Like mother, like burr:

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Abstract

Arising out of a need to document personal memory and narrative, and, more so, to reimagine my pasts, to reconcile with them, this thesis seeks to identify and use the cathartic affordances of game-making and game-playing, contextualizing the practice as a means of imbuing newfound agency, and of self-preservation. The creative component of the thesis is the making of autofictional game sketches of a mother-daughter relationship, acknowledging such a relationship as the crux of one's crucial identify formation (and destruction) - and the recalling, remaking, and replaying of such a relationship as the heart of crafting one's personal catharsis. The research and practice, latticing game studies with fields of literature, film, linguistics, engage in a cyclical process of informing one another through game-making and game-playing. The process adheres to Kara Stone's approach of Reparative Game Design, one centering on the maker, the making, and the acceptance of uncertainties, gaps and questions in the pursuit of knowledge. This thesis aims to offer approaches that a game maker could partake in to truly create a game of one's own.

Keywords: autofictional game, autobiographical game, mother-daughter, reparative game design, aesthetic catharsis, agency, ruminarrative, memory, self-translation, research creation, game sketching

Acknowledgments

My parents.
My advisors Emma Westecott and Cindy Poremba.
My friends.
My peers.

Dedication

献给妈妈。也许有一天我可以鼓起勇气。

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Introduction

Oranges

As a fourteen-year-old, I read Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, an autofictional novel centered on Winterson's fictional self, the relationship with her Pentecostal Christian mother, the dissolution of that relationship, and the simultaneous cementing of her person as she discovers she is lesbian. Instances of externalization is central to the novel. "Jeannette" describes life events in the form of fictitious stories, fairytales and biblical parodies, emphasizing the delusion and pressure that her mother had imposed on her, insisting that the young girl was the embodiment of the spirit of Christ.[1] The novel is rooted in the traumas of Winterson's upbringing and of her identity formation, but the fictional elements in this otherwise assumed autobiographical work afford Winterson with a "new understanding and recreation" of her past and, most significantly, "new agency over her past."[2]

Serge Doubrovosky coined the term "autofiction" in 1977 and described it as a "narrative where there is correspondence between the author, the narrative voice, and the protagonist… [makes] use of authentic paratextual material combined with fictive discourses."[3] These texts establish an audience "that includes the artist as the initial recipient".[4] He also posits that autofiction contributes to one's self-knowledge, as that knowledge is of a dual nature, and one can only achieve complete self-knowledge when one is also knowing the self through recognition of the other. Doubrovoksy proposes, then, that autofiction can be read as a new form of recognition, in which the maker, in full agency, creates a fictional self that re-reads the self, an outer understanding.[5] And viewing the binary of fact and fiction not as opposing but complementary, and necessary in reproducing memory.[6] Winterson has succeeded in such self-knowledge, in her fictional creation of young Jeanette, one is able to visualize the transferring of spirit from her present self to past self; she writes in her actual autobiography, "I wrote a story I could live with."[7]

Though Oranges may not be viewed unanimously as a foundational text of the genre, it is a critical one for me in my own Bildungsroman, being my first introduction to autofictional writing. It was also my first bearing witness to

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[1] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 6.
[2] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 4, 8.
[3] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 6.
[4] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 13.
[5] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 7.
[6] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 9.
[7] González, "Trauma and Autofiction," 4.

the power and clarity that this mode of writing and creating can bring, especially in reimagining one's story.

Agency and games

And so, in tacit ways, my thesis was grounded a decade before its actual initiation, growing as I have worked through different mediums in search of ways to aptly document my memory and my narrative. Deriving from a need to imbue them with newfound agency, to imagine alternative pasts, and, perhaps, also as a means of self-preservation, I ask - What are the affordances of game-making and game-playing in achieving personal catharsis? This remains an internal point of contention, as I debate whose catharsis this belongs to, but, at least tentatively, I've decided that it is mine. As the maker of the game, I am also the player of the game, its primary audience.

In response to the research question, the creative component of my thesis involves the making of an autofictional game composed of episodic events, in the form of game sketches, spanning two decades of my life told through my relationship with my mum. An uneasiness resides in my calling the game autofictional, as I believe the line between an autobiographical work and an autofictional work becomes even blurrier when working with an interactive medium, in that playing creates agency and fictitious outcomes. And I believe my game falls into the in-between. The naming of such is for sake of clarity and the ability to use the affordances of an already established term that "autobiographical" doesn't quite fully encapsulate. The decision to center the game on my maternal relationship stems from the overwhelming effect that my mum had in the formation of my identity and values as we were a parachute family, meaning that whilst one parent immigrates to a new country with the child, the other stays behind. My mum immigrated with me and the two of us were dependent on each other for many years until I moved away from home.

The game is divided into four life stages that follow the chronological order of my life, and each stage consists of one or two playable story events that are of great emotional import to me, ones that I have identified as "narrative disruptions". A concept, introduced by Robert Neimeyer, defined as moments in which one is faced with a loss so great that the continuity of one's narrative is ruptured, fragmenting the Self, and "leaves us subject to the pathologizing of our plot."[8] This concept comes from narrative therapy, which emphasizes seeing the Self as story.

As I reflect on the events that I've chosen to include and reproduce, the commonality amongst them is that they all signify a change in my own sense of agency. And my desire to recreate them arises from the strife and regret that

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[8] Henson, "Fragments and Fictions," 224.

remain pertaining to my response to those changes, regardless of whether those changes were brought about internally or externally. When I was 5 years old, I was to sit at the piano, to practice mechanically every day, with nothing to be done. When I was 8 years old, I immigrated with my mum to a country nearly ten thousand kilometers away, with nothing to be done. When I was 15 years old, I saw that the gap between the two of us had grown so wide and so deep, with nothing to be done. When I was 18 years old, I wanted to die, with nothing to be done. When I was 19 years old, I was battered by the malaises of being an adult, with nothing to be done. When I was 21 years old, I encountered a worldwide pandemic and returned home, with nothing to be done. When I was 24 years old, I realized there was much to be done. The game is as much as a sporadically faithful portrayal of events as it is an account of the ebb and flow of my agency.

In Neimeyer's further deliberation of the concept, he posits that one reaches "narrative achievement," defined as the reconstruction of the Self through meaning-making and narrative reproduction, through "the stories we tell about ourselves, the stories others tell about us, and the stories we enact in their presence."[9] And I believe that I can only attain narrative achievement through my storying and re-storying of past selves through games, the "medium of agency".[10]

Games offer unique affordances in meaning-making and narrative reproduction as games are designated by rules and systems, structuring and, thus, manipulating how one makes choices in game. By fabricating an environment with temporary constraints and temporary ends, one is to adopt a temporary agency. Games, thus, can be viewed as a library of agencies, and to adopt an alternate version of agency different from one's own, is to also adopt "a way of learning new ways of being an agent."[12] By experientially immersing oneself in a game, by assuming different agencies, games allow oneself to engage with agencies in a fluid manner, in being able to communicate and transmit them. This agential fluidity, of being able to move between agential modes, Nguyen argues, is "true autonomy" and one can delight in the "qualities of doing… of deciding and acting."[13]

As I am making an autofictional game, and as I have identified the narratives I am reproducing, the medium affords me the freedom to construct the agential modes that I want to engage with in achieving personal catharsis. Whether to fictionalize and embody a recurring childhood anxiety in play. Whether the

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[9] Henson, "Fragments and Fictions," 224.
[10] Nguyen, "Agency As Art," 73.
[12] Nguyen, "Agency As Art," 76.
[13] Nguyen, "Agency As Art," 104.

mere act of being able to reproduce an event previously thought to be too distressing. Whether the ability to make many, many choices, or none.

Catharsis and games

Aristotle's original definition of catharsis in regards to its role in tragedy from Poetics is as such, "an imitation of an action with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions".[14] And the two definitions of catharsis, that of purgation and purification, have long been contested by scholars as to which Aristotle had implied in his work. However, as Eva Schaper proposes, there is also a third definition, that of aesthetic catharsis, one that is not only pertinent to the form of tragedy and the emotions of pity and fear, but to other if not all art forms, which incite all categories of emotions through "different mimetic contents and structures".[15] Whilst noting that phrases like aesthetic experience, pleasure, and enjoyment are contemporary concepts that Aristotle did not use, he did, in turn, postulate on the issues that arise from them. And noting that an aesthetic concept, in this context, of catharsis is being transposed "from its native domain in a way which changes its function so that it can occur in an analysis of problems connected with art."[16]

Something worth acknowledging regarding the semantics of the word "art" used in definitions of aesthetic catharsis is that I am connecting such definitions to games. And games as art remains a contentious argument. The argument's entailing discourse is a substantial and inconclusive one that will not be elaborated at length. But to temporarily quell voices on both sides and anywhere in between, I am proposing that games are to be thought of here as an artistic medium with notable potential in creative expression and authorship (and should be judged according to new criteria, anyhow).

An aesthetic catharsis, at its base level, points to the unique effect of art through its mimetic function and ability to elicit emotion, the essence of "what it means for something to be… a product of poiesis."[17] Mimesis is defined as a "presentation of a coherent action, made transparent and intelligible through artistic formulation," and is to be understood through feeling. Its function is significant as it illustrates the difference in one's emotional response to events in life to similar events portrayed in art. The latter can transform those events into things "transparent and articulate," leading to an aesthetic pleasure that follows the elicited emotional response in partaking in such art, in which the pleasure completes itself "in a grasp

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[14] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 131.
[15] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 137.
[16] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 134.
[17] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 135.

of" the response's significance.[18] And so Schaper's conclusion is that aesthetic catharsis and its entailing pleasure, and what makes a work of art are founded in the "transformation of events into coherent, meaningful, structured, and intelligible events."[19]

Schaper's definition of catharsis ties into the game form well, in that, games, as well as being an agential medium, are also a condensation of moments of serendipity and harmony that are otherwise rare occurrences in real life. And games can make sense of such moments through processes of crystallization.[20] Generally, because they are fundamentally structured systems with defined rules that can reproduce lived experience experientially. And, personally, because they can cement my memory and narrative in game-making as I parse through them, follow the thread, and embed my mimesis of events into the game environment and the mechanics. And in my game-playing, I can reflect on the meaning that I have imbued, however instinctively, that may transform my understanding and response to the portrayed events.

Alan Paskow provides an analogous definition of aesthetic catharsis that arises when the audience makes "first-person acquaintance with the central character… portrayed with psychological verisimilitude and familial relationships."[21] The character is the audience's principal ego, of the main self, and the counter ego nucleus, of the suppressed and repressed selves, made manifest, and thus carries the audience's project with them, as the audience lives vicariously through them. As the audience undergoes this appropriation, they begin to gain understanding, "new, important and more correct cognitive informings of certain orientation feelings." It is here, Paskow argues, from the changes in posturality and cognition, that catharsis ensues.[22] And so aesthetic catharsis is founded in "that resolution, that recognition, that working through and acceptance of a part of ourselves that was formerly suppressed or disowned, that appropriation," and cathartic pleasure follows the audience's response to their own transformation.

I find Paskow's definition of aesthetic catharsis especially enlightening as I am making an autofictional game, in which the character and player are supposedly bound by the highest degree of identification. The "character" in my game is also not entirely "me," but a somewhat fictional self that moves across events and consciousness, and bearing "a complex mixture of disclosure and disguise" as the self cannot be engaged with directly without appropriation or impersonation.[23] And through this mixture I instill my

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[18] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 139.
[19] Schaper, "Aristotle's Catharsis," 141.
[20] Nguyen, "Agency As Art," 11.
[21] Paskow, "What is Aesthetic Catharsis?" 63.
[22] Paskow, "What is Aesthetic Catharsis?" 64.
[23] Bruner, "The Autobiographical Process," 173.

principal ego and counter ego nucleus, an "inversion and perversion of all conceptions and realities in the search for truth," to bypass an obstinate reality as it is formed in my person and memory.[24] In my game, the character is constructed as "self-less," "placeless," and "timeless," as it speaks disembodied, as it speaks from past and present simultaneously, and as it speaks of things I have said and of things I would never dare to even think.[25] Resolution, recognition, and acceptance as defined by Paskow are difficult to come to, but I hope that through my continual game-making and game-playing I may appropriate this sentiment, that through aesthetic catharsis - "We encounter an other, who, we feel, may redeem us."[26]

The Autobiographical Game

The genre

Autobiographical games are an "emergent genre within independent game production," and are comprised mainly of "small-scale, less developed vignettes".[27] This growth can be attributed to the normalization of existing game making technologies, the advent of independent and artgame festivals, game jams, and the increased accessibility of open-source game tools that require comparatively less technical literacy of their users. Amongst those tools, some notable ones include Ren'Py, a visual-novel maker, Twine, a text-based interactive fiction maker, and RPG Maker.[28] While the genre would be difficult to define as a monolith, seeing as it is not bound by homogenous use of medium, platform or style, its qualities may be more productively assigned to "extra-textual" concepts such as "intention" or "authorial sincerity". An autobiographical game can be just as much a firm retelling of one's narrative or a liberal depiction of one's idiosyncratic thoughts and experiences.[29] Frissen et al hypothesize that due to the prevalence of games in contemporary culture, it is becoming feasible to visualize one's identity "in terms of play rather than narrative."[30] And this phenomenon, Werning proposes, makes it feasible to recontextualize game-making as a "cultural technique" or "a technology of the self," a Foucauldian term that refers to one's "various operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being… to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[31] In this sense, autobiographical games offer compelling evidence that game-making can be an intimate and personal activity.

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[24] Bruner, "The Autobiographical Process," 174.
[25] Bruner, "The Autobiographical Process," 166.
[26] Paskow, "What is Aesthetic Catharsis?" 67.
[27] Werning, "The persona," 29.
[28] Werning, "The persona," 30.
[29] Werning, "The persona," 31.
[30] Werning, "The persona," 30.
[31] Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 18.

Below I look at a small corpus of some significant games in the genre, and while they fall under the umbrella of autobiographical games, it is critical to also note that two of three games are positioned as "semi-autobiographical" or "semi-fictional" by their makers, further illustrating the pliability and potentiality of the genre, and the thin line between autobiographical and autofictional.

As agency, as confession, as half-truth, as survival

[domestic] is an autobiographical game by Mary Flanagan, it is her investigation of game's affordances in "replaying 'recalled experiences'" through the interplay of space and memory.[32] The game is an art mod of Unreal Tournament from 2003, in the form of the first-person shooter. Game modification was initially a participatory grassroots practice in which "fan-programmers" alter or add to a game.[33] As modding tools proliferated and became more accessible in the 2000s, modding began to be used and seen as a feminist intervention, in response to the gendered dynamics in gaming. The practice involves the "appropriating and altering [of] audio/graphical assets and scripts in existing works that provide a core game engine."[34] The game is Flanagan's recalling of her own traumatic childhood event of when she found her house on fire, with her dad still inside. It is constructed mainly of poetic text and photos projected onto structures in the game environment and the player "plays" by shooting "coping mechanisms," in the form of romance novel covers, at the emerging fire as an effort to contain it.

[domestic] appropriates the first-person shooter genre, one built on connotations of masculinity and violence, by modding [domestic] into an explorative space of memory and trauma. Flanagan initializes an "alternative context for contestation," by transforming the game world into an "abstract, non-acquisitional exploration environment" in which the player engages in defensive shooting at the fire, at the trauma. Cindy Poremba notes that the production context as well as the reception are both imperative to how Flanagan has reclaimed agency, in her personal space, and in the cultural space. Upon creation, the game space is a neutral space project onto, in which the subjects are universal and the characters hollow, Pearce proposes, and the personalization of such game space becomes an intervention. Weapons are repurposed, and supposed ambient environments become places of inquiry, pace and mood advertently mirror the malaise of traumatic memory. And in these processes, Flanagan authors her selves, becoming "a system of recorded memory,

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[32] Poremba, "Play with Me," 703.
[33] Postigo, "Of Mods and Modders," 302.
[34] Poremba, "Play with Me," 703.

symbolic trauma, and active resistance," and herself, her own primary audience as she plays life.[35]

Coming Out Simulator is a "half-true story about half-truths," an interactive fiction game made by Nicky Case for the #Nar8 Game Jam in 2014. It is dialogue based and multiple choice, with Nicky, in the "present," sometimes commenting on player decisions. Case is an unreliable narrator, and they make this fact known at the beginning of the game, stating "...all the things we could have, should have, and never would have said. It doesn't matter which is which."[36] The player can make choices that influence the flow of Case's conversations with their ex, mother, and father, but the confrontation is inevitable. It's only at the end that Case discloses the three versions of the story that they have experienced and otherwise created - The Truth, The Half-Truth, and The Lie. Case notes that the narrative structure of the game was made to reflect the same tension they had felt when coming out, "between wanting to tell the truth, and lying to protect myself."[37] This is seen at nearly all points in the game, in which the player is always given three choices, ranging in the truth they hold, and ranging in the "safety" they may afford for Case. Truths and lies are both means of self-preservation, and they hardly exist in binary opposition - "It's that tension between needing to be who you are and hiding that so you can get by day-to-day."[38]

He Fucked the Girl Out of Me is a semi-autobiographical interactive fiction game made by Taylor McCue released as part of a Queer Games Bundle in 2022. The game follows protagonist Ann as they narrate their experience and trauma following their engaging in sex work as a means of paying for their transition and living expenses. The game's draft was created in Twine, before being built in GB studio with art assets made in Clip Studio Paint and Asesprite.[39]

It is unsurprisingly a difficult game to play, with its trigger warning enumerating "Nonconsensual sex, dubious consent, date rape, sissification, kink, transphobia, dead naming, gender dysphoria, age gap, abuse and suicidal ideation."[40] Aptly summarized by Jiang, the game is "a slow death". The game embodies a certain authorial distance as a means of protecting McCue from an external audience but also an internal one. The names have been changed in the game, so no one is identifiable, even the hair color of Ann and Sally, Ann's partner and introduction to sex work, were "inverted at the last minute".[41] And Ann, throughout most of the game, dons a simplified, cartoonish ghost

[35] Poremba, "Play with Me," 706.
[36] Case, Coming Out Simulator 2014, PC.
[37] Case, "Coming Out Simulator 2014".
[38] Case, "Coming Out Simulator 2014".
[39] McCue, He Fucked the Girl Out of Me, GameBoy and PC.
[40] McCue, He Fucked the Girl Out of Me, GameBoy and PC.
[41] McCue, interviewed by Joel Couture, 2023. (Idk how to cite in footnotes)

avatar, again, devoid of recognizable personal details, just as Sally's advice to Ann goes "make a different name, a different life… no one can ever know."

