A Minor(ity) Development: Analysing Video Games as a Vehicle for Queer Art

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ABSTRACT

We exist in an era in which the presence of video games is almost inescapable. The days of these games being locked in place within bulky machines within an arcade have passed, and now can be found in nearly every digital format from computers to phones to the consoles custom-made to house them. Their presence is in daily life is a given, but little consideration is given to what these games contain, and who made them – and, by extension, the potential within the medium for development and change. This exegesis exists to explore the role that video games can take if used as vehicles for minority art and storytelling, with a particular focus on utilising queer theory within this concept.

This is to be contextualised within the work ‘Project: Mystic’, which fulfils the creative project aspect of my submission. This consists of a narrative-driven mystery game set in Aotearoa during the 1920s, where the player is given the goal of investigating the disappearance of the Mystic Liner. Within this, I investigate how stories rooted in queerness can manifest when prioritised above classic game hegemony, as well as how this might affect the playstyle and reception of the game. This is reflected upon via a combination of qualitative surveys and the application of historical queer theory. The resulting analysis discusses both how the idea of queer art manifested within Project: Mystic, and how the gathered research might be utilised best in future production and analysis of game.

KEYWORDS: video games, queer theory, queer narrative, game narrative

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INTRODUCTION

"*The dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naïve, simplistic, or a blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet, the possibility of other forms of being, knowing a world with different sites for justice and injustice... should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve*." – (Halberstam, 2011)

To approach video games as an art form unique to our time gives those who create and consume them a new framework to consider them through. Utilising research gathered within this exegesis, I aim to explore the potential of video games as a platform in which to create and distribute queer art. This is to be informed by existing queer theory, which I intend to utilise specifically within the context of modern video games. Existing research within this field is limited for a variety of reasons, such as the rapid development of the technology used to create video games as well as a historical disregard towards the field of video games in an academic context. As such, I have utilised papers which focus on other forms of media (such has film) to help inform some of my literature review in accompaniment to more specific research into the field of game.

To contextualise the practices and ideology that encompass existing games, I utilise the work of Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce in '*The Hegemony of Play*' (2007) to provide both historical grounding of the development of game, as well as the manifestation of the culture surrounding both mainstream and indie video games. I then look to historical and current discussion on queer theory, as well as investigating the definition and application of said theory. Finally, using a combination of Adrienne Shaw's "*Putting the Gay in Games*" and Bonnie Ruberg's "*The Precarious Labour of Queer Indie Game-Making*" as well as "*Video Games Have Always Been Queer*", I analyse how video games have functioned as a space for queerness, as well as investigating how they might continue to do so in the future. Within the Methodology section, I discuss how concepts I identified influenced the development of narrative and dialogue within Project: Mystic, as well as how an agile pipeline and accompanying action research allowed for constant refinement as results were obtained and reflected upon. Finally, I discuss what was gathered from my research, as well as the future potential of said content in both a practical and theoretical field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of the proceeding literature reviews was to establish the state of the game industry, existing practice in the dominant powers within said industry, and in what manner these currently manifest. The first section focuses on identifying existing ideologies and biases by those who create games inside both the AAA and independent development spheres, as well as the communities that have grown around them, and those excluded from said community. The bulk of this segment is supported by Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce's work in "*The Hegemony of Play*", which focuses on both developers and players. The second section addresses queer theory, what it means, and how it can be contextualised within the field of video games as both a developer and consumer of the media, using Judith Butler and Annamarie Jagose's "*Queer Theory: An Introduction*". Finally, I explore what queerness in game has historically looked like and how it manifests today, informed by Adrienne Shaw's "*Putting the Gay in Games"* and multiple pieces by Bonnie Ruberg, including "*The Precarious Labour of Queer Indie Game-Making*" and "*Video Games Have Always Been Queer*."

WHO'S PLAYING?

To fully understand the manner in which video games can act as an art form to elevate queer storytelling and art, one must first address the current understanding of what a video game is. This definition is one that changes depending on who you ask, but for the sake of this exegesis, I will be using the definition 'A videogame is a game which we play thanks to an audio-visual apparatus, and which can be based on a story' (Esposito, 2005).

Historically, those who make games are white heterosexual men who employ other white, heterosexual men. The International Game Developers Association conducted a survey in 2005 which investigated the demographics of said creators – 88% of game developers were male, 83.3% white, and 92% were heterosexual (Fron et al., 2007). A similar survey was also conducted by the IGDA in 2016, where 75% of developers identified as male, and 76% as white. (Weststar, 2016) Whilst this research seems to indicate the beginning of a culture shift, it also seems to be incorrect that this has also reduced the issues which drove people of colour, women, and non-heterosexual people away from the development industry. Feedback from a number of women in the IGDA investigation during 2007 "complained of 'boy's only' ethos and multiple game industry practices that are alienating to women. These include the use of 'booth babes' at

industry expos, excessive overtime' a lack of work/life balance, and a general locker-room attitude that pervades the workplace" (2016). Meanwhile, in 2021, Blizzard has been sued California in the form of an anti-discrimination lawsuit. A major player on the worldwide stage of game development, with a net revenue of 8.1 billion USD in 2020 (Activision, 2020), the company is currently being investigated for several violations, including 'fostering a frat boy culture' (Jones, 2021). With near identical complaints about entirely separate groups being identified over a decade between investigations, it is likely that this continued culture drives away women and other minority groups who would otherwise be engaging with the development process.

Another significant way in which this culture has been influenced is the intense commercial success it has experienced. In the year 2020 alone, $159.3 billion USD was earned on an industry-wide scale (Field Level Media, 2020). This commercial value has an undeniable influence, and as game has 'become more successful, it has become more risk-averse' (Fron et al., 2007). Games are created first and foremost with the intent to tap into the existing market, which is defined and built upon by those who make the games. Even if 'many designers bemoan the stranglehold that marketing departments have on the trajectory of game design' (2007, p.2), those who have their income relying on the guarantee of a return of the game they produce' have too much at stake to precipitate a revolutionary upheaval of the powers of play' (2007, p.2). If white, heterosexual men are the ones creating games, it seems a natural conclusion that the of play existing within that content appeals to that demographic first and foremost. This market is then considered the primary audience to engage with from a business perspective, isolating developers within companies who wish to try something new. Game development becomes a self-feeding cycle of providing exactly what is expected within game, creating a hegemonic style of creation and production.

As a result of this market, "games that centre violence and sex are the mainstream" (Anthropy, 2012), with Call of Duty and GTA V being prominent examples of intensely popular games. Whilst it is certainly untrue to say this is the only kind games produced, there is a prominent cultural difference when it comes to the perception of the more 'casual' or 'female' game, in which they are considered lesser than other games. Despite this, however, some of the best-selling games of all time are including among what is considered a 'casual' game. Tetris has sold

over 100,000,000 copies as of 2021 (EA, 2010). However, this does not change the output of games that focus heavily on violence, oftentimes against women and people of colour. This undoubtedly drives away those who might otherwise play said games, with personal association with depicted events meaning that playing through them for fun is a markedly different experience. Grand Theft Auto is a prominent example of normalised violence and sexism in a game. Women are treated as sexual objects, portrayed in jobs such as prostitutes and pole dancers, and exist solely within the context of the game to entertain the main character in sexual fashion. It is popular to kill said characters after completing the event, which allows the player to have their money returned, and this sort of sexual violence is prominent throughout many mainstream games, as well as more mainstream, militarised violence.

Despite this, there is a market for "minority" players and play styles (Fron et al., 2007). Wii Sports, a sport-simulation game published by Nintendo, sits as the 4th bestselling title of all time, and Animal Crossing: New Horizons, published in 2020, found itself as the 15th bestselling title of all time ("List of best-selling video games", 2021). Neither of these titles idolise violence, nor sexuality, being marketed in a gender-neutral way for all ages. Rather than "perpetuate a particular set of values and norms concerning games and game play, which tend to subordinate and ghettoize minority players and play styles" (Fron et al., 2007), these games sought to embrace them. We can establish that while there is a "cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued" (p.1), we are capable of creating a non-hegemonic game industry that provides "playful products which appeal to both men and women, children and adults, and players of all races, ages and personal play styles" (p.9) that does not exist to serve as a net loss to the industry.

