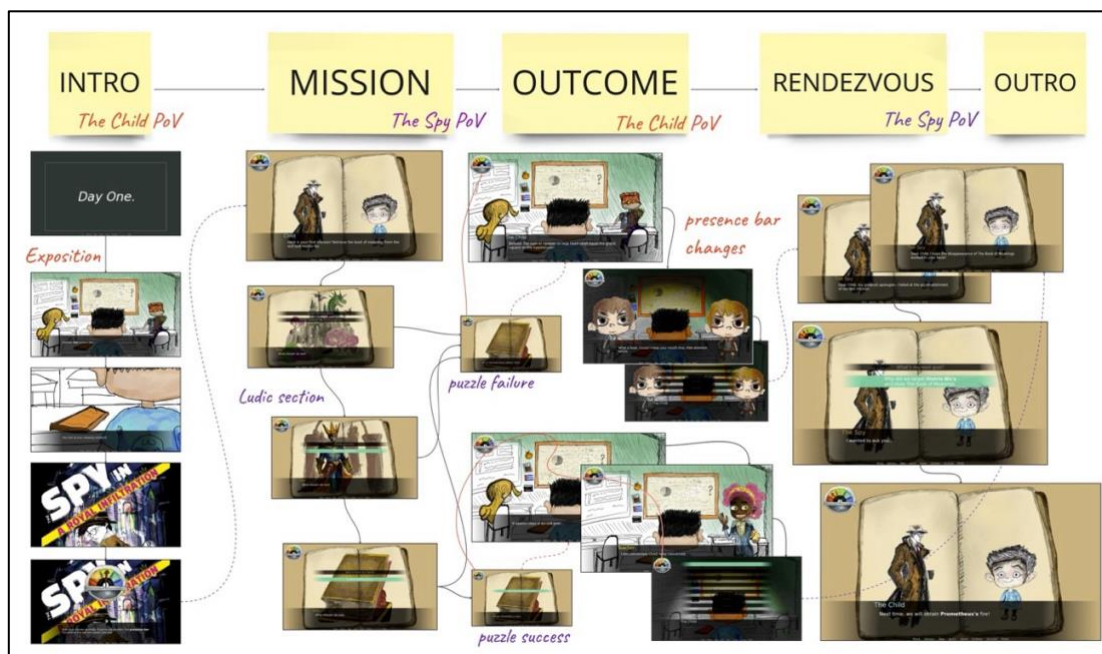


Figure 11. Story sequencing structure for Day/ACT 1, *The Spy*.

## **ACT; An identity Construction Technique**

This section charts how my Queer Identity was constructed, expressed, and played with in the game experience. It goes over how my biographical data was used and translated into the game and what considerations were taken to amplify the communication of that data. I encourage readers to go over in detail, for understanding how the research questions are answered and its connection to the ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’ of decisions taken in making the game, and to revisit the ending section of the second chapter. It includes exemplified guidelines used in making *The Spy*.

The following sections articulate how the three game levels (Days/ACTs) that make up the playable experience were ideated, how fiction and allegory came to be, what key emotions were meant to be expressed in each, how failure triggers them, how rejection is manifested, and how I move between different types of narrative structures for meaning making. These levels use three different game logics built into puzzles. Each is designed to enhance an idea, feeling, or memory. I argue how gameplay connects to key moments from my past and powers the themes.

Each ACT is closely tied to one or more mythological fictions. I grew up reading, devouring books, stories, game manuals, anything printed. Within those, storybooks of mythology, legends, and folktales were among my favourites. The fictions each ACT inhabit are linked to greater mythos constructs from that era. These mythos do more than inhabit the fiction side of the narrative and be a direct reference of a child version of me drawing over his textbooks. They empower, amplify the themes, allegorize, and echo within it.

By remixing with biographical data and other pieces of fiction, I can create vibrant narratives that capture a ‘as nuanced as possible’ landscape of my queer narrative and identity. My own, unique, and very personal, fictions within fictions gamescape. Further, all audiovisuals, illustrations, game elements were made by me, making this experience as personal as it gets.

*Key terms in the game analysis*

**Side A/:** Refers when the player picks options that solve a puzzle / game logic in a successful way. **Side B/:** Indicates the opposite; scenario where player fails at solving a puzzle /game logic, by picking wrong options. Inspired by a naming convention in Celeste.

**Presence bar:** Helps player navigate the game by giving insights in how well they are role playing as a Spy, and the emotional state of The Child. If it goes down, it means The Child feels scared, his presence is very visible, triggering ‘bad things to happen’. If it goes up, it means you are doing well, and are rising in ‘invisibility’ points; conversely, The Child feels safe.

**Overlap:** In the narrative structure of The Spy, this refers to the moments where reality meets fiction and vice versa.

**Reject:** How The Child rejects reality, and what it chooses to imagine in its place.

**Hermeneutic:** A method or principle of interpretation; how meaning is constructed.

**Game logic:** Refers to the foundational framework upon which ludic aspect of each scenario is built. Game logics in *The Spy* are tied directly to narrative and themes.

**Gameplay loop:** A series of interconnected processes that form the foundation of level and game design. In *The Spy*, it consists of: Narrative stage, ludic stage, narrative stage, loop.

***The Spy*, narrative structure dissected (also in Appendix D):**

**Narrative flow:** The way the narrative is displaced between two main characters and realms.

**Intro:** Sets the stage, participants, key themes. Provides exposition / foresight. **PoV:** The Child.

**Mission:** Provides ludic moments in allegoric worlds. Rewards exploration. **PoV:** The Spy.

**Outcome:** Reflects how actions in fiction have a real-life consequence. **PoV:** The Child.

**Rendezvous:** Gives players a confrontational Child-Spy space. Rewards inquire. **PoV:** The Spy.

**Outro:** ACT’s conclusion. Adds transitional info into the next ACT / the endings. **PoV:** Both.

*ACT 1 / A royal infiltration / Math day*



The Spy: "Why did we target **Histrío Nic** and stole **The Book of Meanings**."  
 jump explainuno  
 label explainuno:  
 The Child: "I hate people like **Histrío Nic**. It's because people like **HIM**,  
 that people like **ME**, are made fun of."  
 The Child: "He dresses weird, you can't tell if he's a man or a  
 woman, and talks with funny words. So people mock them for being different."  
 The Child "But, I'm **NOT** like them."  
 The Child "I just... look, I also talk kinda funny and my voice sometimes it's  
 girly. So people just get confused."  
 The Child "So I thought if we steal the book of meanings we would stop  
 Histrío Nic and his flock from talking funny."  
 The Child "Like. That way, if I talk funny, well, it's just me, right? They...  
 can't keep comparing me to them."

Figure 12. Key visual for ACT 1, Castle of Extravaganza, and script sample, *The Spy*.



**Mythos:** Built over imagery from medieval and high fantasy settings, British and European folktales, and knighthood and wizardry legends. As a kid, I adored the legends behind Merlin, King Arthur, and the knights of the round table. One of my favorite book formats were book trilogies, and the idea of following a party in a world of ‘might and magic’ was my comfort food, in book terms. Any RPG game I stumbled with similar settings was a “must try” for me.

**Reality:** The Day counterpart locates itself in a typical, boring school day. According to The Child, at least. The researcher believes math classes, are important and NOT boring at all.

**Game Logic:** Stealth and Infiltration. Deductive thinking. Players can examine a ‘Spy Secret Handbook’, containing guidelines for becoming ‘the perfect spy’. In its pages, players find clues and directions for picking the right option during this infiltration mission.

**Failure: Side A/** Players will find out that they spent too much time playing with The Spy, and that math class is now over. This triggers a game event, the teacher reaching out to you and raising several concerns about The Child’s antisocial behaviour. This will drop 2 points of the presence bar, increasing The Child’s agitation, concern, and fear. His presence turns more visible as he notices The Teacher, an important figure in his life is ‘keeping tabs on him’. This will elicit a ‘even if you win you fail’ narrative theme. **Side B/** Players will be forced out of the drawing notebook, and the presence bar drops 1 point. In doing so, The Child feels forced to participate in the class. After answering a question in a histrionic way, two kids will bully him.

**Key Emotions:** Fear / Frustration / Anxiety

**Rejection:** The Child rejects the school environment, and reimagines a place where he can explore, be free, and do ‘cool stuff’. He rejects queer-codes as fear of ostracization.

**Themes:** No right option, alienation, blame displacement, rationalizing hate, fit in.

The game's beginning, ACT/Day 1 provides players with exposition to start unravelling the story (and my past). As a child I was drawn towards mystery solving and detective media (my favorite cartoon was *Scooby Doo*<sup>171</sup>), and I loved spies as a concept. There was this game I played with my dad, *Comandos 2: Mas allá del deber*,<sup>172</sup> and you could control a Spy character in it. I remember loving it, and wanting more games where you could do that. I fed myself this fantasy that it was ok to be 'like a spy' in school: silent, mysterious, observant, 'It's best to try to analyze others and think of ways to not raise too much attention'. I recall feeling like I was spying other people to get to know what not to say or do that could trigger them.

At the same time, I tried to rationalize the hatred, mockery, and constant bullying that were happening to me. I was associated to "faggot-ness" and anything queer in-between. Since I could not blame the world, or the world that I knew, I blamed queer folks. Or rather, those who would be very expressive or vocal about their queerness. I thought that if they would not act like that, people would not notice them, and by proxy pick on me. This happened when I was a kid, when I did not self-identify yet as queer, even if I knew I was fundamentally different to others. I felt very confused, in an in-between world, questioning where to belong.

These ideas drive this ACT and coalesce into the fiction. The medieval, castle setting sets the stage of what feels like infiltrating, navigating, and orienting yourself in a place like an outsider, trying to read rules and observing others to manage your task. The game logic was designed to make the players think and analyze, what would be the best choice to pick. And even after picking all the right options, the game reminds you that you still fail; players who backtrack the choice tree, for picking all the right options in case of previous failure, will find out that the outcome of successfully achieving your mission, will have dire in-game consequences. This

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<sup>171</sup>Ruby, Joe, Spears, Ken, Warner Bros, *Scooby Doo*.

<sup>172</sup>Suárez, Gonzalo, Pérez Dolset, Ignacio, Pyro Studios, *Comandos 2: Mas allá del deber*.

failure leads to players feeling frustrated in either Side A/B of the narrative. They either lose the mission and get bullied or win it and face confronting the teacher.

Queerness bleeds into the fiction as I remix my imaginings of it over characters and scenarios. The Drag-on, guardian of the castle, is a remix of unicorn, dragon, and drag queen and Histrion Nic, castle ruler, represents my histrionic and theatrical way of speaking. The Book of Meaning, the mission's objective, play a key role in ontological worldbuilding. If players (as The Spy) question The Child about it, he offers an explanation that will provide hermeneutics for players. He does not want to be compared to 'them' (queers), and The Book of Meaning (signifying his own histrionism) is his way of 'taking power' from queers.

This can only be done in a fictional, imaginary world where he can fall to the same level as objects, becoming and making of objectification and objects an ontological worldbuilding process. Failure enables this, as the ACT 1 initial outcomes will explore either isolation (**Side A**) or harassment (**Side B**). At the end of the outcome narrative stage, the character is rendered speechless; or rather, any option he picks have no agency at speaking or saying something against the situation he finds himself. This is enhanced by game's affordances, presenting players with a menu with the same option cascading, but with no real agency outcome behind them, sans 'moving the plot'. A mirror to what thought process felt to me in situations like this.