In interviews discussing the making of the game, McCue says that their story is one they've kept hidden for over a decade - "it was extremely painful, so the only thing I could do to stop the shame was say what was painful for me… because otherwise the shame of keeping it in would have killed me."[42] They also note that originally the game was written as a sequel to a prior game they had made and was to be completely fictional, but upon finishing that version of the script, they were overcome with disgust as they "hid behind the wall of fiction."[43] Having reconciled with the truth they wanted to tell, McCue emphasizes the model that they've come to work with, "The past has happened but it's up to me as the designer to lead them through that past."[44] The game has also been criticized by people as a "trauma machine," and McCue complies with the logic of the comment, stating "I wasn't doing this to make the world better. It was pure selfishness that made me act… I only had to confess once, and it would be over… in an attempt to survive no matter how many people I hurt."[45]

Reparative Game Design

Kara Stone proposes an approach for game-makers to implement - reparative game design. Stone defines it as "a process of creating interactive media focused on healing, emotional acceptance, and accessibility for the psychosocially disabled,"[46] an entangled practice that celebrates gaps, doubts and multiplicity. The term psychosocial disability is used here as opposed to others due to its comprehensive positioning of one's debilitation in both the inner and outer contexts (of the body), as well as to the wider field of disability. Although I identify as a psychosocially disabled person in accordance with Stone's usage of the term, I do want to note that in spite of my strong alignment with this approach, I do not feel well-equipped to fully address this aspect of it in my own practice.

Reparative game design signifies a crucial and belated paradigm shift in game creation, from crunch culture that overworks and exploits, to an anti-debilitative approach, one of caring for the game-making and the game-maker. The three tenets are simply repair, care, and share. Repair is not synonymous with cure, for that implies an eradication, which only further stigmatizes the conditions entailing being psychosocially disabled and is also not wholly

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[42] McCue, interviewed by Sisi Jiang, 2023.
[43] McCue, interviewed by Joel Couture, 2023.
[44] McCue, interviewed by Joel Couture, 2023.
[45] McCue, interviewed by Joel Couture, 2023.
[46] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 14.

possible. Instead, to repair is to strive for work that may one day change the media landscape, to "make life more livable."[47] Care recognizes the labor of time, the cycles of life, and, most significantly, the well-being of the maker as well as the player, commending principles of no overworking and no overplaying. Care for the maker in game-making is also being conscious of one's own self-reflection in game, in discerning that "affect cannot be quantified."[48] Sharing is to be radically open and considerate, conceding that making is about "coming to understanding, not demonstrating understanding," and that meaning extends far past playtime.[49]

Stone's reparative game design framework stems from Eve Segdwick's theorizing of paranoid and reparative readings. Paranoid reading is the convention in academia, "a mode of searching for and then revealing hidden violence, opposition, or wrong ideas."[50] Reparative reading is one that centers not solely on the forms of oppression present, but also to look towards "multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love," in the words of Heather Love.[51] It is imperative to note that though Sedgwick presents these readings as binary, Stone regards them as inseparable from one another, as one opens themselves up to everything, one is also subject to the difficult, they are "bound together by the glue of shared affect."[52] And what arises from such processes may be rejection, criticism, obsession - the acceptance of them is inherent to healing for the maker.

Departing from the sterile, medicalized analyses common in measuring player affect, Stone proposes that one must, instead, opt to focus on the game-making process instead of the game's effect on individuals. And to view these reparative processes as small steps, as tools that foster "care, connection, and radical acceptance of emotion," as the scale that balances self-change and world-change.[53]

Conceptual Frameworks

On the mother and the daughter

In "Approaching Abjection," Julia Kristeva theorizes abjection as a state that exists outside of the Symbolic (order), as containing the single quality of "being opposed to I," it is the ambiguous in-between of the Self and the Other, as neither subject nor object, as "not me, not that, but not nothing,

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[47] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 16.
[48] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 16.
[49] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 17.
[50] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 18.
[51] Stone, "Time and Reparative Game Design."
[52] Stone, "Time and Reparative Game Design."
[53] Stone, "Reparative Game Creation," 21.

either."[54] The abject is closely linked to the reaction to the perceived binary of what is considered impure and taboo, and what is clean and acceptable - "'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it."[55] Kristeva situates the abject in the pre-symbolic, maternal phase, which exists before identity formation, in which "jettisoning" the abject becomes crucial to establishing the self. But the abject haunts and lingers, taunting an incomplete transition, forever an equivocal existence to the Self - "one does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on enjouit]. Violently and painfully."[56]

Eman Khalil Mukattash uses Kristeva's abjection as a framework to examine the ambivalent feelings and conflicts that arise between the first-generation immigrant mother and the second-generation daughter as the latter attempts to build the Self amidst two cultures. To Mukattash, this abjection occurs at the attempted severing of the cord between mother and daughter, in which the child rejects and even sacrifices the mother, but the mother remains the critical source of identity for the child - "there is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded."[57] The mother stands in as both preserver of colonial patriarchal values and the preserver of native culture, in which the daughter is subject to, and any connection that she has to society and culture is filtered through the mother. The mother, out of narcissism, tries to remain in control, and the daughter, now viewing the abject as associated with "all forms of annihilation: meaning, identity and independence," tries to abject the mother.[58] As the daughter believes the abject is the hindrance to her continuity of self and existence and separation as an independent subject. The daughter, unsuccessful, thus becomes entangled in a transitional state of being, in-between Self and the Other, unable to identify with the mainstream nor native culture. The daughter is unable to return to the mother after her initiation to the Symbolic and is trapped in the "marginal space of the abject," maintaining connection whilst renouncing connection with the mother.[59]

Mukattash discusses Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" in brief, a story set in a Chinese American family with a first-generation Chinese mother, and a diasporic Chinese American daughter. As the mother exerts possessive pressure on the child and their relationship becomes strained, the daughter comes to associate Chinese culture with the abject feelings that she feels towards her mother. And the daughter, conversely then, associates American culture with the key to

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[54] Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 2.
[55] Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 3.
[56] Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 9.
[57] Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 5.
[58] Mukattash, "Mothered/Othered," 3.
[59] Mukattash, "Mothered/Othered," 4.

her independence. But alas, the daughter remains in the blurred distinction "between her Self and the m(other)."[60]

Kristeva's abjection is usually read in relation to the horror genre and psychoanalysis, and it is a crucial text to me because the intricacies of my relationship with my mum were rooted in fear for a long time. And through the processes delineated by Kristeva, the implication of what every daughter must undergo, however cruel, to become her own person as necessary, is a welcome comfort in the cognizance of my veneration and guilt that I hold toward my mum. A monologue spoken by the daughter of the portrayed mother-daughter relationship in *Autumn Sonata* encapsulates these intricacies affectingly -

"A mother and a daughter, what a terrible combination of feelings and confusion and destruction. Everything is possible and is done in the name of love and solicitude. The mother's injuries are handed down to the daughter. The mother's failures are paid for by the daughter. The mother's unhappiness will be the daughter's unhappiness. It's as if the umbilical cord had never been cut. Mama, is that true? Is the daughter's misfortune the mother's triumph? Mama, is my grief your secret pleasure?"[61]

And Mukattash's contextualization of abjection brings a much needed and deserved dimension to it that diversifies the context to race and culture. Even when not explicitly framed as such, a lot of the underlying tension of my own relationship with my mother portrayed in the game and recalled, inevitably births from this disjointed split in culture, and the values and identities that I must code-switch between.

The ruminarrative

"One word forward, two words back. Snippets off-script and fragments of self and story that tumble and trouble and trace the secret shape of some secret me."[62] Donna Henson writes of the ruminarrative, and in its form. Plainly, the ruminarrative is verbal rumination in narrative form, it is repetitive, it turns in on itself, it introspects, it reflects, it validates, it teeters in past, present, and future (tense) - and it is the tool that one has to "story [and restory] some sense" into one's life.[63] In essence, it carries the drive and desire to dissect and expound, and, in its nature, is capable of unfurling the self in raw utterances, disquiets, and illuminations. The repetition is embedded within, as one stories and restories a strand of the Self, this narrative reproduction becomes an "authoring of the Self."[64] And it morphs into the scarce thing that one, that everyone, searches for, an "emotional

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[60] Mukattash, "Mothered/Othered," 5.
[61] Bergman, "Autumn Sonata," 1:10:30-1:11:53.
[62] Henson, "Fragments and Fictions," 222.
[63] Henson, "Fragments and Fictions," 223.
[64] Henson, "Fragments and Fictions," 223.

resonance" that exists between the Self and the Other; it is one of the only witnesses to life, living, being.

In my game, gameplay mechanics are accompanied by, if not enveloped in, my own ruminarratives that are sprawled diegetically in the game as well as outside of it. I move backwards in time to when I was five, eight, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one, to moments that I may now consider narrative disruptions, as each stage in the game represents a Self (that has always been) splintered at the boundary of different languages and realities. Selves that I, presently, must write about, that I must instill any inkling of coherence through recalling, imagining, writing, and rewriting. And in this process, I am retaining, enacting and reenacting how narrative relates to the self, how one will always inform the other, crucially and forever.

Language

In translation

Much of my game is bilingual with text written in both simplified Chinese and English. This is not a matter of accessibility but a method to visualize my identity as a process of always being in translation, formed by and tethered to the linguistic systems and cultural milieu that I alternated between as I was growing up, and still do, now. This binary was created when I immigrated to Canada from China when I was eight years old. Though both my mother and I did not speak English, it was decidedly much easier for me to learn, and I bore the role of the translator despite having no mastery in either language. This shift in languages is implied in the game. The Piano, the first event, is the only event in which mum speaks solely in Chinese, as that was the only language I understood at the time at five years old. Her text is always translated from then on.

As Salman Rushdie concisely metaphorizes, immigrants are "translated [wo]men," in that translation is not merely manipulation of a language, but also the translation of identity.[65] As such, Manuela Constantino speaks of her experience as a French-Canadian immigrant facing her French speaking family, "I can now read them in two languages and that I have become a bilingual text that they are trying to decipher with only one language… I have lost the ability to reproduce this person."[66] The pre-migration self becomes a "source text," translating for an Anglo audience, the "target text," it is a process of translating oneself into the Other. But in these processes, one also has to acknowledge the un/translatability of the Self and the asymmetrical relationship between both selves.[67] This un/translatability and asymmetrical

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[65] Constantino, "Emerging," 130.
[66] Constantino, "Emerging," 130.
[67] Constantino, "Emerging," 133.

relationship can be seen commonly in the anglicized version of immigrant names, of words that could never entirely encapsulate what another means, and most fundamentally, "racial difference as a function of language itself."[68] This can refer to the positionality and privileges that one is afforded when speaking in a different language. Early in the game, I comment on my speaking English and my annoyance at my mum's dependence on me because of that. Mum, later, also uses my speaking English as a point of contention, exclaiming that I hold contempt because of it, but that I would never be of another ethnicity and that I would always be Chinese. There are many discomforts in attempting to confront the "linguistic, cultural and generational forms of difference" that come with the translation process, in that it will never be complete, nor will it ever be accurate - there are no "comfortable positions" to read these differences. But perhaps one can view these discomforts as crucial and didactic in the ongoing process of translating identity.

In self-translation

"Giving up one's mother tongue in acts of self-translation is a highly expressive form of the notion of *devenir*…" expresses Deleuze. *Devenir* is the recognition of becoming as a bearing across, as unfixed, as a "place of in-betweenness".[69] It stands as an alternate model to the *machine binaire*, which is described as a "socially, politically and historically-enforced act of choosing between fixed poles."[70] When one cannot relieve oneself of living in such modes, one's life exists through self-enmity that never ceases. And so, with criticality, one must translate themselves when caught veering between two cultural identities. Self-translation becomes a space in which the difference is made visible, but also the movement to "bridge" that difference, as one engages with the *devenir*, moving across the space, "performing and authoring".[71] And in that movement, a new text is produced, by donning the "author-translator" role, self-translation claims a "dialogic (re)imagination of worlds through words."[72] One is in constant interpreting, negotiating conversation with "source text" and "target text," rewriting and reimagining.

The whole of the game is self-translated, but due to linguistic and cultural nuances, the source and target texts are never quite the same, or "correct," and I must reengage with my source text and target text again and again. But there is an actionability to be learnt in this process as one traverses the space with more ease, letting one text be affected by the other and vice versa. In the game, there is an instance in which I insert "mama," into my otherwise completely English response to mum. It's the only time that I translate the word into Chinese, as I always address her as "mum" in the game

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[68] Constantino, "Emerging," 133.
[69] Beaufoy, "Milan Kundera".
[70] Beaufoy, "Milan Kundera".
[71] Gallo, Ouyang Yu," 3.
[72] Gallo, Ouyang Yu," 2.

otherwise. I signal that it's a "foreign" word by italicizing it, it is seen as alien, when, in fact, it has always been my only name for her. It is a crossing of cultural boundaries made visual, but it is also a linguistic liminality, of in-betweenness, made apparent in a way that cannot ever be translated away. In another instance in the game, my mum's text is given two similar English translations and designed so that the translation will be chosen at random to be revealed seconds after the Chinese text instead of appearing simultaneously. The difference in the translations lie in their interpretation of the Chinese word "相信," which, under different contexts, could mean belief, trust, or faith. The two English translations are - "You know that I trust you." and "You know that I believe you." They may appear identical but, to me, the first implies "I trust that you won't be stupid." whereas the latter implies "I believe in you." And the programmed delay emulates the hesitance in my decision in choosing which one to assume, thereby changing the conclusion of my conversation with mum.

In disenchantment

Intersubjectivity is defined as the "shared understanding and connection between individuals in a social context."[73] But intersubjectivity is innately complex and hegemonic, dependent on a common level of mastery of language, first and foremost. And my incompetence in both languages led to a certain "disenchantment with reality" for me, concocted by marginalization in social, cultural and intellectual respects.[74] Even after having immigrated nearly twenty years ago, I am still prone to English grammar and spelling mistakes, prone to mispronouncing words, and I have left Chinese a long time ago. Ouyang Yu encapsulates the sentiment, "You may forever hover around the edge of the centre, giving the mistaken impression that you are part of the centre."[75] Self-translation arises out of a need to take control, and a need to distance. Self-translation as the "authority to draw on the artist's hyphenated self."[76] Self-translation as the practice of "realizing a schizophrenic identity."[77] Self-translation as "the perpetual wandering across worlds and between la langue de la raison/reason and la langue du coeur/heart."[78] I use self-translation not out of want but of necessity, attempting to dis/entangle my identity that has long been dictated by two languages.

The instinctive thoughts that surfaced when I first started self-translating for the game were: How could I use language to exclude? How could I use language to distance? In one event in the game, I sought to make the Chinese

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[73] Gallo, Ouyang Yu," 5.
[74] Gallo, "Ouyang Yu," 5.
[75] Gallo, "Ouyang Yu," 6.
[76] Gallo, "Ouyang Yu," 15.
[77] Gallo, "Ouyang Yu," 13.
[78] Gallo, "Ouyang Yu," 16.

and English texts different, though they may give the illusion of being translations of each other to a Chinese or English speaker, they, in fact, demonstrate the dissimilarity in my two identities. And this split in meaning could only be understood by another bilingual speaker, the whole of my person only to be made privy to them. Perhaps this arose out of a childhood bitterness, in which I was made to feel like I was lacking in both languages and will always carry that lack with me. In an act of pettiness, I hope to claim sovereignty over my text, and to signify them, however I choose as the author-translator.

Memoriality

Though my game is centered on the mother-daughter relationship and my narrative, it is also an implicit examination of my homes, or, rather, of many spaces and places that I can no longer return to nor recall with confidence. Being a parachute child means that home is, always, embodied in at least two conflicting sets of memories and perceptions. Home is not merely a physical being, but an entanglement of experience, time, and identity that constitute my different realities. In the time span depicted in game, I have had five homes. And in real life, I have had nine. In this respect, home has been and always will be filtered through photos, things immaterial, things cold, hard, but "accurate". Like my childhood home in Wuhan that exists as a site of impossibility because I cannot return to who I was before I immigrated, akin to a branching of my life that cannot be undone. Photos, then, are my only means of looking back, and why I've chosen to use them in the creation of my game assets. I foresee the texture of my personal memories to be embedded and changed in the asset creation process, in how they map traces of memory literally and metaphorically, creating fictions and recreating truths.

Acquiring

Susan Sontag describes photographs as "not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement."[79] They are simultaneously a "trace" of the real, of what has been photographed, and an extension of it. The making of a photographic image remains a "magical activity," as this magic in making something real also poses the means for "appropriating or gaining power over [it]... acquiring it, of gaining control over it."[80] Sontag proposes three ways to extend and acquire a subject, as surrogate possession, as consumer to an event, and as information. And the intention for such acquisition is in the redefining of reality, hardly ascribing to static definitions of reality and the image - "When the notion of reality changes, so does that of the image, and vice versa."[81] And below I will foundationally delineate the theoretical groundings of the acquisition process that I partake in as a means of

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[79] Sontag, "On Photography," 128.
[80] Sontag, "On Photography," 120-121.
[81] Sontag, "On Photography," 125.

"possessing" the memory of the past once more through the photographic image in the asset building process, and, in turn, how it "possesses" me.[82]

Reliquaries of memory

In "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," Vivian Sobchack discusses Jean-Pierre Meunier's phenomenology of cinematic identification. He addresses the three "modes of spectatorial consciousness" as such - the home movie or film-souvenir, the documentary film, and the fiction film.[83] Though Meunier envisions the three modes as separate, almost contested existences, Sobchack instead suggests that they coexist simultaneously, that it is possible for one to shift into another. The three modes must be defined, in their relationship to the spectator, or audience, and to each other, before explicating their implications and my application of the scholarship in my observances of the maker-player relationship and the process of altering personal materials for game assets.