When one looks to the culture of the independent game industry, we can see a change in the norm of game development. Although the definition of 'indie game' is as hotly disputed as the term 'video game', for the purpose of this exegesis, I am taking 'a game remains independent if the publisher doesn't fund its development' (Oddo, 2021) as a descriptor when I discuss the term and surrounding development culture.

It is untrue to act as though independent game studios are somehow exempt from racist and misogynistic practices that perpetrate 'mainstream' game development. Regardless of the size of each group, those who participate in counterculture are just as vulnerable to propagating

systematic shortcomings as any larger group. With “the concept of indie... referring to both a style and a mode of production that is not ‘mainstream’” (Simon, 2012), independent games can and do include those who have participated in more mainstream game development, and thus cannot be separated from the identified problems within said development. It often falls to developers of colour “to address diverse and, at times, racist content in games, which consequently enables their own self-exploitation” (Srauy, 2019). The same can be said of those of other marginalized identities within the realm of indie game development.

Despite this, the popularization of independent game development has removed several barriers when it comes to involvement in the industry. One does not have to be under the employment of a company, nor be funded by a company to produce products, and with the rising popularity and accessibility of programs such as Gamemaker Studio, Unity, and Twine, the process of creating is markedly easier than it was two decades ago. It has been suggested that “currently, the only real barrier to game creation is the technical ability to design and create games – and that, too, is a problem that is in the process of being solved” (Anthropy, 2012). If someone can produce a game from their bedroom and publish it online, it allows a new culture to form entirely independent of that dictated by mainstream game development.

As for where these independent games can be found, Itch.io, one of the most prominent storefronts for independently developed games, shows a remarkable variety of content. From fully developed games to productions made overnight and published for free, the scope of the ‘indie games available on the platform is immense, and perhaps more importantly, incredibly varied. Such intense availability allows distribution among many online communities who might not otherwise be capable of accessing the game, but, more significantly, there are many games which are entirely free. They are produced with the intent of no return, and only to be put out and consumed by whatever handful of people that might come across them. People who want to create something not inherently tied to a market can move with more freedom, especially when said market has been established as hostile to non-traditional games. If we accept the notion of video games as an art form, and understand that “games, digital and otherwise, transmit ideas and culture. This is something they share with poems, novels, music albums, films, sculptures, and paintings” (Anthropy, 2012), the idea of creation without the expectation of income becomes more understandable. Yang states that “We love comparing video games to other media and

creative disciplines, so here it goes: across music, film-making, painting, sculpture, theatre, dance, book-writing, poetry, fashion, sports, etc. *the vast majority of practitioners and artists make very little money from their passions,* and often take up other jobs or gigs or client work to pay the rent" (Yang, 2017). Someone can make a game for no other reason than to pursue their wish to make a game. Video games can be more than a beautifully rendered piece, made with the intention of mass consumption – "I like the idea of video games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artifacts instead of impersonal creations" (Anthropy, 2012).

In the context of Project Mystic, I wish to consider the way that my own experience and expectation of the current hegemony of game development has informed my initial passes on the narrative design within the project, and how I can work to reject the more harmful cultural norms that may have found their way into my work.

THE PRACTICE OF QUEER THEORY

Queer theory as a concept is one that is constantly shifting both in focus and topic as those involved grow, change, and evolve in their understanding of the world around them. This discourse encompasses many different things, the definition itself fluid and shifting over time in tandem with the societal understanding of gender and sexuality. It not only encompasses challenging the ideals around heterosexuality existing as the 'norm', but the sexuality and gender ideals which are propagated by a heteronormative culture. The term was first used in an academic concept by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldua in the 80s, but builds off a variety of contributors and theorists, including Michel Foucalt, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jose Esteban Munoz, Sara Ahmed, and Gaylle Rubin. Queer theory is unique in the sense that it rejects a solid definition, even when existing in an academic context. Butler states that "'queer' as a term should never be fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purpose" (Butler, 2020) and this concept is applied to queer theory also. However, the general accepted understanding of queer theory is challenging heteronormativity, or "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant, Warner, 2020). Whilst one might assume that queer theory lies exclusively in discussion on sexuality, it 'cannot be disconnected from the other

categories of social status and identity' (Illinois Library, 2021). The radical nature of queer theory has meant that it had not found a presence in academic fields in the same manner other lens which critique cultural norms and medias are until recently. Rejection of structures and the manner in which queer theory is often put forward by minority groups who do not have access to academia due to the very structures they critique means that they have often been excluded from wider conversation, and it is because of this in tandem with the complex history of the LGBTQ+ community that has resulted in the environment we perceive today.

The very word 'queer' has a complex history. Whilst "originally used as a pejorative, 'queer' has been largely reclaimed as a term of pride in popular as well as academic contexts" (Ruberg, 2019). This reclamation is complex, as individuals within the LGBTQ+ community may not identify with the term whatsoever, but queerness and its reclamation have become formative in circles of modern discourse and identity. Queerness, "at its most basic, serves as an umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to the mainstream norms of gender and sexuality" (2019). This can include "all of the identities described by the acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and many more, including genderqueer, asexual, and intersex" (2019). However, in the context of theory, queer takes on a different implication. As stated above, the fluidity of queerness is critical to its continued survival, as "normalising the queer would, after all, be its sad finish" (Butler, 1994). To "resist the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject" (Ruberg, 2019) is the lens in which queer theory might be interpreted and used to examine the world around us. Whilst much of the power of queer comes from its ambiguity, there is also the issue that "as queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions" (1994). This is a significant point when considering queer theory in tandem with game development, as it has an inextricable relationship with capitalism, and thus work must be done with this in mind.

QUEER GAMES, QUEER DESIGNS

Within this review, I reflect on both Adrienne Shaw's '*Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games*' and Bonnie Ruberg's '*The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games "Better"?*' as well as "*Video Games Have Always Been*

Queer." This is accompanied by examples of existing research into the relationship between queerness and games. With these works published a decade apart, I intend to explore the changes within the industry during that time regarding how queerness is approached and platformed.

Shaw's investigation aimed to address "GLBT representation from a cultural production perspective," and "addresses how members of the video game account for the relative lack of GLBT representation in this medium" (Shaw, 2009). Questions were beginning to be raised about why "when video games had been a popular medium since the 1970s, are questions about the representation of diverse sexualities and gendered identities only now being discussed?" (p.229) Bringing up the 2006 game Bully, it is pointed out that it garnered media attention "not for its display of schoolyard violence but because it allows players' male avatar Jimmy Hopkins to kiss both male and female characters" (Lumpkin, 2007, Matei, 2006). Shaw notes that "this finding was both celebrated and decried by critics," and that "Media covered of this optional homosexuality or bisexuality noted that video games were becoming more inclusive" (Shaw, 2009). Whilst the ideal presented by the latter comment is comforting, Bonnie Ruberg notes that in work published a decade afterwards that "larger corporations and organisations have used this rhetoric to signal their commitment to diversity and as a selling point to consumers or to placate critics who accuse them of discrimination" (Ruberg, 2019). Media articles framing this inclusion of queerness as a recent development is also problematic in the sense that it promotes the "misinformed assumption that LGBTQ players, game-makers, themes and meaning are relatively new to video games" (Ruberg, 2019). Regardless, mainstream attention was beginning to be paid to the idea of the explicit representation of LGBTQ+ people within game during this period of the late 2000s. Community-coined terms such as 'gaymer' (Urban Dictionary, 2005) were also common as self-identifiers found in this time and have carried through to modern communities.

In interviews conducted for this research, Shaw noted that when she posed the question of representation, "respondents often replied that video games are a 'new medium' and that representation would come 'in time', a perspective repeated in press articles and interviews for this project" (Shaw, 2009). However, it was also pointed out that "in the broader space of popular culture, such content is not new" (p.229). At the time this article was produced, video games had been around for approximately thirty years, and "although there has been research on representation in video games... research on representation of the GLBT community is scarce"

(p.229). During this point in time, while there was a presence of LGBTQ+ characters and themes, it was by no means a common occurrence, nor had it been evaluated in the context of academic fields to a significant degree. This is only further solidified by Ruberg's comments within 'Video Games have Always Been Queer', where she notes that "until recently, queerness and LGBTQ experiences were rarely subjects of game studies research" and those that did "frequently did so through questions about straight male identification with sexualised, on-screen women – problematically perpetuating the presumption that video game players are predominately heterosexual, cisgender men." (Ruberg, 2019) With this piece being published near a decade after Shaw's, this misinformed ideal of who a 'gamer' is has clearly had long lasting impacts on the cultural landscape and continues to influence the industry today.