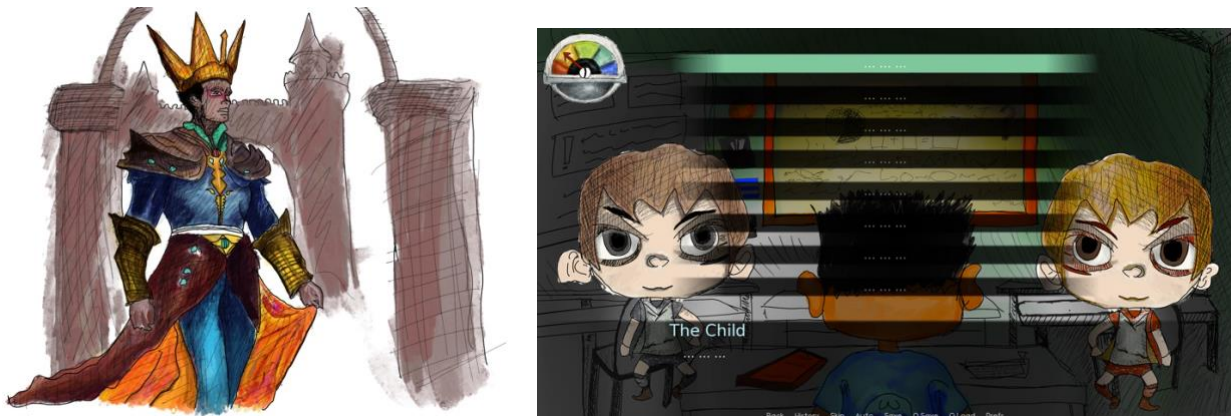


Image 6. Character art for Histrion Nic, and screenshot of a 'no agency' choice in Day 1, *The Spy*.

## ACT 2 / The fire plundering / PE day



```

"Why did you want to steal The Fire?" if menuenduno == False:
jump firewhy
label firewhy:

s "Fire can be a gift, yes, but... it can also hurt others."
# s "In this world, there's two types of fires."
s "There is the holy fire or the cursed fire."
s "People celebrate the holy."
# It's everything they want out of life."
s "For the cursed one though... they despise them."
s "It's everything they can't understand, so they grow to fear."
s "The Fire inside me makes me burn, in a way like no one around me."
s "I learn faster, always have energy, barely need to sleep!"
s "But it's a cursed fire. It repels those around me, hurt them."
s "Prometheus's gift to mankind is also my curse. So I devised a plan."
s "That's where you came in."

```

Figure 13. Key visual for ACT 2, Prometheus, and script sample, *The Spy*.

**Mythos:** Built over imagery from Greek mythology, specifically the legend of Prometheus and the fire. Incorporates statues of the Twelve Olympians. There are sprinkles of magical, mystical, and surreal sceneries. My mum worked in a local bookstore in the countryside town where I was born. She would bring me these tiny, thin books with white covers adorned with splashes of characters. They would contain fables, myths, and legends from Greece. The pages of these books are now stained by pasta sauce. I used to read while eating, and their short-story nature was a perfect fit.

**Reality:** The Day counterpart locates itself in a class day at a park, while The Child attend a Physical Education class. I hated..., I mean, The Child hated sports.

**Game Logic:** Annotating and Deciphering. Analytic thinking. Players are presented with a safe, that they must crack open to obtain a key item linked to The Spy mission.

**Failure: Side A/** Players have 3 chances at inputting a password. Players will encounter a scripted event, regardless of the puzzle outcomes. The scene that follows will focus on failing at sports and the aftermaths of it. **Side B/.** Failing at the puzzle makes it easier to trigger the 'bad ending' in the next ACT and locks players into a paranoid/stressed dialogue at the Intro of it.

**Key Emotions:** Anger / Sadness

**Rejection:** The Child rejects sports and reimagines a place where he can focus on doing a more intellectual activity. He rejects his limitless energy, a 'curse'.

**Themes:** Rebellion, freedom, sin and punishment, find meaning(s), neurodivergences.

The game's rising action / climax, ACT/Day 2 provides an exploratory, meaning filled journey, and finalizes in a fiery, violent climax. Growing up as a queer neurodivergent child, particularly with a severe case of ADHD, was incredibly challenging. Especially, for my amazing parents. I had little to no control over my thought's actions and physical and body impulses. I had flashes of memory, and they are the stuff parental nightmares are made of. One second, I am sucking the tits of a recently in labor dog, as I wanted to be part of the pack; the other, I am locking all the kids from my class in the school bathroom. I cut out all the faces from my family album because I thought it would be fun to use them in an experiment I saw at an art TV show. I wanted to be Aladdin, so of course I would slide down from a two-story roof in a garage using a metallic plank (a.k.a, my magical carpet). I can keep going.

Energy literally filled my body, as my ADHD made me impervious to being tired at all. But being filled with that much energy and little to no control, its, well... It's not a good combo. And there was a lot I could not understand about me, because my parents would not tell me about my ADHD until years later when I was older, as it was caused by a brain injury I received during my mother's labor; the sensitive, complex nature of it, made medical specialists suggest them to withhold this information from me until I was old enough to understand.

This part of the game is about making sense and finding meaning in your surroundings, and in yourself, much like I was trying to do as a child. It's about having that energy, that when overlapped with my queerness, made me unique, volatile, and eccentric. This part of the game, it's about what happens when that energy clashes with those around them. That energy becomes The Fire, an objectified, ritualized in-game item, that acts as the core of the narrative of this ACT. The Promethean legend, of rebelling against the gods, of being kind and different, of doing the 'right thing' and facing consequences, becomes the core of the narrative fiction side.



Figure 14. Key visual for ACT 2, The Fire, *The Spy*.



Figure 15. Key visual for ACT 2, path towards The Fire, *The Spy*.

Object oriented ontology (OOO) becomes even more relevant from this act onwards, and it introduces soliloquy reflective moments that will carry and construct queer Identity in the narrative. Discovery moments through environmental exploration are also introduced. The game logic for the puzzle section consists of deciphering a password, that can be discovered by analyzing writings on statues representing Greek gods. Players will read carved messages related to Prometheus, The Fire, and The Child (in foresight). These messages carry a very dark nature, subverting the positive implications of the Prometheus legend into negative and ominous ones within the narrative. Each deity message links to his/her nature, creating a nuanced exploration of The Fire. They become a vehicle for how The Child is re-coding his ADHD/Queerness; a cursed, dangerous Fire. After solving the password puzzle, a scripted event will play. In the outcome (reality) part of the narrative, The Child faces a group bullying episode, triggered by his inability to catch a baseball ball (byproduct of my ADHD). Players are presented with another ‘no agency’ choices moment. They can choose to calm down or give in to violence, in a series of soliloquy reflections tied to The Fire. If pacific options are chosen 3 times, The Child yells at the player “this is my story” and give in to violence. It captures the essence of anger escalating: of trying to calm down, not being able. Especially when you lack control.



Figure 16. Statues in ACT 2, from left to right: Poseidon, Hera, Athena, Zeus, Aphrodite, Hephaestus & Hermes, *The Spy*.



```

label Poseidon:
  # m "The sea, unrelentless, does not forgive the traveler. Like the fire, untamable."
  # m "The fire drenches in the water, the storm engulfs all equally."
  m "The waves soaks, wets, drowns and quell. Ashes are all that's left of the fire after the..."
  m "{b}F{/b}lood"
label Hera:
  # m "The bonds that ties us to our kin burn bright, a fire dawning from our blood."
  # m "Bonds can empower you, strengthen you. And so they can bind you, chain you, hurt you."
  # m "Be wary of cursed kinds of fire, consuming your kin in flames of torment. Be wary, or bring forth..."
  m "{b}R{/b>uinaton"
label Athena:
  m "Curiosity, ever consuming, sparks abroad like a wild fire. It propells humans into the dark, braving it."
  m "But curiosity killed the cat, and so can the wise one be maimed. Ignorance is, after all, a bliss"
  m "Intellect can sometimes be a burden to wear. Plummeting you from the skies. Like an inverted..."
  m "{b}E{/b>piphany"
label Zeus:
  # m "Upon the throne above the heavens, absolute control. The empyrean ruler commands with a fire-like fist."
  # m "Crush sparks of rebellion, crush the burned, the divergent; control any threats. No ruler, only that of he who commands true power."
  m "Roaring thunders, fall down over the impure, bizarre, the uncanny. Let the kingdom below the sky, to feel true..."
  m "{b}E{/b>nsnarement"
label Aphrodite:
  # m "Feel it's touch, it's embrace, warmth like a gentle fire. Filling you, consuming you, burning."
  # m "Such is love. The passion that draws over your body and chains you to others, that fleshes your purpose."
  m "Love, an inferno within burning, consuming, melting, wilthing, killing. Flame tongues around you, let them be your..."
  m "{b}D{/b>rive"
label Hephaestus:
  # m "The chains that bind the God-traitor where crafted by my hand. Fire was never meant for the humans to begin with."
  # m "Purpose manifest within as a never ending forge of dreams, hope, passions, and duty. Whereas that purpose would stray from reality..."
  # m "It needs only be repurposed, reforged. And so I crafted my gift to humans, Pandora. So they would never forget, who they will always"
  m "{b}O{/b>blige"
label Hermes:
  # m "'Tis a fool errands to play a game with the gods. Like playing with fire."
  # m "A never ending nightmare era followed the dawn of the fire. Punishment or reminder. Such is the rage of gods."
  m "Trapped, forever, eternally, immutably, a message in a bottle stray in the echoes of time. Falling pieces, humans, do not forget the..."
  m "{b}M{/b>essage"

```

Figure 17. Script sample. Statues messages hiding the password and reframing The Fire, ACT 2, *The Spy*.

```

"You feel a fire, The Fire, burning within you."
"The fire usually helps you by having boundless energy, being able to barely sleep
at all."
"One of the perks of your damaged brain."
Child "The Fire, now, turns into anger. An anger like a volcano or a supernova,
pushing away, pushing everything away."
Child "Ready to blowup, ready to erupt, ready to consume THEM."
Child "Time to let loose..."

menu:

"LET LOOSE":
    jump LETLOOSE
"Maybe you should calm down?":
    jump calmup

label calmup:

    Child "I don't think I can. 'Tis their reckoning, they'll burn in holy flames."

menu:

"LET LOOSE":
    jump LETLOOSE
"Anger is not the answer!":
    jump calmupdos

label calmupdos:
    Child "Been there, done that. There's never an answer, not for people like me."
    Child "I... can't control the fire... and neither should I."

menu:

"LET LOOSE":
    jump LETLOOSE
"LET IT GO!":
    jump calmuptres

label calmuptres:

    Child "FUCK YOU!"
    Child "I'm not backing down and your not making me either."
    Child "This is MY story!"
    jump LETLOOSE

label LETLOOSE:
    Child "YOU PICK UP A BROKEN BRANCH NEARBY."
    Child "BEHOLD, MY SWORD OF DESTRUCTION."
    Child "YOU SWIFTLY MOVE AROUND THE SINNERS, SWINGING YOUR SWORD."
    Child "ONE BY ONE, EACH, BATHED IN MY FIERY PUNISHMENT."
    Child "THE SINNERS BEGIN TO RUN AWAY, LAUGHTER TURN NOW INTO TEARS."

```

Figure 18. Script sample from ACT 2, pointing at (white) a ‘no agency’ choice sequence, *The Spy*.

ACT 3 / The final girl / The clinic



```

Spy "My liege. Is everything Ok?"

if presence == -2:
    Child "No, it's not."
    Child "I'm scared."
    Child "My presence is in danger. This a big mess."
    Child "Bad things have begun to happen."
    Spy "What can I do my lord?"
    Child "We need to escape, {b}we need to go{/b}, go along with the plan."
    Child "There's only one way out now..."
    Child "We have to move, now! This time, to the Princess's tower."
    jump thechase
    
```

Figure 19. Key visual for ACT 3, Tower of Madness/Princess's tower & The Aberration and script sample, *The Spy*.

**Mythos:** Built over imagery from Russian folk tales, adding some elements from Norse mythology, 90's slasher movies, and classical fairy-tale tropes. I had three books of Russian folk tales and legends, which I received from my grandma, with the most amazing illustrations ever. Or so I remember. They each had a cover in a different color: green, red, and blue. These stories were among my favorites, as they were short, concise, and featured very dramatic characters. They also imparted moral lessons, akin to Aesop's fables. Ironically, I cannot remember any of them clearly. I do recall many being centered around princesses, tsars, and someone named Ivan.