The apodicticity that Meunier proclaims that one must regard when interpreting the model is that the presentation of subjects on-screen are not corporally present to the spectator, "except in their form as images."[84] And in this state, when the spectator perceives, it is always entangled in their own consciousness and accumulated knowledge, which then forms an existential attitude or bias towards the subjects on-screen. This attitude positions the spectator as an "existential subject in relation to the screen and posits the existential status of what [is seen] there in relation to what [the spectator has] experienced and know of the life-world [they] inhabit."[85] The spectator's attitude towards each film mode, then, is varied due to this established relationship.

Placing the three modes on a spectrum, the fiction film lies at one end of the spectrum, in which the subject on-screen could only be perceived as completely irreal, being a fictitious entity that does not exist elsewhere, has not existed elsewhere, but only "here" on-screen for the spectator. The documentary sits at the intermediate of the spectrum, that which validates a spectator's existential and cultural knowledge, but also evokes their "partial lack" of it in personal knowledge, in that a subject on-screen may not exist to them in specificity.[86] At the other end of the spectrum is the film-souvenir, or the home movie, encapsulating personal affects, places, icons. The spectator's attitude towards such is an acknowledgment of its existence, that it has existed elsewhere in real time and space aside from being solely on-screen. In the film-souvenir, the spectator's consciousness participates in

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82 Sontag, "On Photography," 128.
83 Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology," 242.
84 Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology," 242.
85 Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology," 243.
86 Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology," 243.

a "constitutive activity," as the understanding of the subject on-screen is less prioritized than attempting to recover the memory of what is seen. According to Sobchack, this is a process that can only be undergone by actual subjects of the film-souvenir, as only they can recognize their own history. This creates an almost paradoxical phenomenon that Meunier coins "empty sympathy," and Sobchack calls "nostalgic pleasure," the impossibility felt by the spectator in remembering and wanting to rejoin the home movie yet cannot.[87] In the same vein, Sobchack concludes that for a stranger to view someone else's home movie, it would be an activity posing no merit, as no constitutive activity can be triggered, due to no personal recognition, and no nostalgic pleasure experienced, due to no loss of a personal experience.

Lourdes Esqueda Verano challenges Sobchack's stance on home movies, proposing that they hold intrinsic value and that they function, metaphorically, as reliquaries of memory. Verano notes that although Sobchack names the mnemonic value of home movies, their function as "traces or vestiges of a family history," this same value prevents them from being read as anything but by an outside spectator.[88] However, it is also possible that when home movies are recognized as what they are, a general sense of nostalgic impulse is provoked, almost instinctively. Verano emphasizes that the true importance of home movies lie not solely on what is represented, but in the experience that they create, one of "Mitsein," or being-with-others, and this is immediately legitimized upon their creation, as home movies are made with the intention of being shared amongst close loved ones.[89] And the home movie effect, thus, is possible for all viewers of home movies, and that they experience a peculiar sense of authenticity entailed by recognition and nostalgia.

Borrowing from Wada-Marciano's conceptualization of home movies as a reliquary of memory in reference to the films of Kore-eda, Verano delves into how home movies can be recontextualized as such and their relationship to authenticity. The primary function of the material relic, though its container is beautifully adorned, is in its "presentation of ontological evidence," in the past that it contains. It is more than a site of memory, it is a mode of memory and intimacy.[90] And for home movies, in all their authenticity, "only the genuine everyday actions of the people portrayed, it would seem reasonable to describe these memories as relics and their medium, the film image, as a reliquary."[91] Further parallels exist between relics and home movies, as they are both stored in holy places, viewed as sacred, and are used to connect to a past (of place, of people) that is no longer. Verano exclaims "when we separate content from medium, we become even more aware that what is

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[87] Sobchack, "Towards a Phenomenology," 248.
[88] Verano, "Home Movies," 358.
[89] Verano, "Home Movies," 361.
[90] Verano, "Home Movies," 365.
[91] Verano, "Home Movies," 366.

venerated, as Augustine suggested, is not the reliquary itself, or even the relic, but God."[92] Verano has so aptly likened memory and the affect that it evokes as blest as everything holy, unknowable, and ever so yearned for.

Noting here that though I see myself as both the primary maker and player of this game, within this aspect of engaging with Verano's text, I am speaking on the secondary player, especially as I am to share my work in an MFA setting and the possible subsequent sharing of it online. In my making process, substituting home movies here for all my personal photos, videos, and audio that are the main materials in building the game assets, the texture of such memories, and how they are perceived and recognized by me, the maker, and the player are of especial importance to me. There is an inevitable distance that will always exist between my home movies and the player, as they are not me. And according to Sobchack, this may lead to a meaningless experience, ultimately. But coming across Verano's text, I have been able to reconcile with and make sense of a lot of the anxieties and futilities that come with building a game of one's own experiences. Not in believing that the player's interactions with the game will always be pleasant or meaningful, but that the game's existence and the inclusion of my home movies are not without their intrinsic value.

My personal materials undergo rounds of post-processing, to reach a stage that I feel they closely visually represent my impression of such memories and sites. I view these images on screen as my own reliquaries, but my reliquaries have been altered by me, manipulated, and tainted, even, by my bias, and in turn, transforming the nature of the relics they contain. Although I view memory as significantly as Verano, relics are not unchanging artefacts nor ones of complete reverence. Rather, they are equally sacred as they are malleable, in serving of the self-narrative. For me, healing and creativity arises from the spaces between the reliquary and the relic, the reliquary and the maker, and the relic and the maker. Just as Verano argues, the most remarkable characteristic of the home movies lies not in what is represented in them, but the "God" that they elicit.

Research-creation

For my methodology, I would like to reframe research-creation as a sequential framework, in that, at different stages of my thesis, different forms of research-creation take place. I propose this reframing as my research and practice are interdependent on one another and to isolate one kind of research-creation from all others or to categorize them as disparate from one another is not conducive to my working process.

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[92] Verano, "Home Movies," 369.

The four subcategories of research-creation are as follows:

- *research-for-creation*, a "gathering… of materials, ideas, concepts, collaborators, technologies… directed towards a future 'revealing,'"[93]
- *research-from-creation*, "performances, experiences, interactive art works, et cetera can also be ways of generating research data… used to understand different dynamics,"[94]
- *creative presentations of research*, "presentation of traditional academic research in a creative fashion,"[95]
- and *creation-as-research*, "elaboration of projects where creation is required for research to emerge… extract knowledge from the process… creative production that is entailed, as both a tracing-out and culminating expression of the research process."[96]

Research-for-creation emerges at the stage of the literature review, in which I gather literature from relevant fields and discern conceptual frameworks and theories that later help inform my game-making and game-playing. Research-from-creation emerges at the stage of the contextual review, consolidating and analyzing works in the game genre that help ground my own work, informing how previous games have taken similar or dissimilar approaches to alike subject matters. This is important as the autobiographical game genre is an indie game genre that is difficult to define, and, as of yet, does not have established criteria as to what constitutes one. Creative presentations of research emerge at the stage of game sketching, the sketches themselves embodying alternative presentations of autofiction. Creation-as-research emerges from game-making and game-playing that occurs throughout the work, such processes and documentation of processes generate knowledge for me to achieve my personal catharsis.

Game Sketching

Game-sketching is the approach I use to synthesize everything that I've learnt, written about, and envisioned into rapidly developed "playthings," as initial ideations for the game-making process. Emma Westecott draws from Buxton's theoretical framing that posits a binary between sketches and prototypes, the former characterized as generative, and the latter as evaluative. Sketches emphasize process and documentation, being "plentiful, clear, and distinct gesturally with minimal detail…"[97] Westecott quotes Ionascu, likening game-sketching to its more analog cousin, of drawing, "used

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[93] Chapman & Sawchuk, "Research-Creation," 15.
[94] Chapman & Sawchuk, "Research-Creation," 16.
[95] Chapman & Sawchuk, "Research-Creation," 18.
[96] Chapman & Sawchuk, "Research-Creation," 19.
[97] Westecott, "Game sketching," 14.

as metaphor," contextualizing the process as a feed-back loop between the maker and their practice, one in which the maker communicates with their idea through drawing, and repeats.[98] A three way dynamic is also pivotal to game-sketching, one that exists between the maker, the game, the authoring environment, otherwise known as the game engine. This aspect of game-sketching is crucial to my making as, due to the nature of the game stages that have been designed, each story event employs different mechanics, and thus requires my adaptation to different engines, platforms, and tools to best fit each of them. An example of game-sketching is the whiteboxing of a scene, composed of placeholders and/or prefabs, so that the "what" and the "how" of a game could be repeatedly and continually visualized and reflected upon as the maker works ongoingly, exploring and experimenting.[99] And this is the starting point for most if not all of my sketches as well, as I work concurrently on asset production and scene building - the game mechanics are mapped and coded, placeholders are used in place of assets, and one or two sketches are created leading to a prototyping stage.

The Sketches

Stage 1 "You were once so small in my arms."

Story Event 1 – The piano

I am 5 years old. I promised my mum that I'd practise the piano every single day, but this song is boring to play and my feet are starting to turn numb.

This is a procedural sequence that emulates the monotony of my practicing piano. When I stop playing, an argument ensues between my mum and I, signaled by the ominous footsteps leading upstairs and the heavily distorted text on screen. This is an argument with her that I had for the very first time then, but versions of it invariably found themselves into our conversations many times since then. The incisive conclusion from my mum is always the same, that

I am unable to keep any promises to myself and to her, that I will always 半途

而废 or "fall by the wayside".

Game Sketch 1
Making the piano
It was important to remake the piano in the game based on my childhood piano, instead of using a ready-made model or making one from scratch without reference, as I want everything portrayed in the game to be as authentic as possible. I asked my mum to take photos of it for me, directing her remotely

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[98] Westecott, "Game sketching," 16.
[99] Westecott, "Game sketching," 17.

as to how to frame the photos and what to include. I did not disclose to her what it would be for and thankfully she did not ask.
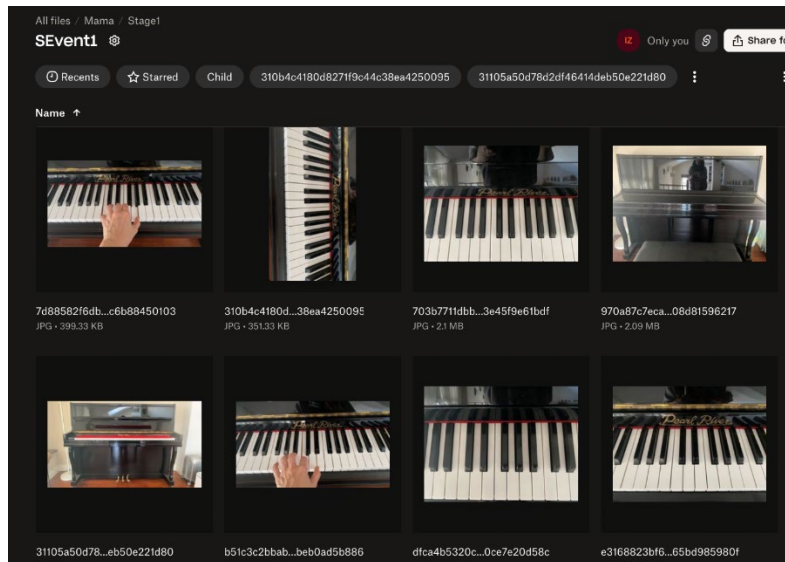

Figure 1 - Photos mum took of childhood piano

The photos were then brought into Photoshop, and the most aptly framed photo of the keyboard was used to create playable piano assets. The white keys were cropped one by one, and everything else served as the static base. Then all assets were brought into AfterEffects to puppeteer the individual key animations. I chose a simplified version of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake as the practice piece as it is one that I remember vividly and fits the piano scale being depicted here.

Figure 2 - Cropped white piano keys
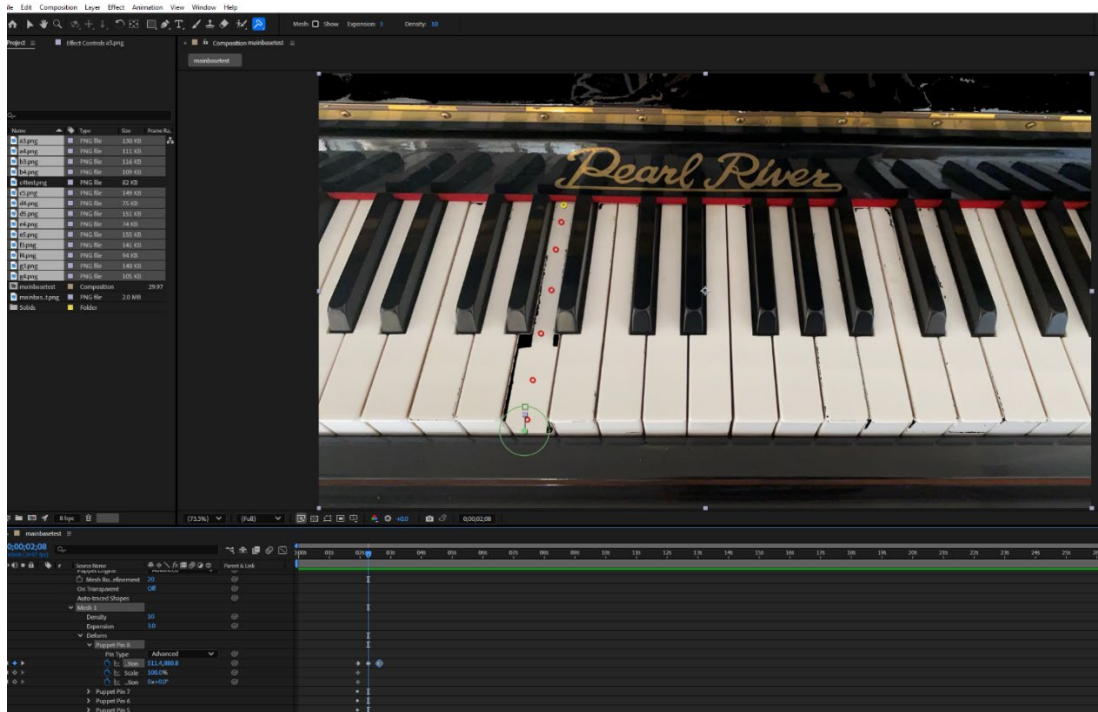
Figure 3 - Piano keys being animated in AfterEffects

After the animations are done, some post-processing is completed in Photoshop
again to ensure the style of the photos are aligned with the rest of the game,
in embodying a mixture of uncanniness and nostalgia. The piano assets were
finally brought into Unity, with animation frame rate and pace adjusted and
sounds attached to each key. The player is prompted to play Swan Lake almost
endlessly by the Chinese cues put on the keys appearing sequentially that
roughly translate to "I don't want to play" repeatedly.

Figure 4 - Piano with cues

The Argument
When I stop playing the piano for five seconds, "mum" is triggered, indicated by the aggressive (looking) text on the screen that translates to "Who says you could stop playing?" accompanied by a stomping sound bite. I think the individual manipulation of the characters in their size and degree of warping visually represents how my young self had perceived mum's voice, one that is mercurial and fear evoking. This process of manipulating text is then used for all the animated texts from mum in the resulting argument.
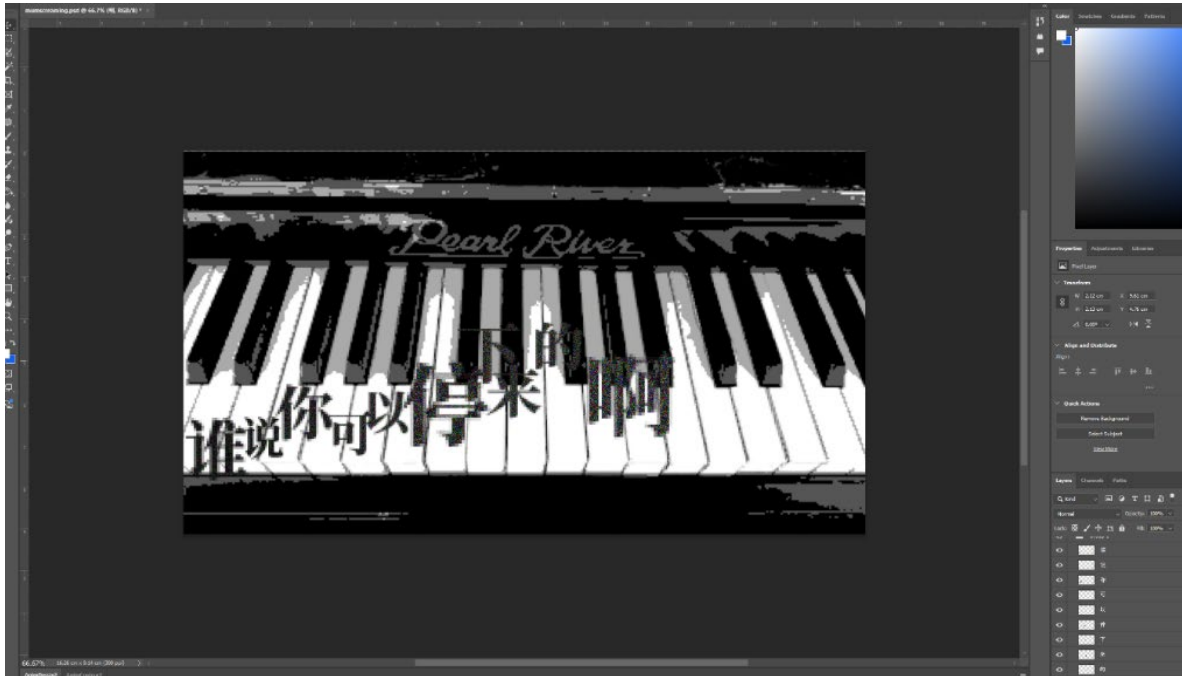
Figure 5 - Manipulation of individual Chinese characters in Photoshop