Within this article, several factors were identified as 'affecting the representation of the GLBT community are the attitudes of those in the video game development community," (Shaw, 2019) which included "the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content, whether the structure of the industry allows it to face this backlash, and the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium" (p.229). Said attitudes of those in the video game community seem to come from a variety of places. One of these is the more obvious of "game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market. These games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time. As only economically successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what 'gamers' play" (p.232). It was previously noted that the presence of LGBTQ+ themes in video games at the time were incredibly limited, and thus it is easy to understand why it would be difficult to convince producers of the merit of said themes. They stood as an incredibly successful medium without this diversity, and "if video game designers are to include GLBT content, they must believe there is an audience for this content" (p.237). Shaw counters this with the observation that "GLBT content does not have to exist just for those who identify with that acronym" (p.232), and "as noted in forums, articles, and interviews, even heterosexual, traditionally gendered gamers may want to play with sexuality and gender in video games" (p. 239) She also observes that "A major argument for excluding GLBT characters is that the majority of gamers cannot identify with them. Empirically, however, we know very little about how and why players identify with same characters and not with others" (p.239). This fear of loss of sales was not necessarily unwarranted, as observed from the initial example of Bully, as well as the fact that "homosexual

content can garner more severe ratings than similar heterosexual scenes" (p.241). When provided with this context, the idea that "the poor representation of LGBTQ in the history of games speaks to the profound impact of corporate concerns on video games as a medium" (Ruberg, 2019) is solidified, and the continued influence of the ideas put forward in 'The Hegemony of Play' (Janine Fron, et al., 2007) which idealise a specific kind of culture and 'gamer' for the purpose of revenue. However, Shaw notes that "the fear of offense and risk has more to do with what audiences might do, rather than what they have actually done" (Shaw, 2009). It would not be unfair to see this line of reasoning as a convenient defence which is removed from the potential accusation of homophobia, but it undoubtedly affected larger companies with larger commercial interests when it came to the presentation of LGBTQ+ themes. Regardless, "Although the survey, interviews, and articles indicate that the video game by and large is supportive of diversity, there seems to be little action to back up these sentiments" (2009, p.240).

Another point of interest which has been brought up when discussing this representation is why it is a goal at all. Shaw mentions that some interviewees argued that "it is more beneficial for the GLBT community to be left out of media than to be only referenced through stereotypes" (2009, p.231). Some were also concerned "that inclusion for the sake of inclusion would result in tokenism and poor video games" (2009, p.236). In contrast to this, during a personal exchange with Shaw, Jean Luc Pierite offered that "denouncing stereotypical representations outright is a bit heterosexist as it often relies on ignoring the nongender normative members of the GLBT community" (2009, p.244) The LGBTQ+ community encompasses an incredibly large range of opinions, and they do not function as a monolith. As such, it will be impossible to truly have a definitive opinion on the matter, but the importance of having the opportunity of an opinion at all is important. Shaw points out that "when GLBT content is supported, it is discussed as a matter of fairness" (2009, p.236), and that "in essence, lack of media representation is a way of saying: "Your concerns/thoughts/lifestyle and so on are not important" (2009, p.231).

What this representation looks like in game is not necessarily what one might assume. If the affirmation that "video games have always been queer" (Ruberg, 2019), and by extension, "even games that appear to have no LGBTQ content can be played queerly, and all games can be interpreted through queer lenses" (2019, Introduction) can be accepted, the paradigm of what queerness in game might look like changes. Ruberg points out that "queerness in video games

means more than representation of LGBTQ characters or same sex romance" (2019, Introduction). Queerness in game might manifest as "its mechanics, or in its imagery, or in its control schema." It might also simply be a way of "designing a game, interpreting it, or playing it" (2019, Introduction). The idea that queerness in game is restricted to a character being portrayed in a same-sex relationship minimises the complex works the developers committing themselves to queer gaming are capable of, as well as pigeon-holing their works. Ruberg notes that "queer indie games have commonly been described as empathy games" (Ruberg, 2019). This is an idea "which queer indie game-makers themselves have publicly refuted" (2019, pg.4), and responded with the idea that "in these instances, empathy is the name for the consumption of queer affect itself" (Ruberg, 2019, Chapter 6). Robert Yang speaks on this in regard to his work, pointing out that "this 'straight empathy' suddenly makes my games more about 'how beautiful and benevolent the straight people are, to tolerate my gay existence instead of vomiting' -- instead of highlighting gay culture or queer solidarity as I intended" (Yang, 2017). He quotes Wendy HK Chun to further express the problematic nature of a queer game being an experience in empathy, as "if you walk in someone else's shoes, then you've taken their shoes" (Chun, 2017). From this, it can be gathered that the matter in which representation is presented is as important as the reasoning behind it and is critical when it comes to disseminating how queerness in game is to manifest.

Finally, there is the matter of who is developing the GLBT content in these games. Shaw draws attention to the fact that "Articles and discussion forums indicated that they (GLBT game designers) would be able to strike a balance between stereotyping and properly reflecting 'gay identity'' (Shaw, 2009), and that "if LGBT individuals are involved directly in development, they can work against the stereotypes and ensure they're represented in a positive way" (2009, p. 234). It was also suggested that "having members of the community on a development team saves time on market research, as the target niche is right there" (2009, p. 234) It was also put forward by Jay Koottarappallil, an interviewee within Shaw's research that "a GLBT (person) may not represent their community well, just as we've seen countless heterosexual developers massacre a hetero relationship in games." (2009, p. 235) Regardless of this, the 2005 IGDA game developer survey that Shaw accessed indicated that a majority of respondents (62.8%) thought that "workplace diversity is important to the future success of the game industry" (2009, p.235). However, "before GLBT designers can insert diverse sexuality and gender

representations into game, they must feel comfortable being ‘out’.” (2009, p.234). As mentioned previously, the game industry has historically fostered a hostile culture for those who do not adhere to the working norm of white, cisgender, heterosexual men, and this means that comfort is complex to establish, even as developers work to foster change. This inclusion, however, does not inherently point to an equal workplace. Ruberg’s reflection on queer labour in the current scene indicates that “simply existing as a queer game-maker in the cultural landscape requires emotional labour” (Ruberg, 2019) and “queer and otherwise marginalised game-makers take on additional work, whether in the form of navigating vitriol in response to their games or managing the emotional labour of working in an industry that feels... like a ‘hostile environment’” (2019, p.6) This labour often goes uncompensated, which is only further emphasised when “their work is appropriated and instrumentalised by AAA development studios and more privileged indie developers” (2019, p.2) If one is going to look to members of the LGBTQ+ community to contribute to the diversity of the industry, support needs to be offered in both a financial and emotional context to support this labour.

Through this review, I have been able to establish some of the history of the relationship between queerness and games, and the struggle that those who want to portray said queerness in games face when navigating the industry. Within the last decade, significant change has begun to occur, but the way in which we navigate this change is important. Regardless, the work which queer developers and academics have done is significant, and the growth in the scene throughout the last decade has clearly begun to alter how we might approach queer art in game and support the marginalised developers behind this work.

CONCLUSION

Looking at this, it is clear the edges of the online game development community are already home to quickly growing communities of those who boldly queer which no one has before. The sentiment expressed of “I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the anti-monumental, the micro, the irrelevant. I believe in making a different by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely” (Halbertstam, 2011), is one seized by those creating content that they consider queer, and from my review it is clear that queer art and storytelling has found a place within video games despite forces that would seek to remove it. Whilst the discussion of representation, queer theory, and video games is clearly an ongoing

point of interest that will continue to change with the times, I hope to carry the concept of platforming queer art in a genuine, respectful way into Project: Mystic through my position as an independent developer and narrative director.

METHODOLOGY

Due to Project: Mystic functioning just as much as an exploration into research questions as a game, the use of an agile pipeline was necessary so user feedback and research findings could be integrated within the production. The nature of my research question is one in which non-traditional game design is investigated, so whilst I did not feel constrained in the way I approached characters and the narrative surrounding them, I did have to consider how they would be implemented, and by extension, how they might fit in and influence the surrounding narrative. The approach I elected to take with Project: Mystic utilised action research as a foundational basis, with the addition of both qualitative and quantitative methods through surveying of players. Action research allowed me to review the narrative and dialogue as it was developed, and constant feedback from my fellow creators allowed a successful agile pipeline development process.