**Reality:** The Day counterpart focusses on a visit to a clinic I did shortly after the violent park episode (previous section). This center identifies behavioral anomalies and determines if a child can continue regular schooling or should attend a special school. These schools, reserved for children with behavioral issues or mental conditions, are infamous in my country.

**Game Logic:** Surviving / Escaping. Navigational skills. Players will find themselves trapped within a labyrinthine tower and must use a map to climb their way out.

**Failure: Side A/** Linked to the 'good' ending. Triggers if players escape a labyrinthic tower after fulfilling specific conditions. **Side B/** Triggers the 'bad' ending by failing to escape.

**Key Emotions:** Despair / Terror / Anxiety / Paranoia.

**Rejection:** The Child rejects reality ad infinitum. He can't reconcile his identities.

**Themes:** Escaping, Overwhelmed, Lost, Confusion, Uncertainty, Loops.

Day/ACT 3 serves as the game's denouement moment. At this point, player control shifts almost completely to The Spy. The game shifts to The Child (being tested in a clinic) in short cutscenes, where reality starts overlapping with fiction, phasing in and out toward the storybook.

The looming threat of 'you could go to an Escuela de conducta' (Behavioral school) hung over my head like a guillotine. The reputation of these schools was so bad that kids and parents would use it as a scare tactic—a boogeyman of misfits and outcasts. A popular and awarded Cuban movie, *Conducta*,<sup>173</sup> examines this topic, and provides an example of how much a community could come together at avoiding a kid being sent to one of these schools.

These centers are, essentially, jail systems and reformatory centers for 'complicated' youth. Centers holding kids with aggressive behaviors or proved intent assault, who would wait for the minimum opportunity to lash out. One of the worst things being a kid, is that my ADHD diffculted me tremendously to control impulses, especially aggressive and emotional ones (and my queerness, of course). I did the math. Fear was amplified in me to the extreme, and I felt that if they made me go to one, it would be the end for me.

ACT 3 is a horror story, born from moments in my life where I felt pure dread. I was examined and had cables plugged into me like an animal, all while having no idea what the fuck was going on. I doubted my sanity, which is the usual thing to do when you commit mass assault against your entire classroom (the P.E. teacher came as a bonus) anyways. I doubted my future; given my trajectory, it was hard to see one. I... I shattered so, so much of those memories. Looking back was very difficult. I remember the white vividly—the ceiling, the encephalogram machine, the tests, the white-coated lab doctors. Me waiting there. I had to go, quite a few times.

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<sup>173</sup>Ernesto Daranas, RTV Comercial, *Conducta*. 11-year-old boy, Chala, lives with his addicted mother and trains dogs to fight for a living. After a change of teacher, an old woman supportive of him, he loses his moral guidance. Going astray, the film uses the threat of being sent to an 'Escuela de Conducta' as a lens to explore poverty, neglect, and the impact of the education system on marginalized youth.

Anyyyyways. The show must go on! This horror story has it all, checks all the marks:

- **Tower of Madness!** This Russian-inspired atrocity stands tall as a Baba-not-so-Yaga reminder, that you, dear player, will have to face your fears and prove yourself worthy. We're all losing our shit here, so will you fall victim to it? Or will you climb to the top? Hint: It's more than just your sanity what's at stake here.
- **Chase Sequence!** Run for your live, survive, find the correct corridor. A beautiful set of identical tunnels will make you attempt at navigating this tower, a real pleasure.
- Lost much? Fear not! Call the mighty *Soy el mapa, soy el mapa*, and guide yourself out of this hellhole. **WARNING:** Monsters lurk while you read a **map**.
- Escape the **Aberration!** Faggot-stein, bizarre amalgamation of your queerness and fragments of your Identities is coming for you! Will it catch up, or will you outrun it?
- Royalty! That's right folks, we have a royal guest in the house! Learn the story of the **princess** through a diary and hidden murals? Will you uncover her royal secreeets?
- **Peasants!** Can't have a monarchy without them, right? These lovable dorks do not speak English, but! You could learn a thing or two from them...
- **The Final Girl!** Survive all those around you, no matter what. When the curtains fall, check your presence bar. Your ending (Salvation / Damnation) lies at the end of it.

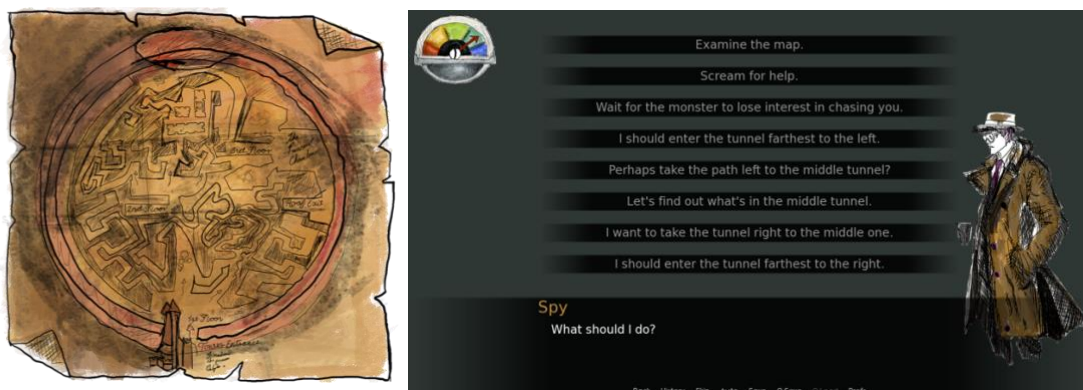


Image 7. Map for navigating the Tower of Madness (left), screenshot (right) of Act 3, *The Spy*.

## Endings

Endings are tied to the outcome of the presence bar and player's progress. To reach Side A/, the 'good' ending, players must reach the top of the last game scenario (ACT 3), the tower's zenith, having succeeded in the previous ACTs and with a positive bar value. This will be made arguably difficult since ACT 3 will see multiple chances where player mistakes or unforeseen interactions will drop the bar's value. Reaching Side B/, the 'bad' ending is easier by contrast. When the presence bar reaches minimum value, players are forced into it (early as ACT 2). To lessen backtracking, upon entering the tower players are encouraged to save the game.

In ACT 3, if players choose a wrong option (e.g. a dead-end tunnel) while navigating The Tower of Madness, the ever-chasing Aberration, Faggotstein will catch up with the player. This triggers a one-point drop in negative value from the bar and allows the player to escape and return to previous points. Peasants roaming the tower trigger events calculated at random, that either gives navigational clues, false information leading to traps, or will outright alert the Aberration. To make matters worse, peasants don't speak English; it will be up to players to find a way around this. To discern the kinds of servant, players need to encounter the story of the trapped princess. Scattered through murals in dead-ends and inside her diary, the story foresees the events of the 'good' ending while providing clues as to which peasants can or not be trusted.

ACT 3 is a true test of the trial-and-error formula, where players will learn the hard way to circumcenter the tower, while not going mad in the progress; frustration by repeated failures directs anger against the object of their struggle. The entire tower is one big extrapolation of my emotional states and thought process while being terrified over my fate. Towers as a theme (Madness, Princess, and Babylon) is integral in ACT 3, and the idea of ascending and descending (reinforced by the presence bar) is a larger metaphor to the self-Identity, sanity, and one's ego.

Eliciting failure into a loop, where players continuously navigate in and out of the tower until finally making their way up, was important for me. It mirrors a moment when I felt overwhelmed, navigating situations where I believed there was no way out, no matter what I did.

Failure and loops lead to the final key piece into ascending for the 'true' ending.

The final girl. The perfect metaphor for how I felt I survived my own horror story.

In the horror genre of movies, especially in Slasher films, the final girl refers to the last girl or woman alive who will face the killer or antagonist in the climax of the story, often the one who will survive to tell it.

Reaching the zenith, The Spy completes the mission, leading to the outcome narrative section. The Child joins The Spy, reaching for a throne at the center. If the presence bar is in positive and players have acquired the Book of Meaning and The Fire, they unlock the "true" ending. Sacrificing The Fire and the Book of Meaning, The Child activates The Throne (an object that signifies his imagination). In a dialogue, The Child reveals a plan to ascend into the stars and integrate with the videogame angels, bidding the player farewell. The Child becomes the final girl of the story; he survives by sacrificing his Identity (aspects of it) and trading books for videogames, losing The Spy and the story(books) in the process, slaying his own fiction.

At this point, the final "no agency" choice can be triggered. Players can confront The Child, via menu interactions: from begging him to choose a different path, to surrender to his plan, to destroying the throne. The three options to change The Child's mind leads to him turning into a robot, forcing the ending. If players try to destroy the throne the screen glitches and fades. Clicking appears to do nothing. The screen eventually fades to black, forcing the ending. The illusion of choice is crafted by overlapping screenshots of that menu's picks, mimicking players interactions. After, the true ending rolls out, and the final girl tells the epilogue of the story.



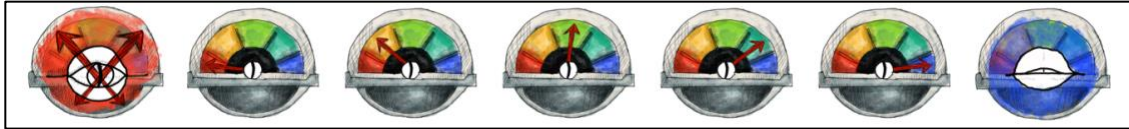


Figure 20. Presence bar values. Negative / alert state (left) and positive / invisible state (right), *The Spy*.

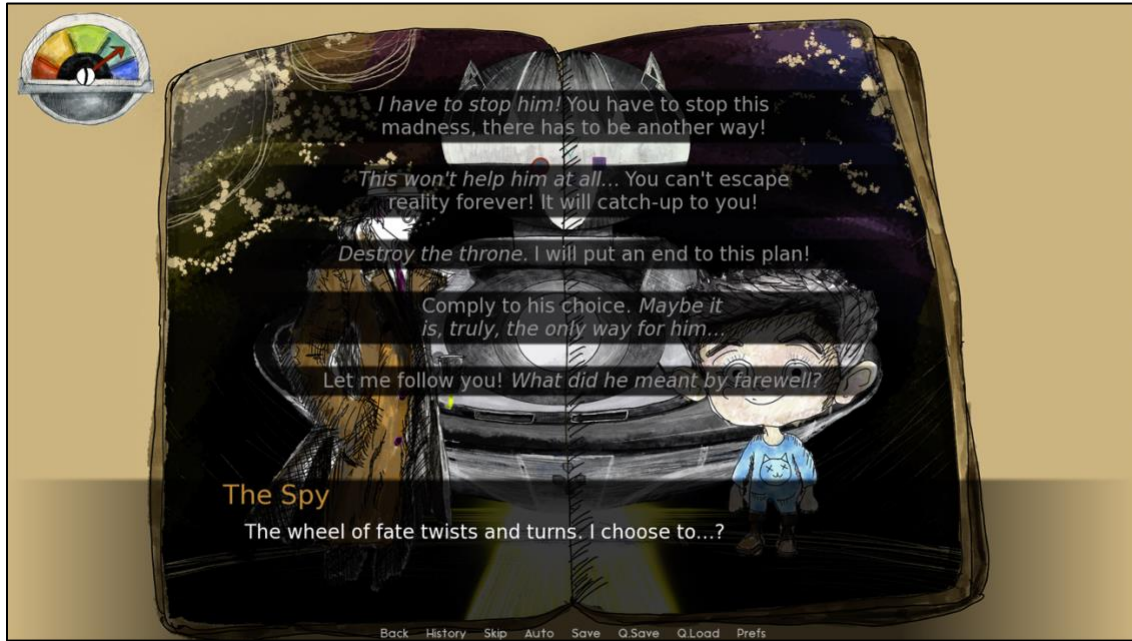


Image 8. Final 'no agency' menu choices, The Tower zenith. Screenshot of Act 3, *The Spy*.