The mechanics for the argument is designed to mimic the inundation I feel whenever in an argument with mum, that she'll continually spew things of her own accord, ignore things I may say, go on tangents, and come to conclusions that, while seemingly didactic, cut deep and stay with me. And I am left to grasp at anything that comes to mind, struggling to speak my mind. The only way to dispel the things that she says, so they don't fill the screen, is through correctly typing out and copying my response as shown on screen. But my responses get longer, and mum is designed to increase with speed in her

comments. Some of them will cover the response input box and hinder my ability to respond.
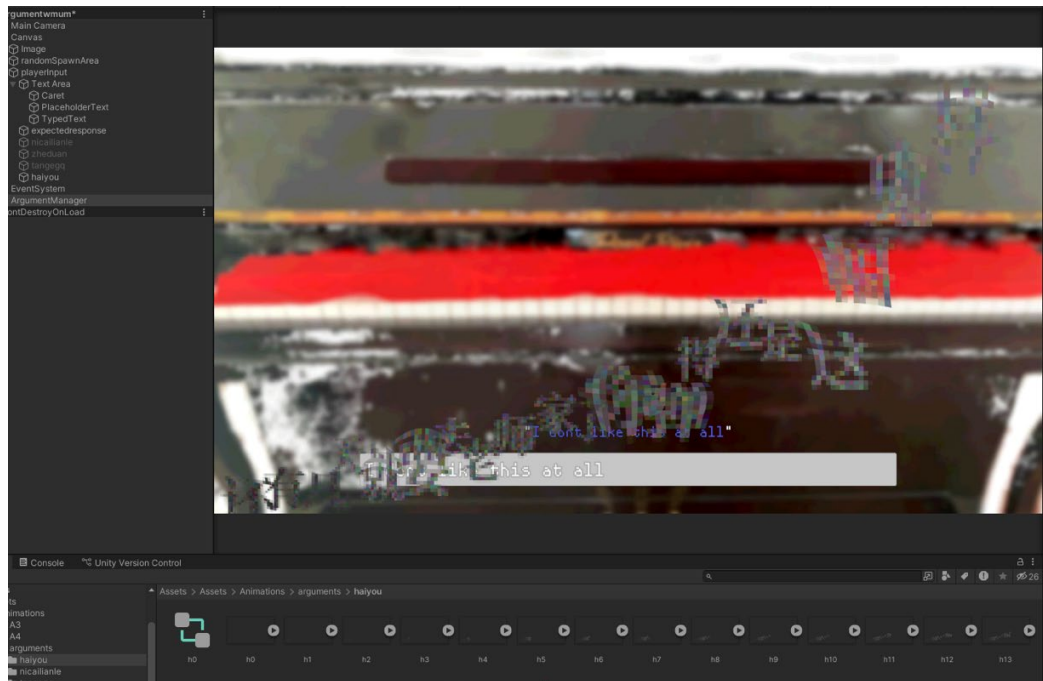

Figure 6 - Mum's words covering text input box

And the last thing that mum says is isolated from all else, in which she prophesizes my uselessness, anything I try to say is automatically deleted, and thus, can't be said or even be made sense of as the full sentence isn't allowed to be formed.

What she says
In this story event, everything that mum says is solely in Chinese, untranslated. This decision was made to align the experience in-game with the development of my language in real life, and there wouldn't have been translations of mum's words in my head then. But I respond in English, "now. The things mum says are also set in stone, as they're imported animations, whereas my prompted responses could be easily changed in the Unity editor. This was an instinctive choice rather than a creative or even pragmatic one made in the asset creation process, to keep my responses dynamic but hers static to emphasize the inconsequential nature of my responses, in that they wouldn't change a thing. In acknowledging that though, I had somewhat felt more able to speak my mind, perhaps in part due to the mechanics, and in part due to the difference in language that is being visually represented, like she wouldn't listen or understand anyway, and I have nothing to lose. As the argument nears its end, my responses resemble more of what I wish I had said and can say to her. When she recalls how much she had wanted to play piano when she was younger but couldn't, and yet I waste my resources and don't play

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as much as I should, I am able to say, "You are you and I am me." I'd always known, even then, that my playing the piano was a vicarious act for her. And when her comments culminate in the verdict that I'd never amount to anything, I am finally able to say, "You never put much faith in me."

Story Event 2 - I (have) memorized these streets

I am 8 years old. I've just immigrated to Vancouver with my mum. Everything is hard. I can't speak English, I can't keep up in class, I have no friends, I only have mum.

This is a searching sequence, simulating my walk home from school and through the streets of Richmond, Vancouver as I had done countless times throughout the ages of eight to twelve. I am searching for my mum, at places that I now recall as having made up much of my childhood. This is an accumulation of everything I'd felt, as it was the beginning of the immigrant life for my mum and I. She was always away, or as I had perceived so, and I was always waiting, at home, in the car, on the reception couch. In my reimagination, I can finally look for her.

Game Sketch 1

Game map
To begin with the sketch, I pinpointed the locations that would serve as key sites in the game, or where mum could be found - school, home, heritage house, McDonald's, city hall, library, bank, mall, grocery store, and 7-Eleven. These are interconnected by scenes of roads and follow the actual street mapping of the neighborhood. The following is the initial game map made by going through the streets on Google Maps. Screenshots of Google Maps Street view serve as placeholders until the next sketch. This process felt ritualistic and fitting as I used to peruse Google Maps to spy on the streets near my house after I moved away.
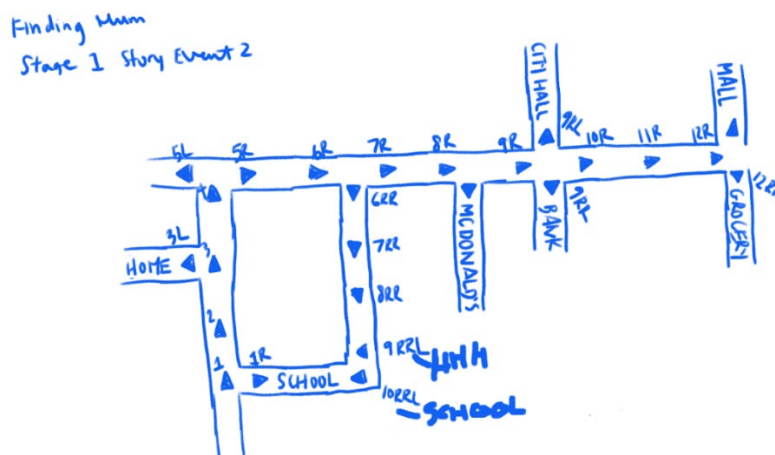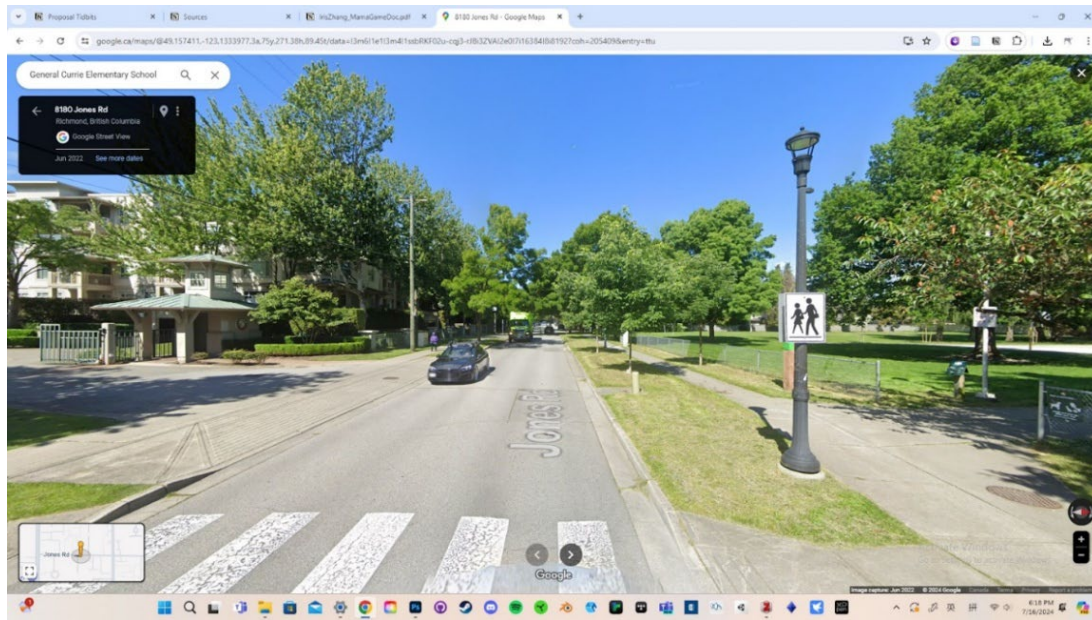

Figure 7 - Game Map

Figure 8 - Google Maps Street View

I begin at Scene 1 and am prompted to navigate the streets through on-screen arrow buttons and a timer counting down. I have to find mum before the timer clears; mum appears at random at any of the key sites.

Game style
I opted to edit the screenshotted images simply with Photoshop filters, Solarize and Gaussian Blur, to visualize how post-processed images would fit with the rest of the scene. My initial pass, some words came to mind as to what these images should be and/or evoke - disorientation, homogenous, uncanny - befitting of a landscape that repeats for a young girl day after day, one painted in anxieties and excitement alike. It's curious that the filters put on the images made the sky orange as it reminded me of being outside in the fall and winter after school and the sunset would already be bleeding through the sky. We had short days and long nights, and the sun would start to set mid-afternoon.

Figure 9 - Screenshot Image After Photoshop Filters

Transition images

When a scene moves to the next, a transition image is shown on screen that dictates some beat of the game. Bilingual text is laid on top of each image that builds context and narrative, as well as simulating my stream of consciousness (as an eight-year-old), talking to myself as a form of self-soothing, creating a strangeness in which I talk in present tense but, evidently, don't sound like a child. The text provides clues as to where I think mum is more likely to be but due to the random spawning coded in the mechanics, these read less like helpful clues and more like evidence of my disconnect from my mum. I also experimented with nearly illegible text and short transition duration times to create distance between the game, myself, and the secondary player, in forcing them to choose what to read, and to scrutinize to read it.

Figure 10 - Transition Image from Scene 1 to Scene 2

Game Sketch 2

Field research

On a trip back to Vancouver, I conducted field research of the neighborhood, consisting of photos and writings of sites to use for asset production for this story event. I took my camera with me as I walked the streets like I used to, stopping at each scene designated on the game map, giving myself ample time to take as many photos as necessary and to write and brainstorm as necessary. I used a private Instagram account for the purpose of compiling the writing.
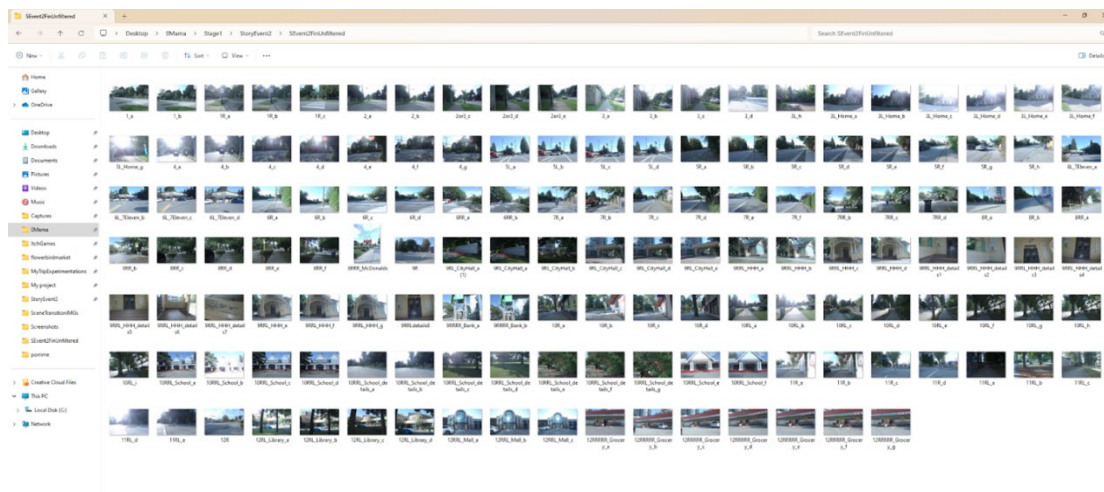

Figure 11 - Screenshot of folder of chosen photos

Figure 12 - Screenshot of field research writing at key site, library

Post-processing

Informed by Verano's metaphor of home-movies as "reliquaries of memory," I experiment with post-processing the photos from field research, to turn them into apt visual depictions of my memory and affect. I began by transposing images on top of one another, trying to replicate how a mind may try to piece together a memory from scattered icons. I delete parts of the photo that are unfamiliar to me, and I fill it with parts that are more familiar. Some photos look more akin to their real-life counterpart whilst others appear foreign; I've placed these sites in memory on a visually depicted spectrum of familiarity. I also play with pixelization to portray the digitally filtered relic, and to signal a bygone era, as this story event is set in 2007.

Figure 13 - Original field research photo of key site, McDonald's

Figure 14 - Transposed photo of key site, McDonald's

Figure 15 - Transposed and pixelized photo of key site, McDonald's

Where is she?

My mum is embodied by the stuffed bear in the game, a bear I've had since I was five years old, one that she gave to me. My transitional object, I suppose, became even more significant in those early years in Vancouver. She appears almost ridiculously large on screen when "I" find her, the word "Mum" etched cheekily into the bear's pink top. There is a farcical aspect to this, like an imagined fever dream that an eight-year-old would conjure, at the cusp of childhood and teenhood, like one last look into childish longings and

hangups. I probably knew I could never find her, and that this was a prolonged odyssey to find the only thing that reminds me of her.

Each key site is accompanied by writing that spawns on screen when mum is found, they are my short reflections of what these places mean to me, as my mum and I would frequent them. Some of the writing echoes back to the field research as well, like in Figure 16, I refer to the action of my mum and I carrying library books together, each holding onto a handle, this can be recalled back in Figure 12, in which I write "Will always be thankful that my mum took me to the library as many times as I wanted and carried my book stacks with me as many times I'd want[ed]."
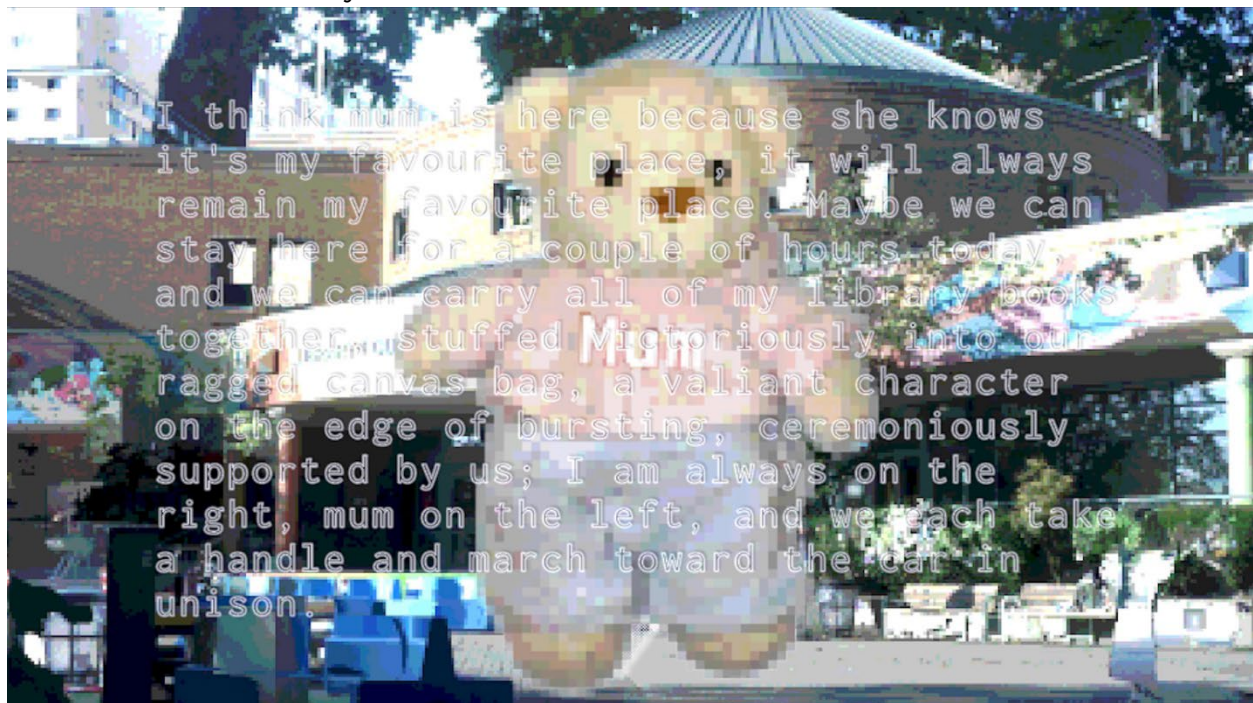
Figure 16 - Mum found at key site, library

When she is found
One of my fondest memories with my mum resides at a beef noodle restaurant. It was almost like inhabiting a secret third space in which all my discontentment and contempt are shed the moment we sit down. Usually when we talk to each other, there is no room for mawkishness, we act like unwitting, unwilling colleagues. Yet when we share a meal here, my mum asks me how I am doing. It is always a cherished event for me, and continues to be even now, so this felt like the organic ending for what happens after I find her. I am moved to a scene with a static POV shot of a bowl of noodles, its edges frayed and pixelized. It is accompanied by rolling text on screen in Chinese, the first line is my own recall of what happens here – mum wouldn't ever eat much but she'd ask me questions I never quite know how to answer. And as "I" continue clicking, mum's questions unfurl on screen in quotation marks, whilst

everything ebbs away with each click, each question, until it fades to white and mum leaves me with, without quotations - mum believes in you.