The communal nature of the project resulted in several reference documents being produced throughout the development of the work. With the bedrock of the game established with input from all three of us, control of respective elements of the game from that point onwards were divided by role, with my own work being in narrative design and in-game dialogue. Due to dialogue often involving outside elements, such as audio and animation, reference spreadsheets that were consistently updated were core to making certain there was consistency within the work. As seen below, it allowed a consistent view of what was to be implemented and allowed more obvious gaps in potential interactive spots to be identified and rectified.

Interactable Assets					
Level	Asset	Animation	Audio	Dialogue / text	Tag Status
Office					
Need	Bin (torn paper)	-	Rustling paper	-	Added
	Book	-	Turning page	-	Missing
	Desk	-	Rustling paper		Added
	Door	Open / close	Door open / close	-	Added
	Exit	-	Door open	-	Added
	Filing cabnet	Drawer open	Drawer sliding open	Yes	Missing
	Safe	Door open	-	-	Added
MISC	Boxes	-	-	Someone should sort these, but if I bring it up, it'll have to be me. Absolutely not.	Missing
	Desk	Empty drawer open	Drawer sliding open	Yes	Missing
	Newspaper	-	Turning page	Yes	Missing
	Office door (Baker)	-	-	I'm not about to interrupt whatever is going on in there.	Missing
	Office door (Chambers)	-	-		Missing
	Plant	-	-	It looks like it could use some watering. How much old coffee have you been watered with, hm?	Missing
	Posters upstairs	-	-	If I took one of these, do you think anyone would notice? It'd look great above my bed.	Missing
Cafe					
Need	Cafe Bartender	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
	Cafe NPC 1	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
	Cafe NPC 2	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
	Cafe NPC 3	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
	Survivor	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
MISC	Menu	-	-	I wonder if I have time for something to eat.	Missing
	Newspaper stand	-	Turning page	It's the paper from yesterday.	Missing
	Plant	-	-	You look a sight healthier than the one at work, little fellow.	Missing
Baggage Car					
Need	Conductor	Idle	NPC gibberish	Yes	Added
	Crowbar	-	Metal thunk / pickup	It looks well-used.	Added
	Door to engine room	-	-	Yes	Missing
	Door to salon	-	Door open	Yes	Added
	Jane's Bag	-	Bag rustle	Yes	Added

Interaction / Asset Chart

The development of Project: Mystic's narrative occurred within Twine. After investigating several possible routes, including in-engine narrative assets, the usability and open-source nature of Twine meant that it was selected. The straightforwardness program allowed me to focus more successfully on the delivery of the narrative without needing to prioritise learning a new program and thus being hindered by a separate technical skill. I also felt as though the influence of Twine in the uniquely queer approach to game, as detailed in my literature review above, was something that I desired to investigate further through the practical approach of producing content within the program. Thanks to the iterative nature of the work that went into the development of Project: Mystic, action-oriented research was prioritised as the primary format in which information was gathered. Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered in equal part during the continued research phase, and this data continued to inform the way I created and presented dialogue as well as the surrounding narrative throughout the development process.

As mentioned, Project: Mystic exists as a piece of collaborative work, and this meant also receiving feedback from co-workers. I decided to utilise this as part of my research, as my fellow

collaborators were privy to information surrounding the narrative and extended lore that the audience would not be. This allowed for me to receive feedback that would assist me in establishing tone and the refining of ideas internally before they were presented to the play-testers. As a result, I could effectively develop the narrative effectively without necessitating a total redesign when the project was considered complete and flaws noted, which was particularly important when our time constraints were taken into consideration. Appendix A details some of this feedback and the manner it was presented.

The initial pass consisted of initial conceptual designs for key characters, as well as the refining of the primary narrative thread and the way it was affected by gameplay and the world appearance. This was then applied to a prototype of the game within the development engine while assets were further refined. The agile development within this context allowed research to not be slowed by the production process of the environment, and for multiple rounds of testing to run within this development. Both a review of puzzles and a round of playtesting were completed, accompanied by surveys in which the players would answer questions and provide individual feedback on whatever they elected relevant. The process wherein the narrative was presented without the world surrounding it allowed a unique opportunity to see what was picked up on, and what was passed over.

SURVEYS

The bulk of our action research was gathered through surveys presented in conjunction with a playtest of Project: Mystic. This took place over two separate events, which occurred during different points of the project's development with unique questions presented for each setting. The first survey had participants review the first two puzzles implemented within Project: Mystic, and then respond to a series of questions presented through Google Forms. For the second survey, participants would play through the existing version of Project: Mystic and fill out a survey immediately afterwards, also via Google Forms. Whilst we did our utmost to have a diverse variety of participants within these surveys, this personal association meant that it is likely that they were likely to share many of our viewpoints on a personal and political level due to the nature of our relationships. Regardless, I believe much of the information here is still worthy of consideration due to the manner of the questions being tied directly to their personal

experience of the game. I will review only the second survey, as it is markedly more relevant to my research.

The focus group was made up of nine people who were between the ages of 18-25, and eight out of nine of the participants did not play mystery games on a frequent basis. This test focused on several questions, with the accessibility of the puzzle design and the amount of information available to the players in-world being most pertinent to my research.

The first result of note was regarding accessibility. The required baseline of digital literacy required engage with video games is often forgotten by those who engage with them on a regular basis, and it was clear that this was a pitfall that we fell into during this phase of user testing. There were multiple instances of players being unfamiliar with the established hegemony regarding controls and 'interaction rules' within both narrative-driven games, as well as mystery games. This meant that players had to spend time figuring out basic mechanics that were not communicated in-game, which was obviously undesirable. With much of my research focusing on the capability of bringing forward a game that does not alienate those who may not be well-versed in 'established practices' due to previous experiences within the culture of gaming, this was an important thing to integrate into further development and retest at a later date.

The second was that of communication. Due to the point in development where this survey was conducted, the visual assets were not finalised, which meant that the atmosphere which would have been provided by the environment was not entirely present. However, I felt as though this would allow for more opinions regarding the discussion and portrayal of characters in-game, as there was less to focus on within the game (which had the potential to have been particularly overwhelming for those who do not often play them). An overwhelming majority of those surveyed stated that the flow of conversation was clear, and that the dialogue felt natural for the situation that the player was in. With much of my interest seated in the potential of games as storytelling devices for marginalised groups, I was pleased that my intended tone and narrative threads were noticed and responded to despite an established unfamiliarity with narrative games. Whilst suspension of disbelief and surrealism can add cadence and tone to a narrative, I made the active decision to prioritise understanding and clarity within this first pass, which was successful.

There was also a line of questioning where players were asked whether there were any characters that they enjoyed speaking to, and if so, what they liked about said character. There were a

variety of results, ranging from the intentionally abrasive characters in the café to the ‘boss’, who was the first non-player character encountered. Whilst it did not necessarily speak to a wider narrative design in which I could pursue, it did establish that the players could connect with different characters through brief conversations based entirely on personal preference (which were not always elaborated upon in the survey results). This is something I would be interested in researching further, especially when it comes to why these characters are liked, and whether liking a character is important when it comes to communicating story. However, it was noted within the survey that the players were not aware that they had the capability to interact with a character multiple times to receive different interactions. This ties back to my previously mentioned reflection on established practice and brings up the question of whether ‘hiding’ the story within this branching dialogue allows effective communication of subtle narrative cues and character backstory, or whether it is better to prioritise this within more obvious locations. Whilst this survey does not provide an answer to this question, it is something I continued to reflect on within the development of the narrative and dialogue, as well as inform how and where I placed what was considered critical information for progressing the game within a wider story context.

IMPLEMENTATION OF QUEER THEORY IN PROJECT: MYSTIC

What follows is a reflection on the application of what I had drawn from my investigation into queer theory and the manner it could be used within game design, and how it manifested in Project Mystic.