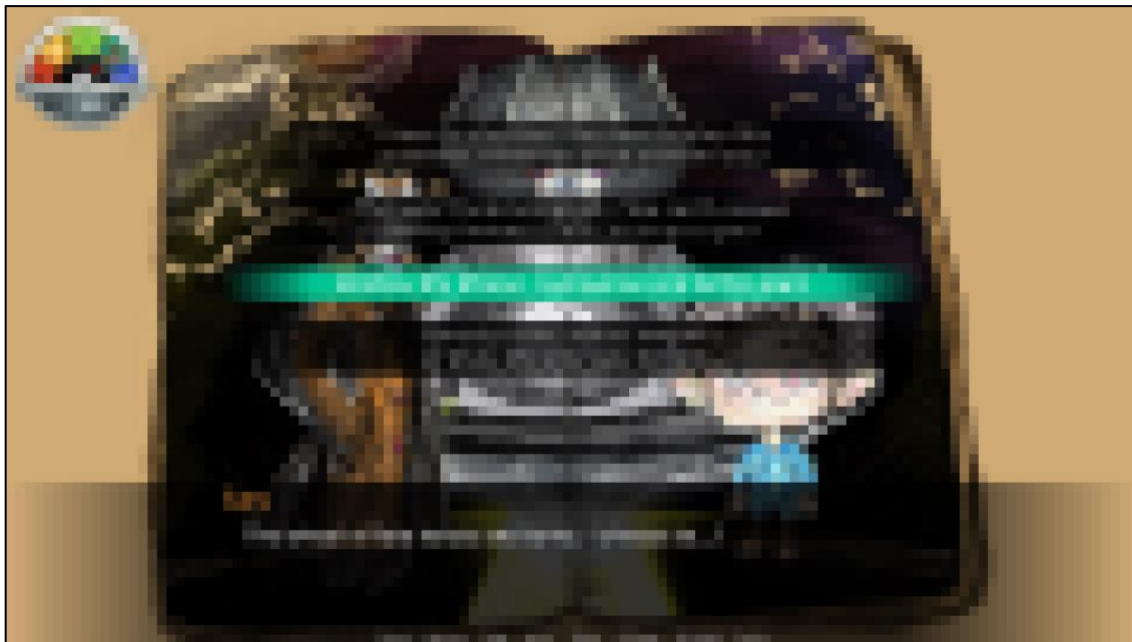
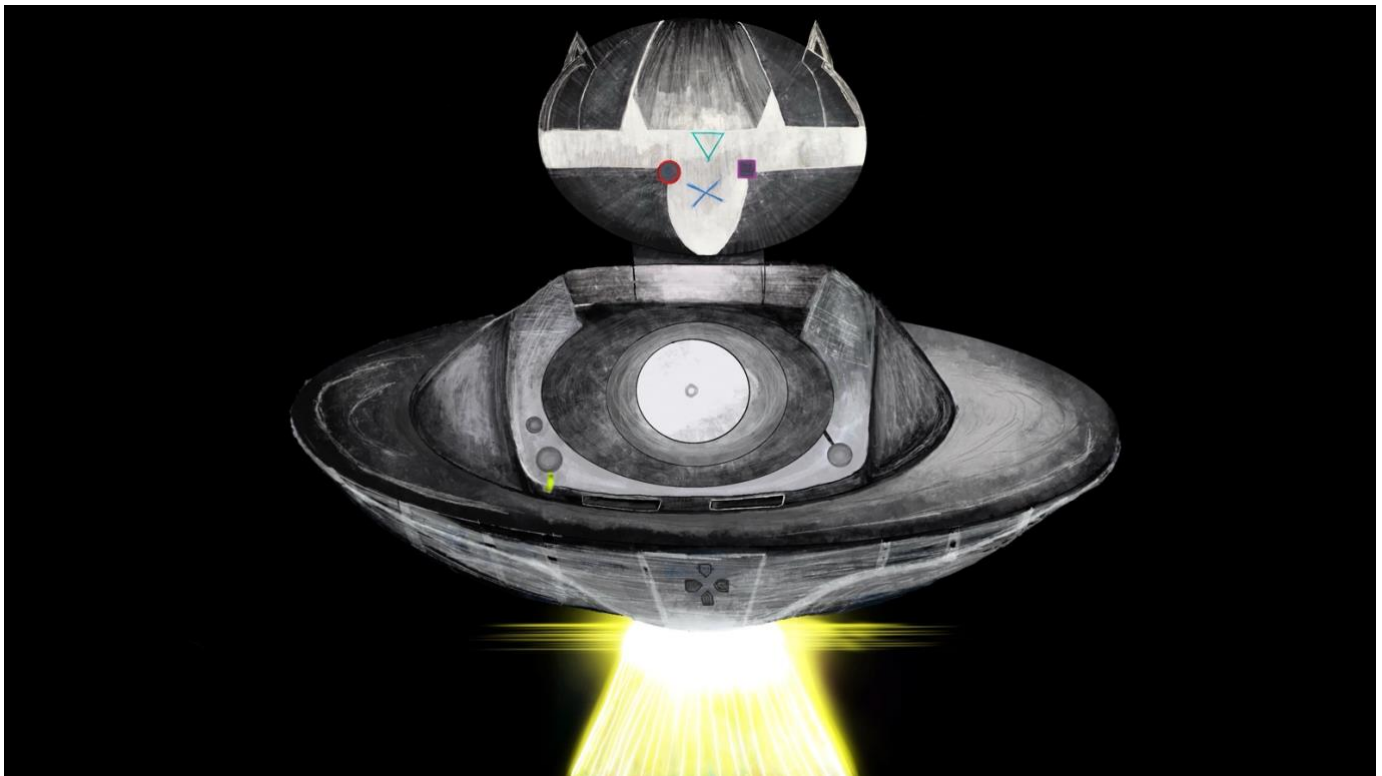


Image 9. Glitching 'no agency' choice sequence fragment. Screenshot of Act 3, *The Spy*.

Side A/ *I was the real boy who longed to turn into Pinocchio*



```

Child "They came to our universe through the Mother Console and slowly began to
    Invade the world with their divinity and technology,"
Child "Around the time of arrival of the great mothership, the Paw Station Once,
    I began to ponder about joining them."
Child "My being, myself would be devoured by games the angels,"
Child "my skin crawling with pixels, quests, menus, stories."
show text "{i}In other words, In other wor(l?)ds{/i}." at truecenter
Child "An information overload that numbed me from the pain of my existence."
Child "Re-booting"
Child? "open_eyes+scan-surroundings.exe"
    
```

Figure 21. Key visual for the 'good' ending, Mother Console Paw Station Once, and script sample from it, *The Spy*.

Inside the clinic, a scene shows The Child parents, The King and The Queen, talking to one of the mans in the white lab coat. The Child notices the word games mentioned a few times, and shortly after, in home, he was presented with the Paw Station Once, a storytelling magical book-cube. Marveled, he comes up with a plan. The Integration. He would become one with the machine, with the videogame angels. But for reaching the skies, a price was meant to be paid...

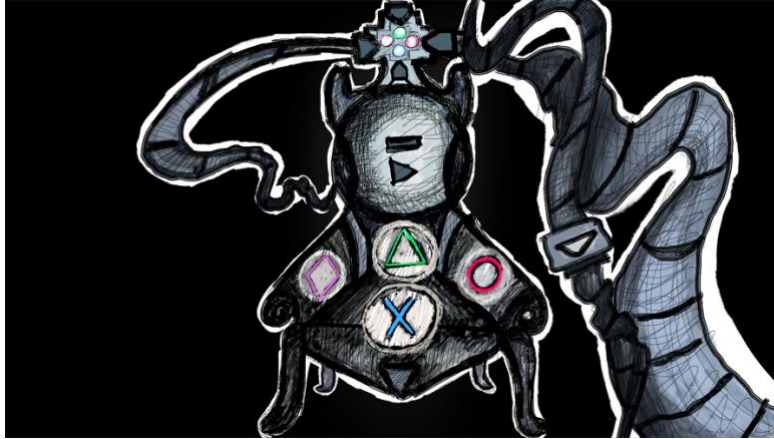


Figure 22. Key visual for the ‘good’ ending, The Throne, *The Spy*.



Figure 23. Key visual for the ‘good’ ending, The Child Integrated, *The Spy*.

When writing / designing the ending, I was inspired by science fiction ideas, such as alien ships and abductions. The concept of Mothership from George Clinton & Parliament/Funkadelic was inspiring, here reinterpreted as a ‘missing bridge between Glorious Queerness’ (signified by the cat, a personal symbol of freedom) and games, a sort of Cat-Game futurism. This ending represents escapism, but also a sense of longing to belong. Angels signify how I see games as saviors in a critical moment of my life, since they helped me control my ADHD and better focus.

Side B/ *So, the journey starts again. Will it ever end?*



```

Spy "{i}But he had to keep going{/i}."
Spy "Slowly, his body began to merge."

show monsterspy at left
with dissolve

Spy "He had tried to usurpe so many identities,"
Spy "that his flesh began to deform into aberration."
Spy "Wings, claws, tentacles, a snake sizzling in the shadows."
Spy "Was the spy even human to begin with?"

```

Figure 24. Key visual for the 'bad' ending, The Spy turns into the aberration, and script sample from it, *The Spy*.

The Spy, after being dismissed by The Child, began travelling through the desert. At the same time, shortly thereafter The Child moved to a new school. Back to The Spy, and he keeps travelling, through another new dessert now, skin degrading and changing. Oh, look, The Child is in a new school. Oh, look, The Spy has a new skin. And so, they would keep travelling...



Figure 25. Key visual for the ‘bad’ ending, The Spy Monster-fied, *The Spy*.

This was a very fun ending to write/design. I worked around the idea of degradation (pixelated images for background), and the monster concept (explored in queer theory). These became a pillar to explore, and I created many bizarre little creatures, then explored overlapping them in the skin of the Spy. I intent on communicating this ‘always a traveler idea’, and being exhausting as a result, since I transferred between many schools, never adapting, always feeling like a monster. But also, the things we take in the way, and how they can change us.

## Ch. 6 - The end?

“Rim, I picked a BA in graphic design without ever touching a pencil before. I actually wanted to study physics. But in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, I decided I wanted to study something quite close to the world of video games. I visualized 3 paths branched in front of me; that of the writer, that of the programmer, and that of the designer. The last one felt like the one that would get me closer as to how I envisioned making games, so I just picked it, knowing very well the road would not be easy (and it wasn't). This MDes puts me on those same paths, just this time around, I will not walk only through one.”

Online comment to a classmate in the class *Creative Techniques* at OCAD U, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

This thesis has been a transformative project. I've grown from having mastery over visual communication to building and expanding writing and coding skills. It has been accompanied with many processes of unlearning, shifting my perceptions constantly. And it's been a tremendously confrontational project with myself; my ego, my past, my present, and my future. Whatever lies in store for me, I'm uncertain. What I am not, it's the path I want to walk towards.

The research provides a breadth of case studies, theories, and references for readers to locate answers to the primary research question. The prototypes inform makers, by creating an understanding of mistakes, wins, and key objectives from the making. Guidelines from the research also inform makers. The narrative interplay between biography / allegory serves as a foundational base for new projects, and the highlight of key queer concepts (failure, personal narratives, emotions, rejection, temporality) can facilitate ideation of key game mechanics or game logics. I presented specific ways to unfold Queer Identity in games; Do I expect them to be the only ones? Hell no! Not for me, not for others. This is not an ending. This is a beginning.