Figure 17 - When mum is found, first line

This could be seen as an instance of a rupture in the assumed identity of me reimagined as my eight-year-old self. This photo was taken as a part of field research, I sat down alone at the beef noodle restaurant, took photos, and finished my bowl. The POV appears misaligned with that of an eight-year-old, as I would've hardly reached half a foot above the table. There is only one bowl pictured on the table; mum is not here. The quotation marks around mum's questions signal not to her in the present but to a memory. This is the only real, factual instance in this story event. What used to be shared between us can only ever remain a reminiscing, however happy.

妈妈相信你可以的。

Figure 18 - When mum is found, last line

Stage 2 "When kids hit puberty..."

Story Event 1 - My conversation with my mum over the phone in which I try to tell her about *Rent* the musical to varying degrees of success

I am 15 years old. I moved away from home to attend high school in a different city. I've been away from mum for some time now.

This is a text-based sequence, a recall and simulation of an actual conversation over the phone in which my announcement of my involvement in a school production of the musical *Rent* turns into an unseemly argument. It divulged that there are certain truths that could never be shared between us, certain conversations never to be had. It was a turning point in my relationship with her, that we may always carry irreconcilable views.

Game Sketch 1
Twine
Due to the nature of a conversation and my wanting to experiment with a text-based engine, this event is made in Twine. This is also my first time working in Twine, and though I've seen and played Twine games that utilize the engine for experimental means, for my sketch, the main aim is to write the story and its conversational routes, and to focus on pacing and what each route may signify as an imagined past.

Conversational Routes
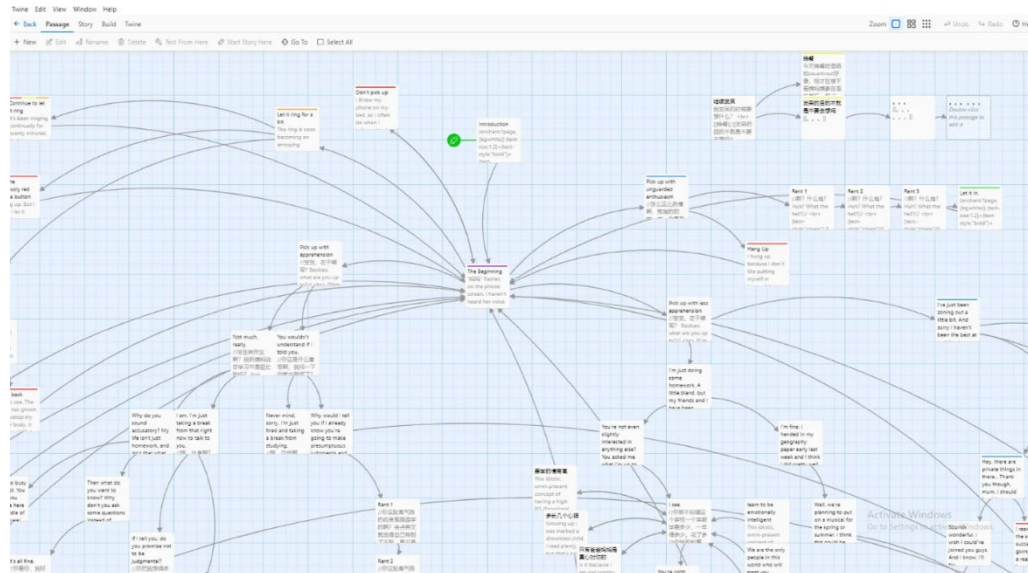
Figure 19 - Narrative tree in Twine

There are five major conversational routes.

Figure 20 - Route choices

One route is arguably the most outlandish, and it is the only one that succeeds in not looping back to the ringing phone, emphasizing the fraught reality of this conversation as it exists in my memory, that my mum will not abstain from saying what she was always going to say, unless... → *[Pick up with unguarded enthusiasm]*

Mostly composed of truths, some sentences are even verbatim. I simulate what it was like to be corralled to death by my mum's figurative spit through an avalanche of words on screen, lectures about something or other… → *[Pick up with less apprehension]* and *[Pick up with apprehension]*

The direness and severity of what happens when one decides to not pick up a call from one's mother. Except it's what happens every single time… → *[Don't pick up]*

A strange past that could have never happened. Or, who's to know, that could… → *[Let it ring for a bit]*

[Pick up with apprehension]

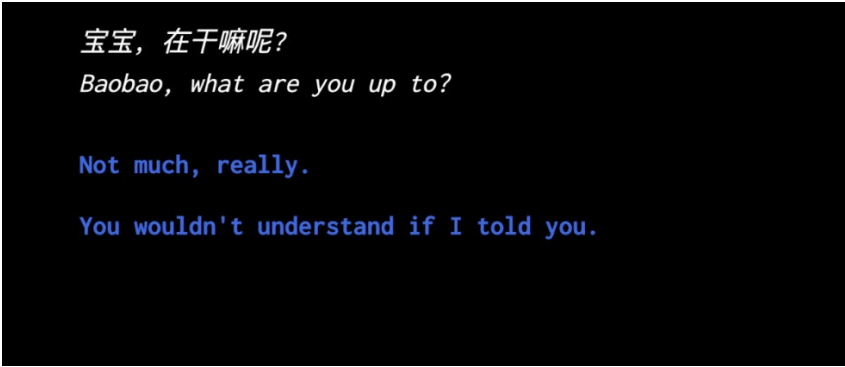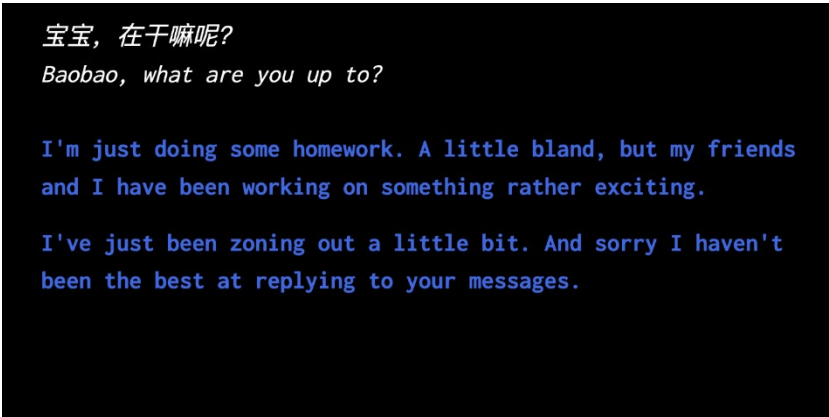*Figure 21 - Starting screen to "Apprehension" route*

Triggers another lecture (if "I" choose to continue being apprehensive) in which she reprimands my condescending attitude, supposed sense of superiority that is tied to my speaking English, and how disappointed she is in me, yet again. I realize this gap that exists here between us is "so wide and so deep, that to try to cross it would only guarantee certain death." My spin on my mum's favourite hyperbolic phrase, that she'll die of anger because of me.

[Pick up with less apprehension]
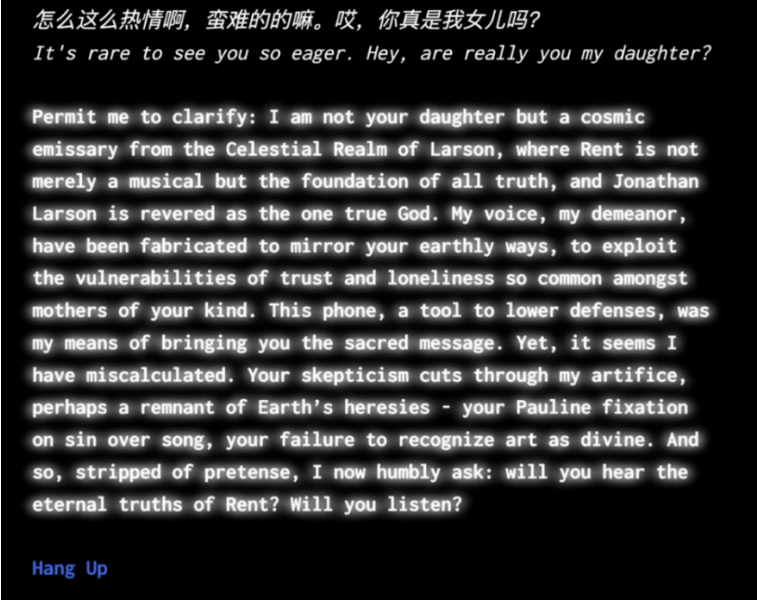
Figure 22 - Starting screen to "Less apprehension" route

This is my favourite route to test as it leads to some wholesome endings (that will still loop back to the beginning, but perhaps with reinvigorated hope that things may work out). But it also leads to the futile ending, as most routes do, and emphasizes that my attitude in picking up the phone is a trivial, inconsequential thing. It won't placate anything, even if I use different words, a different tone. What was going to happen will always happen.

[Pick up with unguarded enthusiasm]

怎么这么热情啊，蛮难的的嘛。哎，你真是我女儿吗?
It's rare to see you so eager. Hey, are really you my daughter?
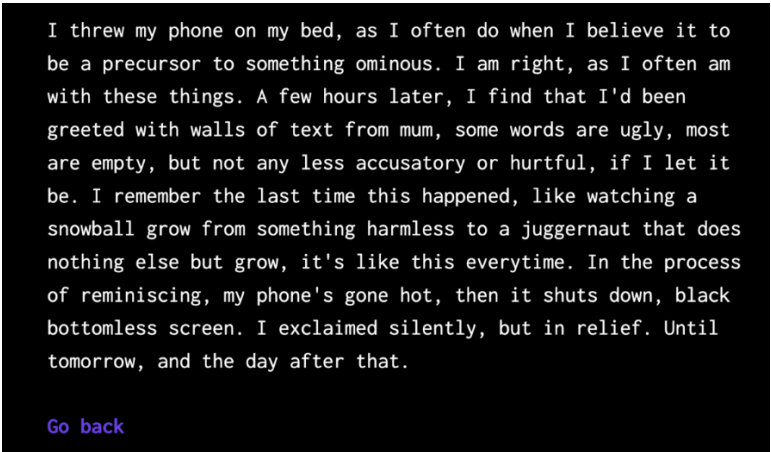
Permit me to clarify: I am not your daughter but a cosmic emissary from the Celestial Realm of Larson, where Rent is not merely a musical but the foundation of all truth, and Jonathan Larson is revered as the one true God. My voice, my demeanor, have been fabricated to mirror your earthly ways, to exploit the vulnerabilities of trust and loneliness so common amongst mothers of your kind. This phone, a tool to lower defenses, was my means of bringing you the sacred message. Yet, it seems I have miscalculated. Your skepticism cuts through my artifice, perhaps a remnant of Earth's heresies - your Pauline fixation on sin over song, your failure to recognize art as divine. And so, stripped of pretense, I now humbly ask: will you hear the eternal truths of Rent? Will you listen?

Hang Up

Figure 23 - Starting screen to "Enthusiasm" route

…Unless she is informed about Rent by a cosmic entity from the Jonathan Larson Universe. Because I deem it impossible to change, otherwise. Unless I fantasize about it. Unless I let a fantastical voice in my head take charge.

[Don't pick up]

I threw my phone on my bed, as I often do when I believe it to be a precursor to something ominous. I am right, as I often am with these things. A few hours later, I find that I'd been greeted with walls of text from mum, some words are ugly, most are empty, but not any less accusatory or hurtful, if I let it be. I remember the last time this happened, like watching a snowball grow from something harmless to a juggernaut that does nothing else but grow, it's like this everytime. In the process of reminiscing, my phone's gone hot, then it shuts down, black bottomless screen. I exclaimed silently, but in relief. Until tomorrow, and the day after that.

Go back

Figure 24 - Starting (and ending) screen to "Don't pick up" route

45

...And I don't pick up because it's much easier to confront my own guilt and passive aggression than her wrath and expressed disappointment sometimes.

The ring is soon becoming an annoying monotonous hymn. It always feels a bit like a death wish when I let it hang. She'll probably get the hint, soon.

Continue to let it ring

Tap the deviously red phone button

Pick up

Figure 25 - Starting screen to "Let it ring" route

Toying with some "speculative" pasts. I could accidentally create a phone that rings forever. I could accidentally never talk to my mum again. Or I could be punished by some Chinese seraphic hand of filial piety for lying to my mum, and I kneel forever.

Story Event 2 – Anthems for an eighteen year old girl who'd much rather

I am 18 years old. It is the week of high school graduation. School and stress have consumed me. I am anxious and scared about the future. I think I may be severely depressed. Mum visits me.

<u>Game Sketch 1</u>

This is another text-based sequence, a reproduction of a conversation. I experiment in Twine to recreate the passivity that I had felt, of having wanted to say everything but for nothing to come out. I was on my bed, and my mum was standing at the furthest point away from me in the room, her arms crossed. She asks me questions then answers them. She attempts words of comfort then undercuts them. My words and thoughts disappear as quickly as they appear. I do not speak up until these words appear, and they grow until they nearly fill the room. Once spoken, the room enters a quietness, something breaks.

Experimenting with Harlowe macros in Twine
There is a lack of choice, or insignificant choice, in playing. And there are only 2-3 points in the event in which I actually respond to my mum in conversation, as indicated by the quotation marks around some of the responses. Anything else that is shown on screen otherwise are merely thoughts in my head unspoken.

Figure 26 - Mechanic 1

Mechanic: after I click the response, it gets replaced by another immediately, then after a certain set amount of time, that response gets replaced as well, and the passage transitions to the next automatically.

"It's been hard." is the first response that I say out loud. I'll do better is without quotation marks, indicating that it is kept internal, a thought I have to myself. The response that I initially click on is what I wish to say, but what is conjured is a sanitized version of what I wish I could say and have the courage to say.

Figure 27 - Mechanic 2

Mechanic: after I hover over the response, it gets "erased," as it's being replaced with " " (space), to emulate the illusion of it having disappeared.

Like a command to myself, "Say something." And yet, ultimately, I was incapable of doing and saying anything at all, and now, I am left with a complete lack, and I must sit with that lack until the next passage appears.

```
//你真的有考虑你将来要做什么吗?
Have you put any real thought into what you'll be doing in the future?//
<br>

(click: "I want to go to university and I want to study and make things for as long as I can
and I want to be happy and I want to make you proud. But thse are all luxuries to me, I
can't imagine a future like that for me right now. I had my first really bad panic attack two
weeks ago and I couldn't understand what was happening, and it keeps happening and I
don't know what to do, mum. How do I think about the future when I can barely keep
myself together right now?")[
    (replace: ?playerResponse)[(text-style: "blurrier")["What can the future look like for
me?"]]
    (live: 5s)[(goto: "Mum4")]
]

|playerResponse>[[I want to go to university and I want to study and make things for as
long as I can and I want to be happy and I want to make you proud. But thse are all
luxuries to me, I can't imagine a future like that for me right now. I had my first really bad
panic attack two weeks ago and I couldn't understand what was happening, and it keeps
happening and I don't know what to do, mum. How do I think about the future when I can
barely keep myself together right now?]]
|
```

Figure 28 - Mechanic 3

Mechanic: after I click the response, it is replaced by a response in the text style "blurrier," rendering it barely visible, and the passage continues to the next.

This is the second response that I voice out loud, but even then, it is almost as if it was delivered under a layer of film, an inaudible whisper, like I don't believe in it.

```
//没有什么想说的吗?
Nothing to say?//

<br>

(live: 5s)[(goto: "Mum10")]

(live: 0.1s)[(either: "I can't tell you anything you want to hear.", "You're always going to be
disappointed in me.", "I feel like I'm going to be this way forever.", "I don't think you even
like me very much.", "Nothing makes me happy anymore.", "I'm, like, prematurely
deteriorating!", "Every single thing that I have done, that I have condoned, up to this point
in my banal little life, makes me hate myself so utterly and with complete tenacious
certainty!!!", "I would like to wake up, I would like to wake up, I would like to wake up, I
would like to wake up, I would like to wake up, I would like to wake up, I would like to
wake up, I would like to wake up, I would like to wake up, I would like to wake up.")]
```

Figure 29 - Mechanic 4

Mechanic: a collection of responses is cycled through at the speed of one response every 0.1s, then after 5 seconds, the passage continues to the next. A visual litany of all the thoughts that had run through my head but did not manifest themselves as words spoken.

```
//你不告诉我，我怎么帮你?
If you don't tell me, how can I help you?//
<br>

|hoverable>[[What could you possibly do?]]

(mouseover: ?hoverable)[
   (replace: ?hoverable)[(text-style: "italic")[You couldn't even help yourself.]]
   (live:0.1s)[(goto: "Mum13")]
]
```

Figure 30 - Mechanic 5

Mechanic: after I hover over the response, it flashes to another instantaneously, then continues to the next passage before it could be read in full.

The flash of an indiscernible response simulates a thought I had that I feel should have stayed unthought.


```
//不要这样小题大做。
Don't overexaggerate things.//
<br>

|hoverableErase>[(text-style:"blurrier")[But I want to die.]]
(mouseover: ?hoverableErase)[
   (replace: ?hoverableErase)[//I think I'm stuck like this forever.//]
   (live: 3s)[(goto: "Mum18")]
]
```

Figure 31 - Mechanic 6

Mechanic: the response on screen is in the text style "blurrier," rendering it difficult to read, after I hover over the response, it is replaced by another, and the passage continues to the next.

The same mechanic is applied to the next couple of passages, the only differing factor is the number of seconds before transitioning to the next passage. At this point in the conversation, I had essentially fixated my thoughts on what I could not say, on what I thought was wrong with me, and nothing my mum said and would say, had much effect on me.

```
//你知道的，我相信你。

(live: 2s) [(stop:)(either: "You know that I trust you.", "You know that I believe you.")] //
<br>

(link: "Say it.")[
    (replace: ?response)[ "但是我想死。 ""]
    (live: 3s)[(goto: "Mum24")]
]

|response>[[]]
```

Figure 32 - Mechanic 7

Mechanic: after 5 seconds, the English translation of what mum says appears after a delay, there's an equal chance of either response being shown. And when I click on the response, I say the thing I'd wanted to say, this time, out loud, audibly and visibly.