JANE FINCH

Jane Finch is one of the major characters within Project: Mystic, and whilst not directly antagonistic to the player, represents the 'other' within the game which the player is positioned against. She is the owner of the bag the player is tasked to return and implied to be one of the people involved within the mysterious happenings aboard the Mystic liner. Historically, female characters in game design exist as tools of heterosexual desire, often propping up the central male protagonist whilst having little agency within the story themselves. Exceptions to this trope exist, and characters such as Samus Aran from the Metroid series, or Lara Croft from Tomb Raider are often invoked as a 'gotcha' when this critique is raised. However, the overwhelming ratio of male to female protagonists is significant enough that famous exceptions to this rule does not warrant this critique being abandoned on that basis alone. Female protagonists are often subject to a different set of expectations than male characters, the most obvious of which is that they are expected to be attractive in a way that is appealing through a mainstream heteronormative lens. This results in many of them being slender, white, and dressed in revealing clothing. Even if a woman within game is queer-coded or explicitly non-straight (such as Ellie in Life is Strange), they are expected to conform to a heteronormative ideal of attractiveness which often results in a hyper-feminine appearance. As such, gender nonconformity is rarely presented in characters integral to the plot, and when such characters do exist, they are often utilised as caricatures or relegated to jokes due to their lack of adherence to beauty standards.

My intention with Jane was to write a woman who, whilst being gender nonconforming, was not played off as a joke or gimmick. This nonconformity is not played as a focal story within the story, but rather simply as an aspect of her character. Throughout the writing process, I made the active choice to not point out this fact during the narrative, instead leaving it to the player to observe themselves. I took inspiration from butch women of the 1920s when collaborating with my co-creator as a subtle nod to her sexuality, as whilst not explicit within the game, I wrote Jane with the intention of her being a lesbian. Her queerness is not necessarily explicit on a passing glance, but it is inescapable once it is noticed, and her existence as a core antagonist means that she also cannot be avoided or watered down.

Jane Finch, by James Hoare

BENJAMIN LAI

Another way in which I elected to implement and experiment with queerness in Project: Mystic was through the characterisation of the conductor of the Mystic liner, Benjamin Lai. I was aware of the limits of the scope when it came to our game - namely, that characters would be found within a single location, and the environments that they would exist within would be created with a specific narrative purpose. This meant that there was only so much that could be placed within the world, and what was placed had to be done so with intent. As such, with the time period taken into account, and the often-secretive relationships due to social stigma, I elected to take route of an indirect communication through letters.

Letters from the conductor's partner can be located on the desk, where a green carnation sits upon them. Popularised by Wilde in 1892, he instructed “one of the actors in *Lady Winderemere’s Fan* to wear a green carnation on opening night and told a dozen of his young followers to wear them too” (Ref). The flower has now been a queer symbol for over a century. The purpose behind this choice is intended to be a flag to those who recognise this history and are attracted to it, but even without this context, flowers have long indicated romantic interest outside of queer culture.

Whilst Benjamin does not necessarily play into the story in the sense of moving the narrative forward, he allows the background world to be fleshed out and players to find places where they can relate to a lived experience, regardless of whether it is within a game that takes place within an altered history. LGBTQ+ people have existed throughout all time, but their presence is often erased to uphold a heteronormative history. It is also common for the stories which do portray this to focus on queer suffering, with that pain being used as a focus point for the narrative. My goal was to portray a relationship that, while being implied to be a secret, does not use oppression as a pivotal factor. Instead, it simply portrays a momentary look into the conductor’s life, establishing queerness as something that exists in-world without any accompanying discourse.

CHARLES AND HARRIET BAKER

As addressed previously, queer theory often encroaches upon heteronormative ideals and the way they can be challenged. The way I elected to utilise this concept in Project: Mystic is through Charles and Harriet Baker. Charles is a single father, and Harriet is his daughter. She is in a wheelchair due to arthritis stemming from her rheumatic fever, and her mother passed away from illness prior to the events of Project: Mystic.

Fathers are often not portrayed as capable of single-parent childcare, with that responsibility often being placed on the mother. This oft ties into ideas of toxic masculinity, in which fathers are unable to maintain emotionally intimate relationships with their children, and furthermore, are incapable of being attentive of their needs. Not only this, but the heteronormative social structures also imposed upon families are often explicitly tied to the idealisation of a society in which deviation from the norm is punished. The nuclear family model is promoted as the only successful way to raise a family, and that often consists of the father working while the mother

raises their child. As a result, the role of childcare is often considered feminine and thus demeaning. It was because of this that I chose specifically to make the role of Harriet's carer her father. During the writing process, I made intentional choices throughout the dialogue exchange that not only show that Harriet fulfils his role as a caretaker in a successful manner but expresses care for his daughter verbally in a way that is not demeaned through the tone of conversation or context of the game. Whilst he mentions he misses his wife, I took care to not paint him as inept, and I was pleased with the way I executed this. Again, Charles and Harriet are minor characters, with the only essential interaction being with Charles whilst investigating who the missing bag belongs to. However, I believe it important that queerness can be portrayed in a way which could be considered only occurring in the 'background' of a game, as much of the queer experience is simply living authentically. Not all queer narratives need to be central to the game, and part of avoiding tokenism is having the understanding that queerness often exists without the need for any further commentary.

Disability is also something not often represented within game, especially visual disability. If a character is disabled, they are frequently a villain or 'monstrous'. This ableism has meant that disabled people have only ever been able to view themselves through villains, or characters mocked for being unattractive. The queer community and the disabled community, whilst having unique struggles, have faced many similar barriers throughout history. The struggle to be married, with many disabled people in the United States choosing not to be married due to being cut from their benefit if they have shared assets of over 2000 dollars and thus losing their only form of income (Altiraifi, 2020), systematic dehumanisation, and general discrimination. A depiction of disability that does not exist as a pity story through non-disabled writers is rare, and thus Harriet's inclusion was intended to bring further thought as to what characters in game might look like.

RESULTS

When reflecting on the research conducted during the process of this creative project, I can identify a number of avenues in which video games can be utilised as storytelling platforms for marginalised and radical narratives and begin my own approach to the topic in a way I feel has been successful. The nature of my question and the information resulting from the subsequent surveys lean heavily into a model informed by art theory and philosophy, which rely more on a

personal interpretation of the information received rather than what could be considered objective truths. Regardless, I am comfortable with the information I have been able to conclude, especially when applied to this framework of research. It is clear to me that the potential of game as a platform for art by minority groups has potential; after all, even within my limited scope of research, communities are easily identified as both existing and actively creating art.

Whilst I received feedback throughout the design process, the nature of the project meant that the final result and reflection was, for the most part, reliant on my own interpretation of the work I produced. My co-creators approved my writing, but if I was to get the chance to conduct this research again, I would like to receive feedback on the complete project to establish a complete feedback loop from players, as I value the opinions of people who experience the queer narrative I presented in a different way than myself. However, as my question was focused on investigating the way games might function as a vehicle for queer art and storytelling, I feel as though it was not critical to seeking a result and would have simply been useful as supporting evidence.

Looking at my work and accompanying research as a whole, I feel comfortable with establishing that there certainly is a space for queerness and the platforming of queer art and development in game. Furthermore, I think that I was successful in my attempt to express that queerness through Project: Mystic as a marginalised developer.

DISCUSSION

This exegesis has made it clear to me that there is much to be done within the discourse of queer theory and game. From exploring the relation of capitalism and the way in which it affects the games produced and distributed en masse, and more specifically, inspecting a medium impacted so profoundly by market value, yet influenced deeply by creative field. It is a unique and still growing field of work, and the many queer researchers contributing to the field offer an exciting future for it.

Within my own contexts, research through a wider focus group would be particularly interesting, as the political and cultural context would vary on a much wider scale when looking outside of NZ alone. I would also like to seek contributions from developers who are affected through other realms of oppression, such as race and disability, as my own personal experiences cannot speak

for theirs, and it is profoundly important to keep in mind that an individual cannot portray the experiences of a much wider group. Regardless, when the existing thought on what exactly games are capable of encompassing is applied in tandem with both modern art theory and queer theory, the result seems to indicate clear precedent for the use of game as a vehicle for subverting expectations and allowing the presentation of queer narrative and creativity in what was once an intensely hostile environment.