This project stands itself over the collective shoulders and archive of incredible queer artist, creators, theorists, and game makers. In doing so, and in learning from them, I hope to provide foundation to others. Autoethnography and reflexional, personal storytelling stands a testament of the incredible power to fuel games. A testament to *la realidad supera la ficcion*,

Spanish approximation of truth is stranger than fiction. The playtest of this game provided me with an incredible opportunity to connect with my community and to gauge that power.

The playtest results and the interaction with my community was one of the most amazing parts of the project. For one, while I was going through the different iterative part of the project, I had a lot of anxiety regarding how clear the story and narrative themes were communicated to the players. Part of that anxiety stemmed in the balance between the fiction moments of the game and the adapted biographical ones; plainly put, I feared being too metaphorical. That anxiety washed over and transformed in relief as I got major positive response into the clarity of the themes being transmitted. I got an overwhelming number of responses in the survey. Playtesting led to refining writing's themes and marking down future considerations. They help understand which sub-texts are more evident or impactful, polyvalent narrative moments and in picking story details I could not perceive myself as being both the maker and research subject for it.

For example, from some of the participants comments: "While baseball is not a sport that is practiced much in my country, I had a similar park episode like The Child with another sport.", "I thought the clinic was a psychological center for detecting your homosexuality, since I went to one around that age", "The Queer dragon is maybe my favorite. The Handsome King was, I was just so very attracted to that character. The Spy, I don't feel drawn to and I also don't feel safe with because The Spy reminds me of anime villains that are sociopathic and hide behind trench coats and fedoras", "I really liked when he went back to that bullies with the stick, with the sword in his hand, there was a really nice empowering movement for me like, they should deserve it, so that's so evil of me to say this, but yes". It was wonderful to engage with them. These comments gave me insight into how my community perceives the game characters, narrative, story; how they create affect over the game, what parts where more meaningful, what

parts could be further developed. And how they interact with the different game logics. As a researcher it's an incredible opportunity to watch the face reactions and changes in voice utterances in the pivotal emotional parts. The game explores the use of negative emotions to poke out reflective moments at key game scenes, so it was important for me to know if there was player's emotional reaction and a reflection associated to them. The observation and physical playtesting process with a follow-up interview helped me assess it. It also helps me understand if those key emotions (anger, sadness) extrapolated from my autoethnographic journey, were being felt or experienced to a degree by the player. These emotions are tied closed to my queer Identity past and the biographical moments they originate; In allowing players to be The Spy of my story, I was pleased to corroborate my game worked out in what it set out to do.

A key takeaway I present to queer game creators consulting the project, it's to not rush the process if they seek to self-insert or replicate parts of their Identity through game making. And this ties directly to my secondary research question. This isn't an easy to answer question, as its very subjective, mutating, and personal by nature, but I can provide insights from my own experience. I presented examples of creators whose own Identity was intertwined in the making process (*Celeste*, *Nimona*), affecting it and them. Mine was too. Or still is. This was a hard, painful, but rewarding process. I felt a lot, to points I just wanted to numb any of it, a reality anchor of *I need to get work done*. I avoided my biographical data; I soaked my first creation in so much fiction, fearing a confrontational moment; of having to write about my past. The moment came later, I cried a lot. I did so at so many other points. I lost count. I soaked myself in sadness and anger, so much of it that I forgot joy. Game-making made me realize about that: a game ending in no happy endings. I fixated my queerness and my Identity, nailed into the past. I reject that. Game-making a game about my past, makes me want to game-make my future.



## Ch. 7 - Second playthrough

“Back to the beginning. We all come to a story with hopes and expectations, looking for an answer. Sometimes it would be better to live with that hope -without ever knowing the full story. In a horror story, there are only victims and monsters, and the trick is not to end up as either. But, trapped by the genre, we are all ripped to pieces along the way. This is not the story I hoped it to be. This is not the ending I wanted. This story will eat us alive. This story is a monster. And monsters wear many faces.”

Opening scene monologue, *Alan Wake 2* (Lake, Sam and Rowley, Kyle, Remedy Entertainment).

At the close of this thesis, I will continue working on the game prototype for *The Spy*.

Some ideas of how I want to iterate over the narrative and game logics are very defined in my head now, others, I will learn along the way. It is the loop zero, to many loops I want to add to it. That future development is linked to my futurity: my desire to keep learning how to make games, of improving my storytelling skills, and of expanding, accepting, and embracing new horizons of my queerness. I want to grow alongside this game, and I want it to keep growing from me.

As a loop 0, or the mother loop, the current “good” ending is intended to regress back the narrative to the beginning. That does not mean, however, that the narrative will be the same. One idea is to explore multiple timelines. Another is to change some elements from the story so that it follows the same course, but with different events. Other is to create parallelisms and move between different ages The Child inhabits, to double down on the idea of cyclical loops.

Ultimately, the different loops will be tied to a process called *the integration*. In the loop 0 (the game thus far), The Child fails to completely integrate to games. Every subsequent playthrough where you beat the game will advance a % of it (e.g. 20%, 30% integration) and change The Child appearance, making it more game-like and robotic. If the progress reaches 100%, by winning all the game loops, the ‘bad ending’ will result, one where The Child is completely integrated into games and its own fiction, vanishing from reality. This was meant to be the ‘true’ ending. Confronting myself while making the game had an effect at modifying that.

“Back to the beginning, with the memory of the past loop already fading fast. But while it lingers, I know there’s hope. We are not doomed to repeat our failures in an eternal loop.

This is a spiral. A fictional poet once said: *Beyond the shadow you settle for, there is a miracle, illuminated.* I will not settle for a shadow. I will find the miracle.

Through the night. It’s not just victims and monsters. I see now there are heroes as well.

We can find our way through the darkness. We will break through the surface.

We will emerge into the light.”

The Final Draft (New Game Plus) opening scene monologue, *Alan Wake 2*.

I will give players a choice at shaping the story. By learning to make new game genres, I can add in *The Spy* new game mechanics. For each loop, I want to add a new genre. The Child is, after all, integrating with games: the more he tries, the more access he has at modifying the game *The Spy* (players) inhabit. A game within a game, a future-self parallel. The meta narrative pushes players at experimenting within different loops / game genres and me into ideating how to insert and explore my narrative and identity inside them: how can players create meaning from The Child’s integration failures, how to link the endings to (game) loops / players choices, and how *The Spy* could disrupt the integration. Through players, my future self reaches my past one.

*I am not doomed to repeat my failures in an eternal loop. They are my spiral.*

When I reached the true ending of *Alan Wake 2*, I was angry at the protagonist, Alan. For escaping/surviving the Dark Place, nightmare realm born from, and altered via art and fiction. He does so by writing an ending I felt didn’t match, to the terror story he was trapped in. Stuck in a time loop and dying myriad times wasn’t enough price to pay, it seems... I wasn’t mad at Alan. I was mad at me. Because the protagonist was not repeating the same (failure) loops, but working (spiraling) a way out of them. What I couldn’t do. Thank you, reader, for listening to my story.

A Cuban poet once said: *We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.* I, choose to be a torchbearer.

This is *my* future.

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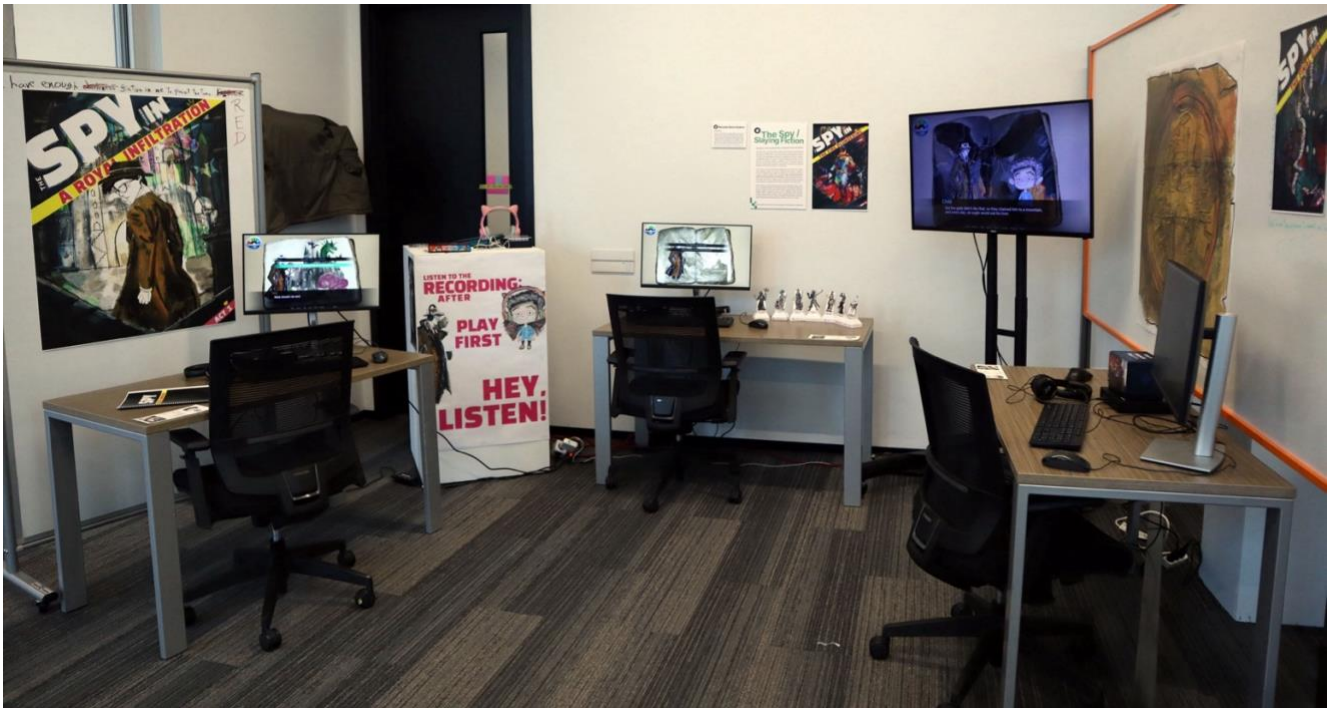
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## Appendix

### **Appendix A: *The Spy*, exhibition (April 4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024) documentation**

The exhibition space consisted of three game stations, and a fourth one including a vintage cassette recorder and audio tapes. Each game station included a poster of each ACT, as well as a printed game asset. They included both the full game, and an adapted version beginning in each ACT. For the first station (ACT 1), a ‘Spy Secret Handbook’, contained clues for making the right decision on this game part. Additionally, this book included collaged art and text of the autoethnographic writings, so players could have a peek at my story. For the second station (ACT 2), paper-craft statues included a text and clues for solving a password. They could be picked up, arranged, and analyzed by the players. The last station (ACT 3) included a large, printed map, where players could look at it for escaping the labyrinth tower in the act. Each game station had a printed information on the table, with what to expect of each ACT that could be played in it. A fourth station included a poster that invited players to check it after finalizing playing. This station had a vintage cassette recorder and 4 tapes. Three tapes contained my commentary and ‘director’s cut’ insight into what went into the design of the game’s ACTs. A fourth tape, included some of the songs I would hear while creating, drawing, and making both game, research, my autoethnographic writings, and while making the game, with some insights and commentaries before each would play. Additionally, each game station included a set of board games that are inspired by spy or detective-like stories. I wanted to give a personal touch, into how themes of spying, investigation, mystery and secrecy became a power fiction of my own and something that I look forward to in any game formats.