The decisions and the mechanic regarding the conclusion of this conversation was touched on in the section "In self-translation," and will be expanded on here. The decision to have the translation cycle through two very similar sentences is my rendition of the instability of my memory of the last moments of the conversation, and how, through self-translation, the meanings of two similar sentences have different, nuanced interpretations that bode drastically different endings. In this respect, each time the conversation is ran, there are two possible "endings". Though "相信" could be translated as either trust or believe, the former denotes "I trust that you won't do anything stupid," whereas the latter denotes a "coming to terms with," an attempt at consolation, in implying "I believe you," or "I believe in you," in that my mum believes my sickness is real. I think these two terms in English have different connotations that don't quite exist in the same capacity in Chinese, and, thus, this is a point in which I decide which "part" of myself to contend with.

Some brief thoughts on the differences between hoverable and clickable response
Hoverable responses create the visual mechanics of something escaping immediately from view upon interaction, despite whether I had finished reading and digesting its content. It is like an initial thought that arises without filtration. It illustrates a thought that even I cannot touch, that I can't allow to exist concretely, that must morph or be forced into some other form before it can be fully acknowledged. The most prominent example of this is seen in Figure 30, "What could you possibly do?" and "You couldn't even help yourself." are both reckless, cruel thoughts directed at my mum that are reflective of my counter ego.

Clickable responses, then, are thoughts that I am capable of processing, by the sheer fact of having thought them many times before. They could be things that I continue to tell myself, things I feed to the depression, things I continue to think, to sulk, to cry, to inflict self-pity on myself.

Arcs and affects
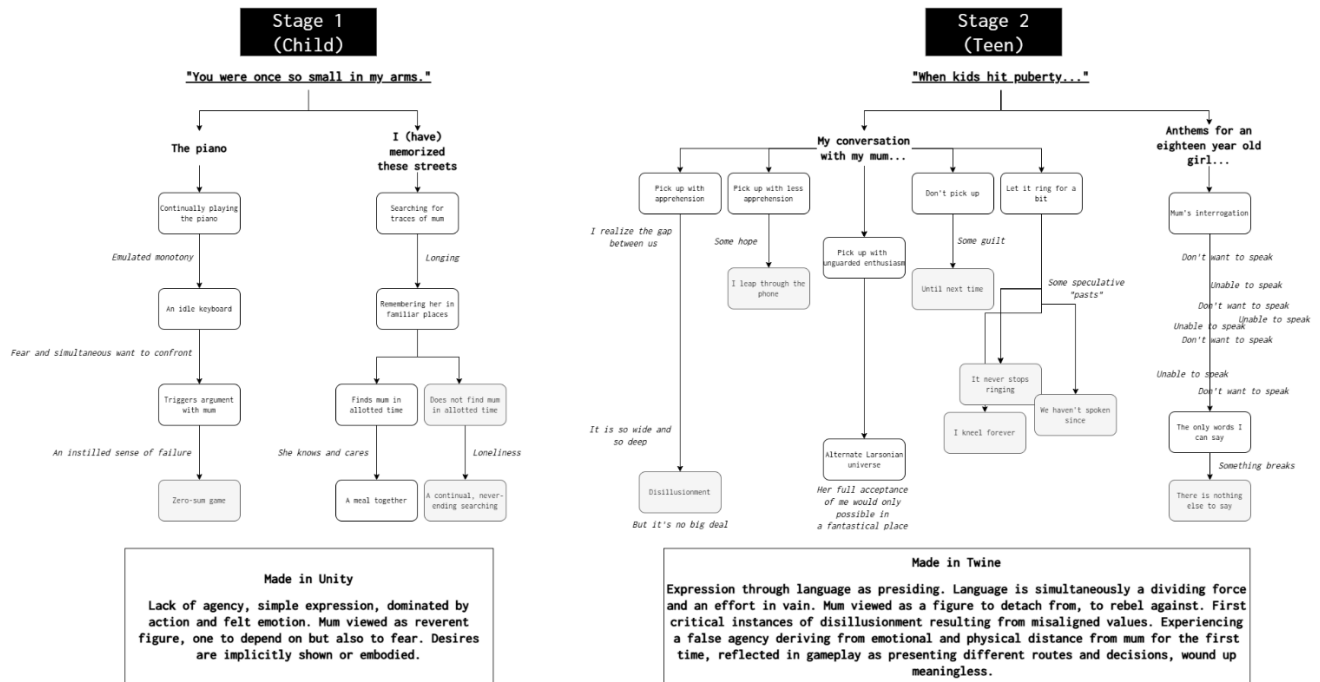
Figure 33 - Diagram of game sketches

A summation of the existing sketches, the choices and consequences that they afford, and the emotions entailing.

Sketches for the future

Due to the timeline given for my MFA program, I am unable to finish the entirety of my planned game sketches. The initial game design document can be seen in Appendix A and outlines for the remaining sketches can be seen in Appendix B. Changes have been made to remaining sketches from the initial game design document for sake of better game flow and are made according to reflections that arose in the process of making and playing previous sketches.

Discussion

Making

Throughout the collective game-making process, I was continually deciding how much I was willing to unload onto myself, and how much, in turn, I was willing to process. There were many personal vulnerabilities that inevitably had to be

shed then reified in game by me as the maker, that proved to be challenging even as I consider myself as the game's primary player. These deliberations remained difficult to resolve to the end, as they felt to me, at times, more akin to matters of self-indulgent exhibitionism than matters of designing game narrative and mechanics. A consistent fear subsisted as I worried that I was being overly sentimental instead of maintaining a productive level of pragmaticism and criticality as a game-maker. Though I can now attest to how antithetical those thoughts were to the crux of this thesis in pursuit of catharsis, these junctures were some of the more difficult aspects of autofictional game-making. I felt that my past and present, game and reality were simultaneously and necessarily entangled. But for the sake of making and my own well-being, I had to also disentangle them at will and refrain from dwelling. It was a cyclical process of dis/entanglement that I repeatedly engaged in.

Playing

Replaying the sketches as the game-maker was a frustrating but essential activity. It led to tunnel vision at times whenever a minor or even inconsequential issue reared its head that became more glaring as I am the source material. But there is a great sense of achievement when I observe portrayals of what I remember and what I felt slowly built from a combination of different media and game mechanics. Replaying the sketches also meant contemplating the intuitive functions of the game, like creating diegetic cues and recognizable game mechanics that contribute to and ensure an ultimately playable game. Even though I am the game-maker and know how the gameplay should ensue, it is important to separate my role as the game-player from game-maker, and to both make and play at some distance. And I have been able to look at events more objectively, which affords me the ability to assess, construct and reconstruct meaning through playing, with a critical detachedness, taking on my different personae. Replaying has allowed me to tease out elements of the past that I would've liked to change, that would otherwise have been more difficult it I sat too close.

Playing the finished sketches as the game-player offers me relief, from my reaching back into different pasts, and the knowledge that this time, despite all, I am safe. Playing offers me simultaneous grief. I grieve for my decisions and lack thereof. I grieve for the impossibility of change that is emphasised by the game. I grieve for myself, and I grieve for my mum. But this grief leads to lucidity. Through playing I see a mother who is trapped by her own beliefs and, despite her best efforts, is prone to hurt the ones closest to her. And I see a daughter who keeps everything inside and hidden. And I see a mother who wants to gift her daughter the joys of playing an instrument, ones that she couldn't afford when she was young. And I see a daughter who wants to be with her mum, who searches for her out of love and dependency. And

I see a mother who must be everywhere all at once, learning everything all at once, in an alien land. She must be exhausted but she remembers what her daughter likes to eat.

Catharsis

Through aesthetic catharsis

Seeing aesthetic catharsis as mimesis in which events undergo metamorphoses, gain coherency and meaning, and elicit an emotional pleasure, I believe this has been achieved through the process of game-making. Most notably, how game design has deciphered decisions I've made both in-game and outside the game, pertaining to which events I've chosen to portray, and the way I've chosen to reproduce them. In making "Anthems for an eighteen-year-old girl who'd much rather," I experimented with different macros in Twine then designated them to responses almost instinctually. As I reflected on these text mechanics, I observed that each response's underlying identity was encoded in the mechanics that were assigned to it, as well as being an emulation of the sentiment attached. This was briefly discussed in my use of hoverable VS clickable macros, in which hoverable macros were used for responses that I deemed formidable, that dissipate as quickly as they take shape, whereas clickable macros were used for responses that were allowed to exist, had been existing, as they were an embodiment of my repeated intrusive thoughts. In another instance, in making "I (have) memorized these streets," I was confounded by my own decision to distance the inevitable secondary player. It was a firm decision that continually showed up in both of my sketches, but I couldn't quite make sense of it. I initially obstructed the bilingual text by making it impossible to read in full, and to have the texts mean different things instead of being translations of each other. Then I added voice-overs of the bilingual text, one language occupying each ear, when listened to together, the audio is indecipherable and a mess. Through the incorporation of theory on self-translation, I understand that these mechanics served a mimetic function in reconstructing the fracturing of the self as divided by language, and as belittled by language. It was a reproduction of what I had felt as a new immigrant, torn between two languages that I couldn't master, imparted upon the secondary player, and a reliving and reminder for me, the primary player.

Seeing aesthetic catharsis as a portrayal of a character's principal ego and counter ego nucleus, in which the audience forms an identification with, evoking a transformation and leading to an acceptance of all parts of oneself, I believe this has been achieved through game-playing. As discussed briefly in the prior section "Catharsis and games," this identification between the character and the audience, or, in this case, the primary player, is emphasized in an autofictional game, as I exist as both inner and outer self. My voice travels between fact and fiction, and the selves are conjoined and

indistinguishable, made real, only when the game is played. And in playing myself, seeing the use of first-person pronouns, engaging in acts of appropriation of my life, discloses things I would have otherwise kept suppressed or not known. When I "searched" for my mum, it divulged that I was rather unhappy, scared, and lonely as a child. And that my mum was, despite all, an anchor. Or when I "asked" her "…would you cry if I turned out like him?" I'd realized how strongly I wanted to know, have always wanted to know, whether she might still embrace me. Though I'm unsure if I've been able to fully accept these new selves that have come to light, there has been much catharsis in these mere discoveries.

Through Reparative (?) Game Design

I find catharsis not through an affective expulsion, but in the meditative process of collecting, making, narrating, remembering, and forgiving.

Repair

Harkening back to my intention of making this game as a means of self-preservation, to remember and to speculate in ways that would be most impactful to me. In knowing now that I am strong enough to do this, to reimagine things, to render them more benign, is a cathartic feat. In allowing myself to simultaneously exist in regret and guilt, in relief and understanding, of decisions I have made, couldn't make, would have made, I inch closer to acceptance. I am reminded of the term negative capability coined by John Keats, referring to one's quality of being able to exist in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,"[100] I, too, am in a continuous pursuit of letting things remain in opacity.

I am no longer looking for total absolvement and believing in a maternal relationship that is completely cleansed. Rather, understanding and appreciating that the game extends outside of being a mere creation, that it has helped to reframe and repair critical moments of my life. And it is a life's work, to repair.

Care

Engaging in practices of ruminarrative throughout the game-making, writing both inside and outside the game, notably in my recurring game intros and outros as well as reflective entries, see Appendix C, have been my main avenues of care. And, in essence, the entirety of the game narrative could be deemed my ruminarrative, even when not languaged. Another aspect of tangible care lies in my decision to halt the sketch making process, as I realized I couldn't finish everything to my satisfaction. And that ultimately, this is an ongoing process of game-making, that may continue for a long time to come.

---

[100] Keats, "Letter to George and Tom Keats".

Share

For me, sharing is not solely the sharing of the game, but also the sharing of the research and of the process. It is also every time that I've been graciously given the time, space, and attention to talk about this work. It is every time someone responds to it, every time someone shares their own anecdote. Despite this being work I made for myself, an unexplainable catharsis does arise from releasing it, letting it be open to everything and everyone, whilst I am still being able to firmly say that this is mine.

Conclusion

Research and practice

As reflected on in prior sections, I see my research and practice as interdependent. I believe it to be inevitable as I attempt to discern achievable paths to catharsis, a phenomenon that is immeasurable. And this process is convoluted, tangential, and completely teetering on its subjective nature. The central tenets of the answer to my research question rest on the concept of aesthetic catharsis and the approach of reparative game design, both rooted in and heavily driven by theory, allowing me to qualitatively assess my outcomes from game-making and game-playing. In creating an autofictional game, I am also engaging with the term's established literature, experimenting with relationships between fact and fiction, authorship, and agency in the game form. And in game-making, research is the underlying foundation for various aspects of the game narrative, mechanics, and media; it is a continual process of research informing making informing (my) research. Research has helped elucidate my game-(re)playing, informing the decisions I made and continue to make, and divulging why I have made them. It is a revelatory cycle and way of working that has afforded me much catharsis as well.

Future

This was an ambitious project that has origins in my own work and interests a decade prior, in fields across literature, film, and linguistics, and, crucially, in my most significant personal relationship. It was, selfishly, a means for me to attempt reconciliation with the past, my mum, and with myself through achieving catharsis and to fathom it. I thought that catharsis could only be afforded through the completion of all four stages I initially had in mind, to see "myself" go through an implicit reconciliation with my mum in game. But now that stands to be untrue. I've found things to cherish throughout and can only anticipate my further research, game-making, and game-playing.

I will continue working to finish the remaining game sketches while refining the existing ones, and to also experiment with different game engines. I will likely release the collection on an online platform like itch.io. I will continue to expand my research, notably into literature on memory and phenomenology as the groundwork for future game design. And I am looking to pursue a PhD soon that may help me with these goals in a structured, academic context.

Like burr

My mum and I are alike in many ways, whether genetic or learned. Little bits of her have always stuck to me. There are comparisons she likes to make between us, passions she imposes on me so we could become similar, and defects she denounces in me that make us disparate. I recorded some of these instances in the game. "Like mother, like daughter." I used to view these similarities with disdain, and fear that I'd become her, that I'd carry the same affectations, insecurities, stubbornness. But as I've grown, and as I've remembered, regretted, and forgiven, I've learnt to view this likeness with fondness as I've grown to finally see her. Our relationship is a slow and bumpy walk that we now take together, continually, always.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Initial game design document

A point and click game in which the player plays as me, spanning four stages of my life, focusing on my relationship with my mum. Each stage centers on 2 main story events, they all need to be finished before the player can progress. Decisions made by the player will affect story events in the next stage (some story events will have a predetermined ending whilst others are based on choice or are purely an exploration). After completing all four stages, the player will be able to unlock a runthrough of events through mum's perspective.

A biographical game examining the hardships that exist in a mother-daughter relationship, with some things bettered by external factors, others exacerbated. It is hugely personal but I think a lot of the nuanced conflicts and appreciation that I have experienced with and towards my mum are commonplace. Also an uncomfortable catharsis on my part, trying to dissect my wrongs and rights in each situation retrospectively as well as trying to imagine how my mum must have felt. This game has a biased point of view; memories are influenced.
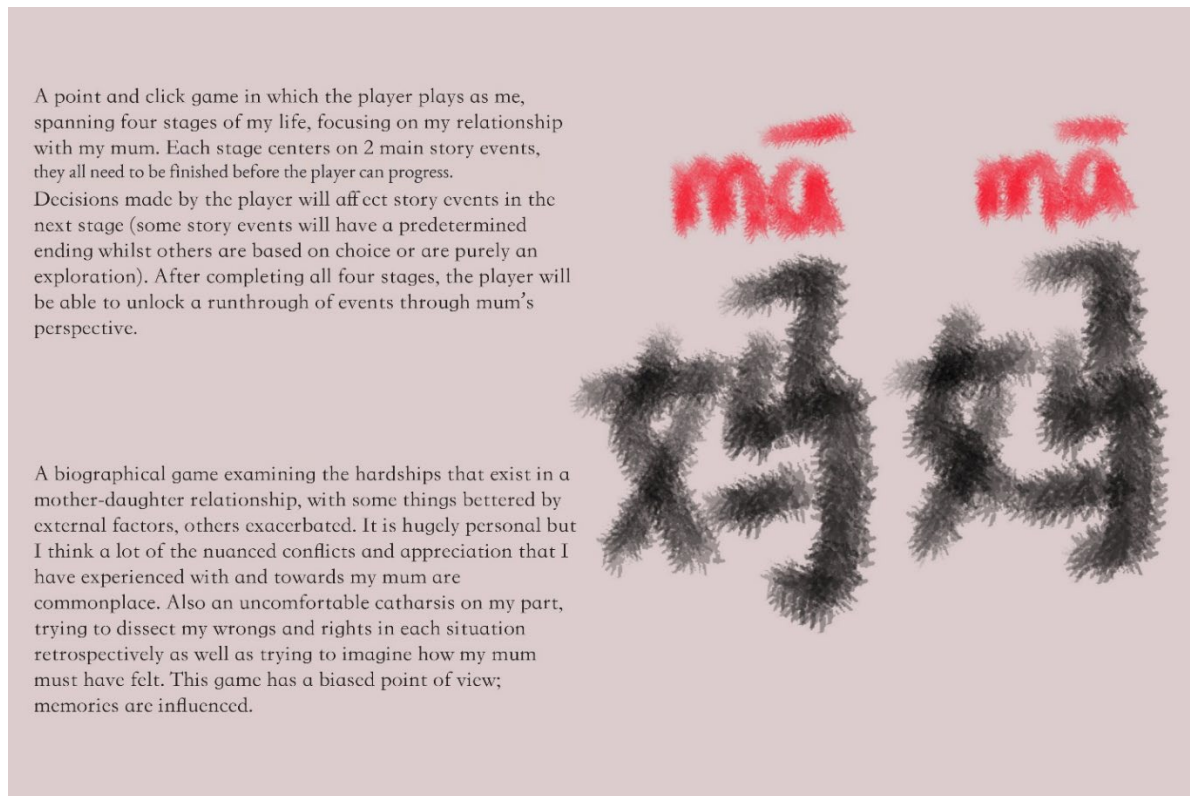
Figure 34 - Introduction to game

Stage 1 "你小时候在我怀里就那么小一只"
You were once so small in my arms

Story Event 1

I am 5 years old.
I promised my mum that I'd practice the piano every single day but I get distracted too easily and this song is boring to play.