The completion of Project: Mystic from prototype to fully developed game is the next step within my ongoing research. The wider reception of a diverse cast in a narrative-driven game which does not conform to many established hegemonic ideals as to what makes a ‘game’ is something that I want to take into account. Whilst the production pipeline allowed real-time responses to the research conducted in the process of the demo, it is still by no means a large focus group, and those who did participate in our research are by and large people we know personally. A much larger audience is necessary, and with the knowledge that many LGBTQ+ people are beginning to feel safer coming out, the opportunity for much wider study is beginning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I believe that my above research and wider analysis was invaluable to the development of Project: Mystic and informed not only the manner in which I implemented both characters and narrative, but my wider methodology of applying queer theory in an unabashed matter to game design. I also believe that I have answered the question of to whether video games can function as a vehicle for queer art and have acknowledged both the pros and cons of what happens when queer theory is applied to game. The work I have done here barely scratches the surface of the rich history that queerness has to game, but I am proud of what I have done, and with the invaluable contribution of my co-creators James Hoare and Liam Knight-Devlin in mind, Project: Mystic is a piece of work that I have been honoured to be a part of.

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APPENDIX A: FEEDBACK FROM FELLOW DEVELOPERS

AUG 18.

INTERVIEW - 5 YEARS (ANNIVERSARY) LATER

LOOKING AROUND THE TRAIN STATION / CAFÉ

JOURNALIST - RELATIVE / FAMILY CONNECTION
↳ BARTENDER

EYE ~~CLOCK~~ (MACHINE) ENDS STORY

↳ JOURNALIST GETS PACKAGE.

✓ UNCLE (WAS) ON TRAIN IS HOW YOU GET INTERVIEW

EVENTS ON TRAIN

FINALE - WEIRD ONTOLOGICAL ROOM
- FIRST TIME SMALL W/ OBJECT - FADE TO BLACK
- ENDING IT'S BIGGER (LIKE A CHURCH) W/ CULT PEOPLE AROUND SAID OBJECT

CHARACTER 'ACCIDENTLY' ON TRAIN

INCITING INCIDENT: MAYHAPS A STOWAWAY,

ACT 1	ACT 2	ACT 3
INCITING INCIDENT. OVERHEAR SOMETHING IS GONNA HAPPEN TO THE TRAIN	CONFLICT. FINALLY GOES INT EMPTY ROOM, GET BAZINGA'D	FINALE. GOES INTO ROOM AND SEES CHURCH PEWS & CULT

CLUDO CHARACTER REFERENCE.

Narrative Feedback April 2021

General

James:

With these sections could you make sure that you are checking back with that document that I sent you a couple weeks ago, as there is some missing info that is important to ensuring that the players get enough info for their objectives / puzzles.

Could we have some text for interactions with objects (like mentioned in that document), it would be best if we got this on a spreadsheet if you haven't already started writing this up.

Something nice for the tone would be to have the characters be a lil less serious overall, maybe more like *A Short Hike* or *Later Alligator*?

Liam:

Change boss to manager - the common enemy of working class hierarchy.
We should have the piece of the carriage mentioned to be a piece of the machine that is slotted into it in the final moment.

Office

James:

The conversation on the phone doesn't mention the safe at all, it's important to have this as it is what starts the search for the fragments of the code.

Liam:

[add conversation through the doors for the composer and botanist]
Composer is playing loud music so you can not hear them
BANG CRASH Botanist tells you not to open the door because they have just broken a specimen jar and don't want spores escaping.
The manager should reference the previous person working in the archive room being a slacker who liked reading more than working to set up the backup clue for the safe.
[backup clue is a book of Poe's Works with a blurb on the back with their birth and death dates]

Cafe

James:

In the conversation with the survivor there is mention of a piece of the carriage - how does this fit in with the narrative? (Liam had a cool idea about this).

There is no mention of the survivor wearing a red jumper in the phone call, as well as inconsistency around if the journalist knows their name - you also gave the survivor a name which goes against the point of having the player choose their own name.

Liam:

During the conversation with the bartender the player says in dialogue they do not know the name of the interview character, but in the interview session they are given the option of addressing them by name.

The interview character automatically has a more annoyed/sarcastic lull to their dialogue,if this is a character made person we should offer more neutral response as to not ellictly type cast the player.

Having them take a more nervous and paranoid stance, fidgeting with newspaper and piece of the carriage would work better to show the accidents prolonged effect on them.

The Lady character says not long ago but the accident has been some months

For the smoking man they should probably have a more direct line 'You don't look like a copper, Bugger Off!'

Train / Baggage Car

James:

You haven't written up a conversation with the conductor, the important points of that conversation are mapped out in that document I sent you.

We also need the names for these characters, even if it is mostly placeholders.

Liam:

Change patched teddy bear to sewn or wooden doll as the anatomy will be easier to make.

If we do frankenstein, it should be titled Frankenstein; the modern prometheus.

Other options that offer more foresight to fans could be 'The Willows by Algernon Blackwood' or 'The Signal Man' - Charles Dickens. Both of these have more related themes of unexpected journeys being fought by supernatural forces.

However if we wish to diversify references Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a better piece of weird fiction and plays with the ideals of entrapment and the supernatuality of domestic horror.

I don;t really see the parallels between our project and the thematic narrative of Frankenstein

The young man is both dismissive of the player character but also offers them a sit in the same breath. I think they should take them for a passenger at first but become domineering and admissive to the player if they reveal they are working later on in the conversation.

For the conversation with the man because he's paying more attention to his daughter who has become the primary femine figure in his life and we are told he sent this time getting her to sleep i think it would be forgiven if we doest notice that jane is women due to her masculine clothes this could be used to offer conflicting reports from characters about the identity of the person, until someone with more information such as the bartender reveals Jane's identity.

APPENDIX B: SCRIPT AND CHARACTER PROFILES

ANSWER THE RINGING PHONE.

Boss: Hello? That was quick. Slacking off again, *Justin?* Lucky you. I've been rushing around all morning after you lot. Place won't run itself, after all.

a. [STAY SILENT]

b. "I was just-"

Boss: Oh, I'm speaking in jest. Don't fuss. Now, do you recall the incident with the *Mystic Liner* a year or so back? I can't remember exactly, but it was when the business surrounding the blue collar lot on the train. You remember, yes? Complaining about pay? Nonsense, in my opinion – we're all lucky we have a job at all.

a. "Right. Yes."

b. [STAY SILENT]

Boss [In response to A]: See? This is why you're one of our best workers. No need for any of that whining.

Boss [in response to B]: You should remember it, too.

Boss: Now, as I was saying, the train. We apparently have someone calling to say they were on board the blasted thing. I'd say it was nonsense, but apparently they have 'evidence'. Bit of the train, or something. Whatever it is, it's on you to interview them. What happened, where the train is, all of that. Got it?

a. I think so.

b. No?

Boss: [in response to A]: Good. You'll find the details on your desk! Do get it done today – we can't keep pottering around doing nothing. Keep it up, and all of that nonsense. {He disconnects}

Boss [in response to B]: Ha, hah. Very funny. Right, well, the information you'll need is on your desk. Get it done. {He disconnects}

Passenger 1

- Mixed Māori / Pakeha [90% of the Māori population in the 1920s lived rurally)
- Lower-middle class. A little standoffish.
- Dresses for a farming/fishing job – not as 'neat' as the more academic of the passengers, but still well put together.
- Informs you that she saw the young girl crying earlier, and that the father seemed stressed enough to forget his head if it wasn't attached.

Passenger 2 + 3

- A father and his daughter travelling together. His daughter is about seven.
- His daughter carries a teddy around for comfort and has her hair loose.
- Her father works in the automotive industry, although he does not have to be dressed that way – that said, maybe bandages on a hand could be interesting, or oil stains on his clothing.
- If you go with the concept of him being dressed for his automotive position, I see his daughter being much more finely dressed, since her father fawns over her.
- The father is defensive if you speak to the young girl, telling you to let her sleep (even if she is awake), However, if you speak to him, he is more open to conversation about the bag, and informs you his bag is matching the described one.

Passenger 4

- Overly enthusiastic, finely dressed young man, informing you that this is his first time travelling alone. White, has moustache.
- Assumes you are 'a member of staff based on how you're dressed'.
- If asked about the bag, informs you with something incorrect based on the fact he 'is certain he saw the conductor with it', and inquires if thievery is common on the train. Will also ask for cigarette. Gets nervous when asked about what he's travelling for and will brush you off.

Passenger 5

- Woman busy reading. She curtly informs you she doesn't speak to people she doesn't know and refuses to say any more on the matter. Wealthy, in a dress, with her hair up and absorbed in a small book. White, alone, maybe with something on the seat next to her.