**Before you play...**

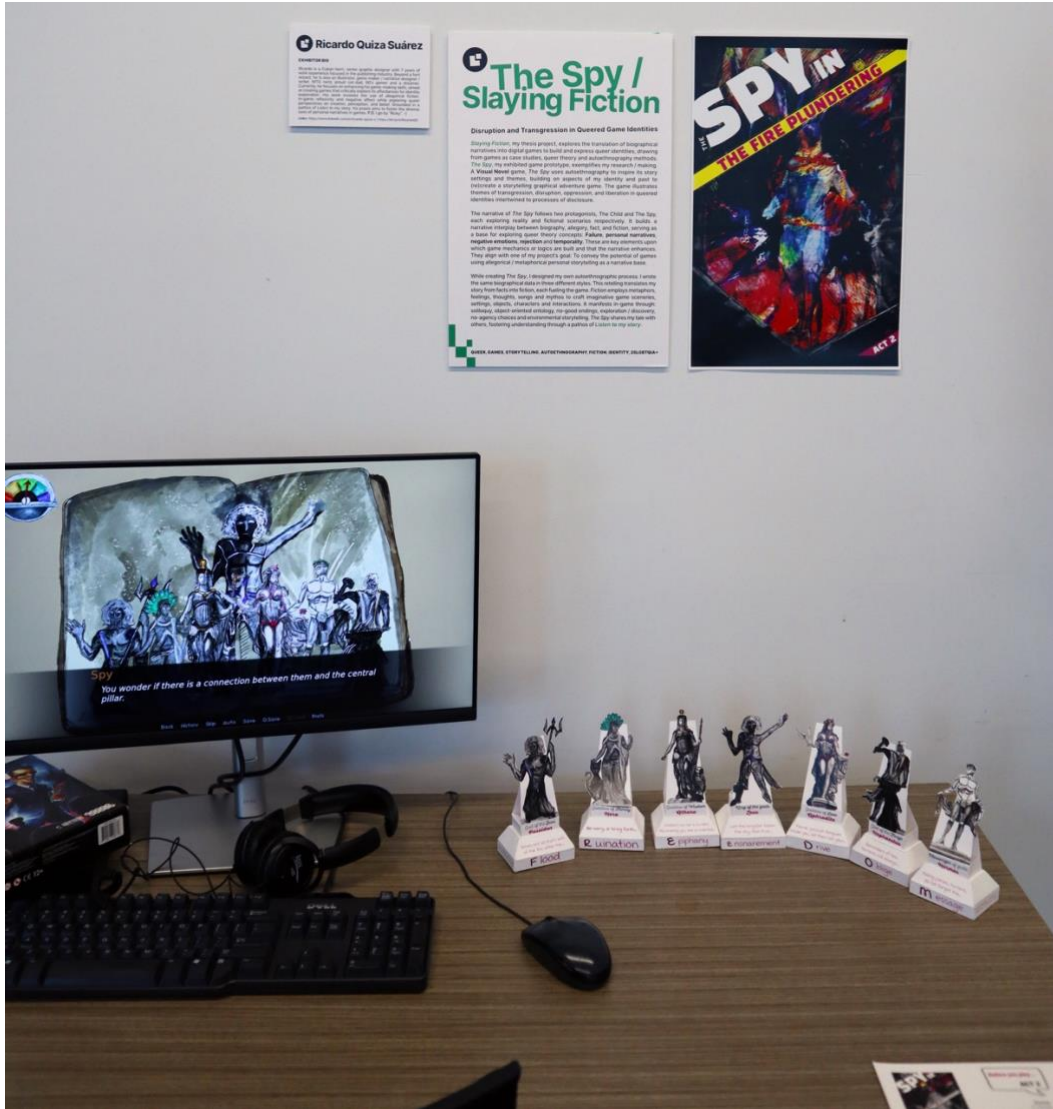
**ACT 1**

**Playtime:**  
3 minutes.

**Play this if you like:**  
Medieval and high fantasy settings,  
introduction sections, gizmos.

**Expect to encounter:**  
Deductive thinking, stealth mechanics,  
"pick the best choice" puzzles.

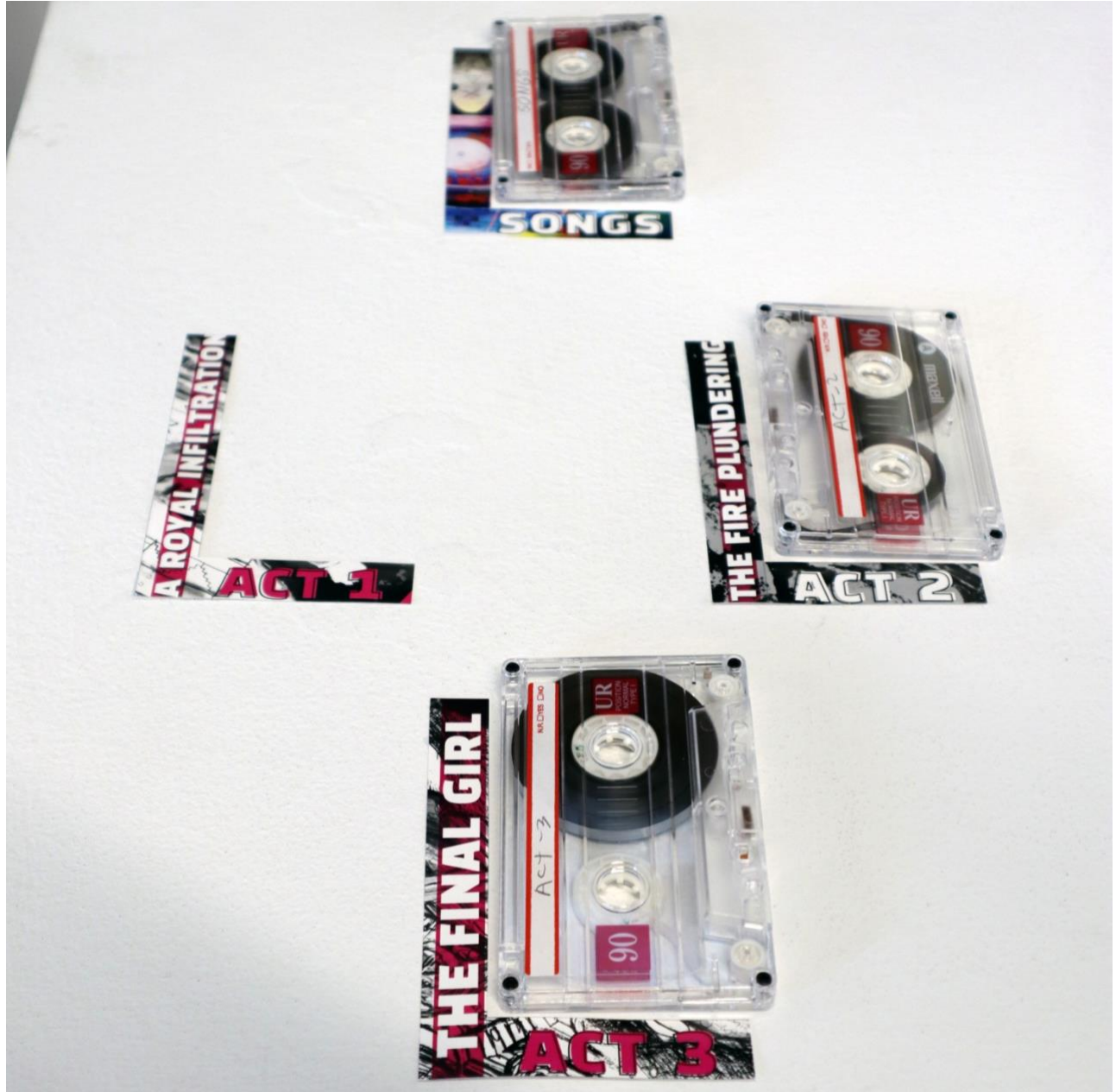




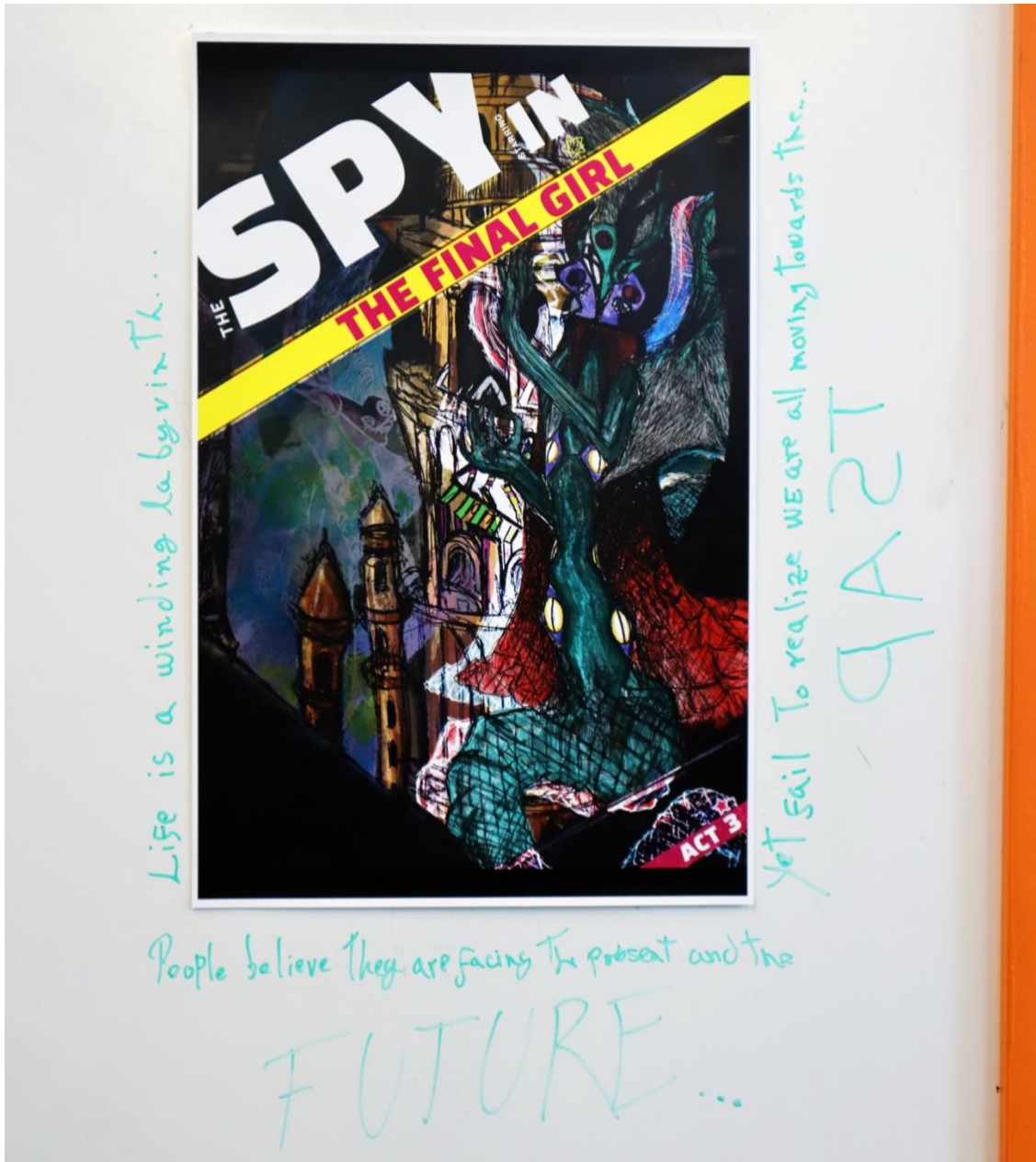












## **Appendix B: REB Appendices for playtest**

### ***The Spy (part of my MDes project, Slaying Fiction)***

#### *Appendix B1: General Overview*

##### ***Overview of the project/deliverables:***

Games have an incredible potential for embodiment and connecting with players, unlike other media. While games that display the intrinsic complex nuances of queerness exist in the independent and personal game scenes, the Triple-A game scene one continues neglecting or shallowly representing queer characters. This project aims to bridge that gap, creating a body of research and guidelines that allows game makers of all levels ethical and meaningful approaches to queer identities in games and a game prototype that addresses such themes.

The project research intends to answer: how can games foster emotionally meaningful experiences within the realm of queered identities?

This is to be done through one-to-one playthroughs of a game experience, *The Spy*.