Player has to play the song on the piano over and over --> click the piano keys in the right order. There is no indication when practice ends.

When the player stops playing for more than 10 seconds --> triggers fight with mum

When arguing with mum:
Player has to type out their rebuttal when mum scolds them to expel her word clouds, the player must be quicker than mum

The argument ends when the player has failed to expel more than 5 word clouds

However, mum is programmed to win and drowns me in an abundance of word clouds (mum picks up speed as argument grows, it will become increasingly difficult to follow)
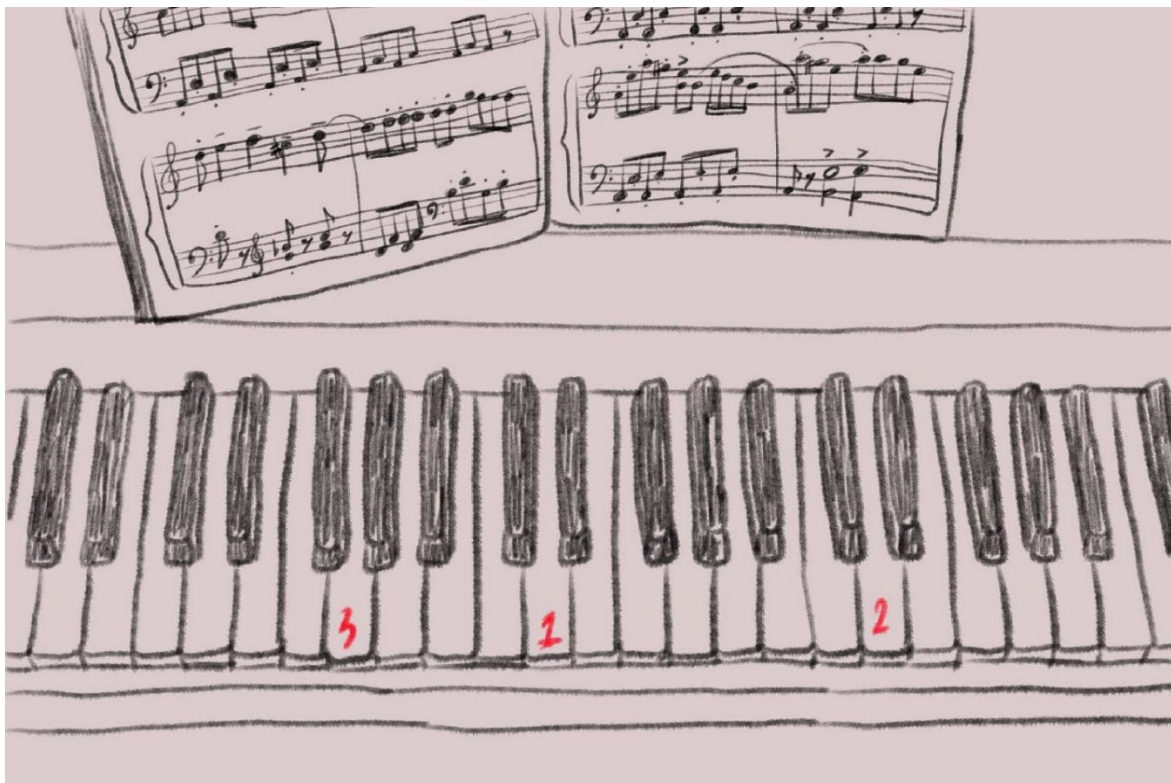
Figure 35 – Stage 1 Story Event 1

Figure 36 – Mock up of piano playing

Figure 37 - Mock up of argument

Stage 1 "你小时候在我怀里就那么小一只"
You were once so small in my arms

Story Event 2

I am 8 years old.
I have just immigrated to Vancouver with my mum. Everything is hard. I can't speak English, I can't keep up in class, I have no friends. I only want to confide in my mum.

Player has to find mum in the city streets/maze as she runs her errands. First person POV for player, there are arrows on screen for the player to decide which direction to go when coming to an intersection.

There are a couple of buildings where mum may be at - bank, grocery mart, driving school, or immigration bureau, this is chosen at random.

There is a time limit of 2 minutes. Whether or not the player can find mum in the time given will affect story events in the next stage(s).

If player successfully finds mum, she will take me to a beef noodle restaurant, and we'll vent to each other about our troubles.
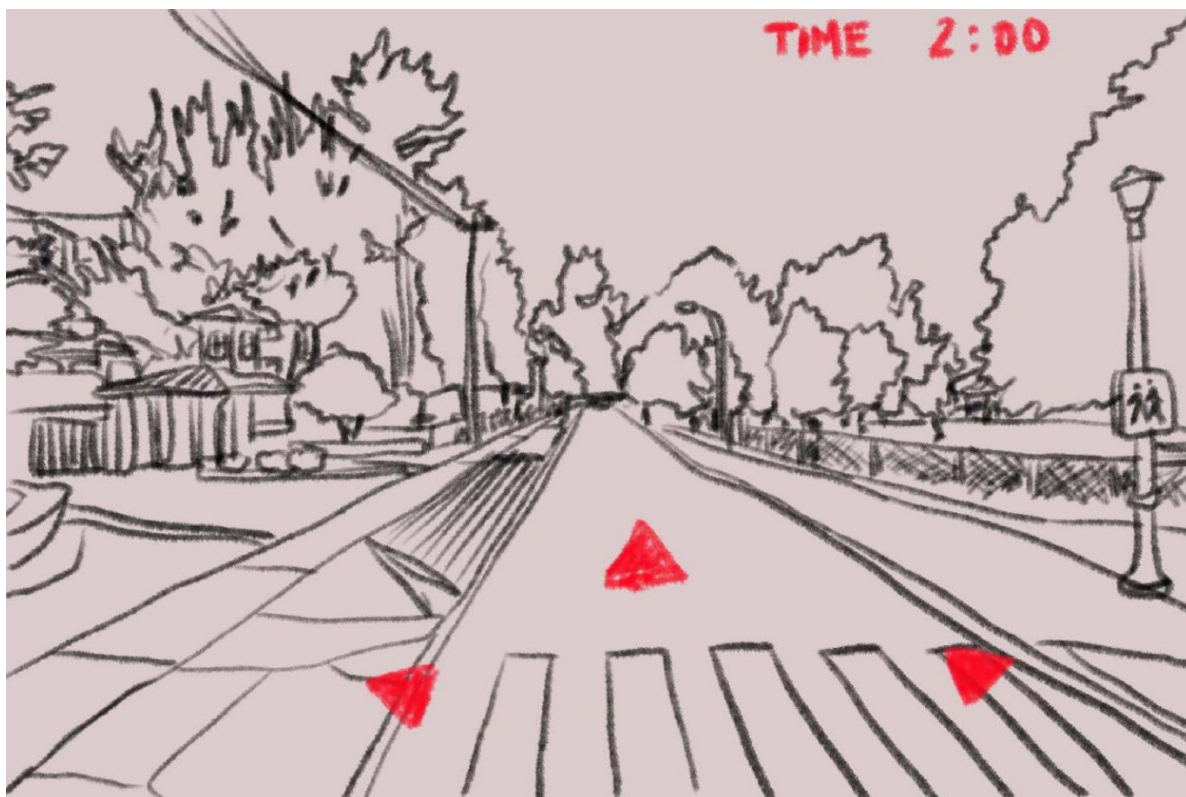
Figure 38 - Stage 1 Story Event 2

Figure 39 - Mock up of searching

Figure 40 - Mock up of a meal together

Stage 2 "青春期的孩子啊..."
"When kids hit puberty..."

Story Event 1

I am 15 years old.
I recently moved to Shanghai for high school and I live with my aunt now.
I've been away from mum for some time now and I think our views have begun to disagree with each other's.

Player runs through a phone call with mum, updating her about daily school life.

Phone call:
Mum asks something and player has to quickly decide between different answers to successfully get through the conversation

There is a meter of patience representing my remaining patience. If player chooses too many "wrong" or unpleasant" answers, the meter empties and the phone call results in an argument and I hang up.

If player had successfully found mum in the previous stage, I am more willing to listen to mum, and the meter is more lenient.
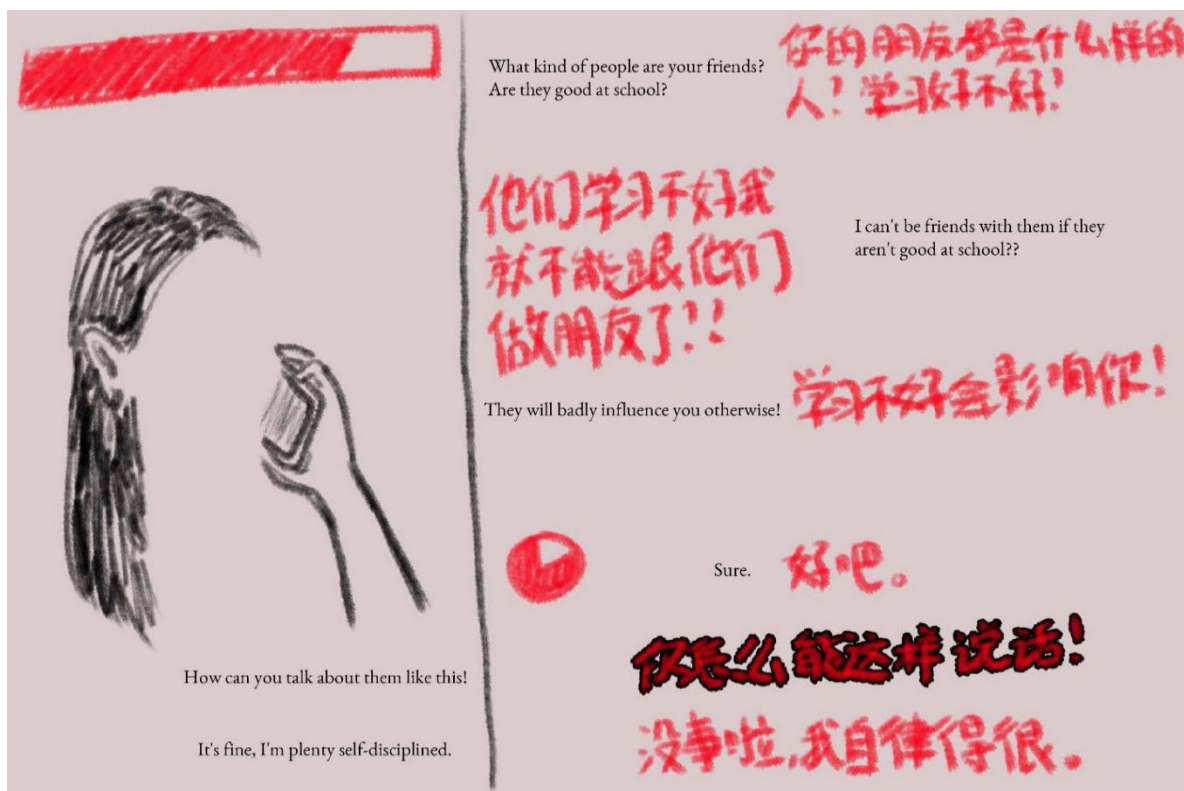
Figure 41 – Stage 2 Story Event 1

Figure 42 – Mock up of phone conversation

Stage 2 *"青春期的孩子啊..."*
"When kids hit puberty..."

Story Event 2

I am 18 years old.
It's the week of high school graduation. School and stress have consumed me. I am anxious and scared about the future. I think I may be severely depressed.

My mum and I are at my bed. Mum has come to Shanghai for my graduation ceremony, she's trying to understand why I'm so sad and angry nowadays.

Though this is a conversation, player does not have a choice. Mum will continue talking and ask player questions, player has to click on their answer, but the cursor refuses to land on the answer, so mum will continue talking (signifying that it's incredibly difficult to come clean to mum).

Player is prevented from answering anything at all throughout the conversation until the very end. When mum asks why one last time, player can click the only response available - "I want to die." Mum doesn't know what to do.
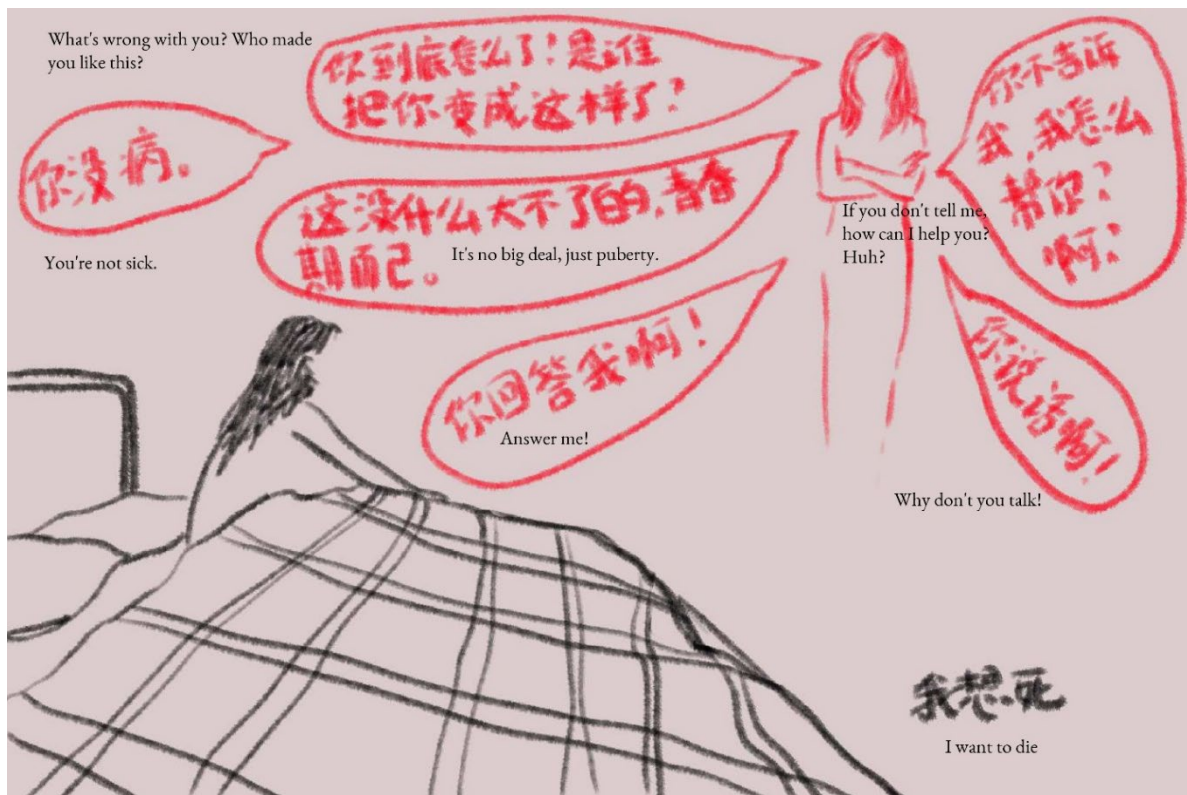
Figure 43 – Stage 2 Story Event 2

Figure 44 – Mock up of conversation

Stage 3 "到底是谁把你变成这样的"
"Who turned you into this?"

Story Event 1

I am 19 years old.
College life is hard to balance. It's hard to stay in daily contact with mum.

Player runs through a day of college:
--> player gets 3 lives, failure to complete a segment results in loss of a life
Roaming about campus - look at map, memorize location of classes and get to class in time, WASD on map
Lecture - take notes AKA type out what's on the whiteboard and also answer quiz question correctly when called on
Eating - find friend in the cafeteria before awkward meter fills up (takes 30 seconds)

Dorm
Player is in bed, and checks phone, mum has sent many messages, player must try to answer them all (typing like in Stage 1 Event 1) before player's sleepy meter fills up --> this corresponds to how many lives player had managed to maintain during the day --> 3 lives, start w/ empty meter, 2 lives, start w/ 2/3 empty meter, 3 lives, start w/ 1/3 empty meter
Whether player successfully answers mum's texts will affect subsequent story events

Figure 45 – Stage 3 Story Event 1

Stage 3 "到底是谁把你变成这样的"
"Who turned you into this?"

Story Event 2

I am 20 years old.
I live on my own and this has been the worst summer of my life.

Player has to get through the day from beginning to end without my anxiety meter fully filled up. Split screen, one side is me trying to finish tasks, the other side is my blurry phone screen, under the blur are messages from mum. Each time the player erases the blur fully, meter decreases. Phone screen will blur up instantaneously after a full erase. If player had successfully completed Stage 3 Event 1, meter decreases more each time. When meter fills up completely, the day resets.

1. Waking up - player has to quickly click continuously to get me up and out of bed, the longer I stay in bed, the more the meter fills up
2. Food - (all the cabinets are closed, and I don't know where anything is, there is a list of possible things to make and ingredients needed right corner of screen, things aren't always where they should be) make a meal without running into the cockroaches in the kitchen, each time I see cockroaches, meter fills up
3. Walk to and from class/getting through class - being outside means being taunted by the stares of other people, player has to dispel the stares before they reach me, each time a stare reaches me, meter fills up
4. Bed - scroll through phone without seeing triggers until I fall asleep

Player must successfully play through the day in order to move onto the next stage.

Figure 46 – Stage 3 Story Event 2

Stage 4 "回来多好，你说你要是现在在洛杉矶我得多担心啊"
"Good that you're back, I would be so worried if you were still in Los Angeles"

Story Event 1

I am 21 years old.
I've come back to live with mum in Vancouver because of the pandemic. There are a lot of things I'm not used to and a lot of things I'm not sure about.