Bartender

- Butch lady, white, cheerful, dressed in a suit and prone to chatter. Has a smiley sort of demeanor, and round glasses. She informs you about a man with a bandaged hand nearly dropping the suitcase, and that she could only assume it was to do with the weight of it.

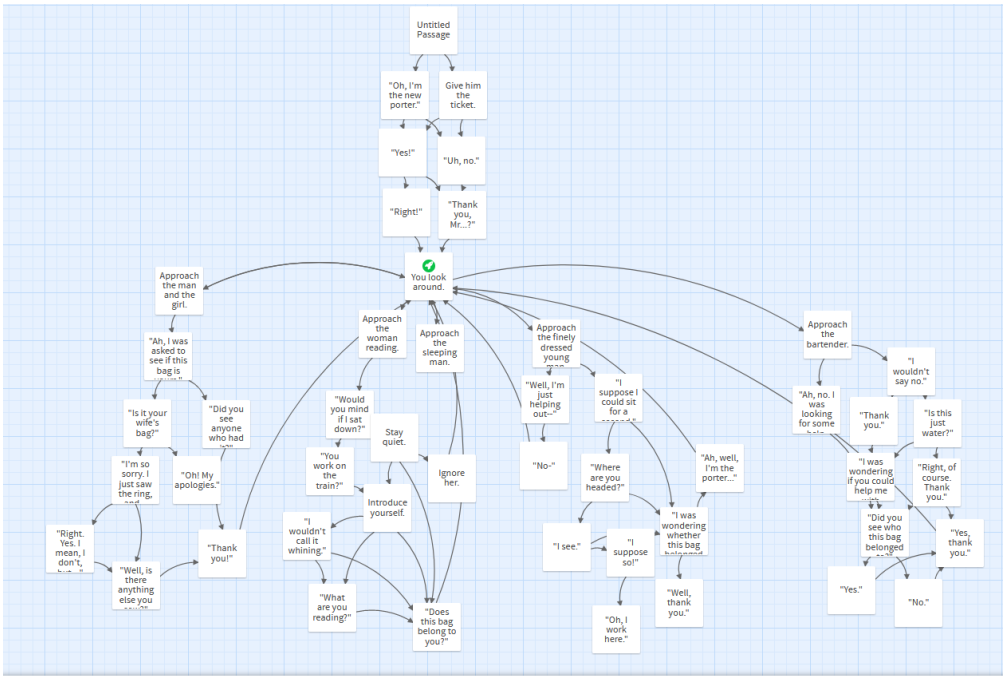
Conductor

- Older Chinese man. Upbeat, friendly, who will have some dialogue about living in Dunedin if prompted. His father was part of the immigration boom during the Otago gold rush.

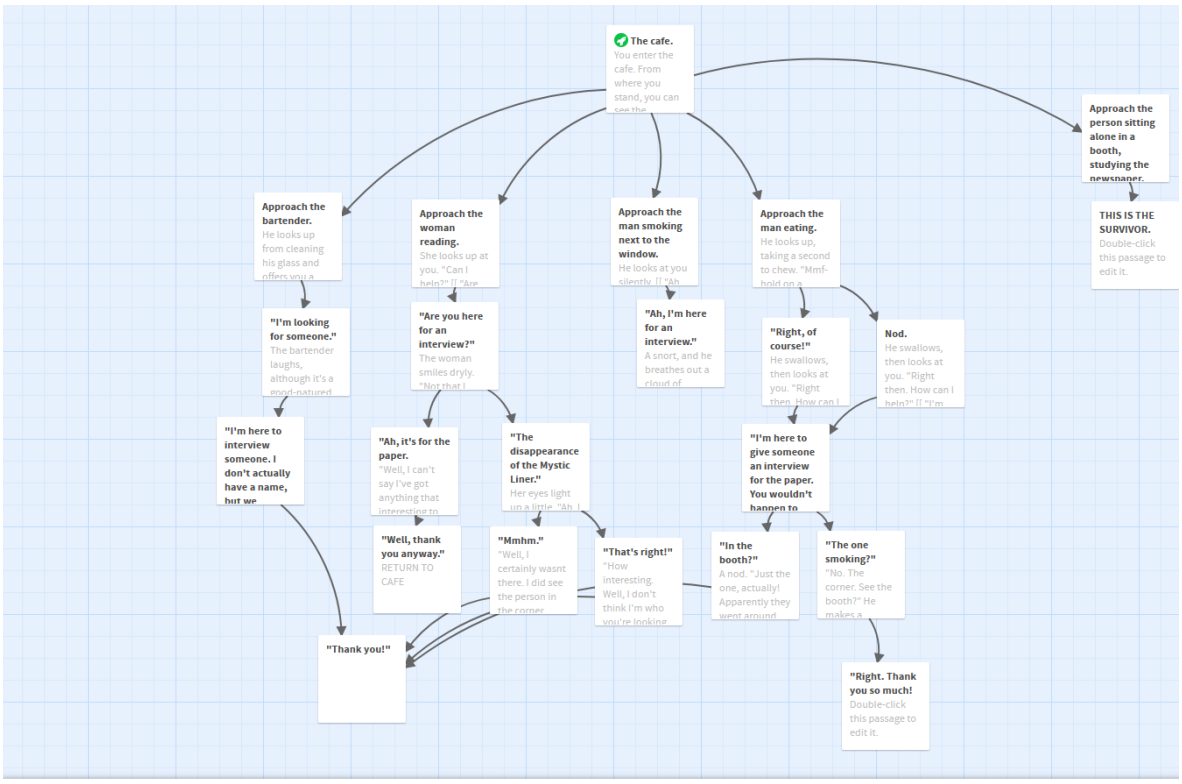
APPENDIX C: DEVELOPMENT DOCUMENTATION

Office	
Bin (torn paper)	Is this - oh! Half of the code! Now, is this the first half, or second...?
Book	"Slept, awoke, slept, awoke, miserable life." Hah. No surprises why this is bookmarked!
Desk	I should probably deal with some of these papers. Later, though. Where is this code?
Exit	I can't leave yet. I need to get that documentation for the interview.
Filing Cabinet	Good Lord, how many documents are in here? No, no... ah! Half the code! But is it the first half, or the second?
Safe [no code]	Ugh, I don't know the code. I swear they're around here somewhere!
Safe [code]	Excellent. Alright, let's get started...
MISC	
Boxes	Someone should sort these, but if I bring it up, it'll have to be me. Absolutely not.
Newspaper	I wonder if my articles are in here? It's been a while since they've published anything of mine, though...
Other doors	I'm not about to interrupt whatever is going on in there.
Plants	It looks like it could use some watering. How much old coffee have you been watered with, hm?
Posters upstairs	If I took one of these, do you think anyone would notice? It'd look great above my bed.
Cafe	
Menu	I wonder if I have time for something to eat.
News Stand	It's the paper from yesterday.
Plant	You look a sight healthier than the one at work, little fellow.
Baggage Car	
Crowbar	It looks well-used.
Door to engine	The engine is audible through the door. You can hear something else, too... voices, perhaps?
Door to salon	Mr. Lai asked for you to see who that bag belonged to. Maybe you should fetch it.
Jane's Bag	It has the letters 'J.F' embossed on the front.
Keys	They're on a big keychain. That might be rust on one of the keys, but you can't be sure.
Letters on desk	There are a handful of letters stacked on the desk. What you can assume is most recent one lies open and readable atop it.
Looking out win	The morning sun is coming weakly through the window.
Some bags	These are bags waiting to be stowed. Benjamin seems to be on top of it, however.
Salon Car	
Door to b. car	Lai is in there, sorting the luggage.
Door to sleep. 1	The entrance to the sleeper car.
Drink on bar	It's half-finished. You can see almost melted ice cubes floating there.
Empty seats	Whoever was sitting here has moved some time ago. The seats do not seem warm.
Left out bags	These look like they were left in a hurry, or, at the very least, forgotten.
Window | Day	The countryside rolls on by, bathed in the bright sun. Are those sheep off in the distance?
Window | Night	It is almost too dark to see. The movement of the train makes it seem as though the hills are moving.

Part of the interaction spreadsheet for character flavour text.