*The Spy* uses autoethnography to inspire its story settings and themes, building over aspects of my personal history and past to create a new fictional storytelling adventure. It falls into the game archetype of “Visual Novels”, its control schematics are simple and easy to understand and the gameplay consists of an interactive branching narrative via text boxes accompanied by audio and visuals, with a gameplay loop of a story that advances depending on the player’s choices.

##### ***Human Participation:***

The project research engages with probing and testing possible ways to communicate and emote “emotionally meaningful experiences” through play. It is vital that in the praxis-making process to playtest the game and document the user's experiences, to obtain feedback data from human participants that will allow to assess if the game successfully achieves its goals, and how clearly its themes are being communicated; it will allow to refine and iterate the research and project, testing if the narrative methods and other tools are successful or not. This helps inform the research in identifying which emotions, tools and theories are the most effective.

## Appendix B2: Qualitative data assessing.

For properly conducting the assessment of qualitative data and affect responses, I am using a combination of Plutchik's *Wheel of Emotions* and Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow Model* to elaborate a framework that can provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of emotional responses to *The Spy* affordances.

### 1. Selection of relevant emotions from Plutchik's Wheel:

- Plutchik's wheel provides a taxonomy of core emotions and secondary emotions, with degrees of intensity. By identifying specific emotions from the wheel relevant to the research, narrative and game design goals, the research can focus on assessing and testing their effectiveness in *The Spy*.

### 2. Data Collection:

- Methods to be employed in the playtest: observations, surveys, audio recording, semi-structured interviews, and note-taking (check **Appendix B3**).

### 3. Emotion Coding:

- A coding system will be implemented to categorize emotional responses into the emotions from *Plutchik's Wheel*. This coding can be applied to observed behaviours, player responses, and self-reported feelings during gameplay. The coding will focus on 3 variables and will be easily translated between both models used. **1-** Color, identifying the spectrum and kind of emotions. **2-** Letter, to identify target emotions. **3-** Number (1-3) to measure emotional degree. **E.g., Red, A-2** (Rage-> anger-> mild)

### 4. Data Analysis:

- Analyze the data to determine which emotions from Plutchik's Wheel were prevalent during gameplay. This analysis will provide insights into the emotional experiences of players, and assess how effectively target emotions triggered in the players.

### 5. Interpretation and Findings:

- Interpret the data within the context of Plutchik's emotional categories to understand how players experience emotions in the game. **E.g., Sadness:** The emotion of sadness was strongly incorporated into the narrative, particularly during moments of the main character's backstory and endings of each story arc. Players described feeling moments of sadness when they progressed the narrative and understanding near the end that there was nothing they could have done to affect the story outcome.

### 6. Assessing Flow Using Csikszentmihalyi's Model:

- In parallel, use Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow Model* to assess the state of *flow* during gameplay. In *The Spy* (Visual Novel game) context, this involves considering factors such as balance between the fictional and non-fictional narrative elements, levels of immersivity within each Act's narrative, and keeping an equilibrium of the game's most distressing themes. It helps evaluate how the tempo of the designed emotions and narrative moments affects the game flow **E.g.,** Players commented that the end of the second act felt confusing, that the realistic events felt very crude and that they felt frustrated with the main character's decisions but felt that the entirety of Act 3 was a step-up and kept them very engaged while experiencing

moments of rage (*Red, A-I*) during the gameplay. They also commented that the art style and audiovisual was more polished and the writing improved vastly in the ending.

**7. Flow Coding and Analysis:**

- Apply Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow Model* to the collected data to determine if and when players entered a state of flow during the game. Analyze how the elements of flow interact with the emotions identified using *Plutchik's Wheel*. **E.g.**, Act 3 delivered a perfect example of achieving the flow, and it managed effectively to communicate target emotions. Act 2 on the other hand, was unable to keep players actively engaged while failing to deliver desired emotional states.

**8. Integration:**

- Analyze the interplay between emotional responses (from Plutchik's Wheel) and the flow state (from Csikszentmihalyi's model). Consider how emotions may impact or be impacted by the state of flow during gameplay. **E.g.**, After actively achieving the flow in Act 3, it was easier to dig deeper into some of the more intricate and complex aspects of the narrative.

**9. Recommendations and Adjustments:**

- Use the combined findings to make recommendations for game improvements or design changes. Consider how enhancing the emotional experience or flow state can lead to a more engaging and satisfying player experience. **E.g.**, Contrast the overall elements that are working in Act 3 to see how to improve other less effective Acts.

**10. Iterative Assessment (Follow-up Playtesting):**

- Conduct follow-up assessments to track changes in emotional responses and flow experiences after implementing changes based on the initial assessment.

*Appendix B3: Playtesting Details*

**First playtesting session, The Spy V1.0:**

*Expected Date: Between Nov. 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.*

The first playtesting allows me to playtest a beta version of the game, gather live data from the participants (10-15), observe and document the reactions of the players, survey for takeaways from the experience and analyze the emotional state in an observant and discussant capacity.

What I am hoping to do in that last regard is to be able to capture the emotional state of players, while navigating through the game, by analyzing facial micro-expressions, body gestures, utterances, and reactions to specific passages of the game, as well as using short surveys and semi-structured interview formats to gather their feedback, emotional state, and opinions about the game. Each (2) playtesting will occur individually, and sequentially.

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*Activities and workflow of the day (20-30 min per participant):*

## **Introduction:**

Welcome participant and thank them for their involvement. Provide an overview of the playtesting session's goals and objectives.

Explain the importance of their feedback in refining the project. Highlight the importance of honest and constructive input. Address that this project is particularly directed at adding to the body of research regarding Queer game studies. Explain and unpack how autoethnography plays a role in the research and in the making of the game. Discuss that while the overall themes are centred around themes regarding the Queer Identity construction process, the narrative and story touch multiple other intersections, such as Identity, memories, fictional storytelling, escapism from reality, videogames, school and childhood life, among others, so participants are encouraged to discuss these themes, especially how (and if) they relate or emote on them.

**Content Warning:** The game you'll be playing contains representations of bullying, emotional abuse, trauma, and painful memories, as well as self-reflective moments, several vivid phantasy worlds, colourful characters, and glitters of the author's non-sensical silly humour. This content might feel difficult for you at times, especially if you have had similar experiences. Your emotional experience and well-being are important to me. Please consider the following:

- you can withdraw at any time
- You may want to reach out to your support network about this representation.
- There are several organizations offering support to queer and trans folk experiencing emotional distress, such as: <https://www.diversitycornwall.ca/> , <https://free2luv.org/get-support/> , <https://www.secutoronto.org/lgbt-resources>
- You can count on me! I am an avid listener and I would be more than happy to (off the books, off the research) hear your story. I am driven as an ethos in life by the idea of helping others, of being of use, so if my content in any way whatsoever hurt you or made you feel unsettled, then please let me at least provide whatever support I can!

## **Icebreaker:**

Conduct a brief icebreaker activity to help the participant feel (Name presentation, Favorite game, Guilty pleasure game). Consent and Confidentiality (check **Appendix B5**). Ensure the participant signed the consent form. Reiterate the importance of confidentiality and that their feedback will be anonymized. Content Warning unpack moment.

## **Playtesting Session:**

Playthrough Instructions (Provide clear instructions on how to play the game, navigate interfaces, and use any relevant controls). Ensure participants have a basic understanding of the game's mechanics and objectives.

Encourage participants to think aloud, share their thoughts, and voice any concerns, emotions, or observations as they play; Ask them if they could narrate what they are doing as they play.

## Observation and Data Collection

Use audio recording with participants' consent. Note-taking to record observations on participant interactions, gather feedback and document each participant's gameplay experiences. Be an active participant in the experience by talking with them and being a proactive member of the playtest, commenting, expressing, and reacting to their actions. Monitor key performance indicators and metrics relevant to the project (check **Appendix B3**). **E.g.**, Do they have any recurrent emotion or feeling during the act of play, do the key moments in the story trigger a surprise or emotional reaction, are the different narrative moments keeping the player engaged and are the subversion elements (e.g. plot twists) working as intended?

## Feedback Discussion / Survey:

Conduct a semi-structured discussion with participants to gather additional feedback. This discussion will also be available as an online anonymous survey for those who desire to partake in it online asynchronously:

### 1. Emotional Engagement:

- While playing "The Spy," can you describe any specific emotional reactions or experiences you had at different points in the game? How did you feel?
- Which story elements evoked the strongest emotional responses from you?
- Were there any moments in the game that made you feel particularly connected to the story or main character? Or any moment in general you would like to discuss?

### 2. Game Design and Narrative:

- Do you believe that the game effectively communicated the themes it set out to explore?
- How effective do you think the game's narrative was in conveying the themes of queerness and identity? Too metaphorical, too real?
- How much do you think there is of non-fiction in the game relating to my autoethnographic approach as a game maker? Were you able to figure out maybe how these events tie to my past and other queer individual's past?
- Were there any specific game mechanics or design elements that contributed to your emotional experience or in communicating the themes? Like, the presence bar.
- Did you like the graphics, illustrations, audiovisual effects? Any comments on that, maybe some other art style suggestion you would like to see?

### 3. Flow State Assessment:

- Did you ever feel completely absorbed in the game? Did you have fun?
- Can you describe a moment/s in the game where you felt most immersed?

### 4. Recommendations and Feedback:

- Do you have any suggestions for improving the game's emotional storytelling or gameplay experience?
- Are there specific aspects of the game that you believe could be enhanced to create a more engaging, immersive and satisfying player experience?

### 5. Overall Impressions/Final Thoughts:

- What was your overall impression of "The Spy" and its approach to queerness and emotional storytelling? Would you like to discuss anything beyond these questions?





## *Appendix B4: Researcher and Participants*

### **About me:**

My name is Ricardo Quiza Suarez, but I go by Ricky. I come from Havana, Cuba. I have a bachelor's in communication design, and 7 years of professional experience, mainly focused on the editorial and print formats of Design. My project stands at the intersection of Queer Game Theory, Videogames, and Emotional-Focused Storytelling, which draws from my personal story to look at possible ways to understand the construction or deconstruction of queerness moments in Identity, such as Obstruction/Liberation, transgression, and disruption processes.

### **About the participants:**

The participants in the playtesting represent a small sample of adult individuals who identify as Queer Gamers. This selection aims to capture insights from a range of desired perspectives and to ensure an effective understanding of the game's format or themes. Approximately 10-15 participants have been chosen to take part in the study. Participants will be sourced from both the OCAD U community and the Gaming Queer communities of Toronto. The first playtesting will be conducted within a reserved OCAD U campus space. Participants do not need to bring anything from outside, all will be provided. For the follow-up online asynchronous playtesting, I will focus on gathering the input data from 5 of the previous participants. The game will be uploaded to *itch.io*, and I plan to conduct the asynchronous session via an online share-screen enabling platform, such as *Zoom* or *Discord*. I will also provide the participants at the end of each playtesting with a brief survey link, to gather any additional thoughts and feedback they might have about the game or anything else they want to discuss about the project in a written capacity.

*Appendix B5: Recruitment*

Recruitment for the playtesting event will be carried out as follows:

1. Manually, by approaching members of the communities the researcher is acquainted with and that would approach through word-of-mouth or social media contact.
2. Online recruitment, by using the researcher’s social media platform (FB, IG, Twitter, Discord) to extend the invitation to the Queer Gamer community. Additionally, it will draw from relevant communities by identifying social media groups related to Queer Gaming and sharing public posts (with consent from administrators), following the previous post example model:

2.1 Example post text: "🎮 Ready for a unique, emotional, intriguing storytelling game adventure? Join our Playtesting session and explore the crossroads of queerness, video games, emotional storytelling, visual novels and more in The Spy! 🌈🗨️ #QueerGaming #GaymingCommunity #Playtest #VisualNovels" (as a reply/comment) If I got your attention so far, then please check the [Link] below to learn more and joins us at *The Spy* playtesting! (The post will feature a screenshot, a GIF, or a short video showcasing the prototype's gameplay/visuals). For interested participants who access the [Link], they will be directed to a [Call for interest] webpage to capture the applicant's contact info if they consider themselves Queer Gamers and wish to participate and review a sample of the consent form letter/invitation/event details. This information will be used to generate a potential participant list that will allow for follow-up with further materials: invitation and consent form. After the follow-up, this list will be deleted. Example social media post:



3. After the first playtesting session, some of the participants (5) who desired to keep participating (according to the previously submitted consent form checkbox) will be contacted for a short future follow-up online playtest, if they are still interested in being a part of the project. They will be contacted via the provided e-mail for the duration of the project.