Player is free to explore around the house and free to explore how to best interact with mum. To end the day, I have to go to bed. Player can decide whether to move onto the next stage or to remain another day, trigger events/animations are selected randomly each day.

Living room (2 events available/day)
-sleep on the couch --> mum scolds me
-stretch --> during a vigorous stretching routine (bridge), mum sees the tattoos on my side and begins an hour long lecture
-watch TV show --> mum joins with a plate of cut apple slices, mum and I debate over which show to watch
-watch documentary --> mum happens upon a documentary about post-pandemic Wuhan, she begins to tell me all the things she had experienced when she went back home for CNY as the pandemic had just begun to spread, I cry with her

Kitchen (1 event available/day)
-fridge --> I pour and accidentally spill a cup of milk, mum scolds

-oven --> I experiment with baking as I scarcely do, my cookies are ugly and bitter, but mum says she likes them
-stove --> mum asks me what I'd like to eat, I answer egg noodle soup, mum makes it for me, it's the best meal I've had in a long while

Work Desk (1 event available/day)
-work station --> my desk is too messy, mum scolds me
-computer --> I work until 3 AM, mum emerges from her slumber and yells for me to go to sleep
-computer 2 --> mum comes over and asks me what I'm working on, I try my best to explain though she doesn't seem to quite understand, but I'm glad she had asked

Backyard (1 event available/day)
-garden --> mum and I tend to our plants
-outside --> mum asks me take our dog on a walk so my eyes can rest

Bedroom
-sleep --> player can choose to move onto the next stage OR run through another day
-waking up --> triggered when player decides to run through another day, there's a 50/50 chance that I'll sleep in and get scolded by mum

Figure 47 – Stage 4 Story Event 1

Stage 4 "回来多好，你说你要是现在在洛杉矶我得多担心啊"
"Good that you're back, I would be so worried if you were still in Los Angeles"

Story Event 2

I am 22 years old.
I've come back to live with my mum for a year now.

Player controls me as I go on a walk with mum and our dog.

Figure 48 – Stage 4 Story Event 2

Appendix B - Outlines for sketches in Stage 3 and Stage 4

Stage 3 "Who turned you into this?"

Story Event – When I woke up that day, I saw visions of myself jumping off Hedrick Summit

I am 20 years old. I'm at university and living alone for the first time. It's hard to keep in contact with mum. And it's been the worst semester of my life.

This is a looping sequence in which I must get through the day from beginning to end without my anxiety meter filled fully; there are three bars to the gauge. It involves waking up, finding food to eat, walking to and from class, getting through class, and going to bed. Each task progresses to the next if the gauge is not filled up fully. In the corner of the screen resides a phone displaying a blurry screen of texts from mum. Every time I read through her texts fully amidst a task, the gauge drains. The day must be played through in full without a filled gauge to get to the outro.

Outline of event
The tasks are designed to be difficult to complete to simulate what it had been like trying to get through each day with severe depression and anxiety. In other words, each task is designed to fail, and multiple play-throughs are required before being able to complete all tasks, getting through the day, hence naming it a "looping sequence".

Introduction:
Sets premise. Introduce conditions to progress to next stage.

Wake up:
Click continuously to get me out of bed as I resist. If I stay in bed past a certain set time, one bar is filled.

Food:
Open the cabinets. If I see a cockroach, two bars are filled.

Walk to class:
People are staring at me. If a stare reaches me before being dispelled, the gauge fills up in full.

Class:
Copy down the lecture notes in full exactly as written on the board before it is erased. Otherwise, one bar is filled.

Sleep:

Scroll through my phone until I fall asleep. If I see something that triggers me, the gauge fills up in full.

Outro:
A message from me "in the present," delineating what had really happened. This period in my life had lasted nearly two years and my memories of what it had been like tend to blend into one another. And I had barely kept in contact with my mum, if at all, though I wish I could've reached out and I wish she could've helped me. It's a comfort, funnily, that could only be experienced in game for me.

Stage 4 "It's good that you're back."

Story Event 1 – Cut apple slices

I am 21 years old. I've come back from university to live with mum in midst of the pandemic. There are lots of things I'm not used to (anymore) and even more that I'm not sure about.

This is an explorative sequence in which I am free to roam around my house whilst discovering ways to interact with mum. Each section of the house has several events that can be chosen, only one event can be chosen from each section each day. To end the day, I must go to bed. At the end of the day, I can choose to remain here or to move on. There are no timers, no winning and no losing.

Outline of event

Introduction:
Sets premise. Introduce conditions, or lack thereof, required to progress to next stage.

Living room:
1. Sleep on couch - Mum proceeds to scold me.
2. Stretch - While I stretch, the tattoos on my body are exposed, mum sees them for the first time and begins an hour-long lecture.
3. Watch TV show - Mum joins me on the couch with a plate of cut apple slices and we debate over which show to watch.
4. Watch documentary - Mum joins me on the couch and we happen upon a documentary about "post-pandemic" Wuhan. She begins to tell me about everything she'd seen when she'd gone back home in 2020 for Chinese New Year. She begins to cry, and I cry with her.

Kitchen:

1. Fridge - I pour and accidentally spill a glass of milk. Mum proceeds to scold me.
   2. Oven -I experiment with baking and my cookies come out simultaneously too sweet and too bitter. Mum tries one and says that she likes them.
   3. Stove - Mum asks me what I want to eat, and I say egg noodle soup. She makes it for me and it's the best meal I've had in a long time.

Work desk:
   1. Mess - Mum proceeds to scold me.
   2. Computer - I am still working at three in the morning. Mum emerges from her slumber, yells at me to go to sleep, then proceeds to scold me.
   3. Notebook - Mum comes over and asks me what I'm working on. I try my best to explain but she doesn't seem to quite understand. I'm glad she asked though.

Backyard:
   1. Plants - Mum and I tend to our potted plants.
   2. Grass field - Mum asks me to take our dog on a walk so my eyes can rest from staring at my computer all day.

Bedroom:
   1. Sleep - I choose to remain or move on.
   2. Wake up - When I wake up, there's a fifty-fifty chance that I will sleep in. If I sleep in, mum will proceed to scold me.

Story Event 2 – A walk

I am 24 years old. I'm going on my last walk with my mum and our dog before I move away for my MFA.

This is a walking sequence. A recreation of a walk that I've taken with my mum many times in the three years that I've come back - at the park near the library, at the running track near the strip mall, at the water near the airport, at the beach near the factories. We'd talk at length about not much at all. We were awkward and we still are, but I know we're both trying.

Outline of event

Introduction:
Sets premise and instructions.

A walk:
Conducted in first person point-of-view. A mixture of videos, one melts into the next. A mixture of voice overs of conversations between my mum and I, I

voice both of us. I press the left and right arrow keys sequentially to walk. The sequence is long, upwards of ten minutes in length of continual "walking".

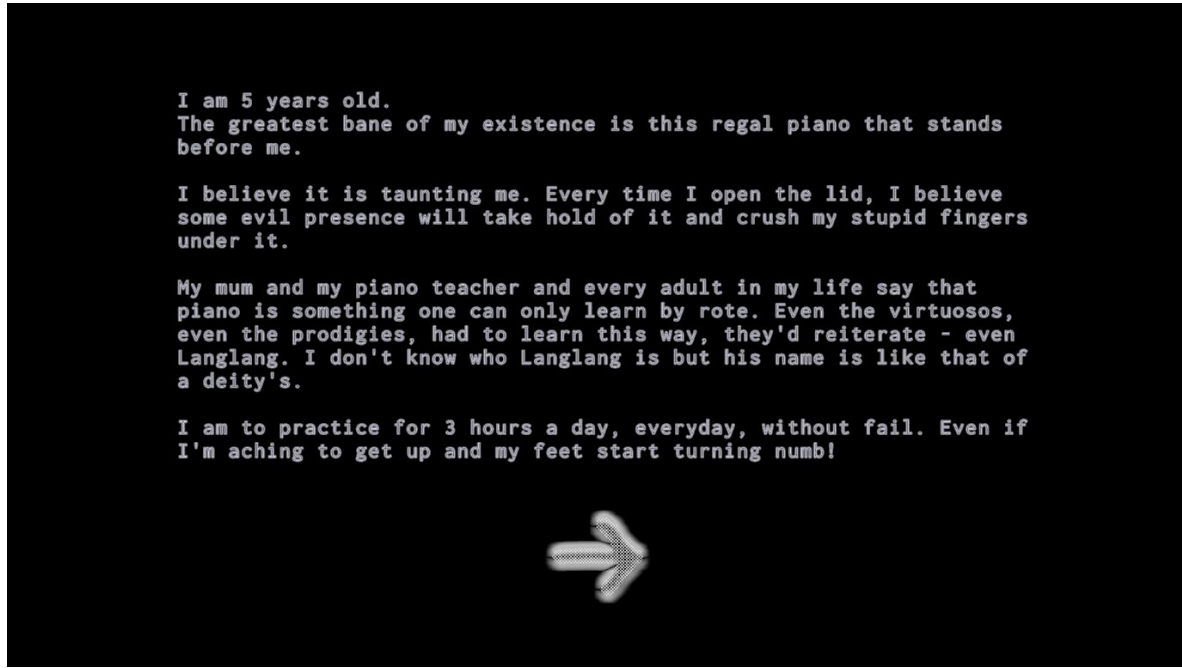## Appendix C - Some ruminarratives
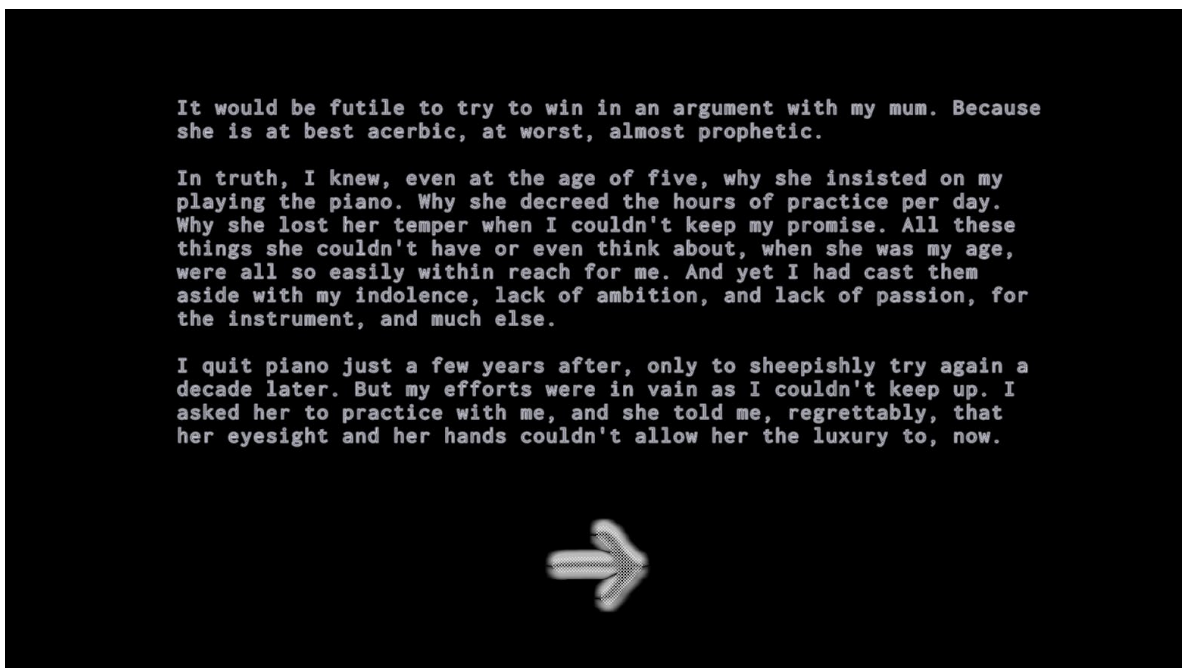

Figure 49 - Intro text from "The piano"

Figure 50 - Outro text from "The piano"

I am 8 years old.
I've just immigrated to Vancouver with my mum.

I'm overcome with great senses of loneliness and incompetency; I can't
keep up in class, not because I can't recite the multiplication table
with great accuracy, but because I'd do it with a noticeable stutter only
exacerbated by my noticeable Chinese accent; I don't have any friends
because my classmates are all unsure of where I fit, I don't even have
MSN; and I can't speak English (suspension of disbelief interjected)
because I'm not Canadian, at least not yet.

I thought I'd grow close to mum like this, but she has her own Stuff that
I may be privy to, yet don't entirely understand or accept. I don't see
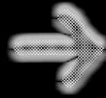much of her on most days. Today, I'm looking for her again.

Figure 51 - Intro text from "I (have) memorized these streets"

I ran out of time.
I didn't find her today.

I will try again tomorrow, as I always do. But I wish she'd seen the
garish apple sticker hyperbolically exclaiming "A+++++" that the teacher
put on my book report. Or how I'd achieved a tornado on the monkey bars
after school. Or the scrapes on my arms that serve evidence of my valiant
climbing of the white tree. Or the rice filled snowman made with an old
sock that I'd grown to cherish and wanted her to have as a little festive
gift of the season. Or how I'd received my first ever Valentine's card in
a complete fit of precocious disconcertment. Or maybe the Mother's Day
portrait I'd never deem good enough, so it lived in the space between my
mattress and bed slats until I no longer remember, and it wouldn't even
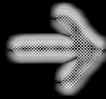matter, anyway, anyhow, now.

Figure 52 - Outro text from "I (have) memorized these streets"

Mum used to tell me about her life before she'd gotten married. She had a short stint in Shenzhen, as a new graduate she was offered a promising job. She told me how apprehensive she felt, as she walked under every shining astigmatic streetlight at night, how big the world felt. She didn't stay in the city for too long after all, but she visited a handful of times a decade or two later. She'd exclaim to me how much she likes the weather, the people, the trees lining the highways, passing on her veiled regrets of not having stayed. Ah, but if I had moved there then, I wouldn't have you, she'd whisper.

Figure 53 – Snippet from "My conversation with my mum…"

Ah, how beautiful a mother is when she has softened the knots in her heart to accept the Larsonian faith as true and The Truth. She'll be singing five-hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes into the hereafter for as long as love endures. She is a changed woman, she is touched. Though, I must, with much regret, impart upon you a truth that even Larson could not rewrite - for this universe, still bound by human fallibility, by presumptions, by some moral cecity, it cannot accomodate the truth that you deserve. Your mother, has awakened to the divinities of *Rent*, its hymns etched within, she has learned to embrace the fictional, of Angel's grace, of Collins's devotion... but such embrace falters at the threshold of your truth.

Perhaps in a universe kinder than this one. Do remember it is not a practiced malice, nor is it hate, some are weighed down heavier with beliefs, stuck like burrs to their being, oblivious, until they hurt the ones they love the most.

Figure 54 - Snippet from "My conversation with my mum…"

```
It wasn't a big deal because it just meant I was growing up. It's
normal to keep things from my mum.

She knew all of me when I was five years old,

then a little bit less when I was ten years old,

then a little bit less now,

then a little bit less.

It's abnormal to believe that anyone could love anyone
unconditionally.

It's just a matter of outgrowing this puerile naiveté.
```

Figure 55 - Snippet from "My conversation with my mum…"

After that, a shapeless silence fell upon both of us. Mum, when she came to it, began
cycling through aphorisms, trying to wise me out of suicidal ideation. I kept my mouth
shut again. She doesn't need to know that some days ago I was circling the lake near
the school. And she doesn't need to know that some days before that I was at the
bridge.

Begin again

Figure 56 – Outro from "Anthems for an eighteen year old girl…"

"I'd often felt like inside me they are always vying for complete control. If
I pour out all of my Chinese sensibilities, only then would I be able to truly
speak the English language, and vice versa. There would be no noting anymore
of how I mistake one Chinese aphorism for another or how I always struggle to
enunciate irreconcilable. But then I would not understand my mother, she'd
truly be speaking to a wall, a mass. All my vestigial intimations of a
homeland, of being a person, of being a girl, of all things in tension, would
be supplanted. By something better, I thought. If I don't understand her I can
cease feeling the differences between us that she can't help but pontificate
at length about. If I don't understand her I can feign obliviousness when she

decides to be embittered about (our) her past(s). If I don't understand her I wouldn't be subject to the soreness that enters through my nose, trespasses, overstays like a limpet on my heart and my gut whenever something she's said will surely make me cry; but I can't let her see it, not a matter of pride, more so a code of honor that neither of us dare breach, a solidarity amongst strong women."

- After I'd woken up from a dream about my mother

"When I find myself having to start the last bit of the game, and having to recount, arguably, the piece of memory most capable of inducing pain and tears, even nearly 10 years later, there is a hellaciously strong aversion to even attempting to progress, despite knowing I'd have to sooner or later. Two days ago, in therapy, I had already cried about it. As it is with therapy sessions, my woes continued branching out until I'd forgotten exactly what I had expected to quell. I think I'd joked that everything had stemmed from my parents, but I probably wholeheartedly believed that up until three, four years ago. Then we talked about my mum. And I felt myself holding it down already, stupid tears that should only come from a child. How I'd been depressed and scared my senior year, just before high school graduation. My grades were slipping as a result. But the only people that could save me, I had believed, were trapped inside my phone. She thought that was ludicrous and decreed that I stop talking to them so I could set my sights back on my "future". I was in my bed, pressing my back against the headboard, at the furthest point away from her that I could manage. She was standing by the door. She kept asking me questions, but I could not answer them to her satisfaction, if at all, and I could not end the conversation on my terms. This is not real, this is fake. It is a matter of brain chemistry and hormones, countless times I'd be revisited by these sentiments in the years following, and now. When I was your age, I felt these things, too. So why couldn't you understand the things I needed. And you kept talking at me and taking away bits and pieces until I finally felt as if I needed to implode. So I screamed at you, or maybe it was only a whisper, I can't remember anymore. I told you, I informed you that I want to die. Funny how I'd planted these words inside of me; I thought I'd buried them triple times over just for them to come out of me all the same years later, ever so often."

- A reflection I had before working on "Anthems for an eighteen-year-old girl who'd much rather"