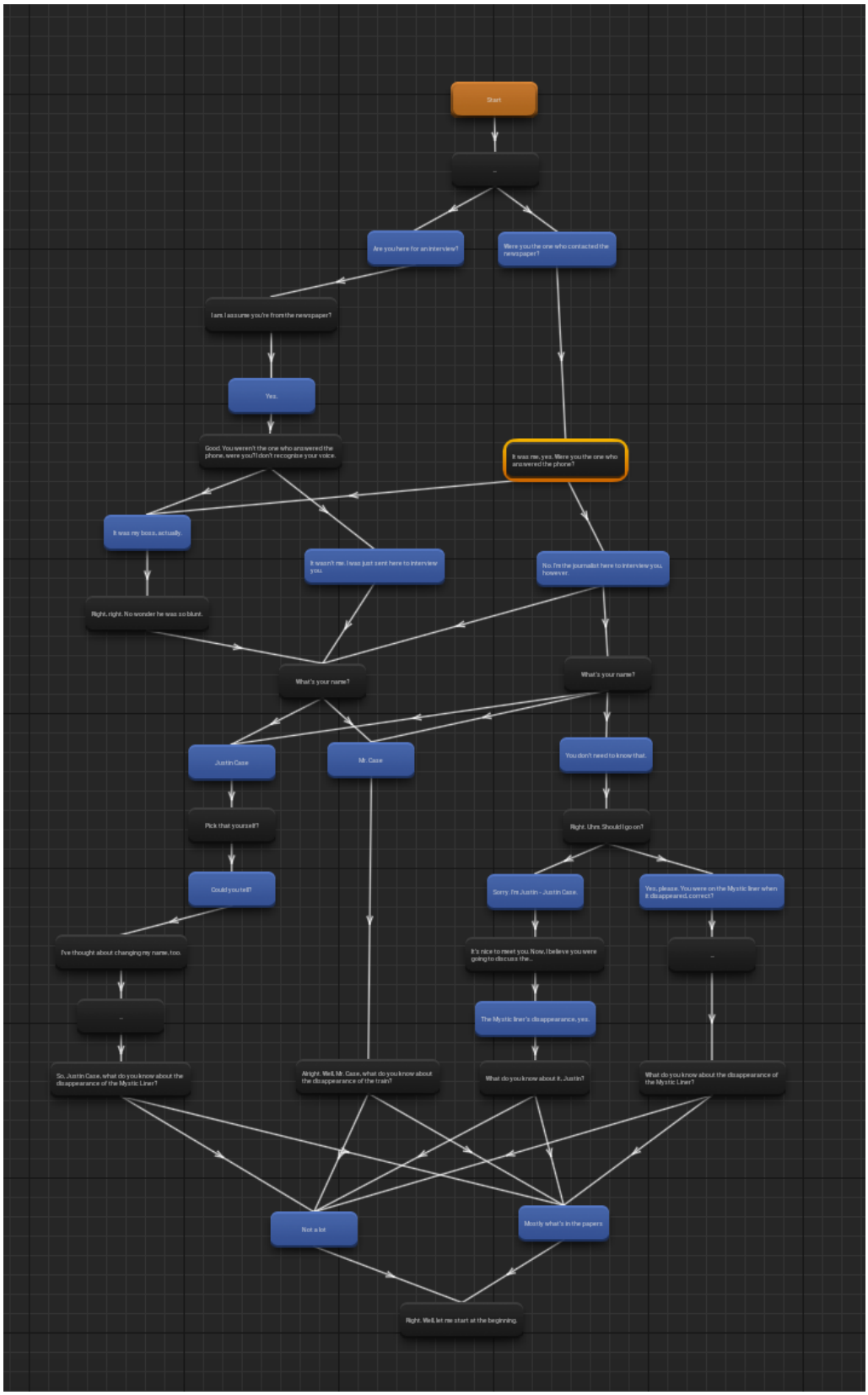


The train - Exploring the carriage.



The Cafe - Exploration

The appearance of the dialogue trees within the Twine Engine.



The appearance of the dialogue trees when implemented in Unity.

Project: Mystic Core interactions

Office:

- Conversation with boss
    - Makes sure there is mention of having misplaced the three number code to the safe, and that you probably ripped it in half for security reasons
- Safe mini game
    - A couple inner monologues for when you are searching areas that don't have the codes
    - A positive response to having opened the safe
- MISC
    - No thoughts, head empty: player inner monologue when they try to open each of the other two doors in the building
    - Some nice little ~flavour~ moments when interacting with different things in the scene, *I should water this* about a plant or *I should really finish unpacking* about a box
- Final scene
    - Interactions with MISC objects again, but all incoherent

Café:

- Conversation with NPC's
    - Opening conversation with the survivor from the crash, they are welcoming and the player can ask them a couple questions – after which they begin their story
    - Conversations with Bartender, and three NPC's – NPCs respond that they aren't who you are looking for in different ways, the bartender points you to the booth in the corner
- MISC
    - Inner monologue when player interacts with menu and any other objects you think would be interesting

- Conversation during break in game
    - The Journalist asks the survivor how they managed to get into the room if it was locked, and they respond that they considered breaking in or stealing the conductors key. The journalist askes which they chose and the player gets to pick

Baggage Car

- Conversation with conductor
    - He asks if you're the new porter, and instructs you to take notes in your standard issue, New Zealand Railways Company Notebook TM (doesn't have to be like this I just found it funny).
    - He tells you about that didn't get tagged for who it belongs to, and instructs you to ask around and find the owner, he gives you a passenger list that details their assigned rooms in case they aren't around but you find out who it belongs to.
- Door
    - Internal monologue comment that you should report to the conductor (will play if you haven't yet)
    - Comment that you should take the bag and find it's owner (if you try to leave without it)
    - Comment about not needing to go to the engine room (for other door)
- MISC
    - Comment about objects not being what you're looking for (will be on the Crowbar and the Keys that are relevant for a later interaction)
        - Inner monologue when player interacts with a couple different bags
        - The player can read the note on the desk of the conductors office to his lover

Salon Car:

- Conversations about the bag
  - With all NPC's, you have the options to ask their name or about the bag ○ Short conversations with four helpful NPCs (one being the bartender, and another being a different member of staff) where they give you useful information about who they think he bag belongs to
- Short conversations with two NPC's that aren't helpful, maybe one that doenst seem to care and another that seems to want to help but is just wrong; these are the ones I had on my survey that you can use as reference:
  - "looks similar to the bag that I helped Jennifer put away"
  - "It looks like something Flemming would own, pretty sure they they have a matching suitcase"
  - "I think a man in a red coat was carrying that"
  - "A woman with a suitcase that matched that walked by just before"
  - "Edward' bags look just like that"
- Conversations after bag has been placed
  - This is just an opportunity to develop the different characters, this time the characters aren't being asked about the bag. This isn't linked to any puzzles so you can have a little fun with it – maybe you can ask them one thing earlier when you have the bag, and if you've done that back then you can ask another now.
  - One of the staff mention that the paintings outside the rooms on the sleeper carriages give them weird vibes
- MISC
  - Inner monologue when player interacts with maybe a drink on the bar and anything else you think could be fun
- After Blackout
  - Player inner monologue wondering what the time is as its now dark, and commenting about how it must be late as everyone else has disappeared
  - Comments on same MISC objects as before now have slightly different responses
  - Player can comment on how strange it is that some baggage has been left out

Jane's Room

- Note on her desk
    - There is a letter on Jane's desk that talks about a meeting in room 2E at midnight, it'd be good if it mentioned opening eyes or darkness or something similar that could help elude to the solution of the final puzzle
- Jane
    - After you have found that the door is locks, and you have picked how you will open it, Jane is now in her room. If you talk to her she will ask if you are the one who found her bag, and she will thank you for remembering to turn off the lights / comment that you forgot to turn the lights out when you left.

Sleeper Car

- Outside room 2E
    - The player can comment that its locked but they can hear a muffled ticking – and that they have to find a way inside (plays before cut back to café)
    - Comment about having to find the conductors keys to get inside / something to pry it open so the conductor doesn't know what they are doing
    - After blackout they comment that the lock and door handle have vanished, and that they have to find out what's happening at midnight
- Paintings
    - Before the blackout you can comment on how eerie the paintings seem, and that all of them look like they have their eyes closed
    - After the blackout you can comment on the painting that now has it's eyes open – something like about it having changed… right?

Cathedral

- All NPC's respond with "…"
- Interacting with anything gives you comments about how weird the place is, how it cant fit inside the train carriage – all of these are slightly jumbled / incoherent