### *Appendix B6: Invitation and Consent Form*

#### **The Spy; playtesting invitation**

##### **Key Contacts:**

Ricardo Quiza Suarez (Researcher/Gamer/Cat dad)

OCAD U, MDes candidate, **Digital Futures**

[rqs@ocadu.ca](mailto:rqs@ocadu.ca)

##### **Dates:**

In Person at OCAD U; ***Playtesting: Between Nov. 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.***

Location: Location; 205 Richmond St W Toronto, ON M5V 1V3, OCAD U grad student building, 6th floor DF lounge, quiet room.

Participants: 10-15

Time: 30 min

Online Asynchronous; ***Follow-up Playtesting\*: Between Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024.***

Participants: 5

Time: 30 min

\*The follow-up playtesting will be conducted with select interested participants.

#### **INVITATION:**

You are invited to participate in the playtesting of *The Spy*, a game that is part of a research project that seeks to explore ways in which we can communicate meaningful Queer Self-Identity processes in video games. Using an autoethnographic approach to the game construction, *The Spy* story focuses on the exploration of a recurring thought from my childhood: “I had to keep watch of my presence, pass a class in invisibility” while adding narrative themes of inevitable conflict, no “good or true ending”, escapism into fantasy (video games) while scaffolding over queer game theory. As players, you will advance the story through simple points and click controls, making choices along the way, and seeing where those choices take the story. You will be able to play while contributing to this research project.

**Content Warning:** The game you'll be playing contains representations of bullying, emotional abuse, trauma, and painful memories, as well as self-reflective moments, several vivid phantasy worlds, colourful characters, and glitters of the author's non-sensical silly humour. This content might feel difficult for you at times, especially if you have had similar experiences. Your emotional experience and well-being are important to me. Please consider the following:

- You can withdraw at any time.
- You may want to reach out to your support network about this representation.
- There are several organizations offering support to queer and trans folk experiencing emotional distress, such as: <https://www.diversitycornwall.ca/> , <https://free2luv.org/get-support/> , <https://www.secutoronto.org/lgbt-resources>
- You can count on me! I am an avid listener and I would be more than happy to (off the books, off the research) hear your story. I am driven as an ethos in life by the idea of helping others, of being of use, so if my content in any way whatsoever hurt you or made you feel unsettled, then please let me at least provide whatever support I can!

### **WHAT'S INVOLVED:**

A group of interested Queer Gamer participants will get to playtest in person a beta version of the game. As a researcher, I will observe and document the reactions of the players (emotional reactions, expressions, comments), while also being an active participant in the play experience, commenting, talking, and being a part of the play activity. The information I obtain from the play test event and your reaction to the story will allow me to assess if the game narrative and key moments are working as intended, and what kinds of emotional reactions are they causing, adjusting if needed some of the game loop sections. After playing, we can conduct a small casual interview about the game, or, if preferred, access a survey link where you can unpack your thoughts on the game experience anonymously.

A select group of participants who are interested will be able to participate in a second online asynchronous playtesting. The game will be uploaded on *itch.io* and we will conduct a play session via an online screenshare platform, like Discord or Zoom. I will gauge the reaction to updated content updates to the game and assess emotional reactions. A brief discussion will be done afterward, and a link will be provided for a short anonymous survey for additional feedback.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS\*:**

- The game story is a fictional adapted version of my personal story; despite the adaptation part, it touches on complex themes such as bullying, bigotry, or isolation, which might cause others to feel uncomfortable discussing. Participants will be encouraged to share, comment, or discuss as much as they feel comfortable with.

- Activities conducted online using Discord or Zoom or other social platforms are subject to the platform's policies, which may include privacy and data risks.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS\*:**

- The opportunity to learn from the researcher's story and background as a Cuban Queer cat dad game maker, and how it influences the story you will play and his creative practice.
- The opportunity to contribute to the Queer community dialogue surrounding video games as a powerful storytelling tool.

\*It is possible that you will not experience any or all the potential benefits or risks listed above. Knowing the risks, participants are encouraged to withdraw from the project at any point, with no explanations given.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY:**

Data will be collected from you during the playtesting sessions such as audio recordings, playing comments, direct replies, facial expressions observation, interview comments and surveys. You get to choose how much (and which of) your data can be used or discarded, by directly contacting me and requesting to see any part of your collected data. Collected data will be published as part of a thesis document and submitted to OCAD U to be made available to a wider academic community. Your responses will remain confidential, and any identifying markers (name, e-mail address and other traceable data) will only be made available to the researcher while the project is ongoing for contact and transcription purposes. Upon publication of the research findings, your responses will be anonymized and will have no direct link to you as a participant.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:**

Participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions and/or participate in any activity or component of the research. You may decline to have all, or some, of your data (including audio and/or photos/videos) included with the data collected for this project.

You may further decide to withdraw from this research at any time prior to January, 31st, 2024. If you choose to withdraw from the research, any data obtained from you will be removed and destroyed.

Participants can request withdrawal from the study by emailing the researcher. You do not need to provide any explanations, nor will your decision affect in any way whatsoever your relationship (if any) with the researcher. I fully acknowledge that some of the topics and narrative dialogues from the game touches complex nuanced themes. It is in the researcher's best interest that the participants enjoy the process without feeling compromised in any way.

### **PUBLICATION OF RESULTS:**

The results of this research will be published as part of the researcher's thesis project.

The data collected in the research will help the thesis research to assess if the game and research question successfully achieve their goals, and how clearly its themes are being communicated; it will allow for refinement and iteration of the research and project, testing if the narrative methods and other tools are successful or not. This helps inform the research in identifying which emotions, tools and theories are the most effective.

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE:**

For further information or for any questions regarding the research, you can contact the researcher, Ricardo Quiza, via email at [rqs@ocadu.ca](mailto:rqs@ocadu.ca). This research has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Board at OCAD University, with clearance number [XXX]. If you have any comments or concerns, you can reach out to the Research Ethics Office at [research@ocadu.ca](mailto:research@ocadu.ca).

**CONSENT FORM:**

I agree to participate in the research described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Consent Form (above) and confirm my ability to provide Consent. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this at any time prior to January, 31st, 2024.

**Playtest**

- Yes, I consent to participate in *The Spy; playtesting*. I understand that all resulting process data (including audio transcripts, comments, observed expressions, and survey answers) will be confidential and anonymized and that, unless otherwise stated by me, will be published after January, 31st, 2024.
  
- No, I do not wish to participate in this study.

**Follow-up Playtest**

- Would you be interested in a short follow-up, online asynchronous playtesting?
  
- No, I do not wish to participate in this follow-up.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your help with this project. Please retain a copy of this form for your own records.*

## Appendix C: The Nicky Case games showcase of explorable explanations<sup>174</sup>

Nicky Case, a Canadian gender-fluid game maker, has a unique way of facilitating through game mechanics the articulations of moments of their queer life. Their work also engages in unpacking through mechanics complex real-life phenomena, like how stigma happens or the effects of social media. His ethos of *Some people just want to watch the world learn* clearly manifests in Nicky's games, as they have a unique way of making you think and learn.

I have been personally moved by playing these games, as Nicky's queer experiences resonate through me and echo using the games as a medium; these interactive narrative game case examples help to express how to successfully bridge narrative, game mechanics, queerness, and *no-fun* themes. If I had to resume the powerful effect of Nicky's game in one sentence, it would be something like: "I want you to better understand this aspect about me. Play this game."

### *Appendix C1: Adventures with Anxiety:*

[Link to game](#)

The game takes players on a journey through the struggles of anxiety. The game personifies anxiety as a character (a red wolf), giving it a tangible form. Players are immersed in a series of scenarios and challenges that represent the various aspects of anxiety, such as overthinking and self-doubt. Through their choices and interactions, players experience the emotional turmoil of the protagonist and gain a degree of insight into the complexities of living with anxiety. The game uses storytelling and gameplay mechanics to evoke empathy and understanding, shedding light on mental health issues in a relatable and engaging way.

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<sup>174</sup>[Link to website](#)



It demonstrates the power of games as an incredible medium for exploring and addressing important emotional and psychological themes, fostering meaningful connections between players and the experiences of others.

*Appendix C2: Coming out Simulator:*

[Link to game](#)

The games focus on the experience of coming out as gay to one's parents, using Nicky's own personal experience. As the player, you navigate through a series of choices and conversations, shaping the protagonist's possible endings and relationships with your parents. The game explores the complexities of self-identity, family dynamics, queerness, and societal pressures surrounding the act of coming out, which is a very universal moment for queer folks.

Players experience the emotional weight and vulnerability of the protagonist's journey - and choices-, fostering a better understanding of the act of 'coming out'. It serves as an impactful example of how narrative-driven games can explore sensitive and thought-provoking themes, allowing players to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives.

*Appendix C3: We become what we behold:*

[Link to game](#)

What if we could create an interactive infographic about the effect of violence on social media? This could be an effective way to summarize the *We become what we behold* game experience. Through simple point-and-click controls, the player takes pictures of moving anthropomorphic square and circular figures. Every time the player encounters a new "trend" e.g., *a square with a hat*, that trend reflects itself on a T.V. at the center of the play area. Eventually, episodes of violence begin to make a trend, from non-verbal ones to more physical ones, ending in mass murder between the characters. In 5 minutes, this game can communicate

through simple controls and visuals, how an overly complex phenomenon can be translated to game mechanics, and how can these be translated to the player.

Nicky discusses with Ruberg in an interview for *The Queer Avant Garde*:

I make primarily what are called “explorable explanations,” which people interact by using the mouse. (...) The mouse gives you so much flexibility but it’s also so constrained; designing for the mouse is a way to make the game approachable for a wider variety of people. I think a lot about people who haven’t played as many games before and won’t be comfortable interacting in complicated ways via the keyboard<sup>175</sup>.

Nicky's approach to simple and understandable controls has been one of my inspirations.

Many of the cases examples that I am drawing from build upon simple controls, as it allows also for communicating a message through players with different sets of skill level at playing games.

In constructing the game, I constrained controls to the mouse. He describes:

Text is really flexible, but it is not as concrete or visceral. Pictures are much less abstract. (...) Interactivity has its own affordances. With interactivity, you can actually prod and push and get an output. Instead of it being a monologue, it’s a dialogue. In terms of *Coming Out Simulator*, interactivity forces you to make decisions. Something I wanted to emphasize in *Coming Out Simulator* is the question of being yourself versus keeping everyone happy. You need to decide whether or not to lie, but you also have to remember what your lies were, because otherwise you can get caught. Straight people who play the game often tell me about how, even though they’ve never come out as queer, they’ve come out as other things in their lives (...). The whole experience of having to hide a part of yourself in order to keep the peace with your family is actually pretty universal.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup>Ruberg, Bonnie. *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid.

## Appendix D: Defense slides

Annexed with this document, a separate (.pdf) document can be downloaded, including the defense slides. Inside the document, as comments, further information concerning the research can be found in my words, as well as thoughts and feedback from the exhibition (see example below). Additionally, the slides contain a step-by-step walkthrough of the narrative model (see example below) and how it was used during ACT 3, as well as pointing out moments from the game in which guidelines are used. I encourage readers to consult the document for more in-depth information about *The Spy*. Examples of two of the thesis defense slides:

